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[HOST: JENN WHITE]

[STORY: THE PERILS AND PROMISES OF
PARASOCIAL REALTIONSHPIS]

00:00:01

JENN WHITE

I'm Jenn White. This is 1A. Pot Roast was one of the most beloved cats on the social media platform Tik Tok. She racked up millions of views as people followed the journey of the sickly toothless cat. And when her owner announced her recent death online fans publically grieved a cat they never met.

00:00:22

FEMALE ONE

We want to check on Pot Roast. And her mom took, she's alive, out of her bio.

00:00:26

FEMALE TWO

Pot Roast, Pot Roast you had some--some audacity. If you never had nothing, you had the audacity to die while I'm [unintelligible] doing.

00:00:41

MALE ONE

Hey guys, this is just your morning reminder. Um, check on all of your friends who followed Pot Roast.

00:00:47

FEMALE TWO

Pot Roast is dead. I can't believe it. Look at him. Uh, what actually Pot Roast, I'm deleting the app. He wasn't just a cat. But he was just a cat for both to me.

00:01:00

JENN WHITE

Another text member writes, Pot Roast the cat on Tik Tok was one of my favorite online personalities ever. I looked forward to watching every day, watching her videos felt like listening to a friend tell a story on Face Time. Pot Roast passed away just last week. And it's been one of the hardest celebrity deaths I've ever had to deal with.

00:01:17 **JENN WHITE (CONTINUED)**

It's an example of a phenomenon we're seeing a lot more. Parasocial relationships--these are one-sided relationships with intense amounts of emotional investment. Relationships with a celebrity, a personality or yes--even a cat. It may not be a cat for you, maybe it's a professional athlete, or perhaps it's a musician or a celebrity whose life you know more about than you'd like to admit.

00:01:39 **JENN WHITE (CONTINUED)**

During the pandemic an uptake in our screen time by as much as 60 percent moved many of our social outlets to the digital realm. One study found this resulted in stronger parasocial connections to compensate for the lack of real life interactions. So for this installment of our extremely online series where we examine our relationship to the Internet.

00:02:00 **JENN WHITE (CONTINUED)**

We're investigating how these relationships form and they're growing influence. Here to talk about it is Kat Tenbarge, a tech and culture reporter at NBC News. Kat, thanks for your time today.

00:02:10 **KAT TENBARGE**

Thanks a lot for having me.

00:02:12 **JENN WHITE**

Also here with us is Bradley Bond, an associate professor at University of San Diego who teaches media psychology. Bradley, welcome to the program.

00:02:20 **BRADLEY BOND**

Wonderful to be here. Thank you.

00:02:21 **JENN WHITE**

And Drew Monson, a YouTuber whose been on the platform for over 14 years. Drew, welcome.

00:02:27 **DREW MONSON**

Thank you so much. Hi.

00:02:29 **JENN WHITE**

So Bradley, parasocial relationships may be a new term for a lot of people. How would you define it?

00:02:37 **BRADLEY BOND**

Sure. You are correct, the term has gained a lot of, um, increased popular press attention. Uh, the term has been since the 1950s when psychologists started to realize that evening news anchors who spoke directly to the screen were having a different type of influence than those who engaged as if they were on a stage.

00:02:54 **BRADLEY BOND (CONTINUED)**

And did not break that fourth wall looking directly at the audience. The concept is very much, uh, a parallel to our social relationships. They're, as you mentioned, there are these one-sided social emotional bonds that we develop with the people we've never met in real life.

00:03:10 **BRADLEY BOND (CONTINUED)**

And for fictional characters may not even exist, um, in our real lives. But they are equally important to our social network.

00:03:18 **JENN WHITE**

How is it different from being just a--a fan?

00:03:22 **BRADLEY BOND**

Yes. So, there is a lot of research looking at kind of differentiation between concepts that we use, um, both just colloquially and in scholarly research. And so fandom is more of an attraction or liking. I think of it like this. That the media provide us with a lot of, um, gratifications.

00:03:40 **BRADLEY BOND (CONTINUED)**

We have different needs and we turn to a lot of different socialization agents for those needs. Media happens to be one. And fandom might be when you feel like you're being gratified in terms of entertainment. Or in terms of information, right.

00:03:54 **BRADLEY BOND (CONTINUED)**

You have informational needs, and you're a fan of a newscaster who you believe provides those. Parasocial relationships fulfills the need for companionship.

00:04:04 **JENN WHITE**

Now Drew, you currently have over one million subscribers on your YouTube channel. How do you experience these one-sided relationships with your followers?

00:04:14 **DREW MONSON**

I mean, I think anything I experience online from my audiences it's always going to completely take place on the comment section or the--I mean, there's--there's kind of two sides of it. There's the public, um, discussion that people are sort of writing to me and everyone else is saying it too.

00:04:30 **DREW MONSON (CONTINUED)**

And then there's like an e-mail or a message that somebody would write me. And I just kind of see people's reactions to whatever I'm talking about that day or someone will go through the entire 40 minute video and sort of line by line respond to everything that I said.

00:04:45

JENN WHITE

Hmm. Do you also have experiences where you cross paths with someone in real life, and they feel an immediate connection to you but this is someone who you don't know, because you've been on the other side of the screen.

00:04:59

DREW MONSON

Yeah. I mean, it doesn't happen super, super often for me. 'Cause I'm, is having a million subscribers doesn't exactly make me feel very famous, um, at all. Like I'm--I'm mostly just walking around the world like anybody else. But when I do have somebody come up to me I would say that there's definitely a--a moment where I can't really tell if they know me from high school.

00:05:19

DREW MONSON (CONTINUED)

Or I know one of their friends or something. Or I've met them before. 'Cause the greeting just sort of sounds the same. It doesn't really seem like someone is, you know, screaming at the Beatles or something. They're just sort of like, "Oh, hey Drew, how are you?" Like it doesn't feel very much like a celebrity thing.

00:05:35

JENN WHITE

Now Kat you report on Internet culture and a lot of online greeters. How do you think the Internet fosters these relationships?

00:05:42

KATTENBARGE

So I think increasingly even before the pandemic, more and more of our lives were spent online. And the social media networks that a lot of people dedicate their time to have certain functions that enable sort of parasocial relationship building.

00:05:57

KATTENBARGE (CONTINUED)

Uh, one of those is like Drew mentioned, the comment section where, uh, any time you put a piece of content out online there's usually a way for people who are, um, reading or viewing that content to respond. Uh, but increasingly there are different types of functionalities such as going live on a platform like Tik Tok.

00:06:16

KATTENBARGE (CONTINUED)

Uh, where you then have a live feed of comments. Um, people can give you gifts. Some of those are monetary. Um, and things like live shoots on Tik Tok. And then there's also a multitude of ways that you can connect with creators and people who you may have a parasocial relationship with from e-mail and IM to, um, DM platforms like Instagram and Snap Chat where anyone can try to start a conversation with anyone else.

00:06:41

JENN WHITE

But Drew you started your YouTube channel before online influencers were-- were popular. How have you seen these parasocial relationships with online creators evolve?

00:06:50

DREW MONSON

Well, I think when I first started it was around 2007 or something. And the Internet, like making a video online had just begun, um, maybe 2 or 3 years, or videos solely made for the purpose of putting them online. And I think that from what I remember it always felt more like a performance and like something you would do like play a guitar, or you would dance around.

00:07:10

DREW MONSON (CONTINUED)

Or you would kind of put on a show. And then as the years have progressed it slowly sort of morphed into more of the virtual friendships or you're kind of just looking at the camera and say, "Hi, how are you guys." And--and just kind of talking more as yourself.

00:07:28

JENN WHITE

Well, one member of Text Club writes, "I'm a 60-year-old woman. I follow a young family on Tik Tok. I love them so much they almost feel like my real family. I even love their pets. They literally have no idea who I am. It is such a bizarre feeling to know that I really have no relationship with them at all."

00:07:46

JENN WHITE (CONTINUED)

Bradley, why do people engage in parasocial relationships? You mentioned companionship. But is there something more to it than that?

00:07:53

BRADLEY BOND

Well, there's research that suggests that we don't differentiate processing a person or processing personhood. Whether we're looking at a face in person, or on screen. Certainly our brains are capable of knowing when we're watching a television show or a YouTube channel. But our brains like to take shortcuts.

00:08:11

BRADLEY BOND (CONTINUED)

And we call these surtistics. And there are suristics involved when we process faces. So when we see people on screen we are making first impressions the exact same way that we do when we meet somebody in real life. As we learn more information about somebody on screen we can forecast whether we want to continue investing our emotional effort in those people.

00:08:30

BRADLEY BOND (CONTINUED)

And the same way that we do with individuals in real life. So there are a lot of parallels actually between the interpersonal communication literature. So those who study our in person face-to-face relationships, and our media relationships. They certainly provide us with a sense of companionship.

00:08:49

BRADLEY BOND (CONTINUED)

A sense of belonging. We have found that parasocial relationships can be particularly meaningful for individuals who are looking for a particular connection that they have trouble finding in real life. For example, marginalized populations, um, queer youth who do not feel like they have queer friends in their real life find these kinds of connections via characters or celebrities.

00:09:13

BRADLEY BOND (CONTINUED)

And it's not uncommon and it's not unhealthy. We--we strive to have strong, uh, excuse me, personal social networks. And as such whether those come from people we know in person or on screen, um, sometimes it doesn't matter.

00:09:28

JENN WHITE

Well, one person from our text's club writes, "My sister who I suspect has borderline personality disorder has relationships with celebrities that are of greater importance and impact than with the actual people in her life. It's not typical fan frenzy. Her entire emotional reality hinges on what is going on for people she has never even met."

00:09:45

JENN WHITE (CONTINUED)

And another texter says, "I have ADHD and experience hyper fixations which sometimes causes me to feel very connected to celebrities. I think I've managed to maintain enough self awareness to understand that it's essentially fantasy, but it can be very intense." Bradley, are--are some people more susceptible to being in intense parasocial relationships than others?

00:10:08

BRADLEY BOND

Yeah. So, we originally believe that parasocial relationships might be compensatory. Meaning that they make up for it, or fulfill the holes that we have in our social networks, right. So if I struggle with making real life social connections maybe the connections I make with YouTubers can fulfill that for me.

00:10:26

BRADLEY BOND (CONTINUED)

But research over the years has actually shown us quite the opposite. It's individuals who have that psychological tool kit that's needed to make friends. So people who tend to be extraverted, people who tend to be risk takers, people who easily make friends in real life also build the strongest parasocial relationships.

00:10:42 **BRADLEY BOND (CONTINUED)**

There is, um, the possibility that a parasocial relationship becomes unhealthy. And what I often share with others is that those types of parasocial relationships are likely consequences of other diagnosable psychosis or--or mental illnesses. So that the parasocial relationship itself is potentially an outcome of mental health challenges that individuals experience.

00:11:07 **BRADLEY BOND (CONTINUED)**

But the parasocial relationship is not unhealthy in and of itself. Um, and a good example I often use is the, you know, the gentleman who attempted to assassinate Ronald Reagan did so to impress Jodie Foster, because he knew that if she just knew he was that they would fall in love.

00:11:22 **BRADLEY BOND (CONTINUED)**

And that type of, of social emotional connection, um, to a character, to a celebrity is obviously unhealthy, but it's not the connection itself that is the, um, that is the mental health challenge that individual is struggling with.

00:11:37 **JENN WHITE**

Well, one member of our Text Club writes, "I've experienced these relationships a lot since the pandemic began. When late night hosts and SNL began streaming from inside actor's homes it began to feel less like watching TV and more like weekly check-ins with distant friends.

00:11:51 **JENN WHITE (CONTINUED)**

Now that things are going back I feel weirdly sad. Not to see Seth Meyers broadcasting from his attic. Kat, how is the pandemic effecting these one-sided relationships we have with celebrities and personalities?

00:12:04 **KATTENBARGE**

Yeah. So one thing that has been sort of a hallmark of influencer culture, uh, over the past decade or more has been sort of the idea of authenticity and connecting with people in their lives as they normally would be. So for example, when you have a favorite YouTuber or a favorite Tik Toker, um, most likely you're going to be seeing them where they actually live, where they actually get ready in the morning.

00:12:28 **KATTENBARGE (CONTINUED)**

They may show you their real closet, their real kitchen. And if you connect with them throughout the day, then you feel like you're actually immersed in that person's life. And to an extent since you're seeing so much of it, you kind of feel like you really are. Um, and I think during the pandemic when we had closures of a lot of types of, uh, studios, schools, offices.

00:12:48 **KATTENBARGE (CONTINUED)**

A lot of people began doing, uh, what they would normally do outside of the home at home and sort of giving people a window into their bedroom, if they're live streaming from their bedroom instead of their workplace. Or in the case of a late night host, we saw a lot of their basements and their family members and pets for the first time.

00:13:06 **KATTENBARGE (CONTINUED)**

And so you see that connection, um, drawing a little bit closer. And even as, um, places like schools and offices start to reopen I think a lot of those bonds have remained. And so you get that kind of sense of loneliness or sadness when someone goes back to that environment.

00:13:22 **JENN WHITE**

We're talking about one-sided relationships with celebrities and creators with Kat Tenbarge, a tech and culture reporter at NBC News. Bradley Bond an associate professor at University of San Diego who researches media and psychology. And Drew Monson, a YouTuber who has been on the platform for over 14 years.

00:13:40 **JENN WHITE (CONTINUED)**

Drew, have you seen a difference in the way people interact with you since the pandemic started?

00:13:45 **DREW MONSON**

I think that the comments I've seen, um, since the pandemic have become increasingly more sort of emotional, but also just it--sometimes I'll look at them and it seems like someone is sort of just texting me. Like it'll just say like, I'll post a video and--and 2 minutes after, you know, an hour long video is posted it'll just say.

00:14:04 **DREW MONSON (CONTINUED)**

"Hey Drew, like I'm eating a snow cone right now. Like I'm having a pretty good day. But I'm sort of tired." And--and it's interesting. I never--I used to just get comments on the video itself. And now it really does sort of seem like I'm talking to somebody alone in my room and then in the future there's just sort of a delay.

00:14:24 **DREW MONSON (CONTINUED)**

And they're talking back to me. Just--it's just really a delay. It doesn't always feel completely one-sided to me. 'Cause I know who they are in a way. And they know who I am.

00:14:35 **JENN WHITE**

Oh, we've been hearing from you. Here's Kevin, from Massachusetts.

00:14:38

KEVIN

With regards to the parasocial relationships. For me personally it's a band. It's been Van Halen. Van Halen has been very important to me. Uh, and through most of my life. Uh, as someone who is in recovery--6 years as a recovered alcoholic. Through the best times of my life and the lowest times of my life that band was there for me.

00:15:00

KEVIN (CONTINUED)

And through the pandemic they have continued to be a gigantic support. And I love them. And I love Eddie Van Halen as much as I can love anybody else.

00:15:10

JENN WHITE

Kevin, thanks. We also want to hear from you. Is there a person you feel a close kinship to, but have never interacted with personally? Maybe like Kevin, it's a band. Tweet us at 1A or send us an e-mail at 1A@WAMU.org. Bradley, how much of this is about there being a certain perhaps predictability in these parasocial relationships that we may not experience in real life relationships?

00:15:38

BRADLEY BOND

Yes. There's definitely a level of comfort that comes along like that. Um, earlier Kat had hit the nail on the head with regards to authenticity. We know that people tend to be drawn to fictional characters or celebrities who they feel they are either like or who they wish to be like.

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BRADLEY BOND (CONTINUED)

And when we see individuals, um, engage in activities or behaviors or we notice that they have a similar pillow, a throw pillow on their couch or anything that can make us feel connected, uh, it can increase that sense of--of this person is like me.

00:16:10

BRADLEY BOND (CONTINUED)

And if we only had that opportunity to chat over a glass of wine, we would just hit it off. Right. We would be the best of friends. And so that definitely increases that sense of--of knowing over the pandemic the predictability of our favorite characters certainly does add to a level of comfort.

00:16:29

BRADLEY BOND (CONTINUED)

Because you know what you're getting and you know what you're, what you're expecting. In fact, when our favorite characters or celebrities break our expectations and they violate what we expect them to do there's a celebrity scandal for example.

00:16:42

BRADLEY BOND (CONTINUED)

Um, we experience oftentimes the same kind of emotional distress that we would if something, uh, like that were happening to a family member.

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JENN WHITE

We're discussing how the pandemic and Internet has impacted parasocial relationships is our latest conversation in our extremely online series. With us, Kat Tenbarger, she's a tech and culture reporter at NBC News. Bradley Bond, an associate professor at University of San Diego. He researches media psychology.

00:17:08

JENN WHITE (CONTINUED)

And Drew Monson, a YouTuber who has been on the platform for over 14 years. We're also hearing from you. Chelsea tweets: "I personally experienced a great amount of grief when Anthony Bourdain passed away. It's still hard to watch old episodes of his show. I'm still sad he's not alive making powerful content."

00:17:25

JENN WHITE (CONTINUED)

I'm Jenn White. We'll hear more from you and our guests in a moment.

[COMMERCIAL BREAK]

00:17:55

JENN WHITE

If you've ever cried about a celebrity who died or been upset about your favorite team losing, you probably experienced a form of parasocialization or a one-sided relationship with a person or entity you've never interacted with. We're talking about how these relationships have grown during the pandemic with Kat Tenbarger, a tech and culture reporter at NBC News.

00:18:16

JENN WHITE (CONTINUED)

Bradley Bond, an associate professor at University of San Diego. He researches media psychology. And Drew Monson, a YouTuber whose been on the platform for over 14 years. We also heard from YouTuber Hannah Hart who went viral for her series called My Drunk Kitchen in 2011.

00:18:33

JENN WHITE (CONTINUED)

She's been in the public eye since then and sent in her thoughts. And she started by talking about her own parasocial relationships with fictional characters.

00:18:40

HANNAH HART

I hadn't heard the term parasocial relationships until pretty recently. And, uh, upon learning what it meant I realized, oh, oh yeah, I know that. But for me growing up and having, um, I guess a role model or public figure, uh, they weren't real people, they were fictional characters.

00:18:59

HANNAH HART (CONTINUED)

For instance, uh, the example that comes to mind for me is, um, Sailor Moon. Now, this parasocial relationship that I was having wasn't really about me feeling like they cared about me, or that Sailor Moon cared about my life experience.

00:19:14

HANNAH HART (CONTINUED)

But rather that it helped me learn how to care for others, or care for myself in a positive way. And it just--it's amazing, because now I--I mean I'm no Sailor Moon. But I will say that it is an incredible like honor and responsibility to be this person who so many people care about.

00:19:36

HANNAH HART (CONTINUED)

And that I do genuinely care about them back. It's not the same though as having social relationships in real life. Like there are many ways that it's similar. For instance, I love my online community. I think about them. I think about my Twitch peeps.

00:19:51

HANNAH HART (CONTINUED)

I got Heart Topia which is our little safe space on the Internet where we get to be happy and talk to each other. And so I--I really do genuinely care. But are we involved in each other's direct lives? No. And, you know, something that I encountered was that sometimes the--the parasocial dynamic can be taken too far.

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HANNAH HART (CONTINUED)

And obviously there's extreme examples like--like stalking or, um, people creating delusions that, uh, I'm married to them secretly, even though I'm definitely not. So I--I'm a big fan of the parasocial dynamic as both a--a giver and receiver of it. But, you know, the boundaries and within--yeah--everything in moderation.

00:20:32

HANNAH HART (CONTINUED)

A healthy balance. That's I think the most important part. That it can be a truly healing space, especially if you're in a space where healing spaces are not made available to you. Um, that you can find a place where you are cared about. Even if it's not physically in real life right in front of you.

00:20:49

JENN WHITE

Uh, Bradley, I want to touch on the last thing she said about creating these healing safe spaces, digitally if people don't have them physically. Hart is a lesbian and currently you're doing research on LGBTQ YouTubers building a safe community. What have you found?

00:21:05

BRADLEY BOND

So, as I--as I mentioned. Uh, marginalized populations tend to turn to media for identity seeking purposes. So, when you're going through a sensitization period and you're trying to understand your own identity, um, regardless of what that identity is. If it's somehow marginalized or ostracized by society the Internet tends to be a low risk place to engage in those kinds of explorations.

00:21:30

BRADLEY BOND (CONTINUED)

And oftentimes we actually find that individuals are gaining a sense of community and social support, um, not just from the YouTuber with whom they feel a social bond, but from the other individuals who are commenting on that YouTuber's video.

00:21:46

BRADLEY BOND (CONTINUED)

From that sense that there's a community around liking or fandom of a particular person. And that's something that a lot of people struggle with in their real lives in finding. So the Internet can provide that kind of safe space perceived to be low risk, um, for that type of exploration.

00:22:03

JENN WHITE

Do you think the--the Internet has fundamentally shifted what community means?

00:22:10

BRADLEY BOND

That is a question I often ask my students. It is a wonderful question. And I think that, uh, ultimately yes. Um, you know, we have--we talk a lot in the academic community about a third place. Your first place being your home. Second place being your workplace.

00:22:27

BRADLEY BOND (CONTINUED)

But that until maybe the 1950s or '60s which would coincide with the advent of television in the 19--early 1950s. People had kind of a third place. A place where they gathered. A place where they went to relax, where they saw people from their community. Whether that be the bowling alley, or the local town square in many European communities.

00:22:47

BRADLEY BOND (CONTINUED)

And that those have slowly kind of eroded. And the argument that is often made is that those have been replaced with our online communities. Now whether that is good for society's functioning or not is yet to be determined I would argue.

00:23:00

BRADLEY BOND (CONTINUED)

But there is a sense of community, um, that appears in these online spaces that is certainly novel, um, and not quite yet understood.

00:23:10

JENN WHITE

Well, Kat, and I wonder in your reporting whether you've explored if this dynamic becomes sort of a self fulfilling prophecy? And that people build these online communities and then feel less inclined to build communities where they physically are located.

00:23:29

JENN WHITE (CONTINUED)

So it's sort of--it sort of feeds itself.

00:23:34

KATTENBARGE

One thing that I have noticed in studying these types of online communities is that a lot of times when you're looking at a space such as a sub Reddit for example or a community on Reddit that's centered around a specific topic. Most people almost everyone in those communities is going to be anonymous in some way.

00:23:51

KATTENBARGE (CONTINUED)

They're going to use a screen name that doesn't connect to their real name at all. And that gives you sort of a sense of freedom. Sometimes that can be a positive sense of freedom. For example, in a lot of sub-Reddits related to certain YouTubers or personalities people will share experiences that they don't feel comfortable talking about in real life with their real name attached.

00:24:11

KATTENBARGE (CONTINUED)

Things like trauma and abuse and mental illness. But on the other hand, that layer of protective anonymity can also result in some negative consequences. For example, people feel more free and willing to criticize others, um, without fear that it could ever be seen as hypocritical or come back to bite them since no one knows what faces--that sort of criticism is coming from.

00:24:32

KATTENBARGE (CONTINUED)

Um, and so I think while people do crave having in real life connection, most people crave having those real life spaces. Um, I think that parasocial communities online can also breed, um, a sort of toxicity and negativity that you wouldn't find in those same real life spaces.

00:24:51

JENN WHITE

Well, Drew you took a step back from the Internet for some time. And when you returned you reacted to what people said about you. What did you experience that--that made you want to talk about it?

00:25:02

DREW MONSON

I think in general people having a parasocial relationship with you, or there's this idea that you're showing yourself online. And this is who I am. But people get sort of frustrated when they feel like they don't have the whole story. And that you're leaving something out.

00:25:16 **DREW MONSON (CONTINUED)**

For me my emotional boundaries are that I have to leave something out. I can't talk about everything. I can't talk about my family, all of my relationships, everything I do day to day, because there would be no difference--the gray area, it would just be too overwhelming for me.

00:25:30 **DREW MONSON (CONTINUED)**

So that's the most interesting thing I've found is that there's sort of a--a hunger and an intense kind of aggressive need for what you don't talk about. And it can get to the point where I feel like my boundaries are being crossed and on sort of a public level. And I just don't really have anything to say about it sometimes.

00:25:49 **DREW MONSON (CONTINUED)**

Because people want me to talk about things that are--are my actual life. And--and I need to, obviously that creates sort of a--a dynamic where it's like, hey, I thought you--you were our friends. Like why aren't opening up like you would with a friend? But there has to be some sort of line drawn in the sand for me.

00:26:07 **DREW MONSON (CONTINUED)**

And I just thought it was so funny that I remember my sister saying, "Oh there's--there's a video on you online. I watched it. It was really interesting. Like I didn't know all this stuff." And I was kind of like, that's so funny that she wouldn't--she would find that interesting when she literally grew up with me.

00:26:22 **DREW MONSON (CONTINUED)**

And, you know, watched my diapers being changed.

00:26:24 **JENN WHITE**

We're talking about how the Internet and the pandemic have intensified parasocial relationships with Drew Monson, a YouTuber who has been on the platform for over 14 years. Also with us, Kat Tenbarger, she's a tech and culture reporter at NBC News. And Bradley Bond, an associate professor at University of San Diego.

00:26:41 **JENN WHITE (CONTINUED)**

He researches media and media psychology. We're also hearing from a lot of you. One member of Text Club writes: The Grateful Dead supplied the soundtrack to my youth and into my adulthood. I went to shows whenever I could. When Jerry Garcia died I grieved as if a member of my family had died.

00:26:57

JENN WHITE (CONTINUED)

His faults and struggles made him more human and more relatable. He brought immense joy to my life. And I will be forever grateful. Another member of the Text Club writes: I'm guilty of this with Fauci. I really like he was sent to our country in a time--I really feel like he was sent to our country in a time of need.

00:27:13

JENN WHITE (CONTINUED)

Seeing him on TV with his steadfast honesty and unwavering desire to keep people safe made me grow closer to him. We also got this e-mail from Cindy who says: I was quarantined due to COVID, and out of boredom decided to learn to crochet from YouTube. I found a YouTuber, Melanie Hamm who was patient, encouraging and very practical in her videos.

00:27:32

JENN WHITE (CONTINUED)

When I went to her Instagram account I learned she had died of cancer just a few days prior. I feel like I had made a new friend, spent a weekend with her, and then lost her to death. You know, Kat, it's interesting 'cause many young people are on the Internet now and have their own Internet presence.

00:27:49

JENN WHITE (CONTINUED)

And there are even these micro influencers. These are people who have a smaller sized following than a celebrity. Typically less than 50,000 followers, but as small as 5,000. Which may sound like a lot to people. But how are these one-sided relationships playing out on--on these even smaller scales?

00:28:07

KATTENBARGE

So when it comes to micro influencers even though they may have significantly fewer followers than some of the big names in the social media space, a lot of times those parasocial relationships and bonds can be just as strong, if not stronger in part because if someone doesn't have a huge following of their fan you may feel like you are one of the few people who follows them as closely as you do.

00:28:32

KATTENBARGE (CONTINUED)

And therefore you might feel more indebted, um, to their time and appreciation. Um, I think that a lot of people who have curated smaller audiences, um, sort of run into more of this gray area with their following. Where it's like, oh, there may only be 5,000 of you but 10 out of those 5,000 of you want a real life relationship with me.

00:28:51

KATTENBARGE (CONTINUED)

And I'm not willing to cross that sort of boundary with you. So I do think that that's something that, um, as more and more people develop these micro platforms they're, uh, running into sort of these parasocial bonds more frequently.

00:29:04

JENN WHITE

Drew, was this a bit of a learning curve for you that you had to figure out where those boundaries were for you? And would you share it with your audience?

00:29:13

DREW MONSON

Yeah. I mean, as far as what I share when I'm making a video--like when I sit down to--to make a YouTube video I do feel sort of like I go into a trance where I--I almost believe that I'm talking to somebody. I mean, I'm a very isolating person. I'm sort of a loner.

00:29:28

DREW MONSON (CONTINUED)

And I'll talk to myself all the time. I'll find myself having kind of a conversation with somebody out there. I don't know what it is or who it is, in like the shower or something. And I recently just started trying to open up more. Because I--I just want to talk that way in front of a camera.

00:29:45

DREW MONSON (CONTINUED)

And I have things that I'll find myself saying that I don't know if I would really say to a friend. It almost weirdly is kind of mixed up, in that I feel more comfortable talking about, um, certain things and to a public kind of vague person or a group of people than--than someone I might know in real life.

00:30:03

JENN WHITE

So when your--your sister commented on the video she saw about you. Was it a video you had created, or a video someone else had created?

00:30:10

DREW MONSON

It was a video about me. I never watched it. I'm never able to watch something like that. But people sort of make essays about YouTubers. Or where it can actually be more popular sometimes I've noticed, um, videos about me, um, sort of as something to commentate on are more popular.

00:30:28

DREW MONSON (CONTINUED)

Because the perspective is--is sort of more intriguing to people than, you know, this person might actually give us a little more juice about this guy than he is going to. 'Cause they'll read between the lines or something.

00:30:39

JENN WHITE

Bradley, I want to talk about the other side of this. So which is, when people become emotionally invested in a person they don't like--maybe they hate watch, or hate follow a person, but keep up with them all the same. How do you explain that kind of engagement?

00:30:53

BRADLEY BOND

Yeah. So, much like having individuals that may be part of our social network who we are not the biggest fan of, that can happen with, um, fictional characters and celebrities as well. Such that we start to develop a negative relationship with individuals.

00:31:10

BRADLEY BOND (CONTINUED)

And in fact research suggests that we will maintain exposure to those individuals. Uh, largely in hopes that we see something bad happen to them. Um, kind of, you know, in line with **[unintelligible]** that like we would get joy out of someone else's pain.

00:31:29

BRADLEY BOND (CONTINUED)

And that person would be somebody that we dislike. So there is, um, this understanding that our parasocial relationships don't have to be positive. That we can have negative connections. Uh, we can also have parasocial relationships that don't mirror friendships, but rather mirror romantic relationships.

00:31:46

BRADLEY BOND (CONTINUED)

Or, um, paternal relationships. So there's--there are different dimensions of the concepts that have been studied.

00:31:54

JENN WHITE

And what do you think we need to remember about parasocial relationships? Because you said they're not inherently negative. But what should we keep in mind when we're building these types of connections to people who we don't really know?

00:32:08

BRADLEY BOND

I think that there are two things that--that we should keep in mind as--as audience members or as just members of our society where these parasocial relationships occur. And one is that they are not equivalent to our social relationships. Our parasocial relationships provide us with a sense of belonging.

00:32:25

BRADLEY BOND (CONTINUED)

They can provide us with a sense of community. And they can be incredibly helpful for our emotional well being. But we also--we get things, uh, from physical touch, right. We get benefits from being in the presence of other individuals that we will not get from our parasocial others.

00:32:42

BRADLEY BOND (CONTINUED)

And that's important to know. I also think it's really important to note that these relationships can be influential. There can be effects from these relationships. And a lot of scholars are starting to study how we utilize celebrity or, um, micro influencers even to promote positive health messages.

00:32:59

BRADLEY BOND (CONTINUED)

How we engage these individuals, um, in communication behaviors such that it will lead to, um, positive and healthy outcomes for their audiences. So, there's a lot to take away from our understanding of these concepts.

00:33:13

JENN WHITE

That's Bradley Bond, an associate professor at University of San Diego. He researches media psychology. Also with us today Drew Monson, a YouTuber who's been on the platform for over 14 years. And Kat Tenbarger, a tech and culture reporter at NBC News. Bradley, Drew, Kat, thanks for speaking with us.

00:33:32

JENN WHITE (CONTINUED)

We'll end on a couple of notes from you. Read e-mails, the biggest parasocial relationship I had growing up was with Robin Williams. I was raised on his films. I was socially awkward as a kid. And Williams provided emotional comfort, joy and laughter into my adult years.

00:33:47

JENN WHITE (CONTINUED)

I sobbed when I learned of his passing. And Katherine e-mails: My grandmother had this kind of relationship with the people on soap operas in the 1960s. She would worry about them as much as she worried about her family. Today's producer was Michelle Harvin. This program comes to you from WAMU, part of American University in Washington.

00:34:06

JENN WHITE (CONTINUED)

Distributed by NPR. I'm Jenn White. Thanks for listening. And we'll talk again tomorrow. This is 1A.

B-ROLL: 00:34:24

end of tape