

PART I Comedy amidst a  
Contemporary Landscape of  
Influence and Information



# Introduction

“*The last thing a comic wants is to be taken seriously. But I can tell you this: You hear people say, “there’s so much suffering in the world—jokes are inappropriate.” I say hunger is inappropriate. Poverty is inappropriate. Lies and hypocrisy from governments, that’s inappropriate.*”

Hasan Minhaj, comedian<sup>1</sup>

In 2015, weeks after a scathing, viral video exposé of New York City’s bail bond system and its outsized impact on poor, low-level offenders, Mayor Bill de Blasio took action. In a swift move, he took steps to correct an institutional process that Human Rights Watch and other social justice advocates had long maligned.<sup>2</sup> In a statement echoing the precise arguments made in the video-based muckraking indictment, Mayor de Blasio said: “Money bail is a problem because, as the system currently operates in New York, some people are being detained based on the size of their bank account, not the risk they pose.”<sup>3</sup>

The source of the media fury that contributed to the mayor’s action? A 17-minute comedy manifesto on a satirical TV news program, viewed millions of times online.

Just one month before the mayor’s history-making announcement, on an episode of HBO’s satirical news show *Last Week Tonight*, comedian and host John Oliver took on the bail issue with his trademark eye-popping fervor as an outraged, bemused social justice advocate. Oliver alternated between silly (“Jail can do for your actual life what being in a marching band can do for your social life. Even if you’re just in for a little while, it can

destroy you.”)<sup>4</sup> and serious (“Increasingly, bail has become a way to lock up the poor, regardless of guilt”).<sup>5</sup> Millions of YouTube views and social media shares later, amplified by attention from media outlets including *Salon*,<sup>6</sup> the *Washington Post*,<sup>7</sup> *Reddit*, and others, New York City officials changed the city’s bail protocol, immediately impacting thousands of poor and low-level offenders in the short term, and many more in the long run.<sup>8</sup>

Was this a home run for comedy? Is comedy a promising way to meaningfully engage audiences and policy decision-makers on pressing social justice issues? Perhaps. But perhaps it’s not so simple.

Consider another story: A few years into the social media era, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention decided to try a new approach to a public health marketing campaign. Rather than imploring the American public to follow typically somber instructions to prepare for a looming natural or human-caused disaster, the agency’s strategists launched a humorous campaign, “The Zombie Apocalypse.” The effort focused heavily on social media engagement with funny messages, relying on the metaphorical connection between a real-life disaster and an apocalyptic zombie attack.<sup>9</sup>

Researchers concluded that the public health campaign was an attention-grabbing, social-media-sharing success: Thanks to its social media strategy, more than 5 million people engaged directly with the campaign.<sup>10</sup> However, the researchers also revealed a distinct juxtaposition. In a deeper analysis, looking beyond the metrics of reach, the research team found that people exposed to the comedic zombie risk messages, relative to more serious risk messages, were significantly *less* likely to take protective actions in the face of an impending disaster.<sup>11</sup> Behavior change, at least in this instance, was too high a bar for comedy to reach.

The two stories illustrate the promise and paradox—and complexity—of contemporary comedy in service of serious social challenges. On the one hand, perhaps it’s not revelatory to claim, based on anecdotes alone, that comedy can cut through the clutter of today’s unrelenting digital supply of information. In the midst of a niche-driven media environment short on the shared cultural watercooler moments of the analog age, comedy’s ability to pick up viral steam is invaluable. Comedy has the potential to preach beyond the choir, even as it also often mobilizes a base of like-minded thinkers. Comedy may even be able to help set a media agenda in ways that impact policy, as illustrated in the bail story. On the other hand, to ascribe mono-

lithic, one-size-fits-all characteristics onto comedy—and its ability to contribute to social change—risks possible backfiring. Comedy comes in distinct forms, it is often culturally specific, and its appeal for communicating serious issues depends on many factors, not least of which are the roles of the audience and the issue itself. The construct of “social change” in the context of comedy and media also is not monolithic; instead, it exists on a practical level as a continuum that includes building public awareness, shaping individual attitudes and behaviors, shifting social norms and practices, encouraging public engagement, setting a media agenda, and influencing policy.

#### LOCATING CONTEMPORARY MEDIATED COMEDY IN THE CONTEXT OF SOCIAL JUSTICE

The twenty-first century finds us within a dramatic transformation in information, entertainment, and technology—and, simultaneously, an era of social justice activism augmented by digital advocacy. Thanks to a confluence of factors, comedy may be in the midst of its newest golden era of experimentation and influence, both in the United States and around the world. In the still-evolving digital era, the opportunity to consume and share comedy has never been as available. And yet, despite its vast cultural imprint, comedy is a little-understood vehicle for serious public engagement in urgent social problems. Moreover, in the midst of a merger of entertainment and news in the contemporary information ecology, a revolutionary transformation in entertainment media business practices and technology, alongside a decline in perceptions of trust in government and traditional media institutions,<sup>12</sup> comedy may be a unique force for change in pressing social justice challenges, such as global poverty, immigrant rights, gender equality, and climate change, to name only a few. Simultaneously, the post-9/11 sociocultural moment is characterized by renewed demands for social justice and equity, exemplified by social movements such as the Movement for Black Lives and #MeToo. Both the activism and cultural expression empowered by digital media converge to position comedy as a source of influence on today’s social justice issues.

With the growth of entertainment in the streaming era, mediated comedy is finding new outlets beyond traditional gatekeepers, and the

present-day entertainment marketplace is embracing and reflecting new voices and cultural identities. As a result, the digital media landscape has witnessed a surge of comedy. The contemporary mediated comedy menu includes an array of genres—some legacy, established forms, and some that emerged in the digital era—including satirical news, long-form sketch programs, scripted TV sitcoms, streaming comedy stand-up specials, short-form online videos destined for viral spread, documentary storytelling, and podcasts. The present-day U.S. comedy ecology includes a heavy dose of social-issue consciousness: through overt social justice commentary and topics in commercially successful comedy entertainment on legacy TV like NBC, HBO, Showtime, and Comedy Central; through new voices and audacious reflections on social justice issues on risk-taking streaming networks like Netflix and Amazon; through a rise in YouTube-enabled comedy; and through comedy producers like Funny or Die.

We position digital-era mediated comedy as a powerful influencer in contemporary social justice issues based on several specific ideas:

***The entertainment marketplace for contemporary mediated comedy is embracing humor that includes social justice challenges.*** From a media industry perspective, mediated comedy's current moment is characterized by upheavals in economics, production, distribution, and consumption. The digital entertainment ecosystem is dominated by the upstarts—including Netflix and other streaming outlets—that have the power to shape and demonstrate a massive audience marketplace for diverse comedic voices that overtly take on social justice issues. Amanda Lotz articulated the authoritative cultural power asserted by the new streaming, niche-dominated TV environment, coining the term “phenomenal television” to describe “a particular category of programming that retains the cultural importance attributed to television’s earlier operation as a cultural forum despite the changes of the post-network era” that limit its reach to a narrowcast audience.<sup>13</sup> Phenomenal television—new watercooler-moment entertainment—is characterized by its ability to cut through media clutter and reach incongruous, or unexpected, audiences due to its resonance with particular themes and discourses circulating in the culture and its attention to issues of social importance.<sup>14</sup> This is a useful characterization for our own articulation of comedy and social justice. Phenomenal TV projects may naturally tend to incorporate social justice

topics because of their attention to matters of contemporary cultural, civic importance.

TV comedy sketch programs that skewer social issues such as race, gender politics, and class include the long-running *Saturday Night Live*, which reasserts its cultural legacy with each decade. Among other notable examples, legacy TV network ABC memorably portrayed the historic wedding of a gay couple, Mitch and Cam, on its hit sitcom *Modern Family*. Streaming networks like Amazon Studios have welcomed new voices and social-issue perspectives through scripted episodic programming like *Transparent*. Netflix has become a home for on-demand stand-up comedy specials; for example, its culturally acclaimed, Peabody Award-winning 2017 hit, *Homecoming King*, featured comedian Hasan Minhaj talking about his experiences of racism as an Indian American immigrant in the United States.<sup>15</sup> TV is not the sole domain of comedy that embraces social justice topics, however. Podcasts and online sites, like Funny or Die, are also influential sources.

***As a far-reaching projector of cultural values and narratives, contemporary mediated comedy can serve as a site of cultural resistance.*** Comedy's prominent role and popularity in the dominant system of popular culture—the shared location where “we absorb the majority of our beliefs, ideologies, and cultural narratives”<sup>16</sup>—provides its central position of influence. Comedy is watched, shared, and discussed by millions of people in the digital age. Such reach matters, given that popular culture and the industrial production of entertainment is “the arena of consent and resistance. It is partly where hegemony arises, and where it is secured.”<sup>17</sup> Dominant shared norms are fluid, and popular culture both reflects and shapes societal values and beliefs.<sup>18</sup>

For its part, contemporary mediated comedy—positioned prominently in the current entertainment marketplace through both reconfigured post-network TV<sup>19</sup> and the digital-native environment of YouTube and Funny or Die—is an engine for new ways of seeing, or an arena of resistance. The contemporary TV landscape, a dominant—but not the sole—domain for mediated comedy viewing, thus operates as a cultural institution and a cultural industry, “as a social conduit that participates in communicating values and ideas within a culture by telling stories and conveying information that reflects, challenges, and responds to shared

debates and concerns.”<sup>20</sup> To the extent that much contemporary comedy overtly includes social justice topics, it may thus provide a steady stream of cultural resistance.

***Social justice topics—and diverse new comedy voices—are embraced by audiences in a cultural moment characterized by social justice struggle.*** Contemporary comedians are using their voices and platforms to assert their cultural identities and call out oppressive power dynamics. In turn, as a partial consequence of the shifting comedy and entertainment marketplace in the digital era, the voices of traditionally marginalized people and groups—racial and ethnic minorities, women, and sexual minorities—are not just increasingly seen in comedy, but also are rewarded by critical acclaim, media coverage, and audience buzz. For instance, after the attacks of September 11, 2001, as the United States turned the page on a new chapter of Islamophobia, Muslim-American comedians took to their microphones. In 2013, comedians Negin Farsad and Dean Obeidallah distributed their Netflix documentary, *The Muslims Are Coming!*, which featured their stand-up tour throughout the American Midwest and South, where they aimed to hilariously entertain audiences and “to combat what they call Islamophobia and to explain, reveal and connect with prejudice one passerby at a time.”<sup>21</sup> In 2015, comedian Zahra Noorbakhsh and activist Tanzila “Taz” Ahmed launched the #GoodMuslimBadMuslim podcast to humorously address harmful Islamophobic stereotypes.<sup>22</sup>

Within the context of a cultural moment marked by struggle and calls for social equity, comedians themselves serve as social justice influencers in a range of ways. They are overtly calling for remedies to social problems, reframing issues in the news, asserting cultural identity, sharing experiences of discrimination and othering, and unmasking taboo topics. At a similar cultural and social justice moment, in 1960, *Time* magazine featured comedian Mort Sahl, made famous by his humorous social critique, in an in-depth article titled “Comedians: The Third Campaign,” which focused on the powerful social influence of a new class of comedians as public intellectuals: “At 33, Mort Sahl is young, irreverent, and trenchant. With one eye on world news and the other on *Variety*, he is a volatile mixture of show business and politics, of exhibitionistic self-dedication and a seemingly sincere passion to change the world.”<sup>23</sup> Notably, coinciding with a moment in which fewer than two in 10 Americans say they trust

government, and not even half (45%) describe business leaders as honest and trustworthy,<sup>24</sup> a 2015 article in the *Atlantic* magazine (“How Comedians Became Public Intellectuals”) asserted a similar premise:

Comedians are acting not just as joke-tellers, but as truth-tellers—as guides through our cultural debates . . . comedians are doing their work not just in sweaty clubs or network variety shows or cable sitcoms, but also on the Internet. Wherever the jokes start—Comedy Central, *The Tonight Show*, Marc Maron’s garage—they will end up, eventually and probably immediately, living online. They will, at their best, go “really, insanely viral.” . . . Comedy, like so much else in the culture, now exists largely of, by, and for the Internet. Which is to say that there are two broad things happening right now—comedy with moral messaging, and comedy with mass attention—and their combined effect is this: Comedians have taken on the role of public intellectuals.<sup>25</sup>

Satirical news, perhaps the most immediately recognizable in this context, is well documented as a source of political and civic information<sup>26</sup>—and an undisputed audience hit, with millions of views and shares. At its height, use of *The Daily Show* as a source of news and information—not just entertainment—rivalled that of traditional news programs, and its coverage was found to ideologically balance topics and perform a *de facto* watchdog function, particularly for civic issues, politicians, and the media.<sup>27</sup> Viewers’ widespread embrace of satirical news has manifested in a handful of new shows—*Full Frontal with Samantha Bee*, *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver*—thus multiplying the reach of this kind of agenda-setting information and social critique packaged in comedy.

***Mediated comedy in the digital era is shared widely, a public engagement mechanism and practice also central to contemporary networked social justice efforts.*** Within the context of a technologically engaged digital society, contemporary comedy’s availability online is situated for the kind of peer sharing that also is a requirement for public engagement in social justice topics. The cultural imprint of comedy programming is amplified by the viral-sharing nature of digital-era entertainment, which allows content to reach well beyond the audiences who tune in to watch the full shows. Indeed, along with their full appointment-viewing episodes, comedy programs produce short-form video clips designed for easy online sharing. Along parallel lines, a YouTube-socialized

digital audience is all too happy to share the objects of its cultural affection. How comedy's public engagement potential comes together and can manifest explicitly—based on its audience, agenda-setting, and discursive effects—is the core of the ensuing chapters. Of course, the peer-sharing, participatory properties of the digital era do not encompass the full spectrum of social-change possibilities, but they are central, parallel traits of both contemporary entertainment and social justice activism. The practices enabled by the networked culture are embedded in both digital-era entertainment and public engagement with social challenges.

Online comedy sites churn out funny short-form sketches, faux public service announcements, and other humorous treatments of the news and issues of the day. The major powerhouses garner millions of audience views among them: Funny or Die, *The Onion*, and *CollegeHumor*, along with *BuzzFeed* and *Upworthy*. In the online realm in particular, contemporary comedy's imprint lurks well beyond the traditional boundaries of entertainment: When former first lady Michelle Obama wanted to promote higher education to young people in the United States, she skipped the serious appeal and appeared in a comedic rap music video along with *Saturday Night Live* comedian Jay Pharoah, espousing the merits of getting a college degree—for *CollegeHumor*.<sup>28</sup> In a formal nod to comedy's reach and potential influence on U. S. policy, in 2015, Funny or Die created a department focused explicitly on producing comedy PSAs to engage policy leaders and the public in social and civic issues—including poverty, gun violence prevention, and climate change—in accessible, funny ways.<sup>29</sup>

#### ABOUT THE BOOK

*A Comedian and an Activist Walk into a Bar: The Serious Role of Comedy in Social Justice* is about the contemporary intersection of mediated comedy and social justice in the evolving, converged digital media age. The book illustrates how media and technological disruption—combined with newly invigorated calls for justice—have created the ideal conditions for boundary-pushing, socially critical comedy to not only thrive in the entertainment marketplace but also play a strategic role in social change efforts. We argue that mediated comedy, as a voraciously consumed and shared

cultural product, is uniquely positioned to confront injustice and re-envision social reality in ways that engage and inspire.

In this context, we do not imagine comedy as a simple, tidy tactical tool for social change, as that thinking reduces it—falsely—to a lab-created mechanism able to produce predictable effects. Indeed, this is not our intent in this book. Comedy is, after all, art, with the creative serendipity embodied in such a form of artistic expression. As a widely beloved entertainment phenomenon, comedy is as old as the improv in Aristotle's ancient Greece and the physical pratfalls of vaudeville in early twentieth-century America, and as newly reinvented as the Funny or Die era of short-form online video.<sup>30</sup> This volume does not attempt a comprehensive full history or landscape of all entertainment comedy in the marketplace. Such a pursuit would be a different book, or, more likely, a compilation of the excellent existing works focused on comedy as entertainment. Instead, given our focus on social change, we argue that comedy's potential for public influence in the context of social issues is newly powerful in the digital media age. We concentrate on mediated comedy in distinct genres, including satirical news, scripted episodic TV, comedy documentary, stand-up comedy, and sketch.

As for social justice, when considering global problems that demand both consistent public engagement and remedy, the list is seemingly endless. From a contemporary global perspective, the closest articulation of established imperatives for social justice arrived first in the form of the United Nations' Millennium Development Goals in 2000, revisited and reconfigured 15 years later as the Sustainable Development Goals. Both sets of goals—a global to-do list—emphasize two key areas: climate change and the environment, and poverty,<sup>31</sup> to which we devote particular focus in Part II of the book. Throughout the book, we also reflect a range of other individual justice challenges—from civil rights to gun violence prevention to sexual assault.

As collaborators, we come to this topic from distinct professional vantage points along with shared perspectives and experiences. Together, we comprise a professional Venn diagram that includes communication scholarship, media strategy in the context of social change and justice, comedy, and creative media production—and a mentee stint with the game-changing comedy impresario Norman Lear. In this way, our lens is informed by, and reflects, scholarship, creative practice, and strategy at

the heart of comedy and social justice. In our professional lives and combined body of work, we collaborate with scholars and researchers, social justice advocates, social-change communication strategists, comedians, and other creative storytellers. These intersecting perspectives underlie the book's approach and analysis.

With this premise in mind, the book stems from a series of intertwined questions, both theoretical and practical: In a niche-oriented, polarizing information ecology, how might mediated comedy be leveraged for social justice problems? How does comedy's influence work, and how can its appeal be harnessed in service of daunting, disturbing, complex social issues where public engagement can contribute to positive change? Similarly, when might comedy challenge troubling social norms, and where might it simply reinforce them? How do comedians themselves see their role in this intersection? How do social-change communication strategists and social justice leaders work collaboratively with comedy professionals? And, what are the actionable strategic recommendations and practices for scholars, students, change-makers, strategists, storytellers, and humanitarian organizations that may hope to adopt comedy in their efforts to improve the world?

In answering these fundamental questions, we locate mediated comedy—and its likely influence on social justice—within a sociocultural context at the convergence of media and entertainment, technology, and renewed social justice upheaval. We explicate five specific comedy genres—sketch, satirical news, scripted episodic TV, stand-up, and documentary—and their intersections with social justice. With this expansive focus on various comedy forms, we recognize the social-change role not only of comedy created with explicit social justice aims and targeted to narrower audiences, but also of mainstream comedy that illuminates social justice issues and has the potential for broader reach. This focus is embedded with a practical lens in mind for social-change organizations, human rights advocates, and strategists who may wish to leverage comedy in their missions, but don't know where to start or how to imagine it.

Our book is methodologically diverse and includes a range of perspectives, integrating original, in-depth interviews with comedians and change-makers that elucidate the evolving conditions and practices that support multisector collaborations, as well as comedians' conception of their role in a landscape where the lines between entertainment and activ-

ism are increasingly blurred; quantitative experimental audience research illustrating comedy's effects and its mechanisms of influence; analyses of contemporary comedic texts; as well as syntheses of existing scholarly literature. Through this approach, we offer a comprehensive, multipronged study of mediated comedy and social justice that intersects various facets of communication research—including industry dynamics, audience effects, cultural criticism, and strategic practice—in ways that we hope are valuable for scholars and practitioners alike.

The book is divided into three parts:

Part I—Comedy amidst a Contemporary Landscape of Influence and Information—provides the brief history, contemporary context, theoretical foundation, and definitions to explain how and why comedy can be a powerful force in service of today's social justice challenges. In chapter 1, "Why Comedy, and Why Now?" we illustrate the cultural, social, historical, media, and technological conditions that have given rise to contemporary social justice comedy, and we position comedy's cultural influence in the context of social justice.

Chapter 2, "Comedy's Pathways to Social Change," synthesizes interdisciplinary theory and research about the effects of comedy in social, civic, and political challenges. We locate four common forms of comedy's influence at the audience level: increasing message and issue attention, disarming audiences and lowering resistance to persuasion, breaking down social barriers, and stimulating sharing and discussion. In parallel, we highlight the broader effects that comedy can have on the wider cultural conversation through its influence on press coverage and social media discourse.

Chapter 3, "From Stand-Up to Sitcoms: Socially Critical Comedy across Genres," distinguishes five forms of comedy that leverage social justice topics and dominate the entertainment comedy marketplace: satirical news (such as *The Daily Show*), scripted episodic TV (such as *Black-ish*), stand-up (such as the Netflix special *Homecoming King*), sketch (such as *Saturday Night Live*), and comedy documentary (such as *The Muslims Are Coming!*). We situate each genre both historically and within the contemporary marketplace, describe its reach and influence, highlight notable examples, and illustrate its unique potential to engage audiences with social justice topics.

Part II—Comedy in Social Justice Challenges—focuses on how comedy has been used to communicate about two major global social justice

challenges: climate change (chapter 4, “Can Laughter Help Save the Planet? Comedy’s Role in Communicating about Climate Change”) and poverty (chapter 5, “Beyond Poverty Porn: How Comedy Reframes Poverty and Engages Publics”). Here, we argue that comedy helps to empower and motivate audiences beyond the tragic, hopeless stories that often characterize public communication around these two issues. Using case studies of contemporary comedy examples and experiment-based audience research of comedy’s effects, we show that comedy’s influence on public engagement is due primarily to its ability to create entertaining media experiences and inspire positive emotions.

Part III—Leveraging Comedy for Social Change—gives voice to the comedians and social justice advocates who do this work, and in so doing, presents considerations and strategic recommendations for leveraging comedy in the pursuit of social justice. Chapter 6, “Comedians’ Perspectives on the Intersections of Art and Activism,” draws from interviews with comedy professionals who take on social issues in their work, including comedy performers, producers, writers, and TV showrunners—many of whom are members of traditionally marginalized gender, racial, and ethnic groups. The chapter reveals the nuanced ways in which comedians conceive of their own role—as well as of comedy more broadly—in entertainment and social change, along with their perspectives on and contributions to the evolution and diversification of the contemporary marketplace for comedic storytelling. Chapter 7, “Creative Collaborations: How Comedians and Social Justice Advocates Work Together,” uses original interviews with social justice leaders and comedians to delve into cross-sector collaborations and the creative, strategic process between activists and comedians who have worked together to engage audiences in social challenges. Through case studies that illuminate these unique efforts, this chapter highlights opportunities and challenges inherent in comedian-activist collaborations, enabled by the participatory convergence culture. This chapter offers important practical considerations for activists and social change communicators who hope to work with comedians to achieve their goals.

Finally, chapter 8, “Imagining the Future of Comedy’s Role in Social Justice,” ties together the earlier chapters to underscore why and how comedy can engage publics with serious issues in the pursuit of social

justice. It opens the door to highlight what's next by illuminating new initiatives in progress at the intersection of comedy and social change, considering unanswered questions in the arena of comedy and social change, and offering directions for future research and professional practice for communication scholars and practitioners as well as social justice advocates.

And so: Why comedy, and why now?