

# Episode 1: Kanye West and the Never-Ending Context Collapse

Hey! Hi! Hello! Welcome back! It's been... a while. Look we were gonna take like a month off. And then the world kind of... started ending? Or like... kept ending but in new and exciting ways? Like there was a bit more pandemic, but then also a flooding, the Cold War is a thing again... and there's some other things that I feel like I've blocked out cos I don't have the bandwidth. So, we pushed it back a bit. And then a little bit more. And now it's the end of March, because linear time is a cruel mistress. But we're back now, and ready to party, just on a slightly different fortnightly schedule. That'll hopefully give us some time to get organised, and you a little break in the middle.

Anyway, pop culture waits for no man, and beyond the looming threat of total social and economic collapse, celebrities have continued to wear beautiful dresses and say stupid things; movies continue to be made and 97% of them continue to be about comic books; fans continue to argue about which global pop star is an underappreciated icon, despite said underappreciated icon being literally a global pop star worth millions of dollars. So, it's basically business as usual.

Things do feel a bit off though, and I'm trying to work out if it's me or the world, so I thought I would take you guys along for the ride so we can work it out together. I've been seeing the Kim Kardashian/

Kanye West/ Pete Davidson scenario unfold on basically every available platform and it's made me really uncomfortable. I think I was probably being a little bit naïve, but I had kind of assumed that people had drawn at least a vague line in the sand when it came to male celebrities publicly orchestrating takedowns of former partners. Not so, apparently. I want to explore that a little bit, but before we get into it, I will stay I'm going to be discussing domestic violence fairly extensively throughout this episode and probably in a way where it wouldn't be effective for me to just give you time stamps to skip over. If that's not something you can do today, please feel free to sit this one out. I'll also have a link to some resources in the show notes for you if you need them.

But otherwise, join me as I dig into our extremely broken public forums.

I'm Alex – this is Pop Culture Boner, the podcast edition, and today I'm thinking about Kanye West.

I'm assuming that at this stage most people are familiar with Kim and Kanye's divorce, but it does occur to me that some of you might be sensible and have set healthy boundaries with your social media consumption and/or doom scrolling. But luckily for you, I have not, so here is a brief rundown of the story as

it stands: Kanye West is a producer and rapper, widely acknowledged as being a musical visionary. Kim Kardashian is a... I was trying to work out what the best word would be... Wikipedia says "media personality, socialite, model and businesswoman", so we'll go with that. Anyway, she's a multi-hyphenate who essentially ushered in a whole new era of reality television. They began dating in 2012 following Kim's divorce from basketballer Kris Humphries, a man I suspect she was only involved with because he spells 'Kris' with a K. Kim and Kanye married in 2014, and in many ways, used each other's existing presences and connections to diversify their media presence. As a serious and well-respected artist, Kanye offered Kim an aura of credibility that her career previously lacked. As a moneyed and well-connected socialite, Kim allowed Kanye access to connections he might not have been able to forge previously. Obviously, I don't have any skin in the game on whether or not they loved each other at one point, but as a couple they were able to build some of that old-media A-list credibility that they might not have been able to find solo. Met Gala invitations, Vogue covers, fashion lines – the sort of thing that's not usually available to new media stars who hold court on reality TV and Instagram, or rappers known for their eccentricity.

Then in February 2021, Kim filed for divorce, citing irreconcilable differences. Rumours had been swirling for a while, with West becoming increasingly prone to controversial public outbursts, ranging from vocal support for Donald Trump, to a presidential bid and accusations that Kris Jenner was trying to have him

institutionalised. He had previously spoken publicly about his bipolar diagnosis, and in 2018 he indicated that had stopped taking his medication. He said "I cannot be on meds and make 'Watch the Throne' level or 'Dark Fantasy' level music", referring to two of his critically acclaimed albums. Despite the semi-public nature of Kanye's deteriorating mental health, Kim has been as generally tight lipped as you can be when your life is on television, save for a brief statement in 2020 where she referred to him as a "brilliant but complicated" person, and indicated that she would continue to deal with the matter privately out of respect for him and their children.

Following the divorce filing, the pair seemed to be working together to co-parent their children. They were frequently seen together, and Kim attended a number of album events for Kanye's most recent effort. However, West frequently publicly maintained that he believed they would reconcile, and included a Kim Kardashian look-alike in a faux wedding ceremony at a performance of his new album Donda. Then, Kim was linked to comedian Pete Davidson following her stint as an SNL host, which apparently didn't go down well with Kanye. The rapper spent all of early February publicly threatening Davidson on social media, making public call out posts about anyone who spoke to Davidson, penning violent lyrics and destroying look-alikes in music videos. He posted a number of screenshots of text messages where Kim begged him to call off his fans, as he was causing a safety issue for herself and Pete. He posted more messages where she begged him not to make every conversation they had

public. This prompted Kim to file to have herself declared legally single, with her lawyers saying "Mr. West, by his actions, has made it clear that he does not accept that the parties' marital relationship is over." At one point, West's PR team (or his lawyers) obviously took over his Instagram account, and posted messages of contrition. Eventually his Instagram account was suspended for 24-hour for violating the platform's policy against harassment – something they're notoriously bad at enforcing anyway – and when it was reinstated, all posts were deleted.

Even without being someone who was particularly invested in any of these celebrities, the public fallout was almost entirely unavoidable. It was on every news outlet all the time. I was struck with an intense discomfort every time I encountered an article or a post about it. I had a bit of trouble pinning down where that feeling was coming from. Initially I thought the feeling was similar to the one I often have when I see someone be too vulnerable in a public forum for no reason – like those Tik Toks where the tweens are performing the emotion of their first breakups self-seriously into the camera like they won't eventually have to revisit it with the same disdain you would have for your teenage diary, except now it has an audience and the potential to go viral. But the more I sat with it, the more I realised that what was actually upsetting to me was the behaviour itself and the interaction we were having with it as members of the public.

Despite having a minimal investment in Kim Kardashian, Kanye West or Pete

Davidson, I was seeing what I had mentally identified and catalogued as an incident of domestic violence play out as an entertainment spectacle on social media. People were following Kanye updates like it was the latest thrilling instalment some TV drama, whether they were fans or not. On one side, fans were deeply invested in the relationship, praising Kanye's "dedication to fighting for his family" when he had a truckload of roses delivered to Kim's house and talking about Pete interfering with their God-designed reunion. And then on the other side, people were flippantly using images West was posting on social media as meme-fodder. Within 20 minutes of Kanye posting a photo of himself holding a legal pad saying "my account has not been hacked" to clarify that the increasingly threatening posts on his Instagram were definitely coming from him, I saw three brands using it to announce some product launch on their social feeds.

Now, I did say at the beginning of this episode that perhaps I had been a little naïve about the lack of push back that a scenario like this would receive in the public sphere. It's not like labelling Kanye's behaviour as having a number of the hallmarks of domestic abuse is particularly radical. Even more conservative publications are able to call a spade a spade here – you can find an article on the Today Show website right now called Why Kim Kardashian West's divorce feels eerily familiar for many women (gosh... I wonder what it could be). But I think that I assumed that a part of me would still be horrified that men who publicly abuse their partners not only still have fans but have fans who

actively don't see this type of behaviour as a problem. The more I think about it though, the more I realise that that's not necessarily true. We've seen much more specific, violent and targeted instances of domestic abuse play out in the public sphere with minimal consequences for the men involved. Next time one of these types of cases hits the headlines for one of these men, I want you to go to their Instagram on the day and find whatever their last post was – could be notes app apology or it could be something else – and look at the comments. I guarantee that they're full of fans taking it upon themselves to absolve the celebrity of whatever wrongdoing they've been accused of.

So, knowing that there will always be a contingent of people willing to excuse certain types of behaviour because their favourite celebrity did them is a depressing thing to realise that you understand about humanity as a whole, but I don't think it was the full source of my unease. I think what I'm actually concerned about is the other end of the spectrum – the section of people that immediately took all the information and translated it into an endlessly repeatable joke product. The timeline of 'event' to 'played out meme being recycled on a mid-tier brand's Twitter' was done in record time. We went from 'A-list rapper threatens comedian's life, attempts to intimidate ex-wife' to 'lol it's funny that Kanye held a piece of paper' in the space of a day, aided not only by people's own engagement with the situation, but the algorithmic mechanisms of social media that reward short bursts of uncritical attention.

It's something I've been thinking about a lot generally – the way that current media consumption trends reward minimal engagement and preference content that can be quickly consumed without prompting further thought or research. This has the effect of continually stripping away any meaningful context from a scenario, until all you're left with is the faint outline of an issue and a vague sense of having achieved engagement by tapping 'like' or sharing to your Instagram story. I'm going to draw a long bow here, but stick with me I promise there's a point. The way we're engaging with the Kanye West situation reminds me a lot of the war unfolding in the Ukraine. Is this the episode where I drawn a line between Kanye West and the looming threat of nuclear war? Yes. Stick with me.

When the Ukraine was invaded, there was this immediate outpouring of grief on social media. Now I, a person who doesn't understand a lot about ongoing Eastern European conflicts following the collapse of the Soviet Union but who gets deeply nervous in the face of intense nationalism, went with my incredibly nuanced position of "war bad" until I could bring myself to do more detailed reading without wanting to walk into oncoming traffic. Imagine my surprise then, when I logged into my various social media platforms to find that there was a not insignificant contingent of people who had already gotten to the place where they were lusting after the Ukrainian president, Volodymyr Zelenskyy because his "leadership was making them horny"... or something. Now look: I understand that, in Australia at least (I'm not sure about the rest of

the world) we're all looking for someone with leadership skills, just anyone with a spine. But that doesn't mean you should just grab the nearest guy with a spine. He could be anyone! You don't know anything about him!

But with the help of some well-placed propaganda pieces and a reasonably charismatic leader, a whole war got dissolved into a couple of pithy soundbites in a matter of minutes. And I think at least part of the reason why, is that there's been this push with social media to make it all things. Instagram is no longer just photos, it's news sites, shops, spaces for collective organising. Twitter isn't just a drip feed of the stupidest thoughts you've ever heard, it's a place for news and discussion. Everyone is an expert. But these platforms need to make money, and to do that they need you to engage, but not for too long. You have to keep scrolling. Users are encouraged to strip and re-strip the nuance from their posts so that audiences have something that they can briefly feel good about engaging with before moving on to the next post. And what that does is endlessly strip the context away from big issues so that they becoming nothing more than a weird blank slate for people to project jokes or an agenda onto, share, rinse and repeat. There's a really good piece from Jason Okundaye in Gawker called *The Narcissism of Queer Influencer Activists* which I highly recommend reading generally (I'd narrate the whole thing to you if I could), but it generally pushes back on the drip feed of information we receive through social media using these queer influencer activist's shallow, myopic engagement with the Ukrainian conflict. He says: "I sometimes want to tell people that,

actually, you do need to read and engage with the difficulty of these issues and you can't hope to learn through Instagram, even if you use it as a starting block."

It's hard to capture the nuance in short form and platforms don't reward engagement with that difficulty, so why bother at all when you can resort to self-righteousness or humour. That's how we got from "they're bombing civilian areas and people are going to die" to "duuh horny for former funny man who won't abandon his post" SO quickly. We can move on to the next piece of media, safe in the knowledge that we've saved Ukrainian children by ironically saying we'd like to fuck the Ukrainian president. We just end up with a never-ending collapse of context in the face of constant, uncritical consumption. To quote a Tik Tok (which I saw a screenshot of on another social media platform, if you want to talk about the endless removal of context): "I'm literally watching thirst traps followed by footage of war crimes and then an ad for moisturiser all within 30 seconds of each other. Tell me that's not causing irreversible brain damage."

We've done the same thing with Kanye West, albeit in slightly less horny way. We see his behaviour playing out on multiple social platforms and being reported on by huge media outlets. And that can illicit a lot of really difficult feelings for people. Audiences can recognise his behaviour as wrong and abusive. They can also recognise it as likely being linked to his complicated relationship with his own mental illness. Maybe they recognise both of those scenarios in their own lives somewhere. They're also looking at someone who has produced musical

works that are recognised as iconic, and unpacking the split between art and artist is the kind of broad-scope question that we give first year philosophy students to highlight that thinking is actually hard. On top of that, audiences have a complicated relationship with Kim Kardashian and her wealth. The spectacle of a white multimillionaire saying "get your fucking ass up and work" is so out of touch with reality it's infuriating. She can be unlikeable, and because of the way domestic violence is packaged in the media, it's tempting to believe that her wealth would make her immune from abuse. Audiences might even be battle with the knowledge that this immunity is an illusion because, as Nicole Froio points out for Bitch Media, her "wealth only makes resilience more attainable". And then on top of that there is the endless profit mechanism of tabloid media, which is desperately vying for people's attention.

This is a huge mountain of emotional baggage to grapple with, and the platforms we use to communicate with each other are not designed to encapsulate all this nuance. So, we start to remove it. Stripping away the context makes it easier to engage with the scenario in a way that feels comfortable – the Kim and Kanye show can just continue unabated. It's just reality TV and it's just entertainment.

The fact that that isn't immediately horrifying to everyone is horrifying in and of itself. Boiling down a targeted campaign of harassment to something that sits within the regular celebrity news cycle only serves to remove any humanity from the issue. And that has

consequences. When you laugh about, or think about it as regular tabloid fodder - what are you saying to the woman who keeps trying to leave? Or the one who did and suffered doubly for it? If they're recognising themselves here and saying so, loudly and repeatedly, and you're still laughing, where does that leave them?

I've obviously grappled with media representation on this podcast before, and I often swing wildly between "nothing means anything" and "everything means everything", but this isn't really generic media representation. It's a real-life domestic abuse situation being sold to us, devoid of context or thoughtfulness, as regular reality entertainment. It feels like we're just deliberately inflicting psychic damage on ourselves to avoid having to sit with discomfort.

Well, those are my Kanye thoughts. Would you believe that the first line I wrote of this episode was actually "Kanye West's divorce is a bit like the war in the Ukraine"? I read it out to a friend and they were like "Alex... no...". ALEX YES! As I said at the top of this episode, if this episode has brought up anything for you and you're in need of assistance, check the links in the show notes for further information. Other than that, welcome back. If you have any extremely long bows you want to draw about celebrity divorces and global geopolitics... talk to me about them next time you see me at the pub! Peace!



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**Episode written by Alex Johnson and produced by Wes Fahey.**

**Theme tune by Wes Fahey. (Soundcloud: [lee snipes](#))**

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