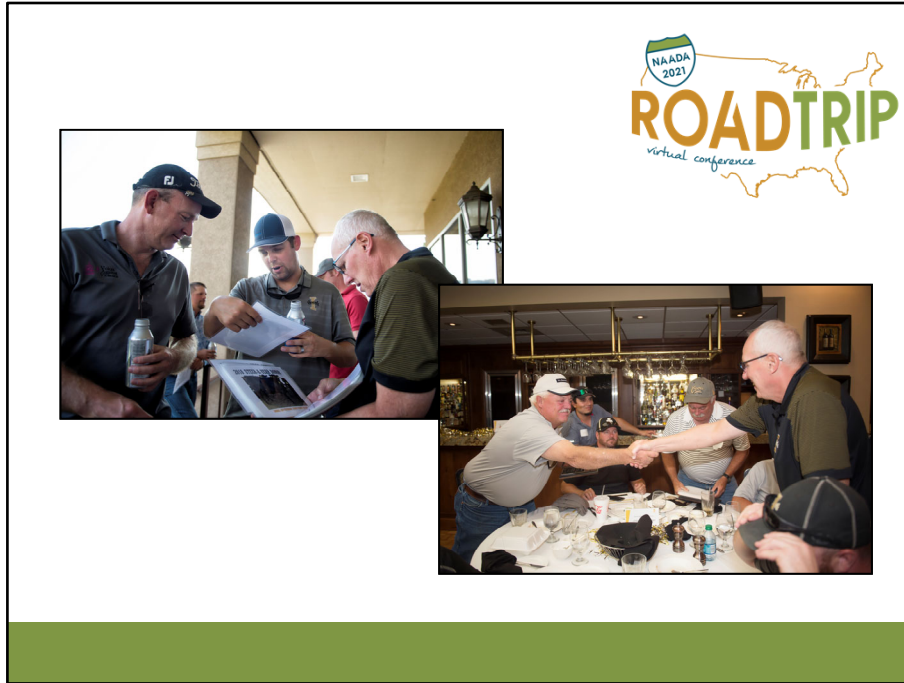




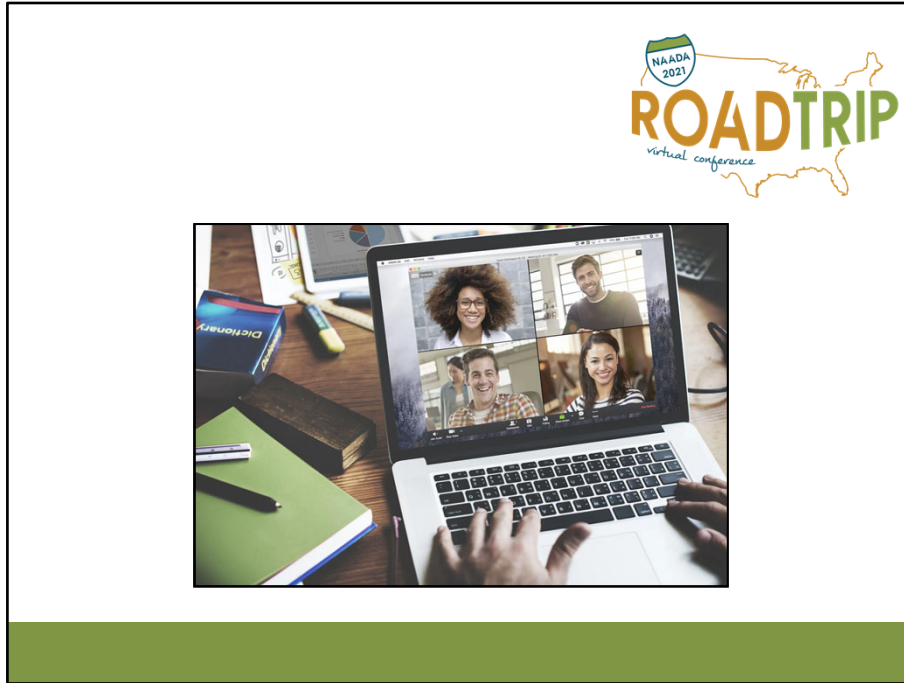
## Examining Parasocial Relationships in the Time of COVID

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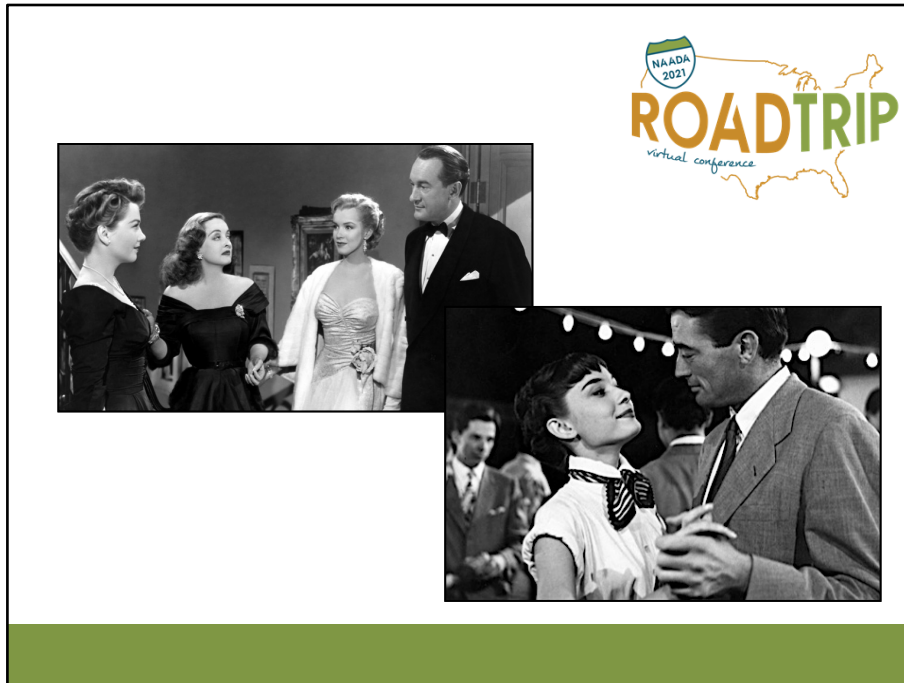
As marketers, recruiters, development officers, and general brand ambassadors, our careers have largely revolved around in-person meetings and events. When covid hit, many of us were scrambling to continue to thrive in our jobs; to maintain relationships in a strictly virtual world. Certainly, my job was turned on its head as an event planner. I became a zoom expert and got the chance to explore a variety of platforms that would be conducive to relationship building. Even now that restrictions are lifting and in-person events are feasible again, the success of virtual programming necessitates the need to continue to engage with these other mediums.



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That said, there are people who have not only adapted to an online space, but are thriving there. Careers are made out of being “influencers” or “internet personalities”. And by looking at these internet successes, we can bring a greater understanding to what works, and what doesn’t, when building an online presence. In no way do we need to “reinvent the wheel”. By simply examining what these creators have in common we can build a road map to success. In a vast majority of these cases, we see strong evidence of parasocial relationships. And in this presentation we will look at what that means for them, and for us.



The term “parasocial relationship” can be traced as far back as the 1950’s when movie stars began to hold a more prominent position in society. The idea behind this type of relationship is: one-to-many. In which the audience feels a deep connection with a person, but said person has little to no idea the other party exists at all. This is the basis for fandoms, team “this or that” or the very idea that the audience is entitled to the details of the creator’s personal life. In a way, it’s the idea that an audience member genuinely sees the creator as a close personal friend, while never having directly interacted with them.



There are a number of platforms that are conducive to building a parasocial relationship. Today we're going to be focusing on video and streaming platforms so primarily text and photo based platforms are out (fb/insta/twitter), discord and patreon, while impactful tools, aren't content hosting sites, and if I give a presentation on only-fans, I'm pretty sure I'm going to be banned from NAADA.



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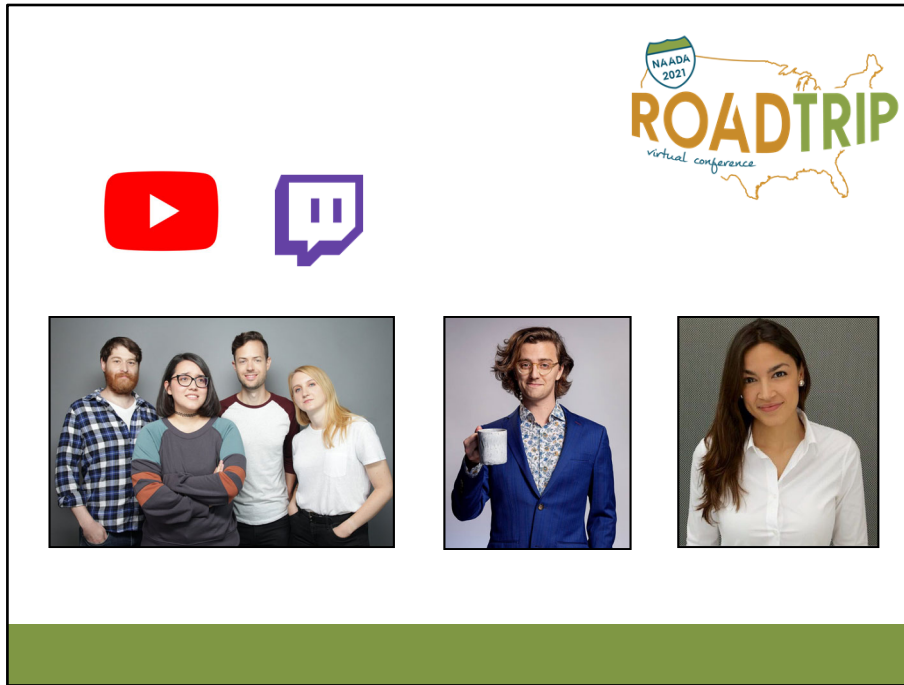


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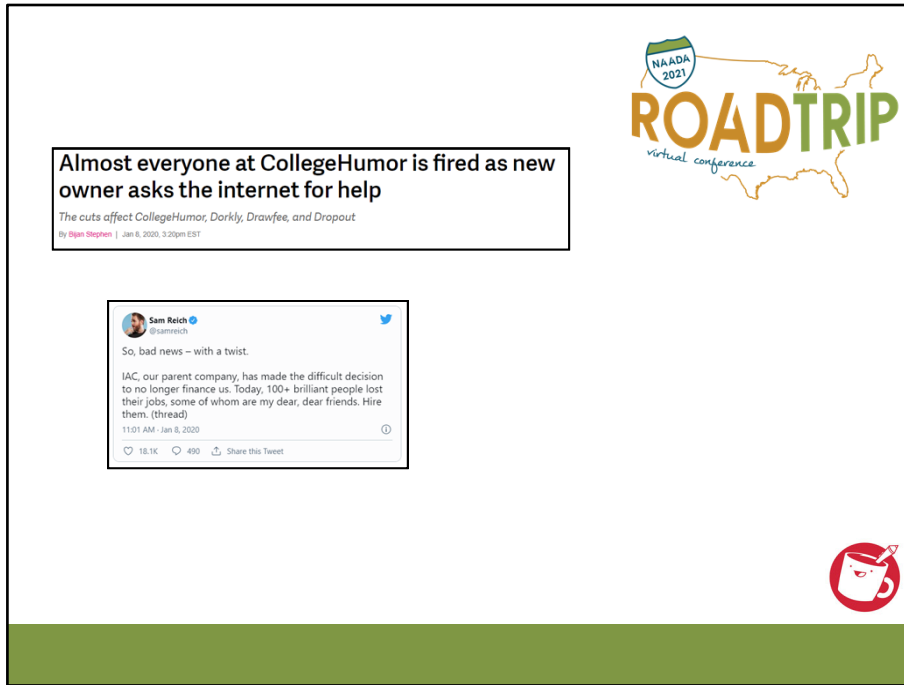


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So we're going to focus our discussion on Youtube and Twitch, while examining three scenarios that emerged during the 2020 pandemic as case studies.

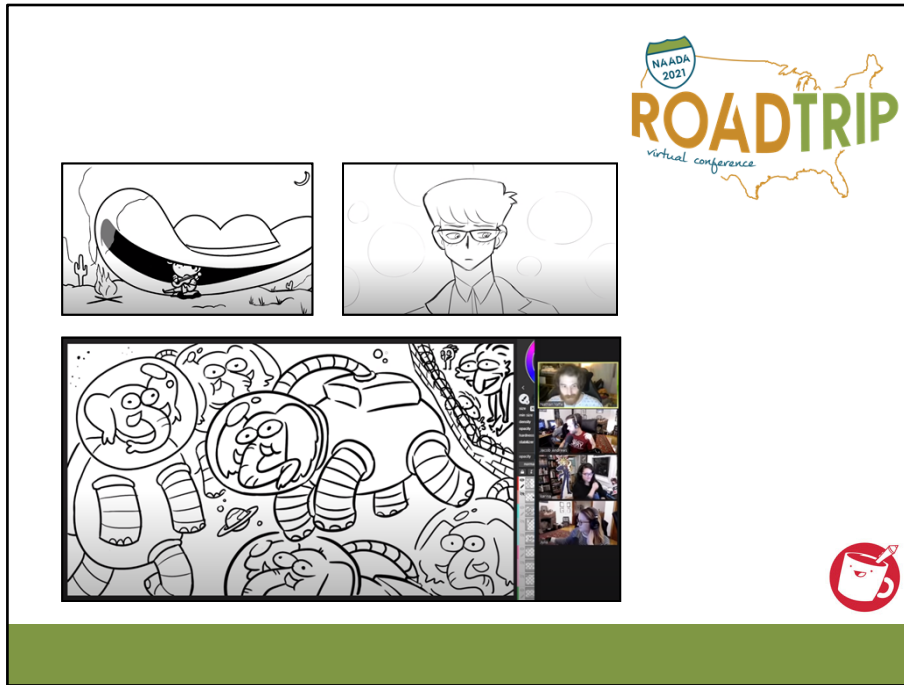




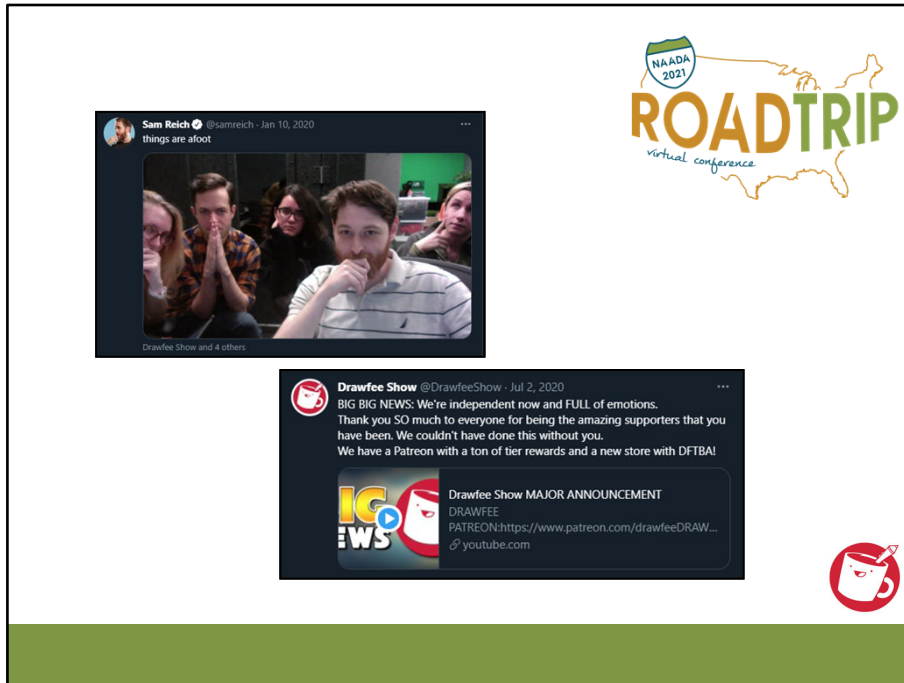
In January of 2020, the media family College Humor announced that it was laying off the entirety of their staff, with the exception of a dozen employees. Under the College Humor umbrella lived individual franchises such as Dorkly, Dropout, and Drawfee. Many of these employees and entertainers went on to find their next endeavor, but the team at Drawfee took the opposite approach.



In January of 2020, the media family College Humor announced that it was laying off the entirety of their staff, with the exception of a dozen employees. Under the College Humor umbrella lived individual franchises such as Dorkly, Dropout, and Drawfee. Many of these employees and entertainers went on to find their next endeavor, but the team at Drawfee took the opposite approach.



Drawfee is an improvisational comedy show, featuring hosts who take turns drawing pictures and making each other laugh. It originated as an artist's warm up exercise for artists at College Humor- thus creating the name Drawfee, a combination of Drawing and their morning coffee. Over the years, the team became more solidified into what it was at the time of the College Humor shut down.



The team began discussions with their former parent company to buy the rights to Drawfee show and doubled down on their internet outreach efforts. The team of four artists and one video editor continued releasing weekly videos on youtube and live streamed a minimum of three times a week on their individual channels. By the time the Drawfee team announced they were officially independent in July of 2020, their fan base was at the strongest it had been in years. Their funding model was based entirely on youtube ad sales, twitch subscriptions, and patreon donors.

The image shows a composite of four elements related to the Drawfee channel:

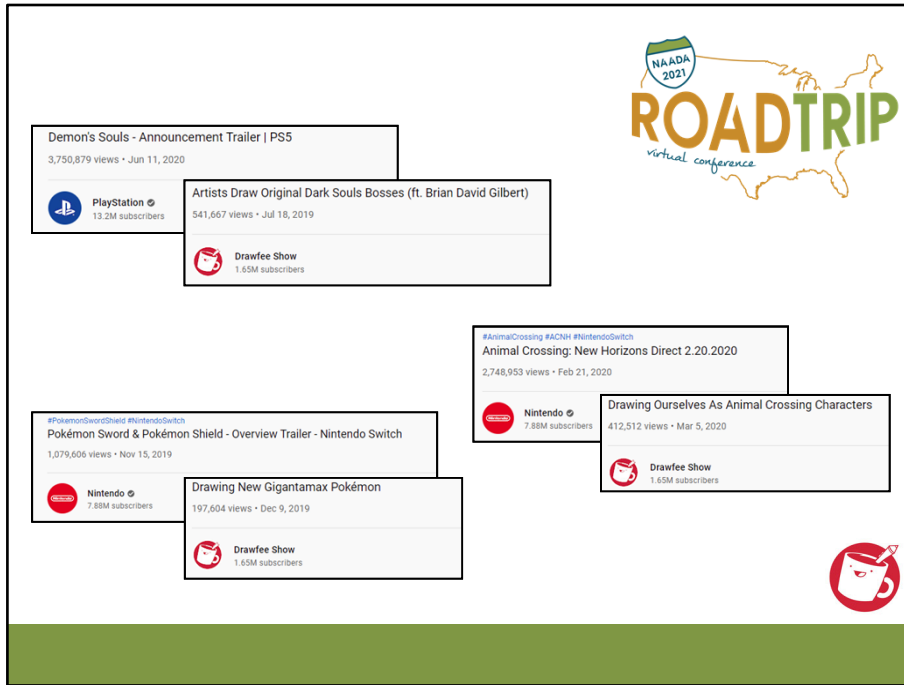
- Top Left:** A banner for "DRAWFEE INDEPENDENT" featuring a group of people. Below it, a box displays "7,452 PATRONS" with social media icons for YouTube, Twitter, and Instagram.
- Top Right:** A logo for "NAADA 2021 ROADTRIP virtual conference" featuring a map of the United States.
- Bottom Left:** Two Patreon membership tiers:
  - \$5 PER MONTH:** Includes Official Discord Access, News Posts, and Bonus Monthly Livestream.
  - \$15 PER MONTH:** Includes Official Discord Access, News Posts, Merch Discounts, High Res PNGs, Drawfee Avatar Pack, and Bonus Monthly Livestream.
- Bottom Right:** Two screenshots of Twitch stream announcements. The top one says "Tonight at 7pm ET, we're BACK ON TWITCH!!". The bottom one shows stream analytics for "Monday, July 13" with "Average Viewers" at 3,308 and "Max Viewers" at 4,513.

At the time of their launch, word spread so quickly through the fan population that they were able to hit their two-year funding goal in matter of one week. Benefits provided to patreon donors were simple: access to the Drawfee exclusive Discord channel, bonus Twitch streams, and for the higher levels of donors, a one-time commissioned piece of art. As an independent company, their debut twitch stream reached 4,500 viewers- well above the 75 viewers necessary to become a verified channel and begin to earn an income.





So what did they do right? For one, the format of their show is congenial and conversational. Tuning in to one of their shows is like sitting in their living room and listening to them hang out as friends. It's that illusion of friendship that parasocial relationships provide.



Additionally, they were careful about the topics they chose to discuss and engage with. They were consistently piggy-backing off of trending topics, making them easily discoverable to new audiences, and highly relatable to their existing audience. And finally, what these creators have long-held their success to be is in fan suggestions for topics. Encouraging their audience to leave comments and engage with them for the chance to be called out in a future video.

## Takeaways

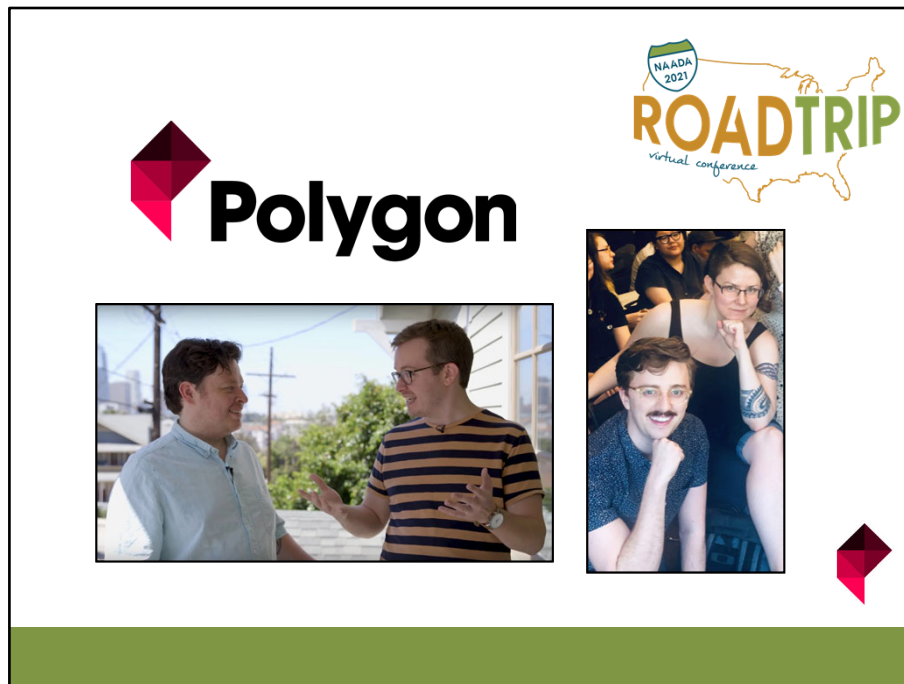


- Be available for audience feedback and be vocal about using it.
- Allow content delivery to be relaxed and approachable.
- Know and respond to trends that are meaningful to your audience.

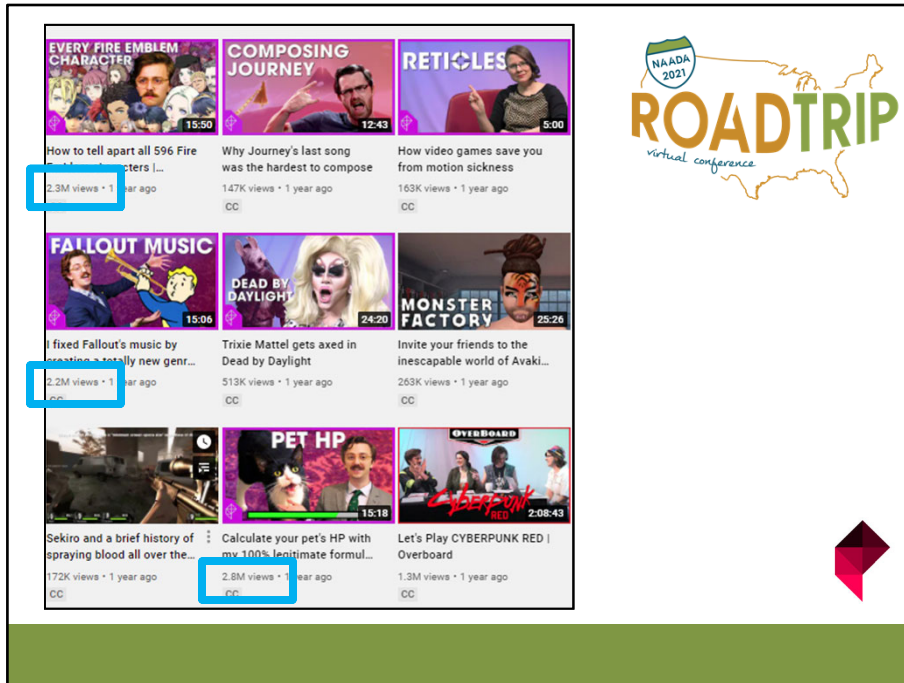




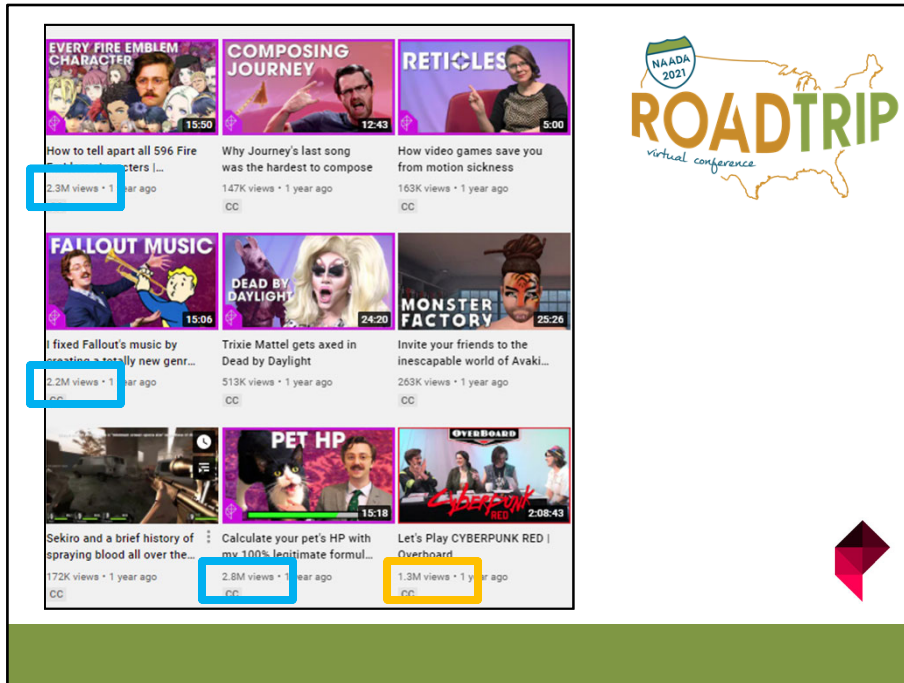
Popular video game website Polygon Dot Com has employed a number of internet personalities who have mastered the art of the parasocial relationship. Most famously, Griffin and Justin McElroy of the podcasts My Brother My Brother and Me and The Adventure Zone. When the McElroy brothers announced their departure in 2018, Polygon brought on two new staffers to the video team: Jenna Stoeber And Brian David Gilbert. BDG, as he often referred to, experienced an almost meteoric rise in the company.



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His series Unraveled became some of the most popular the site has ever hosted, and even videos that feature BDG playing table top boardgames outperform those more carefully scripted and researched videos by his peers.

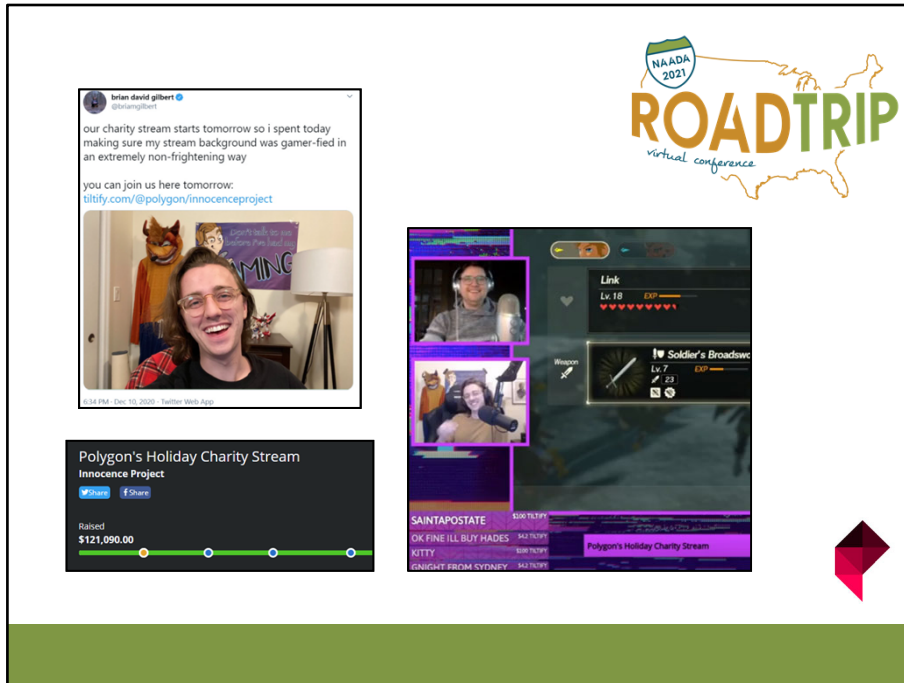


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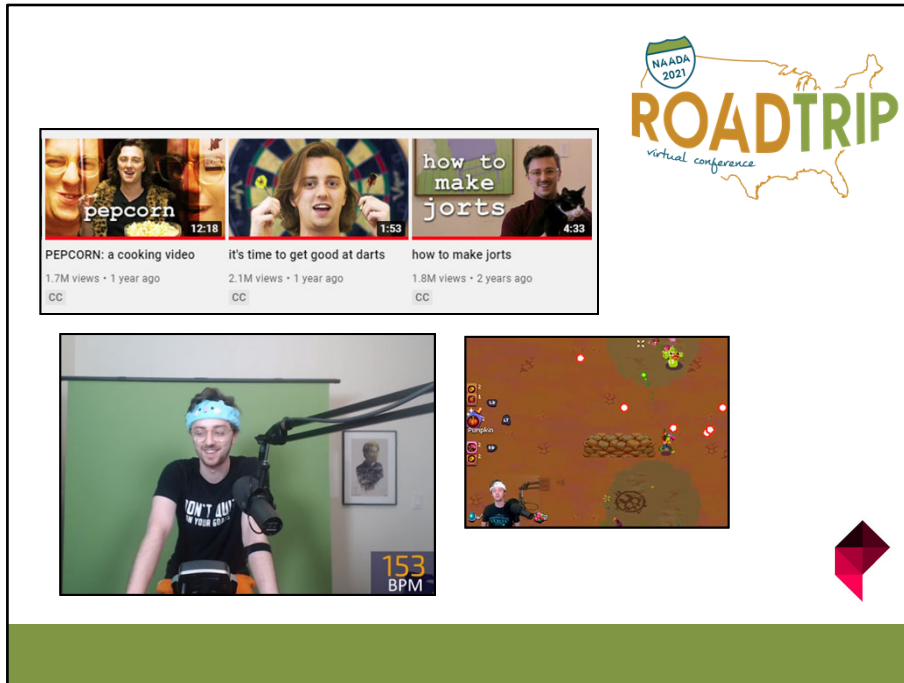




At the start of his career at Polygon, he hosted variety show style live streams that encapsulates the very nature that endeared him to fans. His eagerness to go off script, to engage with his audience in real time and his general playful positivity made him a powerhouse within the company.



In December 2020, he spearheaded Polygon's first ever charity stream to benefit the Innocence Project. By the end of their 56 hour livestream event, they were able to raise an incredible \$120,000 donation- outperforming their goal by tens of thousands of dollars. He employed a variety of techniques like allowing donors to select music for the stream, and shouting out names of donors as they came in. It was after the charity stream commenced that BDG announced his departure from Polygon, and in late December of 2020 he became an independent creator.



In addition to his scripted and carefully produced videos on his personal channel, BDG also hosts a daily livestream in which he rides his stationary bike and plays video games. These streams have an average of three thousand viewers a day, further illustrating that his audience simply enjoys his company and the need for carefully curated content has all but vanished.



So what can we learn from BDG? First off, his candid nature paired with his unwavering positivity make him an instantly likeable persona. He is king of the improv technique “yes-and” and uses this to build up his coworkers and create bits and goofs. His manner of speaking and willingness to appear silly and outlandish create moments that are easily quotable and memeable.

## Takeaways



- Allow speakers more creative control of their presentations.
- Don't shy away from personality driven content.
- Recognize contributions from your audience in public ways.





Our final example involves a live stream of the game Among Us. The game was originally released in 2018 But rose to popularity in 2020. It is a multiplayer online game with a simple premise- the team tries to complete a series of tasks while one member of said team- the impostor tries to eliminate players without being found out. With the country in various stages of lockdown, Among Us provided welcome a social outlet was otherwise absent.



In October 2020, political figure Epi | erhve\$ gews Gswi ~ hosted a live stream with the intent to encourage voter turnout in the upcoming election. Like Drawfee, AOC capitalized on the trending game at the moment and invited friends from across the globe to play, engage in friendly conversation, and talk about political issues in a low-pressure format.





During the broadcast, she pulled in an audience of 430,000 viewers, making it the third most viewed Twitch stream to date. By comparison, the 2019 Bernie Sanders New York rally which was hailed as one of the largest of its kind had an estimated attendance of 26,000 people. The stream currently has 5.7 million views, and is still available as a Video On Demand.

lindsay  
@levinds  
highlights from the @AOC among us stream - my love for this woman knows no bounds ❤️ [iwillvote.com](https://www.iwillvote.com)

Mara Davis  
@MaraDavis  
This is brilliant. My 15 year old woke up and couldn't wait to tell me about @AOC on Twitch and how great it was. Laying the foundation for voter/political enthusiasm. Gotta go where the kids are.

hasanabi  
@hasanthehun  
what an incredible night. more than half a million people tuned into watch a record breaking #gotv effort we put together in less than 24 hours which started with a single tweet by @AOC - i hope you boomers are paying attention.  
11:16 PM · Oct 20, 2020

Yichao  
@michaelyichao  
In game design we talk a lot about going where players are and engaging folks on platforms they're already excited to be on.  
  
@AOC's engagement with young folks and doing so with internet celebrities (streamers) just feels like the smarter version of the celeb endorsement. /1  
9:25 AM · Oct 21, 2020

ROADTRIP  
virtual conference  
NAADA 2021

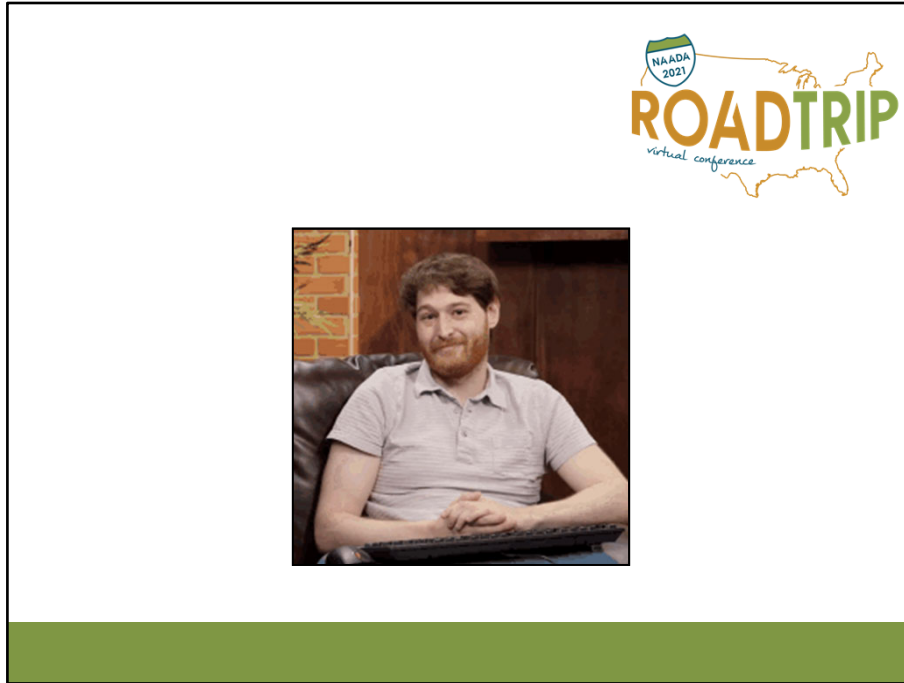
AOC  
Q&A and Retail Trading  
Just Chatting English  
99.31K 00:40

What AOC did that none of her rivals were able to accomplish was bringing the conversation to her target audience. While political debates and rallies do little to sway public opinion. AOC was able to reach a previously untapped market, and one that was statistically likely to support her political views. She has long fostered this type of relationship, and has generated a sort of adoration from her fans. While politicians often try in vain to connect with the younger market, AOC shows a willingness to present herself as a peer and trusted resource.

## Takeaways



- Allow your audience to dictate how they would like to receive information.
- Be authentic in representing your interests and areas of expertise.
- Don't be afraid to let your audience see a less polished product.



So with all of this information, are we all prepared to go out and conquer youtube? Not necessarily.

## Commonalities in Parasocial Relationships



- Adapting to trends and cultural shifts
- Acting quickly to seize opportunities
- Soliciting audience input
- Giving back in the form of recognition
- Engaging with topics that truly interest the performer
- Allowing excitement to be a central focus

While it's unreasonable to suggest that we have a clear roadmap to what it takes to facilitate and nurture a successful parasocial relationship, we can identify some commonalities.

## Thank You!



- Questions/Discussion

- How do you envision these lessons influencing your work?
- What platforms have you used to engage audiences?
- What is your faculty/staff excited to talk about?
- What do your students/alumni want to know more about?
- What's trending now in your field?
- How do you track trending issues?