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Bon Appétit's It's Alive With Brad on YouTube: a Postmodern Turn
in Digital Lifestyle Journalism

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Introduction

Condé Nast is a major player in the world of lifestyle journalism, owning the likes of *Vogue*, *The New Yorker*, *Vanity Fair*, and *Bon Appétit*. The company was started over a hundred years ago, and has been promoting elite and exclusionary modes of social distinction (Bourdieu 2007) ever since. But things have changed, as the media giant previously known as an arbiter of elite taste is now making YouTube videos, a far cry from its usual elitism. Previously thought of as a repository for videos or as a niche for gamers (Zoia 2014) and DIY enthusiasts (Wolf 2016), people's perception of YouTube and its role in the media ecosystem is shifting.

Bon Appétit has a YouTube channel, launched by Condé Nast (CN) in 2012. Its style revolves around informal food tutorials, and most of its videos are set and shot in Condé Nast's

test kitchen at Rockefeller Center in New York City. The channel is led by hosts with a strong on-camera presence, who work on specific series. Most notable hosts include Claire Saffitz from *Gourmet Makes*, *BA's Baking School*, *Making Perfect*, and Brad Leone from *It's Alive With Brad*, which is the focus of this essay. Beyond his current role as a video host, Brad is also described as a former food editor, kitchen assistant, and kitchen manager on the BA website. *It's Alive With Brad (IAWB)* aired its first episode in 2016, and it released its 100th episode in March 2022. The show focuses on Brad as he “teaches” and experiments with fermentation.

CN launched the *Bon Appétit (BA)* channel when YouTube had already cemented its place in the digital media market. There, it had to operate under a new set of norms, as the audience and the means of dissemination were drastically different. Otherwise put, CN had to change its approach to appear less elitist. Through *BA's* YouTube channel, Condé Nast now addresses a different audience in a different manner, which results in a shift of tone as they transitioned online. *BA* now sits at the intersection between digital and lifestyle journalism, and exemplifies a “postmodern turn” in journalism.

As Laprade (2020) documents, CN settled onto YouTube following the platform's 2011 Original Channel Initiative, which aimed to draw existing celebrities and established entities into the online community. Although *BA* was not directly involved in the Original Channel Initiative, *Vogue* was, and *BA* joined with its own channel a year later. This goes to show that although *BA* releases videos on YouTube, its hosts cannot be called “YouTubers” due to the scale of the organization they represent. As Laprade (2020) summarizes: “YouTube is now inhabited by two opposing factions—the original amateur content creators and the celebrity-turned-vloggers that YouTube has brought on” (7). While *It's Alive* may convey a sense of spontaneous randomness, *BA's* editors are aware of the zeitgeist of deprofessionalization, and

this randomness is meticulously deployed to appeal to mass audiences. This illustrates a shift in the world of digital and lifestyle journalism. More precisely, as CN shifted to the online platform, its target audience and mode of social distinction changed as well.

BA's case exemplifies how the rise of digital lifestyle journalism (in this case about food) can be understood as part of a postmodern turn in journalism. I argue that YouTube as a postmodern digital space is one where amateurs brand themselves as professionals to appear legitimate, and professionals brand themselves as amateurs to appear relatable. By offering an informal creative space which was never intended to conform with traditional journalistic norms, YouTube now fills the needs of audiences and content creators alike (which significantly overlap), and has fostered the next era of lifestyle journalism.

This work draws on elements from Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to provide an informed case study of *Bon Appétit's It's Alive With Brad*. As themes and tropes are recurring throughout the series, I selected five notable episodes for this analysis. I offer an in-depth analysis of Brad's episodes covering Kombucha (S1E1), Koji (S1E6), and Pastrami (from April 4, 2022). I also include two minor episodes, one titled "Brad Makes Mistakes" (S1E13), and a now-deleted video from January 2021 in which Brad cans seafood using improper safety procedures. I explore these episodes in varying manners to convey different elements of my analysis. For instance, my study of the Kombucha episode serves to identify major tropes and themes of the series, and offers an analysis of amateur authority on YouTube. Conversely, I use the Pastrami episode to illustrate the potential pitfalls of the journalist-influencer (such as safety), and use the Koji episode to address the use of disclaimers when it comes to such concerns.

Research goals and approach

Journalism is a complex and varied field, and that what is commonly known as being worthy of critical attention is often based on arbitrary hierarchies which are disconnected from content which people consume and identify with. Lifestyle journalism is a serious endeavor, and even YouTube videos can play a part in a healthy media ecosystem, especially in the postmodern era. I seek to illustrate how Brad's colloquial mannerisms and his emphasis of mistakes, improvisations, and customization, while seemingly insignificant, represent a shift from modernist journalism in its lack of a claim to expert authority, illustrative of how the digital revolution is affecting media environments and public discourse.

In my analysis of digital lifestyle journalism, I use *BA*'s presence on YouTube as a case study to inform my exploration of late modern or post-industrial media environments. I hope to demonstrate how postmodernism as frame of thought can still be relevant and helpful in explaining late modern audience behavior and media organization. While I am critical of many aspects of *Bon Appétit*'s management philosophy and find issue with media giants emulating aesthetics of labor for financial benefit, I nonetheless hold YouTube as a platform in high regard, and have experienced its many benefits first-hand. Spending time on the platform has allowed me to pursue many varying and deep-lasting interests, such as Western and Japanese calligraphy, urban sketching, watercolor technique, harmonica, and Esperanto. Vloggers sharing their thoughts have allowed me to feel connected to a community of peers which have gone through similar struggles. YouTube taught me how to tie a tie as a young man, and taught me how to cook and care for myself as a young adult away from home.

The digital (especially video) era fosters the prominence of lifestyle journalism, in which audiences feel more closely related and closer to their journalists, and high and low brow forms

of journalism are no longer segregated. This research illustrates the channel's popularity beyond "people just like Brad" in asking: "why do people like Brad (and *BA*) so much?" I argue audiences desire a closer relationship with their journalists, which includes a portrayal which humanizes and demystifies the journalist while making the audience feel engaged and represented. On YouTube, having a journalist audiences can identify with helps people navigate the mores of the sub-cultures they wish to integrate in. YouTubers tend not to appeal to the widest possible audience, and instead focus on a niche crowd of like-minded people to serve their interests more effectively. YouTube's multiplicity means there is no "default journalist" as was the case in the Cronkite era, and both audiences and content creators choose who they wish to follow or work for. This wide choice means that audiences follow vloggers based on their own consent, paving the way to a more personal relationship.

YouTube's history as user-centered and its prevailing spirit of experimentation is what allowed such haphazard content as *It's Alive* to flourish, unimpeded by strict and elitist representational norms. As Brad's style would not be fully realized on other traditional media, I ask if there is something unique about YouTube as a media platform operating in a post-industrial environment that satisfies audience needs and foster the development of such content. In other words, this is also a sociological inquiry into needs and trends shaping digital lifestyle journalism, or a discussion of which cultural forces are shaping the digital transition and affecting journalistic conventions and public discourse.

Critical Discourse Analysis

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is an interdisciplinary framework consisting in uncovering oppressive structures of power through deconstruction. In this way, it is postmodern

due to its attempt to reveal cognitive bias. In other words, I use elements from Critical Discourse Analysis's social directive to balance postmodernism's tendency toward deconstruction for deconstruction's sake.

Food studies is an interdisciplinary field, and is well suited to be studied alongside postmodernism, as the branch's interdisciplinarity was influenced by it: "The interdisciplinary focus ... became the dominant trend in many food societies and journals by the 1990s. [...]. Instead of disciplinary divide, new focal points appeared behind certain theoretical debates, historical processes, and trends in the food system. In the 1980s and 1990s, Atkins and Bowler (2001) classified contributions to this interdisciplinary field into categories such as historical, cultural and sociological, post-modern and post-structuralist, and food system approaches" (Winson et al. 2017, 6). Not only is postmodernism conceptually linked to food studies, but it can also be seen as fitting within the "critical paradigm", of which CDA is a part: "Many people view postmodern as part of a critical paradigm. In this perspective postmodern social theories are born of the critical paradigm" (Iskandar 2019, 80).

This piece leans on Norman Fairclough's (1992) three-dimensional model, in which a text is analyzed along with discursive and social practices: "Discursive practices —through which texts are produced (created) and consumed (received and interpreted)—are viewed as an important form of social practice which contributes to the constitution of the social world including social identities and social relations. It is partly through discursive practices in everyday life (processes of text production and consumption) that social and cultural reproduction and change take place." (Jørgensen and Phillips 2011, 2). Otherwise put, the content we create and consume reflects and constructs our values, and determines how we define ourselves and in relation to others. Discourse and ideology are omnipresent in language, and so

thus is power. Even cooking videos on YouTube reflect and have the influence to maintain and/or alter power relations. Using elements from CDA, this work attempts to answer the following questions to obtain a better understanding of which cultural forces are guiding public discourse:

Research Questions

- (1) What discursive strategies has *BA* used to frame itself in *It's Alive with Brad*?
- (2) How can this be understood within the socio-discursive context of digital lifestyle / postmodern journalism in our post-industrial media environment?

This research is a critical case study looking at select episodes from *It's Alive with Brad*. Through the use of examples, this piece looks at how tone, mood and atmosphere are deployed in *It's Alive with Brad* across different levels of communication to make the argument that CN uses *BA* as a relatable branch of their portfolio to frame itself as amateur-driven and appeal to the masses, employing progressive democratic ideology and a postmodern discourse. This change of discursive strategy reflects a cultural shift in audience preferences and representative journalistic norms, which was intensified through the move to digital platforms. This shift is illustrative of digital lifestyle journalism's postmodern characteristics (as defined by Wahl-Jorgensen and Hanusch), or a "demotic turn" as defined by Graeme (2006).

The series framing itself as amateur through its emphasis on mistakes, personalization and improvisation reflects a change in modality, which in this case refers to the degree of certainty or authority Brad displays (or doesn't). Brad's subjective modality is unrepresentative of traditional media: "...the mass media often present interpretations as if they were facts, partly by using categorical modalities and partly by choosing objective rather than subjective

modalities [...] The media's use of categorical, objective modalities both reflects and reinforces their authority" (Jørgensen and Phillips 2011, 21). This analysis offers an academic perspective of Brad's series from a critical perspective, looking at how Brad's interaction with the audience, his approach to food, and the atmosphere he creates reflects a subjective modality, characteristic of the postmodern turn in journalism. This includes a wide qualitative analysis, including of Brad's accent and speech patterns, the setting and shooting of the videos, as well as post-production effects and edits. This section proceeds largely through the use of examples, as such non-linguistic elements are difficult to quantify. But this removes nothing from their relevance, as tone, mood and atmosphere reflect modality and are part of communicative events, and thus, discourse.

Lifestyle and food journalism

Journalism is a fragmented field, as can be observed in its separation of "hard" and "soft" news. Hard news refers to coverage of war, immigration, politics, natural disasters, employment, and other areas deemed "serious" enough to make it onto the first half of the 9 o'clock news. In not so many words, lifestyle journalism is almost everything else; it is a subset of journalism which deals with the mundane aspects of everyday life, often in relation to consumption. Folker Hanusch, one of the foremost experts on lifestyle journalism, defines this news genre as "the journalistic coverage of the expressive values and practices that help create and signify a specific identity within the realm of consumption and everyday life ... Typical sub-genres of lifestyle journalism that could therefore be studied include: travel; fashion and beauty; health, wellness and fitness; food, cuisine and cooking; living and gardening; parenting and family; people and celebrity; and personal technology" (Hanusch 2017, 4).

Kimberly Wilmot Voss is a food scholar specializing in the intersections of women's rights and food writing. She found that food writing and lifestyle journalism began with the women's pages, which were at their most popular in the post-war era. Elizabeth David, Jeanne Voltz, and Jane Grigson were three of the most prominent examples of early women's writers' contributions to the field (Jones & Taylor 2001) (Voss 2012) (Fusté Forné 2017, 21, 49). Worker shortages during the second world war made it strenuous to apply traditional gendered divisions of labor during that time, leading society to reluctantly allow women to work in stations typically reserved for men. But as the war ended, so too did the conditions which led to women's involvement in the public sphere, and women were once again relegated to the food sections. Although it seemed women would only be able to cover lifestyle journalism, this vacuum and mainstream disinterest gave these new professionals the freedom to experiment and innovate (Voss 2012, 69).

Even among lifestyle journalism, an already underappreciated domain, the study of food largely stands out in its exclusion from the renewed academic interest in its parent field: "Conversely, academic interest on food journalism has been scarce in comparison to other journalistic forms related to leisure and lifestyle" (Jones and Taylor 2013, 97). Among the authors who have conducted research on the analysis of gastronomy contents and food journalism, the following must be noted: Acosta (2011), Ferguson (1998), Fernández and Aguirregoitia (2017), Fusté and Masip (2013), Jones and Taylor (2013), Naulin (2015), Navarro and Acosta (2012), Sánchez (2008, 2011), Voss (2012) or Urroz (2008)" (Fusté-Forné 6, 7). As noted, food journalism takes its historical roots in the women's pages, and alongside it, the domestic sphere. This traditional gendered segregation of the private and public has caused food journalism to be associated with the domestic (feminine), which contributes to its general

historical lack of mainstream unpopularity. Thankfully, this binary division has been eroding. As per Hanusch, this is the first of three principal factors behind lifestyle journalism's growing popularity, what he refers to as the process of "detraditionalization" in *Journalistic Roles and Everyday Life* (the other two being an emphasis on self-expression, and increased media presence in people's daily lives) (2017, 193-4). All three factors Hanusch attributes to the rise of lifestyle journalism can be seen as evidence of postmodernism.

The Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU), the research division of The Economist, documents the rise of the internet in food journalism:

Chaotic and democratic, readers got instant, crowd-sourced reviews of wherever they were tempted to eat, rather than waiting for a weekly column and then rushing for reservations. Review websites like TripAdvisor surged in popularity. [...] The collapse in print advertising revenue, in part due to the growth of online ads, saw food websites with eye-grabbing rankings and listicles hasten the decline of august publications like Condé Nast's *Gourmet* magazine (1940-2009).¹

Review sites illustrate the fundamentally diverse nature of food journalism, as they offer a more limited, specialized viewpoint on a commercialized activity. I argue such platforms are, if not journalism outright, functionally journalistic, as they help people justify their food preferences (or as is often the case on Yelp, aversions) and unite communities in providing a service that is of overall interest to the general population. Restaurants also function as institutions which employ and reproduce discourse, and thus have high symbolic value in the public arena. To use Norman Fairclough's terminology, although review sites and YouTube videos may not be hard journalism, such content remains a communicative event which leads to social practice, and is therefore of relevance. In that it is limiting gatekeeping on culinary criticism and that it functions as an "organized, collaborative intelligence," (Kovach and Rosenstiel; 32: 2021) (or functions as part of one), review sites are a postindustrial,

counterhegemonic development to food journalism (despite being operated by tech companies). In giving ordinary people a chance to participate in public discourse, it can also be linked to participatory (lifestyle) journalism. Although review sites are not the focus of this study, YouTube works in much the same manner in allowing almost anyone the chance to post, comment, and generally participate in online communities they wish to integrate.

Background on Postmodernism

Postmodernism differs from its predecessor in its ontological assumptions, namely, the existence of an independent reality. The approach is characterized by deconstruction and relativism, “by which I mean the view that truth itself is always relative to the differing standpoints and predisposing intellectual frameworks of the judging subject” (Butler 2002, 16). This has several implications for the journalistic field. Postmodernism does not necessarily assert that our physical reality does not exist, but that it only gains meaning through discourse, thus highlighting the importance of self-awareness in the analysis of public discourse. This has implications for the role of the journalist, as it challenges the “protocol of pretended supra-political objectivity” (Said 1978, 18), an essential part of western journalistic identity since its inception (Kovach and Rosenstiel 2021, 33, 51). While this paradigm shift has caused some disturbances in the field, such as a destabilizing of journalists’ role perceptions and unprecedented loss of revenue (Kovach and Rosenstiel 2015, 331-2), (Usher 2016, 5-9), I argue it is far from the system collapse others have come to view it. I support Kovach and Rosenstiel on their point that “the end of the press’s monopoly over mediating information to the public offers the opportunity to elevate the quality of journalism we receive, not weaken it” (Kovach and Rosenstiel 2021, 26). The loss of objectivity means that journalists are now just one part of an “organized collaborative intelligence” (29). This public-oriented conception of journalism

echoes postmodernism's goal of perspectival pluralism, as thus defined: "When pluralism is invoked, the assumption is that alternative perspectives are being permitted into the discourse, displacing the dominant hegemony. In the most basic sense, pluralism is an acknowledgement of alternatives so that additional perspectives have the possibility of being understood" (Chin 1989, 164). From a postmodern view, journalistic loss of objectivity is a positive development, as this conception of objectivity is rooted in metanarratives. This would lead the way for counter-hegemonic voices to appear, bringing us one step closer to such collective "understanding" rather than "truth."

Self-reflexivity is a core principle of postmodernism, and a key feature of *It's Alive with Brad*. Self-awareness is a key strength in the appeal of bloggers, participatory journalists, and critical journalists, as the erosion of credibility is met with new standards. Journalists can be unreliable narrators, and food journalists are no exception. But framing them as narrators is valuable in itself, and highlights the fact that they are constructing a narrative like any other: "Although the traditional journalist reflexively denies he is anything but a mirror reflecting reality, there is nothing shameful about this effort. On the contrary, admitting there is work involved puts him on a surer footing. It guarantees that he will not take his perceptions for granted" (Arena 2000, 4). The rise of personality-based content, the emphasis on kitchen mistakes, and elements of self-reflexivity in *It's Alive with Brad* show a postmodern turn in journalistic culture. In an exploration of blogs as online participatory journalism during the Iraq War, Wall (2005) documents the body of research on postmodern journalism as an academic discipline. We notice here that this criticism of postmodernism can be linked to those usually made against lifestyle journalism generally.

Some observers see certain postmodern characteristics embodied in negative trends in journalism, connecting it to the increasingly blurry boundaries between news and

entertainment and the overall celebration of commercial culture (Hartley, 1996). Yet others have attempted to flesh out a description of postmodern journalism that embodies more positive values. Ettema (1994) suggests postmodern journalism would consist of small, local stories about people that convey human suffering and would reject a meta-narrative. With the audience engaged in actively consuming stories and creating new meanings, postmodernity would give rise to non-official voices and versions of events. Likewise, Moore (1998) suggests that postmodern journalism would consist of small, localized stories; focus on suffering; provide less emphasis on objective data-gathering and rational analysis; and reject a meta-narrative. Davis (1996) identified postmodern journalism as more active engagement on the part of journalists, providing less emphasis on objective data-gathering and rational analysis. (Wall 2005, 158)

Although postmodernism came under heavy fire in the so-called 1990s "Science Wars" (Butler 2002, 37-43), and has gradually fallen out of favor (Gradinaru 2013, 429), some calling it a "fad" (Arena 2000, 34), I believe the movement still has much to offer in the face of contemporary issues.

Bon Appétit on YouTube as a Postmodern and Postindustrial development

I describe *BA*'s presence and success on YouTube as part of a "postmodern turn" in the world of digital journalism. This research explores postmodern changes in food journalism, specifically, in *Bon Appétit* as it moved to an online format, which itself represents a postmodern change to journalistic means of production.

As has been extensively documented (Kovach and Rosenstiel 2015, 331-2; Usher 2016, 5-9; McChesney 2011; Lule 2016, 580-5) the rise of the internet has led to an existential crisis for journalism's business model, which had been financially sheltered thanks to its near monopoly on advertising. The move to online formats made the legacy industry lose its advantage of high startup costs and low competition through consolidation. Unprecedented loss of revenue, coupled with the rise of the post-truth era (Tischauer and Benn 2019, 131) has led to

an existential crisis in the post-industrializing field. This has led legacy media to market to audiences and with technologies they would never had considered before, as is illustrated by Condé Nast's dramatic turn. Advertisements in food journalism have historically been marketed to luxury audiences, but the wide reach of online platform has suddenly made mass market audiences desirable, leading to a stark marketing shift (Johnston & Baumann 2015, 26)

Today's journalism as a whole can be thought of as postmodern in several ways. Dr. Karin Wahl-Jorgensen is one of the few academics studying the intersection between postmodernism and journalism. The digital, postmodern era is fragmented, and this has opened the door for many alternative narratives to enter public discourse, which in turn, affects the conventions of news genres: "The changes occasioned by technological transformations could be understood as a postmodern form of journalism because they have destabilized conventional (a) physical, stylistic and genre distinctions; (b) differentiations between amateur and professional content, and (c) distinctions around the truth value of objective versus emotional content" (Wahl-Jorgensen 2016, 16). Indeed, *It's Alive with Brad* displays these three characteristics:

That this interaction is mediated through YouTube affects the product, as for example, YouTube videos are likely to be at least 10 minutes long (given that this is the length requirement to qualify for monetization from YouTube ads), and audiences are used to content with a colloquial tone, from non-experts (Laprade 2020, 11). The series, although professionally produced, frames itself as amateur content. Brad's colloquial mannerisms and his emphasis of mistakes, improvisations, and customization creates a personal atmosphere that, while seemingly insignificant, represents a shift from modernist journalism in its lack of a claim to expert authority: "Instead, they enable a particular form of subjective journalism by encouraging more personal forms of story-telling, based on the lived experience of 'ordinary people'" (Wahl-

Jorgensen 2016, 17). Note the similarities between what Hanusch attributes the rise of lifestyle journalism (detraditionalization, emphasis on self-expression, and increased media presence in people's daily lives) and Wahl-Jorgensen's understanding of postmodern journalism.

I argue that YouTube as a postmodern digital space is one where amateurs can brand themselves as professionals to appear legitimate, and professionals brand themselves as amateurs to appear relatable. As Kniazevaly and Venkatesh (2007) note: "The age of postmodernism also becomes the age of spectacle for providing an environment that artistically combines high art and mundane consumption" (431). As is exemplified by the case of *BA*, YouTube (and third-party digital platforms) is thus also a space where the high-brow and low-brow intermingle, illustrating the characteristic postmodern loss of hierarchical distinction.

Wahl-Jorgensen illustrates how journalism's move to internet platforms, especially the ones in which audiences and previously disempowered groups now have a greater role in the news-making process, can be conceived of as a postmodern development: "A second and closely related transformation pertains to the blurring of the line between audiences and producers of media content, and the corresponding increase in the role of the audiences in participating in the generation this content. These developments have variously been referred to as the rise of "participatory journalism," "citizen journalism" or "produsage"" (Wahl-Jorgensen 2016, 16). To be clear, the move to online platforms gave way to alternative narratives, but the internet is far from the free and fair libertarian cyberpunk ideal it is sometimes characterized as, and its democratizing possibilities can sometimes be overstated (Iskandar 2019). But indeed, access to a common platform evens out the playing field in a major way. YouTube's educational content is vast, and many channels run by individuals or small groups release content of remarkable quality, with far more attention paid to detail and video editing than would be expected from

amateurs, to the point where jokes about how one attends “YouTube University” are common place, and I proudly include myself among its graduates. *It’s Alive* is a novel hybrid incarnation between YouTube educational videos such as those of John Green and the food journalism found in the *Bon Appétit* magazine. Examining the history and methods of pioneers of YouTube content is worthwhile to help us understand some of the rationale used in producing *It’s Alive*.

YouTube’s Aesthetics of labor:

I begin my analysis of the videos not with Brad or food journalism, but with the thoughts of the genuine YouTuber Tom Scott on the aesthetics of his platform. Independent YouTubers often address their experience of being a YouTuber, and share with their audiences some of the process which goes into making clickable videos. This is not the case with *It’s Alive*, which despite its emphasis on self-reflexivity, displays little of the pre- and post-production process. This can be attributed to the fact that, as illustrated, Brad is not a genuine YouTuber, unlike Tom Scott or John Green. I use the term “YouTube content creator” for Brad and such professional amateurs to distinguish from genuine “YouTubers”, who are native (or almost) to the platform, maintain a small team of volunteers, or rely on crowdfunding to maintain financial viability.

Scott makes short educational videos on a wide range of topics, and has almost 5.5 million subscribers to his self-titled channel. In “Why do YouTubers clap at the start of videos?”, Scott shares his thoughts on the conventions proper to the YouTube platform. He explains that because the microphones built into the camera used for recording the video produce substandard audio, creators often record a separate mic attached to their shirt, to then synch the audio and video later. Simply, the clap simplifies the editing process and helps synchronize audio and video, and serves the same function a clapperboard does on professional sets: “If the

production's got a high budget, they might use a clapperboard instead" (Scott 2:00). But Scott points out that creators could just as easily edit that part out, and then comments on this convention:

Why do we leave a bit of technical junk in the video? Why do I set up a really nice shot and then ruin it by showing the setup part, letting my camera fuzz with the autofocus, and make the whole video... worse? Well, I can't speak for everyone, but my reason is: it sets the audience's expectations, and it makes it feel more authentic. When I'm filming on my own with a static camera, it can sometimes look like I'm just stood in front of a green screen. But clapping, walking into the frame, letting the focus settle, showing that behind the scenes moment, it proves I'm here, it makes me seem more trustworthy. For someone vlogging from their bedroom, keeping those claps and the preparation in, letting the audience see a little bit of the slip-ups and how it's made... it helps make a connection, it helps make them relatable.
(Scott 2:22-2:58)

Scott makes the argument that YouTube creators leave certain imperfections to foster closeness to their audience, making them seem more trustworthy and relatable. That creators' choice to leave and showcase such details is noteworthy. This convention is both a link to traditional or established media because it is a "professional" motion, but is distinct because of the choice to use hands instead of a clapperboard. In that sense, the clap at the beginning of videos is a perfect representation of YouTube aesthetics of "DIY" or do it yourself. YouTube has long been ruled by thousands upon thousands of small channels run mostly by independent creators, and this demotic aspect of its history has influenced audiovisual conventions to the point that even companies with the resources to release professional-looking content choose not to.

I choose to start my analysis with Scott instead of Brad because, although my analysis is of food journalism on YouTube, much of my analysis can be applied more broadly to that of digital media environments. As can be seen in the beginning of the Pastrami episode, *It's Alive* features a clapperboard (signifying professionalism). Although Brad's series does not feature this

clap, its spirit is very much present. That *BA*'s editors kept the clapperboard clip from the beginning of a take illustrates how they are trying to give the show a DIY aesthetic.

Hyperreality, the framing of the amateur, and the label of YouTuber

In her study titled “YouTube: Theater for Gen Z’s Hyperreality”, Marina E. Laprade offers insight into the construction of fame on the YouTube platform. In her analysis of famous YouTubers David Dobrik and Jake Paul, Laprade makes the argument that norms of fame on the internet is evidence of the hyperreal in the way it has normalized the extraordinary. She states: “A hyperreality can be understood as an augmented and ideal version of one’s self and life. It is achieved through a carefully calculated performance despite its primary goal of persuading viewers to believe otherwise. And although the performance straddles the boundary between the authentic and the artificial, it has become the archetypal model for success in the new, burgeoning influencer economy” (Laprade 2020, 4). I apply Laprade’s analysis to my understanding of Brad’s character as one which exemplifies this meticulously crafted demotic sensibility: an influencer. Consequently, my analysis of Brad’s character can provide insight into our current values of fame, and our current construction of the amateur or ordinary in this era of personality-based content.

This is demonstrated in my analysis of the series’ tropes and visual themes which were developed by Vincent Scott and carried out by Matt Hunziker. As I illustrate below, although qualified professionals in their own right, Scott and Hunziker gave the series a purposefully goofy and haphazard atmosphere. Alan Kirby’s “Digimodernism: How New Technologies Dismantle the Postmodern and Reconfigure Our Culture” gives us insight into why. Kirby demonstrates that the internet is imbued with a culture of experimentation and cyberpunk

idealism, which makes it favor amateur aesthetics over professional ones. YouTube emerged out of Web 2.0, which made navigating sites more intuitive and user-centered, leading to the rise of online participatory culture (Laprade 2020, 26). The platform allows individuals to easily create their own channels and compete equally with others in a rhizomatic web of communication, as opposed to the arborescent structures of authority seen at *BA* (Deleuze and Guattari 1988). As Kirby illustrates, digital natives value authenticity above all else, and amateurishness allows distinction from prefabricated corporate aesthetics: ““Amateurishness” has always been a back-construction of Hollywood’s “professional” conceptions of expertise, a set of characteristics identifiable as merely the polar opposites of studio techniques: cheap stock, handheld cameras that shake and wobble, uneven sound, overlong shots, blurring, offbeam framing, the staginess of untrained actors, and so on” (Kirby 2009, 120). Although it is professionally produced, the approach to filming and editing the *It’s Alive* series reflects this amateur aesthetic, emblematic of the postmodern turn. However, I argue the scale of *BA*’s organization and the financial support of its parent company disqualify Brad from being appropriately called a “genuine YouTuber”.

This does not mean that any YouTube channel run by more than one person is not genuine; John Green, the founder of the legendary channel Crash Course, is the godfather of YouTube educational content and the gold standard of YouTube professionalism from an amateur perspective. He now has a sizeable team by his side, yet remains distinct from such YouTube content creators as Brad. The channel now features educational series on such a wide array of topics as chemistry, black history, economics, astronomy, government, sociology, intellectual property, film history and production, mythology, computer science, and many more.

Crash Course began its journey in 2007 with John and Hank Green creating informal and educational videos in their spare time. Whereas this later formed into Crash Course, the channel

and its creators are native to the YouTube medium. This is not the case for *BA*, which “originated as a liquor store giveaway 66 years ago” (Hanson). Furthermore, *BA* offers far too much financial backing for its hosts to be called “YouTubers”, while genuine YouTubers such as John Green use the crowdfunding platforms such as Patreon. In December 2018, the channel released a video titled “A History of Crash Course”, in which John Green, his brother Hank, and several other members of the Crash Course and Thought Café teams recount the experience of starting the channel and what it takes to keep it running. Nick Jenkins, Senior Producer and Director at Crash Course, recounts how YouTubers’ unique financial model allows for a direct connection with audiences: “obviously we want crash course to continue, we want to keep making educational content, but we also wanna know what’s working and what’s not working. Patreon allows us to do that, it allows us to have a much more immediate contact with people who really care about us and who really care about what we’re gonna be doing” (Crash Course 15:48-58). It is worth noting that this is a self-published video, which is as much a history of Crash Course as an invitation to contribute via Patreon, but it nonetheless illustrates the benefits of crowdfunding, which helps us understand how *BA* is fundamentally different from such digitally native content as Crash Course. In a moment when he thanks the audience, John Green states: “it’s not an exaggeration to say that crash would not exist without the people who support us on Patreon. We never would’ve made it to this moment” (16:00-05). This is something often repeated by genuine YouTubers, but will never be uttered by Brad, as *Bon Appétit* noticeably does not have a patreon, and does not directly rely on crowdfunding to survive.

Context on *Bon Appétit*'s staff and scandals

It's Alive came out at a time where clean and well-produced videos were the norm at *BA*, and Brad's early recorded attempts followed this style. According to an article by Forbes, only when Vincent "Vinny" Cross got involved with production did Brad receive the green light for *It's Alive*, bringing method to Brad's madness: "Not only did he capture Leone's delightfully silly energy, curiosity, and culinary know-how, but Cross added sarcastic fourth-wall breaks, pop-up video style graphics and weird camera angles. It worked. Before long, the show had a following" (Saxe). Vinny left *Bon Appétit* in 2019 to work for the famous food YouTube channel *Binging with Babish*. Despite his departure, Vinny's style for *It's Alive* remained, and was carried out by Matt "Hunzi" Hunziker until he too left the company in October 2022. Hunziker was famously suspended from June to August 2020, allegedly for social media posts in which he denounced Condé Nast's treatment of people of color, although the company cited internal concerns, according to business insider (Premack). Hunziker was instrumental in the formation of the Condé Nast Union, and left a few months after its creation.

Adam Rapoport, the editor in chief of *Bon Appétit* at the time of *It's Alive*'s initial release, has also left the company. Following the killing of George Floyd in May 2020, *BA* released social media posts showing support of people of color. But the posts had an adverse effect, as many people (including some who worked with *BA*) denounced the way in which *BA* management underrepresented and under-remunerated people of color. Rapoport came especially under fire, with many asking for his resignation. This tension climaxed on June 8th, as a photo of Rapoport and his girlfriend in brownface surfaced on social media. Rapoport handed in his resignation later that day, but the controversy did not leave with him: "Rapoport's resignation did not stop the discussion around *Bon Appétit*'s culture and alleged discriminatory practices.

Other current and former *Bon Appétit* employees accused the magazine of having a toxic culture, along with gatekeeping video appearances by people of color” (O’Rourke (Ed.) 2021, 6).

What I hope to show with this context is that *It’s Alive*, *Bon Appétit*, and Condé Nast are not homogenous entities; they are staffed by people of varying backgrounds, skillsets, and ideologies. Not only that, but the *BA* staff is in constant flux, even more so after the departure of several hosts in August 2020, and the channel’s subsequent relaunch under the direction of a new editor in chief, Dawn Davis, two months later (Ellefson).

It’s Alive is the product of the collaboration of a multiplicity of entities. Leone, Scott, Hunziker and Rapoport all had a role to play in the creation of *It’s Alive*, as did many others, which makes it impossible to pinpoint a single discourse in the text. The series is not wholly any one thing; it is both constructive and problematic, fun and dangerous, innovative and regressive. While *It’s Alive* provides a free and fun resource for learning how to cook, the hyperreal representation of Brad’s character contributes to a construction of fame which can lull audiences into a false sense of security and closeness. This can lead to audiences becoming hurt from improper instructions, or feeling betrayed after a scandal such as the one which occurred at *BA*.

Brad Makes Kombucha

The following is an analysis of *It’s Alive*’s first episode, the one which launched Brad and *Bon Appétit* into stardom. Amateur content creators’ videos tend to change significantly over time, as they learn production skills, acquire new equipment, and find their creative style. That is not the case with *It’s Alive*, as it is a professional production. Consequently, the themes and tropes developed in this pilot (tvtropes.org) are recurring and relevant to the rest of the series, from Brad’s mispronunciations and haphazardness to playful edits and cameos.

This first episode is representative of the style and spirit of the rest of the series in its focus on Brad's character. This can be seen in a quote from Adam Rapoport (*Bon Appétit's* former editor in chief) as he recounts his experience when first watching the series: "I loved it immediately because it felt like we were just hanging out with Brad," Rapoport said of the show, "and as coworkers of Brad, we were always so amused and so enthralled by all things Brad" (O'Rourke (Ed.) 2021, 3). Indeed, the show is about Brad more than it is about the food.

Kombucha is a naturally effervescent tea drink with origins in Northeast China around 220 B.C. (Troitino). Its effervescence is the result of a double fermentation, during which sweetened tea is exposed to a Symbiotic Culture of Bacteria and Yeast (SCOBY), which has the appearance of a viscous jellyfish cap. The SCOBY then feeds on sugars in the tea, which sours the mixture, alters its flavor and color, and adds natural effervescence during the second fermentation. Both steps can take up to ten days each, depending on acidity, sweetness, and ambient temperature. The drink has gained mass popularity in the last ten years for its alleged probiotic health benefits, which led several kombucha-inspired videos from notable YouTube channels.

The first of such videos was released by the "Munchies" channel on May 4, 2016. It was hosted by Lisa Lov, and now has 1.9 million views. Pro Home Cooks released the second notable kombucha video on August 1 2016, and it now holds claim to a sizeable 3.4 million views, compared to 3.8 million for Brad's video published two months later. As Pro Home Cooks is a genuine amateur without formal financial or professional backing, these numbers highlight how YouTube is a space where amateurs can compete head-to-head with legacy companies. Joshua Weissman is another such successful amateur YouTubers, and although his

August 2018 kombucha video has fewer than a million views, his 6.98 million subscribers surpass *BA*'s 6.13 million.

The *It's Alive* video is set at the *Bon Appétit* recipe test kitchen, an open-concept stainless steel covered kitchen with several separate stations. The episode begins with a cold open introducing Brad as he is hunched down spilling kombucha while siphoning. The scene then cuts to him kneeling on the floor with paper towels cleaning up the mess:

BRAD: [while siphoning] And you really just want... [spill] oh god oh god oh god. Cut, Vin.

UNIDENTIFIED: What happened, Brad?

BRAD: F***ing tragedy over here.

UNIDENTIFIED: This your first time making kombucha, Brad?

BRAD: Sure looks like it.

[Smash cut, into theme]

(“Brad makes Kombucha” 00:01-15)

This introduction scene illustrates the appeal and pitfalls of Brad's approach: on the one hand, he shares the kombucha brewing method, and does so in an engaging manner. On the other hand, several signs point to the fact that he indeed *doesn't* know what he's doing, and is therefore potentially serving inaccurate, or at worst, hazardous instructions. For instance, when siphoning the kombucha to prepare it for its second fermentation (which gives it natural fizziness), Brad tells us of the SCOBY: “You don't wanna touch that with your hands. The bacteria in your hands is very bad.” The very next shot shows him sucking on the end of the tube before sticking it into the kombucha, exclaiming, “wamo bamo, right in there” (“Brad makes Kombucha” 5:45-5:52). The fermentation also took two and a half times longer than he expected (5:39). Brad frequently addresses such issues by saying he never claims to be an expert, but that is not entirely true. In an apology statement following his canned seafood episode, Brad published the following on his Instagram: “I *apologize* again and will do *better* as a *teacher* and

student of food”. Brad clearly sees and presents himself as a teacher, and if not explicitly an expert, claims to exercise a position with expert authority.

Furthermore, when Brad is listing what to use for a given recipe, ingredients and their proportions are displayed on a dark green chalkboard, with Brad’s face added onto the body of a cartoon teacher holding a pointing stick. Brad may never explicitly claim to be an expert, but he is frequently framed as a teacher, a position which conveys implied expertise.

Moments later when discussing sugar-water ratios, a bubble caption supposed to represent the audience’s point of view appears on screen, stating: “I didn’t come here to do math, Brad” (00:53). That the audience “isn’t here to do math” reinforces the idea that *It’s Alive* is less of food journalism and more entertainment for its own sake. This is also seen in the syntax of the titles, which shows how *It’s Alive* is personality-based content rather than “pure food journalism” which focuses on the food or the people making it. “Pure food journalism” does not necessarily exclude personality, but the journalist remains the frame for information, not the product themselves. For example, a look at The 24 Best Longform Food Stories of 2016 (Rosner) shows that use of the first person is quite common, but the focus is not as much on the host as is the case with Brad. “Brad” is always the subject, food is always the object. Although this video on YouTube is entitled “How to brew your own Kombucha with Brad”, on *BA*’s website it’s called “Brad makes Kombucha”, and that is the format that is used on YouTube the majority of the time.

Diction and tropes

The language Brad uses when making his instructions is reflective of a soft modality. Rather than giving a recipe, Brad tells us that we “could maybe” “probably” “try to” “if

possible” add “a little bit” “some” “a decent amount” of a certain ingredient (or another) and cook it “about” or “almost” at a certain temperature. He often ends his explanations with something like this: “And you can mix ’em too, you can really put anything in it” (“Brad makes Kombucha” 7:51). Such a modality is empowering to the viewer as it gives more space for personalization.

Brad’s malapropisms are often paired with caption humor drawing attention to the imperfection. On three occasions in this first episode, Brad’s mispronounces “water” and a caption is accordingly added: “one courdouve of wurder” (one quart of water) (00:40), “warder” (2:05), “wourder” (3:32). This becomes a running gag throughout the show. This first episode also gives us one of Brad’s famous malapropisms: towards the end of the process, with a thick New Jersey accent, he says: “So, yeah, like I said, ya’know, this ain’t rocket surgery, so I don’t really uh... I eyeball everything, you know. I’m not really big measure [person]” (7:34). As usual, his mistake is immortalized with a caption. Captions are frequently used throughout the episode, one time as Brad is siphoning kombucha to indicate that he has siphoned gas three times in his life (4:30), another to provide post-production commentary from Brad about his siphoning hose: “Update! “F*** these.” –Brad Leone” (9:28). The episode also features cameos from food editor Chris Morocco (3:45), Claire Saffitz (3:06), Andy Baraghani (2:29), Sue Li (2:44), and Adam Rapoport (3:51).

Brad Makes Mistakes

It’s Alive’s emphasis on Brad’s mistakes is most glaringly seen in the episode “Brad Makes Mistakes | It’s Alive Camping Outtakes” (S1E13). Released by popular demand from requests in the video comment section, the compilation video has no narrative and is an absurd

pastiche of Brad goofing off, complete with frequent smash cuts, and a non-sequitur featuring a Jimi Hendrix guitar solo. Absurdism is a major postmodern theme, and the *motus operandi* of *It's Alive*. Although all episodes are absurd to some degree, this compilation is particularly striking.

This is also the episode where Vinny makes his first vocal appearance in the series, and he is heard from more frequently from this point on (as is the case in the crab episodes) despite remaining in the background most of the time:

BRAD: This is either gonna be great or terrible, huh Vin?

VINNY: That's how I feel about every one of our videos"

[end of video]

("Brad Makes Mistakes" 7:22-27)

This episode also gives us one of Brad's most cult malapropisms, confusing "suffering" with "suffrage":

CAPTION: Any tips on keeping the smoke out of your eyes?

BRAD: There are no tips, it's called "suffrage."

CAPTION: SUFFRAGE: the right to vote in political elections.

("Brad Makes Mistakes" 1:24-1:29)

But these mistakes, improvisations, or "derivations" from the script must adhere to the narrative of the simulacrum- (he can mess up but only when it makes sense and adds to the character). Understandings of the simulacrum and of the hyperreal vary per theorist, but it is generally understood as occurring when representation replaces reality (Beaudrillard, 1981). Laprade argues that the hyperreal is essential to understanding why YouTubers present an augmented version of reality. She states: "YouTube's foundation of promised honesty has set up vlogging to be successful only because of its false premise that keeps viewers assuming

everything and everyone is only ever true, honest, and real. [...] Instead, what has emerged is a genre of entertainment in which formalism masquerades around as devoted realism” (Laprade 22). We therefore arrive at another point of contradiction in that emphasizing mistakes and improvisations (defined as the “money shot” by Grindstaff) make these elements the most sought after, and for a professional show such as *It’s Alive*, therefore become the most curated. *It’s Alive* therefore occupies a space between food journalism and reality TV, making Brad a food influencer, a hyperreal character, and often an absurd caricature.

Brad Uses Moldy Rice (Koji) to Make Food Delicious

In a video from April 2017 entitled “Brad Uses Moldy Rice (Koji) to Make Food Delicious”, Brad experiments with relatively uncommon and à la mode culinary methods and ingredients: dry-aging and koji. Brad experiments with dry-aging beef, chicken and shrimp with koji, grains of rice inoculated with *Aspergillus oryzae* spores. This product is then dried and used in fermented products, most notably, sake. Dry aging is a culinary process which consists of exposing large cuts of meat (usually beef) to air in a controlled environment over a period of four to eight weeks (López-Alt) to deepen its flavor and tenderize its texture. What Brad does is coat small pieces of beef, chicken and shrimp with koji, leaving them in a fridge for several days for some moisture to be pulled out from the proteins. This is then not dry-aging in the strict sense of the term, as Brad acknowledges.

YouTube videos are not isolated pieces of work, as they function alongside and are supplemented by paratext, such as a video thumbnail, the video’s title, description, or attached hyperlinks. The video titles and descriptions are paratext illustrating how *It’s Alive* is personality-based content: as is usual in the series, the title begins with “Brad”, which places him

as the center of the action. The video's description begins in a similar manner: "*Bon Appétit* test kitchen manager, Brad Leone, is back with episode 6 of *It's Alive*, and this time he's experimenting with koji-rubbed meats. His koji-rubbed short ribs are a crowd favorite, but will the chicken and "experimental shrimp" be winners too? Join Brad on this marginally scientific adventure to find out!" True to Brad's haphazard characterization, the video description represents his method as "marginally scientific", which it is. In the video's introduction scene, Brad also describes his shrimp as "experimental":

BRAD: Alright guys, today on *It's Alive* we're gonna set up a couple pieces of boneless short rib, boneless chicken thigh, and some experimental shrimp. I've done all of them but the shrimp, but uh, you know, it is a test kitchen so we'll give it a shot.

VINNY: The chicken was out for a week?

BRAD: Yep.

VINNY: Is that safe?

BRAD: You know, I never claim to be an expert. We're just learning together, Vinnie.

[Cuts to *It's Alive* theme]

("Brad Uses Moldy Rice (Koji) to Make Food Delicious" 0:05-0:25).

Brad intentionally framing himself as a non-expert is noteworthy and uncharacteristic of traditional notions of journalistic aptitude; he is making a claim to authenticity by relinquishing expert authority. Brad and this new category of journalist (vloggers selling authenticity from a traditional company) must negotiate the tension between their character appearing knowledgeable and relatable.

The Disclaimer

In claiming not to be an expert, Brad invokes another staple of the YouTube genre: the disclaimer, which also takes the form of "this is just how *I* do it". This makes him seem like a likeable host, makes his series seem interactive and playful, but can have unintended

consequences. Although often used interchangeably, these disclaimers are employed as catch-all phrases to conveniently absolve the host of a video from any responsibility, and this raises further ethical concerns. Disclaimers have implications: saying we are “learning together” is another way of saying that he doesn’t know. Brad also uses the “it’s just how I do it” disclaimer (as he does in the Pastrami video), and that disclaimer comes with implications of its own. Saying “this is how I do it” implies not only that the action has been done before, but that it is frequent and almost a habit; it is a claim to experience (and legitimacy) in its own right. But this disclaimer is characteristic of the kind of legitimacy is valued on amateur or historically demotic media: YouTube audiences heavily value authenticity, and favor experience over expertise, similar but not identical concepts.

In summary, I see the specific disclaimer “this is what I do” as serving three main functions which are deployed concurrently or individually, depending on context:

- 1- It encourages the audience to customize and makes the show seem interactive—if this is just what *he* does, then that must mean I can try to do it another way.
- 2- Implies the action is frequent and subject is knowledgeable, thus in a way making a claim to *amateur authority*—if it’s what he does, he must know what he’s doing.
- 3- It functions as a disclaimer in the event of injury, a use which I call an “alibi.”

This is not problematic when the host is an obvious and genuine amateur, but Brad makes a claim to authority without explicitly saying so. His knowledge is implied, as he still performs the function of instructor. This can be misleading when disseminating to a large audience from a professional kitchen with a recording crew, despite emulating aesthetics of labor, or “amateurishness” through an emphasis on mistakes as previously illustrated (Kirby 2009, 120).

As experimenting with dry-aging chicken and seafood can result in severe food poisoning and poses obvious health risks, there are some ethical issues with Brad that are not resolved simply with a disclaimer. After tasting the chicken, Chris Morocco, a cast member of *Bon Appétit*, says: “Well, we’ll know in 24-36 hours if it’s gonna kill us” (4:00-4:04). At a later point in the video, when the chicken has been curing for a week, Brad admits: “I think the sweet spot might be three days with the chickens. But we’ll see, maybe this is the sweet spot” (4:59-5:05). Vinnie has the video’s last words, as it cuts after he says: “I hope nobody gets sick” (7:00).

As I expand upon further, two of Brad’s videos caused serious health concerns: his canned seafood video, and his pastrami video. Although the canning video was removed altogether, the pastrami episode was met with a mere disclaimer added into the video description: “A disclaimer: Although we all enjoy the discoveries that come with Brad's unique experiments in the kitchen, if you’re inspired to create your own version at home be sure to follow a tried and tested recipe so your preparations line up with food safety standards.” This leads us to ponder why the canned sardine video was taken down while the pastrami video received a disclaimer. Perhaps Scout Canning (the partner and sponsor of the episode) requested *Bon Appétit* remove the video, which would not be a factor for the pastrami episode as it was not the result of a collaboration, leaving *Bon Appétit* satisfied with a disclaimer. Furthermore, as most of Brad’s videos are experimentations of some kind, does this *BA* disclaimer suggest all such videos are unfit to be used as a genuine model? If so, would there be grounds to declare *It’s Alive* to have withdrawn from journalism altogether?

YouTube cooking tutorials are a form of decentralized food journalism, as such content helps people learn new skills to better themselves, provides information of general interest, and may help connect individuals with online communities they wish to integrate into. But the content

made by *Bon Appétit* belongs to another category, as when supplemented by the hyperreal construction of Brad's character (as an influencer), this journalism is no journalism at all, and more an elaborate performance for the sake of entertainment and profits.

Brad Makes Canned Seafood

A video from January 28, 2021 titled "Brad Makes Canned Seafood" caused scandal and was taken down for posing a health risk to viewers. Although I tried several ways to find the video or its transcript for the purpose of this analysis, I was unable to do so. The following analysis is therefore once removed, based on articles by people who were able to view and comment on the video when it happened. The episode was the result of a collaboration between *Bon Appétit* and Scout Canning, a premium canning company. Sardines (and canning generally) invoke the homestead pastoral, and as a food item it contains a discourse of self-sufficiency, making it an appropriate topic for the series (and Brad's brand) beyond the sponsorship with Scout Canning.

To showcase Scout Canning's own products, the video showed how to can lobster and mussels using a water bath method. The video was quickly taken down as it did not follow the FDA's seafood canning guidelines, which require using a pressure canner, as a water bath cannot reach high enough temperatures for this application (Heil). Scout Canning released a post on their Instagram page which places the blame on *Bon Appétit*'s editors: "Unfortunately, the specifics of how do this at home did not make it into the published cut. In the video, we chose to use a water bath instead of a pressure canner. What was not captured in the video that was provided by me is the pressure canner and temperature that make canning at home safe" (ScoutCanning 00:22-00:38). This incident introduces some of the issues with the way *BA* handles food safety, a topic which is expanded upon in the next section.

Brad Makes Pastrami

In April 2022, an *It's Alive* video caused Brad's biggest scandal to date, resulting in the appropriately called "botulismgate." A video titled "Brad Makes Pastrami" showed Brad's methods for making a brined and cured beef brisket with, as famous food commentator Joe Rosenthal comedically puts it, "just intuition" (Rosenthal), poking fun at Brad's haphazard methods. Gawker similarly uses *BA*'s own terminology to lightly mock Brad: "Leone has leaned into the "marginally scientific" aspect of his show, framing himself as an affable doofus with an amateur understanding of culinary terminology and protocols" (Hitt). Marginally scientific it was, as Brad's substitution for pink salt proved too weak to ward off botulism for several viewers who made the recipe at home.

Pastrami is a cured meat recipe made by brining, smoking, and steaming a large cut of brisket. The brisket is then brined for a minimum of five days, and depending on the recipe, up to twelve. This brining liquid is made up mostly of water, salt, sugar, and spices. Most brine recipes on the internet also include a small portion of sodium sulfite, also known as pink curing salt or Prague Powder #1. This ingredient, which gives the pastrami its pink colour and helps prevent botulism, was absent from Brad's recipe, citing health concerns over nitrites: "In substitution of the pink curing salt is the celery juice, which is high in sodium nitrate, and then we have our culture, which in this case is sauerkraut juice. And the end result of those two mingling for a week is gonna leave us with sodium nitrite, which is what we're trying to achieve in the curing, corning process" ("Brad Makes Pastrami" 7:59). Brad and *BA* are obviously aware of the risks such an experiment might pose, as a caption reads: "Follow food safety guidelines and always heat meat to safe internal temperatures before consumption!" (2:45). Beyond serving as a disclaimer, such captions are often added as a supplement to add onto Brad's instructions, which

are often lacking in certain areas. This is not an issue most of the time, but this episode illustrates how food safety is an afterthought on *It's Alive*. Brad also jokes about how his cut of meat might have gone bad: “I think it went ba-ad. No, I’m just kiddin’” (8:00). Although there is no way to know the state of Brad’s cut of meat at that time, for several viewers, their meat was indeed contaminated by the end of this step.

This episode was set in Brad’s home in Connecticut because COVID-19 restrictions forbade shooting from the *BA* test kitchen. The atmosphere set up in Brad’s home—or at least the kitchen, where the video is set—is reminiscent of cottage lore. The exposed wood, the hanging copper pans, the ducks, the smoker, the lumber backhouse, and the bouquets of fresh herbs suggest Brad is selling us on the image of a homesteading pastoralist who regularly makes pastrami from scratch in his rural setting. Pastrami also has working-class connotations and is closely associated with authenticity, especially in the Jewish-American imagination. Brad notably invokes Katz’ Deli, a New York staple and definition of authenticity.

Similar to his Kojied shrimp, Brad describes this cooking technique as “experimental” and frames it as common sense, implying he has experience with pastrami and establishing his credibility: “The brine, I mean, it’s the curing factor of it, it’s what we’re trying to achieve, at least an experimentation of the traditional cooking method. A good test for me, if you’re familiar with corned beef is, right outta the brine, just [puts brisket to nose and inhales] give it the old snifter” (“Brad Makes Pastrami” 9:45). Ironically, Brad prescribes the “old snifter” method to those who, as he claims to be, are familiar with making pastrami. Brad thus frames his cooking process as “common sense”, experimenting with and simplifying recipes which needlessly use superfluous ingredients and complex techniques.

Beyond the substitution of pink salt for celery and sauerkraut juice, Brad performs several other improvisations which add to his amateur authority. For instance, Brad decides to use a fork instead of a “proper” meat tenderizer (2:00) even though he has one. He similarly uses a blender and strainer to make up for his lack of a juicer; instead of juicing his celery, he blends them whole and passes them through a cheesecloth and chinois (6:55). Whether or not Brad had a juicer at hand is unknowable, but it is undeniable that the resulting improvisation is clever and gives him DIY credibility. At the end of this process, Brad then declares, “we made pastrami!” (15:26), his incredulous tone almost suggesting surprise at himself.

Conclusion

As Brad demonstrates, part of being “authentic” is appearing as *not* being knowledgeable, which is a step further from admitting not to be an expert and definitely at odds with traditional journalistic authority, here completely subverted. Traditional or modernist journalistic norms usually have a strong and consistent modality, but here are deployed fluidly when convenient to strengthen the narrative, or sell the simulacrum. It is a fluid modality which varies as Brad navigates aspects of his role as an entertainer and friend, and his role as an educator, teacher, and arguably, a food journalist.

BA's hosts frame themselves as amateurs, a choice led by market demands reflective of the demotic and digimodern turn in journalistic culture, wherein fame and authority are demystified and news is mixed with entertainment. Beyond Brad's detached attitude, the show's offbeat post-production effects style created by Hunziker contribute to the show being framed as a haphazard and amateur production when it is anything but.

As previously illustrated, the rise of YouTube and other such platforms are a postmodern or digimodern development in media environments. But this is not the death of journalism. Quite the contrary, YouTube food tutorials (and many other YouTube videos) are a valuable resource to many in that they teach, connect, and help people navigate daily life. In other words, YouTube videos provide a service and qualify as journalism insofar as they exercise several roles of the informational-instructive and developmental-educative elementary functions of journalism as outlined by Hanitzsch and Vos (2016, 152-5). However, Brad's status as a YouTube food journalist is not as clear-cut, and my analysis points to the fact that he would perhaps be better described as a digital food influencer. The complete corporate-led collapse of news and entertainment found in *Bon Appétit's* content creates a multiplicity of ethical concerns from a journalistic perspective, from health and safety concerns to those of racial equity, financial exploitation, responsible representation, and journalistic integrity.

Although the focus of my analysis is YouTube, it is imperative to remember that such work is multimodal, and in no way limited to YouTube. Beyond their channel, *Bon Appétit* is first and foremost a magazine, one with a social media presence across all major platforms. Furthermore, hosts most often have their own online presence through blogs or social media accounts. Even Reddit, which is not a platform directly used by *BA* or its affiliates, contains many threads discussing specific episodes or topics. As Brad's seafood canning video had been deleted, much of the little I was able to uncover on that subject was through a Reddit thread. Reddit's page layout makes it more usable as a forum than YouTube's comment section, and allows users to debate the series in ways that would not be possible if *BA's* work was restricted to one platform.

This illustrates McGrane's point that "Multi-modal texts are typically user-centered in their design. Multi-modal texts offer many more options for entering and interpreting texts" (McGrane 2007, 57). *It's Alive* as a text thus extends beyond itself to different platforms where its meaning is interpreted and reproduced independently of *Bon Appétit*. Brought on by technological changes, this empowerment of mass media audiences has altered digital norms and aesthetic forms. This research has shown that *It's Alive*, as the modern incarnation of food journalism bible *Bon Appétit*, is characteristic of the postmodern turn in journalism, which underscores the notion that "news is a social product reflecting the values of its context" (Wall 2007, 163). As the latest evolution of lifestyle journalism, *It's Alive*'s absurdism encapsulates the zeitgeist of our personality-based digital era.

I hope to have shown that as discursive practice leads to social practice, content such as *It's Alive*, as plebian and absurd as it may be, deserves critical academic attention simply due to the extent of its reach. I have frequently been asked to justify why Brad is a subject worthy of my focus. I respond I am not the one that question should be asked to, but rather, the millions of viewers who have given, and continue to give legitimacy to Brad and *Bon Appétit*. Journalism studies ought to be focused on where journalism happens and where people actually communicate, interact, and collectively build identities.

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