

Tragic but true: how podcasters replaced our real friends

The pandemic has seen audio shows fill a hole in our lives, providing companionship that is increasingly difficult to distinguish from the real thing



Friendship without the fuss ... Nobody Panic hosts Tessa Coates and Stevie Martin. Photograph: Marco Vittur



Rachel Aroesti

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Some of my friends have no idea I even exist. These are people I know intimately, extensively, profoundly: I know what they had for dinner last night, the petty arguments they have at home, their obsessions, their insecurities, their fears, what time they wake up in the morning. No piece of minutiae is too minute, no idle thought too inconsequential, no detail too mundane: I want to hear it all.

If this is beginning to sound slightly alarming, I should point out that they tell me all of these things - and try to make me laugh in the process. I think of podcasters as my friends - and I am not alone.

Initially, I thought I might be. I have always taken pop culture to heart in an excessive way, much to the bemusement of those around me. But, to my relief, my actual friends seem to feel the same way about the podcasts they listen to. "Karen and Georgia from My Favorite Murder are my friends," says one, when I broach the subject over text. "Yes, they're my mates," confirms my brother of the presenters of his beloved Tiny Meat Gang podcast, while a colleague says that the hosts of Trashfuture have "felt like my pals for a while now".

The pandemic has, no doubt, expedited the podcaster-friend trend. After a brief dip in listener numbers during the first lockdown (something attributed to the change in people's daily routines, particularly the absence of a commute), audience figures leapt up again - in December, BBC Sounds reported a [21% increase](#) in podcast listening over the year. The number of podcasts also ballooned, filling voids in the professional lives of the hosts and the social lives of the listeners, and in some cases replacing both. There were periods during lockdown where I was hearing more from certain podcasters than anyone else on Earth - even the people I was sharing a home with.



Trashfuture's podcast team (from left): Nate Bethea, Milo Edwards, Hussein Kesvani, Olga Koch and Riley Quinn.

But believing that people you encounter through the media are your friends is not a new phenomenon. It is called parasocial interaction, a term coined by sociologists Donald Horton and Richard Wohl in 1956. Obviously, they did not have podcasts in mind, but everything about the form seems perfectly pitched for such a relationship to blossom.

Podcasts are intimate, with no in-the-room audience to remind you of your own distance. They can also be very long, and very long-running, which means masses of information about the podcaster can be communicated and a network of in-jokes and callbacks established. They are often collaborative, fuelled in part by listener correspondence. There are a lot of them and the bar to entry is far lower than for other forms of media (everyone could be a podcaster; sometimes it feels as though they are). That means you are not only more likely to find a podcaster who shares your outlook and sense of humour, but also one who shares the material reality of your life. In other words, someone who might truly be your friend.

But can you really get to know someone just by listening to their podcast? Surely all broadcasters are putting on an act. “For us, it isn’t a performance,” says John Robins, a co-host of the Elis James and John Robins show (and one of my best pretend-friends). “Because I’m with Elis, and he’s with me.” The pair are, he says, “two men who are really good friends and who love each other - I think that’s what has made it strike a chord with people”.

This deep bond isn’t just a mechanism of the show - something that allows the duo to be “very authentic” in their conversations - it is also its primary subject and animating principle. Like the hosts of many other podcasts, the pair invite the listener to learn how their dynamic functions, preparing them for the glorious day when they become part of it.

This kind of vicarious friendship is something Robins is well acquainted with - to the extent that it has become an active consideration when making his own shows. “I totally got that feeling the first time [that I listened to a podcast]. I think I even sent [Adam and Joe](#) a soppy email at one point, just as a fan, so when I went into it with Elis, I knew what that relationship was like. We’ve always been quite conscious of looking after our listeners and creating a community around the show.”



John Robins and Elis James. Photograph: R Shiret

That sense of community was much needed during the pandemic, but the shared experience of lockdown also benefited podcasts. As lifestyles converged and opportunities dwindled for everyone, hosts became more relatable than ever.

For Alice, who is 29 and works in PR, podcasters - in particular, the *Sentimental in the City* hosts Dolly Alderton and Caroline O'Donoghue - served as "replacement" friends during lockdown. They also simulated the casual intimacy of the colleague experience. Like the office, podcasts allow you to form "strong connections based on day-to-day stuff, but it's not a deep and meaningful relationship", Alice says.

The pandemic also meant that most friendships were conducted exclusively through technology, blurring the lines between podcasters and acquaintances even further. "We're all starved of information," says 32-year-old Steph, who counts the *Nobody Panic* hosts Tessa Coates and Stevie Martin among her podcast pals. "A story you've heard [from a friend] and a story you've heard via a podcast are coming in via the same medium, which is a disembodied voice on your phone. In a lot of ways, one isn't any more real than the other."

To blame the pandemic entirely for my own delusions would be unfair. In fact, thinking I am friends with podcasters is something I have done since I was a teenager (thanks for the good times, Adam and Joe). What hadn't occurred to me was that my parasocial tendencies might betray questionable personality traits. Robins points out that podcasts provide friendship "on your terms" - and, crucially, at your own convenience. Steph describes it as a "lazy, selfish version of socialising - you're getting what you want without putting in effort". Podcasts also allow for companionship that is free of chaos and confusion; ideal for control freaks.

Yet sometimes podcast friends aren't merely user-friendly substitutes - they can fill real voids in your life. Part of the reason I am such a huge fan of Rob Beckett and Josh Widdicombe's *Lockdown Parenting Hell* is because none of my friends have children, so listening to the pair's candid complaints feels reassuring and cathartic. Similarly, when nobody you know in real life shares your niche interest, some podcast somewhere will provide someone who does.

But even when they serve no discernible purpose, these fake friendships still bring much to my life: comedy, camaraderie, comfort, an expanded universe. As lockdown lifts, I have no intention of weaning myself off them. But I am also looking forward to reacquainting myself with real relationships: ones that are messier, more inconvenient and, actually, far less self-serving - even if they give me the opportunity to talk about myself for a change.
