

Podcasting Personas in the Creative Knowledge Industries

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Declaration

I declare that this thesis has not been previously submitted to another university as part of any other degree. Except where otherwise cited, this thesis is comprised entirely of my own work.

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Abstract

Using digitally networked media to garner attention and build an online reputation has become a popular practice in the information and technology industries (Marwick, 2013). This phenomenon is often subsumed under the rhetoric of individual empowerment that celebrates ideals such as self-expression and entrepreneurialism (Gandini, 2016), and the promising potentials of participation. This thesis investigates how a selection of Australian creative knowledge workers use podcasting to construct networked identities that serve to increase their professional opportunities and build their reputations, yet may simultaneously contribute to experiences of precariousness through the blurring of public and private lives. To understand this tension, I draw on a range of discourses including participatory media studies, affect theory and Persona Studies. The research places early theories of media participation in dialogue with Persona Studies, and proposes that the study of persona may offer a more nuanced understanding of participatory media use in the contemporary moment.

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Introduction | The making of an industry

In August, 2016, I attended the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's OzPod 2016, Australia's very first media industry conference exclusively dedicated to podcasting. The event explored "everything from audience acquisition and retention, approaches to measurement, new technologies, the rise of the podcast in traditional media, revenue opportunities and the art of storytelling" (ABC, 2016a), through a program of panel discussions and keynote presentations. This was an ambitious agenda for a one-day conference, but that so much was crammed into such a short period of time is reflective of the fact that podcasting has been paid far less attention than other new media formats such as blogging, social media or online streaming. Following in the wake of a rapid growth in podcasting worldwide, this business-focused schedule seemed understandable. The underlying implication was that there is much work to be done if podcasting is going to be taken seriously by the media industry, its advertisers and broader Australian audiences.

Globally, the Apple Podcast app served up over 10 billion streaming plays in 2016 across 155 countries, up from 8 billion in 2014. According to the company's Podcast Business Manager James O. Boggs, podcasting now has three established business models: "ads and sponsorship, community support/donation and upsell," each which are "key for podcast success, both creatively and financially" (Boggs, 2017). Third-party research commissioned by a group of prominent independent podcasting businesses including Gimlet Media and Midroll Media suggests that the "podcasting industry" is now on track to generate more than \$250 million in annual revenue in the USA alone (PWC, 2017). And in Australia there has been a 14 per cent net increase in podcast listening year on

year, with 36 per cent of people listening to a greater variety of podcasts compared to the year before (ABC OzPod, 2016b).

All of this development and excitement around the podcast hints at the fact that it is no longer adequate to consider the media format as just remediated radio or questionable-quality audio produced by amateurs existing in non-commercial environments (McHugh, 2016: 70-77). Instead, podcasting is undergoing a maturing process that requires media scholars to more closely examine the podcast and its unique developing cultures.

Within the discipline of media studies the podcast has often been celebrated for its ability to facilitate participatory culture. Henry Jenkins defines participatory cultures as those which have low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement; support creating and sharing; have an open and informal form of mentorship; are places where people's contributions are valued; and where there are degrees of social connection with other members (Jenkins, 2009). The podcast was theorised, along with a suite of other DIY networked technologies, to be able to deliver on these participatory user expectations. For communities of amateur media users, tech geeks and grassroots content producers its accessibility meant individuals could participate in social, political, and professional settings. Newly empowered, they could also record, time-shift, consume and engage with discourses and ideas otherwise unlikely to have been given a voice in traditional media structures. As a born-digital form it appeared to exemplify the 'long-tail' (Anderson, 2007) interests of producers and consumers alike and is often seen as evidence of the rise of an enabled 'produser' (Bruns, 2008). As such, it has been widely regarded by media academics to embody the agency and empowerment experienced by everyday media users at the dawn of Web 2.0 and the participatory turn in media studies (Jenkins, 2006a, 2006b; Benkler, 2006; Berry, 2006; Bruns, 2008).

However, within the agenda explored at the OzPod 2016 conference – one of monetisation, audience acquisition and audience measurement – Jenkins’ idealistic grassroots potentials seemed less relevant. Although participatory podcasting cultures may involve artistic expression and civic engagement, more and more they also involve the imperatives and lexicon of an emerging market. These dominant participatory media theories from the early 2000s seem outdated in their ability to describe the nuances of podcasting in the contemporary moment, in particular the competitiveness and individualism now ingrained in networked cultural production. The leading academic perspective describes the podcast as a tool for empowerment in grassroots networks, but does not consider how the rhetorical dimensions of the medium have evolved as participatory cultures have matured. Furthermore, existing podcasting literature falls short of explaining why within these new media environments early ideas of technological liberation and empowerment persist.

This thesis analyses Australian creative knowledge workers and their use of the podcast to unveil the ways in which participatory cultures more broadly are changing beyond the scope of early participatory media theory. I propose that there is a disconnect between historical theorisations of the podcast and the podcasting cultures of the present day, and draw on a range of new media theory including affect and persona studies to provide a more nuanced description of participatory culture in the networked era. It is my hypothesis that Australian creative knowledge workers use the podcast not only to build online participatory communities, but also to construct personal brands in response to neoliberal imperatives in networked environments.

Research Context

I was inspired to study podcasts hosted by creative knowledge workers by the audience at OzPod 2016. I met and mingled with producers, copywriters, advertisers, social media managers, digital strategists, and content marketers like myself. They worked across a generous portion of the 15 sectors that make up the creative industries as defined by John Howkins: advertising, architecture, arts, crafts, design, fashion, film, music, performing arts, publishing, research and development, software, toys and games, TV and radio, and video games (Howkins, 2001). The podcast's penetration in many of these sectors is impressive, but not coincidental; I also chose to study this culture as gaining employment in the creative knowledge industries increasingly requires individuals to use digitally networked media to create an online presence (Marwick, 2013; Gandini, 2016). Using the podcast in an effort to build a personal brand is becoming more common and therefore, this particular culture is a good site to study the intersection between participatory media cultures, changing labour markets and how personal brands are built and leveraged in this environment.

Personal brands play an important role in the creative industries since the rise of a global 'creative class' (Florida, 2002). According to Florida, these workers have an economic function to "create new ideas, new technology, and new creative content" (ibid., p8). Florida's concept of the creative class celebrates the idea that individuals are now able to lead prosperous and autonomous lives based on their ability to wield creativity in a new digital economy. For example, in many popular online press these tech-savvy workers are often labelled "yuccies" (Infante, 2015) or "slashies" (Hickey, 2014), referring to a broad category of young, educated, urban individuals who use online networks to pursue and profit from their own creativity. To navigate this world of individualised entrepreneurship, personal brands are used to increase employment opportunities and

establish status throughout networks. This is particularly pertinent in the contemporary moment as Andrew Ross notes, “No one, not even those in the traditional professions, can any longer expect a fixed pattern of employment in the course of their lifetime, and they are under more and more pressure to anticipate, and prepare for, a future in which they still will be able to compete in a changing market place” (Ross, 2009: 2).

This exploration of podcasting cultures is also an exploration into how participatory media and the values of participatory cultures have been co-opted as part of this movement from fixed patterns of employment to the reorganisation of creative labour.

Methodological and Theoretical Approach

To conduct this research, I have performed a close critical reading of an illustrative selection of Australian podcasts hosted by creative knowledge workers. I created an archive of approximately 30 hours of audio content from eight podcasts selected from the OzPodcasts Australian Podcasts Directory, with an emphasis on two particular texts in Chapters One and Two. I selected this collection of podcasts as their hosts represent a diverse cross-section of creative professions including freelance writer, content marketer, DJ, media personality, comedian and software developer. Each podcast host also has public profiles across other participatory media platforms such as social media and blogging, offering further insight into how their podcasts function within broader transmedia eco-systems. The selection of episodes I studied were all published in the Apple Podcasts App within the last 24 months at the time of listening. I excluded traditional broadcast radio remediated into podcasts in this study as my focus is on independent users in participatory media cultures.

By performing a close critical reading I have been able to interpret these podcasts as cultural artefacts using a range of theories from discourses including affect, persona studies and participatory media studies to better understand how participatory media cultures are evolving. As McKee explains, “We interpret texts (films, television programmes, magazines, advertisements, clothes, graffiti, and so on) in order to try and obtain a sense of the ways in which, in particular cultures at particular times, people make sense of the world around them” (McKee, 2003: 1). I listened to each podcast episode in line with Glaser and Straus’ inductive grounded theory approach, that is, an intensive rather than extensive research approach (Harre, 1979: 137) concerned with processes instead of patterns (Sayer, 1992: 242-244 cited in Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2011: 15). Additionally, “Glaser and Straus (1967) argued that theories developed using their model will be understandable by practitioners, and will ‘work’ in real world settings” (Oktay, 2012: 5).

Marko Ampuja notes defining critical media research can be complicated as it is “a broad category encompassing divergent methodologies, approaches, and theoretical assumptions” (Pendakur, 1995: 67 cited in Ampuja, 2004: 60). I have turned to the approach outlined by Mark Andrejevic, which proposes that critically studying media 2.0 technologies should involve considering “the ways in which the deployment of networked digital media contribute to and reinforce the contemporary exercise of power, and to imagine how it might be otherwise” (Andrejevic, 2009: 41). Andrejevic emphasises the directive to develop knowledge that explores the information landscape for “purposes other than marketing and prediction” (ibid., p47).

Scholars including Nico Carpentier (2011), Elizabeth Bird (2011) and Ginette Verstraete (2011) have offered important critiques of the idea that media participation is

foundational to expanding democracy, citizenship and political empowerment in the networked era. In line with this critical trajectory, across four chapters I will argue that podcasting is not an inherently empowering participatory media technology, but one that is better described and understood through the paradigm of persona. This position builds on the way that many media scholars have previously described participatory media cultures (Levy, 1997; Leadbeater & Miller, 2004; Benkler, 2006; Bruns, 2008) and contends that the ways that media researchers conceptualise and study technologies like the podcast need updating. In particular, I open a dialogue with Henry Jenkins' most recent book *Participatory Culture in a Networked Era: A Conversation on Youth, Learning, Commerce and Politics* (2016) co-authored with Mizuko Ito and danah boyd. I offer a critique of early participatory media theories with the hope that it will make a positive contribution to the discourse of media studies. As Andrejevic says, "The goal is to suggest some elements of a critical approach to digital media and in so doing to upgrade critical theory in ways that make sense of the fact that the media revolution has not facilitated a social one, while remaining committed to the possibility that it might" (Andrejevic, 2009: 36).

In Chapter One I locate the podcast within the participatory media cultures literature and argue that despite the rhetoric of empowerment often associated with the medium, the format's 'second coming' has led media personalities to use the podcast to build transmedia personal brands that reflect traditional media hierarchies.

In Chapter Two I investigate how amateur media producers in the Australian creative knowledge industries use participatory technologies to navigate economies of status and reputation operating within increasingly fragmented labour markets. I observe that Australian creative knowledge workers mimic the media use of traditional celebrities in

attempts to leverage their ‘micro-celebrity’ (Senft, 2008) as a competitive advantage in online networks.

In Chapter Three I explore how networked media technologies such as the podcast carry affective promises capable of ‘empowering’ creative knowledge workers who are tasked with creating a personal brand in online media networks. I argue that this rhetoric of empowerment can lead to an impasse of ‘cruel optimism’ (Berlant, 2011) involving experiences of precariousness, which requires new lines of academic inquiry.

In Chapter Four I propose that Persona Studies will play an important role in advancing the participatory media studies discourse. I outline the concept of ‘micro-persona’ as a way of reimagining what is possible within contemporary participatory media cultures, offering a perspective that contributes to updating how scholars describe and understand participatory technologies like the podcast.

In Conclusion I reflect on the thesis, summarise key ideas and identify areas of further inquiry.

One | Podcasts, Participation and Personal Branding

Early theorisations of the podcast celebrated the technology as an inherently empowering tool for participation. Media scholars at the turn of the millennium associated podcasting with its potential to facilitate grassroots community ideals such as participatory democracy, network decentralisation, and collective intelligence (Jenkins, 2006a). Since those early days, the proliferation of mobile technology and the success of shows such as *Serial* have signalled a ‘second coming’ which set the stage for highly visible media personalities to adapt participatory culture values to create branded personas. This has altered podcasting cultures beyond the understanding and scope of early participatory media studies.

The podcast as participation

On February 12, 2004, *The Guardian* published an article titled “Audible revolution” written by Ben Hammersley, a British journalist, internet technologist, blogger and broadcaster. Hammersley claimed that the increasing flow of communication between journalists and their readers, the decentralisation of networked distribution and the emergence of new business models for the online marketplace were leading the media landscape to a “boom in amateur radio”. This exciting medium was so new at the time that Hammersley didn’t even have the adequate terminology to categorise what he was reporting at the intersection of iPods, cheap audio software and the rise of weblogs.

“But what to call it? Audioblogging? Podcasting? GuerillaMedia?” he wrote (Hammersley, 2004).

Across broader networked environments other ground breaking new media experiences were transpiring. That same year, Mark Zuckerberg made Facebook available to students at Harvard University; in 2005, the video sharing platform YouTube was founded; in 2006, *TIME* magazine proclaimed “You” the person of the year; and in 2007, Apple launched the first ever iPhone. Just one month after Hammersley first used the term “podcasting” (Berry, 2006: 143, Madsen, 2009: 1192), Henry Jenkins published an article in *The International Journal of Cultural Studies* that attempted to map such shifts in the media into “a theory of media convergence that allows us to identify major sites of tension and transition shaping the media environment for the coming decade” (Jenkins, 2004: 33). Clearly, both media practice and media theory were undergoing a period of incredible change. Moreover, it appeared that the podcast was an important component of this movement, embodying a sense of empowerment experienced by new media users.

To begin, I must place the podcast within what Jenkins previously referred to as ‘participatory culture’, a term first used by the researcher in his book *Textual Poachers: Television fans & participatory culture* (1992). These cultures are open cultures in which individuals feel encouraged to express and share ideas, where knowledge is transferred from experienced members to new members, contributions are seen to matter, social relationships are meaningful and most individuals are able to participate due to low barriers of entry (Jenkins, 2009). Jenkins proffered that these cultures could redefine the media landscape. Prior to the flourishing of those interactive and networked media technologies that today we may take for granted, *Textual Poachers* interrogated the standing logic that traditional media audiences were passive and that any meaning they found in texts was temporary and transient (Jenkins, 1992: 44).

Jenkins took his departure from *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984) in which French

scholar Michel de Certeau theorised conceptualisations of appropriative media audience politics known as ‘poaching’ and ‘tactics’, that were determined primarily by the absence of a proper locus, resulting in consumption without the conditions necessary for autonomy (de Certeau, 1984: 37). In Jenkins’ ethnography of *Star Trek* fans, he adapted de Certeau’s concept to demonstrate how television fans could be understood to be active and empowered agents who made meaning through mediated communities and derivative work they were creating as ‘Trekkers’ (Jenkins, 1992). This required traditional media organisations to reconsider the idea that “all participation in the consumer economy constitutes cooptation” and encouraged stakeholders to “look instead at the ways that consumers are influencing the production and distribution of media content” (Jenkins, 2004: 36).

Recasting fans as participants in a media franchise instead of simply consumers set the groundwork for his theories on participation in a convergent media environment. He canvassed his perspectives in his article ‘The cultural logic of media convergence’ (2004), and then expanded these theories in *Convergence Culture: where old and new media collide* (2006a) and *Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers: exploring participatory culture* (2006b). A key pillar of this effort to extend the conclusions he came to in *Textual Poachers* was the work of Pierre Lévy (1997), which provided an explanation of how empowering practices of participatory fandom could evolve alongside networked technologies.

Lévy’s idea of ‘collective intelligence’ articulated Jenkins’ theory that media fans were increasingly empowered by the rise of digital networks and as a result were able to access knowledge and power that far exceeded their own individual limitations. Speaking on Lévy’s concept Jenkins says, “And this organization of audiences into what Lévy calls knowledge communities allows them to exert a greater aggregate power in their

negotiations with media producers” (Jenkins, 2006a: 27).

This signaled a ‘participatory turn’ in media studies (Jenkins, 2014: 271) which asserted that a new conceptualisation of the media consumer as participant occurred at the intersection of new technologies that enabled consumers to remix and recontextualise content, expanding cultures of Do-It-Yourself (DIY) media production and economic trends that encouraged the flow of information across different platforms (Jenkins, 2006b: 135-136). Consumers were no longer regarded as passive but active nodes in the network. Jenkins states that “The term *participatory culture* contrasts with older notions of passive media spectatorship” (Jenkins, 2006a: 3, emphasis in original text). This thinking expanded the concepts of the ‘prosumer’ (Toffler, 1980) and the ‘pro-am’ (Leadbeater and Miller, 2004), themselves more recently contemporised by Axel Bruns’ idea of the ‘produser’ (Bruns, 2008).

According to Bruns, “What the network makes possible is the existence of a distributed but coordinated community, organised not according to the directions of a central authority to which all other nodes in the network are subordinate, but by the community’s own protocols of interaction” (Bruns, 2008: 15). This forming of a “networked public sphere” allowed individuals to communicate with each other in ways that could not be contained or controlled within traditional media structures (Benkler, 2006: 11). Such cultures were open to various contributors, which disrupted the established dichotomy between artist and audience, producer and consumer (Jenkins, 2006a).

Similarly, for Richard Berry, podcasting is a perfect example of this new way of conceiving media producers and consumers. Berry states, “What podcasting offers is a

classic ‘horizontal’ media form: producers are consumers and consumers become producers and engage in conversations with each other” (Berry, 2006: 146). The medium was identified as an early expression of DIY media in the digital era that allowed individuals to leverage the network to communicate with each other (Meserko, 2015a: 798) and establish important new social connections (McLung and Johnson, 2010: 85).

The podcast’s nascent popularity was spurred on by a rising culture of ‘music for free’ which emerged from the prevalence of peer-to-peer sharing platforms and the ascent of the Apple iPod (Menduni, 2007: 9). At the time, the iPod was redefining how listeners ‘inhabited’ the spaces they moved through in the everyday, creating “privatised audio bubbles” in which they could control “thoughts, feelings and observations as they manage both space and time” (Bull, 2006: 344). The device’s technological ability to port a vast library of audio files far exceeded what was possible with precursory personal music players such as the Sony Walkman and Discman, which relied on hardware. Through its integration with the iTunes software, the iPod enabled its owners to travel with a near limitless number of voices, songs and ideas, ready to be played at the click of a button. Through this non-linear listening capability, podcasting contributed to a new form of freedom in which audiences could time-shift their listening and avoid the same homogenous programming and saturated advertising found on traditional radio. It celebrated the new possibilities of fragmented media consumption (Crofts et al., 2005), aided by the medium’s incorporation into the iTunes software in 2005 and later the introduction of a standalone Apple ‘Podcasts’ iPhone app in 2012 (Morris and Patterson, 2015: 223).

But beyond illustrating new models of networked and mobile communication, podcasting was a tool of empowerment that placed the capabilities of media production

into the hands of the non-professional audio producer. It enabled a type of ‘de-professionalised’ (Luders, 2008 cited in Bottomley, 2015: 181) world-building that helped producers and consumers make sense of the hyper-mediated environments that increasingly surrounded them (MacDougall, 2011: 718). For the first time, networked audiences could seamlessly listen to unconventional perspectives brought into public forums by the audio recordings of amateur content creators. Virginia Madsen draws attention to *The Dawn and Drew Show!* as a good example of how early podcasting enabled audiences to connect with niche-orientated voices (Madsen, 2009: 1196). In 2004 Dawn Micelo and Drew Domkis started recording a podcast about “two ex gutter punks who fall in love, buy a retired farm in Wisconsin (then move to Costa Rica and back) and tell the world their dirty secrets” (Micelo and Domkis, 2017). At the time, the hosts were reflective of a new wave of alternative voices in the networked media landscape that did not rely on endorsement from traditional gatekeepers. Micelo commented on the success of their homegrown, self-produced amateur show in their 100th episode saying, “Who’d have thought anyone would listen?” “Take this, Big Brother! I don’t need you. I don’t need your fucking contracts. I’ve got my own radio show!” (Micelo as cited in Madsen, 2009: 1196). Madsen says this is expressive of the early excitement that accompanied amateur podcasting and its ability to challenge traditional media and communication channels (ibid). For their efforts in the early days of podcasting, Micelo and Domkis have since been inducted into the Academy of Podcasters Hall of Fame, whose membership is based on “longevity in and contributions to the podcasting community” (Academy of Podcasters, 2017).

What the podcast provided for *Dawn and Drew* and a raft of other early non-media-professionals like Dan Klass of *The Bitterest Pill* and Mignon Fogarty of *Grammar Girl*, was agency to independently connect with audiences. This kind of grassroots broadcasting

posed a challenge for traditional media companies such as public broadcasters, which had long “promoted themselves as gatekeepers of quality content and journalistic integrity among the free-for-all babble of the internet” (Murray, 2009: 199). Established media companies risked “brand dilution” as they navigated the burgeoning days of the medium and its “interactive and participatory characteristics” (ibid.) The DIY podcast embodied the optimism and the potentials of participatory cultures in the early days of the web to redefine traditional media landscapes.

The podcast’s second coming

Despite the idealistic theories marked by the participatory turn, Journalist Kevin Roose wrote in *New York Magazine* that sometime in 2009 or 2010, the hype surrounding the early days of podcasting seemed to wither. Roose attributes a lack of content innovation as well as the rise of online music and video streaming as potential detractors, and claimed that only podcasting stalwarts like *This American Life* and *Radio Lab* (two remediated broadcast radio shows) remained prevalent in Apple’s podcasting top charts. “Download numbers fell. Interest waned,” he reported (Roose, 2014). Yet just five years later in 2014 an entirely different problem had emerged – “There [were] *too* many great podcasts to keep up with” (ibid., emphasis in original text). Independent podcasting networks such as Radiotopia had emerged, podcasting production companies like Pineapple Street Media were founded, and a number of ad buying companies such as Midroll Media were making ground in monetising content at scale. Consumers and producers alike heralded in a renewed podcasting boom. Roose speculated that an increase in audience awareness, higher quality production values, and the integration of smart phones into new cars were three significant factors contributing to this podcasting renaissance.

Richard Berry identifies the podcast *Serial* as a landmark that encapsulates this second coming. *Serial* was a 12-part US podcast series released in 2014 that follows the 1999 true crime murder story of high-school student Hae Min Lee. Each week a new episode was delivered by RSS feed to subscribers as per the standard protocol for podcast distribution. However, unlike any other podcast that came before it, *Serial* achieved record-breaking success and audience figures not yet seen in podcasting. It became the fastest podcast to reach five million downloads (Dredge, 2014), it was still being downloaded 500,000 times per day months after its initial release (Kohjer, 2015 cited in Berry, 2015: 171), and it was the first podcast to attract an off-season ad campaign (Blattberg, 2015), meaning that marketers were willing to pay to retro fit their advertisements into the show to capitalise on any downloads thereafter. It also spawned a number of podcasts about the show, a practice not common at the time (ibid.).

In addition to the technological convergences Roose wrote of, Berry attributes *Serial*'s success to its association with the “well-known, much loved and highly respected brand” *This American Life* (*TAL*). He unpacks how a new media brand forged by a traditional broadcast powerhouse gained traction in an environment that was originally celebrated by scholars and amateurs for its ability to subvert such media hierarchies. Berry notes that *Serial* was a spin-off of *TAL* with co-producer and host Sarah Koenig having worked on the former radio show for a number of years before starting her own podcast; *TAL*'s anchor host Ira Glass is himself a well regarded and highly visible media personality, who also appeared on popular television show *The Tonight Show with Jimmy Fallon* to promote *Serial*, including airing an instructional video telling viewers how to listen to podcasts, specifically *Serial*; and Glass also presented a preview of *Serial* via the *TAL* RSS feed (Berry, 2015).

Through all of this promotion, a *Serial* trailer had already reached the top spot on the Apple Podcast charts before the first episode's release. Furthermore, Berry's research discovered that more than half of survey respondents said that they were listeners of *TAL* before they listened to *Serial* (Berry, 2015: 174). It was a show that was entering a market that had been primed by the success of highly produced independent shows such as *99% Invisible* (ibid.), but it had the cultural clout and marketing channels of one of American public radio's biggest entities. In other words, the podcast's renaissance and its entry into the pop-cultural zeitgeist wasn't only caused by the participatory potentials of new media exemplified by the efforts of amateur content creators like *Dawn and Drew*, but also due to the profile of traditional professional media brands such as *This American Life*.

The role that traditional media brands have played in the rise of podcasting is an important consideration for scholars studying how media participants use the podcast in the contemporary moment. Since 2014 many traditional media personalities have created their own podcasts, banking on their traditional media celebrity status similar to the way *Serial* leveraged the brand capital of *TAL*. In Australia, a selection of media stars from radio, television and print media have started their own independent podcasts. For example, the ABC's Leigh Sales and Annabel Crabb host *Chat 10 Looks 3*, a show offering insights into their lives as television hosts, journalists, mothers and friends; Triple J radio alumni Tom Ballard hosts *Like I'm a Six-Year-Old*, an interview show featuring young political and social activists; former *Cosmopolitan* editor and founder of the Mamamia Women's Network Mia Freedman hosts a talk show called *No Filter*; and standup comedian Wil Anderson produces, hosts and co-hosts a variety of shows about philosophy, sport and pop culture.

To understand the two-way relationship between the new culture of podcasting and traditional media brands I perform a close critical reading of one of Australia's most popular shows, *The Osber Günsberg Podcast (TOGP)*. Observing how podcasting is being used not just as a tool for participatory empowerment but also how it is being used to build the personal brands of established media personalities reveals how Jenkins' participatory cultures theories are not entirely adequate to describe participatory media cultures in the present day.

Expected to participate (as personal brands)

In the creative knowledge industries, the expectation of media producers to adopt the characteristics of brands partly stems from the convergence of "production and consumption, work and cultural expression" (Terranova, 2004: 75), illustrated by the rise of social media, knowledge work and 'immaterial labour' (Lazzarato, 1996).

The value placed on such labour is exemplified by historic shifts in cultural policy in the UK, implemented by Tony Blair's 1997 New Labor Government (Hesmondhalgh, 2008: 555; Ross, 2009: 18, McRobbie, 2016: 60). Blair's 'New Economy' policies involved an invigorating re-birth of the arts sectors, promoting an entrepreneurial model of self-organisation for the arts. The progressive yet capitalist reimagining of what was formally regarded as the 'cultural industries' – now '*creative* industries' – incorporated all of the hype of technological enthusiasm, the harnessing of youth, innovation, branding, and opportunities for commerce (Ross, 2009: 19).

The new ideologies of the UK's creative industries celebrated the convergence of

personal creativity and commercial services, blurring the lines between producing media for leisure and producing media for this new kind of work. An example of this kind of cultural thinking was captured by the launch of educational training for the creative industries. This included the now defunct Creative and Media Diploma – a vocational qualification offered by a “consortia of schools, further education colleges and business” (Buckingham, 2013: 31) in the UK. It aimed to help transition students into professional work based on the premise that young people are “spontaneously developing skills and knowledge in their leisure time that they will eventually be able to trade in on the employment market. Dedicated amateur enthusiasts or fans – it is suggested – will one day be able to translate their expertise into jobs in the industry” (ibid., p29). In other words, in this new economy, personal media participation could, in some instances, lead to a professional pursuit.

Tiziana Terranova comments that such a conceptualisation of labour leads to environments where creative industry workers are forced into the economy of continuous innovation, summing up the condition by saying, “After all, if we do not get online soon, hype suggests, we will become obsolete, unnecessary, disposable” (Kenney, 1997 cited in Terranova, 2004: p81).

The position that active online participation is part of working in a re-imaging of what it means to be creative in the networked era has arguably only become more pervasive in the time since Terranova’s writing. Building social and professional status through blogging, maintaining a ‘bio’ on LinkedIn, updating a creative portfolio or making your own podcast are each examples of the on-going effort expected in some creative knowledge industries today. For media personalities like Osher Günsberg, the podcasting environment is particularly well suited to this imperative as its rise in popular culture was

spurred on, in part, by the attention drawn to the medium by traditional media brands such as *This American Life*. The podcast's intersection with, yet contrast to, traditional media creates a rich opportunity for broadcast media personalities who are willing to participate. In other words, it's a great medium to build a personal brand, particularly if you already have one.

Despite a successful career in commercial media that has spanned more than a decade and canvased stints in radio, television and live performance, Osher Günsberg hosts an independent podcast self-described in the Apple Podcasts app as "A weekly conversation with someone remarkable that will leave you truly inspired." By some measures, it is an Australian podcasting success story that celebrates what is possible when individuals invest in participatory media formats. It has an international audience of listeners (as comments in Apple iTunes reveal), over 260 mostly favourable reviews on the Apple Podcasts app, is, at the time of writing this thesis, ranked 53rd in the corresponding comedy top charts, has a 5-star Apple listener rating, and boasts an archive of more than 140 past episodes recorded over more than three years. The show is produced by the host in his spare room using off-the-shelf consumer technology (Günsberg, 2016a) allowing him to deliver content with ease (Tulley, 2011: 268), free from the limitations of traditional radio (Fauteux, 2015: 203). Günsberg alludes to his ability to connect with audiences and build an online community premised on developing a meaningful relationship with his listeners saying, "This show makes my week and I know from the emails that I get every single week that a lot of people enjoy it" (Günsberg, 2016a).

Günsberg's podcast is notably different to his show business work elsewhere where he is known for hosting popular reality television shows like *Australian Idol*, *The Bachelor*, *Bondi Rescue* and *So You Think You Can Dance (US)*. On TV screens his personality is confined

by well-worn formats of novelty challenges, confession cams and contestant eliminations. The podcast, however, holds potentials that permit him to talk about more personal anecdotes, perhaps unexpected of a high profile media personality.

In this way *TOGP* can be seen to operate within the transmedia personal brand of Osher Günsberg. This personal brand also consists of his roles as the host of prime time television shows and as co-host of the *Stav, Abby & Osher* show on Hit105 Brisbane. In *Convergence Culture: where old and new media collide* (2006a), Jenkins outlines this kind of matrix with the concept of transmedia storytelling as a marketing strategy for brands. It is a storytelling technique that stems from the Japanese marketing strategy known as ‘media mix’ and refers to “a process where integral elements of a fiction get dispersed systematically across multiple delivery channels for the purpose of creating a unified and coordinated entertainment experience” (Jenkins, 2007). He confirms the potential of transmedia brands saying, “close collaboration between program producers, brand gurus, and new media companies suggests rapid growth of industry interest in transmedia entertainment over just a few short years” (Jenkins, 2006a: 125).

Though Jenkins is referring to massive fiction story world franchises such as *The Matrix*, elements of this framework appear prevalent in Günsberg’s media participation, too. As a podcast host, television presenter and radio personality Günsberg is at an epicentre of Australia’s creative industries and exposed to those same producers, brand marketers and media companies that converge in transmedia storytelling. Comparably, where Jenkins says transmedia stories reveal different dimensions across different channels, Günsberg is revealing different parts of his personality across different discourses. The outcome of participating in both commercial and self-produced medias in this fashion is increased listener self-brand connection, which generates social and commercial authority (Granitz

and Forman, 2015: 44). The crosspollination of the personal and professional is clear in a podcast episode where Günsberg asks listeners to tune-in to the 2016 season premiere of *The Bachelor*, which is “less than 72 hours away” (Günsberg, 2016b). He calls on his podcast listeners to watch because the TV show’s stakeholders are “looking for a big opening,” referring presumably to high numbers in audience viewership and ratings.

The outcome of Günsberg positioning himself as an accessible yet layered media personality is what Jenkins refers to as transmedia engagement (Jenkins. 2013: 132). Transmedia engagement is concerned with prolonging interactions between media participant and media stimulus for a deeper, richer experience, (ibid., p137). This can be observed in podcasting conventions such as live recordings, listening parties, panels and stage shows that invite audiences to move through physical and social spaces all the while stretching out their exploration of the podcaster and his or her content (Edmond, 2015: 1578). In the case of Osher Günsberg, audiences can discover the dimensions of his personal brand on their morning commute via his radio show, during their lunch break via his podcast, and at home before dinner via the television. The result is a personal brand that feels familiar to large populations across multiple settings, increasing the personality’s exposure, status and social capital. However, it is a formula that appears to work because the host benefits from the affordances of already having an existing audience. The podcast allows him to perform authenticity through a willingness to be open and transparent about himself, with his guests, and most importantly, with his audience.

Airing authenticity

The Osher Günsberg Podcast champions authenticity, focusing on broadcasting unfiltered

‘real conversations between real people’. This is a common conceit in the podcasting landscape as Vincent Meserko’s research on the immensely successful US comedy podcast *WTF with Marc Maron* illustrates. Meserko investigates how *WTF*’s perceived authenticity – of its host comedian Marc Maron and his guests (having previously included US President Barack Obama) – has contributed to the show’s success. Meserko claims, “There is a perception that Maron’s podcast allows him a space to be more real and reveal a more ‘authentic’ version of himself” (Meserko, 2015b: 797). He adds that the podcast’s affordances enable first-person accounts to explain away controversy, participate in communal reflection and provide a more authentic presentation of oneself (ibid., p808).

The ‘realness’ may be performed, but it doesn’t mean it is not perceived as authentic. While in other participatory media cultures, such as MP3 blogging, authenticity is perceived in part by distance from commercialisation (Borschke, 2014), the podcast’s intimacy and DIY history seem to afford even those from highly commercialised backgrounds with a kind of redemption; an opportunity to ‘truly be themselves’ despite whatever association with programming on corporate media networks they may have. It can also help entertainment professionals maintain control over their artistic integrity (Meserko, 2015a: 23).

In one podcast episode, Günsberg and his guest Socratis Otto, an Australian actor currently known for playing a transgender woman on the Foxtel television drama *Wentworth*, cover a lot of intimate topics in their conversation. Using an interview format, Günsberg prompts Otto to reveal facts about his personal life in the podcast, also revealing his own intimate insights and thoughts as the conversation progresses. Within the hour-long episode Otto recounts what it was like being a migrant in Australia. He

says that he is unsure if his parents did or did not come to Australia as ‘boat people’ after World War II, tells Günsberg about the violence he witnessed at his parents’ general store growing up, and talks about his journey as an actor. Günsberg refers to his guest as one of the warmest, loveliest people he has ever met saying that he “lights up the room”, and goes on to compare him favourably to other actors he has met in the industry who are “hollow as people” (Günsberg, 2016b). This kind of content is an example of the show’s tagline in action: “Authenticity is the new black. Come and join us.”

Strong links can be drawn between Maron and Günsberg’s podcasts. Meserko explains that positioning oneself between traditional and new media broadcasting technology is a strategic response to the increasing preoccupation that audiences have with ‘technologies of self-fashioning,’ (Johnson, 2008: 32 in Meserko, 2014: 458). These podcasts are examples of “overt commitment to self-improvement and self-fashioning [...] Such podcasts are lessening the distance between celebrities and their fans through discourses of therapy, self-improvement, and intense indulgences of feeling” (ibid., p458). In addition to conversations about their guests’ personal lives, both Maron and Günsberg openly discuss their own struggles with mental health on their respective shows. This is an important practice for both podcaster and audience as Kris Markman notes that interpersonal connections are one of the main motivators for podcasters to continue podcasting. Markman says, “Listener emails, submissions, discussion, and phone calls (via voicemail playback) were used regularly, and the feedback podcasters received from these channels helped sustain their interest” (Markman, 2011: p31-33).

By conducting revealing interviews, sharing personal stories and podcasting about mental health issues, Günsberg has managed to build an unfiltered podcasting persona that combines grassroots aesthetics as well as his identity as a traditional media celebrity.

Podcasting is just one aspect of his broader transmedia personal brand that also spans across television and radio, generating powerful social capital that serves him well in the creative knowledge industries in which there is an expectation that individuals reveal aspects of their personal lives. In this example, personal branding has been used as a mechanism to participate in both traditional and new media environments, demonstrating how contemporary participatory cultures are influenced and shaped by traditional media structures.

In this chapter I have explored how podcasting has historically been regarded as an inherently empowering medium for grassroots media participants. However I argued the podcast's 'second coming' draws attention to the role that traditional media hierarchies have played in the format's popularity. In this wake, a selection of Australian media personalities have created their own podcasts that exemplify participatory media empowerment, but also demonstrate the enduring influence that traditional media brands play in structuring participatory communities. This tension illuminates how dominant media theories from the early web that celebrated participatory media primarily for its potential to deliver community values such as participatory democracy, collective intelligence, and bottom up power flows, must now adapt to consider how the branded individual effects networked participatory cultures, and vice versa.

In the next chapter I will investigate how the empowering participatory media rhetoric associated with work in the creative industries encourages non-professional content creators to mimic the podcasting practices of highly visible media celebrities.

Two | When High Hopes Become High Stakes

Digitally networked media has redefined work in the creative knowledge industries, contributing to a culture of flexible labour and hyper-competitive entrepreneurialism. As such, participatory media now functions as an important consideration for individuals trying to gain and retain employment in the fragmented creative labour market. Using the podcast to become a ‘micro-celebrity’ (Senft, 2008) and achieve status has become a practice among some Australian creative knowledge workers, who mimic the podcasting behaviours of successful and highly visible traditional media personalities. A critical reading of this practice uncovers how ideas of self-direction and self-sustenance under a rhetoric of participatory empowerment also requires individuals to perform ‘free labour’ (Terranova, 2004). Participation in this context can be seen as simultaneously empowering and disempowering, highlighting the inadequacies of early participatory media theories to describe more contemporary participatory media use.

An empowering participatory media rhetoric

The idea that the podcast has been celebrated by scholars for its ability to place the power of media production into the hands of the media consumer (Berry, 2006; Bottomley, 2015; Madsen, 2009; Meserko, 2015a; Murray, 2009; Salvati, 2015) is by and large an unsurprising one. In *Participatory Culture in a Networked Era* (2016) danah boyd describes a state of internet cultures in the early 2000s that is sympathetic to this conceptualisation of participatory media technologies. She says that by 2003 the “tech scene” in San Francisco, USA, had “happily bid adieu to the financial leeches” that had caused the commercial boom and crash of the early web (boyd in Jenkins et al., 2016: 121). boyd herself had re-located to San Francisco in the wake of this micro-economic

implosion, “ecstatic to be surrounded by geeks and designers” in a new tech scene that was buzzing. She describes a reincarnation of Silicon Valley that was then firmly in the hands of evangelists of open cultures, free thinkers and techno-optimists who had witnessed, and learned from, the aforementioned tech bubble blowout. “The driving frame of the new tech scene was ‘social software,’ and the idea was to build new technologies that would allow people to focus on interacting with others” she adds (ibid.).

In *This is Not a Remix* (2017) Margie Borschke explores the emergence of similar cultural narratives in MP3 blogging communities. Borschke draws attention to a position that imagines participatory media as a kind of contemporary folk culture saying, “Throughout Jenkins’s potted history, folk music is presented as culture that can stand in opposition to commerce—it is either noncommercial or of little economic consequence” (Borschke, 2017: 138). Borschke’s accompanying ethnographic fieldwork exploring competing ideals of authenticity in such communities uncovers an online environment in which some media participants believe it sometimes unethical to commercialise media activities, but not always, claiming that commerce might be antithetical to their intentions in some cases. Keeping their media participation “pure” (i.e. non-commercial) permits them to be “true to themselves” (ibid.) – just as had been romanticised in folk cultures long before the emergence of digital technologies (Jenkins, 2010).

In line with this empowering narrative of internet history and the intentions of the academics, UX designers and product people who gathered in the e-rubble of 2003 to build and design new social technologies, Jenkins unfolds a dichotomy between individual media participants and powerful organisations that shows how these technologies, including the podcast, were seen to shift power structures in new

ways. Media users had agency to build communities independent of commercial cultures, but also to engage with and challenge these same cultures.

Podcasts today can still be seen to enable grassroots content creators to interact with each other, build communities and in cases, certainly to subvert the commercial powerhouses that any romantic folk notions aimed to redress. There is a healthy podcasting eco-system developing in Australia that still honours these potentials. According to OzPodcasts, Australia's largest podcasting directory, there are currently over 1200 podcasts produced locally, sparking discussions in categories including the arts, health, education, technology and other discourses that can impact wider society. These include both shows featuring well-known media personalities as well as complete podcasting amateurs. In addition to forums like OzPodcasts there are also efforts like the Australian Audio Guide, which make grassroots podcasts discoverable alongside more polished programs from organisations like the ABC.

In Sydney, a range of podcasts hosted by Andrew Levins, a DJ, restaurateur and creative director, appear to be examples of such participatory media empowerment. Levins' shows *Hey Fam...!*, *Serious Issues* and *The Mitchen* are three separate, self-produced weekly podcasts about popular culture, comic book franchises and local nightlife, respectively. They each open dialogues with social communities, individuals working in relevant industries and cultural commentators to share knowledge, ideas and concerns. *The Mitchen*, as a brief example, is described online by Levins as "a weekly podcast about food in Sydney. Each week, ACME's Mitch Orr and I sit down with some food industry legends and talk about their craft, how they started doing what they do and the issues facing the industry today" (Levins, 2016).

In one episode, Levins and co-hosts Mitch Orr and Mike Eggert discuss Sydney's controversial nightlife lockdown laws. The co-hosts condemn the laws and respond to a recent incident in which a local restaurant was questioned by alcohol licensing police about encouraging anti-social behaviour. The hosts use the podcast as a forum to criticize the laws and are able to add their perspectives as restaurant owners and industry stakeholders to the broader public debate. Instances of community empowerment via media technologies are clearly alive and practiced today via the participatory ideals that boyd observed forming at the turn of the millennium. These media technologies are used in attempts to equalize the media landscape and influence public dialogues.

The history that boyd writes of, the liveliness of the local amateur podcasting scene and the David and Goliath battles embodied by Levins are illustrative of a rhetoric of empowerment that is tethered to theories of participatory cultures and even more so to DIY Web 2.0 technologies. Not only did this idea of empowerment spread throughout online networks in social, cultural and political scenes, but also in the professional sphere, especially in the creative knowledge industries.

Reorganising creative work in the networked era

In *Work's Intimacy* (2011) Melissa Gregg researches the role that web technologies have played in the convergence of personal and professional lives of Australian knowledge workers since the rise of participatory media. She localises the UK policies of Tony Blair's 1997 New Labour government mentioned in the previous chapter, using the example of state government policies in Queensland, Australia, saying that "by 2009 the Queensland Government's 'Smart State' policy, a platform designed to invest large sums of money to enhance the cultural and intellectual infrastructure of its capital, Brisbane,

had also proven their purpose” (Gregg, 2011: 23). The process included major renovations of public libraries and art galleries, a “revitalized arts and information precinct” and the “installation of a revolving tourist ‘eye,’ in the vein of London’s signature riverside attraction.” Gregg describes this transformation as “a national forum for cutting-edge arts and culture” (ibid., p23) before declaring “Brisbane’s status as a creative city is one of the clearest examples available of state-sanctioned investment in cultural labor” (ibid., p26).

Gregg further explores the manifold lifestyle changes that accompany official endorsements of such technologies, observing, “The vital companion to the leisure of affordances of newly minted creative cities is a flexible and fulfilling work culture” (Gregg, 2011: 30). Alongside establishing a creative city comes the opening up of a creative labour market, in which individuals must often pit themselves against each other as skilled cultural entrepreneurs.

Gregg’s work draws attention to the competitive individualism that is now concomitant with participatory technologies and cultures. She outlines an idealisation of working that appears complementary to the rise of digital economies, creative cities, knowledge workers and media participation. Working in hyper-mediated and hyper-individualistic environments deploys positive connotations around ideals of connectivity, mobility and professional autonomy (Gregg, 2011: 32). Here participatory practices and cultures appear to comfortably coexist with commercial imperatives; even participants who might avoid aligning with one commercial narrative, often fall into the rhythms of another. Jenkins et al. valorised media participation for its political possibilities implying that individuals could engage in open dialogues with large corporations, and grassroots cultures could be made more visible and viable. However, the same practices and

technologies are now a condition of entry into new networked labour markets, and are essential technologies for the transition from secure employment to flexible modes of working. Although boyd and Jenkins persist in their faith in participation, they acknowledge how participatory cultures can be co-opted by the commercialisation of the web. For example, boyd cites a “global economic downturn” as a catalyst that caused “politicians everywhere” to turn to the web with the expectation that it would be an economic saviour (boyd in Jenkins et al., 2016: 123), while Jenkins critiques the restrictive parameters of copyright as an inhibitor to “grassroots production culture” (Jenkins in Jenkins et al., 2016: 126). When considering how participation has evolved in the networked era boyd says, “The quick and dirty answer is capitalism, but the reality is much more complex” adding that “The story of Web 2.0 began with a vision, but sustaining it required navigating people, capital, and cultural dynamics” (ibid., p127).

By encouraging media participation as a central part of creative work culture, this idea of individual empowerment through technology evolved from concerning not only the political but also the professional, which itself has become seen as a reflection of the personal.

Steven P. Vallas notes that du Gay (1996) and Rose (1990) first observed the practice of individuals taking personal accountability for their own professional success or failure in the early 1990s. He says, “One of the more enduring strands of thinking has been the argument that in an era of post-Fordism, organisations have promulgated a ‘culture of enterprise,’ which induces employees to adopt a consumer-oriented outlook toward their job duties and themselves” (Vallas, 2015: 293-319). Accountability for the success of the business falls upon the shoulders of the employee, who, in the tradition of 1980s, 90s, 00s business self-help, self-actualisation and entrepreneurialism, must constantly prove

their worth through “life narratives as testimony” (ibid., p302). He continues, “For, despite this discourse’s emphasis on voluntarism, individual freedom, and autonomy, [individuals] are commonly told that they have little choice but to embrace the commercial ethos and apply it to their innermost selves” (ibid., p306).

In *The Reputation Economy: Understanding Knowledge Work in a Digital Society*

(2016) Alessandro Gandini found that practices such as self-branding, ‘venture labour’ (Neff, 2012) and networking were translating mediated social interaction into economic outcomes within creative labour markets (Gandini, 2016: 8). Gandini says the popularisation of gig work, employment flexibility and contract jobs encourage freelancers to regard themselves as individual entrepreneurs in a fragmented employment landscape. Media participation in the form of curating ‘all star’ LinkedIn profiles, circulating creative portfolios and publishing personal brand websites are seen as mechanisms to obtain ‘reputational capital’ (ibid., p10), an asset commonly traded for work opportunities in the creative industries. Gandini observed that “Those with a greater consolidated reputation were consistently better off in the freelance and new economy labour market” (ibid., p54).

Podcasts are now among the forms of participatory media that creative knowledge workers have adopted and adapted in these new flexible and atomised work environments. In some cases, I will argue that this media use can have a potentially negative impact, while also redefining the norms of participatory cultures.

The plight of the micro-celebrity podcaster

For Melbourne-based app developer and freelance writer Belle Beth Cooper, the podcast is just one of many media platforms used to develop her online professional presence, network and participate in the Australian technology scene. Her podcast *Hello Code* sits alongside her personal blog bellebethcooper.com, her email newsletter learning course ‘Productive Habits’, her online magazine *Field Trip*, a variety of social media profiles, and plenty of guest blog posts scattered across various tech news sites such as *Fast Company*, *Life Hacker*, *The Next Web* and *Entrepreneur*. In the many mini-biographies that accompany Cooper’s articles, projects and profiles on the internet, she identifies first and foremost as a co-founder of her startup business Hello Code. She gives an explanation behind this personal convention by saying her main focus right now is to build up the business so it can support her and her partner full-time (Cooper, 2016a). Content creation and online interaction are seen as ways to achieve this goal.

To bring attention to her podcast Cooper relies on the template exercised by traditional media stars such as Osher Günsberg, mentioned in the previous chapter. I observed that Günsberg used the podcast to reveal personal details in public networks to create an unfiltered persona as part of his overall transmedia personal brand, premised on authenticity and intimate connection. This effectively created meaningful ties between the podcaster and the audience, which reinforced a strong personal brand.

Drawing on this phenomenon, Cooper pays homage to a US-based podcast called *StartUp*, hosted by award-winning radio journalist Alex Blumberg about “what it’s really like to get a business off the ground” (Gimlet, 2016). Inspired by *StartUp*’s focus on its own story as a way to build its business, Cooper turns her attention to her own startup journey, offering listeners an intimate look into her efforts to build a customer base and turn her dream into a full-time business. *Hello Code* the podcast chronicles the history of

Hello Code the company since its founding in 2013 and introduces listeners to the range of apps that the company develops and sells via mobile subscriptions. Along the way Cooper is candid about the challenges of starting and running a business. In multiple episodes she and her partner Josh Sharp discuss first hand experiences of dealing with self-doubt, rejection and financial strain.

In sharing this typically private information with her public in an unfiltered fashion similar to the way Osher Günsberg and Alex Blumberg are seen to do, Cooper is using the podcast to perform 'micro-celebrity' (Senft, 2008). According to Theresa Senft micro-celebrity is "a new style of online performance in which people employ webcams, video, audio, blogs, and social networking sites to 'amp up' their popularity among readers, viewers and those to whom they are linked online" (Senft, 2008: 25).

Micro-celebrity in Cooper's case may assist the startup founder to achieve higher status and thus higher visibility in the technology scene, while also building her reputation as an reliable freelancer. While reflecting a level of empowerment through participation and the notion of self-directed entrepreneurialism, a more critical perspective would see this kind of participation as an example of the way that media participation is now required of creative knowledge workers in the new labour market. Alice E. Marwick notes, "The attention economy, which treats visibility as status, makes it important for anyone who hopes to succeed in the technology industry to live at least somewhat in the public eye" (Marwick, 2013: 143).

According to Marwick, being successful in networked media environments involves participating through the disclosure of intimate and unfiltered first-person narratives, even if it leaves individuals vulnerable to criticism usually only reserved for traditional

celebrities (ibid., p151). Through online practices such as self-branding and 'lifestreaming' (ibid., p205), everyday media users are simultaneously empowered to take control of how they are represented in networked settings, but are encouraged to do so or else risk being less visible and therefore less competitive in the creative knowledge industry network. Marwick remarks on the cost that this can place on the individual. She says,

“The micro-celebrity is held to a different set of standards than the movie star; in particular, the micro-celebrity is expected to be available and transparent, in line with the exhibitionist internet, rather than carefully guarded and assisted by a network of managers like the movie star. Because the self-brand is a person underneath his or her shiny exterior, with the attendant imperfections and mistakes, creating and maintaining a consistent image involves real labor” (Marwick, 2013: 277).

Tiziana Terranova would regard this effort as 'free labour' (Terranova, 2004). Speaking in the 'society-factory' tradition of the Italian Autonomists, she states, “Simultaneously voluntarily given and unwaged, enjoyed and exploited, free labor on the Net includes the activity of building web sites, modifying software packages, reading and participating in mailing lists and building virtual spaces” (Terranova, 2004: 74). Perpetually updating a personal brand, consistently sharing personal anecdotes with a digital network in order to retain an audience's attention and performing constant creativity through social media can be a full-time load in and of itself. By contrast, Jenkins says that when critics understand participation as an economic activity, they fail to recognise any social or cultural reasons as to why people participate (Jenkins et al, 2016: 139). However, it seems that now the lines between 'economic activity' and 'cultural reasons' have converged in the creative industries. Participation is now succinctly interlinked with employment for creative knowledge workers – that is, their personal *economic activity*. To still regard media participation as inherently empowering in this context is to disregard the risks that creative knowledge workers may be exposed to through formulaic participation in

technologies like the podcast. Although the podcasts of celebrities like Günsberg and Blumberg effectively function as nuanced markers of attention, this practice is fraught with risks for micro-celebrities.

Normalising creative risks

If cultural policies that champion creative cities have resulted in flexible yet fragmented labour forces in which status and reputation become important measures of cultural capital used to ensure visibility and credibility in networked environments, it is easy to see how and why everyday users have adopted the unfiltered media practices of traditional celebrities. In an episode of *Hello Code* Cooper and Sharp discuss the financial failures of their startup business, a revelation that mimics the confessional approach of Alex Blumberg in *StartUp*, but arguably also exposes their business to financial risks. Disclosing narratives that remark on their business challenges, in this case the failure to fund their startup with venture capital investment as well as their failed attempts at gaining admission into a number of high profile tech incubators, has the potential to reduce the authority of Cooper's status and professional reputation (as well as their ability to attract future funding). This is rather pertinent as Cooper subsidises her time spent working on her startup through freelance writing work, a truth conceded in the same episode. In this instance she is leveraging her micro-celebrity status and reputation in order to attract investors to her business, but also to win important freelance writing contracts that help her to "pay the bills" in the meantime. Media participation has become entangled in Cooper's business efforts in high stakes ways; participate in order to build your company, participate further in order to support yourself while doing so; participate to stay visible in the employment market. High hopes in the potential of participation have created a high stakes reality that involves constant content creation in

order to remain part of the creative network.

In the episode, Cooper gives some “context about our current situation” across which her partner Josh Sharp quickly interjects “We have no outside funding. We have no inside funding, either, come to think of it” (Cooper, 2015b). This is confirmed by a bar graph published publically on their website hellocode.co which documents the startup’s revenue over the past four weeks. At the time of writing this thesis the last four weeks of income total \$3,782.34, over \$2,000 short of the milestone “Belle on board” and over \$6,000 short of “Comfortable living” (Cooper & Sharp, 2016). This volunteered transparency depicts the financial struggles that running a startup involves and to this point Sharp says, “We don’t make enough to pay us both a salary... We work on [the business], I would say full-time, but we still have to have day jobs” (ibid.).

Hello Code’s dedication to the ideology of self-reliance and transparency facilitated by DIY media technologies exhibits how creativity, independence and entrepreneurialism are deployed as labour reform in the era of the creative industries (McRobbie, 2016). Angela McRobbie says that in creative industries birthed from the UK’s New Labour government (or, in this case, in local contexts through examples such as Queensland’s ‘Smart Cities’ mandate) labour is fundamentally changed. She says,

Work is not there, because in this rhetorical world it is business and entrepreneurship that now count, and so ideas of working life or labour process do not figure, since these ideas are too sociological; they are explicit reminders of what is now being superseded by an entirely different mode of activity, one that is nebulous, self-directed, taking shape with less ‘interference’ by the state, and not in any way connected to an industrial policy (McRobbie, 2016: 61).

Drawing on McRobbie’s work, participatory media scholars can better understand how digital technologies contribute to the individualisation of creative labour. Technologies

like the podcast are now at the centre of this movement and as such are marked by many of the same problematic attributes. While participatory cultures may still allow members of society to form communities, find voice and establish common interests (Jenkins in Jenkins et al., 2016: 152), the technologies upon which these relationships are built are simultaneously contributing to work environments that pit participants against one another for employment. As Marwick surmises, “In addition to shaping our views of social status, privacy, and community, these technologies have enabled the infiltration of neoliberal, market-driven values and ethics into day-to-day relationships” (Marwick, 2013: 281). This is demonstrated by micro-celebrities who mimic the participatory plays of media celebrities who leverage the values of grassroots participatory cultures in the service of their own traditional media brands. While the celebrity is safeguarded from the possibility of revealing too much, the amateur media producer must wrangle with exposing themselves enough to be visible, but not too much as to open themselves to public scrutiny. These kinds of risks are often overlooked in participatory media theories, which instead focus on the empowering potentials of mediated folk cultures. The rise of a competitive labour market in the creative industries has coopted media participation and redefines the rhetorical dimensions of technologies like the podcast, but also the cultures that surround them.

In this chapter I have argued that an empowering participatory media rhetoric associated with the early days of Web 2.0. has converged with a reorganisation of creative labour. Within this new labour economy Australian creative knowledge workers are encouraged to use participatory media technologies like the podcast to perform micro-celebrity (Senft, 2008) in the hopes of building an audience that can be leveraged for professional opportunities. This practice follows a formula exercised by celebrities, and reveals an imperative to participate through a revealing and seemingly unfiltered performance of the

open and transparent self. Early 2000s media theories that celebrated participation fail to recognise that the same cultures also require free labour of creative entrepreneurs (Terranova, 2004).

Ultimately, individuals are left to assume a personal responsibility of this participation in order to enter the labour market, which contributes to an erosion of stability in the creative industries, increasingly bereft of industrial policy (McRobbie, 2016). In the next chapter I will investigate why the promising potentials of participation nonetheless persist and how this trope of empowerment through self-branding is used in service of precarity.

Three | Promises, Promises

That cultures of participation can simultaneously carry promises of connectivity, togetherness and community while also keeping individuals at a distance and in competition with one another reveals a conundrum central to the modern condition of networked life. To understand why some Australian creative knowledge workers are compelled to use the podcast to participate in networked settings, it is important to investigate the affective dimensions of the medium. These affordances offer insight into how media participants can enter into a relationship of ‘cruel optimism’ (Berlant, 2011) that arrives at a theoretical impasse. This revelation calls on new discourses that may be able to describe media participation better than early participatory media studies.

A connectivity conundrum

During a 2013 interview with U.S. television personality Bill Moyers, MIT professor Sherry Turkle shared three insights into what contemporary media users expect from digitally networked technologies: that they can always be heard; that they can be wherever they want to be; and that they never have to be alone (Turkle, 2013). These expectations, expounded and interrogated by Turkle in her book *Alone Together: why we expect more from technology and less from each other* (2012), shed light on the conditions and expectations produced in networked participatory media environments, described by Turkle as ‘always on’.

Early networked media technologies developed in the 1990s were seen to allow users to “live simultaneously in the physical and virtual” (Turkle, 2012: 151). This observation was an extension of work that Turkle had done in the 1980s published in *The Second Self*:

Computers and the Human Spirit (1984), which in part explored how computer technologies performed as intimate extensions of the self. In *Alone Together* Turkle observed students at the MIT Media Lab experimenting with early iterations of such technologies, carrying radio transmitters in their backpacks, mobile keyboards in their pockets and clipping digital displays to their eye glasses, making them feel more confident, secure and even “invincible” (Turkle, 2012: 151). The emerging ideas that users could essentially live multiple lives, have greater knowledge and access increased memory reflected the participatory and convergence cultures studied by Henry Jenkins at the time (Jenkins, 2006a). Within a decade the once alien notion of being continuously networked was normalised as smartphones and mobile practices replaced the relatively experimental network devices. “This is the experience of living full-time on the Net, newly free in some ways, newly yoked in others” Turkle remarks (ibid., p152).

Alone Together goes on to offer a critical perspective on these kinds of hyper-connected technologies. For example, Turkle is concerned that perpetual connectivity in public may turn sites of interaction into sites of isolation. “People come together but do not speak to each other” she says (Turkle, 2012: 155). It is also suggested that media participants can think of connectivity as proximity to the technologies that facilitate this mediated feeling of connectedness, instead of considering the actual distance between one another (ibid.).

danah boyd comments on Turkle’s change in thinking regarding networked technology saying that, “It is easy to become dystopic, and plenty of early tech evangelists have. Thinkers such as Jaron Lanier and Sherry Turkle – once leading proponents for infusing tech into everything – are now lambasting it with equal zealotry” (boyd in Jenkins, Ito & boyd, 2016: 123). boyd says that Turkle’s more recent reservations speak to concerning debates about the constant surveillance of marketing and the ubiquity of online

advertising as market forces that have driven value trade-offs in participatory cultures (ibid.).

This modern experience reflects a considerable contrast to the media cultures that Jenkins first described in his own life as a media fan. In *Participatory Culture in a Networked Era* (2016) Jenkins reflects on his earliest experiences with such cultures, claiming that his first encounter with *Star Trek* in the 1960s was a politically transformative moment in his life. *Star Trek* presented an interracial and even intergalactic imagining of society that “articulated a philosophy that celebrated diversity” at a time when U.S. neighbourhoods were still racially segregated (Jenkins in Jenkins et al., 2016: 153). While Jenkins begins with the assumption that one of the primary concerns of participatory cultures is political action, Turkle now suggests that being alone is a precondition to consciously being together. She says, “Today, our machine dream is to never be alone but always in control.” Turkle adds that this is not possible in real life situations, but can be moderated through the use of technologies like social media, blogging and other “portals of a digital life” (Turkle, 2012: 157). In other words, in some circumstances, the technologies that inspire events of collectivism and political action now also reduce life to feeds and inboxes that merely keep users stitched together at arm’s length.

Turkle’s ultimate position in *Alone Together* is that technology, when unchecked, can become damaging to its users: people can develop lessened expectations of one another (p216), become susceptible to blind idealisations of new technologies (p242) and default to mediated relationships that occupy, but essentially do not bind (p280). In creative labour markets where connectivity, interaction and participation are now inherent in finding work, these issues can become part and parcel of the professional status quo. Yet instead of being critical of such technologies, creative knowledge workers now living this

always on experience continually turn to these participatory medias to solve the very problems that they can create, a position that Evgeny Morozov calls ‘technological solutionism’. He says, “all too often, this never-ending [will to improve (Li, 2007 cited in Morozov, 2013)] is short-sighted and only perfunctorily interested in the activity for which improvement is sought” (Morozov, 2013: 5).

Similarly, Turkle observes,

Overwhelmed by the pace that technology makes possible, we think about how new, more efficient technologies might help dig us out. But new devices encourage ever-greater volume and velocity. In this escalation of demands, one of the things that comes to feel safe is using technology to connect to people at a distance, or more precisely, to a lot of people from a distance (Turkle, 2012: 280).

Turkle’s critics have claimed that her critique of networked and mobile technologies doesn’t offer enough nuance to account for factors such as how different users experience environments (Fischer, 2015; Hampton, Goulet & Albanesius, 2015; Oppenheimer, 2014), however her work nonetheless reflects and synthesizes broader social anxieties associated with ontological security under ‘high modernity’ (Giddens, 1991). Despite her observations that networked technology can be damaging to its users, participation as technological solutionism persists in the creative industries. Through a rhetoric of individual empowerment, creative knowledge workers are co-opted in the reorganisation of creative labour in a networked economy. Understanding the persistence of technology here involves understanding why the podcast in particular is considered effective in helping Australian creative knowledge workers build their personal brands.

The podcast’s powerful dimensions

In *Camgirls: celebrity and community in the age of social networks* (2008) Terri Senft conducts an

ethnographic study of camgirling, a participatory media practice in which individuals use webcams to broadcast images and video of themselves in private settings at regular intervals over the internet. As part of her ethnography Senft sets up her own feed called TerriCam, through which she experiences the confronting expectations that media audiences can have of media producers and how such expectations are commonly tied to the convergence of user identities that occurs in networked environments.

She says that in online spaces our “public persona is utterly integrated” as, although we can present different identities to different audiences via private email and direct chat, ultimately these selves “must somehow be consistent” with the self we create on more public platforms like social media, our personal homepage or, in Senft’s case, an open camgirl feed (Senft, 2008: 8). This merging of networked selves manifested as a confronting experience for Senft when those who had heard about her feed logged on to watch and chat. These strangers included those who had heard about Senft’s webcam through press coverage and amounted to what the researcher referred to as a “small following”. Her audience was engaging with TerriCam in order to interact with an academic who had branded herself elsewhere in networked settings as the ‘camgirl who wrote about camgirls’. Senft remarks of her experience facing her audience in this dynamic within her home saying, “Was I supposed to put on a show? Ask them about their lives? [...] What exactly did I think my product was?” She goes on to explain that press *coverage* of her camgirling, which attracted attention from new audiences, required her camgirl feed to be press *worthy*. “Eventually I realized that these people felt they were owed some entertainment” she says (ibid., p9).

Senft cites Arlie Hochschild’s concept of ‘emotional labour’ to describe the experience. According to Hochschild, emotional labour is the effort required to perform a role

within an exchange between people, in which work roles function dramaturgically. Using the subjects of flight attendants and bill collectors, Hochschild observed how such employees elicited certain emotional responses from customers by acting in a particular way or faking a smile; the employee as performer and the customer as audience. Whether conscious or not, pleasant or otherwise, Hochschild argued that this effort qualified as labour (Hochschild, 1983 cited in Senft, 2008: 9).

Senft's ethnography reveals two important considerations for media scholars studying how creative knowledge workers are encouraged to use participatory media. First, that media users are required to conform to the 'context collapse' (Marwick & boyd, 2015) of their online personas, each of which must remain consistent with a dominant public persona. Secondly, that the audiences of these personas expect media creators to use these technologies in a way that delivers a certain experience, one that requires emotional labour. Vitaly, of this second point Senft further clarifies that "viewers tend to debate the personality's obligations to those who made her *what* she is. This is because on the Web, popularity depends upon a connection to one's audience, rather than an enforced separation from them" (Senft, 2008: 25-26, emphasis in original text). It follows then that the more open a user appears to be, the stronger the connection with their audience is likely to be, and thus the more popular or successful they will be. Or rather, the more popular and successful they could *believe* they will be.

The podcast is specifically well suited to this task. Audio media can impact its creators and listeners in intense ways that draw on the 'affective power of sound' (McHugh, 2012). Gregg and Seigworth define affect in *The Affect Theory Reader (2010)* saying, "Affect arises in the midst of an *inbetween-ness*: in the capacities to act and be acted upon. Affect is an impingement or extrusion of a momentary or sometimes more sustained state of

relation *as well as* the passage (and the duration of passage) of forces or intensities”

(Gregg & Seigworth, 2010: 1, emphasis in original text).

Siobhan McHugh locates the power of affect in audio in the emotional tenderness portrayed by the human voice in radio documentaries. She notes that, “when an informant narrates an experience in an affecting way (i.e., with palpable emotion), listeners will register the emotion through the prism of their own lived experiences; we can infer that this personalization will confer added impact” (Lindgren, 2011: 215 cited in McHugh, 2012: 195). The human voice can be used to evoke empathy in listeners and place them in an intimate mediated relationship with the storyteller.

For the podcast, the ‘inbetween-ness’ of affect is constructed not just in moments of “affective auditory elements such as ambient sound and music” (McHugh, 2012: 198), but also through additional medium affordances. Consider the closeness of the human voice as it penetrates a listener’s private sound-world (Madsen and Potts, 2010: 43), the mobility of human intimacy made possible by devices such as the iPhone (Crawford, 2012: 214) and the practice of ‘background listening’ that is “critical to the sense of intimacy generated in these spaces; ongoing contact with the minutiae of a person’s life” (Crawford, 2009 cited in Crawford, 2011: 68). Through intentional use of music, hushed exchanges and revealing anecdotes, podcasting can communicate narratives of intimacy and authenticity to listeners in what Seigworth and Gregg identified as powerful “forces” and “intensities”. Günsberg’s emotive stories of dealing with his mental health issues, his guests’ ‘behind the scenes’ confessions and Cooper’s professional transparency about the financial pressures of running a startup all work with the affective power of sound. This characteristic may also be true of other audio formats like radio, but as mentioned previously, the podcast is digitally networked and therefore has a range of additional

affordances such connection to the world of the Apple Podcasts app, the ability to time-shift, and physical mobility, which make it particularly effective in facilitating intimate connections with audiences, when audiences demand it.

Brian Massumi notes that affective intensities are “asocial, but not presocial” alluding to the multifaceted nature of affect and its precognitive transmission. He continues, “it includes social elements, but mixes them with elements belonging to other levels of functioning, and combines them according to different logic” (Massumi, 1995: 91). The podcast’s ability to pass these highly complex intensities into everyday life (Madsen, 2009: 1197) is illustrative of the personal influence that podcasters can have on their audiences, through what Kathleen Stewart would describe as ‘ordinary affects’. Stewart says, “Ordinary affects are public feelings that begin and end in broad circulation, but they are also the stuff that seemingly intimate lives are made of” (Stewart, 2007: 2).

The affective dimensions of the podcast present creative knowledge workers with an opportunity to build familiar relationships with listeners that deliver a sense of meaningful connection. These characteristics of the medium are powerful in networked communities where audiences come to expect a certain type of unending and unfiltered performance from micro-celebrities. Ultimately this is important because as Alison Hearn notes, within these scenes “we come to recognize that the ability to attract attention – to garner a reputation – might provide us with a modicum of personal and financial security” (Hearn, 2010: 426).

However, this idea that digital technology and personal branding can provide participants with personal and professional opportunities and stability in the creative labour market is a notion that media researchers can probe using Hearn’s critique. She further states,

“This promise is predicated on lofty ideas about the power of authentic free expression from the ‘center of the self’ and the possibilities of a profitable self brand” (ibid., 433). This trope, which I have argued is reflected by the formulaic emulation of celebrity through micro-celebrity, creates a problematic relationship between creative knowledge workers and networked technology. DIY media seems unable to always deliver on the high expectations of empowerment through participation, while perpetuating networked conditions of hyper-individualised neoliberalism. Instead, what can emerge is an affective relationship of ‘cruel optimism’ (Berlant, 2011).

The cruel optimism of participation: promises, precarity and the impasse

The apparent online cycle that creative knowledge workers may surface in is a precarious state that Lauren Berlant calls ‘cruel optimism’ (Berlant, 2011). Berlant writes, "A relationship of cruel optimism exists when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing [...] They become cruel only when the object that draws your attachment actively impedes the aim that brought you to it initially" (Berlant, 2011: 1). She suggests that all objects are optimistic, in the sense that when we consider objects we are really considering “a cluster of promises we want someone or something to make to us and make possible to us” (ibid., p23).

Cruel optimism makes obtaining the implausible object seem entirely possible via an expansive transformation worthy of risk and vulnerability. Berlant proposes that this kind of object relation can be particularly cruel as it is not just the object that carries promises, but the relation to the object also; the pleasures of being in the relationship become what sustains the individual, regardless of what that object actually is or what it promises.

In the study of Australian creative knowledge workers and their podcasts, cruel optimism is marked by the disconnect between the celebrated potentials of participation and the risks that come with participating. Podcasting is optimistic because it is seen as an inherently empowering media format with influential affective dimensions that can deliver the individual an audience built on an intimate and meaningful relationship of unfiltered interaction. Yet this relationship is problematic because the atomising process of exposing one's personal life online works to undermine the stability of the creative labour market and the autonomy of the worker. It encourages individuals to perform a media formula, which benefits those with higher social status such as traditional media celebrities. In this scene creative workers compete with each other simply to sustain visibility, yet their efforts require real labour. It can be read as labour for labour's sake in the hope that all of this effort will one day provide personal security and deliver a life of entrepreneurial self-actualisation. Berlant says,

What's cruel about these attachments, and not merely inconvenient or tragic, is that the subjects who have x in their lives might not well endure the loss of their object/scene of desire, even though its presence threatens their well-being, because whatever the content of the attachment is, the continuity of its form provides something of the continuity of the subject's sense of what it means to keep on living on and to look forward to being in the world (Berlant, 2011: 24).

This faith in the relationship to the object of desire, when applied to participatory media, reflects what Grant Bollmer refers to as 'technological humanism'. In *Inhuman Networks* (2017) Bollmer explores historical conceptualisations of networks as inherently powerful and empowering. He proposes that these ideas have led to the hegemonic notion that contemporary technologies enable humans to achieve an always already natural desire to connect with one another. From this he derives the concept of the 'nodal citizen' (Bollmer, 2017).

According to Bollmer, a nodal citizen emerges in the network where, “One must constantly make and manage connections or else be left behind and rendered invisible (or inhuman), erased from the world as a casualty of technological development” (Bollmer, 2017: 10). He says that a nodal citizen “relates to others by connecting and maintaining flows. And this ‘citizen’ doesn’t do much else” (ibid.). With this concept Bollmer opens up discussions greater than the limitations of this thesis, yet it is possible to observe how the imperative to use media, to create a personal brand, to innovate and to be authentic becomes a preoccupation that is maintained by a participatory imperative that otherwise leaves individuals to be excluded from online networks. Or in other words, to be considered in the network, media users must use technologies in relentless ways that reflect the expectations of systems designed to exclude those considered to be not normal, or “inhuman”.

Näsström & Kalm cite the concept of ‘institutionalised individualisation’ to explain how this experience is no longer just a condition felt by those at the margins of society. They observe, “To secure their own well-being, individuals need to become ‘actors, builders, jugglers, stage managers of their own biographies and identities and also of their social links and networks’” (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim 2002: 23 cited in Näsström & Kalm, 2014: 12). This contributes to an “anxious worry arising from existential vulnerability [which] is no longer distinguishable from a fear arising from precarization” (Lorey, 2012: 89). Associated with this tension between the expectations placed upon media users and the expectations they in turn place upon participatory media objects in order to “keep on living on”, is a sense of anxiety that some scholars suggest is in part underwritten by the privatisation of risk that places social, professional and financial burdens on the individual (Näsström & Kalm, 2014: 9).

Morgan, Wood & Nelligan offer a synthesis of this experience of precariousness in relation to the creative industries saying that “Atomised freelancers are forced to face the risks of creative employment individually”, weakening stable work places and the collectivism of unionisation (Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2011 cited in Morgan, Wood & Nelligan, 2013: 402). Many of the scholars working on questions related to the normalisation of precarity (e.g. Judith Butler, Bojana Cvejić, Isabell Lorey, Jasbir Puar and Ana Vuljanović) have discussed the spread of this experience as a working condition of the middle class and identify this imperative to produce a personal brand as a symptom of “self-precarisation” conditioned under neoliberalism. A virtual roundtable discussion between these scholars illuminated the competitiveness of such hyper-individualised environments in society: “Currently everybody has to become ‘creative’ and to design her/himself to sell her/his whole personality on the market of affective labor” (Puar et al., 2016: 164).

This perspective highlights how the rhetoric of participation tends to draw on democratic ideals about the place of the individual in the collective as a mechanism to deliver liberty, while the lived reality of a great deal of participation is led by a commercial drive to develop a personal brand, an undertaking that comes without a choice. Precarity is the condition of labour in the creative industries in particular and in the neoliberal networked economy more generally. Michelle Ty writes that, “What remains consistent across accounts of precarity is that such existence is characterized, if not constituted by, the fact of being unchosen and unwilling” (Ty, 2015: 132). She explains that precarity exists when an individual is subjected to a “prolonged state of choicelessness” which consists not necessarily of the total *absence* of choice, but when the intervals at which choices have to be made and remade “are imposed from without”

(ibid., 135). In other words, precariousness can be experienced when it seems we have no choice but to make a choice. To this point, Senft observes, "In spite of their differences, Web micro-celebrities share something important with mainstream media stars: both must brand or die" (Senft, 2008: 26).

It is at this point that participatory media theories arrive at an impasse. Creative knowledge workers must turn to networked technologies to help them create personal brands that express authenticity, intimacy, trustworthiness and status, but these same media activities seem to also induce experiences of anxiety, uncertainty and precarity – the very things an authentic personal brand is believed to mitigate.

Berlant says that, "An impasse is a holding station that doesn't hold securely but opens out into anxiety, that dogpaddling around a space whose contours remain obscure" (Berlant, 2011: 199). She identifies three types of impasse: the social catastrophe that occurs when "one no longer knows what to do or how to live and yet, while unknowing, must adjust"; a state of numbness of "coasting through life, as it were, until one discovers a loss of traction"; and a "happy life-without-guarantees" which can be a positive experience, yet one that is inherently tied to experiences of ontological uncertainty (Berlant, 2011: 200). Each of these eventualities reimagines the potential of participatory cultures to include a 'cruel' cycle that fails to deliver on its rhetorical and affective expectations. It reveals that existing frameworks in media studies may not be adequate for explaining the experiences of precarity that creative knowledge workers are subjected to in participatory online environments.

In Turkle's critique we can observe that the potentials of networked technologies are not always realised and may have negative consequences for media users. Yet, because

unfiltered mediated connections are regarded as valuable to an individual's personal brand, the podcast's affective dimensions present it as a particularly effective brand building tool. As such, podcasts offer creative knowledge workers affordances that can be leveraged to strengthen their employment prospects. The benefits of these personal brands, which are not necessarily always attainable, incite media participants to become nodal citizens concerned primarily with circulating flows of content. This can lead to a state of cruel optimism in which media participation is valorised despite the fact that it can contribute to the experience of precariousness spreading throughout creative labour markets. This exposition reveals a trope of participation as empowerment that requires the proposal of new discourses in participatory media cultures.

In the final chapter of this thesis I will draw on the field of Persona Studies as an area of theory that may better account for the practice, and importance of, constructing mediated identities in the contemporary moment.

Four | Potentials in Persona Studies

Participation is now an inherent part of finding work in, and engaging with, the creative labour market in the networked economy. Early participatory media theories offer a perspective that is primarily celebratory of the potentials of networked media, however, do not sufficiently consider the inherently risky tasks that come with online participation like constructing and maintaining a competitive personal brand. The field of Persona Studies offers media scholars with a more nuanced perspective of this phenomenon and reveals an array of theories and ideas that can more accurately describe the intersection between participation and persona construction in the networked era. This can lead to new ways of describing and understanding participatory media use, including the concept of micro-personas.

Where media participation and persona construction meet

In David Marshall's groundbreaking work on persona he builds on early theorisations of the concept in psychoanalysis and philosophy, following on from the work of key scholars like Jung, Goffman, Butler and Foucault (Barbour, Marshall & Moore, 2014: 2). Marshall describes persona as the strategic construction of forms of public identity and states that the concept is "not about the real 'self', but it [has] indices that link the individual to the persona" (Marshall, 2016: 1). Key to Persona Studies is exploring the construction of persona through everyday media use. Marshall proposes that creating a public persona is a task that is now increasingly common for greater and greater parts of the population (Marshall, 2014: 154).

Persona Studies draws primarily from three areas of scholarship. Firstly, it includes theories of complex agency found in the tradition of cultural studies, such as John Fiske's (1989) "art of making do" and Michel de Certeau's (1984) strategies and tactics. These concepts function as key resources for the future work of Persona Studies as they outline the ways that individuals use persona to negotiate their way through the world around them (Marshall and Barbour, 2015: 8). Secondly, it emerges in the wake of Celebrity Studies, which explores "the play of the highly visible individual in different environments." Marshall notes that Celebrity Studies can be read as a subset of Persona Studies and serves as a powerful example of the way that patterns in celebrity culture are adopted by DIY media users (ibid., p9). Thirdly, Persona Studies is linked to the work of scholars such as Alison Hearn, Terri Senft and Alice Marwick in Internet Studies and digital sociology. Here, it serves to interrogate the acts of online monitoring and sharing, identifying persona-making as a common digital practice that organises and monetises the web (ibid.).

These theoretical lines converge at a central notion that Marshall has identified previously as the movement from a primarily representational media environment to a primarily presentational media environment (Marshall, [1997] 2014: xxxii-xxxvi cited in Marshall, 2015: 126). Representational media consists of "books, newspapers, magazines, film, radio and television" and has been considered dominant over the past two centuries. They are representational in that through "stories, narratives, and images, these media forms attempt to embody a populace" and represent a culture (Marshall, 2014: 160). Presentational media, by contrast, is media that is "performed, produced and exhibited by the individual" outside of the representational media structure (ibid.). As participatory media technologies become more and more a part of everyday life, so too does the act of constructing personas (Marshall, 2015: 124).

Scholars in both participatory media studies and Persona Studies are concerned with the acts of cultural production occurring at the hands of everyday media users. However, the Persona Studies perspective is interested in the idea that these acts of production involve constructing networked identities, each akin to wearing a different kind of mask.

Studying participation through the lens of persona is to acknowledge that identity construction is part of participation in networked environments and vice versa. Barbour et al. cite Hannah Arendt's reading of persona in ancient Greece to note that "this mask of public identity was not seen in a derogatory way; rather it was natural to assume a public/political persona that was quite removed from the private and home sphere" (Arendt, 1958 cited in Barbour, Marshall & Moore, 2014: 2). In other words, there was an expectation that individuals perform different personas in different settings.

Persona Studies places emphasis on the individual's inherent task of constructing identity through participation, considering it as an outcome alongside the emancipatory potentials of participatory cultures. It theoretically allows for the possibility of one individual having multiple personas, which better describes participatory media use in networked settings. Creative knowledge workers use the podcast to create communities, build bodies of collective intelligence and democratise the media landscape, but *also* because the construction of persona through mediums like the podcast is required in neoliberal settings like the creative labour market. This position recasts participation as an important economic task as well as a potentially social, cultural and political pursuit. Participation can therefore lead to the empowering potentials that Jenkins wrote of, but also the privatised risks and precariousness associated with self-branding in a hyper-competitive economy, which I have considered in the previous chapters. As such, Persona Studies reveals concepts that can be used to more insightfully describe creative

knowledge workers' use of the podcast with nuances not currently considered in podcasting literature.

Moving from front and back stage to nuanced networked personas

Erving Goffman's work *The Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life* (1959) offers an important dramaturgical metaphor for understanding persona that is foundational to Marshall's Persona Studies. Goffman's thesis outlines the performative nature of the self by proclaiming that life consists of various scenes and settings in which there are explicit roles and rules to be abided by. For example, he says, "When an individual plays a part he implicitly requests his observers to take seriously the impression that is fostered before them" (Goffman, 1959: 28). One of Goffman's most useful ideas to accompany his overarching metaphor is the notion that individuals perform in distinct settings of front stage and back stage, also known as front region and back region.

Goffman says that "the performance of an individual in a front region may be seen as an effort to give the appearance that his activity in the region maintains and embodies certain standards" (Goffman, [1959] 1990: 110). This can be viewed as the public persona performed by an individual for an audience, characterised by traits such as politeness and decorum (ibid.). In contrast, he also says that "it should be clear that there may be another region – a 'back region' or 'backstage' – where the suppressed facts make an appearance" (ibid., p114). He continues, "Here the performer can relax; he can drop his front, forgo speaking his lines, and step out of character" (ibid., p115). This back region is where the performer can assume that he or she will not encounter an audience and commonly these two spaces are physically divided by a partition or a guarded passageway (ibid., p116). It is proposed that the separation of these two regions is vital if

the front stage is to be performed effectively. Goffman illustrates this point with an example, saying if a grieving funeral procession is to be given the illusion that the body of the deceased is at peace, then they must be kept from the undertaker's workshop where the corpse is drained and embalmed (ibid.).

In networked environments however, Marwick and boyd have noted that a separation of front and back stage is not always possible. In a study on teenage internet use and notions of personal privacy, Marwick and boyd observed that individuals must negotiate the co-presence of various online audiences from different networked environments. They referred to this phenomenon as 'context collapse', described as a state in which "seemingly disparate audiences co-exist" often creating a lost sense of privacy for the individual online (Marwick and boyd, 2014: 1056). By participating in multiple online worlds, users are forced to deal with revealing different and possibly conflicting aspects of themselves to converged online audiences.

Yet through the study of persona, Melanie Piper observed that entertainers who play with their identities in contemporary media cultures such as the widely acclaimed US comedian Louis C.K. now purposefully blend these regions in complex ways. Piper argues that C.K. mixes humour and honesty, comedy and tragedy, and performances of the comedian-as-person and comedian-as-comedian (Piper, 2015: 42). These kinds of performances ask audiences to be mindful of the performer's intentions as they masterfully bring "back stage talk to the front" (ibid.).

Kate Warren has expanded this thinking through the concept of parafictional personas. According to Warren, performing parafictional personas involves "individuals actively appropriating their own proper name – that basic distinguisher of individuality" (Warren,

2016: 56). She says that their “critical potential lies in the ways that they make visible the difficulties of maintaining clear distinctions between historical and fictional, social and individual narratives” (ibid.). Warren borrows the term ‘parafictional’ from Carrie Lambert-Beatty’s studies of contemporary performance artists whose work have “one foot in the field of the real” and the other in fiction (Lambert-Beatty, 2005: 54). In regards to the parafictional in networked environments exhibited in formats such as blogs and wikis, Lambert-Beatty says that this tactic “challenges viewers to assess the forms of information – from the font to the URL at the top of the page – with as much care as the content, and it trains them both in scepticism and belief” (ibid., p79). It is a practice that encourages audiences to be critical of mediated personas, and not to assume that an unfiltered, authentic and intimate performance is wholly representative of an individual’s personality.

Kim Barbour has observed how variations in the performance of persona exist more broadly in networked environments. In her research on persona construction of street artists, tattooists, craftivists and performance poets, Barbour identified three registers of persona performance – professional, private and intimate (Barbour, 2015). The practicing of these various registers by individual artists revealed a process of selective self-presentation and the “capacity for agency in persona creation” (ibid., p59). Persona registers enabled the subjects to retain some form of agency in experiences of tension that Barbour categorised as: strategy/happenstance, specialisation/diversification, visibility/self-protection, self/collective and work/play (ibid., p61). For example, some of Barbour’s subjects employed a professional persona register to engage in networked environments where visibility and self-protection were at odds. This involved revealing only certain aspects of their personalities online, which was effective in distancing the artists from their work where a degree of anonymity was needed – critical for street

artists whose work is oftentimes deemed illegal (ibid., p62). Barbour further observed, “The personal register of performance extends the artist’s persona past that of artistness, and gives their audience of fans and followers insight into the personality and values of the person behind the work” (ibid., p64). Additionally, artists observed employing an intimate register of persona did so to discuss life matters and moments not linked to their art practices, like giving birth and taking drugs (ibid., p67).

Barbour’s typology uncovers how some artists are employing strategic nuances in their media use to preserve the distinction between the stages of Goffman’s dramaturgical metaphor. Her subjects used persona to deny the convergence of artistic identity and legal identity, “or by trying to maintain some level of control over the spread of images and other material” – as other subjects demonstrated when they chose to share only parts of their work online, forcing audiences to engage offline on the artist’s preferred terms (ibid. p62). The observation of persona registers provides media scholars with a more comprehensive lexicon to understand participation in networked worlds. This not only offers insight into how participants are preserving elements of the front and back stage separation, it allows for the theorisation of more than just *two* stages. It proposes that networked individuals have multiple stages *and* the ability to create discrete boundaries between these performances by strategically performing personas.

These ideas from Persona Studies are not comprehensively considered in the podcasting literature that I reviewed in the first chapter of this thesis. Standing literature predominantly subscribes to the rhetoric of participatory empowerment that stemmed from media theories at the turn of the new millennium. In the podcasting culture of Australian creative knowledge workers we can apply Barbour’s typology to better understand the transmedia personal brands of famous podcasters like Osher Günsberg,

yet they may be particularly useful to perform a deeper analysis of the micro-celebrity's use of the podcast. How everyday media producers form or enact different personas through registers is sure to have an impact on the rhetorical dimensions of the podcast and cultures of participatory media communities. A cross-platform study that considered a media participant's various media channels could unpack this further: by studying variations in persona *as well as* variances in persona registers across formats researchers may discover that the podcast, for example, is particularly adept when used to convey a professional register. Furthermore, understanding the podcast's role in the construction of parafictional personas and persona registers may shed light on how everyday media participants may resist online vulnerabilities like context collapse, and why this may be important for future developments in precarious and fragmented creative labour markets.

Persona Studies has the potential to bring discourses of strategic self-presentation and networked individualism into conversation with media theories that have historically regarded participation as an inherently empowering action. In doing so, Persona Studies may work to illuminate reasons why individuals participate in instances in which participation can simultaneously be an empowering ideal yet also a conscious undertaking that involves individualised risks. Persona building is concomitant with networked life, in the creative knowledge industries in particular, and therefore its study should be at the centre of media theory.

To further explore how the study of persona may contemporise participatory media studies, in the last section of this chapter I will offer Mikhail Bakhtin's (1956) theory of the carnivalesque as a potential lead into the idea that we can describe everyday moments of media participation as acts of micro-personas.

Micro-Personas

To build on Barbour's observation that an individual's persona can be enacted across three different registers (professional, private and intimate), I propose further interrogating how each of these persona registers is performed through moments of media participation. To describe how individuals assume these different registers within an always-on media environment, I turn to the theory of the carnivalesque.

In *Rabelais and His World* (1965) Bakhtin explores the carnival as an embodiment of the utopian potential of folk culture, the importance of which he deems "immense in the Renaissance and the Middle Ages" (Bakhtin, [1965] 1984: 4). He divides the manifestations of this culture into three observable forms that are derived from the medieval religious event the Festival of Fools. They are:

1. *Ritual Spectacles*: carnival pageants, comic shows of the marketplace.
2. *Comic verbal compositions*: parodies both oral and written, in Latin and in the vernacular.
3. *Various genres of billingsgate*: curses, oaths, popular blazons (ibid., p5).

According to the Russian scholar, these three forms reflect a unity through folk humour that was "sharply distinct from the serious official, ecclesiastical, feudal, and political cult forms and ceremonials" of the day (ibid.). They functioned to build "a second world and a second life outside of officialdom" (ibid., p6).

Bakhtin outlines how the performance of persona is integral to the functioning of this second world, consisting of various characters such as the king, jester, sad clown, dwarf

and giant, which anyone, regardless of social rank or status, may perform (ibid., p246).

Bakhtin reveals that “This is extremely important for the carnival atmosphere – that even in its beginning it has no serious or pious tone. Nor is it set in motion by an order; it opens simply with a signal marking the beginning of merriment and foolery” (ibid.). By adopting personas, individuals become participants of the carnival and are able to suspend existing hierarchies and the expectations associated with their ‘unmasked’ selves (ibid., p251).

Barbour’s persona registers describes a similar kind of ‘costume box’ approach to media use that allows individuals to assume different registers in a comparable manner across different scenes of networked life. While Bakhtin’s carnival ensemble consists of definitive archetypes like clowns and kings, participatory media users can be observed using their own ensemble of persona registers. Interactions facilitated by participatory media formats like the podcast can be read as the carnivals within which these persona registers are explored. I propose that these acts of participation can be described as micro-personas, a distinctive feature of which is the inherent connection they have to *temporality* in line with Bakhtin’s carnival.

Bakhtin explores the relationship between unity through folk humour and the impermanence that lies at the heart of the carnivalesque theory. He states, “The carnivalesque crowd in the marketplace or in the streets is not merely a crowd. It is the people as a whole, but organized in their own way, the way of the people. It is outside of and contrary to all existing forms of the coercive socioeconomic and political organization, which is *suspended for the time of the festivity*” (Bakhtin, 1984: 255, emphasis my own). The personas assumed for the carnival are temporary, as is the carnival itself. They exist without conventional rules or an official order embodied by a crowd of randomly

personified characters. Yet it exemplifies “material abundance, freedom, equality, brotherhood” and generates an “atmosphere of the feast, making everyone participate in this awareness” (ibid., p256). Put simply, rigid identities and the social and economic conventions are suspended when individuals fluidly assume different personas for a set period of time. The three hallmarks of the festival that Bahktin identified facilitate a temporary unity in which coercive structures can be playfully tested.

In an episode of the comedy podcast *The Little Dum Dum Club*, recorded at the Splendour in the Grass music festival, Australian comedian Wil Anderson joins hosts Tommy Dassalo and Karl Chandler, and other special guests Tom Ballard and Dilruk Jayasinha, for a panel discussion. The show is set in front of a live audience, on a small stage with chairs, stools and floor space for the podcasters to sit on. After warming up the audience by asking audience members how many times they have used the toilet that day, Dassalo and Chandler introduce Anderson, who takes to the stage with an emphatic “G’day, dickheads!” (Dassalo and Chandler, 2016). The hosts quickly and jokingly imply that Anderson did not want to come on their podcast, to which he replies: “I mean, I really did just come back stage to drink free beer and they were like, ‘Do you want to go on the podcast’, and I was like, ‘Well I probably can’t say no now, right?’ But if anyone has [magic] mushrooms...”, to which the audience responds with laughter. He continues, “I mean, I would be happy to take mushrooms right now and then end this podcast off my fucking head on mushrooms. I mean, how good is that festival” (ibid.).

Following this introduction, the hosts draw attention to a man in the audience making a phone call (it is inferred, in relation to sourcing drugs for Anderson). The podcasters make a joke to engage with the man, demonstrating how the fluid and unstructured nature of the carnival can draw observers in as participants. The use of crass language,

personification of the court jester and suspended inversion of status (between nearby police officers in the crowd and an audience member jokingly accused of being a drug dealer) work to create an atmosphere that allows participants to experiment with persona. Although the podcast episode only lasts for an hour or so it functions as a temporary scene of participatory unity through persona play.

Conceptualising the podcast as a stage for the carnivalesque performance of persona alters user expectations associated with the medium. The medium is transformed from being a site of confession, intimacy and authenticity to one that celebrates the experimental nature of pageantry, parody and billingsgate while calling on audiences to critically engage in a suspended reality. This temporary suspension of reality offers carnival participants a foretaste into alternative worlds without *promising* such kinds of unity. The podcast in this example essentially allows its participants to try personas and structures, relationships and ways of being on for size, for a limited duration.

I propose that this kind of media use can be described as micro-personas. It reflects the actions of participants using technology to quickly construct nuances, contradictions and complexities in their online identities and worlds, as explorations of alternative realities. Understanding these actions as acts of micro-persona provides scholars with a more nuanced lexicon when studying how more and more of the general public begin to construct networked personas through the everyday use of digital technologies. Fittingly, Bakhtin adds, “In the world of carnival the awareness of the people’s immortality is combined with the realization that established authority and truth are relative” (ibid.). With this, scholars can use Bakhtin’s idea to gesture towards ways to overcome impasses that currently appear immovable. Consider how micro-personas – everyday fleeting moments of strategic media use – can describe participation in podcasting panels, live

shows, festivals, unscripted conversations and field recordings where participation is understood, and possibly expected, to be exploratory. An individual's personal brand reflects their online persona, which is performed across three registers, which are each constructed through passing everyday acts of media participation that are not rigid but can be experimental.

Bakhtin surmises,

Finally, and this is important, this utopia is enacted without footlights; it is presented within life itself. True, the scene is strictly limited by time, the time of the banquet, but during that period there are no footlights, no separation of participants and spectators. Everybody participates. While the usual world order is suspended, the new utopian order which has come to replace it is sovereign and embraces all (ibid., p265).

Similarly, in always on networked environments, persona construction is all encompassing. It requires interaction with the network and therefore it requires a never-ending but fragmented media activity, which users may have agency over through the strategic performance of micro-personas. Like the carnival, these online interactions can be experimental; they can provide a glimpse into a future of possibilities; and they build up a nuanced range of persona registers, parafictional personas and personal brands that help individuals navigate the networked era.

Ultimately, there is great potential in Persona Studies to do two critical things for participatory media studies. First, it offers a more detailed description of some of the behaviours in participatory cultures in which media is used not only for empowerment in the form of building collective intelligence, fostering participatory democracy and creating grassroots communities that are open and encourage sharing, but also for the construction of hyper-individualised, competitive self-brands. Secondly, it shines a light on theories and ideas that may prove useful in the further study of participation at the

intersection of the precarious creative industries and everyday media use. Concepts like persona registers and parafictional personas are theories that reconsider the media user as having agency over how they present themselves in pervasive network settings that govern both social and professional worlds for Australian creative knowledge workers.

The task for media scholars studying participatory cultures like podcasting is to analyse how DIY media is used in building online personas while accounting for the many nuances which are now associated with that task. By better describing and understanding how media is used in both the service of participatory culture ideals as well as neoliberal market imperatives, Australian creative knowledge workers will become more informed of how their participation in networked media landscapes may obstruct or reinforce experiences of empowerment and precarity, particularly in cases where these two forces function simultaneously.

Conclusion | The Next Episode

I began researching this thesis in order to better understand how networked media practices and cultures have evolved since dominant theories of participation emerged in the early 2000s. I was inspired to explore podcasting cultures specifically after attending a conference dedicated to the future of podcasting in Australia, which seemed to heavily focus on business concerns like monetisation, marketing and audience acquisition. This experience indicated that the rhetorical dimensions of the podcast had expanded since the participatory turn in media studies, exemplified by the practice of using the podcast to build a personal brand. To update the way that scholars describe and understand the podcast and participatory cultures more broadly involved drawing on ideas from other discourses, including Persona Studies.

Bringing attention to the role that personal branding now plays in the networked lives of Australian creative knowledge workers uncovers how significant participation has become in the contemporary moment. More specifically, it unveils how DIY technologies like the podcast are used in service of the task of constructing an online persona. This process is fraught with risks and vulnerabilities that expose individuals to precarious states of employment, yet this process is increasingly becoming a prerequisite to gaining and sustaining work. This phenomenon changes the dynamics of participatory cultures and suggests that media participation is not only capable of empowering individuals but also of perpetuating an affective relationship of what Berlant calls “cruel optimism” (Berlant, 2011).

Despite forming this critique of participatory media theory and the empowering rhetoric associated with participatory cultures, through a turn to Persona Studies I have

attempted to remain optimistic about what is possible. As Jenkins writes, "I want to challenge my critics to use this debate to better articulate what they are fighting for and not simply what they are fighting against" (Jenkins, 2014: 238). He further adds, "Cynicism may be the one sure way to be right at least some of the time [...] but fatalism is not the best way to support struggles for expanded democratic participation and cultural diversity" (ibid., p267).

Persona Studies offers a suite of concepts and ideas like persona registers (Barbour, 2015) and parafictional personas (Warren, 2016) that recast participatory media use as strategic performances of online identities. By describing media use through the lens of persona, media scholars are offered more nuanced theories of why individuals participate, and how this can be read as both simultaneously empowering and disempowering. Beyond the dominant ideas that understand participation as a democratic process that has affordances such as openness and decentralised power structures, a focus on persona uncovers that participation is now at the centre of neoliberal ideologies of hyper-competitiveness and individualism. Moreover, media use to this end is becoming a condition of choicelessness in the creative industries.

To contribute to further research into the intersection between media participation and persona construction I proposed the idea of 'micro-persona' as a way to describe how DIY media is used in everyday life to construct online identities, and how understanding a link to temporality may open up into broader theories of user agency. Responding to the imperative to participate experienced by Australian creative knowledge workers with ideas that reexamine agency is an important first step towards better understanding how media users might negotiate the trope that participatory media is inherently empowering in the future.

In Chapter One I identified the podcast in participatory media literature as an exemplar case of the empowerment experienced by media users in the participatory turn in media studies. I critiqued this notion through a close reading of *The Osber Günsberg Podcast*, demonstrating how traditional media brands are influencing participatory media cultures today.

In Chapter Two I highlighted the convergence of personal and professional participatory media cultures and examined how these technologies are being used in the creative industries to build status and reputation in order to find work in fragmented creative labour markets. Through a close reading of *Hello Code* I identified how mimicking the media template of celebrities can expose amateur media users to risks and vulnerabilities such as exposing their private lives online (Marwick, 2012; McRobbie, 2016).

In Chapter Three I argued that media participants can find themselves in always on mediated networks, expected to use participatory media in prescriptive ways. I explored the expectations of intimate and meaningful relationships concomitant with the affective dimensions of the podcast and argued that these factors can lead to an impasse of precariousness and a cycle of ‘cruel optimism’ (Berlant, 2011).

In Chapter Four I proposed Persona Studies as a ripe area of academic investigation for media scholars. I argued that studying persona is useful to participatory media researchers as it foregrounds the inherent task of building an online persona. I introduced a range of ideas from Persona Studies that may be useful for future media analysis and I used Mikhail Bakhtin’s (1954) theory of the carnivalesque to propose the idea of ‘micro-personas’ to theorise how participation and persona have now converged in the technological minutiae of everyday life.

Areas for further investigation

Using textual analysis to expand the work that Moore, Marshall and Lee (2017) have done mapping five primary characteristics of online persona may be productive as podcasting benefits from unique affordances associated with the intimacy of audio and the mobility of networked devices. Researching the dominant characteristics of persona in podcasting cultures could offer insight into how podcasters wield the affective dimensions of the format.

As Mia Lindgren and Siobhan McHugh have noted, Australian audio cultures are heavily influenced by the first-person neoliberal storytelling genre popular in the USA (Lindgren & McHugh, 2013). A study of how participatory media practices are changing due to the influence of prominent radio shows like *This American Life* and *Radio Lab*, which have been successfully remediated into podcasts, will likely offer insights into how the production of amateur podcasts may become further professionalised in the future.

Finally, this study only analyses one media channel used by Australian creative knowledge workers to build their personal brands. A broad comparative study across other formats such as blogs, social networking sites, personal websites and online video platforms would enrich any claims made in this thesis about how participatory cultures have changed in the networked persona era.

The next episode

It is not uncommon for podcasters to use the sign off “review and subscribe on iTunes” at the end of an episode. It is a prompt to get listeners to leave feedback, give a star

rating and to sign up to be notified when the next episode of that particular podcast is published. In some ways, I feel as if this critique captures a transition between two “episodes” in the podcast’s cultural narrative. The medium’s evolution, from representing the empowerment of everyday media users to create online communities centred on collective intelligence, democracy and participation, to the present scene of personal brands, formulaic media use and neoliberalism is a plot twist that early participatory media scholars might not have imagined, but is one that is undeniable in the current media landscape. It is my hope that this thesis highlights how important it is for media researchers, podcasters and podcast listeners to critique and pay attention – to *review and subscribe* – to the role of the podcast in the contemporary moment as a study for broader participatory cultures. Without the attention of critical stakeholders, the format is vulnerable to losing its empowering participatory potentials as it transitions to its next episode.

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