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The gossip bros

BY

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The age of the podcasters as thought leaders—think #PodcastandChill and The Hustlers Corner—is upon us.

There is a running joke on Twitter about how easily a man with a smattering of opinions feels compelled to start a podcast. For those who have observed men from close and afar building their own virtual talkshops, this journey is often treated like a divine calling, a moral duty similar to the kind superheroes wrestle with before deciding to suit up and save the day. Despite increased awareness around the social perils of “mansplaining,” right-wing men continue to front the most popular podcasts in the English-speaking world, with The Joe Rogan Experience, The Ben Shapiro Show, and their less famous alpha male acolytes topping global lists of the highest-ranking programs across streaming devices.

Much of the criticism of these podcasts has focused on how their hosts present misogyny, quack science and right-wing conspiracy theories as insightful analysis and logic. Yet little has been written about how gossip, particularly of the tabloid type, orients the topics of discussion on these shows. On *The Joe Rogan Experience*, one is just as likely to hear feverish speculation about the Popeye-looking muscles of actor and hustle-and-grind influencer Dwayne Johnson as one is about the “woke communists” destroying free speech on college campuses. An impassioned monologue on the threat of “beta males” to society can exist alongside a disjointed rant about the ethics of reality star Kim Kardashian’s dating life on The Ben Shapiro Show. For the reactionary male podcast host, gossip is used to prop up their anti-establishment schtick, allowing them to pose as brave everymen fighting the vapidness of Hollywood and the self-indulgence of liberal media culture. However, it is ironic that the demographic known to have public meltdowns over the so-called crisis of masculinity in the West, is happy to partake in an activity routinely stereotyped as the province of women and girls.

Over the last decade, South Africa has seen a steady rise in the number of people listening to podcasts, courtesy of better mobile connectivity, access to streaming devices, and the proliferation of different social media apps. Though radio is still the go-to medium for the vast majority of people in the country, podcasting has given South Africans a buffet of niche and offbeat topics that would struggle to be greenlit on traditional radio. For example, the History of South Africa takes listeners through an in-depth journey of how our country came to be, so far chronicling the geological formation of pre-historic southern Africa through to The Battle of Mhlathuze River between the Zulu and Ndwandwe in 1820. In addition, The Sisterhood of Traveling Mgowo is a thoughtful and funny guide on how to navigate adulthood from the perspective of two black women friends. The Sobering showcases the best of local hip hop through interviews with artists and exposure to new releases, while The Almost Perfect Podcast features conversations with artists, writers, and other culture workers on how to adjust to the unpredictable conditions of the creative industries (full disclosure: I have been a guest on this show).

But much like the US and UK, some of the best-performing podcasts are usually dominated by men who benefit from the preference for a certain kind of male voice and perspective in South African media. The shows Podcast and Chill and The Hustlers Corner have arrived at a time when entertainment has been entrusted with doing the work of journalism. While there has always been some degree of overlap between the two, the disappearance of structures designed to support journalists and reporters means that just about anybody can attempt this line of work, especially if they have some fame and notoriety already. Hosted by MacG and Sol with off-camera contributions from Ghost Lady, Podcast and Chill has become one of South Africa's most popular podcasts, notching up 735,000 subscribers on YouTube alone. Started in July 2018, the show bills itself as a platform for raw, no-holds barred conversations on current affairs, which like the aforementioned male podcasts, is a euphemism for gossip. Having earned a loyal following among young South Africans looking for an alternative to commercial and public radio, Podcast and Chill has tapped into the evergreen curiosity about other people's business, riffing on social media influencers like Mhlali, beef between the country's biggest artists and media personalities, Twitter's perennial gender wars, tropes about different ethnic groups, Champions League matches and mental health, among other things.

To its credit, *Podcast and Chill*, a linguistic nod to the 2015 *Netflix and Chill* craze, has recreated the feel and intimacy of a chill session with the bros (or gossip bros). This sense of camaraderie has allowed the podcast to retain its underdog status, which was cultivated at its inception. Despite riding the kind of success which could alienate a cult audience, it has managed to preserve its "us (podcasters) vs. them (radio broadcasters)" identity. For subscribers or "chillers" who witnessed the show transform from a rinky-dink two-man production shot in a poorly lit bedroom to a slick outfit with professional mics and crisp thumbnails, the space

Podcast and Chill has carved for itself may feel like a personal win, given their initial struggles to get celebrity interviews and sponsorship deals.

Now in its fourth year, Podcast and Chill has secured sit downs with a number of public figures in South Africa and other parts of the world, such as actor and director Dr John Kani, record label and producer Dame Dash, singer Moonchild Sanelly, politician Mmusi Maimane, gutless shock jock DJ Gareth Cliff, and kwaito pioneer Zola, as well as the late journalist and TV personality Kuli Roberts.

As the face of the show, MacG has been compared to Rogan for the controversy he has courted throughout his broadcasting career, which has involved stints at YFM (a Johannesburg youth radio station dating back to the late 1990s) and 94.7 (a previously white station now catering to a multiracial middle class audience). But his approach is more rambunctious than righteous, bringing to mind the antics of a young Phat Joe, a radio and TV producer who partly grew up in the US and cultivated an obnoxious persona during the late 1990s and early 2000s. Even when MacG's line of questioning becomes crass and invasive, he disarms his guests with his happy-go-lucky charm, hearty laughter, and genuine interest in their careers and lives. In a recent interview with EFF party leader Julius Malema, he not only made a tongue-in-cheek remark about Malema's spending habits (specifically, a trip to Ibiza for a friend's wedding), but he also asked Malema about his mother's battle with epilepsy and eventual death. Yet, this seemingly harmless sensibility can also obscure MacG's rap sheet of bigotry, which has been treated as an endearing part of his polarizing persona. In 2010, he was fired from YFM after he lobbed insults at a gay colleague on-air and played a clip of Ugandan pastor, Martin Ssempe, discussing the "evils" of same-sex relationships. In January 2021, Old Mutual, a local life insurer, dropped their sponsorship of Podcast and Chill after MacG and Sol used a litany of transphobic slurs in an episode. And later that year, he came under fire for his comments about Amanda Du-Pont, a popular actor and model, in an interview with musician Jub Jub, after which she revealed that Jub Jub had abused her.

The interview with Malema is part of a shift towards more politically driven content on Podcast and Chill. Despite MacG's open distaste for politics, the devastation of the COVID-19 pandemic, rising costs of living, persistent electricity blackouts, government scandals, and overall despair over the future of our country seem to have pushed him to engage with realities affecting most South Africans. But this change has also revealed the extent of his ignorance. Buoyed by a trip to the UK earlier in July, MacG offered his thoughts on why South Africans should consider voting for the Democratic Alliance (DA) in the upcoming 2024 general elections. "I don't understand how you can't see that [if] the DA were to be in power, we wouldn't have things like loadshedding. Our infrastructure would be better, our roads would work. Things would work like first-world countries."

Besides the fact that people have long debated whether they could vote DA, a historically white party that has had a hard time retaining black leaders, it is alarming that the party's uneven record of governance in the Western Cape (especially in the black and coloured townships of the Cape Flats as one guest in the room pointed out), did not factor into MacG's assumption that they would run the country better. More troubling is his rehashing of ideas that one would expect from an apartheid nostalgist without receiving much resistance from anyone in the room. Not long after this, DA leader John Steenhuisen appeared on the program. (On that occasion, Steenhuisen made a sexist joke about his ex wife). Other than Steenhuisen, the then leader of Soweto Parliament and Operation Dudula (a movement leading the rash of anti-immigrant social movements in South Africa), Nhlanhla "Lux" Dlamini, who left the organization in July over a dispute about removing all immigrants from the country, African National Congress (ANC) national spokesperson, Pule Mabe have appeared on Podcast and Chill. Yet these conversations have exposed how fangless MacG's provocation becomes when he interacts with people who have been trained to tame it. Throughout these interviews, it is clear that he is out of his depth, discussing political issues and terminology with the confidence of someone cramming new information before the start of an exam. It goes to show that the gossip bros may know how to unsettle thin-skinned celebrities, but they cannot, for example, outfox an Nhlanhla Lux whose calm demeanor, deft oratory skills, and undeniable charisma left MacG and Sol as awestruck as a group of school children seeing a lion for the first time at the zoo.

On the other hand, The Hustlers Corner is the grown-up's answer to the more juvenile stylings of Podcast and Chill. Hosted by DJ Sbu and Penuel The Black Pen (a self-proclaimed cult leader and founder of the religion "Penuelism"), the format for this podcast takes on a more measured tone, with interviews that are better researched and more level-headed. As a self-described billionaire, cryptocurrency enthusiast, energy drink salesman, and veteran of the broadcasting and entertainment industry, DJ Sbu's nonstop pursuit of self-improvement has positioned him as celebrity who is "rooting for everybody black," so long as they make him rich. With a resume that boasts a list of business ventures, countless motivational talks and self-help books titled *Billionaires Under Construction: The Mindset of an Entrepreneur* and *The Art of Hustling: Sell or Surrender*, it was only natural for him to venture into podcasting in late 2019. While his subscription numbers are sitting at 135,000, a significant lag behind MacG and company, his decision to migrate Virtual Mkhukhu, the new title given to the podcast, to its own channel by 2023 proves that as always, Sbu means business.

He may take himself very seriously, but Sbu still indulges in the class-clown humor that made him a beloved figure in music. The Hustlers Corner has moments of fun, cheekiness, and levity, displayed in an episode with writer, broadcaster and adult debate champion Eusebius McKaiser, where he banters with Sbu over his choice of outfit and scent, as if they are two high school friends meeting at a reunion. In addition, Sbu's conversations with the politicians and political figures are a little more substantive than those on Podcast and Chill. He refuses to discriminate

when it comes to the politics of the guests, choosing members from across the ideological spectrum. Take, for example, his meeting of the minds with deputy CEO of pro-Afrikaner “civil rights” group, AfriForum, Ernst Roets. Though Sbu questions Roets over the idea of white genocide, the use of the apartheid flag and whether he believes apartheid was a crime against humanity, he manages not to be combative. It was something that was praised in the video’s YouTube comments but after some thought, it seemed to meet the low bar for political interviews in South Africa. At this stage of our nearly 30-year democracy, it is astounding that we are still congratulating a media personality for posing basic questions to an organization that advances false information about the murders of white farmers, or celebrates memorabilia from a brutal, racist regime. Roets was complimentary of the interview on Twitter, which should not surprise anyone who has paid attention to AfriForum’s strategic rebranding over the last three years. This period has seen the organization morph from a small network of Afrikaners devoted to their own interests, to a so-called advocacy group purporting to care for the lives of all South Africans, particularly if they are poor and black. With their appearance on The Hustlers Corner, support of impoverished communities demanding service delivery from dysfunctional municipalities, and provision of legal counsel in the reopened murder case of beloved Bafana Bafana goalkeeper Senzo Meyiwa, AfriForum’s racial pandering appears to betray their larger political ambitions. This requires rigorous scrutiny and challenge from our media class, especially at a time when the general sense of hopelessness and nihilism in our country could be taken advantage of by opportunistic, well-organized, and monied vigilantes.

In an episode with Duduzane Zuma, the young son of former President Jacob Zuma, in which he makes yet another announcement about his intention to run for president, it becomes clear that The Hustlers Corner is a platform for self-promotion. This makes it a perfect fit for South Africa’s burgeoning online personal development market, where many black men seek advice on romantic relationships, financial security, career progression, and politics. Luckily for Sbu, his achievements have provided him a foothold in this space, which has given careers to disgraced “self-made millionaire” Vusi Thembekwayo and former sock merchant Sibusiso “Skinny Sbu” Ngwenya. While these men have been plagued by personal scandals and skepticism about the financial health of their businesses, Sbu has been left unscathed by his questionable handling of singer Zahara’s career, as well as the allegations that he cheated artists on his record label of their earnings. Some years ago, men like Sbu would have been called hoteps who trafficked in a goofy performance of Pan-Africanism associated with Dr Umar Johnson and Louis Farrakhan in the US. But in an interview with avid anti-communist Herman Mashaba of Action SA (who is a former DA leader), Sbu renounced any affiliation with ideology, advocating for a system which does away with government. In other words, Sbu is now a “non-ideological” hotep, who also believes in capitalism.

Podcast and Chill and The Hustlers Corner should not shoulder the responsibilities of journalism. But their growing influence raises questions about the role they will play in the run-

up to the 2024 general elections in South Africa. While political parties might be leery of buying the support of someone as unpredictable as MacG, Sbu understands the interplay between politics and product, having shilled his MoFaya energy drink at rallies of the ruling ANC, and participated in the party's star-studded Siyanqoba Rally at Ellis Park ahead of the local elections in 2019. For a media landscape that has been skeletonized by political interference, dubious foreign benefactors, mass retrenchments, and a global failure to find a viable financial model for journalism, it is critical that the rise of these podcasters-turned-thought leaders does not become a substitute for the principled reporting, interviewing and analysis that keeps the powers that be in check.

About the Author

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