

Introduction

RIGHT-WING COMEDY: “THAT’S NOT FUNNY”

“That’s not funny” is a powerful, complicated thing to say. It can be an opinion stated as a fact. It can be a motion to dismiss. It can be, and often is, a moral judgment aimed at others or even at one’s self: a tsk tsk for laughing when you shouldn’t. When liberals discuss right-wing comedy, “that’s not funny” is always lurking around the corner, ready to deploy one or all of its potential meanings in conversational combat.

Often, liberals use “that’s not funny” to express a bored disinterest in conservative attempts at humor. This book will introduce a number of new, odd, and sometimes terrifying right-wing comedians doing reactionary jokes. Nonetheless, a lot of mainstream, high-profile right-wing humor is simply stuff from the past dragged into the present, a beat-up old Cadillac trying to turn heads with a new coat of paint. Think of Tim Allen, star of the 1990s sitcom *Home Improvement*, resurrecting his macho dad schtick with the MAGA-fied, Trump-friendly sitcom *Last Man Standing*. Politics aside, the retread nature of much right-wing comedy just isn’t funny to people with less paleolithic tastes in humor.

There is also, however, a blithe, dismissive way in which “that’s not funny” frames right-wing comedy. If something does not or, even better, cannot exist, then surely no one needs to worry about it being funny. The

prevalence of this approach to right-wing comedy became apparent as soon as we dared admit to our fellow liberals that we were working on this book. The mere mention of right-wing comedy provoked raised eyebrows and dropped jaws during our countless Zoom calls throughout the pandemic. We were, it seemed to many, playing with an obvious oxymoron, a phantasm. Instead of wasting our time with an impossible combination of humor and politics, perhaps we should instead take a close look at unicorn mating rituals or investigate the finer points of plumbing infrastructure in the underwater city of Atlantis. Such topics, we were told, are no less absurd than right-wing comedy. Better yet, they can be studied without suffering through a single Ben Shapiro video, let alone the hundreds we had to endure. In other words, for some, there is simply a definitional contradiction between conservatism and comedy.

And then there is, of course, the moral approach to “that’s not funny”-ing away right-wing comedy. This book delves into the depths of right-wing humor, taking readers into comedy crevices that make traditional dirty jokes look like kindergarten curriculum. And it’s not much better at the surface-level of the right-wing comedy world. Even Tim Allen’s banal brand of broadcast television humor trades in jokes based in racial stereotypes, smug sexism, and barely disguised homophobia. If something is morally abhorrent, why should liberals allow the possibility that it is also, for conservatives, funny?

But closing our eyes doesn’t make the monster go away. Dismissing right-wing comedy with any species of “that’s not funny” means overlooking the growing influence of conservative comedians, and it encourages a fundamental misunderstanding about the nature of contemporary politics and entertainment. Take Fox News’s Greg Gutfeld, for example. For years, he hosted *The Greg Gutfeld Show*, a weekly conservative *Daily Show* knock-off featuring cheaply produced satirical sketches, strained right-wing monologues, and celebrity guests unknown to most readers of this, or really any, book. It sounds, we admit, dismissible. The show’s ratings, however, tell a different story. By the time he transitioned to the nightly *Gutfeld!* in 2021, he was consistently outperforming liberal late-night luminaries like Trevor Noah and Stephen Colbert. Clearly, Gutfeld’s comedy appeals to a considerable audience, expanding Fox News’s content and offering new ways for people to understand their identity as a conservative

in America. Furthermore, as we show throughout this book, Gutfeld is ensconced in a constellation of right-wing comedy that goes well beyond the confines of Fox News and wields considerable cultural and economic power. For people who disagree with Gutfeld politically, his jokes are not funny at all. In fact, they should be taken quite seriously.

Outside of this book, serious analyses of Allen and Gutfeld are extremely rare. Even humor scholars fall into this blind spot. Academics tend to write about the many successful comedians who fit their liberal sensibilities: Jon Stewart, Trevor Noah, Stephen Colbert, and Samantha Bee, for example. When scholars do cite right-wing comedy, it is almost always to point out its failures. For example, in 2007 Fox News ran an ill-conceived, poorly rated news satire called *The ½ Hour News Hour* for a few months. For many on the left, this failure is still an exemplar of right-wing comedy, despite its fleeting, forgettable place in TV history.

The comedy institutions we examine in this book are not forgettable footnotes, regardless of their moral or aesthetic failings. They are established, viable elements of the world of contemporary comedy as well as, in some cases at least, innovation hubs for truly pernicious right-wing ideologies. Greg Gutfeld dismisses racism and dabbles in sexism. He celebrates the most egregious actions and uncouth sentiments uttered by the likes of Donald Trump. And Gutfeld is one of the more innocuous ones. It gets worse, so much worse. The ways in which people discover new comedy today—algorithmic suggestions on YouTube, retweets on Twitter, cross-promotion on podcasts—provide a set of pathways that connect more banal right-wing humor to the truly evil stuff, up to and including actual neo-Nazi comedy spaces. In a few clicks, one can move from Gutfeld on Fox News laughing at a story about immigrants, to a libertarian comedy podcaster interviewing a race scientist, to a song parody on YouTube of Oasis’s “Wonderwall” featuring the line “Today is gonna be the day / that we’re gonna fucking gas the Jews.”

To be clear, this book considers a wide range of right-wing comedy, some of which will feature mild, clever, comedic insights. Other elements will be utterly revolting. It is not our goal to convince you that any of it is funny. We do, however, offer a forceful argument that none of it should be ignored. For years, the limited options of the American mediasphere left little room for right-wing comedy to become a significant economic and

political force. Mainstream media tended to use comedy either to appease the moderate middle through sitcoms or to court somewhat younger, left-ier viewers during late night. Outlets such as HBO and Comedy Central in particular aimed for more urban, educated audiences by offering counter-cultural fare. There was little room for anything else, instilling a sense that commercial comedy is perpetually and exclusively liberal.

It's not.

This book maps the robust, financially lucrative, and politically impactful world of right-wing comedy in the United States. Certainly, much of this humor fails the tests of comedic quality and moral probity that many (ourselves included!) wish to apply. And, just as certainly, the cultural pervasiveness of right-wing comedy pales in comparison to that of long-standing center-left institutions such as *Saturday Night Live*. In the fractured world of contemporary media and culture, however, right-wing comedy need not dominate or even cross into the mainstream in order to shape American society and politics profoundly. In fact, it may be all the more effective because it goes nearly unnoticed by the liberal world. Right-wing comedy has reached a point of economic sustainability and significant influence. The future of liberal politics, we argue, depends in part on facing right-wing comedy, recognizing its economic success, and acknowledging its aesthetic appeal for conservative viewers. "That's not funny" is a perfectly fine way to express one's tastes and moral principles. It's just not a very good political strategy.

This book warns readers not to bury their heads in the sand. We confront right-wing comedy with two specific goals in mind. The first goal is to avoid taking for granted the left's significant recent advantage in the comedy arms race. For years, left-leaning comedians have had serious impacts by pushing boundaries and attacking norms, shaping conversations around racial justice, LGBTQ rights, and other liberal political objectives. Such comedic efforts also inevitably, occasionally, invite criticism for being too incendiary or edgy. If liberals believe that only they possess the power of comedy, it is tempting to over-police humorists in order to reduce the risk of insensitivity. Our second goal, then, is to urge liberals to foster the freest possible space for the best comedic talents to work in. Understanding the potential appeal of conservative comedy should motivate the liberal world to be excited for, and forgiving of, good

faith comedic experimentation, even if it pushes against the mores of the moment. The left must overcome the impulse to respond to conservative comedy by saying, “That’s not funny.” Instead liberals must understand how right-wing comedy has expanded its reach and embrace the need to combat it with new, progressive comedic weaponry.

A TALE OF TWO COMPLEXES

Right-wing comedy is a complex: a networked structure of conservative, comedic TV shows, podcasts, streaming media, and websites that work together, directing viewers to each other and circulating them throughout intertwined ideological spaces. It is robust, growing, and profitable. Acknowledging this fact reveals a different kind of complex—one of the psychological variety—that leaves the collective liberal world defensive and eager to repress the increasing influence of right-wing comedy today. The growth of this type of complex among liberals is also robust—and profitable, but more for our therapists—as liberals move further into a defensive state of denial about the growing popularity of right-wing comedy. Many of today’s young liberals, whose comedic tastes matured in a post-9/11 era when celebrated satirists such as Jon Stewart defined so much of left-wing identity, understand comedy to be central to their own political and ethical selves. Consequently, within liberal discourse there is an instinct to deny, obscure, or ignore any political comedy coming from right-wing people and media institutions.

These two types of “complexes”—one of which is a metaphor for the contemporary media industry, the other for a liberal psychology—have jointly allowed for right-wing comedy to emerge in recent years, engage large portions of the American public, and go mostly unnoticed by the left. This denial of right-wing comedy among liberals, we argue, is not only comforting, but also a mark of good taste, allowing everyone from pundits to professors to gain cultural capital by assuring fellow liberals that they are the only ones who know their way around a joke. But ignoring the prevalence of right-wing comedy means more than just missing the conservative joke. It also means overlooking the tools that conservatives use to reshape the cultural and political landscape in America.

There Goes the Neighborhood: Building the Right-Wing Comedy Complex

Imagine entering a representation of the contemporary mediascape of the United States. Envision it not like the boxy virtual reality of a 1990s erotic thriller, but as a city or community like the one in which you live. Hundreds of buildings dot the landscape, representing all of your favorite content on a given night. As evening approaches, you walk by an office park of familiar sitcoms, and Dunder Mifflin's Jim Halpert gives you a knowing look out the window. You navigate toward several towering skyscrapers, each marked with the iconic logos for Marvel movies, *Sunday Night Football*, or Netflix. As night falls, you retreat toward a cluster of modest bungalows, the voice of Rachel Maddow or Anderson Cooper beckoning you home. Of course, this serene scene also contains hundreds of back-alleys bustling with social media chatter, variously distracting you from or driving you toward more established neighborhoods.

For much of the twentieth century, the mediascape was less densely developed and chaotic than it is today. There weren't as many destinations then, and they were all on the same few major thoroughfares. The map was not yet organized around specific demographics, identity groups, or political affiliations. Studios, networks, and advertisers—the construction outfits that produce and sell media—provided broadly appealing attractions that were only marginally different from those of their competitors. For instance, the Hollywood system of the 1920s–50s played it safe, with powerful studios producing formulaic films that, given meager competition, beckoned large, undifferentiated audiences. The classic network era of American television from the 1950s to the '80s took a similar tack. During this stretch, the three broadcast networks of NBC, ABC, and CBS controlled what viewers watched and when. Sure, they competed with one another, but they did so by producing similar programs aimed at similarly widespread audiences. Even a famously contentious sitcom like *All in the Family* (1971–79) enticed people from across the political spectrum, resolving disputes between the conservative Archie Bunker and his liberal son-in-law Meathead, through humanizing, non-partisan dialogue. For the most part, then, twentieth-century audiences wandered the mediascape along well-worn paths, with each storefront taking a “come one, come all” approach to potential customers.¹

As the twenty-first century approached, the media map got messy. Two trends, media convergence and audience siloing, motivated a whole new approach to developing media real estate. With convergence, both creators and consumers stopped emphasizing traditional media content categories. Once-distinct media forms such as film, TV, and radio began to blur as the internet brought all sorts of digital content onto single devices. In the past, *The Daily Show's* Trevor Noah would have been just a TV star. Today he is a multimedia presence, moving viewers from place to place, bringing them from his cable program to streaming social media clips to podcasts and so on.

Media convergence coincided, perhaps ironically, with increasing divisions—or siloing—among media audiences. The advent of digital media radically reduced the cost of construction for new media spaces. Creators produced new content at an unprecedented rate. For example in 2019, American television produced a record 532 scripted shows, more than double that of just ten years prior, to say nothing of the countless options available on YouTube and beyond.² The inevitable consequence of this construction boom is that each unit must be built for a smaller, more tightly defined target audience. Nowhere has this effect been more profound, and perhaps more alarming, than in the realm of news and political media. Since the collapse of network news broadcasts, audiences have increasingly taken up residence in ideologically divided cable news outlets like Fox News and MSNBC. From there, even more interest-specific division awaits on social media, where news from professional journalists struggles to stay afloat in a morass of disinformation and distraction. Podcasts and YouTube channels further slice up audiences into razor thin segments.

Whereas once both Republicans and Democrats got their news from Walter Cronkite, today's consumer can pick a precise point on the political spectrum and find something that seems made just for them. This politically motivated audience siloing is both economically useful and democratically problematic. Smaller audiences, in order to be attractive targets for advertisers, simply must become more ideologically and culturally homogeneous. At the same time, this dynamic contributes to an increasing possibility that your real-life next-door neighbor spends their time in a media zone full of opinions and facts you barely recognize. Audience siloing can also, we argue, create a world in which entire subgenres, such

as right-wing comedy, are invisible, or at least ignored, by those who are not targeted by them.

As media both come together and pull apart, the fundamental order of the modern media landscape can be difficult to recognize. The metaphorical “complex” discussed earlier in this introduction provides a start: right-wing comedy is an integrated structure of TV shows, podcasts, streaming media, and websites that work together, developing a shared audience and keeping them contained as a relatively homogenous, easy-to-advertise-to grouping. As a means of comparison, think of the sort of modern mixed-use real estate complex found in many of today’s American suburbs. Built just off the highway on an old industrial site or vacant lot, these complexes try to do it all without actually doing very much. Centered around an ample parking structure, you’ll find condominium housing, retail shopping, a few entertainment venues, a Chili’s, a more expensive place that’s basically a Chili’s, and so on. The logic of the space is to provide a sense of convenient familiarity and, most importantly, to keep the residents/shoppers on-site. Sure, there’s probably a more interesting restaurant to visit somewhere downtown, but who needs the traffic, and what’s wrong with Chili’s anyway? Today’s mediasphere operates in a similar fashion, creating comfortable, interconnected systems of content that allow audiences to flow among related, if disparately owned, programming, while ensuring they remain in the complex as much as possible.

Liberal comedy’s version of this media structure has been going strong for decades. Viewers have shuttled between broadcast network fare like *Saturday Night Live* to slightly edgier cable programming such as *The Daily Show*, to blue light HBO specials and back again. For example, you might become a fan of Chris Rock on *SNL*, come to appreciate echoes of his comedy on *The Daily Show*, anticipate his HBO specials, and return to watch him host *SNL*, all the while enjoying similar programming along the way. Like the stores in the mixed-use complex, these shows are not owned by a single entity. Nonetheless, they work together, in this case sharing talent, program formatting, and comedic sensibilities in order to keep their consumers in the complex and foster greater predictability in an unstable media market.

For years, right-wing comedy struggled to put together a coherent, profitable complex. As noted above, the aesthetic subtleties of comedy

and entertainment have proved challenging for the right. Perhaps most importantly, there simply was not as much real estate for developing a right-wing comedy complex in the past. The dominant comedy structure was of a more center-left orientation, and the right-wing media world focused on the purer political spaces of news and talk radio. However, over the last several years, the media industry has moved toward providing more options, with each geared to more narrowly defined groups of viewers. When traditional media boundaries were just beginning to fall toward the end of the twentieth century, attracting a wide range of conservative viewers with comedy may have been difficult. Today, however, as media producers have grown adept at targeting very specific audiences, and as production costs have fallen, focusing on a smaller, politically engaged cadre of right-leaning consumers with comedy has proven to be a viable business strategy.

The right-wing comedy complex, perhaps surprisingly, consists of a range of media properties that embrace a number of ideological positions. This reality sits uneasily with liberals' received political wisdom, which, until recently, tended to emphasize conservative Republicans as uniformly ideological, in contrast to the more flexible, coalitional nature of the liberal Democratic Party. The rise of Donald Trump, however, has shown that today's American right can succeed in coalescing despite significant internal disagreement and even utter logical inconsistency. A club inclusive of both strict Christian moralists and a man who brags about infidelitous sexual assault is certainly diverse, if only in the worst possible way. And so, perhaps, are the media we discuss throughout this book. Ranging from cold-hearted libertarianism to red-hot regressive nationalism, the television shows and podcasts we consider are united not by a single set of beliefs, but by a series of connections to a common enemy: liberalism.

In this book, we define "right-wing media" as that which participates in the conservative fusionism most influentially articulated by the political philosopher Frank Meyer. Traditionally, fusionism has meant combining individualistic free-market fiscal policy with traditional, often religious, value systems.³ Full of tension to begin with, this uneasy conceptual marriage has become all the more complicated since Trump's rise in the Republican Party. The latest evolution of American right-wing politics has added an additional fusionistic element, whereby crass populism somehow

coexists with individualistic economics and an ostensible dedication to cultural conservatism. The Trump era has also forced us to consider the growing connection between the mainstream conservative coalition and more intensely reactionary politics steeped in extreme nationalism and overt prejudice against minority groups. Of course, not all forms of conservatism are the same in either political or moral terms, and we are careful to distinguish the different ideologies—mainstream Republicanism, libertarianism, fascist white supremacy—that make up the contemporary American right. However, we contend that comedy serves as a lubricant that helps audiences slide among these disparate aspects of right-wing ideology, with a certain gravity pulling them down into the lower, dirtier depths of the complex.

This book is a tour of the right-wing comedy complex. Like any good trip to a shopping center, it starts with a well-known big box store. In today's right-wing comedy complex, that's Fox News. For years, right-wing media outlets failed to create a mainstream comedy around which other conservatives could gather. The aforementioned *½ Hour News Hour* failed, as did a half dozen other lesser-known efforts. But, just when no one was looking, Fox News built a quiet hit in Greg Gutfeld's *Gutfeld!*, a late-night political comedy program that, as we discuss in more detail in chapter 1, represents the complex's Walmart or Target. Though old fashioned and offline, Gutfeld nonetheless provides a consistent, legitimizing presence in the complex and lets customers know there is plenty of ideologically similar content to explore elsewhere. In chapter 2, we visit the gathering place for dads who were cool in the '90s—let's call it the complex's cigar shop—where a style we dub “paleocomedy” flourishes. This type of right-wing comedy centers mostly on aging white men like Tim Allen and Dennis Miller who, once upon a time, may have been considered edgy. Today, though, their reactionary jokes are designed to take down woke culture and provide a template for a new generation of old voices such as Bill Burr. In chapter 3, we stop by the right-wing comedy complex's religious bookstore, where Ben Shapiro and Steven Crowder punch up their pseudo-intellectual arguments with jokes that punch down on liberal and particularly minority voices. It is also where *The Babylon Bee* does the apparently impossible, producing a profitable, conservative, religious(!) version of the news satire website *The Onion*. Though not quite reaching

the popularity of that liberal satirical publication, some of the *Bee's* stories receive millions of social media shares and attention from the likes of Elon Musk, stuffing mailboxes with circulars advertising the broader right-wing comedy complex. Then, in chapter 4, we visit libertarian comedy podcasts like *The Joe Rogan Experience*, the complex's extremely popular, dusky bar that, although inclusive of a range of political perspectives, uses comedy to introduce listeners to right-wing personalities ranging from alt-right trolls to elected Republican politicians. We even sneak you into the bar's backroom, where the hedonistic, libertarian *Legion of Skanks* overindulge in racist epithets and retrograde sexism under the guise of comic freedom and free expression. Finally, we give you fair warning before descending to the ugliest of places in chapter 5: the hidden basement of the right-wing comedy complex, where white supremacist figures like Proud Boys founder Gavin McInnes and neo-Nazi programs such as *The Daily Shoah* and *Murdoch Murdoch* beckon consumers not satisfied with the reactionary jokes of Gutfeld or the messy libertarianism of Rogan. Perhaps most importantly, we'll show you how all of these forms of right-wing comedy connect through a complex series of algorithms, recommendations, and appearances by notable right-wing personalities across media platforms.

Nothing to See Here: The Origins of Liberals' Psychological Complex

So, how is it that so many liberals fail to see this large right-wing comedy complex lurking only a few clicks away? Importantly, when we write about liberals, liberal audiences, liberal psychological complexes, and so on, we by no means suggest a uniformity of thought among the millions of Americans—and perhaps billions of people worldwide—who identify with the left side of the political spectrum. We use the term *liberal* in the broad *demographic* sense drawn from the world of contemporary culture industries. We point not to specific liberal people but instead to how entertainment media, journalism, and academic scholarship address liberal audiences and mediate ideas about contemporary comedy. Of course, some liberal readers will already be aware of, and take quite seriously, the popular right-wing comedy players that we discuss throughout this book: Greg Gutfeld, Dennis Miller, Luis Gomez, Jay Oakerson, Dave Smith, Ethan Nicolle, Michael Malice, the creators of *Murdoch Murdoch*,

and so on. And, just as certainly, some liberal writers, both scholarly and popular, are familiar with these people and their work. Liberal discourse, however, features these right-wing comedians with a frequency that pales in comparison to their true cultural impact, and it tends to dismiss them when they do make an appearance. You, as a liberal individual, may have a wide-ranging understanding of comedy across the political spectrum, including on the right. We collectively, as liberals, do not.

Of course, everyone knows that some humor is mean and regressive. Bullies get laughs. Jeff Dunham, the massively popular, cartoonishly racist ventriloquist who voices Ahmed the dead terrorist, gets laughs. Even Donald Trump, whose schtick isn't so different from Dunham's, gets laughs. Once, theorists of comedy went as far as to define the entire genre as an exercise in pathetic self-aggrandizement. As far back as 1651, the philosopher Thomas Hobbes explained laughter primarily as a mechanism for asserting one's superiority, describing it (with delightfully old-timey spelling and capitalization) as a "signe of Pusillanimity."⁴

Scholars writing more recently, however, have tended to take a rather different approach to defining comedy, identifying it as a powerful and progressive tool. Today, comedy is understood as having political import and as a serious form of engagement in ethical debates. Some philosophers have taken great pains to assure their literate, largely liberal audiences that *real* humor is, in fact, ideologically monogamous and only has eyes for them.⁵ Alenka Zupančič, an influential if rather abstract theorist of humor, describes "subversive" comedies—those that tend to articulate a left-leaning worldview—as "true" ones and "reactionary" comedies—those that tend to articulate a conservative worldview—as "false."⁶ Zupančič offers a sophisticated explanation for these terminologies, but ultimately, her true/false binary is a choice steeped in a political project. There are many ways to distinguish the comedy of Jeff Dunham from, say, radical anti-capitalist satirists such as The Yes Men. Zupančič's choice serves not only to distinguish, but also to safely remove Dunham from the picture. It also ends up reinforcing the liberal viewpoint that there is no such thing as "true" right-wing comedy.

Zupančič is not alone in arguing that comedy must be defined in a fashion that excludes access to it for the reactionary. The cultural critic Umberto Eco, for example, argues that true "humor" must expose the oppressive

structures of society. Jokes that excuse or reinforce conservative world-views may make people laugh, but they are mere examples of “carnival.”⁷ His point is likely heartening to liberals but, ultimately, semantic in the same manner as that of Zupančič. Simon Critchley, perhaps the most celebrated contemporary philosopher of comedy, describes conservative, reactionary jokes as the humor of “untruth.”⁸ They are, he argues, fundamentally different from progressive jokes, to be studied as a species apart and used only as a lens into what’s wrong with those who employ them.

It is through this lens that some important comedy scholars have acknowledged the role of comedy on the right. Historian Kobena Mercer, for example, analyzes the persistence of minstrelsy in comedy, arguing that racist, blackface performers evoke a carnivalesque tone to express “ugly, comically distorted, ludicrous, and bizarre” images of African Americans.⁹ Throughout this book, we cite contemporary examples of this phenomenon. Sociologist Raúl Pérez looks broadly at the intersection of racism and comedy, showing that “racist humor and ridicule has long been used as a mechanism for fostering social cohesion among whites at the expense of nonwhites in the United States.”¹⁰ Our project in this book is, in significant part, to show how these nefarious aspects of right-wing humor have integrated themselves into the comedy industry while still going mostly unnoticed by liberal observers.

A direct contributor to this obfuscation of commercial right-wing comedy is media commentators and scholars’ celebration of liberal political satire throughout the first two decades of the 2000s.¹¹ During this period Jon Stewart, Stephen Colbert, Samantha Bee, Trevor Noah, John Oliver, and others of their ilk forged a tight cultural bond between political satire and the critique of conservative institutions ranging from the George W. Bush administration to Fox News. Undoubtedly, their brand of political comedy was well suited to the task, using knowing irony and selective anger to poke at the logical inconsistencies that abounded in post-9/11 America. Polls during the period confirmed that, for many young, liberal viewers, *The Daily Show* became a major source of both news and comedy. Liberal academic discourse established a binary coupling conservatism with Fox News’s right-wing outrage and liberalism with *The Daily Show*’s ironic humor.¹² As one study put it in pegging a politics to satire, “The nature of conservatism does not meet the conditions necessary for

political satire to flourish. . . . [Conservatism] originates from a place that repudiates humor.”¹³ This certainly seemed compelling at the time. Television networks were building out new brands, using countercultural edge to court younger, leftier audiences. Liberals were on the attack, with satirists leading the charge. Conservatives, in power and having made a series of obvious post-9/11 blunders, were cranky about being called out on them. And, on top of all of that, the discipline of academic media studies was rapidly expanding during this period, leading to fantastic analyses about how it was all going down. For this shining moment, laughing was, understandably, seen to be in blissful marriage with left-wing oppositionality. As comedy scholar Amber Day notes, however, this fact should not suggest the eternal, exclusive nature of that union.¹⁴

Recent political communication research has further encouraged liberals’ denial of the existence of right-wing comedy by arguing that there are fundamental differences in the ways that liberals and conservatives process humor. This research often generates breathless news headlines such as “Why Aren’t Conservatives Funny?”; “Liberals Love to Laugh—Conservatives, Not So Much”; and “Can Conservatives Be Funny?”¹⁵ The left’s need for reassurance from cold, hard data has been understandable since the start of the Trump age—after all, how could anyone who shares a worldview with Trump have a good sense of humor? And yet, even the empirical facts generated by laboratory studies require contextualization—especially when they reaffirm an existing worldview.

Social scientists’ concern with the media’s effects on consumer behavior and voting patterns often precludes a full consideration of the history, economics, and aesthetics of actual television shows, movies, and podcasts. In one study, for instance, researchers sought to construct a politically neutral format for evaluating subjects’ responses to political humor by showing them “videos of jokes delivered by a professional male comic in the style of Weekend Update’s ‘desk jokes’ from *Saturday Night Live*.”¹⁶ However, television comedy is not the same testable input as a doctor injecting lab rats with antibiotics. In striving for neutrality, the researchers’ “desk jokes” reproduce a media text with a clear history and political connotation for many viewers. *Saturday Night Live* was born of a countercultural impulse in 1975 and aimed at a young, liberal audience. Since the start of the Trump presidency, it has avowedly (if mawkishly) taken to task the

policies and idiosyncrasies of right-wing political leaders. A parade of *SNL*-inspired voices across American media, ones intentionally targeting young liberal viewers, have emphasized the association of this format with a specific political vantage point. In other words, *Saturday Night Live* and its “desk jokes” are always enmeshed in a broader cultural discourse that very likely predisposes liberals and conservatives in different ways.

In the influential 2020 book, *Irony and Outrage: The Polarized Landscape of Rage, Fear, and Laughter in the United States*, scholar Dannagal Goldthwaite Young argues that liberals naturally prefer to engage politically through ironic humor, and conservatives through outrage, because of key differences in the political psychologies of the two groups. This argument bolsters the liberal psychological complex, using social science methods—quantitative experiments and surveys—to show how audiences react under certain conditions. The book does not, however, consider the reality of the contemporary media industry, overlooking the many examples of right-wing comedy that are actively shaping the cultural conversation in America through humor—albeit a humor that liberals generally don’t find funny. As we show in this book, in order to understand right-wing comedy, we must closely consider what the actual, wide range of right-wing comedy looks like, who makes it, and the cultural and economic conditions under which they do so.

In one revealing example of the way social science research can reinforce liberals’ belief that comedy only exists for liberal audiences, *Irony and Outrage* looks at two short-lived media experiments from the George W. Bush era: the liberal radio network Air America (2004–10)—whose shows used liberal outrage to reach its audiences—and the Fox News comedy news satire *The ½ Hour News Hour* (2007). *Irony and Outrage* points to the fact that both of these products were short-lived in order to indicate that they were failures. It then goes on to explain those failures by suggesting that although liberals can sometimes do the conservative thing by expressing outrage in their humor, and conservatives can sometimes do the liberal thing by trying to be funny in their outrage, in the end these efforts are doomed to fail. Liberals and conservatives are simply hard-wired to understand political humor differently. From this perspective, the shows were unsuccessful because they failed to cater to their intended audiences’ inherent psychological proclivities. *The ½ Hour News Hour*