

Upright Citizens of the Digital Age:  
Podcasting and Popular Culture in an Alternative Comedy Scene

BY

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## Abstract

In this thesis I look at how one of our newest communication mediums, the podcast, is being used by a group of Los Angeles-based comedians loosely assembled under the “alternative comedy” label. Through the lens of critical and medium theory, I identify two primary functions of the podcast for this community: 1) as a space for comedy performance involving character-based sketches and stream-of-consciousness conversation and 2) as a meditation on the nature of stand-up comedy that often confronts tensions between popular and folk culture. I argue that these two functions have become generic hallmarks of the alternative comedy podcasting community. As such, they provide important insight into how subcultures reinforce, reinterpret, and manage artistic value in new media environments. Further, the podcast offers an object lesson in the ways that creative artists have exercised a new sense of agency in controlling the direction of their careers.

*Keywords:* podcast, medium theory, comedy, subculture, popular culture, folk culture

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**Introduction:**

Marc Maron does not broadcast from a state-of-the-art studio. It's actually not really even a studio, but rather a place that he affectionately calls "The Cat Ranch." The grizzled veteran of the alternative comedy scene sits amongst his cats in his disheveled garage in Highland Park, California each week and talks—a lot. He talks about his past addictions, his neurotic insecurities, his failed marriages; he interviews fake childhood friends, phony Latin radio hosts, and old comedy pals who he may or may not have been rude to in the past. In addition to being a stand-up comedian, Maron is also a podcaster. Within the current Los Angeles alternative comedy scene, the two are becoming increasingly difficult to distinguish. Maron records a twice-a-week downloadable audio podcast, *What the Fuck? (WTF)*, and offers it as an iTunes download and as an MP3 download where anyone with a computer, MP3 player or an iPod can listen. Such has become a familiar process for those operating within this comedy scene, as this new communication medium has worked to reinforce this burgeoning subculture with a type of do-it-yourself audio identity that fortifies its place as a subversive voice in the spaces between popular culture and a counterculture.

Maron, along with fellow podcasters Jimmy Pardo of *Never Not Funny*, Scott Aukerman of *Comedy Death-Ray*, Jesse Thorn and Jordan Morris of *Jordan, Jesse, GO!*, and Doug Benson of *Doug Loves Movies*, has been using the podcast as an artistic outlet and tool for self-promotion for the past several years. All of these podcasts share similar guests and are tied to the Upright Citizens Brigade Theater (UCB) in Los Angeles. This small theater located just north of Hollywood Boulevard has become the hub through which many of these podcasters travel. Some of the podcasts are live tapings from the UCB while others are recorded at home in a spare bedroom at their house or in an actual radio studio. Some of these podcasters, like Maron, have

moved their podcast out of their house and onto the UCB stage for monthly live podcast tapings. This podcast medium allows this group of comedians to skirt FCC-regulations, produce content not indebted to advertisers, gatekeepers, club owners, or executives, and feel empowered that their podcasted content is able to reach their most ardent fans in the most direct, intimate way. These properties make it a fine complement to the UCB Theater, whose intimate seating arrangement and small confines make palpable the energy that flows between the audience and the stage. In this way, the podcast provides a sense of continuity between physical places, like the UCB, and the virtual community of fans that have embraced this medium. I call this scene “the UCB alternative comedy scene” because its members have been principled in drawing distinctions between their style of comedy and the more staid, traditional schools of improvisatory comedy, such as Chicago’s famed Second City. The UCB alternative comedy scene offers an alternative performance style and venue, and it is clearly rooted in a physical place. It also is using an intrepid, alternative medium. As I demonstrate, these podcasters each have forged distinct places for themselves within this scene, and their use of this upstart medium represents an important case study in the shifting cultural dynamics that the podcast introduces. Each podcaster’s own biographical profile offers a few possible explanations as to why they have taken to this medium so passionately.

These podcasts all have separate identities with divergent personalities operating them, but are nevertheless linked to one another through shared comedic sensibilities and a shared talent roster from which each of them taps. All of these podcasts are further linked together by their shared commitment to live performances at the UCB Theater. The revolving cast of familiar faces who turn up on these podcasts ensure that the scene is given a core identity. However, the individual personalities build the shows, and it is ultimately their own differing comedic styles

that shape the content. It is in this sense, that the podcasts are an empowering medium for the comics and perhaps the most direct way of engaging their audience.

The emergence of this artist-empowering medium has been felt in the broader new media environment as well. As books by Caddell-M (2006), Hart-Davis (2004) and Hahn (2003) demonstrate, promotion, marketing, and branding have increasingly become do-it-yourself enterprises. Rather than rely on publicists or marketing companies, most of these UCB podcasters have embraced this do-it-yourself mentality. Third-party intermediaries are eliminated in this scenario, and the comedians using these podcasts have seen this immediacy, intimacy, and direct relationship forged between artist-fan contribute to an ever-broadening fan base that drifts fluidly between these physical and virtual places. These comedians have made an attempt to shape technology rather than have it determined for them. As Bijker & Law (1992) argue, “technologies do not evolve under the impetus of some necessary inner technological or scientific logic” (p. 3). Rather, technology is “pressed into shape” by those who use it, and these are the people who determine the trajectory of our technologies (p. 3). In this sense, these comedians have become technology shapers by understanding how the properties of the mediums they shape can be used to their benefit. To use McLuhan’s (1964) aphorism, they are attuned to the fact that often the “medium is the message” (p. 8). Moreover, this technology shaping exists among a group of comedians that value their alternative label but are also in some ways beholden to large, commercial, and mainstream industries to provide them with some semblance of monetary stability. Such competing demands create an interesting dynamic and produces a tension that is negotiated in the discussions and interviews between comedians that make up a substantial part of the podcast discourse.

While popular news media seem to be becoming increasingly deluged with stories

tracking the newest advancements in technical gadgetry, these podcasters have moved the discussion beyond mere curiosity with the new or novel. The newest communication technologies, like the iPod, with its increased download speeds, ever larger storage capacities, and dramatic public unveilings may entrance people, but the popular fixation on the material object may in fact disguise the ways in which their supposed uses are open to creative interpretation by the user. In this sense, the iPod is not merely a music-listening device but also a distribution channel for an emergent artistic subculture. The way the podcast is used by these UCB comedians seems especially indicative of the potentially creative uses of new communication mediums, as podcasters have taken the iPod, ostensibly a music-playing device, and reimagined it as a hub for an entire artistic community, whose content is downloaded, listened to, commented on, and processed by comedy fans and fellow comedians alike. The results of this creative use are at once exciting and invigorating, but they are also problematic, as the creative user of these devices must harness the freedoms afforded by the medium with the equally crucial need to create content attractive to potential listeners. Such an understanding of the forms and functions of these podcasts can provide insight into how value is managed and created, and how this value is directly influenced by the properties of the podcast medium itself. In other words, given these freedoms, how does this particular medium's content function, and what implications might it illuminate for the larger new media culture of which it is a part?

As McClung and Johnson (2010) note, much of the academic research that has been done on podcasting has been limited to the following areas: tracking the motives of the podcast user, the rate in which podcasts are being downloaded, and how podcasts are being used in educational and business settings (p. 83). The uses of the podcast in education have been an especially prevalent research topic in a number of scholarly articles. Jarvis and Dickie (2010) describe the



potential positive uses of the podcast for field researchers in geography; Moss, O'Connor, and White (2010) have described some of the psychosocial predictors of podcast use in educational environments; and Altvater (2009) outlined possible uses for art-related podcasts in art education. While this particular research is useful and gives much-needed definition to often intangible concepts, there nonetheless exists a significant void in research into podcasting that transcends these genres. Additionally, there exists a considerable amount of new media research that details the ways in which the internet and digital communications technologies have fundamentally altered notions of fandom, artist-fan co-creation, online community and the participatory nature of contemporary artistic creation. Works by Jenkins (2006), Baym (2000), and Suhr (2009) have described in detail how cultures of media convergence are participatory and transformational in the ways that fans and artists relate to one another and how consumers themselves are adding their own creative touches to the media they consume.

What seems to be an often overlooked critical approach, however, is to engage these texts as inherently important in their own right and as exceptional examples of the inventive use of new media from the perspective of the artist. I argue that the dynamics of the artist-fan relationship are profoundly influenced by the content itself. If the user is to feel compelled to participate with media she consumes, then there must exist something within these texts that makes engagement with them attractive to those who seek them out. By turning a critical eye to new media texts as rhetorical discourse that function for a situated audience, I hope to illuminate the aesthetic form of the podcast medium while developing and building upon previous research into the dynamics of communication technology. Ultimately, I argue that there are two primary functions of the comedy podcasts in this UCB alternative comedy scene: 1) as a unique space for comedy performance, oftentimes featuring characters and stream-of-consciousness wit and 2) as

a vessel for discussions and conversations that are self-reflective, self-promotional, and even therapeutic for the performers as they navigate the boundaries and limits of popular culture. In my analysis I argue that the UCB community of podcasters have used the freedom of the medium not just to perform their craft, but also to comment specifically *on* that craft--to situate it in a cultural context, to define the parameters of alternative comedy, and to comment on how to maintain artistic integrity when forced to confront having to compromise that integrity. These two functions are felt more forcefully in certain podcasts than others, but they are nevertheless omnipresent forces within the discourse of the UCB alternative comedy podcast. I argue that these two functions end up being the defining characteristics that give structure to the UCB alternative comedy scene. These comics are certainly tied together by place (the UCB), but they are also tied together by the style of the comedy and by the tenor of the conversation that takes place within the podcast medium. In this way, what seems to be a wholly unpredictable medium ends up having a characteristic style for a situated group of artists, and this style reinforces the ways in which the comics identify with one another. In short, the medium helps to define the community as much as the place defines the community. The two primary uses of the podcast then are used as a way to reinforce the collective identity of the scene. The style of comedy and the trajectory of the conversations within this podcast discourse tells much about how this community views itself and what values it shares—values not often seen by the casual audience member. Such an analysis reveals this community to be as equally dedicated to a certain style of comedic performance as they are to insightfully discussing what it is that this style means for their careers and for their placement in the spaces between alternative and mainstream popular culture.

To make this argument I first give a brief definition of what a podcast is. Second, I

engage in a discussion of relevant theoretical material. Next, I provide an overview of the methods that I will use in my analysis. Finally, I engage in an analysis of these podcasts before concluding with a discussion of the implications for this scene as it looks to the future.

## **Medium Theory and Popular Culture**

### *What is a podcast?*

Before going farther it is necessary to first develop an understanding of what is meant by the word “podcast” to describe a particular medium. The term podcast is itself quite elusive, perhaps contributing to a lack of critical investigation into its exact uses, forms, and functions. Podcast developer Mark Curry conceived of the podcast by using Real Simple Syndication (RSS) technology “to identify and automatically deliver MP3 files to his computer” (p. 83). Curry offered up the technology to open source developers and eventually over 100,000 podcasts became available through the iTunes software (p. 83). A few articles have attempted to provide a concrete definition of the term podcast. In a pioneering article for podcasting research, Richard Berry (2006) defines the podcast as “as an over-arching term for any audio-content downloaded from the internet either manually from a website or automatically via software applications” (p. 144). More recently, McClung and Johnson (2010) offer the following definition: “podcasts are audio and video files that can be downloaded to a desktop computer, iPod, or other portable media player for playback later” (p. 83). Some podcasts are simply conventional radio or television shows that have been made available in podcast form, but others are truly do-it-yourself operations created by amateurs using primitive equipment and broadcasting from their own homes. In some ways, the podcast is a secondary medium; for others, the podcast is the

primary medium. Further, the podcast is also often subscription-based and episodic, and subscribers can have this audio content automatically delivered to them as soon as new episodes are available. While the numbers of subscribers continue to rise, the podcast is still a relatively nascent communications medium. A 2008 study conducted by the Pew Internet & American Life Project states that only 20 percent of internet users have downloaded a podcast (Madden & Jones, 2008). The study acknowledges that “very few internet users download podcasts on a typical day” (Madden & Jones, 2008). The research also demonstrates, however, a near threefold increase in the number of podcast users from February-April of 2006 to May of 2008. An even more recent study would likely see these numbers continue to climb.

The podcast, despite often being channeled through the Apple mega corporation, nevertheless retains a certain rogue flavor. According to Berry (2006) the podcast function of the iPod medium “was not developed, planned or marketed and yet its arrival does challenge established practices in a way that is not only unprecedented but also unpredictable” (p. 144). The podcast is made unpredictable because it is able to circumvent the traditional media gatekeeping process and skirt all FCC regulations with regard to language and content (pp. 143-144). The podcast is filtered through no overriding authority and its content is subject to no time restrictions or advertising requirements. Its place-shifting and time-shifting qualities allow for it to be listened to anywhere and at any time (McClung & Johnson, 2010, p. 83). As Bull (2005) suggests, users of portable MP3 devices like the iPod “have unprecedented power of control over [their] experiences of time and space” (p. 343). Further, Bull argues that these portable devices actually function to imbue meaning to mundane activities like walking to work that, without the iPod, are “so habitual as to not merit mention” (348). He argues that the customizability of the iPod allows the user to create sophisticated playlists that achieve “harmony with their desired

mood, orientation or surroundings” (p. 348). As such, the medium takes these mundane everyday activities and processes them *through* the iPod’s songs which in turn ascribe narrative meaning to the places in which these mundane activities are carried out (p. 349). This process allows users to create “narrative memories at will in places where they would otherwise have difficulty in summoning them up” (p. 349).

These details point to the fact that our experiences of media are intimately tied to the physical properties of the mediums through which they are delivered. Understanding the content and form of podcasts necessarily entails an understanding of how the medium itself is biased, to use Harold Innis’ phrase, in favor of certain uses, experiences, and behaviors on the part of media creators and consumers (Innis, 1951). Meyrowitz (1994) describes this medium theory as “focusing on the particular characteristics of each individual medium or of each particular type of media” (p. 50). A medium theorist asks the following question: “what are the relatively fixed features of each means of communicating, and how do these features make the medium physically, psychologically, and socially different from other media and face-to-face interaction” (p. 50)? This thesis focuses on how the podcast’s fixed features influence the way it functions as a medium. In the following pages I provide a review of relevant theoretical material beginning with an explanation of medium theory followed by theories of folk, popular, and convergence cultures.

### *Medium Theory*

Considered a luminous figure within the evolution of medium theory, Canadian economist and theorist Harold Innis is credited with being one of the first intellectuals to begin to formalize the theory’s tenets. Innis (1951) recognized that a “medium of communication has an

important influence on the dissemination of knowledge over space and time” (p. 33). Innis suggested that the “character” of the medium itself constrains considerably the ways in which the knowledge inscribed on that medium is disseminated throughout society (p. 33). Durable mediums, such as clay tablets, are time-binding rather than space-binding because the character of the tablet itself is “biased” in favor of longevity rather than transportability (p. 33). Further, light and portable mediums, like papyrus, are space-binding rather than time-binding (p. 33). Their character makes them easily transportable, but it also binds them to a certain space in time because their fragility makes it difficult for them to preserve well. Innis argued that even our study of history itself is influenced by the character of the medium because only the most well-preserved artifacts are available to us (p. 33). In effect, the evolution of history owes its progression to the character and prevalence of the mediums of the time, and our *understanding* of this history is itself biased or skewed in favor of those times in history where time-bound mediums prevailed (pp. 33-34).

Given that Innis instructed and guided the thought of McLuhan, it is hardly surprising that McLuhan’s *Understanding Media: Extensions of Man* is concerned with issues surrounding the medium through which media “content” is transmitted rather than the content itself. In fact, McLuhan hardly considered there to be any difference between the two, as “content” itself does not actually exist (p. 8). Using the example of the electric light, a medium considered capable of only transmitting “pure information,” McLuhan suggested that the “content” of any medium is always another medium” (p. 8). McLuhan stated that the “content of writing is speech, just as the written word is the content of print, and print is the content of the telegraph” (p. 8). Using this logic, McLuhan proposed that content itself does not actually exist because all content originates in human thought which is itself nonverbal (pp. 8-9). McLuhan even went so far as to argue that

“the content uses of media have little effect on human association” (p. 9). So preoccupied are we with content, McLuhan argued, that we have overlooked and ignored mediums whose content messages are not explicitly stated for us (p. 9). Moreover, medium theorist Joshua Meyrowitz (1985) states that medium theorists “suggest that media are not simply channels for conveying information between two or more environments, but rather environments in and of themselves” (p. 16). While certainly arcane, McLuhan’s illumination of the physical characteristics of our mediating objects are nonetheless insightful because they direct our attentions away from the social scientific pursuit of media “effects,” and instead focus them on how the tactile properties of the medium itself affect our sensorial processes of the world at large (Meyrowitz, 1985, pp. 16-17).

Further, McLuhan’s prescient acknowledgment that as information and communications processes accelerate and change so too do the “scales, patterns and pace” that become introduced into “human affairs” (p. 9). To McLuhan, this was the true “message” of the medium, not the visible content, but the medium’s effects on the social relations of people and the experiences of humans in the world at large (p. 9). McLuhan used the medium of the camera to explain how the work of visual artists, for example, was forced to change in response to the ascendancy of the photograph. No longer, McLuhan wrote, could the painter “depict a world that had been much photographed” (p. 194). Therefore, the painter must “reveal the inner process of creativity in expressionism or abstract art” (p. 194). The novelist must compensate for the work of photographers, filmmakers, and radio and television producers by avoiding “happenings” already covered by these mediums (p. 194). Such a point underlies the notion that mediums do not exist in a vacuum, nor are they wholly independent of the influence of other mediums.

As Bolter and Grusin (1999) suggest, there exist very few cultures in which a single

medium predominated, irrespective of the influence of other mediums (p. 65). As they argue, “such isolation does not seem possible for us today, when we cannot even recognize the representational power of a medium except with reference to other media” (p. 65). In analyzing new media texts, Bolter and Grusin argue for a critical approach that addresses the “hybrid character” of mediums, in which the critic takes into account all “aspects” of a medium (p. 67). Moreover, they argue that “although it is true that the formal qualities of the medium reflect their social and economic significance, it is equally true that the social and economic aspects reflect the formal or technical qualities” (p. 68). Such a point underlies the difficulty in determining who influences who in mediated interactions and who it is that is ultimately responsible once the influence is felt in the culture at large.

Surely, using the principles of medium theorists can help the critic discern how the formal components of a medium influence its content and how this content reflects outward to the larger (sub)culture. It may seem counterintuitive to use a medium-based approach when addressing and confronting issues of media *content*. As Meyrowitz (1994) asserts, medium theorists are primarily concerned with how the medium influences certain variables rather than the actual content itself (pp. 50-51). However, it is extremely difficult to separate properties of the medium from the content that a medium carries. In a famous critique of McLuhan’s *Understanding Media*, Kenneth Burke (1966) argued that “if the medium is the message, obviously the important thing is not what somebody says in a given medium, but what medium he uses, regardless of what he says” (p. 169). Burke states this as an “oversimplification” and that if the “information” that makes up a medium’s content “isn’t content, then what is it?” (p. 171). McLuhan’s acknowledgement of the importance of the medium is prescient, but Burke’s critique offers a way of putting the brakes on a solely medium-based approach. As such, I have



taken the medium-based rhetorical approach and incorporated other relevant theoretical material throughout this thesis as a way of ensuring that I am not “oversimplifying” the degree to which the medium is a sole predictor of a medium’s “message.” As Oosterhoff (2001) argues, medium theory is a fascinating, “amazingly intriguing,” and intellectually rigorous concept, but it is not testable nor is it particularly scientific (p. 6). For a different study it might not be an appropriate fit, but for a media-centered critical approach it provides a valuable lens for the media critic.

Given the rapid proliferation of gadgets and the glut of information that they carry, it is helpful to conceive of the information conveyed in podcast discourse as “a kind of shorthand to include the converging fields of culture, media, and telecommunications” (Schiller, 2007, p. xiv). This is similar to the idea expressed by Kellner (1995) in his book *Media Culture*. Kellner explains that “media cultural texts articulate social experiences, transcoding them into the medium of forms like television, film, popular music” (p. 150). Following this progression, the properties of the medium influence its content, and this content is also an “articulation of social experience” (p. 150). In this way the podcast medium and the podcast content are interwoven and this interaction is reflective of a wider cultural context. As Meyrowitz (1994) asserts, medium questions operate on at least two levels: “the micro, individual-situation level, and the macro, cultural level” (p. 51). The micro, individual-situation level will concern questions of podcast content, such as the way that the podcast is used as a comedy performance medium. The larger, cultural context will be evoked in my discussion of how the interviews and discussions that take place in the comedy podcast allow these comedians to reflect on where their comedy fits into a wider, popular culture context. In the following section, I will describe these macro-context notions of popular, folk, and convergence culture.

*Folk Culture, Popular Culture, and Technology Shaping*

Henry Jenkins' (2006) book *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* is one such attempt at placing new communications technologies and artistic work into a broader cultural context. Convergence culture is defined by Jenkins as a move from "medium-specific content toward content that flows across multiple media channels" (p. 243). This convergence culture makes for even "more complex relations between top-down corporate media and bottom-up participatory media" (p. 283). This rejection of the "definitive, authorized version" of media content has led to the corresponding ascendancy of media communities, whose members have sought out and developed new collaborative spaces that reject, at least in theory, the commercial logic of mainstream popular culture even while operating within its constraints. In this comedy community, the battle is not so much between top-down media and bottom-up media, but more of a struggle between the use of a folk-culture, do-it-yourself (DIY) medium like the podcast and the broader popular culture context that these comedians are always oscillating in and out of. It is a struggle of artistic integrity as these podcasters attempt to remain steadfast in offering an "alternative" to something else, but they also make the very real acknowledgement that popular culture pays awfully well. Jenkins does recognize that DIY media "turns back toward a more folk-culture understanding of creativity" (p. 288). Such a phrase suggests that fan-produced creative work resists privatization and commodification (p. 288). Fans of certain media franchises thus "apply the traditional practices of a folk culture to mass culture, treating film or television as if it offered them raw materials for telling their own stories" (p. 288). The idea that participatory, DIY culture is influenced by folk cultural understandings of creativity has been asserted by other academics as well. Jan Simons (2002) has commented that the "new media" is defined by three distinct features: digitization, interactivity, and multimedia (p. 232). Such

elements, he argues, produce a “folk theory of new media” (p. 232). Others, like John Fiske (1989) and John Storey (2003) have argued that there exists little difference between folk culture and popular culture. Fiske writes that “both [folk and popular culture] are, in their different contexts, the culture of the people” (p. 168).

Another definition, as proposed by Harmon (1983), states, “popular culture may be defined as consisting of the arts, rituals, and events, myths, beliefs, and artifacts widely shared by a significant portion of a group of people at a specific time” (p. 3). To Harmon, this popular culture is contrasted with its “assumed nemesis, elite culture and with its non-commercial counterpart, folk culture” (p. 4). The folk culture mainly exists to “improve on the living situation” (p. 5). Folk style is thus conceived as an “oral, traditional, unschooled, continuous, homespun, earthy, improvised, and community-oriented” (p. 5). Often those who employ this folk style are a part of a subculture. Subcultures, according to Kahn and Kellner, (2003) traditionally represent “alternative cultures and practices to the dominant culture of the status quo” (p. 229). A subculture attempts to transcend the “grander cultural forms, themes, and practices” of the broader culture. Similar to Fiske, however, Kahn and Kellner recognize that these alternative subcultures “strive to capture media attention, and in doing so become involved in the Janus-faced process of attempting to transform dominant codes even as they become appropriated, commodified, and redefined by the dominant culture that they contest” (p. 299). Similar to Harmon and Kahn, Kellner, and Strinati (2004) recognizes that “the boundaries drawn between popular culture and art, or between mass, high and folk culture, are being constantly blurred and changed” (p. 41). These podcasts, as I will show in the following pages, use the medium as a way of exploring and giving definition to the UCB alternative comedy scene and to the popular and folk cultural contexts in which they reside.

It will also be important to think of a “folk culture” approach to new media as one that recognizes the media user’s ability to shape the technology that he or she uses without having those choices determined from top-down authorities. The sense of agency enjoyed by these podcasters helps to add authenticity to their acceptance of the “alternative” label given to them in the popular press. As mentioned earlier, Wiebe Bijker and John Law (1992) argue that there is “nothing natural or inevitable” about the ways in which technologies evolve and that their trajectories are often shaped by “heterogeneous contingency” (p. 18). What will be most relevant to consider here is the form that this media takes within this application of folk culture to mass culture. This is a very complex interaction to be sure. Rather than looking at it from a top-down perspective, however, the comedians using these podcasts are essentially artistic free-agents, certainly beholden to the logics of mass culture, but also acutely aware of the freedom afforded to them by the properties of the podcast medium. Such arguments amount to a strong repudiation of technological determinism as practiced by Marshall McLuhan (1967) when he claimed that once we shape our media, media thereafter shapes us. However, McLuhan’s general contribution to media studies, the idea that our mediums of communication are inherently important in and of themselves because of the way they affect the “scales, patterns, and pace” of our relations, remains an incredibly useful principle for this thesis.

### *Putting These Theories Together*

The ideas expressed in the previous sections are all related, yet they also reside in their own distinctive space within media studies. For this particular subculture of UCB alternative comedians, the podcast medium presents a useful case study that can effectively weave together these strands of media theory. Understanding those formal components of the podcast medium,

its time and place-shifting abilities, the ways in which it is biased in favor of certain uses over others, is critical to understanding how it functions within this artistic subculture. I argue that a medium-based critique of the podcast offers one possible explanation for how value is created between comics and their audiences and what these dynamics say about the nature of creativity in the artistic spaces between folk and popular culture. Knowing the form and function of these podcasts, while hopefully a productive undertaking in its own right, is nonetheless limiting without placing it in a larger cultural context. Convergence culture has been the focus of dozens of scholarly inquiries, but they have thus far favored explanations from the perspective of the fan or of media industry, somewhat neglecting the role of the struggling artist in shaping and contributing to this culture. Jenkins (2006) foresees that “the long-term cultural consequences of our current moment of media in transition” will be determined by the conflict between the paradigms of the “corporate-based concept of media convergence and the grassroots-concept of participatory culture” (p. 290). Such a conception seems to accept as given circumstance the placement of media convergence as a corporate-based concept, a system through which products are distributed through culture by aggressive licensing, cross-platform promotion, and the opening up of consumer entry-points. While Jenkins also acknowledges the existence of “grassroots convergence,” defined as “the folk process accelerated and expanded for the digital age,” there is inadequate attention given to what grassroots convergence might look like rhetorically from the artist’s perspective (Jenkins, 2006, p. 136). Rather than just offering examples of who might be spearheading the development of grassroots convergence (e.g., hackers, adbusters, game modders, etc.), it is valuable to look more carefully at the actual content produced in this environment to see exactly how the antagonisms between alternative subculture and the logic of commercial popular culture are negotiated within the form and function of the

podcast medium. A medium-based critical approach can tell us much about the functioning of the new media culture, within which this subset of comedians operates, creates, self-promotes, and meditates on the nature of the business they have chosen. In the following section, I will offer an overview of how this method will look in practice.

## **Methods**

As with any type of new media research there are certain methodological concerns to confront. As Baym and Markham (2009) state, new media research is always placed into “ever-shifting sociocultural contexts” and the internet that helps shift these contexts is itself transitory, subject to perpetual change, and influenced by the emergence of even newer forms of media (p. ix). This shifting context has even contributed to the blurring of academic disciplines (p. ix). Such interdisciplinary research related to the internet also lacks any “canonical texts” and thus “indicates a markedly undisciplined field” (p. xiv). This undisciplined field of research naturally requires the use of a “broad array of theories and methods from multiple disciplines” and demands that the researcher become grounded in a “historical understanding of novel research topics” (p. xiv). The new media that is always shifting these contexts is itself in a state of always changing making it difficult for qualitative researchers to “identify one phenomenon when convergence intertwines them all” (p. x). Working within a theoretical framework that is so expansive demands that the researcher not apply this broad concept to an even broader pallet of phenomenon. As such, I hope to use the influential ideas of medium theorists and others and apply them directly to certain texts and to specific instances in an attempt to avoid overstretching the concept even farther. My study pieces together relevant theoretical concepts because such a method of inquiry is commonplace when dealing with new communication mediums.

Because these media paradigms are explanations of culture, and the mediums within this culture are themselves reflections, articulations and manifestations *of* that culture, I feel that analyzing the content of these specific texts is the best way to pass critical judgment on the cultures from which they come. As mentioned earlier, critical inquiry into the new media environment from the artist's perspective has not been fully developed. Suhr (2009) offers us one methodological approach in her analysis of the problematization of values that occur within the artistic culture of Myspace. Suhr uses a combination of blog post responses and e-mail correspondence with musicians in order to understand the end goals of the artist in this environment. She wonders how the work of art is "consecrated" within the Myspace culture. Is Myspace used simply as a way of propelling the artist towards mainstream exposure or are they merely trying to get their music heard by others? (p. 179). While certainly valuable, this study is concerned with looking at how artistic values are conveyed through a social networking site, whereas the podcast represents a stand-alone artistic creation. The podcast is a networking channel, but it is also an entry-point into a subculture that produces rhetorical discourse. As Brummett (1991) argues, "the rhetorical critic of popular culture is grounded in an awareness of form and pattern" (p. 95). Moreover, "instead of seeing texts as separate entities reacting to situations and expressed by subjects who are also separate entities, the critic describes a form that sees text, context and subject as structurally *one* within a mosaic" (pp. 95-96). This is a significant methodological principle to consider with this particular study. Because the UCB comedians operates as a type of artistic subculture, it is critical to do as Brummett urges, and to see their uses of the podcast medium as linked structurally between text, context, and subject. Brummett argues that the critic should consider "the technological characteristics or habits of social usage of a medium" (p. 99). In this sense, he is arguing for a medium-based approach to

popular culture criticism that links text, context, and subject into a coherent “mosaic” (p. 98).

Further, as Bird (2003) notes, “classic ‘encoding/decoding’ audience studies, with their usual use of focused, directed questions for artificially-constructed groups, are indeed limited in their ability to evoke the broader cultural context” (p. 8). In order to evoke this broader context, I apply a media-centered rhetorical perspective to these texts with special attention paid to the ways in which they chain out to other mediums. One of the foremost experts on rhetorical approaches to new media criticism, Barbara Warnick (2002), explains that this type of method is predicated on the assumption that “forms of identity, community, and culture are text-based,” and because of this, “it makes sense to read components of communication out of the text” (p. 14). Warnick describes this as “rhetorical criticism as an analytic method” (p. 14). A critic using this method should be especially attuned to the ways the authors of these texts “build their credibility through textual cues” and how they “construct and shape audiences through strategic use of shared beliefs and premises” (p. 14). Moreover, these critics are concerned with the “received wisdom and commonplace ‘truths’” that are taken for granted in the constructed messages (p. 13). Put simply, this sort of rhetorical analysis “considers how authors and producers of messages address or construct their audiences in the texts” (p. 13).

Similar to Warnick’s conception of a new media rhetorical approach, Schudson’s (1991) notion of the “anthropology of performance” evoked in popular culture texts is closely related. Delving into a subculture in the way that this thesis will does take on the character of an anthropological study. These podcast “performances” help define the larger subcultural identity to which they are a critical part. The goal of this thesis is to discover what these conventional functions are and how they resonate in the podcast medium, the “performed” context, that helps define this community. In the following section I will describe how and why I have chosen this



particular group of comedy podcasts to answer these questions.

### *Defining the Community*

Scott Aukerman of *Comedy Death-Ray*, Marc Maron of *WTF*, and Jimmy Kimmel of *Never Not Funny*, are all professional comedians or comedy writers roughly categorized under the umbrella of “alternative” comedy, a somewhat indefinable term that has been popularly applied to a community of comedians based in Southern California that are tied to the Upright Citizens Brigade Theater (UCB). The idea of alternative comedy is hardly a new concept as any biography of Lenny Bruce or George Carlin will rightly point out. Stott (2005) states that the early alternative comedians “rejected the easy racism and the fast delivery of the gag comic” and were often “overtly political from the start” and informed by a punk rock aesthetic (p. 114, 119). The idea that alternative comedy might be informed by a countercultural sentiment is certainly applicable to this group of comedians. These UCB comedians have been identified as alternative in some part because of their relationship with legendary comic pioneer and 1960s counterculture icon Del Close, whose long-form improvisational style proved influential in shaping the early comedy careers of UCB founders Matt Besser, Ian Roberts, and Adam McKay in the early 90s Chicago comedy scene (Johnson, 2008, p. 335). Eventually Besser and Roberts were joined by Amy Poehler and Matt Walsh and the team formed the UCB sketch comedy group. This particular incarnation of the UCB sketch group had a brief three season run as a sketch comedy television show on Comedy Central from 1998-2000 (“Upright Citizens Brigade”). In 1999, Poehler, Besser, Roberts, and Walsh opened up the first UCB Theatre in New York City. The NYC theater holds 150 people and also doubles as a sketch-comedy and improv training school in addition to a comedy performance venue (“Upright Citizens Brigade”).

In 2005 the group opened up a second UCB Theater, this one only seating 95 people, in Los Angeles, California. Each of these podcasting comics brings their own comedy style to this scene, and their ascendancy within alternative comedy ranks dovetails with the increased popularity of the UCB Theater venue. They each have their own reasons for embracing the medium, and they each enjoy a certain stature within the scene.

Maron was let go from Air America Radio when it folded, and readily admits that his notoriously combative personality and abrasive style of comedy have not made him a popular choice for comedy clubs. With his podcast *WTF*, however, Maron has become an unequivocal hit, with tens of thousands of listeners, a slew of merchandise, and a few small sponsorship deals. Through all his personal and professional setbacks, Maron has admitted that his *WTF* podcast has provided him a therapeutic outlet that has “changed his life” (Richardson, 2010). The 46-year-old Maron is older than most of the comedians and patrons that frequent the theater. As such, his place within it is tenuously defined. Maron has adopted a somewhat antagonistic posture towards this UCB alternative comedy scene. While the theater’s fans have clearly embraced Maron, he nevertheless feels that some of the younger comedians have not yet had the life experiences he has had, and as such, perform comedy that is severely lacking in depth or personality. Maron still respects the intelligence of the UCB Theater audience, however, and many of his podcast guests are performers, owners, or bookers at the UCB Theater. Once a month, Maron moves the *WTF* podcast out of The Cat Ranch and onto the UCB stage for a live *WTF* taping. Within this scene, Maron might be considered the wily curmudgeon, grateful to be able to perform in front of an intelligent comedy audience yet concerned with the style produced by the scene’s younger comics. Through it all he is always willing to impart his sage-like wisdom and trenchant commentary. *WTF* is his outlet to do just that.

Jimmy “the shooter” Pardo, often dubbed “the comic’s comic,” has made a decent living as a touring club comic, but his mainstream breakthroughs have been glancing (he once hosted a program on the decidedly under-the-radar Game Show Network). At the UCB Theater, however, he regularly receives standing ovations. His *Never Not Funny* podcast remains one of the most popular comedy podcast on iTunes, second only to Ricky Gervais’ podcast in popularity (Lidsky & Macsai, 2010). *NNF* is so popular that Pardo charges money for full episodes and has hired an audio/video production crew to help him offer both video and audio versions of his podcast. Because *NNF* began in 2006 at the infancy of podcasting, it is considered a pioneering effort and is credited with popularizing this medium this community. Pardo regularly hosted the monthly UCB live shows *Running Your Trap* and *Match Game* and currently makes frequent appearances on the *Writer’s Room* live show. As the proverbial “comic’s comic,” Pardo has garnered the admiration of many within the UCB alternative comedy scene. If Maron is the wily curmudgeon, then Pardo is the scene’s whirling dervish; an expert talker with a penchant for stream-of-conscious rambling and sudden shifts in topic. *Never Not Funny* lets him revel in the nonsense.

*JJGO*’s 29-year-old wunderkind Jesse Thorn started his podcast as a college radio show and after graduating and finding himself jobless, continued offering the podcast as a free download. His other radio show, *The Sound of Young America*, was eventually picked up by Public Radio International and now is broadcast in several dozen markets. He still records *JJGO* and *TSOYA* from a spare bedroom in his Silver Lake, California apartment. Thorn comes to the scene from a non-comedy background. While he did perform in college in various sketch comedy groups, Thorn’s resonant radio voice, quick wit, and perceptive intelligence have won him respect as an interviewer of comedians more than as a comedian himself. His co-host, 28-year-old Jordan Morris, is a product of the UCB training school, an adjunct institution to the

performance theater that teaches improvisation, sketch comedy, and comedy writing. Morris currently hosts action-sports network Fuel TV's show *The Daily Habit* where he often interviews celebrities and attends red carpet events dressed in ridiculous costumes. Morris and Thorn have both become integral pieces of the scene. Thorn pioneered the MaxFunCon, an annual summer camp-style event at Lake Arrowhead, California that has featured many of the stalwarts of the scene. Maron performed at the 2010 MaxFunCon and Pardo performed stand-up and recorded a live podcast taping of *Never Not Funny*. In many ways Thorn and Morris give continuity between the UCB audience and the performers, as their age and Thorn's non-comedy background provide a fan's perspective on the scene. *JJGO* is the place where they do this.

Finally, Doug Benson of the podcast *Doug Loves Movies (DLM)*, and Scott Aukerman of the *Comedy Death-Ray (CDR)* podcast each have a special relationship with the UCB Theater. *DLM* is taped weekly live from the UCB stage, and Aukerman's *CDR* podcast is a companion to a live stand-up showcase at the UCB that is also called *Comedy Death-Ray*. Aukerman was a writer on the HBO sketch-comedy series *Mr. Show*, while Benson has made a living as a touring comic. Within this scene, *DLM* offers the podcast listener a glimpse into the wild unpredictability of a typical performance at the UCB Theater, and Aukerman's *CDR* gives the UCB performers the chance to try out new characters and to promote upcoming appearances at the theater. In this way, these two podcasts are crucial in forging the identity of the scene because they anchor the podcasts to the physical location that is the audience's reference point.

This community of comedians has received considerable attention from the Los Angeles-area press. *The Los Angeles Times* ran an extensive article in April 2009 detailing how this subculture both operates inside and outside of the Hollywood superstructure that surrounds it, as many of its pioneering stars like Patton Oswalt, Zach Galifianakis, and Sara Silverman have

broke big into the mainstream American consciousness. Journalist Gina Piccalo described the scene this way: “It starts in the small theaters of L.A., places like the Upright Citizens Brigade Theatre, Largo at the Coronet and ImprovOlympic ... where a comic playing to small crowds can quickly end up reaching millions of fans on prime-time TV and the cineplex in one exhilarating ride” (Piccalo, 2009). One of the defining characteristics of this group of UCB-centered comedians is their aversion to traditional comedy clubs. Oswalt, Galifianakis, Brian Posehn, and Maria Bamford’s well-publicized “Comedians of Comedy” tour in 2004 shunned comedy clubs completely, instead favoring indie-rock clubs as comedy performance venues. The tour eventually culminated in a brief six-episode Comedy Central television show and a series of DVDs.

The type of humor in these alternative comedy venues, like those on the Comedians of Comedy tour has a certain aesthetic style. Piccalo describes it as “scathing, scatological, darkly ironic, and subversive,” (Piccalo, 2009). The UCB Theater and its comedians have received considerable media attention outside of the Los Angeles and New York City press circles. The satirical newspaper *the Onion* described the UCB-style humor as “witty, irreverent, and conceptually ambitious” (“Upright Citizens Brigade”). *Paper Magazine* called it “goofy, hip and subversive,” and the *Austin Chronicle* described it as “a combination of subtly clever intellectual comedy and slapstick nonsense” (“Upright Citizens Brigade”). Given their comedic style, it is hardly surprising that these UCB-anchored comedians have so readily taken to the podcast as an artistic outlet. If the style of humor still navigates along the periphery of mainstream sensibilities, a medium for which there are no time, space, or content regulations seems particularly suited to carry this content.

Given that setting parameters and giving definition to such a seemingly amorphous

community is an uncommonly difficult task, I have chosen to limit the focus of this analysis to the following podcasts: *Jordan, Jesse, GO!*, *Marc Maron's WTF*, *Never Not Funny*, *Comedy Death-Ray*, and *Doug Loves Movies*. As mentioned, these podcasts were chosen because they are all anchored to a specific place, in this case the UCB Theatre in Los Angeles. The theatre is the unequivocal epicenter of the scene that I am studying, so it makes sense to keep the focus of the project on the podcast because it has clear ties to the scene's most active club.

There are over 100 episodes of a few of these podcasts and attending to other mediums associated with them would be an impossible feat to accomplish with much depth or precision. Because of this, I have chosen to use a cluster sampling method to highlight just one average week in the life of this comedy podcasting community, the week of April 16-23, 2010. Babbie (2007) states that cluster sampling is used "when it's either impossible or impractical to compile an exhaustive list of the elements composing the target population" (p. 209). I have chosen this week, quite simply, because each podcast has an episode this week and because it was sufficiently close to the creation of this thesis so as to accommodate the recent changes in format and content that have occurred within the past several months. This week was not chosen at random, but it does represent a typical week for this podcasting community. During this week Marc Maron's *WTF* had two episodes: episode 65 with podcaster and comic writer Scott Aukerman and episode 66 with stand-up comedian Brendon Burns. *Jordan, Jesse, GO!* had only one episode, episode 130, with actor-comedians the Sklar brothers. *Doug Loves Movies* had one episode featuring Martin Starr, Ken Marino, and Adam Scott of the television program, *Party Down*. *Comedy Death-Ray* had two episodes: episode 49 with Adam Scott, UCB founder Matt Walsh, actress June Raphael, actor James Pumphrey, stand-up comedian Chris Fairbanks; and episode 50 with stand-up comic Paul Gilmartin, sketch performer Mookie Blaiklok, and the cast

of the Thrilling Adventure Hour sketch comedy group. *Never Not Funny* had two episodes for this week: episode 623f with podcaster Mike Schmidt and episode 624f with comic actor Andrew Daly. On a typical week, Maron uploads episodes on Monday and Thursday. He almost always has two episodes per week. *Comedy Death-Ray* has a new episode every Friday and is typically uploaded to iTunes sometime Friday evening. Similarly, a new episode of *Never Not Funny* is made available for download every Friday evening. *Doug Loves Movies* and *Jordan, Jesse, GO!* follow a less defined schedule. *DLM* is typically uploaded every 7-10 days depending on Benson's travel schedule and the occasional "special" live podcast taping from the road. Because of the travel schedule of Jordan Morris, *JJGO* has the most varying upload dates. Thorn and Morris try to have a new episode available each week, but they sometimes are not able to do this. Each of these podcasters makes a commitment to have at least one episode available each week. With the occasional exception of *JJGO*, most of them are able to fulfill this commitment making this week a valid indicator of what a typical week looks like.

While there are doubtless other "alternative" artists using the podcast as a medium, they are likely less inclined to use it as a performance medium in the same way that these comedians have taken to it. For example, much mainstream news content is now simultaneously distributed through audio and video podcasts, but these are merely reproductions of content that has aired elsewhere in another form. They are lacking in original podcast-only content. Even podcast-only content can often lack the performative quality of the comedy podcast, as they are actually talk-radio shows, not performances in and of themselves. The alternative comedy podcasts thus fulfill two functions making it especially suitable and interesting as a subject for further study. It is both a traditional talk-radio show that functions to unveil the process of comedic invention, and also a performance space where comedians can try out new characters, broadcast snippets of

upcoming comedy records, and reveal absurdities through stream-of-consciousness conversation. In some ways, stand-up comedy is just talking, and the podcast is a medium that allows for a lot of talking. In the following pages of analysis, I will reveal what I see as two primary functions of the comedy podcast: 1) as a character-driven improvisatory comedic space, and 2) as a meditation on the nature of stand-up comedy that often confronts tensions between popular and folk culture.

While these podcasts are intimately linked together because of the guests that they share and their connection to the UCB Theater, each podcast leans more heavily in favor of certain functions over others. While *WTF*, for example, certainly has been used as a space for character-driven sketch-style comedy performance in past episodes, the two episodes featured for this week of analysis lean much more heavily in favor of the conversational function. Similarly, the *CDR* episodes featured in this sampling lean much more heavily in the comedy performance direction, while episodes previous to this sampling may divide time between the two functions. It is important to realize that these two functions do not appear equally in every podcast. I am not arguing that they do. What I do argue, however, is that these podcasts function cohesively even when their functions are not uniformly similar because the listener of one podcast will likely be exposed to the others in this study. For example, a listener of *WTF* is likely to also listen to *JJGO*, *NNF*, *DLM*, and *CDR*, and the guests on each of these podcasts are likely to appear repeatedly on the other podcasts. In the iTunes store, a podcast listener is even told that those who have downloaded *WTF*, for example, have also subscribed to *Never Not Funny*, *Doug Loves Movies*, and *Comedy Death-Ray*. Therefore, it can be reasonably concluded that those listening to *CDR*'s character-based comedy will also be listening to *WTF*'s sobering ruminative discussions and Jimmy Pardo's nonsensical ramblings. The listener of these podcasts will be



exposed to all of these functions merely by listening to a couple of different podcasts.

The community of listeners listening to these podcasts is therefore confronted with all of these functions regardless of whether they appear together within a single podcast episode. It is for this reason that I have divided my analysis into sections based on which podcast is most demonstrative of the function that I am describing. Organizing my analysis this way demonstrates that these podcasts are certainly not homogenous in their style. They do not merely conform to these two functions, but rather, each performs distinct roles despite being organized under the UCB banner. *CDR* and *DLM* are much more performance-based while *NNF*, *JJGO*, and *WTF* are more conversational and reflective. As I have shown, the listener of one podcast will likely confront the others, and as a result, will be exposed to these two functions. In this way, the audience will get their comedy from *CDR*, *DLM*, and *NNF*, and then have this comedy placed into a cultural context through the conversations in *WTF* and *JJGO*. To begin this analysis, I start with a discussion of the comedy-performance function of the comedy podcast by looking at how this manifests itself in the *CDR* and *DLM* podcasts. Next, I describe how Pardo's *NNF* acts as a bridge between the two functions, and, finally, I conclude with a discussion of the conversational function as demonstrated on *JJGO* and *WTF*.

### **The Comedy Performance Function of the Podcast**

I begin with a discussion on how the podcast functions as a medium of comedy performance. Because the podcast is similar in many ways to conventional radio, as an auditory medium biased towards private listening experience, podcast comedy is similarly provided to us “with a cloak of invisibility” (McLuhan, 1964, p. 302). Of all the podcasts that I will be looking at, Scott Aukerman's *Comedy Death-Ray* is the one that utilizes the “cloak of invisibility” most

effectively. More so than the other podcasts in this analysis, *CDR* frequently has “guests” on the show that are not really guests, but comedians trying out new characters. While a listener might garner from the name of the podcast alone, *Comedy Death-Ray*, that these characters are not real, Aukerman has stated on Maron’s podcast that some listeners actually do contact him believing that some of the characters are real people. Further, *WTF*, for example, often does have legitimate authors on the podcast. As such, the lines between reality and fiction are blurred so as to be unrecognizable to the listener. The number of “real” guests on these podcasts make the “fake” ones less likely to stand out. To the untrained ear or the novice listener, the performers’ characters seem like real people. On the April 23<sup>rd</sup> *CDR* podcast for instance, comedians June Raphael and UCB founder Matt Walsh play a fake married couple, the McDowells, who are also self-help authors of the fictional book *Perfect Marriage*. They are welcomed onto the show as if they were real people with an actual book to promote. Aukerman’s co-host for the episode, Adam Scott, greets them cordially and Aukerman explains that he really enjoyed reading the book. Walsh then explains that the book is based on the premise that in a marriage, the man and woman should not change, sacrifice, or compromise anything for the other person.

**Walsh:** For example, Kath and I had a pre-nup agreement before we were even married.

**Raphael:** It was an emotional pre-nup. If I opened up my heart in any way ...

**Aukerman:** Then your husband could sue you?

**Raphael:** Yes.

Walsh then explains that the two never travel together because Walsh likes to read and would not want to be interrupted by his wife who might want to have a conversation. Further, Walsh explains that the two have feedback sessions with each other after having sex in order to see what went right and what went wrong. Walsh states that this is “much like a focus group, but it’s a focus group of one.” The discussion gets increasingly bizarre with Walsh explaining that the couple never tell each other that they love one another because it creates “gender confusion,”

Raphael discussing how Walsh will circle parts of her body in red ink that he doesn't like, and finally, the revelation that the couple's son performs in a Marilyn Manson cover band that Walsh states is "empirically bad." The performances are played with sincerity and are made more authentic by Scott and Aukerman's frequent quizzical interruptions. The entire sequence is set up as a type of audio trick for the listener, a way of transferring them into a performance space unwittingly or unknowingly and forcing them to discern reality from fiction, comic performance from staid personal interview. In this way, the podcast medium lends itself to an "extension," to use McLuhan's phrase, of the auditory senses as the listener has nothing else to go on in making judgments of the content. It is theater of the mind in the truest sense, and the comedy podcast medium as practiced by these comedians induces the listener to remain active in deconstructing the material. It is also representative of Jenkins' (2006) notion of the new participatory culture that demands more engagement from the media audience than traditional media.

Another example of the aesthetic dimensions of the comedy podcast performances occurs on the the April 16<sup>th</sup> *CDR* podcast featuring comedian Paul Gilmartin. The first 13 minutes of Aukerman and Gilmartin's conversation are relatively straightforward as the two discuss Gilmartin's stand-up career, his battles with alcoholism, and his struggles to acquire a management team that will actually find him work. Suddenly, however, the tone shifts dramatically as the sound of a vinyl record being played backwards interrupts Aukerman mid-sentence. Aukerman then asks, "Whoa, what was that? There was a sound and a big flash of light. There's actually a man hear in the studio. This never happens." Aukerman goes on to tell the audience that the man in the studio is wearing a straightjacket and chains. The man then asks Aukerman to check the chains to ensure that they are real as the listener hears them clanking around. The man then slips out of the chains and declares himself to be Harry Houdini to the

astonishment of Aukerman. The man declares that he is the “world’s premier debunker of made-up horseshits.” Aukerman then goes on to have a conversation with Houdini until the backwards record noise again signals a shift to a new character, this time it is one described by Aukerman as wearing a “Captain Crunch-esque military uniform. I’m pretty sure he’s British. He just used the word ‘darlings.’” This new character, Colonel Tick-Tock, cautions Aukerman against punching Houdini in the stomach and killing him. Suddenly the sound of a smoke bomb going off is heard and Houdini vanishes while Colonel Tick-Tock continues discussing the nature of time paradoxes and the “tough customers” that he has to take back to their rightful places in time. Then a theme song plays as Colonel Tick-Tock exits the imaginary stage that Aukerman, playing the role of the narrator, has constructed for the podcast listener.

The cycle of characters is so bizarre and arresting, a stunned Gilmartin is heard back on microphone saying, “You don’t even need acid,” to describe the scene that has just unfolded. While this sequence is played for comedic effect firstly, it only appears to have been superficially rehearsed as such and exists outside any type of scripted context. The music, sound effects, and appearances are all integrally woven together, but where the scene goes from there is solely up to the ingenuity of the performers. When Aukerman asks Colonel Tick-Tock what historical figure was the most difficult to send back in time, the performer playing the character pauses and stumbles before replying “Freud,” giving the audience the subtle indication that this was not choreographed beforehand. In a traditional radio context, this lack of formality (Gilmartin and Aukerman often laugh out loud during the sequence) might not make it on-air because of its lack of professionalism, for its lack of any coherent narrative flow, and would certainly be edited for vulgarity. Within the context of the podcast, however, such attributes become expected norms. An audience familiar with the UCB Theater and other L.A. alt-comedy

venues would listen to the CDR podcast expecting to hear a certain type of comedic sensibility and performance style. The UCB trains performers in the art of improvisational comedy, and Aukerman's podcast style reinforces the inherent anxiety that comes with unscripted comedic performance.

This unscripted style of comedy has exploded into mainstream consciousness thanks to half-improvised and half-scripted television shows like *The Office*, *Parks and Recreation*, and *Whose Line is it Anyway?* Within podcast discourse, however, the improvisation is defined by conversational context rather than from a set idea that has been suggested from an audience member, such as what occurs in typical live improv performances. Nor is this type of comedy performance defined by any specific type of narrative arc, such as those that occur on narrative-driven television comedies. On *CDR*, for example, the lack of visual cues makes it impossible for the listener to expect to be thrust into such a fantastical sequence of events. Someone watching *Whose Line*, for example, knows that the show is premised on improvisational comedy and is aware of when it will happen. A *CDR* listener will be familiar with UCB-style improv, but they have no way of knowing at what time and in what context they may be confronted with it.

As Pye (2006) notes in his critique of Susan Purdie's normative explanation of "comedic mastery," comedic analysis should instead "consider the relationship between implausibility and anxiety" in order to "allow for an understanding of the destabilizing function of the comic" (p. 68). Such an approach, Pye argues, "focuses the debate about the subversive potential of the medium" (p. 68). As is customary for this podcast, this scene abruptly interrupts what is a fairly mundane conversation about Gilmartin's career to engage the listener in a series of absurd situations. If Pye is arguing for a better understanding of the centrality of the implausible within comic narrative, this scene suggests that within podcast discourse the absurdity and anxiety are

paired with one another in an obvious form-function relationship. The listener is jarred from a familiar radio-style interview into a world where magician Harry Houdini is forced into conflict with a fictional character named Colonel Tick-Tock. The uneasiness of the improvisational form thereby reinforces the absurdity of the situation as Aukerman and the characters riff back and forth, frequently “breaking” character and chuckling, in the common UCB improvisational style; a style that teaches performers to ask the question “yes, and?” so as to avoid ending an improvisational scene prematurely.

In this case, we have an actual alt-comedy performance style, perfected and taught at a physical location, being interpreted and infused with a comedic style familiar to the listening audience. Absurdity and anxiety are what make the UCB tick. As Palmer (1994) states, one of the biggest reasons that many comics flounder is their inability to match their aesthetic choices with the expectations of a given audience (p. 161). In the case of the podcast, the audience is imaginary, conceived of only as someone somehow aware of Aukerman or the UCB Theater. Such is part of the artistic appeal of such a medium. There is no discernible physical audience for the performers and no way of accurately gauging their immediate response to the material. In a way this is also liberating, as the performers have free creative license and a tacit reassurance that the material cannot be rejected outright. With such uncertainty comes some assurance that the audience is predisposed to liking this style of comedy. In many of these podcasts, performers express reluctance at performing in traditional comedy clubs because the audience is too often just going to see “comedy” and is attending the event simply because they have been given free tickets or are trying to find something to do on a date. As expressed in so many of these podcasts, part of the appeal of the alternative comedy performances spaces is that the audience is already familiar with the comedian’s material and in-tune with the sensibility of the UCB

performance style. As a medium, the podcast's general lack of mainstream visibility is not detrimental, but rather, it is especially well-matched to fulfill the needs of what is still a niche community of comedy fans.

### *Alt-Comedy's 'Sense of Place'*

The comedic interplay that exists in the aforementioned *CDR* podcast is consistent with medium theorist Joshua Meyrowitz's (1985) basic notion of the medium of communication not just being a tactile object transferring content, but an environment in and of itself (p. 7). In *No Sense of Place*, Meyrowitz states that electronic media have "increasingly encroached on the situations that take place in physically defined settings" (p. 7). Physical setting and social situation are to some extent divorced from one another as the environment of these character-driven scenes is largely a construction of Aukerman's own narration and of the imagination of the individual listener. As Rasmussen (2000) notes, "the 'magic' of radio is that ... the images are reconstituted individually, according to personal biography and experience" (p. 102). As an oral medium, the podcast experience is certainly contingent on listener interpretation in this way. However, the nature of the types of comedy performances described above do in fact give the listener a "sense of place." These performers like Matt Walsh, June Raphael, Paul Gilmartin, and Scott Aukerman are all tied physically to UCB Theater, either as founders, bookers, or frequent performers. They are intimately tied to the place, and they have that link reinforced by the natural intimacy of the audio medium and the style of the comedy. Meyrowitz suggests that "electronic media weaken the significance of physical place as a determinant for social situations" (p. 122). This is largely true in the case of a telephone conversation for example, where the interaction between people is divorced from a physical place but is still a profoundly

social exercise. However, the podcast derives its appeal and generates its audience by in fact defining itself *through* its association with a physical place. Yes, the podcast listener is not physically present, but they are certainly not alienated spatially or, if they are regular up-to-date subscribers, even temporally. Again, the UCB defines the scene, and these podcasts merely provide a new outlet for a specific style of comedy and a specific style of conversation.

Doug Benson's *Doug Loves Movies (DLM)* podcast illustrates the significance of physical place, in this case the UCB Theatre, to the functioning of the L.A. alt-comedy scene and, further, to the podcasts that help define it. The *DLM* podcast is an actual weekly live show broadcast directly from the UCB. It is typically recorded on a Tuesday directly before the *Comedy Death-Ray* live show (not to be confused with the *CDR* podcast), and it is usually available for download Friday nights or the following Monday. Here the podcast listener actually has the benefit of experiencing a completely unedited, largely unrehearsed full UCB show, whether they are at home eating waffles at the kitchen table in New York City, or pumping iron at a gym in Butte, Montana. For those that cannot experience the L.A. comedy scene firsthand, this is an especially intimate bit of eavesdropping onto one of the scene's most popular shows. A listener will get a peak into the conventions of a typical UCB show. They will notice that Benson starts each show with this habitual "hey everybody" greeting, that each show consists of movies-related games, and that the comedians will be paired with audience members who will win prizes if their comedian wins the game. Losing participants will get to choose who Doug gets to call a shithead at the end of the show. The April 16<sup>th</sup> *DLM* show featuring Adam Scott, Martin Starr, and Ken Marino demonstrates how this particular podcast links the UCB performance style and comedic sensibility with the generic expectations of the medium. The spontaneity that is present in the *CDR* podcast and the UCB improvisation style both contribute to the aesthetic of the *DLM*



podcast.

As is the case with a few other UCB live shows, the audience is never told who will actually be appearing ahead of time. In this way, the spontaneity of the style of comedy is mirrored in the booking of the guests themselves, and as such, makes the UCB live shows feel less like choreographed performances and more like impromptu social engagements. As Aukerman recently told *the Onion's A.V. Club*, this is actually part of the UCB's strategy: "The energy from the audience is part of their [the comedians] performance, and is directly impacting the performer... I prefer it when the audience is directly stacked on top of each other, and the performer is playing off that" (Ryan, 2010). In the performance environment that the UCB has cultivated there exist few barriers between performer and audience, a choice that is evident in the fact that the UCB seats only 95 people. When Benson announces comic actor Adam Scott to the stage, the crowd cheers loudly, but the podcast listener can still feel the intimacy of the setting because these cheers are heard audibly without a microphone. This lack of space between performer and audience gives the feel of a social engagement rather than that of a comic performance, and this is further reinforced by the style of the live show itself. The comedy is built out of the absurd, the impromptu, and the unsavory and is a natural fit for the podcast medium. Another guest on the April 16<sup>th</sup> show, Ken Marino of the sketch group The State, disregards Benson's question related to the movie game they are about to play and instead addresses a strangely dressed audience member directly.

**Marino:** I wasn't listening to you [talking to Benson]. I was listening to the guy in the Star Wars awesome cool thing. He's got some kind of edible wristband on. He's got two bananas in his hands. This guy's fucking awesome.

**Starr:** Are you on ecstasy? [asking audience member]

**Marino:** He's got his pants cuffed up twice.

**Starr:** I think he might be on ecstasy.

**Marino:** He's got one of his shoelaces undone. He's got sunglasses on. It couldn't be darker in here, and he's got a hat on that has some kind of tribal (trails off) ... and it

looks like it's never been worn.

This sequence lasts for several minutes of the 45 minute show. Eventually the performers determine that the audience member is from South Dakota, and in the words of Starr, “the riddle is solved.” Shortly after this sequence, Benson spills water all over the place onstage because “there were a couple of people nodding off.” A few minutes later Marino interrupts Benson again and says “Do you have a theme song for this part of the show?” Benson says that he does not, and then Marino begins singing a game-show style ditty. Benson then says, “That could happen [referring to Marino’s goofy song]. Or some guy could talk to a guy about his bananas for ten minutes. You don’t know which way it’s going to go when I say it’s time for the Leonard Maltin game.” It is important to the functioning of this UCB alternative comedy scene that this podcast is recorded directly from the UCB Theater. The interactions between Marino, Benson, and the live audience make the listening audience *feel* the presence of the place that gives the scene its identity. It also exposes them to a type of comedic sensibility, that of the carnivalesque.

### *Doug Loves Movies and the Carnavalesque*

The comic sequence is funny and is a completely unstructured piece of what is a completely unstructured show. This lack of formal structure is a marker of not only *DLM*, but of nearly all of the podcasts used by this scene. Other than the aforementioned Leonard Maltin game, a movie guessing game that Benson invented based on critic Leonard Maltin’s movie reviews, *DLM* has no formal arrangement other than some ancillary discussion of recent movies. In the same comedic spirit that informs Colonel Tick-Tock and Harry Houdini’s mysterious appearance on the CDR podcast, *DLM*’s comedy relies heavily on the stream-of-conscious wit of the performers and their perceptive recognition of the ridiculous. Bakhtin’s notion of the

carnavalesque seems appropriate in an analysis of the creative atmosphere developed by these comedians and podcasts. Bakhtin (1998) describes the carnival as a “pageant without footlights and without division into performers and spectators” (p. 250). Further, “the carnival is not contemplated and, strictly speaking, not even performed; its participants *live* in it; they live by those laws as long as they are in effect” (p. 250). While it would be overly dramatic to characterize *DLM* and these attendant podcasts as being as truly transformative in the way that Bakhtin describes, there nevertheless is some truth to the idea that the standard conventions of theatrical performance have undergone some type of warped convolution. The UCB in this envisioning would be the “carnival square,” and the “mode of interrelationship” that percolates within this environment would certainly conform to the “half-real and half-play acted form” that Bakhtin describes as existing in the carnival (p. 250). When Starr stops to ask if the audience member is on ecstasy, the exchange is played for comedic effect but comes across as an actual half-true question by Starr. When *CDR* is having a relatively mundane conversation with Paul Gilmartin about the arc of his comedy career before being interrupted by a Harry Houdini impersonator, the tenor of the program is anchored to both real and fantasy worlds. It’s an NPR-style radio interview sporadically interrupted with events that are completely fantastical. While the Leonard Maltin game on *DLM* is conducted as if it were a legitimate game-show, the performers also interrupt it to spill water on the audience, make comments about an audience member’s attire, and to even have a brief conversation with another audience member about the possibility of making a sequel to the movie *Private Parts*. There seems to be no discernible structure and the quality of the comedy is solely dependent on the flow of ideas—ideas that are given maximum freedom in an environment that nurtures the rhapsodies of the absurdist. In the following section I will describe how this freedom and unstructured style informs the second

function of the comedy podcast: as a meditation on the nature of stand-up comedy that often confronts tensions between popular and folk culture.

### **Podcast Function #2: Valuing the Conversation**

It makes generic sense that *DLM* is the only live UCB show that exists in podcast form. The UCB has several nights each week that are dedicated almost exclusively to scripted sketch-comedy based performances. If one of these performances were recorded in podcast form and linked in with the family of podcasts that I am describing, it would likely be a tough squeeze, and moreover, a less effective use of the properties that make the podcast such an apposite medium for this community and style of comedy. The Bakhtinian notion of the carnival would hardly resonate if these podcasts were watered down, given a professional sheen, and forced to conform to standard FCC regulations. In other words, the podcasts might not make for especially good radio, or even legal radio for that matter. What they do, however, is make for popular podcasting. Further, all of the administrative barriers to entry that exist in traditional terrestrial radio would likely make it difficult for some of these podcasters to ever be given professional radio jobs. Doug Benson's outspoken advocacy of marijuana legalization has already caused some television executives to shy away from giving him his own show on deep cable, and Marc Maron of *WTF* and Jimmy Kimmel of *Never Not Funny* have not been able to make their style of comedy work on traditional radio. In fact, Maron's dismissal from Air American Radio when the company imploded was the reason he started his podcast in the first place.

However, critical to the second podcast function is an acknowledgment that the podcast does in fact contain elements of traditional radio. Because the second function I have identified relies on a more traditional interview/discussion/conversation structure, it is necessary to

acknowledge that it would be inappropriate to label the podcast medium as a wholly new entity. As medium theorist Paul Levinson (1999) notes in his discussion of television, old mediums are viewed as art forms and subjected to nostalgic longing only in the immediate aftermath of the rise of an intervening, insurgent medium (p. 152). After that, “an [old] medium survives as an art form to the extent that it has qualities that humans find attractive whether or not they have had previous experience with the medium” (p. 152). The podcast does this by taking on characteristics of an insurgent medium (the lack of a governing presence, the do-it-yourself format), but also retaining the qualities that make for effective traditional radio like incisive, insightful interviewing and intelligent self-reflection.

While *CDR* and *DLM* podcasts do have moments that echo traditional radio-style interviews, *Jordan*, *Jesse GO!*, *Never Not Funny*, and *WTF* are all built around the recognition that good radio, and good comedy for that matter, are fundamentally verbal exercises rooted in the appreciation of good conversation. Like *CDR* and *DLM*, they are all funny, but *JJGO*, *NNF*, and *WTF* are less performance-based than *CDR* and *DLM*. They are merely conversations, and these conversations are often self-reflective and insightful, but also entertaining by virtue of the absurdity, wit, and irreverence that remains omnipresent. Understanding the properties of the medium can help make sense of how these tensions are navigated in podcast discourse. As Ong (1982) describes in *Orality and Literacy*, radio and other electronic media have “brought us into the age of secondary orality,” an age characterized by an increased self-consciousness on the part of the verbal communicator (p. 136). This secondary orality, according to Ong, preserves the “participatory mystique, fostering of communal sense, [and] concentration on the present moment” that was indicative of early oral cultures (p. 136). Now, however, the secondary orality produced by mediums like radio is broadcast to an “immeasurably larger” audience so that the

communal group sense operates in a “global village,” to use McLuhan’s term, rather than an immediate face-to-face audience (p. 136). While a seemingly obvious observation, the idea that this secondary orality is more self-conscious and grander in scale makes the conversational aspect of these podcasts more rhetorically interesting, as they are forced to confront conversational material that is in-the-moment and self-conscious while also remaining mindful of the broad reach of the medium through which that material is translated. They are speaking to one another as friends and fellow performers, but also to an audience of their fans.

These conversations, the comedians might argue, are “for us,” the comedians, because they allow for the opportunity to engage with friends in goofy conversation while also allowing them to meditate insightfully on the nature of the alt-comedy they are performing. It is a way of figuring things out for the comedian, probing the questions of where they stand as comedians, as a scene in the alternative culture, as a podcast medium, and as friends. It is in some sense played purely for fun, but it is a type of fun that almost seems therapeutic, as these issues are confronted and ironed out in an environment where time constraints and overarching regulation is not of concern. One gets the sense in these conversations that these comedians are using this dialogue as a way of working through the tensions between folk and popular culture. However, these podcasts are also “for them,” the fan, in the sense that these comedians use the podcast as a tool for self-promotion, as a way of telling their fans where they will be performing or what movies they will be appearing in. This self-consciousness that Ong states is a marker of secondary orality manifests itself in the way that these podcasts relate to the idea that they exist as an “alternative” to something else, and confronting this classification is often enlightening and cathartic for the performers. It is doubtless self-conscious to a fault, a marker of secondary orality, but it is the self-consciousness that produces the meaning. In summary, these more

“conversational” podcasts use the conversation for nonsensical spur-of-the-moment amusement, as a self-reflective meditation on their “alternativeness” of their comedic output, and as a tool for self-promotion. These more conversational podcasts exist on a continuum of absurdity, and I will begin with the most absurd, Jimmy Pardo’s *Never Not Funny* podcast.

### *Never Not Funny and the Art of Irreverent Conversation*

*Never Not Funny* perhaps best demonstrates how the podcast “interview” is used mostly as a vessel through which these comedians can reveal their talents in off-the-cuff humor. As such, it is certainly entertaining for a wide audience, but it is also an excuse to riff back-and-forth with their comedic peers. It is essentially a very enjoyable, hilarious vanity project, or perhaps a kind of way of eavesdropping on a couple of very funny friends talking about essentially nothing for 90 minutes. In *NNF*, the conversations rarely broach such serious topics as the validity of the alternative comedy scene or a discussion related to the demands that popular culture puts on the performer operating within a folk culture medium. In this way, *NNF* is an extension of the character-driven comedy of *CDR* and the carnivalesque style of *DLM*. It is a type of comedy performance that comes out of seemingly mundane conversation rather than through improvised character-driven pieces. As such, *NNF* takes on the form of the second podcast function while retaining the effect of the first.

Recording a conversation between friends might feel narcissistic, self-insulating, or too self-referential, but in this environment the performers are so entertaining that the *NNF* podcast is able to get by despite being utterly content-less. The April 16<sup>th</sup> episode of *NNF* with fellow podcaster Mike Schmidt demonstrates the stream-of-consciousness style of Pardo’s conversations. Pardo usually begins each broadcast by “walking the listener around the room”

and describing the attire of the production crew, any changes to their facial hair, and a brief description of the temperature both inside and outside the studio. Then Pardo will welcome co-host Matt Belknap before introducing his guest. The following introduction that Pardo gives Schmidt is indicative of the tenor of Pardo's conversational style.

**Pardo:** This gentleman is the gentleman I call the former third-baseman, and why not he used to play third-base. Not in the major leagues, but he did play third-base one time at softball game. As far as I know you've never gone back and played third-base have you?

**Schmidt:** No, sir.

**Pardo:** So I'm not wrong?

**Schmidt:** No, you're right. I can be called the former third-baseman.

**Pardo:** Sure you can. I can also be called "former catcher." I probably caught a softball game once. After that game I tore my quads.

**Schmidt:** You caught a game that you and I played together.

**Pardo:** That's exactly right. That's that game you played third-base. Actually I believe you were pitching that night.

**Schmidt:** Yeah, fatty was pitching.

**Pardo:** At any rate, he's here, he's queer, let's get used to it.

The joke here is that Mike Schmidt shares the name with a former Philadelphia Phillies Hall of Fame third-baseman. This leads the two into an exchange about a mythical softball game that never occurred and ends with Pardo's customary phrase, "He's here, he's queer, let's get used to it." The phrase is used by Pardo at the conclusion of many of his introductions even though most of his guests are not homosexuals. The exchange is done so rapidly that the listener may miss the joke on Schmidt's name or the fact that they are describing a softball game that occurred only in Pardo's imagination. In the following 10 minutes, Pardo and Schmidt discuss baseball, how to do an Andy Griffith impression, mangos, and whether or not it is ok to eat cheese without a sandwich. In the April 23<sup>rd</sup> episode, comedian Andrew Daly and Pardo have a comparably scattered conversation. This discussion comes directly after a conversation about a run-in with Al Pacino and references to past episodes where Pardo has used the word "tethered."

**Pardo:** That's the second week in a row I've been able to use the word "tethered." More than happy to do it.



**Daly:** Good for you.

**Pardo:** I like Al Pacino by the way. I want to make that perfectly clear.

**Daly:** I like him as a guy.

**Belknap:** Me too. Now let's talk about zim-zam. Do you know what zim-zam is?

**Pardo:** Nope. Why are we talking about it now?

**Belknap:** Because it's a game of tethered tennis.

Then the intern, Dan, googles zim-zam quickly. Pardo is so impressed with how fast Dan googles “zim-zam.” Then Pardo complains that Dan talks too much. This discussion lasts around 45 seconds before Belknap deadpans, “Zim-zam is like tetherball except with a tennis ball instead of a volleyball, and you use a tiny racket.” The exchange ends when Pardo sternly states, “All of us stopped caring. To go back for that seems crazy.” After a few seconds of laughter Pardo then begins discussing flim-flam, the popcorn treat. As these exchanges demonstrate, *NF* lacks any type of coherence, thematic continuity, or formal radio-style segments. This makes it compatible with *DLM* in the sense that the comedy relies on the off-the-cuff ingenuity of the performers and their ability to chain out certain topics in unexpected directions. Again, the properties of the podcast medium affect the ways the content is processed by its audience. Pardo's style may be off-putting to a casual radio listener, as it requires concentration to track the illogical wanderings of Pardo's mind, but within the podcasting community such musings conform to audience expectations of the style of the comedy produced in this artistic subculture. As Meyrowitz (1985) describes, casual television viewers or radio listeners, for instance, “spend more time deciding over the model of a radio or a television set than we do selecting the particular broadcast program” (p. 82). As has been empirically proven, “people tend to choose a block of time to watch television rather than choose specific programs” (p. 82). In this sense, people merely play the radio or play the television as background distraction rather than out of loyalty to a specific program (p. 82). A person cannot just play a podcast “machine” in the same

way that they access television or radio. If they do not like a certain podcast they cannot simply switch back and forth to a new one in the same way that the remote control allows the television viewer to skip frenetically between programs. Here the selection and work that goes into finding the *Never Not Funny* podcast, downloading it in iTunes, subscribing to it, and placing it on your iPod requires some degree of new media savvy and at least a moderate interest in Pardo's stream-of-consciousness style. If Pardo's scattered performance style made him incompatible with mainstream audiences, as his flop on *Last Comic Standing* and his relative mainstream anonymity seems to indicate, then his podcast gives him a forum to do his style of comedy on his own terms. Deciding whose terms to play by, however, is of critical concern to the podcasts that I will discuss in the following section. Rather than using the conversation solely as a forum for entertaining the listener, these podcasts, to varying degrees, use conversation as a way of reflecting on the larger cultural context from which they operate.

*Jordan, Jesse, GO! and What the Fuck?: Conversation as Ruminaton*

Jordan Morris and Jesse Thorn's *Jordan, Jesse, GO!* podcast is in many ways similar in style to *Never Not Funny* in that it relies on witty conversation to provide most of the entertainment value. However, this podcast often makes use of a more traditional-style interview format, a rhetorical choice that seems reflective of Thorn's NPR background. The April 15<sup>th</sup> episode of *JJGO* features twin comedians Randy and Jason Sklar, frequent stand-up comedians at the UCB Theater. On the absurdity continuum, *JJGO* is somewhere in the middle between Pardo's manic episodes and Maron's self-reflective earnestness. *JJGO*'s premises and conversation waver between these two extremes. The following exchange between the Sklars, Morris, and Thorn demonstrate how the conversational elements of this particular podcast are

used as a way of commenting on the liminal cultural space that this subculture operates within.

**Thorn:** I'm against these people who will tell you that someone (actor, comedian) sucks because they've been in a bunch of bad movies.

**Jason Sklar:** Well, they're working.

**Morris:** Is it a certain kind of celebrity though?

**Sklar:** Let me say something (said sternly). It is *so* hard to get anything made ever.

**Morris:** Absolutely.

**Sklar:** *Ever*. Even if the most snarkiest, most independent, most alternative person saw that someone like Patton Oswalt, who we all love, or someone like David Cross was ever to get into some movie or a couple of movies and do a couple of funny things (trails off)

**Thorn:** So they're in fucking *Marmaduke*.

**Sklar:** We'll be siked for them. Now you have enough money to go and do a project that you love. David Cross, joke all you want about him being in the *Alvin and the Chipmunks* movie, but now he's got a chance to do a show on IFC (Independent Film Channel) and other stuff. Now he's got the room to make great decisions to make something like this (IFC show). God bless it. Randy and I were in *Wild Hogs*. Wild fucking Hogs. Why were we in that movie? Because we got a job!

Later in the conversation Morris somewhat sheepishly reveals that he had a small part in the Sandra Bullock box-office flop *All About Steve*, and the Sklars and Morris sympathize with one another's career decisions. "I'm right here with you," Morris says. The following exchange between Jason Sklar and Morris builds on this self-reflective conversational arc:

**Sklar:** If you're a creator you keep trying to create stuff that you like and think is great on all levels, in all formats, in all media, and then you take *jobs* because you get families and you have things you have to pay for in your life.

**Morris:** Sometimes I get a little showbiz grumpy. I'm like (said in grumpy voice) 'no one wants to read my screenplay' or 'no one wants to have a meeting with me.' Then I feel like I have to sit down and think to myself, 'you know what, Bob Odenkirk and Karen Kilgariff (former writers and performers for pioneering alt-comedy series *Mr. Show*) totally don't have shows on television right now. So maybe let's get them set up first and then maybe someone wants to take a meeting with Johnny Podcast (referring to himself). It *is* super hard to get something made.

**Thorn:** Jordan, have we talked about the fact that you changed your name to Johnny Podcast?

**Morris:** No, honestly. I did it while drunk and on mushrooms.

This relatively tense conversation spans several minutes, and as the last part of this conversation indicates, Thorn senses the unease and quickly brings the conversation back into a comedic context. As Sklar, Morris, and Thorn argue in these exchanges, the realization that taking these

jobs was necessary for monetary reasons indicates that their lukewarm embrace is based less on an inherent antagonism with popular culture. It is based instead on their mediocre content. As Fiske (1989) argues, the problems of everyday life necessitate the production of “nomadic subjectivities who can move around this grid, realigning their social allegiances into different formations of the people according to the necessities of the moment” (p. 24). Thorn, Sklar, and Morris are conflicted to be sure, but their artistic choices are pragmatic and strategic reflections on a more overarching desire to balance artistic integrity with the comfort of monetary gain. In this instance they have allegiances to both the alternative comedy podcasting culture and to the larger popular culture substratum to which they seem to owe some reluctant gratitude. This vacillation between popular culture and alternative subculture are troublingly blurred in this scenario making it difficult to discern under what grounds one might be expelled from the community.

In a segment earlier in the show, this “grid-moving” that Fiske describes is borne out in a discussion between Thorn and the Sklars about their regular appearances on the popular E! Network television show *Chelsea Lately* and their involvement with the accompanying live tour. Thorn begins the question by describing that the Sklars popularity owes much to the fact that they appeal to both the alternative comedy scene and to sports fans as well, based on their association with the ESPN Classic cult television show *Cheap Seats*.

**Thorn:** The alternative comedy world could not be more opposed to Chelsea Handler. The sports world could not be more opposed to Chelsea Handler. The Chelsea Handler crowd could not be more opposed to at least the sports world. So who is at this show?

**Randy Sklar:** That’s actually a phenomenal question, and we think about it a lot. Imagine it as a venn diagram. We do have these circular spheres of people. If you take those spheres of all those worlds they intersect at a certain point.

**Thorn:** (said sarcastically). So you’re saying the people who come to your shows are those people who love sports, love Chelsea Handler, and love alternative comedy?

**Sklars** (in unison): Some.

**Thorn:** (said sarcastically). So *he* comes to your show.

**Sklar:** Yeah, that one guy comes to the show.

**Sklar:** The one thing I love about what we get to do on the Chelsea Handler show is we get to write our material. So the jokes that we're putting forward are *ours*. It's the same kind of comedy, just different subject matter.

**Thorn:** There's not a segment producer running up to you saying 'this is insufficiently catty?'

**Sklar:** No.

This bit of dialogue certainly highlights Fiske's notion of the shifting allegiances and nomadic subjectivities that confront anyone working between these two cultural contexts. It also, however, speaks to the idea that "a text that is to be made into popular culture must, then, contain both the forces of domination and the opportunities to speak against them, the opportunities to oppose or evade them from subordinated, but not totally disempowered, positions" (Fiske, 1989, p. 25). The antagonisms that exist between the alternative comedy community and Chelsea Handler's audience are based on very real assumptions, as Thorn's sarcastic, needling responses seem to indicate. Despite Thorn's misgivings about Handler's audience, both Sklars seem to indicate that their appearances on *Chelsea Lately* are not entirely disempowering. Rather than succumb to the pressures of the alternative comedy community, who vilify Handler's program, the Sklars are instead viewing it as an opportunity to, in de Certeau's (1984) words, "make do with what the system provides" (qtd. in Fiske, 1989, p. 25). The Sklars are in fact more than making do with what Handler's forum provides because they are not artistically compromising their comedic aesthetic at all, but merely doing what they have always done. Now instead of a sweaty, cramped UCB Theatre, they are on a popular television show on a major cable network. The circumstances and demographics may seem perplexing to Thorn, but the Sklars are attempting to take a popular cultural text, subvert its perceived limitations, and transcend the psychographic profile by approaching their comedy with the same sincerity that the alternative comedy crowd expects from them. Eventually, Thorn and Morris seems to capitulate and accept

the Sklars' explanation after the brothers give a few examples of the type of jokes that they have written specifically for the show.

As this episode indicates, the conversational component of these comedy podcasts is not limited merely to nonsensical conversation, but it is also used as a way of discussing how best to manage artistic value within seemingly disparate cultural environments. By mapping and making sense of the shifting allegiances that confront those in this comedy community, *JJGO* is attempting to provide some sort of definition to the idea of alternative comedy. Such is also a concern of the next podcast I discuss, Marc Maron's *What the Fuck? (WTF)*. On the April 18<sup>th</sup> episode of *WTF*, Maron is joined by Scott Aukerman of the *CDR* podcast discussed earlier. It is not uncommon for podcast hosts in this community to appear on one another's podcast. Maron has appeared on *JJGO*, *NNF*, and *CDR* while Aukerman has been on *WTF*, *NNF*, *JJGO*, and *DLM*. As Maron remarks to Aukerman at the beginning of the conversation, "Scott and I operate in the same world." Defining what exactly this alternative comedy world means, however, dominates Aukerman and Maron's conversation in the same way that it is addressed in the aforementioned *JJGO* episode.

**Maron:** I don't know where I stand in the comedy world sometimes. I wouldn't be defined as an alternative comic. I'm certainly not a mainstream comic. I'm this thing that seems to provide some raw honesty to the alternative world. I don't know of a lot of people like me in it, but I seem to have respect there.

**Aukerman:** I personally don't think alternative comedy is a style.

**Maron:** It's a community.

**Aukerman:** No, it's a *location*. I think alternative comedy is only comedy done in alternative venues, meaning not comedy clubs. I don't think anyone shares any sense of style.

**Maron:** I don't know (said skeptically). I think we should have, not a debate about that, but a conversation.

In the following few exchanges, Maron pushes back against Aukerman's characterization of alternative comedy as only comedy done in alternative venues. Maron describes how he is often

credited with starting alternative comedy in New York City, and mentions that many of the comedians playing alternative rooms at that time were also club comedians, meaning that there was some comedic sensibility that united them all together beyond the location where the comedy was being performed. Eventually Aukerman concedes the point, and the two agree as the next exchange demonstrates:

**Aukerman:** That style actually was a little different (referring to Marc's NYC days). People who started those alternative comedy things kind of did have sort of what your style which is very confessional, talking *with* the audience and not *at* the audience. That's a big part of [current] alternative comedy too.

**Maron:** That's the heart of it I think.

**Aukerman:** People want to have a discussion and be engaged. They don't want to see an act.

**Maron:** Right. That's still a hard sell on the road. They [audiences] say 'why does he need us to help him?' (laughs).

**Aukerman:** But some acts (referring to club comedians) actually do really well in alternative comedy.

**Maron:** That's amazing to me. I love when that happens. You get all these kids, I'm not going to be condescending, but there is a fashion to it. It's very white, it's very hip in the sense that they are a community of people that like roughly the same things, you know, anime, Dungeons and Dragons maybe (laughs).

**Aukerman:** A lot of it is, the audience sits there and goes, 'Oh my God. That's stuff I like. That's stuff that's really important to me.'

**Maron:** Right, but what's always interesting to me is that, given all this attitude and posturing which is what defines a community it doesn't matter what the community is and I'm not condescending it, but you get an old road warrior in there that just did his road jokes and they'd kill.

**Aukerman:** Yeah, sometimes.

**Maron:** But the snobbery isn't there because they didn't really have a sense of what they were condescending to.

A few minutes later the conversation continues:

**Aukerman:** Some people slam alternative comedy because they're like 'you don't write any jokes. You just talk off the top of your head.'

**Maron:** That's not true.

**Aukerman:** That's not what it's been like for years and years. That's not what alternative comedy is now.

**Maron:** No. I think what it's become now is sort of a ironic, detached, young people's form that's very joke-centric. It's so joke-centric that I have a hard time deciphering the personality of the person.

**Aukerman:** It fluctuates though.

Aukerman then describes how, in the contemporary alternative comedy scene, he'd much rather book someone like Maron for his *CDR* UCB live show, someone who reveals more of himself on stage. Maron then mentions how there is "not much risk" in current alternative comedy. All of these exchanges demonstrate Maron's tacit acceptance of his role in alternative comedy, but also a creeping condescension that manifests itself at the end of nearly all of his sentences. Despite his denials, he is being transparently condescending in a way that attempts to overshadow what he feels to be a scene that is too detached, too self-consciously hip, and too lost in its own tastemaking abilities to know what specific type of comedy it is that it enjoys. Maron is essentially accusing the alt-comedy audience of having a false consciousness about their oppositional posture. These bits of dialogue demonstrate what Kuipers (2006) describes as a type of "taste hierarchy" (p. 359). As Kuipers argues, "the status of the culture may vary: there are marginal taste groups with a low status, subcultures of the same status as the mainstream, and exclusive tastes that are marginal but very prestigious" (p. 362). As the discussion continues, Aukerman notes that some of the stalwarts of the alternative comedy scene, like Zach Galifianakis of *The Hangover* and Aziz Ansari of MTV fame, have become major mainstream draws after existing in relative obscurity on the alt-comedy fringe. It was not many years ago that Galifianakis was performing stand-up comedy at laundromats on New York City's Lower East Side.

If a string of shows at the UCB can propel a comic to mainstream visibility, then, Maron reasons, "anyone that does a comic-booked show (show booked by the comedian, not a club owner or booker) that brings their friends two or three times a month can all themselves a comic, which I'm not completely comfortable with." Within the taste hierarchy, Maron would likely



position himself as marginal but very prestigious, as his thinly-veiled condescension seems to suggest, while the UCB performers would move in and out of the mainstream. The alt-comedy audiences that frequent the UCB Theater might purport to be a marginal taste group with *high* status, but this is contradicted by Maron and Aukerman's admission that "road warrior" comics, those associated with antiquated comedy clubs, often "kill" at the UCB. Meanwhile, the mainstream success of Ansari, Galifianakis, and others seems to signal that the UCB is actually a subculture with mainstream tastes.

Using this hierarchy of tastes, it seems plausible to argue, as Fiske (1989) does, that a group of people are "capable of adopting apparently contradictory positions either alternately or simultaneously without too much sense of strain" (p. 24). If popular culture is indeed constructed by and subjected to the tastes of the "tastemakers," then the notion of alternative comedy as an actual "alternative" seems to unravel. The only difference seems to be that the UCB audience is "in on" what is to be perceived as the "popular" before it is actually christened as such. Such logic seems to point to the lack of any enlightened critical discernment on the part of the UCB Theater audience. Their tastes and the tastes of the mainstream are not dissimilar in any way. However, upon closer inspection, Aukerman and Maron both agree that alternative comedy is tied to a location, the UCB Theater, a place in which comedy performance is less performance and more of a participatory exercise, a way of closing the distance between performer and audience. This style is certainly apparent in the performance-based comedy podcasts described earlier. It seems no mistake that the podcast is the medium of choice for a community of performers that demand a special type of intimacy and engagement with their audience.

**Conclusions:**

*“Podcasting is going to change everything, really. And it’s about time that the hierarchy of the way content is moved is shifting into the hands of the content producers.”*

-Marc Maron

As I’ve attempted to show, the podcast provokes a tapestry of different uses from its users and provides an audio presence for a scene previously defined by its proximity to the UCB Theater. An analysis of podcast discourse is an object lesson in the way that emerging mediums are giving identity to subcultures, reinforcing the characteristics that define them while providing a forum of reflection and critical insight. These podcasters have adopted the uses of the medium to match the characteristics of the place, the UCB Theater, and have used this medium as a way of reinforcing that identity. In this way the podcast medium’s two primary functions, as a comedy performance medium and site of conversational rumination, work in tandem. The comedy performance function is certainly shrouded in the cloak of visibility, but the conversational aspect intermittently lifts that cloak to reveal what it is that makes this community different from or similar to mainstream tastes. It is as if the comedy podcast is entertaining the listener with its often ludicrous comedy, but then attempting to show what this comedy means economically, aesthetically, and socioculturally. It is a constant process of revealing and concealing—revealing the insights and wisdom of the comic while simultaneously concealing his or her identity behind the cloak of the “invisible” audio medium. I have used the insights provided by medium theorists as a way of demonstrating the ways in which these comics have capitalized on the affordances provided by this “invisible” medium.

As I have suggested, the UCB Theater functions as the nexus of this comedy scene, and

the shared guests provide the critical links that give this podcast community a shared sense of presence. I have shown these podcasts to vary in the degree to which they perform the two functions I have identified. Some are more performance-based while others are more conversational, thoughtful, and even philosophical. Nevertheless, because of the linkages to the physical location and the sense of community fostered by the guests, the listener to this family of podcasts is likely to download the others, and as a result, come into contact frequently with both functions of the alternative comedy podcast. In the same way that alternative comedy itself contains a good deal of stylistic nuance, so too does the alternative comedy podcast. Each podcast is thus able to forge its own distinctive audio identity while still providing the entire scene with a sense of artistic harmony. The fact that these two functions have become hallmarks of this community tells us a good deal about how this scene views itself, views the purpose of the podcast, and views itself as a thriving comedy scene. As mentioned earlier, scholars of media and medium-centered rhetorical criticism argue for an approach that describes both the micro and macro context of media discourse. For this reason, I first describe the micro context implications of the podcast for the UCB alternative comedy scene.

First, these podcasts reveal the limitations of more traditional channels of self-promotion and comedy performance, especially for a scene that has constructed its identity by constituting itself outside of the comedic mainstream. These podcasts were created in part to compensate for the lack of agency that these comics enjoyed over their creative product and to give a voice to those locked out of traditional promotional channels. Many of these comics have expressed displeasure with more traditional promotional activities, like the “morning zoo” style radio interview where the comic is often asked the same monotonous questions over and over. Moreover, Maron and others associated with this scene have expressed bewilderment at the

noticeable lack of promotion done by the traditional comedy club. Other than a billboard listing or a website feature, traditional comedy clubs, these comics argue, have done a dismal job recently of promoting appearances by featured comics. There are relatively few, if any, newspaper features written to coincide with a scheduled appearance. Stand-up comic Greg Behrendt, a frequent guest on many of these podcasts, has wondered aloud how it is that these clubs actually stay in business in the absence of any discernible marketing scheme or promotional package. Whether or not these podcasters foresee the end of the traditional club remains to be seen. What is evident, however, is that they have taken to the podcast not merely as a place to perform their comedy, but as a way to promote themselves in ways that do not place them at the mercy of club owners, bookers, or branding and marketing operations. The creative control over the comic's branded identity is up to the comic. As a result, the podcast has immediate short-term and long-term benefits as a promotional medium. In the short-term, it provides fans with up-to-the-date listings of upcoming appearances and provides them with information on how to buy merchandise and comedy records. In the long-run, the podcast's properties make it conducive to forging long-term bonds with the listener. As McLuhan argued, "radio affects most people intimately, person-to-person, offering a world of unspoken communication between writer-speaker and the listener. That is the immediate aspect of radio. A private experience" (p. 299).

If the comic is able to sustain this private experience over multiple episodes, the intimacy of the medium helps ensure that the bond has longevity—that the comedy brand has legs. It sets in place a long-term benefit. The intimacy of the podcast and the various settings in which it can be enjoyed guarantees that the listener is given a good sense of the comic personality of the podcaster. This personality is revealed in both the podcast functions. The listener is subjected to

both the “serious” side of the comic when he or she indulges in reflective conversation and the comic persona of the podcaster in the comedy performance function. As I have shown, when Scott Aukerman is hosting *CDR*, he is rarely serious. He is, in a sense, “performing” a comedy character, that of the clueless radio host. On Maron’s podcast, however, he is insightful, thoughtful, and serious. Such dual functions give us both “sides” of the podcaster, and thus provide multiple entry points for the listener into the personality of the comic. The podcaster is able to reveal both sides of their personality, and thus are able to engage listeners in multiple ways, effectively extending the promotional reach of the medium. As Benson and Maron have recently commented, there are a substantial number of fans coming to their stand-up performances that found out about them solely through the podcast medium. Once the bond clicks, it seems likely that it will be a strong one thanks to the podcast’s dual functions. The promotional power of the medium will certainly continue to have lasting implications for this comedy scene.

Beyond the promotional opportunities, the podcast also reveals what it is that these comic-podcasters actually value as creative people. Given the seemingly limitless ways that the podcast could be used, why exactly have these podcasters chosen to fall into these two familiar functions? Each function offers insight into what these podcasters value. First, the comedy performance function of the podcast makes sense given the background of these podcasters. The fact that the style of comedy produced at live UCB shows is so carefully replicated on an audio medium says a great deal about the level of commitment that these comics have to performing comedy on their own terms. Rather than see the absence of visuals as a hindrance, these podcasters have stretched the degree to which the listener’s imagination must fill in the content on their own. It is up to the listener’s own imagination. This requires a great deal of extra

cognitive processing on the part of the listener. The jarring character-based humor of *CDR*, for example, requires the listener fill in the missing visual cues by using details from their own imagination. The frenetic wanderings of Jimmy Pardo's mind, his frequent obscure references and shifts in topic, require the listener to keep up so as not to get completely lost in his rambling. This suggests that these UCB alternative comics place much faith in their audience to not just be committed enough to actually download a podcast, but to have the ability to let their imagination process the material quickly enough to make sense of it.

The second podcast function, the "conversation and rumination" function, reveals that these comics are especially concerned with how their creative work is perceived by those within the scene. As the exchanges between Thorn, Morris, and the Sklars expose, there is much uneasiness among these comics as to how to best justify taking work that may seem artistically compromising. While there is certainly an obvious attempt in these conversations to separate alternative comedy from mainstream comedy, the *JJGO* sequences also seem to indicate that taking mediocre, mainstream work is a necessary evil for any alternative culture. The comics seem have accepted this and do not seem to harbor any outright delusions that every project they take will be both artistically and commercially satisfying. Such reveals a scene not so inflexible in its alternative leanings that it cannot imagine wandering outside of their commercially insulated scene. For comedians like Maron, who admits that he seems to not know where he fits, the podcast allows for a way of reasoning through where he stands as a comic, who his fans are, and what type of comic this audience might embrace. The conversations like that between Aukerman and Maron suggest that there is much disagreement about who is "in" and who is "out" of the scene. Using the podcast medium to try to come to some type of agreement about these issues gives the listener the impression that a defined sense of creative self-identity is an

issue that this community is still in the process of resolving.

On a macro, cultural level, these podcasts are representative of a wider do-it-yourself cultural phenomenon that manifests itself in computer gaming hackers, the pages of *Make Magazine*, and the participatory, grassroots media productions described in Henry Jenkins' *Convergence Culture*. In a string of recent keynote lectures and in a forthcoming book, media theorist and public intellectual Douglas Rushkoff has spoken persuasively about the need to "program or be programmed." He states that we are currently running on pieces of "social software" that are "basically legacy systems to legacies we don't even remember, and they are completely inappropriate to what it is that we want to get done" (Rushkoff, 2010). Similar to Innis' theory, Rushkoff argues that we are consistently one step behind in our uses of communications mediums. We have gone from an oral culture of hearers to a written culture of writers, and he argues that with the advent of the computer, we should now be programming our mediums ourselves rather than being subjected to the biases of those we let program our mediums for us. Using this logic, it could be argued that we should be moving towards a computer culture of programmers. While hardly a complete fulfillment of Rushkoff's grandiose vision, these podcasts nonetheless represent a useful case study demonstrating the ways in which a medium can be shaped by an audience and programmed with a set of biases that favor the artist over anyone else. It provides a macro-level example of how the creative person can exercise control of their creative output. I am not suggesting that everyone who knows a funny joke or that can play three guitar chords start their own podcast, but I do foresee this DIY aesthetic and sense of agency having cultural implications for years to come.

Further, Rushkoff's clarion call can be viewed metaphorically as a way of seeing the world itself as potentially (re)programmable, and to see each street we walk down, news

programs we watch, or the food we eat as biased in favor of certain uses over others. Asking these questions, like what type of behavior does this medium encourage and discourage, remain useful questions for anyone doing critical or creative work, and the contributions of medium theorists can help answer them. In other words, the accepted uses of our mediums are only limiting insofar as our imagination lacks the ingenuity to redesign them. This is a principle these podcasters seem to have understood quite well. They have shown how artistic subcultures can be reinforced through new medium channels and thus provide a blueprint for others to follow. As this thesis has shown, the type of content produced in this new medium tells much about what this community values and what issues it has with its own sense of identity.

While it might be easy at this point to paint a utopian portrait of the alt-comedy podcasting community, in the following concluding section I will illuminate several challenges that may problematize the future of this burgeoning subculture.

As I have argued, these two comedy podcast functions do not necessarily exist in a dialectic relationship, but rather, a complementary one. However, the relationship between the in-front-of-the-curtain comedy of *CDR*, for example, and the subsequent behind-the-curtain comedy deconstruction that takes place on *WTF* and *JJGO* seems to make this relationship's future somewhat tenuous. This is the first problem I foresee this community encountering as it moves forward. Using Erving Goffman's model of front region (public) behaviors and back region (private) behaviors, Meyrowitz (1985) argues that "if performers lose the ability to keep their back region behavior separate from their front region behavior, they not only lose aspects of their privacy, they also lose the ability to play certain parts of their front region roles" (p. 46). Using this model, it seems possible that those comics not willing to engage in the sort of contemplative, deeply personal reflection that Maron often provokes from his guests will lose out



on the tremendous self-promotional forum that his podcast provides. It takes a certain type of comedic personality to make the medium work most effectively. It requires the comic to be entirely comfortable in revealing the intricacies of his or her craft. While most of Maron's guests prove to be articulate and thoughtful, those comedians whose comedy is more impulsive and less calculated may have difficulty reflecting on their craft with such earnestness.

Moreover, for those comics that have developed a well-honed comic persona, will appearances on these more self-revealing podcasts have an adverse effect on the way that their fans relate to that persona? Meyrowitz states that "whatever aspects of the rehearsal become visible to the audience must be integrated into the show itself; whatever backstage time and space remains hidden can still be used to perfect the performance" (p. 47). Once the fan has seen behind the curtain, seen the performances deconstructed and the sociocultural environment analyzed, will that take some of the magic out of the comedy performance? Will the comedy produced in this community become more personal and self-reflective, as Aukerman asserted that it might in his exchange with Maron? Much of this hinges on whether or not the comedy podcast stays a relatively niche medium or whether this comedy audience broadens beyond what Maron calls "comedy nerds." The comedy nerd fan is likely to revel in the behind-the-curtain wisdoms of Maron, Morris, Thorn, and Aukerman, but will the average comedy fan really be interested in hearing Maron engage in an encyclopedic chronicling of the aesthetics of alternative comedy each week? Finding out what it is that motivates the podcast listener to download these podcasts would make for a fascinating future inquiry and would likely reveal latent podcast functions not covered in this present study.

The second potential problem that this community may confront involves what ends up happening at the intersections of popular culture and folk culture. Using a Gramscian approach

to cultural studies, Storey (2003) argues that “popular culture is neither an ‘authentic’ folk culture, working-class culture, subculture, nor a culture simply imposed by the capitalist culture industries, but a ‘compromised equilibrium’” (p. 51). As this podcasting community demonstrates, what it is that passes for the “authentic” or the “alternative” is often elusive or even illusory. The conversations that take place within this family of podcasts suggest this community is uncomfortable with having a clearly defined self-concept, or they are at least cognizant of the ways in which these distinctions become blurred. As Aukerman, Maron, and others have argued, the alternative comedy scene is continually undergoing renovation, its members move fluidly between mainstream and alternative contexts, and there seems to be no overriding comedic sensibility that ties it all together. If the podcast medium ends up contributing to the demise or the blurring of the definitions of alternative comedy, then what will that say about the supposed DIY, bottom-up nature of the podcast medium? Is it really in opposition to anything?

Recent developments further illuminate the blurring of alternative and mainstream comic identities that problematizes the future of alternative comedy as a true alternative. In recent weeks, Maron’s *WTF* podcast has taken the somewhat unprecedented step of inviting two of the most intensely vilified comics within the UCB alternative comedy scene onto his show for some revealing interviews. Dane Cook and Carlos Mencia, two wildly popular but maligned comedians, have been the target of much vitriol within the alternative comedy community amid accusations of joke-stealing, arrogance (Cook accused comic Steve Byrne of “stealing his essence”), and bullying of other comics. After hearing Mencia’s often quite bizarre, contemplative, somewhat disingenuous interview on *WTF*, Cook publicly reached out to Maron and asked to appear on the podcast in an attempt to clear his name in the same way. Such

overtures by Maron, who has stated repeatedly that he has nothing against either comedian, further smears the hazily constructed lines between mainstream and alternative comedy. The average podcast listener might reason the following: “If these comics (Cook, Mencia) are welcomed onto Maron’s podcast, then who is it that we are against?” Cook actually comes across in these interviews as quite sincere and legitimately scarred by the amount of hatred directed towards him. He explains away his perceived arrogance as resulting from an intense shyness and insecurity, and repeatedly states that despite his successes, he does not live an opulent lifestyle.

This problematizes the oppositionality that is at the heart of any subculture/popular culture relationship. If Cook and Mencia are seen as human beings, human beings who have worked tirelessly to perfect their craft, then will they be subsequently welcomed in as a part of the scene? There is no doubt that Mencia and Cook’s interviews are deeply personal, meditative, and thoughtful, hallmarks of the alternative comedy podcast. Whether or not this pensiveness was the result of a genuine need to set the record straight or as a strategic public relations move intended to capture a new group of fans, remains to be seen. It does, however, illuminate the complexity of the interactions that take place inside this podcast world and spotlights the ways that alternative comedy’s sense of the “other” might unravel if the “other” is humanized and permitted to tell their side of the story. On the other hand, Mencia and Cook’s disparagement cannot itself be completely attributed to their perceived arrogance and joke-stealing. They are also considered bad comedians. Mencia is often accused of mercilessly attacking society’s most vulnerable populations, (minorities, the poor), and Cook’s flamboyant, preening theatrics (dramatic shirt removal) have placed him at the receiving end of “all show, no substance” indictments. If this humanization does in fact lead the podcast listener to actually become fans of Cook and Mencia’s style of comedy, will this weaken the distinctions between the alternative

style of comedy and the mainstream style of comedy? It will be fascinating to track the response to Maron's overtures and to see how they affect the scene's self-identity.

To close, it is useful to turn back to Marc Maron's assertion that the podcast is really changing everything for this community of UCB alternative comedy podcasters. In some ways, it certainly has. It has provided a relatively low-cost, low risk-high reward forum for self-promotion, rumination, and comedy performance that ties together physical settings with virtual spaces. However, the idea that alternative comedy can slip around the claws of commercialism, industry indebtedness, or the antiquated comedy club circuit, has thus far proven unsubstantiated. It is important to understand that these podcasters are professional comedians firstly, and not yet professional *podcasters*. The podcast, except in extreme cases, has not become a monetarily self-sustaining medium. None of these comics are making a living by being a podcaster. The notion that these comedians exercise the same degree of artistic freedom in their larger careers as they have using the podcast medium simply does not bear reality. Maron, Aukerman, Thorn, Morris, Pardo, and Benson are all still beholden, in their larger careers, to commercial interests that are often quite compromising artistically as the Sklar brothers *Wild Hogs* appearance illustrates. Even when the work is not artistically compromising, this community is still at the mercy of the executives and industries that they have managed to mostly circumvent using the podcast. Aukerman, a writer for the *Sara Silverman Program*, recently lost his writing job when the series was abruptly canceled, and Pardo's dream gig of being the warm-up comedian for the *Tonight Show with Conan O'Brien* was thwarted when Jay Leno bumped him from the air after only a few months.

Further, stand-up comedians like Pardo and Maron cannot escape entirely, or even at all, from the traditional comedy club circuit. Most of their current tour dates are casinos or

traditional comedy clubs, with the occasional alternative venue thrown in. As much as they love playing alternative rooms like the UCB Theater, they do not get paid for appearing there. Besides not being paid, the idea that Pardo or Maron might be able to tour exclusively in indie-rock clubs has never been successfully reproduced even after the relative success of Zach Galifianakis, Maria Bamford, Patton Oswalt, and Brian Posehn's *Comedians of Comedy* tour made the idea seem like an attractive alternative. For right now, the idea that these comedians have somehow miraculously circumvented all the trappings of commercial logic seems at best insincere, and at worst, self-delusional. It does give the creative person hope, however, that the control of content is indeed moving back into the hands of the content-producers, that the large media establishment's grip on artistic distribution is becoming unclenched, and that the new media future is one for the artist's taking.

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