

The Radio Journal – International Studies in Broadcast & Audio Media
Volume 14 Number 1

© 2016 Intellect Ltd Article. English language. doi: 10.1386/rjao.14.1.43_1

KYLE WRATHER

University of Texas at Austin

Making ‘Maximum Fun’ for fans: Examining podcast listener participation online

ABSTRACT

This article analyses how three podcasts from the independent podcast network Maximum Fun use online spaces to cultivate audience engagement and listener interest. While some of these listener engagement techniques are not unique to podcasting, they offer examples of how podcasters have built strong audience connections by expanding interaction beyond their episodes and into the online spaces young, tech-savvy listeners often frequent. Specifically, this article compares how three podcast shows on the Maximum Fun network promote and use different online spaces (forums, social networks and blogs) to engage listeners and cultivate community.

KEYWORDS

podcasting
audiences
social networks
online spaces
interactivity
audience engagement

INTRODUCTION

In a time of media convergence, podcasting offers many new opportunities for examining the interaction between media creators and fans. Aspects of podcasting technology help create new forms of engagement while also paralleling many features of legacy technologies like radio. Podcasts have steadily grown in popularity and availability over the last ten years. In this case study, I describe how audiences are addressed and embraced within the text of three podcasts and analyse how the online spaces promoted by those podcasts are used to foster greater fan engagement and participation. The

interactions between podcasters and their audiences both within the shows themselves and the spaces around them reveal a complex and mutually interested relationships of community building and fan involvement. In particular, the podcast producers take advantage of tech-savvy podcasting fans and their familiarity with multiple online platforms to more deeply integrate the fans into the show.

WHY PODCASTS?

The term *podcasting* was first used in 2004 as a neologism that combined the words iPod and broadcasting to describe a form of media distribution that blended audio files with the syndicated online publishing of blog posts (Hammersley 2004). Podcasting offers the accessibility and linearity of audio content, but because it is chosen by listeners rather than offered by broadcasters, podcasts often appeal to niche audiences who select specific content geared to their interests (Berry 2006). Podcasting has steadily grown in popularity over the last ten years (Edison Research 2015).

One of podcasting's notable features is the shift in accessibility. Unlike radio, which requires expensive equipment and licensing, podcasts can be created by virtually anyone with a minimum amount of equipment and technical knowledge. This accessibility unlocks a potentially powerful distribution platform for audio and spoken-word content (Sterne et al. 2008). However, these low barriers to entry have not led to the dominance of amateur podcasters. Instead, many of the most popular and most listened-to programmes are created by existing radio and audio content producers, namely public radio programmers seeking to distribute content to audiences not reached by terrestrial radio (Crofts et al. 2005; Sellas 2012).

Podcasts allow these programmers to make content (and advertising) more available to younger, tech-savvy listeners and potentially expand their influence and reach potentially around the world (Crofts et al. 2005). Tiziano Bonini (2015) has argued that the growth of the medium has made it a viable space for commercialization, yielding a growing cadre of large producer/distributors including networks like Panoply and Radiotopia. There is a growing group of mid-sized, independent podcast producers and distributors including Maximum Fun, Earwolf, Nerdist and others (Weiner 2014). Some of these mid-level podcast producers and organizations are based around the community of stand-up and improv comedians in the Los Angeles, California area, and offer added notoriety and influence to a highly connected group of entertainers with access to each other as well as connections to other media producers (Liem 2013; Markman 2012). Meserko (2015a) argues that podcasting has been particularly popular among comedians as a way to share their work and personal brands. Podcasting also offers mass media not subject to censorship by the US Federal Communications Commission (FCC) and without the gatekeeping functions of media organizations and advertisers. Programmes created by this mid-tier of producers constitute a growing number of the most popular podcasts as seen on the Apple iTunes Podcast comedy and overall charts.

UNDERSTANDING PODCASTING AND PODCAST AUDIENCES

Podcasting combines radio's intimacy with the portability and personalization of digital media forms to create a new and interesting space for media and cultural interaction. Studying podcasting, its producers and audiences holds

the potential to reveal new insights about both media history and its future. Because of podcasting's thematic, aural and generic connections to traditional audio broadcasting, Andrew Bottomley (2015) argues podcasting is in many ways 'refashioned radio', and in this sense, it is important to consider not only the significance of podcasting itself but how this medium functions within contemporary media industries and audience practices.

Scholarship examining podcast production and audiences is a small but growing part of the broader scholarly work analysing the radio medium. For instance, McClung and Johnson identified podcast listeners as young, affluent and often socially motivated to listen to podcasts (McClung and Johnson 2010). Listeners are generally more wealthy, educated and more active on social networks (Edison Research 2015). Markman suggests podcast creators (particularly small, independent podcasters) are motivated by the social interactions and connections created within their audiences. Small podcasts often have a strong community where both creators and listeners play an important role in the programmes themselves (Markman 2012; Markman and Sawyer 2014). Vanessa Quirk's *Guide to Podcasting* (2016), created for the Tow Center for Digital Journalism, distinguishes this 'engagement' approach as one of the several business models adopted by podcasts to appeal to audiences. Quirk argues these podcasts 'may be freely accessible in order to grow listenership, listeners are encouraged to support the content makers via direct donations or a subscription model' (Quirk 2016: 49). Therefore, we might consider the study of podcast audiences, their participation and engagement not only of cultural interest but also an aspect that is deeply connected to the podcasting industrial model.

As Meresko notes, this connection between audience and producer is a particularly interesting aspect of podcasting because it highlights the intimacy of audio media and the blurring of public and private spaces (2014: 468). Because of these connections, Morris (2012) suggests that the practice of podcasting, its role in audience's lives beyond the text of the episodes themselves, becomes an important part of understanding podcasts as a medium and cultural object. Salvati's (2014) examination of Dan Carlin's *Hardcore History* (2006–) describes the ways fans and podcasters align themselves in relation to topics as a way to build connections and affinity. Likewise, Florini's (2015) study of the informal networks of black podcasters and listeners highlights the ways podcasts not only develop community but also serve as a shared space for social engagement.

While these and others offer a growing account of podcast engagement and fan behaviour, previous studies of other media audiences offer parallels for better understanding today's podcast fan audiences. As an enquiry into the spaces of audience engagement and fan reactions, Henry Jenkins' works examining the construction of fan communities in *Textual Poachers* (1992) and the shifting dynamics afforded by online spaces in *Convergence Culture* (2006) are particularly salient. Jenkins describes fans as 'active participants in the construction and circulation of textual meanings' and in the case of podcasts (just as in the case of television programmes that Jenkins wrote about), these fan activities sometimes play a significant part in shaping how media producers react as well within the texts themselves (Jenkins 1992: 24). Podcasts and the interactions around them offer a particularly resonant example of media convergence. Jenkins argues that convergence of new technologies enables 'content to flow through many different channels and assume many different forms at the point of reception' (Jenkins 2008: 11). This can be seen in the

interactions, relationships and bonding between podcast producers, audiences and communities across many forms of media beyond the episodes themselves.

Spaces of interaction and reaction offer insights not only into audience behaviour more broadly, but also how fans and audiences engage media texts and each other. In fact, this shift towards examining the ability of audiences to meet, interact and engage with each other and with media texts has been an important facet of recent fan and audience research (Coppa 2006; Gray et al. 2007). In an article on fan produsage, Elizabeth Bird (2011) acknowledges that these technological changes and the shifting spaces of audience and text interactions raise significant questions about who is empowered within these converging spaces and calls on scholars to better understand how these roles are shaped in online spaces. This echoes her earlier observations of online forums and the ways fan communities are built within and structured around online space (Bird 1999).

As Lucy Bennett (2012) shows with her study of music fan sub-communities, unique interests can be manifested within online communities to create subsections of audiences and that may be reflected in their online actions. Phillips (2011) notes that the connections fans create with each other and media producers can be seen across multiple spaces both online and offline. Klein (2009) examines how the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) Radio programmers and audiences use online message boards as a space to interact and provide feedback about both programming and the larger listener community. Other similar studies have demonstrated how specific subgroups of fans within online message board communities (Wakefield 2001), as well as more critical examinations of how media creators respond (and sometimes co-opt) to audiences within these online spaces for their own advancement (Andrejevic 2008).

While many of these works study audiences through ethnographic approaches, this article instead highlights producer–fan interactions primarily through the texts and discourses surrounding a few select podcasts, including the podcasts themselves, the spaces for fan interaction and fan-created objects within those spaces. This approach has been proven to be a fruitful avenue for understanding audience and fans in the past, particularly in cases where fans may be hard to trace or the objects they create and respond to are particularly relevant to the study at hand (see, e.g., Cavicchi 2014; Coppa 2008; Jenkins 1992). This particular study of podcast fan interactions and the texts (podcasts, interactive spaces and fan creations) shows how participation and interest flow between the podcast creators and their audiences work together to create a rich, complex community.

To demonstrate this richness, I have highlighted some of the ways three podcasts from a mid-sized US podcast production company attempt to engage their audience both in the text of the shows themselves and through repeated calls for fan participation across multiple online platforms. I analyse how fan and audience interactions function within each of the three shows examined, and analyse the enhancing and mitigating factors structuring each show's fan engagement practices. I also argue that these podcast-promoted audience spaces and engagements function as productive places for audiences to respond to the podcasts' episodes, characters and topics. Furthermore, by taking advantage of the interactive qualities of these spaces, producers use the platforms not only as a way to cultivate audiences for comedic material but

also to give audiences and fans new and deeper ways to participate within the show community.

MAKING MAXIMUM FUN

While large radio-affiliated producers and distributors such as National Public Radio are a staple of the top-downloaded podcasts, smaller podcast producer and distributors like Maximum Fun offer insights into the development and growth of podcasting brands that do not have the pre-existing name recognition and prestige afforded by a presence in other media. Nonetheless, Maximum Fun's origins and business model are deeply influenced by radio. The Maximum Fun podcast network grew from a variety comedy radio show, *The Sound of Young America (TSoYA)*, hosted by Jesse Thorn on the college radio station of the University of California, Santa Cruz (UCSC) (2000-2012). Thorn has cited the influence of the public radio show (and podcast) *This American Life* (1995-) and its creator Ira Glass as a key influence on his own interest in both radio and later podcasting (McQuade 2015). After graduating from UCSC and moving to Los Angeles, Thorn continued *TSoYA* by recording from his home living room as a public interest interview show, while also recording and distributing other programmes as podcasts (Rabin 2013). The show continued to be distributed on a handful of public radio networks and as a podcast. In a 2006 interview, Thorn said the show's popularity as podcast led to syndication through the radio distribution organization Public Radio International (PRI) (Kharakh 2006). In 2012, National Public Radio began a national distribution of Thorn's *TSoYA*, renamed *Bullseye* (2012-) (Lapin 2012).

This wider distribution has brought more notoriety and publicity to Maximum Fun and the network now produces over twenty podcasts (Maximum Fun n.d.b). Shows often focus on a single topic or theme ranging from parenting and film reviews, to history, and more abstract comedy and improv programmes. Shows vary in length and structure, with some shows consistently running less than twenty minutes while more open-structured shows have episodes that run consistently between one to two hours. Moreover, Maximum Fun has increasingly expanded beyond its podcast base, offering a short video series, and organizing annual conferences and cruises (Rabin 2015).

Much like public radio, the company is largely funded through listener pledges and donations. In an interview with the podcasting blog *The Timbre*, Thorn said the decision for Maximum Fun to be listener-supported was necessary because of the company's initially small audiences:

I think that if it were easy to get the audiences and sell the advertisements, [Maximum Fun] might have considered being advertiser-supported. That's still not the case now and certainly wasn't the case ten years ago. And even more than that, I've always wanted to run a business that led me to be responsible to the audience and not responsible to people who wanted to sell things to the audience.

(McQuade 2015)

The company holds an annual week of special shows and events annually called 'MaxFunDrive' to solicit pledges and donations for the company. Maximum Fun episodes generally include short advertising breaks featuring outside brands or promoting other podcasts and events. Increasingly, some of

the company's podcasts have dabbled in branded content and native advertising, most notably, an episode of *My Brother, My Brother and Me* (MBMBAM) (2011–) called 'The McElroy Family Fun Hour Brought to You by Totino's', which had paid sponsorship by the microwave pizza company and was described as 'a hilariously meta parody of product placement' (Rabin 2016). While these episodes are relatively uncommon, they offer new opportunities for providing revenue by playing on audience expectations for humour, satire and being 'in-on-the-joke' (Best 2016). These tactics may be effective, in part, because podcasts offer a particularly intimate and clubby feeling, which is then furthered by interaction and audience engagement.

MAXIMUM FUN IN THE PODCAST LANDSCAPE

For this article, I focus on three particular podcasts (*Judge John Hodgman* (2010–); *Jordan, Jesse, Go!* (2007–); and *MBMBAM*) to highlight the interactions between podcast shows, producers and audiences in online spaces. In *Textual Poachers* (1992), Jenkins argues that approaching subjects from the position of both an academic and an admitted fan positions researchers in a way to more deeply consider the implications of media text choices and their audience responses. As a fan of Maximum Fun and their podcasts, I have a familiarity with their content, patterns and changing approaches to engaging with audiences. By foregrounding my position as researcher and fan, I hope to highlight the ongoing interactions between Maximum Fun and its fans, but also to more deeply analyse the significance of the strategic choices by the company on their relationship with audiences.

Beyond my own interest in and history with Maximum Fun's podcast offerings, the distributor and its shows offer an insight into the workings of mid-size producer-distributors, an influential sector of the podcasting ecosystem. As an early figure in podcasting, the network's creator Jesse Thorn has had an influence on other similar podcasting groups and creators. Most notably, Marc Maron publically thanked Thorn for his help in the creation of *WTF with Marc Maron* (2009–) and Thorn's own shows often include participation from the wider community of comedians and podcasters in Los Angeles (*WTF with Marc Maron*, 29 July 2012). Maximum Fun's podcast offerings are not nearly as widely downloaded as *WTF* or *This American Life*, but they remain an influential segment of the podcast ecosystem with strong ties to some of the most critically lauded podcasts today. In particular, focusing on the ways three select Maximum Fun shows include and engage with fans, and promote outside audience engagement shows the strategic and practical ways small podcasts cultivate audiences and reward fan engagement.

THREE APPROACHES TO ENGAGING PODCAST FANS

Jordan, Jesse, Go!

In 2007, Thorn and Jordan Morris began recording *Jordan, Jesse, Go!*, a conversational comedy show based on Thorn and Morris's college radio programme. The show's conceit is largely based on casual comedic banter between Thorn and Morris and their weekly guest (who is usually a comedian). The episodes last roughly an hour or an hour and a half and consist of extended conversations about recent amusing observations, riffs on current events or pop culture, or extended departures into obscure conversations or paths of enquiry. Episodes begin with an extended introductory conversation and are

then segmented into 30-minute chunks divided by 30-second sponsor breaks or brief musical interludes to allow the hosts to reset the topic of discussion. *Jordan, Jesse, Go!* episodes are filled with running gags, in-jokes and call-backs to previous episodes (sometimes from years earlier.) However, the show's topics are not exclusively light and funny. In a 2013 interview with an American pop-culture website, The A.V. Club, Thorn described the choice to expand the range of issues discussed in the podcast from comedic to more personal:

We had a couple of segments that weren't related to my dog dying. I'm doing jokes, but I'm thinking, 'Should I talk about this thing that happened?' Finally, I just decided that part of what our show is about is our connection with the audience. I thought that I could talk about it in a way that that wouldn't feel like I was exploiting this thing that happened and could be relatable and honest and sincere. So that's what I tried to do. It was hard to talk about. But the reaction to that episode was part of what convinced me that doing *Jordan, Jesse, Go!* was a worthwhile endeavor outside of the stuff I was doing and outside of the part of it that's about everybody getting a few laughs.

(Rabin 2013)

While most segments are unstructured, the show routinely prompts listeners to call in and record voicemail messages, which the hosts then respond to. For two of these segments, 'moments of shame' and 'momentous occasions', listeners are encouraged to share their own experiences with the show by calling the podcast's voicemail immediately after exciting, interesting, or embarrassing moments in their lives. In the 2013 A.V. Club interview, Thorn said participatory segments offer a space to build camaraderie and shared experience between the podcast itself and its fans:

Things have happened in my life that I haven't talked about on the show, really significant things, but part of what *Jordan, Jesse, Go!* is about is us going through changes in our lives that reflect the changes in our audience's lives. That's why we do Momentous Occasions: Partly it's because we want to hear about someone seeing a goat standing on top of a cow. But partly when we hear from somebody who is transgendered and just went out in public as the opposite gender for the first time, or when we hear from somebody who just had their first kid, it's about things that happen in the game of life.

(Rabin 2013)

Beyond these regular segments, the hosts of *Jordan, Jesse, Go!* ask listeners to call in with prompts to less regular questions. For example, one yearly gag has been the creation of a new-year slogan, where listeners suggest humorous and hyperbolic slogans that will serve as inspiration for the year to come (*Jordan, Jesse, Go!*, 7 January 2013). With each annual slogan, the hosts prompt fans to illustrate the phrase and post and share these illustrations online (*Jordan, Jesse, Go!*, 7 January 2013, 20 January 2014). The fan-created illustrations and artwork (see Figure 1) range from crude drawings to elaborate artwork in the hope of prompting acknowledgement of their work by the hosts on future episodes (Maximum Fun Forum 2013c, 2013a). The combination of these fan contributions along with continued references and



Figure 1: This painting was created by Maximum Fun listener Xyloart for the 2014 Jordan, Jesse, Go! slogan 'The Flight of the Raptor, the Sting of the Asp'. Posted in the Maximum Fun Forum on 30 January 2014 (Maximum Fun Forum 2014a).

inter-episodic callbacks reward regular listeners and fan contributors for their loyalty as regular listeners.

MY BROTHER, MY BROTHER AND ME

The first episode of *My Brother, My Brother and Me* (MBMBAM) was uploaded in April 2010 and the show joined the Maximum Fun network in January 2011. This show is hosted by three brothers, Travis McElroy, Justin McElroy and Griffin McElroy, and is loosely structured as an advice show where the hosts answer public questions (Lavender 2010). According to the podcast's page on the Maximum Fun website, 'the brothers McElroy will answer any query sent [their] way, each fielding questions falling into [their] respective areas of expertise'. The question-answer nature of this theme allows the brothers to joke and create ongoing comic riffs on the basis of their knowledge of each other and digressions about (sometimes absurd) questions. Episodes also occasionally include outside guests who are asked to help offer advice.

The brothers actively prompt audience participation in asking the questions to be asked on the show (MBMBAM, 15 December 2014). During episodes, they ask listeners to provide questions that range from the serious to the banal and absurd. The brothers sort through the questions provided by phone, e-mail, Twitter and other online spaces (Lavender 2010). In addition to fan-prompted questions, the brothers also collect unanswered questions from Yahoo Answers – a website where anonymous Internet users can post questions, which are crowd-sourced by other Yahoo Answers users (Yahoo n.d.). The combination of these sources allows for a diversity and volume of questions that suit the comedy focus of the shows, affording the audiences opportunities to participate.

JUDGE JOHN HODGMAN

Started in late 2010, the *Judge John Hodgman* podcast features John Hodgman, a comedian with notable roles in a variety of small comedy programmes and a recurring guest on *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* (1996 – present) (Thorn 2010). A take on small-stakes courtroom programmes, the show features audience members who call the show to ask for decisions regarding minor disputes and disagreements. In an interview with the comedy news website Splitsider, Hodgman described the range of cases: 'We invite people to submit their disputes, whether they are philosophically grand, such as "Does a machine gun qualify as a robot?" That was one of our earliest cases. To the much more mundane ...' (Madrid 2014). In a typical show, Hodgman acts as judge and makes final rulings on the case while Jesse Thorn acts as bailiff and comic sidekick. Hodgman listens to the participants plead their cases while adding wry commentary, and then 'rules' based on the case he thinks is stronger. Occasionally, Hodgman will 'clear the docket' at the end of the episodes and offer summary judgements on cases without calling the audience members (*Judge John Hodgman*, 19 October 2011).

Unlike the previous two podcasts, which ask listeners to submit ideas or respond to running gags and conversations, *Judge John Hodgman* is premised on including listeners and fans within the structure of the show itself. Interested participants are asked by the hosts to visit a dedicated web page on the Maximum Fun website, which describes the submission process. The show's submission web page instructs listeners to describe their dispute and provide contact information so they may be contacted to schedule a Skype audio call, which will be recorded for the episode (Maximum Fun n.d.). Thorn suggests that the involvement of audience members is important for creating the show's humorous and interesting dynamic, saying 'The best *Judge John Hodgman* cases [...] are always about the relationship between the litigants' (NPR Staff 2013). Moreover, listeners are prompted to 'weigh in' on the cases presented in the episodes with their own opinions or experiences, creating two levels of fan participation: that of the listeners invited to be on episodes, and for the rest of the fans who then comment on each episode's decision.

Judge John Hodgman has been ranked as one of the more popular podcasts both for comedies and among all podcasts, whereas *Jordan, Jesse, Go!* and *MBMBAM* are generally far less popular according to the iTunes podcast charts (Apple 2014a, 2014b). This popularity is also probably in part due to John Hodgman's popularity and notoriety as comedian and author. Hodgman has parlayed his 'Judge' persona beyond the podcast into a recurring column in *The New York Times* also titled 'Judge John Hodgman' (Doctorow 2015). Beyond Hodgman's own popularity, the accessibility of the show's format may also be a part of its continued success. The show's familiar 'people's court' genre may make the show more accessible to new listeners compared with the inside-joke and relationship-driven humour of *Jordan, Jesse, Go!* and *MBMBAM*.

ENGAGING PODCAST CREATORS ON FORUMS AND SOCIAL NETWORKS

While these three podcasts each offer different forms of audience acknowledgement and participation, the shows also promote a variety of spaces for fan interaction, creation and involvement. Rather than focusing on one specific space to interact with audiences, the network and its podcasts suggest that

listeners visit a variety of spaces for following and reacting to episodes as they are published and distributed. The following online spaces are all somewhat equally promoted and mentioned within the previously described Maximum Fun podcasts, yet the popularity, accessibility and organization of these spaces yield different forms and levels of participation of participation.

Maximum Fun Forums

The most notable example of Maximum Fun following users can be seen in the transition from the Maximum Fun Forum, an online forum hosted by the company, to the r/maximumfun forum page found within the online link-sharing website Reddit. These two spaces demonstrate the delicate balance between organizational control and seeking-out spaces where fans are more likely to participate. Ultimately, the growth of the Reddit page and the stagnation and ultimately the archiving of the Maximum Fun Forum can be seen as the trade between a self-run space with dedicated participants and an open online space with more traffic, but a greater reliance on fan labour and participation.

Until 2015, Maximum Fun podcasts heavily encouraged listeners to participate in conversations about episodes and related topics on the Maximum Fun Forum (see Figure 2) – the forum website, which was linked to the organization’s primary website with earliest post, dates to January 2007 (Maximum Fun Forum 2014a). On the forum, hosts actively asked fans to post their thoughts on each episode on the forum and sometimes ask fans to fulfil specific requests in reaction to subjects brought up in the shows themselves, such as the previously mentioned slogan art for *Jordan, Jesse, Go!*



Figure 2: A screenshot of the Shows section of the Maximum Fun Forum taken in December 2014.

The forum site itself was divided into two sections. The first, 'MaximumFun.org – Shows & Events', consisted primarily of threads created for each Maximum Fun podcast episode. Generally, either a host of the show or a Maximum Fun employee posts them with the prompt 'discuss' (Maximum Fun Forum 2013c, 2014a). Other posts included references to upcoming live recordings of the podcasts or scheduled 'meet-ups' where audience members can meet hosts in person. By 2014, the majority of forum posts on the show section received few comments, with some consisting of questions or positive reactions to the topics brought up on the shows (Maximum Fun Forum 2014b). The second section of the Forum, 'Arts & Culture & Everything Else', was more directly aimed towards building a community of listeners and fans. The section included posts directly about podcast hosts and personalities, posts about broader topics like pop culture texts (television, movies, video games, other podcasts, etc.) and posts seeking other Maximum Fun listeners in their city, region or country.

Foreshadowing the Forum's 2015 closure, the most commented-on thread of 2014 was a post where users had voiced their displeasure with the usability of the Maximum Fun Forums – particularly the organization of the 'shows' section into single episodes (Maximum Fun Forum 2013b). Within that thread, Thorn acknowledged the limitations of the existing system and said the purpose of keeping all episodes in the same forum was in part because of financial limitations but also to foster fan engagement with each other and with the Maximum Fun podcasts saying '[o]ur goal is to foster one lively community' (Thorn 2013b). But by 2015, Maximum Fun made the choice to shutter the forum and re-focus the online community building efforts towards publically hosted networks like Reddit, Twitter and Facebook. In anticipation of the Forum closure, Maximum Fun fans posted memories and words of appreciation for the forum on the r/maximumfun reddit page (JCSaffer 2015). Within that thread, several commenters posted about the connections they had made with other listeners, while also acknowledging that the Forum had become less frequently used and visited. Several posted that they hoped the Reddit page would become a more centralized space for the listener community.

Maximum Fun podcasters have worked to cultivate stronger ties with more public forums, including the online link-sharing and commenting website Reddit. More specifically, hosts including Thorn or pairs of hosts like Thorn and Morris have participated in AMA ('ask me anything') threads where celebrities (or notable people) answer public questions (Morissette 2012; Tickle 2014). During these AMA sessions, the hosts answer questions about themselves, their shows and their process of creating the shows and how they balance podcasting with their lives (Thorn 2013a).

As early as 2010, the r/maximumfun subreddit was promoted by Maximum Fun (Duus 2010). Posts on r/maximumfun (see Figure 3) are similar to those on the organization's independent forum. Some posts focus exclusively on episodes or events; others may highlight photos or videos that users think are relevant to the podcast network. For example, in one recent thread, users debate whether they believe an audience member on *Judge John Hodgman* is who he claims to be and whether they liked the episode in question (mr_glasses 2014). The Reddit forum is moderated by a combination of fans and podcast hosts.

The Reddit forum is a combination of the existing forums where show-specific participation and general-interest topics often blend. It includes a mix of episode-specific threads where listeners can comment on the latest



Figure 3: A screenshot of <http://www.reddit.com/r/maximumfun> taken in December 2014.

episodes, along with Maximum Fun-relevant threads posted by fans. While participation on both the Maximum Fun Forum on the Reddit forum appears to be exclusive to a relatively small group of dedicated users, participation on Reddit is more accessible for casual fans and listeners than the organization’s self-maintained forum. This is particularly true for AMA posts, which are generally more widely publicized and posted on Reddit pages other than *r/maximumfun* and thus viewed by more than the most dedicated fans. Additionally, producers have used the subreddit as a space to solicit questions/topics for episodes – for example, in February 2016, Thorn asked the reddit page to ask the hosts anything, with the answers recorded for a special fundraiser episode (Thorn 2016).

While the migration of audience space from the Maximum Fun Forums to the *r/maximumfun* Reddit page might be an effect of following fans to more active spaces, the platform itself has been the source of controversy and criticism. Most directly, Adrienne Massanari (2015) argues Reddit’s interface, which asks contributors to pander to sensational and outrageous content, perpetuates mob reactions and have helped foster abusive and misogynist incidents including #Gamergate and the 2014 mass leak of celebrity personal photos. While the *r/maximumfun* does not appear to overtly include any explicitly abusive content, moving the central site for fan community from a separate forum to Reddit may potentially alienate listeners unfamiliar or uncomfortable with Reddit.

Forum-based audience engagement offers a consistent space for community building and contact with podcast creators and fans, but may remain relatively insular compared with more widely visited spaces. The choice for Maximum Fun to close its self-hosted forum and increase promotion of other

spaces of participation suggests an intentional following of fans to more open, less explicitly company-led spaces. As participation on the Maximum Fun Forum dwindled before its 2015 shutdown, audience participation on other sites had steadily grown, particularly across social networks such as Twitter and Tumblr where listeners can not only connect with each other to discuss episodes, hosts and related topics, but they can easily share their fandom with other potential listeners as well.

Maximum Fun on social networks (hashtags on Twitter and Tumblr)

Maximum Fun podcasts also promote fan interactivity through the promotion of hashtags (searchable keywords) related to each specific podcast for the online social media platforms Twitter and Tumblr (see Figure 4). Within each of the three podcasts, hosts ask listeners to label their posts about the shows

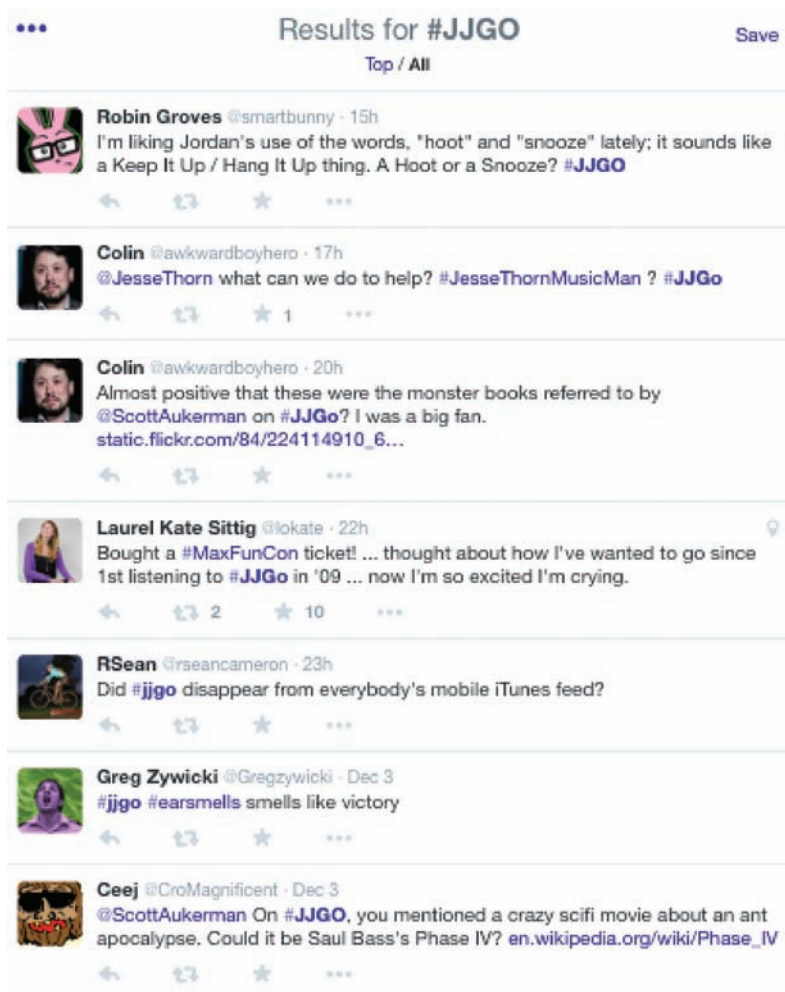


Figure 4: A screenshot of a search for #JJGO taken on 2 December 2014.

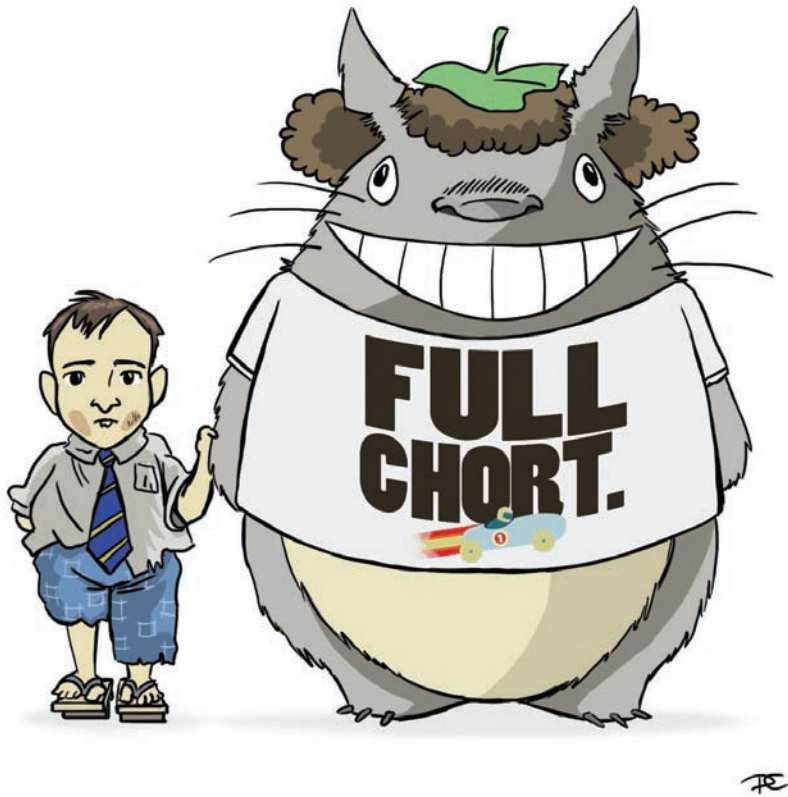


Figure 5: A fan-made illustration depicting a caricature of Jesse Thorn and a stylized animal with a T-shirt including 'full chort', a running joke from Jordan, Jesse, Go! Created by Tumblr user dddancostales (2013).

and episodes so they can be easily found and shared. *Jordan, Jesse, Go!* uses the hashtag #JJGO, *Judge John Hodgman* uses the tag #JJHO, and *MBMBaM* uses #MBMBaM. Engagement through hashtags is more free-form than forum posts. There are few continuous lines of conversation or organized community interactions. Instead, the show tags become shorthand for indicating knowledge of the show to other users, repeating jokes and bits heard during episodes or promoting the podcasts themselves (Twitter n.d.a).

Participants also use hashtags to post about the show on Tumblr, a micro blogging with more flexibility than Twitter's 140-character limit. Tumblr posts with the hashtags include audio clips, fan-made photos and longer quotes from episodes. Notably, many Tumblr posts include fan-art that the posters claim to have drawn after being inspired by the shows. These often consist of comical paintings or drawings of the hosts or the topics they have discussed in previous episodes (see Figures 5 and 6).

While hashtagged posts offer the most flexibility for users to create and play with the content within podcast episodes, they may also offer the least direct connection to the podcast hosts and community at large. That flexibility may lead to an increased distance between podcast creators and the most in-depth forms of podcast communities. Because of the popularity of social



Figure 6: A fan-made illustration depicting the hosts of My Brother, My Brother and Me MBMBAM) as the figures on the cover of the 1977 Fleetwood Mac album 'Rumours'. Created and posted Tumblr user rivaldojo (2013).

networks for both casual and intense fans, podcast hashtags hold the potential to broadcast interest in the podcasts to connections who are casual or non-listeners. These displays of fandom potentially offer a bridge of interest to disinterested or apathetic parties exposed to media (called 'non-fans' by Gray) while the relative obscurity and small scale of the podcast community remain somewhat insulated from potential anti-fans (Gray 2003).

The fan spaces above offer producers and fans different levels of engagement and participation for listeners including prompting fans 'call in' to podcasts, engaging with fellow fans online and the producers and hosts of the Maximum Fun podcasts in this case appear to have made a concerted effort to promote participation as a way to enhance the listening experience and fan enjoyment of the episodes themselves.

CONCLUSION

As the analysis of these Maximum Fun examples has demonstrated, interactions between podcast producers and podcast fans take many forms. More importantly, this level of engagement appears to be in part enabled and enhanced by the presence of other digital technologies, spaces and tools,

which allow producers and listeners to expand their connections beyond podcast episodes to form communities and shared spaces. However, these spaces are burdened not only by fan expectations and work to develop and fill them, but also by the industrial demands of podcast producers who use these spaces to gather content and promote content. In the above example, these two groups form a delicate symbiosis of practices and engagements that require maintenance from both producers and fans to ‘maximize fun’ for all involved. Podcasts and the communities that surround them offer a fascinating example of how new media convergence expands interactions and engagement between audiences and media creators beyond the media products themselves. In the three Maximum Fun podcasts discussed, audiences and fan participation play an important role within the text of the podcast episodes themselves. While this is not new, audiences have played a role in many forms of performance and media from theatre to television game shows; in the case of podcasts, the intimacy of the medium and fan familiarity with the hosts build community and camaraderie. By interacting across digital spaces, these relationships are deepened.

The power of this convergence is seen in how these communities are built and maintained in online participatory spaces outside the podcasts themselves. By actively promoting the production company’s online forums, Reddit pages dedicated to its podcasts, and show-specific hashtags, Maximum Fun podcast hosts promote an engaged and active community, which potentially feeds back into the content heard on their podcasts. These spaces appear to offer different levels of engagement and responses for different levels of fans, offering more flexibility and availability for different fan interests and levels.

My analysis of how audience participation is discussed, promoted and engaged within these select cases emphasizes the nuanced relationship fostered between relatively small media producers and audiences. Specifically, we see an execution of Quirk’s (2016: 49) ‘premium model’ of podcasting, where producers integrate engagement, fan service and interactions as a way to build and maintain listenership and brand loyalty. But rather than framing these relationships as occurring between makers and takers, it suggests a more complex interaction in which fans help create and consume the podcasts themselves. Moreover, the communities around these podcasts embody Jenkins-ian notions of actively producing fans across many converging media spaces (Jenkins 2006).

With the growing scholarly interest in podcasting, there are many opportunities to continue these explorations of podcasts and audiences. While existing research has explored some of the motivations for podcast creators, a deeper ethnographic study of podcasting listeners, habits and consumption practices may offer a deeper understanding of what motivates podcast listeners and the role podcasting plays in everyday life, building on contemporary podcast audience research like Florini (2015), Meserko (2014, 2015a) and Salvati (2015).

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SUGGESTED CITATION

- Wrather, K. (2016), 'Making "Maximum Fun" for fans: Examining podcast listener participation online', *The Radio Journal – International Studies in Broadcast & Audio Media*, 14: 1, pp. 43–63, doi: 10.1386/rajo.14.1.43_1

CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

Kyle Wrather is a doctoral student at the University of Texas in Austin. He received a Masters of Arts from Georgia State University in 2014. His research interests include new media technologies, media industries and new media audience practices.

Contact: Radio-Television-Film, The University of Texas at Austin, 2504 Whitis Ave. Stop A0800, Austin, TX 78712-1067, USA.
E-mail: kyle.wrather@utexas.edu

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