

**The Simpsons:
A Case Study in the Limitations of Television as a Medium for
Presenting Political and Social Satire**

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Introduction

I remember a rolled up napkin thrown across my dinner table at the college dining center and splashing into my cup. Everyone chuckled. This ritual happened daily to me and my friends during our meals as we conversed after practice about politics, baseball, and the next beer run. What struck me, though, was how at 6:27 p.m. everyday, my teammates in the senior class all got up from their seats, placed their trays away, and moved quickly across campus to the television set in their suite. Another rerun of *The Simpsons* was on—and not a second could be missed.

Audiences from around the country and from all age groups follow the same routine as my fellow scholar-athletes, all wanting to watch the antics of this one dysfunctional and animated family from Springfield over and over again. *The Simpsons*, and television more generally, offers insight into the thoughts and mores of American culture, both politically and socially. Taking a step away from the television to examine this cultural phenomenon in a scholarly manner, to understand how television critiques society, I wanted to focus on *The Simpsons* as a way of exploring the unique nature and boundaries of the medium as well as the historical precedents that have allowed the show to become so successful.

Countless fans of *The Simpsons* have been enamored by the show's ability to satirize society consistently through looking at various elements and different perspectives throughout its 15 seasons; *The Simpsons* is unlike any other show on network television because it analyzes society from a variety of angles, settings and perspectives due to its animation, while prying deeper into the thoughts of characters through voice-overs, flashbacks, and dreams that do not appear cumbersome as they

would in live animation. This essay traces the historical roots of *The Simpsons* in the history of television. Television is a particularly conservative medium—in comparison to radio, live and printed forms of entertainment—that responds to more than changes in the social norms and political culture of its times. An analysis of *The Simpsons* and its precedents demonstrates the limits of television as a venue for social change since its content must conform simultaneously to government regulations, sponsors and the greater viewing audience. *The Simpsons* constitutes a fusion of three different formats: the sitcom, the variety show, and animation. Thus, *The Simpsons* benefited from important landmark shows in the history of each of these genres. This essay will explore those landmark shows and the historical conditions of the 1950's, 1960's, and 1970's that gave rise to these shifts in television programming. *The Simpsons* is truly a landmark show that would have been impossible without the preceding shifts in genre and remains, like its predecessors, a landmark of time, not a preview of time to come.

Early Television Programming

Understanding the Link between Television and the Time Period

The early television period of the 1950's produced the first models for the sitcom and the variety talk show that all later programs incorporated in some capacity. We must understand how these shows formed, their basic structural formulas that later shows followed and the ways these shows represented the mores of this time period. This investigation will examine the evolution of these particular programs to understand how these shows created the foundation for the much more daring and socially relevant programs of the late 1960's and 1970's. To analyze actual programs that aired during this time period, one must incorporate the social conditions of that era, television's

inherent need to maintain corporate sponsorship, and the desire to attract a strong viewership that allowed certain shows to thrive while others saw abrupt cancellations. Through understanding the basic premise of television, one can comprehend why television can only reflect and react to the time period through the images it presents, instead of leading to new ways thinking.

The United States had just seen World War II end and the Cold War with the Soviet Union begin. McCarthyism and the fear of communism pervaded American sentiments. The dynamics of the 1950's and the political surroundings of that time suggest why certain shows succeeded on the air while others failed. The first programs on television reflected the cultural mores and values of that time period, which is why the time period must be studied along with the first programs in order to understand that era's place in television's history.

During this era Richard Nixon led Congress's charge against un-American activities when he and Karl Mundt sponsored the "Internal Security Act, [which] makes it a crime to attempt to establish a totalitarian dictatorship, by any means. In effect, this makes the existence of the Communist Party itself a violation of the law." This bill also was created to "protect the United States against un-American and subversive activities,"¹ greatly affecting film and television programming because it gave the government a great deal of power. The government could now censor material or remove anyone who produced subversive texts, which meant that television had government limitations in terms of content even as the first shows were produced. Television would not begin its fledgling existence with the ability to question the government or produce

¹ Michael Barson and Steven Heller, *Red Scared! The Commie Menace in Propaganda and Popular Culture* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2001), 56-57.

anything remotely controversial, a major reason why many programs during that time period reflected moralistic family values.

In June 1950, the government published “Red Channels: The Report of Communist Influence in Radio and Television, a 213-page pamphlet that lists 151 names, 130 organizations, and 17 publications with suspicious ties to the Communist doctrine.”² Understanding the government effects on radio greatly enhances one’s analysis of the role of government on the creation of television programming. Radio provided the direct link to television as many national radio stars turned their programs into television versions of the same show. Being “demonized as a ‘communist’ and ‘un-American’”³ scared producers, writers, and advertisers from creating anything that could have even been remotely controversial. As Carol Stabile and Mark Harrison explained, “What remained was a now unanimous support for a status quo that transformed the anomaly that was the fifties family into a transhistorical universal reality...If the fifties family now appears as a shining oasis in contrast to contemporary realities, this is in large part an effect of the ideological homogenization of the culture industries that proceeded from the Red Scare.”⁴

Television must be viewed as a profit making industry in order to comprehend how television programs reflect the goals of these corporations. Television relied on the use of advertisers to pay for its programs, making it reliant on the tastes of their sponsors in order to air material. O’Neil explained, “TV was even easier to intimidate than Hollywood [in regards to content], because [it] used the public airwaves and depended on

² Ibid, 88-89.

³ Carol A. Stabile and Mark Harrison ed., *Prime Time Animation: Television Animation and American Culture*, (New York: Routledge, 2003), 8.

⁴ Ibid, 8.

advertisers.”⁵ The pressure of government sanctions and the fear of losing advertising revenues caused television to create programs that would not offend any viewers, who were also consumers of the products that aired on television.

David Farber, a historian of the 1950’s time period, explained the goal of advertisers, “The owners and managers of commercial television broadcasting were in business to make money. Television became a grand success from their perspective because the biggest players in the business world found that television commercials sold their products better than any other form of advertising.”⁶ Television talent had to conform to the goals of their sponsors because advertisers not only allowed talent to profit, but also were responsible for their next television appearance.

Corporate sponsors invested a tremendous amount of money in television and earned large profits from television, which was why no company would risk its investment with any risqué material; their only purpose was to achieve as much of a profit as possible. Television had become the best medium for companies to air advertisements, resulting in massive profits, justifying companies such as Proctor and Gamble went from going 1.7 percent of their advertising budget on television in 1950 to 92.6 percent in 1960, totaling \$101.5 million dollars that year. O’Neil explained the impact that advertising had on television when he said, “Though television did not fulfill the dreams of those who longed for a high-minded mass medium, there was little reason to suppose that it would. A class medium with a discriminating audience might promote art and culture. But if advertisers were to reach a national market, television had to be

⁵ William O’Neil, *American High: The Years of Confidence, 1945-1960* (New York: The Free Press, 1986), 147.

⁶ David Farber, *The Age of Great Dreams: America in the 1960’s* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1994), 55.

aimed at the lowest common denominator.”⁷ Companies invested too much money in their advertisements to risk airing controversy. These companies needed to generate large profits and could not afford to take risks in their programs. Television executives understood this dilemma and therefore actively pushed and aired programs to satisfy the needs of their sponsors. If a show did not generate enough of a following to warrant the amount of money spent on production and advertisements, it was dropped.

For example, when *The New Jack Benny* show aired, it received public acclaim as many people enjoyed his ‘Play, Don’ when he would pretend to conduct an orchestra. His show’s fate, however, rested in the hands of General Motors president William F. Knudsen, who dropped it after the first season, and not his attentive audience. This example proved that advertisers have a significant amount of authority in relationship to content and programs. During this time period if an advertiser felt that a show would not help their profit, they had enough clout to remove the show. Ultimately, President Knudsen’s decision to cancel the show represented how important the role of advertisers is in terms of the types of programs that air and the subject on those broadcasts.⁸

The First Variety Shows

The structural limitations of television coming from government pressures and laws, the impact of advertisers, and the attentiveness of the viewing population explain the earliest and most successful performers and programs on the 1950’s. One of the most popular performers during this time period in creating variety show format was Jack Benny. He was among the first and most successful performers in terms of ratings to

⁷ William O’Neil, *American High: The Years of Confidence, 1945-1960*, 82.

⁸ Irving Fein, *Jack Benny: An Intimate Biography*, 64.

take his national radio show and present it in a television format. The precedents that he established created the groundwork for more revolutionary programs, in terms of content, in the following decades.

The variety show, which derived from radio and vaudeville, consisted of an assortment of various types of segments such as monologues, comical sketches, celebrity guest appearances, and musical guests. These shows moved from sketch to sketch, giving the freedom to use many characters and address a variety of relevant and social issues. The movement of the variety show that Jack Benny helped pioneer allowed for later shows to have the precedents necessary to deal with much harsher social critiques effectively when the time period and audience changed in the late 1960's. Performers like Jack Benny continued their radio shows along with their television shows.⁹ "The early television programs, with a few variations, were photographic versions of the radio shows, and Jack retained all the characteristics he had built up in his years in radio: the cheapskate, the braggart, the blue eyes, the toupee, and the age gags."¹⁰ Obviously, these sketches were not the most hilarious or edgiest, but "the studio audience...looking at a man they knew was in his fifties, laughed at the mention of 'thirty-six.'"¹¹ The goal of these programs was simply to entertain as many viewers as possible so that they would watch, listen to the advertisements, and buy those products.

One of the running segments Jack Benny made famous was with his black butler, Rochester. In a boxing match between the two, Benny kept prodding his butler to punch him in the face, believing he had an impenetrable chin. When Rochester hit Benny, he dropped to the floor. This scene created uproar in the South because it showed a black

⁹ From 1950-1955

¹⁰ Irving Fein, *Jack Benny: An Intimate Biography* (New York: Putnam, 1976), 142.

¹¹ *ibid*, 142.

man hitting a white man, but the purpose of the sketch was to make the audience laugh. Benny, however, handled the subject of race extremely well, and subsequently did not receive any negative attention because he handled these scenes without controversy. Irving Fein explained this idea when he said “it was because ‘Roch,’ as he was called in private, always stopped Jack with a put-down. He insulted Benny, and although it was done with great affection, Rochester always came up with the topper to the gag, often making Jack the silly one.”¹² Benny was effective because he tailored this sketch so that the viewer could laugh while not offending any audience members in order to appease the executives and sponsors. Though this humor might have been blander than in other pieces, it pleased advertisers so the show could stay on the air.

A slightly more satirical piece of Benny’s was his attack on Beverly Hills and the elite establishment of that city. Rochester the Butler went into the police station to report a theft and was asked if he had an appointment. Later in the sketch six white standard French poodles were used by a sergeant to find escaped prisoners, and when Rochester finally was able to tell the secretary that he wanted to report a stolen car, the receptionist answered, “What kind of Jaguar is it?” This sketch probably was one of the more biting pieces Jack Benny ever performed, and was only a mild attack on the rich.

Jack Benny was revolutionary in that he had the “chutzpah” to invite former President Truman and the Reverend Billy Graham onto his show. Great societal figures such as these men had never been brought on television in any type of comedic way. Before their appearances there had always been a separation of politics, religion, and entertainment. One of the lines that Billy Graham used was indicative of the where television was at this point in time.

¹² Ibid, 77.

One of the Reverend Graham's wittiest lines came when I remarked that once, when I was drawing great crowds to the London Palladium, he had drawn about 500,000 people in one week to his meetings in London...And he said he couldn't take the credit for his success: 'Look at the writers I have, Jack.'

'Writers?'

'Yes...Isaiah...Jeremiah...Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.'¹³

The jokes were not edgy, but they established the precedent of using television to bridge politics and religion with entertainment. This small step into mixing various elements of society enabled future comedians to open up doors wider than Benny could have imagined.

Jack Benny revolutionized television commercials when he aired something creative instead of following the script, but the advertisers' initial reaction to these changes represents why television in general possessed a difficult time trying out new approaches. Benny, ignoring the advertisers' script, remarked in the commercial: "I was driving across the Sahara Desert when I came across a party of people who had been stranded in the desert for thirty days without a drop of water, and they were ready to perish from lack of liquid. I gave each of them a glass of Canada Dry Ginger Ale, and not one of them said it was a bad drink."¹⁴ The advertisers became angry at Benny and insisted that he return simply to selling the product without any additional spin. When advertisers realized that this type of advertisement worked, however, they allowed Benny to continue. This story repeats itself throughout the course of television history as it represents the mentalities of advertisers in marketing products; the advertisers' goal consisted solely of profit and they were critical and hesitant toward taking risks.

¹³ Jack Benny and Joan Benny, *Sunday Nights at Seven* (New York: Warner Books, 1990), 248.

¹⁴ Irving Fein, *Jack Benny: An Intimate Biography* (New York: Putnam, 1976, 61-62.

Steve Allen, another leading variety show host during this period, used satire in about 15 percent of his sketches,¹⁵ but his show and its format offered new ways to promote satire even if he did not always actively engage in it. Steve Allen, one of the first hosts of the *Tonight Show*, used the talk show medium as a way to offer quick jokes that poked fun at social issues, and probably more important, brought comedians on such as Lenny Bruce and Mort Sahl whose acts included much more acerbic commentary. Bruce and Sahl's acts derived from their nightclub routines that could be much more risqué and did not have to appease network censors and sponsors. In short appearances, Allen could utilize their talents as they discussed issues. Since they only had a few minutes of air they could critique society and then exit off the stage.

The other type of program that developed during this period was the situational comedy or sitcom, which usually showed the inner workings of the American family from various perspectives. The political culture of the Cold War directly impacted the material presented in these sitcoms because of television's need to conform to the wills of the government and the images that families would accept. Stabile and Harrison illustrated this point when they said, "The domestic sitcom that emerged in the 1950's and the political mandate it served was arguably a rather different creature. Indeed, more than any other genre, the domestic sitcom served to institute a particular myth about the nuclear family in popular culture."¹⁶ The sitcom deliberately brought its viewers away from the harsh reality of the time; there was never any family that was "homeless,

¹⁵ Steve Allen and Jane Wollman, *How to be Funny: Discovering the Comic You* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1998), 138.

¹⁶ Carol A. Stabile and Mark Harrison ed., *Prime Time Animation: Television Animation and American Culture*, 7.

hungry, prone to sexual abuse, discontent, or in any way unhappy.”¹⁷ Every episode dealt with a simple problem and was easily resolved without any controversy.

The Early Sitcom

The 1950's especially pushed “not simply ‘the way we live today’ but also ‘the way we ought to live.’ In its very title, *Father Knows Best* announced its moralistic tone...With the end of the Korean conflict, the death of Stalin, the close of the Army-McCarthy hearings...the US seemed to be settling down into a time of peace, social progress, and considerable prosperity.”¹⁸ American social conscious wanted to promote programs that reflected the era and the audience, which in turn would allow companies to make a profit. This was why the networks aired so many family based shows with a simple moral conscious.

Early sitcoms such as *The Honeymooners*, *Mama*, and *The Goldbergs* that pushed working class and ethnic comedy also did not dominate the ratings compared with *Father Knows Best* and *Leave it to Beaver*, not only because of the material but also because these moralistic shows fit into the networks profit goals. Mullen illustrated this concept when she said, “When commercial sponsors controlled program production, content [became] tailored to accommodate commercial messages. With multiple sponsors, the networks controlled program production and thus faced the challenge of making program content a showcase for a variety of commercial messages.”¹⁹ The messages that the viewers watched reflected the time period and social atmosphere, but these programs also

¹⁷ Ibid, 7.

¹⁸ Michael V. Tueth, “Back to the Drawing Board: The Family in Animated Television Comedy,” in *Prime Time Animation: Television Animation and American Culture*, Stabile and Harrison ed. (New York: Routledge, 2003), 136.

¹⁹ Megan Mullen, “The Simpsons and Hanna-Barbera’s Animation Legacy,” in *Leaving Springfield*, John Alberti ed., (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2004), 67.

allowed for companies to advertise more effectively without worrying if a particular brand of humor or satire would bring viewers back week after week.

Attempts to create programming with more realistic and pressing issues that focused on the Cold War were usually halted soon after production because these series did not have a following and could not generate profit. Barson explained the futile attempts of television to produce relevant material, saying, “The mass audience for television had little to gnaw on [in terms of Cold War programming]²⁰ ... The truth is, except for *I Led Three Lives* and *Foreign Intrigue*, none of those programs aired for more than a single season, obviously because their ratings weren’t even remotely comparable to those earned by the...shows that were then ruling the airwaves.”²¹ The public chose in large numbers to watch the moralistic sitcom that could remove it from the harsh realities of life rather than watch shows based around the Cold War; the public’s tastes greatly affected what shows aired and which ones the networks cancelled.

As Farber explained, “Hits rarely came in the form of a vivid portrait of a world crisis or a pressing political issue. People preferred a show that touched them where they lived. In the late 1950’s, while Cold War hysteria and corporate/suburbia conformity were hot topics among the intelligentsia, TV watchers reveled in frontier justice and the bloody individualism of the mythic Old West.”²² Corporate gain and appealing to the lowest common denominator of the American audience were the two most fundamental goals of television in the 1950’s. Programmers and sponsors aired material to accomplish

²⁰ The one possible exception would be *The Rocky and Bullwinkle Show*; however, because of its animation and the many various sideshows in the actual program, this show is different from other sitcoms. *The Rocky and Bullwinkle Show* will be looked at under during the section of *The Simpsons* that concentrates on animation.

²¹ Michael Barson and Steven Heller, *Red Scared! The Commie Menace in Propaganda and Popular Culture*, 106.

²² David Farber, *The Age of Great Dreams: America in the 1960’s*, 52.

these objectives. Since television could not be as provocative as film, television producers and sponsors simply created programs to satisfy their needs. Even though television could not have offered every viewer with engaging content, it accomplished what it set out to do, bringing people to the television for entertainment—and to buy products.

Americans, both the audience and the executives behind these programs, pushed for escapist material that allowed people to abandon the harsh realities of that time period and venture into either the life of a happy family or remove themselves to a distant land or time period. As Farber explained, “Arguably, shows like *The Beverly Hillbillies* and *The Andy Griffith Show* were popular because they exposed these tensions but simultaneously defused them with broad humor, turning complex questions about modern society into escapist nostalgia.”²³ Americans did not want to confront the pressing questions of the day; instead they created programs to remove themselves from the harsh realities of the Cold War. This rejection of these issues on television reflected the feelings of most Americans, to avoid talk about these subjects. These precedents in the 1950’s in television programming became the standard that all programs followed; television shows had to reflect the images and thoughts of the American population instead of leading them.

The Evolution of Television Programming in the Late 1960’s and Early 1970’s

The Development of the Medium

By the late 1960’s society transformed as this country fought in Vietnam and witnessed the assassinations of President John F. Kennedy, Senator Robert F. Kennedy,

²³ Ibid, 55.

Martin Luther King, and Malcolm X. Television also played a dramatic role in these changes as the networks broadcast live the riots in Chicago during the Democratic National Convention of 1968. Bodroghkozy explained television's role in these societal changes when he suggested that, "television was intrinsically bound up with the unmasking of power at the Chicago Democratic Convention as protestors used the medium to reveal the brutal power that hid behind American liberal democracy... This crisis was also playing out within the popular culture industry."²⁴ The 1968 convention proved that television played an important role in society—and these societal changes also affected creative television programming. The public, especially the youth, clamored for social change and when television programs catered to youth's needs and desires, they were rewarded with wide popularity and strong ratings.

Television programs did evolve through time but changed only the approach to the genre and preserved the goals of family programs. By the early 1960's the moralistic family sitcoms became "clichéd," and were replaced with programs like *Bewitched*, *The Munsters*, *The Addams Family*, *Mister Ed*, *I Dream of Jeannie*, and *My Mother the Car* that "either anthropomorphized animals and machinery or they rewrote sitcom families as monsters and ghouls. In other words, magicoms parodied earlier domestic sitcoms by introducing fantasy elements into familiar formulas."²⁵ The premise of the "idealized" family was modified only to the point of making the sitcom family slightly more entertaining. These "magicoms," as they came to be known, also helped maintain commercial support in that "Rather than taking the financial (and career) risks of

²⁴ Aniko Bodroghkozy, "The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour and the Youth Rebellion," in *The Revolution Wasn't Televised*, Lynn Spigel and Michael Curtin ed., (New York: Routledge, 1997), 208.

²⁵ Megan Mullen, "The Simpsons and Hanna-Barbera's Animation Legacy," in *Leaving Springfield*, John Alberti ed., (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2004), Alberti ed., 67.

developing innovative programming, television producers will return again and again to formulaic plots and stock characters that have been successful in the past. Television programming reuses old plotlines, characterizations, and series premises that viewers will instantly recognize.”²⁶ Other types of shows broadcast during this time period focused on escapist settings such as farms or the Wild West with shows like *Green Acres*, *F Troop* and *Bonanza*. These new programs that idealized the family rehashed similar plots and storylines only with the simple addition of a magical character or a change in setting; no new programs seemed to veer away from this concept, because the networks and advertisers were comfortable with the profits that came with these safe program choices.

As these magicoms or Westerns dominated television, CBS executives, after constant failures to defeat other network’s top rated programs, awarded Tom and Dick Smothers a variety show that they hoped would finally tackle the top rated *Bonanza*. CBS hoped that the *Smothers Brothers* would attract all audience demographics because of their appearance and humor. *The Smothers Brothers* appealed to all audiences because they represented something new that had never appeared on television. The brothers’ clean-cut look charmed older generations and their comedy represented many youthful opinions. As Josh Ozersky described, “They were ‘young’ and mettlesome with...new ideas, new forms, and the new solidarity coalescing in opposition to the war and the Establishment...Their show that broke the intellectual stranglehold of the 1950’s corporate consensus on programming because, alone of all the ‘youth shows’ of the period, it was true to its core audience on their own terms.”²⁷ The Smothers Brothers

²⁶ Valerie Weilunn Chow, “Homer Simpson as Everyman...and Everywoman” in *Leaving Springfield*, Alberti ed., (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2004), 108.

²⁷ Josh Ozersky, *Archie Bunker’s America: TV in an Era of Change, 1968-1978* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2003), 34.

non-confrontational style allowed them to maintain a general audience and their carefully placed innuendos solicited the youth's attention. For these reasons the *Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour* regularly defeated the powerful mainstay of Sunday nights, *Bonanza*.

Building upon the precedents of past variety shows, *The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour* simply maintained the same format as Jack Benny and other comedians. The differences were not structural rather the show only varied in terms of content, guest stars, and subject matter. Much like the "magicoms" that built upon the moralistic family and tweaked them by adding things like sorcery to the nuclear family, the late 1960's variety shows maintained the same format but altered what could be said and how it was presented to the audience. *The Smothers Brothers* rose in popularity quickly and readily beat *Bonanza*. "*The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour*," as Josh Ozersky explained, "produced exactly those kinds of Nielsen ratings that advertisers most craved."²⁸ The ratings were spread out relatively evenly between groups 18-34, 35-49, and 50+, as opposed to *Bonanza's* retiree-heavy demographic. *The Smothers Brothers's* success gave CBS the best of both worlds."²⁹ After analyzing the Nielson ratings, the brothers realized that their show could be used as a voice to the youth who were a neglected demographic.

Before the *Smothers Brothers* very few shows catered to youth, and the programs that did failed to target the 18-34 range. Ozersky described that, "Youth shows of the 1960's, like *Batman* or *The Monkees* (1966-1968) had tapped, however obliquely, into something discrete in late baby-boom culture. But there was not a long-term appetite for 'camp' in the grown-up mind, nor did the *Hard Day's Night*-inspired slapstick of the

²⁸ To take as an example our randomly selected night of 18 February, this time of 1968, *Bonanza* weighs in with a 24.7 rating, compared to the *Smothers Brothers's* potent 27.7.

²⁹ Josh Ozersky, *Archie Bunker's America: TV in an Era of Change, 1968-1978*, 33.

Monkees do much for viewers much past pubescence.”³⁰ *The Smothers Brothers* offered a fresh alternative to the stale predecessors of youthful television. Shows prior to the *Smothers Brothers* failed to speak the language of youth and seemed to talk down to them. When the *Smothers Brothers* appeared on television in 1967, the younger generation finally possessed programming relating to their world.

For the first time in the history of television, the youth possessed a show designed for them created by people who shared similar ideologies. When Tommy Smothers, the more provocative of the two brothers, realized that a bulk of his audience consisted of youth, he decided to become the voice for that entire generation. This realization changed the content, tone, and philosophy of the show because the brothers believed it necessary to make political statements for the “silenced” youth audience rather than placating to the entire general audience. The show changed gradually as its content drifted from simple folk humor into political material and later political statements. As the show became more controversial, network executives at CBS became more insistent that the *Smothers Brothers* diminish their “edginess.” This conflict between the *Smothers Brothers* and CBS turned into a censorship war as Tommy Smothers made all clashes between the two sides public by going to newspapers such as the *New York Times*. The more CBS fought to censor parts or all of the shows, the more the brothers produced brash material criticizing the government, Vietnam—and CBS.

The Smothers Brothers’ popularity and innovative content demonstrate the limitations of the networks and television as a medium. Television previously focused on maintaining a general audience in order to generate advertising revenue. Up until the late 1960’s, most advertisers directed their attention to the older consumers. The networks’

³⁰ Ibid, 34.

agenda dealt with generating profit, and they rejected any kinds of programming that would hurt their greater goals. The networks feared programming with social commentary because these broadcasts might offend audiences and upset advertisers, thus pushing networks to air simple fantastical sitcoms or non-threatening variety shows. Television possessed serious limitations in its ability to editorialize on social issues, until the *Smothers Brothers* developed enough of a following and subsequent revenue to produce provocative content that pushed new types of subject matter forward.

The Smothers Brothers appeased the general audience early on by writing funny sketches that possessed two levels to which viewers responded to according to their generation. Josh Ozersky illustrated the *Smothers Brothers*' success at reaching all demographics when he explained, "'A Little Tea with Goldie,' for example, became an ongoing skit, in which (viewed from one angle) a San Francisco hippie girl hosted a ladies' daytime show in her far-out idiom; and (viewed from another angle) a hippie mole filled a TV-show monologue with covert reference to marijuana ("tea") and other hippie folkways."³¹ The brothers used this tactic of appealing to all members of the audience early in the show's history because they needed ratings to stay on the air. These *Smothers Brothers* sketches were some of the first on television to confront current social issues relevant to youth culture, which reflected a dramatic change in television programming.

Carefully crafting their comedy to both youth and the older generation, they developed an audience that brought their show to number one. Once they established a following, however, the brothers became much more subversive in their humor as they attempted to become the voice of the ideological youth. Josh Ozersky once again

³¹ Ibid, 36.

illustrated this point when he explained that the brothers believed, “they were champions of that audience fighting for its right to be heard, for its fair share of the nations’ attention.”³² *The Smothers Brothers* decision to write for the youth instead of a general audience by writing political and social critiques caused friction with CBS executives due to issues of content. The brothers possessed a previously untapped audience, but it is important to understand that they did not create it; they only catered to it.

The sketches with “Goldie the hippie,” seemed benign, but as time went on the show became more controversial, especially in view of their attitudes toward the Vietnam War. The brothers produced a sketch where two frogs conversed, one green the other “red”. The green frog kept telling the “red” frog that he could not live, could not exist, because if one “red” frog lived in the swamp they would eventually take over the swamp. This scene clearly parodied the political theory of the communist domino effect where if one country became communist, all the surrounding countries would follow.³³ CBS President Frank Stanton became infuriated with sketches like these, and CBS’s relationship with the White House only created more of a conflict between the Smothers Brothers and CBS.³⁴

In another sketch, two soldiers fought in Vietnam while a voice from above, named “Jim Freedom” gave a speech about the various reasons they fought in the war such as “Mom’s apple pie and hot dogs.” By the end of Jim Freedom’s oration, one soldier went to the other and said, “I understand now. I’m not afraid anymore. I can kill, but I still can’t vote?” *The Smothers Brothers* position in the ratings and their variety

³² Ibid, 35.

³³ Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour, CBS 1967-1969.

³⁴ Maureen Muldaur, ed., *Smothered: The Censorship Struggles of the Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour*, 2002, documentary.

show format allowed them to venture into material no one had ever previously broadcast on television. The ability to produce sketches with new characters allowed the brothers to broadcast various themes that could not air with the static fictional characters of sitcoms. The more the *Smothers Brothers* drifted into political material, however, the more network censors became involved in battles of content and guest stars.³⁵

Overtly denouncing the domino effect or taking jabs at the government for not being able to vote had never aired on television before. A decade before the *Smothers Brothers*, only a few shows dealt with the Cold War and most did not air long. *The Smothers Brothers* actively attacked CBS and the United States, representing a change in overall content for television. Before this show no television program actually questioned the harsh realities of the world and instead focused on utopian settings with idyllic families. Television, for the first time, represented this change in social consciousness against the status quo among the population.

Tommy Smothers, building upon established variety show principles, realized that guest acts that appealed to youth culture would help his show achieve cultural relevancy. Acts like Jefferson Airplane and Simon and Garfunkel gave the show a certain credibility in engaging the younger generation. The brothers, however, invited other guests who performed extremely controversial material which CBS tried to censor. CBS eliminated portions of shows because of these broadcasts, leading to discord with the brothers who continued to invite controversial guests.

The Smothers Brothers created controversy with CBS when they demanded that blacklisted singer Pete Seeger perform one of his provocative songs on the show. CBS originally denied Seeger a spot on the *Smothers Brothers*, but after months of arguments,

³⁵ *Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour*, CBS 1967-1969.

eventually relented and allowed him to perform “Waist Deep in the Big Muddy”. As part of the song he uttered the lines, “...every time I read the papers/That old feelin’ comes on—/We’re waist deep in the Big Muddy/And the big fool says to push on.” The “Big Fool” symbolized President Lyndon Johnson, and this performance ultimately infuriated CBS.

The antagonism between the brothers and the network over artists like Pete Seeger only instigated the brothers to invite more controversial pop-culture stars that made politically motivated statements on the show. Before Joan Baez performed her song, “Green Grass of Home,” she dedicated the performance to her husband who had been imprisoned because he refused to enter the military. CBS became incensed over this line and forced the Smothers brothers to edit her speech. Tommy Smothers responded by editing out only the reason why Baez’s husband had been jailed and not the entire speech; CBS cancelled the entire program. Television only airs what already exists. In this instance, the Smothers Brothers did not create the viewpoints of these guests, they only offered them a platform.³⁶

When Harry Belafonte appeared as a guest on the show CBS did not even offer Tommy Smothers a chance to edit the footage. The brothers wanted Harry Belafonte to sing “Lord Please Don’t Stop the Carnival,” and footage from the Chicago riots of 1968 were to be superimposed in the background. CBS objected to any footage depicting violence. *The Smothers Brothers* taped Harry Belafonte singing with the riots in the background anyway, and CBS responded by canceling the entire segment. This incident exemplifies why television reflects greater culture and gives voice to preexisting

³⁶ Ibid

movements. The Smothers Brothers reacted to society by allowing popular artists with social messages to perform; they did not create these messages and images.

Following the cancellation of this segment Tommy Smothers immediately went to Jack Gould of the *New York Times* to make these censorship wars public. Ozersky explained, “At least as significant, if not more so, than the show itself. The news made the front page of the *New York Times*, whose television writer, Jack Gould, had been one of the show’s champions...The cancellation of the show was seen by many inside the industry as a peace offering to the government after the Chicago convention debacle.”³⁷ *The Smothers Brothers* did not win this particular battle over content; however, their ability to make their problems public brought issues of censorship to the masses. *The Smothers Brothers* could not beat the CBS juggernaut, but they allowed the public to question censorship and these questions eventually led to a shift in network ideology over content.

By April of 1969, CBS canceled the *Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour* because of an apparent breach of contract; “The CBS action with respect to the *Smothers Brothers* actually arose from an administrative annoyance.”³⁸ The bottom line as Jack Gould explained “was the climax of many weeks of unpublicized in-fighting aimed at ‘cleaning up’ television.”³⁹ CBS canceled the *Smothers Brothers*, even though they continued to reach the top ten in the Nielson ratings and maintained both their audience and advertisers. The network executives at CBS felt that the show had become too much trouble in terms of censorship and content, and when the brothers handed in the 1969 season finale to Standards and Practices two days late, CBS fired them.

³⁷ Josh Ozersky, *Archie Bunker’s America: TV in an Era of Change, 1968-1978*, 38-39.

³⁸ Jack Gould, “Mavericks and How to Smother Them,” *The New York Times*, 4/13/69, D19.

³⁹ Ibid

After their cancellation the *Smothers Brothers* made their battles public and launched a lawsuit against CBS, which they ended up winning. Jack Gould of the *New York Times* believed CBS wronged the brothers with their abrupt cancellation. As Gould explained in one of his articles, “Young viewers...are entitled to proportional representation...That they [Smothers Brothers] should be summarily blipped off the air deserves contemplation and reappraisal once last week’s emotions have cooled off and there can be a fresh look at what their departure could mean, not to themselves alone but to TV as a whole.”⁴⁰ This public debate eventually changed the thinking of network executives who decided that in order for the medium to survive and maintain relevance, programming needed to cater to the audience.

CBS insisted throughout the show’s lifetime that certain segments and jokes could not air because many would find these sketches and performances offensive. The network, however, failed to realize that the show would not have survived without a great deal of viewer support. CBS’s struggle with the *Smothers Brothers* neglected to address the needs of the viewers, and what they wanted from television; the *Smothers Brothers* would never have aired for three seasons without strong audience support. Robert Dallos of the *New York Times* illustrated that the popularity of controversial television resulted from audience desires—and not from provocative performers. Dallos explained this through an interview with Robert D. Kasmire, vice president for corporate information at NBC when he said, “If TV is more permissive, it is because the audience—indeed the whole society is going along...Girls are wearing miniskirts, universities and colleges are more permissive. It is the whole attitude toward sex. We try to keep up with those social

⁴⁰ Ibid

changes.”⁴¹ CBS neglected the audience’s needs, and instead decided to broadcast proper material in *their* minds. *The Smothers Brothers* reflected the desires and thoughts of an underrepresented youth culture, and their censorship struggles with CBS ultimately led to even more revolutionary television programming in the years following their show.

The cancellation of the *Smothers Brothers* offers an example of the limitations of the medium, showing that not only must the viewers’ and advertisers’ needs be fulfilled, but the network and their censors as well. For programs to last on television they must have the support of all of these groups or face cancellation. Even popular shows like the *Smothers Brothers* cannot exist unless they appease all these elements. Herein lies the structural limitation of the medium; it remains extremely difficult to satisfy all of these entities while broadcasting provocative material. Most shows, therefore, must broadcast to the lowest common denominator and run the risk of being limited in their ability to critique society.

History remembers the *Smothers Brothers* as one of the more provocative television show of the late 1960’s, but its counterpart *Martin and Rowan’s Laugh-In* also appealed to youth culture through its relevant political humor. *Laugh-In*, a quick moving variety show with an enormous cast of stars, approached its humor much more even-handedly and avoided content battles with the networks by not targeting any one particular group. Instead, they poked fun of nearly every group or political party. The show’s constantly moving format and quick wit allowed for controversial material to appear but the audience did not have enough time to become offended. *Laugh-In* simply found a format that did not directly appear confrontational or consciously attacking, and therefore, people did not become uncomfortable. As Ozersky explained, “Its satire and

⁴¹ Robert Dallos, “TV’s Quiet Revolution: Censors Giving In”, *The New York Times*, 4/29/69, 86.

topical humor—it was all in good fun, as the speed with which it moved away from any one joke attested. Where the brothers had been pointed and polemical, even didactic, in their support of the antiwar cause, *Laugh-In* took on the trappings of the youth culture—its jargon, its irreverence, its energy.”⁴² *Laugh-In* followed the precedents of older variety shows in that Rowan and Martin realized their program had to appeal to a wide spectrum of viewers while simultaneously appeasing the network and their sponsors. Their ability to move from joke to joke allowed them to attack certain groups without appearing offensive. This approach gave the show more staying power and created the model to present controversial material.

Laugh-In succeeded because it used a much more balanced approach in dealing with serious issues such as politics. Dan Rowan described the show’s philosophy in regards to controversial material as opposed to the *Smothers Brothers* when he stated, ““You take the *Smothers Brothers*—they use a lot of political material, but it’s all slanted. We don’t slant ours. If we knock LBJ or the Vietnam War, we knock Ronnie Reagan too. Our writers, for instance—and we’ve got about 10 of them—run from right to left, Far Right to Far Left. Our chief writer writes speeches for Richard Nixon.””⁴³ The show’s ability to keep a neutral political ideology enabled the broadcasts of more controversial material than the *Smothers Brothers*. Rowan and Martin made certain they staffed writers from all various political spectrums, far right and far left, to invite all of America to laugh. The show’s even-handed approach toward socially relevant material ensured that viewers would not be seriously offended by the show.

⁴² Josh Ozersky, *Archie Bunker’s America: TV in an Era of Change, 1968-1978*, 40-41.

⁴³ Calvin Kentfield, “Far Right, Far Left and Far Out”, *The New York Times*, 4/14/68, D19.

Laugh-In probably aired more questionable material than the *Smothers Brothers* because of their attitude, format, and approach to the censors. *Laugh-In*'s style pushed forward new material and proved that television could achieve social relevance and editorialize society by producing non-threatening material. *Laugh-In* referenced Joan Baez as did the *Smothers Brothers*, but instead of airing a five-minute segment *Laugh-In* wrote a five-second joke as "Goldie Hawn stared saucer-eyed into the camera and chirped 'I love Joan Baez. I've even got a set of her fingerprints!'"⁴⁴ Dan Rowan explained the differences in thinking when he suggested, "Tommy Smothers used comedy as a platform for a doctrine, *Laugh-In* used doctrine as a platform for the comedy...*The Smothers Brothers* made specific savage attacks on a limited selection of sacred cows...*Laugh-In* threw its political gags in the same stew as everything else, spewing out jokes at such a rapid rate that the audience didn't have time to be offended."⁴⁵ The experience of the *Laugh-In*'s producers enabled them to "play ball" with the censors, which allowed for more questionable material to air.⁴⁶ This resulted in much more socially relevant material and helped push the boundaries of television censorship. *Laugh-In* lasted longer and became more critically acclaimed because it presented a more balanced approach to comedy. Its need for balanced comedy proved that television possessed serious limitations, but the agreement of producers to work within television's framework enabled more satirical material to air.

⁴⁴ Hal Erickson, "From Beautiful Downtown Burbank" (Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Company, Inc., 2000, 18.

⁴⁵ Ibid, 16.

⁴⁶ Ibid, 18.

The Socially Relevant Sitcom

The popularity of the *Smothers Brothers* and *Laugh-In* proved to network executives that television could be socially relevant, and if produced in a certain manner could be inoffensive. These shows' popularity also demonstrated that advertisers would sponsor them because they offered a new and previously neglected demographic, baby boomers. The networks no longer needed to conform to archaic censorship codes and could explore much more socially relevant material. CBS President Wood's speech in 1970, a year after CBS cancelled *Smothers Brothers*, indicated that television finally could produce provocative material without fear or reprisal from advertisers and viewers as evident when he said:

“The winds of change are at a gale force. Everything is being tested and challenged...For television to stand still while all this is happening is to be out of touch with the times...The days are gone when we can afford to be imitative rather than innovative. Indeed, if we are not only to lead but to survive, we must be responsive to the forms and concepts of today. We...have to attract new viewers, viewers who are part of every generation, viewers who reflect the growing degree of education and sophistication that characterizes American society...We are taking a young fresh, new approach to programming. We're not going to be afraid to try the untried.”⁴⁷

Wood's drive to change his networks programming philosophy suggested a television-wide revolution that now encouraged relevant material. By 1970, the *Smothers Brothers* had been cancelled and *Laugh-In's* momentum started to fade. CBS executives believed

⁴⁷ Josh Ozersky, *Archie Bunker's America: TV in an Era of Change, 1968-1978*, 52.

that a sitcom could achieve cultural relevancy if the fictional characters possessed realistic characteristics; television no longer needed a bewitched wife to drive ratings.

The “magicoms” of the 1960’s that replaced the moralistic family became stale by 1970; and network executives, building upon the popularity of hits like culturally significant *Laugh-In* and *Smothers Brothers* variety shows, tried to bring that spirit and relevancy into the sitcom family. CBS found its culturally relevant sitcom when Norman Lear, a prominent Hollywood writer and producer, pitched an idea about a bigot who lived with his liberal son-in-law called *All In the Family*. Using a fictional sitcom allowed Lear to discuss realistic issues without threatening the audience. When Tommy Smothers attacked the government, *he* criticized the government, which made network executives and audiences uneasy. A fictional character in a sitcom did not threaten audiences because it was not real. The audience could react only to the issues and fictional characters without reacting to a particular person. When *All in the Family* aired, the sitcom changed its approach. Instead of creating fictional characters that did not live in society, e.g. *Batman*, CBS aired a series using fictional characters who might actually live next door in a row house in Queens. *All in the Family* possessed a more inherent sense of reality than other shows; Archie Bunker was one of the first characters on television to resemble someone’s actual neighbor.

The Smothers Brothers’ approach disenfranchised many viewers and CBS because politics replaced comedy. Through the fictional sitcom, however, the show’s political message became part of the comedy. Arnold Hano of the *New York Times* explained this concept when he stated, “Fifty million Americans are being told, week after week, it does you no good to be a bigot. You end up where you begin, plagued by

fears and doubts, confused by a world you refuse to accept, clinging to a world that no longer exists. And it is done with laughter...It is to America's credit that satire is succeeding on that unlikeliest of media, TV."⁴⁸ Television, up until the late 1960's, never offered satirical critiques similar to novels or film because of the conservative nature of the networks. By 1970, the power of television as a satirical medium started to develop, and CBS led this innovative programming. *All in the Family* flourished because it dealt with social issues similar to *Laugh-In* by writing balanced material that all viewers could appreciate.

Norman Lear surrounded himself with people such as former *Smothers Brothers* writer Rob Reiner and used tactics similar to those employed by the writers of *Laugh-In* in order to maneuver around the censors and air important satirical critiques. Ozersky explained Lear's capacity to work with the censors when he stated, "Tankersly [the CBS head censor] was mollified by a few minor concessions on sexual matters, such as an opening scene in which son-in-law Mike is seen coming downstairs zipping his fly. Lear gave in these points, which were in all probability put in solely as bargaining chips with Tankersly in mind. No political material was removed."⁴⁹ Lear's craftiness and CBS's desire to broadcast relevant material, along with the eagerness of the viewers and sponsors, enabled television to air much more satirical and controversial material.

All in the Family succeeded in producing quality political satire without offending the audience because it possessed the even-handedness that the *Smothers Brothers* lacked. For every one of Archie's politically incorrect statements, another character would immediately prove Archie wrong; establishing a balance since all sides of an issue

⁴⁸ Arnold Hano, "Can Archie Bunker Give Bigotry A Bad Name?," *New York Times*, 4/12/1972, SM 32.

⁴⁹ Josh Ozersky, *Archie Bunker's America: TV in an Era of Change, 1968-1978*, 64.

were presented much the same way as *Laugh-In* with their neutral and quick political humor. *All in the Family* presented topics never had previously broadcast. Words such as “fag, queer, spic, spade, hebe” became commonplace on the show and worked because the foolishness of Archie’s logic always appeared. In one episode Archie confronted Mike about his friend, who he believed was a homosexual because of his dress, voice, and politics. Mike tried explaining the falsities of Archie’s logic, but nothing changed his mind. Archie discovers later in that episode one of his friends, a big strong ex-football player, was actually homosexual and he did not know throughout the ten-year-long friendship.⁵⁰ CBS cancelled the *Smothers Brothers* because the brothers lost perspective and balance and only broadcast one-sided statements, while Norman Lear ensured that Archie Bunker was proven wrong with each slur that he uttered.

Norman Lear’s hit show established great popularity because the show made certain that all viewers laughed. Laura Hobson of the *New York Times* explained, “And of course it was the essential trick, to make this show laughable not only to the bigots among that 100 million out there, but also to the ‘bigotees,’ the very Hebes and coons and spades and spics and Polacks themselves. Do you think that any nations’ blacks would laugh if Archie Bunker constantly said nigger?”⁵¹ *All in the Family*’s ability to balance its humor by making fun of all types of people allowed for the viewers to laugh without taking offense to the material. Archie’s tone allowed for all viewers to embrace the show. Although, this even-handedness might have limited all of the show’s satirical capabilities, it demonstrated that television could be a powerful satirical medium.

⁵⁰ All in the Family, CBS

⁵¹ Laura Hobson, “As I Listened to Archie Say ‘Hebe’ ...,” *New York Times*, 9/12/71, D1.

All in the Family became important because it proved that television could critique society, remain relevant, and last on the air. Television, through the late 1960's and early 1970's, evolved because of societal changes and satirical pioneers who demonstrated that television could tackle established social issues if done with proper balance. When television first ventured into heavily critiquing society with the *Smothers Brothers* and *Laugh-In*, the variety show offered the best medium to discuss these issues because of its ever-moving and quick-witted approach. During the late 1960's the sitcoms encompassed a fantasy world that remained ill equipped to tackle these social issues. After the precedent of the variety shows, networks executives realized that if they constructed a sitcom that possessed a more realistic setting, it could achieve even deeper satire because the characters would seem real.

The reason why *All in the Family* became so important was that it led an entire generation in television relevancy. *All in the Family* offered something catering exclusively to the baby-boomer generation and allowed television to focus on social issues. Furthermore, this time period in American culture was about changing how people saw the world. Jack Gould of the *New York Times* illustrated the significance of the show as he explained, "Some of Archie's words may chill the spine, but to root out bigotry has defied man's best efforts for generations and the weapon of laughter might just succeed." *All in the Family* gave the baby-boomers a voice and expressed what they had so desperately fought for: change.

The show's dialogues, especially between Archie Bunker and his son-in-law Mike Stivic, entertained audiences because it represented real political arguments between provincial and progressive thinkers during that time period. These debates help to

describe to the viewer the absolute absurdity of these racist viewpoints as illustrated in this particular match of verbal sparring:

Archie: Your mother-in-law and me is people. Help *us* and go to work!

Mike: I know what's bothering you. You're upset because I was nailing you on that law and order thing.

Archie: You was nailing *me*?

Mike: Yeah, that's right, and now I'm going to tell you something. I know I promised, Gloria, but I feel I got to say this. You know why we have a breakdown of law and order in this country, Archie? Because we got poverty, real poverty. And you know why we got that? Because guys like you are unwilling to give the black man, the Mexican American, and all the other minorities their just and rightful hard-earned share of the American dream!

Archie: Now let me tell you something. If your spics and your spades want their share of the American dream, let them go out and hustle for it, just like I done.

Mike: Now I suppose you're going to tell me that the black man has had as much opportunity in this country as you.

Archie: More, he's had more! I didn't have no million people out there marching and protesting to get me my job!

Edith: No, his uncle got it for him. (huge laugh from audience)⁵²

These opposing viewpoints created conflict differing from past sitcoms that focused more on plot and not overt dissension.

All in the Family's popularity not only proved to network executives that socially relevant programming could thrive, but also that other genres such as the "magicoms"

⁵² Josh Ozersky, *Archie Bunker's America: TV in an Era of Change, 1968-1978*, 67-68.

and rural sitcoms such as the *Beverly Hillbillies*, *Green Acres*, *The Jim Nabors Hour*, *Hee Haw*, and *Mayberry R.F.D.*, no longer represented the general viewing tastes of the American public. Institutional acts, such as the *Jackie Gleason*, *Red Skelton*, and even *Ed Sullivan*, had been canceled. Socially relevant programs replaced more conservative shows that presented escapist themes and variety shows that represented the previous generation.

Building upon the precedents of past programs, executives like CBS President Robert Wood decided to reuse already proven sitcom formulas and tweak them to make new shows. *Sanford and Son*, also created by Norman Lear, was the first show to use the *All in the Family* model focusing on a black junk dealer and his son who lived in Watts, and dealt with social issues, the government, and the economy in similar ways to *All in the Family*. Multiple-Lear produced spin-offs followed *Sanford and Son* and many quickly jumped to the top of the Nielson ratings. *Maude*, a woman on her fourth marriage, presented many female issues that had previously proved taboo on the air such as abortion, menopause, and alcoholism. *Good Times*, another Lear sitcom spun-off from *Maude*, focused on Maude's maid who raised her family in the housing projects of Chicago while confronting the many tribulations of that environment. *The Jeffersons*, furthermore, focused on the Bunkers' neighbors and portrayed George Jefferson as a near parallel to Archie, except that he disliked whites.

These programmers recognized this genre could be replicated, which allowed socially relevant programs to become a staple of early 1970's television. As Josh Ozersky explained, "Wood's gamble had paid off. More significantly, it had given 'realistic' conflict-based comedy the beacon glow of proven success; as with *The Beverly*

Hillbillies earlier, pilots by the hundreds and series by the dozens attempted to emulate it. None had the transcendent success of the original; but by then, they didn't need to."⁵³ *All in the Family* pushed what was considered decent, and its spin-offs went further into that direction as boundaries were removed. This trend made television much more open to satirizing society and the government, which was important when one compares programming of the early 1970's to the censorship wars that finished the *Smothers Brothers* only a few years earlier.

The ratings for 1971-1972 demonstrate a dramatic change in television. *All in the Family* ranked number one, Flip Wilson, a young black comic ranked two, and Norman Lear's second show *Sanford and Son* debuted at number five. Three of the top five shows dealt either with a socially relevant person or had socially pertinent subject matter. Television had dramatically changed from the age of fantastical worlds or clean-cut comedians, and now focused on issues stemming from the movements of the late 1960's. Racism, feminism, and sexuality all started to receive air time and had the mass public watching.

The changes in programming signified that the public wanted shows that related to their world. Ozersky explained the removal of fantastical shows and old time institutional acts, "By ventilating television entertainments with outside issues, the swirling whirlwinds of discontent and social unrest had blown the stale air right out...The outbursts and "disturbances' of the 1960's were now understood to be neither transitional nor exceptional but rather the state of the union: the fact that so pragmatic a man as Wood was impelled to give new programming the green light attests to the changes afoot

⁵³ Ibid, 70.

in America.”⁵⁴ *All in the Family* signified a dramatic shift in how television was presented to viewers, and these changes allowed for satirical programs that followed the opportunity to attack social institutions.

By the mid 1970’s the socially relevant sitcom lost its momentum, as it had become the norm of television programs instead of the leader. Eventually shows like *All in the Family*, *Sanford and Son*, *Maude*, and *The Jeffersons* followed the pattern of past genres, like the moralistic family, magicoms, and sitcoms with rural environments, and no longer provided television with a new style of looking at the world. Ozersky explained that, “All of these shows conspicuously lacked the electric quality of ‘hipness,’ the thing that supposedly separated cultural elites from the hoi polloi and had been behind the most visceral objections to TV by the young a decade earlier.”⁵⁵ During this time period, television executives began to look for a new type of program to revitalize the industry once again.

Saturday Night Live

NBC approached Lorne Michaels, a writer for *Rowan and Martin’s Laugh-In* and other network specials, to helm a late night variety show that would replace Johnny Carson reruns on Saturday nights. Michaels believed that he could create a show that possessing the hip-ness and social relevance of *Laugh-In*, and went out and found some of the best writers and performers in improv and off-Broadway. Once again, Michaels’ *Saturday Night Live* used the same formats that Jack Benny and other comedians created and followed similar approaches in terms of cultural relevancy to *Laugh-In* and the *Smothers Brothers*. He pushed television boundaries, however, in regard to material,

⁵⁴ Ibid, 76.

⁵⁵ Ibid, 138.

making the show live, and placing it in New York in late night. Viewers fervently welcomed this next evolution in programming material—and this popularity allowed for the writers and cast members of the show to push further the boundaries of acceptability.

Not only did Michaels want his show to have popular celebrities, but he also demanded that the show be aired live and in New York. Most of the entertainment industry had moved out West to Los Angeles and taped its shows. The live show was novel for this time period, and Michaels realized that New York would offer a fresh attitude and would give television a newfound spontaneity. The live format also differed from shows like the *Smothers Brothers* because it made it much more difficult for censors to stop material from airing. If CBS had green-lighted a sketch for the *Smothers Brothers*, they still had the option of deleting it before air; *Saturday Night Live* did not have those restrictions, which allowed it to work without the creative restraints that Tom and Dick Smothers had a few years earlier.

Michaels, furthermore, realized that in order to attract a strong viewing audience and have social relevancy, he would need weekly guests from film, television, and music to help with the show. Hosts like George Carlin, Andy Kaufmann, and Richard Pryor gave the show instant credibility, as did musical guests such as George Harrison. The cast members collected from National Lampoons' touring company and Second City Chicago added new elements to television. These actors and writers matured on stage where they were given more freedoms in terms of content compared with television. When they were placed on television, they gave the medium a freshness and new perspective to represent culture. As NBC green-lighted *Saturday Night* for the fall of

1975, the format, producers, cast members, and celebrity guests allowed the show to expand prior limits and revolutionize television in the process.

The show's placement in late night allowed the material to be a little more cutting, but not as offensive because of the particular viewing audience at that hour. Michaels "wanted to have the first television to speak the language of the time. He wanted the show to be the first show in the history of television to talk—absent expletives—the same language being talked on college campuses and streets and everywhere else."⁵⁶ *Saturday Night Live's* fearlessness in regards to network censors allowed the show to be at the forefront of pop culture, which in turn set the tone for other shows to venture into new and uncharted territory.

Saturday Night Live's format used sketch comedy, which was older than the medium of television, but its method of performing the various sketches changed television. The show used burlesque tendencies to critique culture; this type of humor had been in its infancy on television. *Saturday Night Live's* late time slot, 11:30 pm, along with its surging popularity, allowed for words such as "penis" and "vagina" to air for the first time ever. As Tom Shales and James Andrew Miller explained, "NBC censors were virtually forced by the program's surging popularity to become less strict—this was well before people could say 'pissed off' or 'that sucks' on television—and as other programs took advantage of the liberation, a new candor and a new realism came to American TV."⁵⁷ *Saturday Night Live* not only had the medium and format, but also had the popularity and innovative atmosphere to push boundaries that changed television standards.

⁵⁶ Tom Shales and James Andrew Miller, *Live From New York: An Uncensored History of Saturday Night Live* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2002), 20.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 95.

One of the most pronounced sketches of *Saturday Night Live*'s satire was Richard Pryor's hosting the show. He took part in a sketch where he applied for a job with Chevy Chase as the interviewer. Chase would give a word and see how Pryor would react, and throughout the sketch, Pryor becomes increasingly angry.

Chase: White?

Pryor: Black.

Chase: Negro?

Pryor: Whitey.

Chase: Colored?

Pryor: Redneck.

Chase: Tarbaby?

Pryor: Peckerwood.

Chase: Spearchucker?

Pryor: White trash.

Chase: Junglebunny?

Pryor: Honkey.

Chase: Nigger?

Pryor: *Dead honkey*.⁵⁸

Not even *All in the Family* used words and dialogues that were as acerbic as sketches seen on *Saturday Night Live*. Norman Lear preferred words like “spade” instead of the “nigger”, and this semantic change shows how much television had shifted as a medium even in five years.

⁵⁸ *Saturday Night Live*, NBC, 1976.

Sketch characters like the pedophilic baby-sitter Uncle Roy and Fred Garvin, Male Prostitute, proved that television could venture into more risqué material, be the most popular show on television, and maintain advertising revenue. Also, Chevy Chase's Gerald Ford impersonation as a bumbling, incoherent idiot was one of the first ever nationally televised impressions of a President. Shales and Miller explained, "In those first five years, *Saturday Night Live* not only had probably its best cast ever, but also the best and ballsiest collection of writers. The sketch form was older than television itself, but the way they approached it, bent it and shaped it, was their own, and it resulted in sketches that are remembered vividly to this day by the first generation of *SNL* viewers."⁵⁹ Because *Saturday Night Live* was a variety show, it did not have to focus on one specific topic and could parody many issues because of its constant set and character changes with each sketch. This movement that *Laugh-In* utilized so well in the late 1960's gave *Saturday Night Live* the ability to parody various sectors of society without dedicating an entire sitcom episode to a few social points. The quickness of the show enabled new satirical heights to be achieved and created new precedents that later shows successfully employed. *Saturday Night Live* also had a tremendous legacy in the entertainment industry as a whole because many Harvard writers worked for the show and would soon invade the rest of Hollywood, funneling many of its writers to shows like *The Simpsons*. Even former *Simpsons* writer and talk show host Conan O'Brien wrote for the *Harvard Lampoon* and *Saturday Night Live* before working on *The Simpsons*.

Without the precedents of 1970's television, the medium as a whole could not have progressed in terms of satire. Even though television does not offer itself a complete freedom from censorship, the progress created by people like Norman Lear and Lorne

⁵⁹ Ibid, 122-123.

Michaels allowed for a more intimate reflection of society than could have ever been achieved prior to their debuts. Shows like the *Simpsons* would never have aired if it had not been for the triumphs and popularities of television in the 1970's.

These daring comedies were only part of large-scale programming. *Saturday Night Live* and *All in the Family* were in fact extremely popular but there were also shows that followed a much more conservative sitcom and variety show format. The *Brady Bunch*, for instance, was a long running show devoted to family comedy; it was more or less a 1970's version of *Leave it to Beaver*. The difference, though, for this study are shows that constantly pushed the boundaries of television. These controversial programs paved the way for other shows to move in that direction, even though some maintained the idea of traditional family values. Not every show on television resembled *Saturday Night Live* or *All in the Family*, yet the precedents that these shows established did change the way that television critiques society. Furthermore, shows like *All in the Family* and *Saturday Night Live* could not have sustained themselves and pushed those boundaries had they not had the public support and the approval of sponsors and the networks. These shows reflected the desires of that era as is evident in their material; however, these shows could only reacted to the culture of that particular time period.

The Simpsons

The Creation of the FOX Network and the Birth of America's Favorite Animated Family

The Simpsons are a case study useful to understand the inherent limitations of the medium and also to comprehend how *The Simpsons* developed satirical commentary eluding previous programs. To analyze *The Simpsons* and place in its proper context, one must first understand how the show derived and how it achieved so much success in

terms of content and its social critiques. This section will investigate how *The Simpsons* incorporated animation, the variety show, and the sitcom—along with acknowledging FOX’s role in the show’s creation to understand why the show was considered revolutionary. This section will further analyze precisely how *The Simpsons* critiques society in ways that pushed television’s previous boundaries.

The creation of the FOX network and their attitudes toward programming offer an understanding of how *The Simpsons* broadcast material and used content not previously existing on television. FOX, from its outset, wanted to be different from NBC, CBS, and ABC. Hilton-Morrow and McMahan explained the original strategy when they said, “When FOX came onto the scene in 1986, it developed a very simple programming strategy—to be the alternative to the ‘Big Three’ networks. Jamie Kellner, president of FOX Broadcasting, outlined the most important rule at the upstart of the network: ‘If it would work on one of the other networks, we don’t want it.’”⁶⁰ FOX realized that it could never defeat the three other networks for overall viewership, at least not immediately, so instead it decided to follow ABC’s strategy from the 1960’s, which was to target the 18-49-year-old demographic.⁶¹

One of the television producers that FOX brought in as it was developing programming was James L. Brooks. Brooks attained a respected status among television programmers because he “along with Normal Lear (and Brook’s then-partner Allan Burns), was credited with inventing the ‘socially relevant’ sitcom of the 1970’s through

⁶⁰ Wendy Hilton-Morrow and David T. McMahan, “The Flintstones to Futurama: Networks and Prime Time Animation,” in *Prime Time Animation: Television Animation and American Culture*, Stabile and Harrison ed., (New York: Routledge, 2003), 82.

⁶¹ *Ibid*, 82.

such groundbreaking series as *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, *Rhoda*, and *Taxi*.”⁶² FOX believed that Brooks’ background would be essential “[because] the fledgling fourth TV network’s counter-and niche-programming strategies were nothing new [to Brooks]. They [Fox’s programs] were firmly rooted in the traditions of ‘quality demographics’ and ‘quality television’ which, ironically, Brooks himself had helped usher in two decades before.”⁶³ FOX relied on experienced producers to create programming to attract the 18-49 demographic and allow Fox to develop as a powerful network, which was why they created daring and adventurous programs like *Married with Children* and *In Living Color*.

One of the first shows FOX aired was *The Tracy Ullman Show*, a constantly-moving sketch comedy show. James L. Brooks invited a cartoonist, Matt Groening, who achieved fame for his *Life In Hell* comic strip, to write “bumpers”⁶⁴ for *The Tracy Ullman show*. As Alberti explained, “It was Brooks’ clout—along with the leeway offered by a new network willing to tolerate a certain amount of experimentation in order to attract younger viewers—that allowed Groening’s biting satire on the spiritual hollowness and mindless conformity of suburban Christianity to appear on prime-time television. These shorts quickly led to a Christmas special in late 1989 and finally to the appearance in early 1990 of *The Simpsons*.”⁶⁵

FOX realized that it had to be different in regards to its programming and programming style in order to attract viewers. As Nancy Cartwright, the voice of Bart

⁶² Vincent Brook, “Myth or Consequences: Ideological Fault Lines in *The Simpsons*,” in *Leaving Springfield*, Alberti ed., (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2004), 174.

⁶³ Ibid, 176.

⁶⁴ A bumper is the television industry term for a block of time from the broadcast of the show and the commercials.

⁶⁵ John Alberti ed., *Leaving Springfield*, xii.

Simpson explained, “FOX had worked hard to create its reputation, a reputation for doing things differently—a reputation designed to snare a ‘lost audience’ that had no home. It was the only card they had to play, after all, fighting the uphill battle against...the reigning networks.” FOX used *The Simpsons* bumpers as a way to attract a new audience; they wanted “to try something unique that had never been one before in an industry where ‘everything had been done before.’”⁶⁶ This attitude enabled FOX to blend elements of the sitcom, the variety show, and animation together to create a revolutionary type of program with more opportunities to critique society than had ever been created.

The Historical Precedents of The Simpsons

Prime-time animation did not originate with *The Simpsons* and the FOX network; it became established in the 1960’s with Hanna-Barbera’s *The Flintstones* and *The Jetsons* as well as with Jay Ward’s *Rocky and Bullwinkle*. *The Simpsons* capitalized on features of animation of its predecessors by exploiting images appealing to younger viewers as well as implementing dialogues and plots to interest adults. Mullen illustrated this concept, saying, “As with its Hanna-Barbera predecessors, *The Simpsons* never fails to please children with its bright colors, comical characters, and slapstick antics. But every *Simpsons* episode is also packed with cultural references that address a very wide audience, an audience so diverse, in fact, that it seems unlikely that any single viewer could notice all of them.”⁶⁷ The creators of *The Simpsons* realized that animation’s innocence allowed for more risks to be taken in the writing and character development to enable *The Simpsons* to more directly satirize society.

⁶⁶ Nancy Cartwright, *My Life as a 10-Year-Old Boy*, 44.

⁶⁷ Megan Mullen, “The Simpsons and Hanna-Barbera’s Animation Legacy” in *Leaving Springfield*, John Alberti ed., 74.

The subversive family humor of *The Simpsons* redefined the sitcom's evolution. The fledgling sitcoms of the 1950's depicted the ideal family, followed by the magicoms of the 1960's, which explored the family in a fantastical light. The 1970's looked at the family more realistically with *All in the Family* and its spin-offs, but *The Simpsons* analyzed the family much more subversively by going inside the characters' minds; this technique could have been accomplished only through animation because voice-overs, flashbacks, and dream sequences work seamlessly compared to live action. The evolution of the sitcom and the advantages of animation have allowed *The Simpsons* to explore new levels of realism in regard to the family as new perspectives and viewpoints have been analyzed.

The Simpsons could not have survived as a sitcom, however, without its ability to function under the same primary rules that past sitcoms followed. Matt Groening and company still had to have strong viewership backing and maintain financial profitability for their advertisers. With the debut of *The Simpsons* America seemed ready for this edgy and confrontational television show, as Tueth explained, "The subversive view of the American family that started showing up...[in large part] because of the steady development among the viewing population. Viewers had come to expect...some presentation of alternative viewpoints and more-or-less direct challenges to the prevailing values and social norms."⁶⁸ As with the popularity of the *All in the Family* in the 1970's, *The Simpsons* could never have sustained itself on the airwaves if not for the readiness and attentiveness of the general public watching the show.

⁶⁸ Michael V. Tueth, "Back to the Drawing Board: The Family in Animated Television Comedy" in *Prime Time Animation: Television Animation and American Culture*, Carol A. Stabile and Mark Harrison ed., 133.

The Simpsons took the sitcom and all of its history and techniques—and exploited it using animation while also critiquing society, culture, and the family through a different lens. FOX built upon what previous creative writers and producers accomplished and reorganized it in a new way that challenged older societal views. Mullen explained this when she said, “[*The Simpsons*] certainly surprised audiences but clearly did not alienate them...Audiences were becoming used to the notion of live-action sitcoms challenging the status quo...[*The Simpsons*] use [d] animation to surpass the narrative capabilities of any of these live-action programs and thus to make some radical observations about the status quo.”⁶⁹ The basic premise of *The Simpsons* does not differ from that of nearly every sitcom, that the show revolves around family. As Sloane explained, “At its heart, the show is about family, and no matter how much the portrayal of *The Simpsons* satirizes or critiques the institution of the American family, the program continually comes back to reaffirm the bond between these people.”⁷⁰ *The Simpsons* simply takes an old format and revitalizes it through looking at the same subject through a different premise, but this perspective allows for much more “realistic” insight into society.

Simply analyzing the episode, ‘Make Room for Lisa,’ shows clearly the impact of *All in the Family* on *The Simpsons*. In this installment, Homer takes Lisa to the Smithsonian’s traveling presentation where Homer accidentally takes the Bill of Rights from an unprotected display and sits down to read it in Archie Bunker’s chair. Instantly

⁶⁹ Megan Mullen, “The Simpsons and Hanna-Barbera’s Animation Legacy” in *Leaving Springfield*, John Alberti ed., 66.

⁷⁰ Robert Sloane, “Who Wants Candy? Disenchantment in The Simpsons,” in *Leaving Springfield*, John Alberti ed., (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2004), 140.

two security guards attack Homer and attack him using language extremely similar to something that Archie Bunker would shout about:

Security Officer #1: Get out of Archie Bunker's chair. Now!

Homer: Relax! I'm just boning up on the old constitution.

Security Officer #2: Oh! You're going to regret that, Pinko! [Raises his billy club to strike Homer]

[Homer cowers, holding the Bill of Rights in front of his face]

Security Officer #1: I'm so sick of people hiding behind the Bill of Rights!

Security Officer #2: Look! He got chocolate on it!

Homer: I didn't mean to! Look! [Homer licks the chocolate off; unfortunately, some of the ink comes off as well]

Security Officer #1: Mn-hn. You just licked off the part that forbids cruel and unusual punishment.

Security Officer #2 [pounding brass knuckles into his palm]: Heh heh heh. Beautiful.⁷¹

Archie Bunker and all of Norman Lear's relevant programming created television precedent for analyzing society through the sitcom. *The Simpsons*, through its ability to incorporate history, such as old television programs and deceased personalities through animation, allowed television to analyze more deeply the realities of American society.

The Simpsons also incorporated fundamental principles used in variety shows such as *Saturday Night Live* and *Laugh-In* that allowed for the show to have culturally significant guests give the show social relevance—and could implement more

⁷¹ Kevin J.H. Dettmar, "Counter-cultural Literacy: Learning Irony with *The Simpsons*," in *Leaving Springfield*, John Alberti ed., (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2004), 87.

questionable jokes and characters because animation allowed objects and people to appear quickly without beleaguering the point. In the first few seasons alone, Penny Marshall, Danny DeVito, and Kelsey Grammar gave the show credibility and allowed for the plotlines to be more interesting. Since these actors had to work only in a sound studio, they did not have to spend much time away from their regular acting and production positions and their appearances also were not as costly because they were only lending their voices. As the stars of *Laugh-In* could quickly move from joke to joke during their “Joke Wall,” *The Simpsons* has the ability to have a character do something absurd in the middle of a dialogue without ruining the scene’s flow. For instance, Homer and Mr. Burns could be talking and Mr. Smithers could quickly escape into one of his Mr. Burns sexual fantasies without missing a beat. *The Simpsons* incorporated the free-moving style, ever-changing sets and characters, and guest stars to make the variety show an extremely important television genre.

The Simpsons’ debt to the variety show remains enormous, which was why it devoted an entire episode to parodying the 1960’s and 1970’s culturally-relevant programs *The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour*, *Laugh In*, and even *Saturday Night Live* in ‘The Simpsons Family Smile-Time Variety Hour.’ This episode features a dance ensemble known as the Springfield Baggy-Pants Players, referencing *Saturday Night Live’s* original ‘Not Ready for Prime-time Players.’ There are assorted allusions from all of these shows like “After the skit, there is a Laugh-In-like montage wherein other cast members comment on the skit itself; the seas captain McAllister does so as he opens a large porthole-like door in front of a colorful background, much like Laugh-In’s ‘Joke

Wall.’”⁷² *The Simpsons*’ writers realized that many of their original ideas built upon the precedents of these three shows, as well as nearly every other show ever to air. Not only does *The Simpsons* act as a forerunner into new types of programming, but it also reflects and carries with it much of television’s history. *The Simpsons* remains popular because it has the freedom to explore the virtues and foibles of modern culture.

The shows that preceded *The Simpsons* help to understand its role in television history, *The Simpsons* incorporates all of these elements: animation, the sitcom, and the variety show—along with FOX’s programming attitudes—to push the boundaries of television and comment on society. *The Simpsons* through its ability to incorporate all of these genres critiques society more deeply and analytically than other shows; however, it even with these freedoms, television as a medium can react only to culture due to the inherent limitations of the medium.

The Power of Animation

Animation remains one of the most distinct features of *The Simpsons* that allows itself to satirize society so poignantly without offending its audience. *The Simpsons* presents images that would thoroughly disturb the audience, but because animation seems innocent and does not create as much objection with its viewers, the scenes and jokes continue without angering the audience. Tueth explained this concept when he said, “The acceptability of the presentation lies in its inclusion of material which might otherwise disturb a viewer but which is easily incorporated into the cartoon format. [*The Simpsons*] would tend to offend viewers if presented in [live action], but their very

⁷² Robert Sloane, “Who Wants Candy? Disenchantment in *The Simpsons*,” in *Leaving Springfield*, John Alberti ed., 158.

exaggeration in animation they become ludicrous beyond offense.”⁷³ For example, the *Itchy and Scratchy* cartoons within *The Simpsons* demonstrate high levels of violence with decapitations, electrocutions, and death. The animated format, however, allows one to interpret these images as absurd, instead of becoming disgusted by the violence that these same images would if presented in live action because it would seem too gory, especially with all the blood in these vignettes.

One of the reasons that animation has been considered so successful in *The Simpsons* is that it “is not limited by the constraints of live action programs, it is free to incorporate a broader range of referential material, and stylistic devices which foreground construction over realism.”⁷⁴ The Simpson family can travel anywhere and come into contact with new characters every episode—and they have as the show has the freedom to travel to Japan, Brazil, and throughout the United States. Furthermore, the show’s multitude of characters, probably in the hundreds, allows for a depth in storylines that most live action shows cannot have because they are limited in their number of actors. *The Simpsons* transcended other sitcoms through its ability to manipulate the inherent freedoms of animation while conforming to FOX’s strategy for creating original and subversive programming.

Animation extends beyond the regular sitcom and creates the opportunity for writers and producers to explore settings that could never be accomplished through live action. As Bruning explained, “The artist creating animation is bound only by the limits of his...imagination. Animators may, and often do, use this freedom to incorporate extra-

⁷³ Michael V. Tueth, “Back to the Drawing Board: The Family in Animated Television Comedy” in *Prime Time Animation: Television Animation and American Culture*, Carol A. Stabile and Mark Harrison ed., 142.

⁷⁴ Jonathan Bruning, *Negotiating Complex Television: The Simpsons and Its Audience*, (University of Kansas Press, May 2002), 59.

textual material, invigorating the intertextual allusion. An animator's palate is unlimited—they may include guest appearances by world leaders without their approval, or create fantastic situations impossible with live-action.”⁷⁵ For example, in “Dacin’ Homer,” Homer becomes the mascot for the Springfield Isotopes, Springfield’s minor league baseball team. The show’s writers and producers need not worry about finding a stadium and packing it with extras to achieve these shots because the animation allows these images to be presented easily. This creative freedom allows endless possibilities for satire and humor that could never be achieved through a regular sitcom; understanding the differences between the two types is necessary to comprehend the power of *The Simpsons*’ humor.

Since the show takes six months to develop before it airs nationally, *The Simpsons*’ writers maintain a rather independent relationship, in regards to creativity from FOX. FOX creative executives do not have as much influence as they would for live action sitcoms because they do not have time to watch over a half-year period for just one episode. Matt Groening explained this in an interview when he said, “one of the reasons for this lack of network input, as compared to a traditional show, is that there is no set around which to congregate. Because of the disjointed and prolonged nature of each episode’s production, there is no central location at which network executives might focus their energies.”⁷⁶

The Simpsons, as with all animated sitcoms, circumvents cost conflicts limiting other programs when they want to change sets or have guest stars. Animation simply can add characters or scenes without worrying about the financial repercussions or wondering

⁷⁵ Ibid, 60.

⁷⁶ Robert Sloane, “Who Wants Candy? Disenchantment in *The Simpsons*,” in *Leaving Springfield*, John Alberti ed., 140-41.

if such a move will be profitable for the network. Furthermore, animation allows more freedom for the camera's point of view, shots that are either expensive or nearly impossible for a regular camera. Bruning explained these advantages of animation after he interviewed *The Simpsons* producer George Meyer: "If we want them to go to the Great Wall of China...it won't cost \$100,000'. Writers may include the likenesses of [celebrities and dignitaries] without their consent, or the cost...incurred by a physical appearance in live-action...Also, specific camera angles, or complex shot sequences, can be achieved with relatively little effort or expense."⁷⁷ *The Simpsons* can travel anywhere and welcome as many characters as it chooses; for example the Simpsons family encounter aliens on a spaceship in all of the "Treehouse of Horror" episodes. This freedom allows the show more creative freedom to expand upon television's previous limitations. One major reason why *The Simpsons* has been so popular and so edgy with its satire has been animation's ability to create images only possible through that medium.

The process through which the show starts from a script to a finished product seen on national television also allows *The Simpsons* to create wittier and often more topical humor. *The Simpsons'* gestation period is usually six months from the completion of the script to when the animators' finishing production of the show. The writers can change the script constantly to enhance the show in ways that other live action shows are prohibited from due to their creative nature. "Conan O'Brien explained the creative process:

We would start with a good script and then, page by page, comb through it: 'That could

⁷⁷ Jonathan Bruning, *Negotiating Complex Television: The Simpsons and Its Audience*, 58.

be funnier right there.’ And then we would sit there for an hour, if it took that, and then get it. A week later, after we’d done another script, we’d pick up that one again and comb through it. Then after the read-through, we’d comb through it again... ‘Simpsons’ episodes are being worked on until they air, because the mouth movements are pretty imprecise. Homer can say, ‘I’m hungry’ or ‘Look, there’s Michelangelo,’ and you don’t have to change the animation.⁷⁸

The Simpsons’ utilization of animation technology by its writers has allowed them to constantly rework their scripts to a much more refined and culturally relevant product than any of their live action counterparts, another major reason *The Simpsons* has been considered so groundbreaking.

Each week, television writers and producers have the opportunities to critique public figures such as presidents, senators, and celebrities—the actual people in these positions while they are in those positions. A problem with film is that by the time movies are made many of those people or the times that those settings are from are gone, making them much less topical. The themes of films might engage in much more profound ideas and not have to worry about network censorship, but they cannot necessarily explore what happens on a daily or weekly basis. Bruning explained this concept, stating, “Through jokes aimed directly at a specific social problem or issue, the audience may be exposed to information that is uncommon in other entertainment venues. The audience may or may not get the jokes, or apply the joke to a real world problem, but much of the critical information in the show is conveyed in a humorous fashion.”⁷⁹ In “Mr. Lisa Goes to Washington” Lisa confronts political corruption in the

⁷⁸ Ibid, 59.

⁷⁹ Ibid, 66.

capital and through this episode questions the governments ability to act fairly and democratically, taking jabs at the entire political system in the process. Television, through its weekly format, has the ability to attack Washington's latest faults, whereas other mediums such as film do not possess the same topical nature because they usually take over a year to shoot, edit, and distribute. *The Simpsons* capitalizes on television's ability to attack topical culture and use humor as a mechanism to comment upon it.

Satirical Brilliance

Satirical shows like *Saturday Night Live* can mock the President of the United States but are limited to mannerisms or things that the president says—and not the actual political messages. Alberti explained this when he stated, “*Saturday Night Live*, for all of its irreverence, bases much of its political satire on the telling impersonation of given political personalities...Will Ferrell's potentially devastating portrayal of George W. Bush as a simple-minded frat boy has been crucially distanced from suggesting any fundamental challenge to Bush's legitimacy as president.”⁸⁰ *The Simpsons* can challenge political figures more because the show does not appear as abrasive with animation, and therefore, audiences can laugh at the comedy and the message without becoming offended. The animation allows *The Simpsons* to push deeper beyond the boundaries of television to offer much more satirical critiques while maintaining a sense of decency, allowing their messages to come across and sustain their viewership.

In another comparison between the political satire of *Saturday Night Live* and *The Simpsons*, one can look to how both shows handled President George Herbert Walker Bush. Dana Carvey caricatured President Bush's mannerisms and kept repeating, “Stay the course...A thousand walks of life...Stay the course.” Carvey never attacked

⁸⁰ John Alberti ed., *Leaving Springfield*, xv.

President Bush on taxes or the legitimacy on the Persian Gulf War, only on his mannerisms or how he was going to eventually lose to President Clinton.

The Simpsons, on the other hand, while not attacking his politics, used their President George Herbert Walker Bush without much reverence for his status as former commander-in-chief. In “Two Bad Neighbors” President Bush spanked Bart after his memoirs were destroyed and actually got into a fistfight with Homer. No live-action show could possibly have had the President of the United States or an impressionist strike a kid and brawl with another character because it would startle the viewers. The animation dulls the blow and makes these actions that much more outrageous; this distortion allows *The Simpsons* to have more leeway in their comedy than other television shows.

One of the earliest episodes of *The Simpsons* satire appeared in “Two Cars in Every Garage and Three Eyes on Every Fish.” The show’s premise had Bart and Lisa fishing in the local lake when they discovered that one of the fish that they caught had three eyes. An investigative reporter just happened to be watching this event and reported it to state regulators who might be interested in a connection between the mutated fish and the nearby nuclear power plant. The state regulators witness gross acts of negligence in the plant as nuclear acid drips from the ceiling, gum is covering a hole in the cooling tank, a plutonium rod is used as a paper weight, and Homer is asleep at his post as a safety inspector.

Mr. Burns, upset as he realizes that the government will shut down his plant, decides to run for governor after Homer explained to his boss that if he were governor then there would be no worry about the safety regulations. Collecting a politically savvy

team of spin-doctors, mudslingers, and strategists, Mr. Burns goes from having no support in the polls to a deadlock the night of the election. Throughout his campaign Burns appears on commercials and speaks about the “failure of the bureaucrats in the capital.” Throughout the campaign Burns emerges from two sides, the image of the concerned candidate and as the conniving politician focused solely on winning the election. In a last effort stunt to win the election, Mr. Burns goes to the Simpsons’ for a televised dinner and is barraged with pre-written questions (by his campaign staff) from Homer and Lisa. Marge, infuriated by this political stunt and herself a supporter of Burns opponent Mary Bailey, prepares dinner with the three-eyed fish. Burns takes one bite of the fish and spits it to the floor, losing the election in the process.

This episode incorporates many of the issues that separate *The Simpsons* from nearly every other show before it in producing satirical commentary. The topic of environmental pollution itself is tremendously difficult to portray on television without making the issue overtly political and offending part of the viewing audience. Through the animation, however, this episode easily engages in this topic because all of the flaws of the power plant do not seem so real. For example, if this episode were done in live-action the three-eyed fish alone would seem so unsightly that viewers would not watch. There are also plutonium bars resting on a table, acid falling from the ceiling, and Homer sleeping on the job. Yet, the viewer is amused because the animation allows these acts of negligence to be so far removed from reality that the viewer can enjoy the program.

As George Meyer explained, setting and cost are never a factor. Most other shows could not devote one episode to a character running for governor. Countless characters were simply added to that episode without worrying about the budget; the

political commercials, and construction of a three-eyed fish would not have been worth devoting so much money to one single episode. *The Simpsons* is limited only in this way only by its creative capacities. There is no character they cannot create and no place that they cannot travel, as long as the censors, advertisers, and the public accept them.

This particular episode of *The Simpsons* helps understand television's inherent limitations in most other programs and explains why *The Simpsons* and other animated sitcoms since it appeared have not been so strained. Homer Simpson can do or say anything within the boundaries of acceptable language that other characters on other shows cannot. Archie Bunker could be critiqued only by his thoughts and prejudices whereas Homer can be analyzed also through his actions and incompetence. Homer can guzzle pints of beer and engage in marital acts with his wife and the audience enjoys what it sees. If Archie Bunker had done the same thing, he would have lost the audience. Archie and Edith in bed, for that matter, would simply make the audience cringe, which is why animation has that advantage over live action.

One of the major problems of the *Smothers Brothers* was its inability to critique CBS without reprisal. The infighting between the *Smothers Brothers* and CBS limited the brothers' creative abilities and proved why television must adhere to the standards of the networks and their censors. FOX, however, under the leadership and vision of Rupert Murdoch, did not have to fear network repudiations because it was given the freedom to attack all institutions, including FOX. Murdoch's ability to create irreverent programming and poke fun at himself enabled Fox to develop an edge that other networks lacked. As Alberti explained, "The program[s] regularly foregrounds its status as FOX corporate product, often while denigrating the FOX network...These mocking

references to FOX can function at the same time as signifiers of both the independence of *The Simpsons* and the supposed hipness of FOX, meanings that can work together in the marketing of FOX as a ‘renegade’ network.”⁸¹ FOX’s willingness to allow it shows to mock it explains one of the many reasons why the network has moved beyond standard broadcasting boundaries in an effort to create more satirical and entertaining programming.

One of the most visible examples of *The Simpsons*’ attacking FOX and corporate leader Rupert Murdoch was an episode where Homer and his drinking buddies wandered into an empty luxury suite at a football game. Upon entry into the suite they consumed nearly all of the food and alcoholic beverages without paying attention to the game. A few moments later the suite’s owner walked in, furious to see his intruders in his box:

Murdoch: What the bloody hell?

Homer: Hit the road, ‘Gramps!’ This is a private skybox.

Murdoch: I’m Rupert Murdoch, billionaire tyrant, and this is my skybox!

Wiggum: If you’re Rupert Murdoch, prove it!

Murdoch then whispers into his assistant’s ear, who immediately dials a phone and says something that the audience cannot understand; the shot moves to the field and the audience hears the 20th Century FOX Films’ theme song. Suddenly, both teams stop play, move to the center of the field, and spell out with their bodies, ‘Hi Rupert!’⁸² The freedom that FOX gives to *The Simpsons* allows it to move beyond normal television standards in order to broadcast material that exposes a closer version of reality. The

⁸¹ Ibid, xxii

⁸² Brent Allen Whitmore, *From Barthes to Bart Simpson: Semio-Rhetoric, Commercial Intertextuality, and Popular Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press: August 2000), 136-137.

medium's built-in censorship between the networks, censors, and advertisers hinder most programs' ability to air sensitive or controversial material. FOX's willingness, however, to openly mock itself, allows its programs to gain a deeper realism and satire lost on most other networks' programs.

Pleasing network advertisers and allowing both sides to profit remain among the most important goals for a network and its shows. *The Simpsons* capitalized on young and new viewers, which advertisers paid significantly to sponsor during that time slot. As Morrow and McMahan illustrated, "By its second season, *The Simpsons* commanded a \$300,000 from national advertisers for a thirty-second spot...As Pat Mullen, station manager for WXMJ in Grand Rapids, related at the time, 'I can get \$2,000 for 30 seconds on *The Simpsons*. That used to be an entire Sunday night for me.'"⁸³ *The Simpsons* could not have engaged in such subversive material had the audiences and therefore the advertisers followed its popularity trail. The main objective in television by network executives is to turn profit, and *The Simpsons* through their innovativeness allowed FOX to accomplish those goals. In turn, the sitcom was itself revolutionized by building upon old methodologies and incorporating them in new ways, such as animation.

The Simpsons' incorporating past television precedents allows one to understand *The Simpsons*' role in television history. The show literally acts as a glossary of television events, genres, shows, and actors that make it not only important for present society, but also for understanding the history of television. *The Simpsons* has been able to merge some of the most important models, in terms of satire, in television history in

⁸³ Wendy Hilton-Morrow and David T. McMahan, "The Flintstones to Futurama: Networks and Prime Time Animation" in *Prime Time Animation: Television Animation and American Culture*, Carol Stabile and Mark Harrison ed., 83.

order to make poignant social commentary. Television boundaries have been pushed and broken due to FOX's irreverence, changing the way television reflects society.

Conclusion

The Simpsons revolutionized television through its incorporation of past television precedents, the liberality of FOX in terms of content, and the wild popularity that allowed the show to continue pushing television's boundaries. As much as *The Simpsons* leads television programming in terms of satire, one must remember that it still remains confined to the limitations of television as a whole. *The Simpsons*, through its ability to push the boundaries of programming and content, has proved only the material reflects the time period. It still has limitations, limitations that other mediums still do not have, which hinder the medium's ability to look at the world through a new lens. *The Simpsons* can only reflect those new perspectives and react to them. The success of *The Simpsons* came from its ability to build upon past television programs to redefine the genre in general. The incorporation of primetime animation, never done in the previous twenty years, reflected a daring risk, but allowed for all of that medium's advantages to be exploited. Furthermore, *The Simpsons* evolved the sitcom, as the socially relevant sitcom replaced the magicom, which replaced the moralist family, popularizing the subversive family. By integrating some of the variety shows methodologies and precedents, *The Simpson* created a collective smorgasbord of television and was therefore able to push the limits of television.

The reason why this essay focused on network television and not cable was that cable operates under a different set of rules and circumstances. Network television

differs from cable in that these stations are free to anyone with a television set and therefore must appeal to every demographic. Furthermore, the government restrictions in relationship to content, both language and sexual, are much more stringent than cable. Cable, because people pay for its service and each station focuses on more specific demographics than the networks, can cater more to those groups without fear of offending viewers. Cable does not have the inherent structural problems of federal regulations, more conservative network censors, conglomerate advertisers, and the entire television demographic that network broadcasters face. Thus, this essay focused solely on the way *The Simpsons* acts as a case study for the complexity of network television and how that particular aspect of television remains limited and a product of the times.

As much as *The Simpsons* changed television and the way television presents society, television has only the ability to critique what exists in society—and not to change the way one looks at parts of society. For example, Mel Gibson’s *Passion of the Christ* looks at the death of Jesus Christ in a completely new and revolutionary way. Television does not have those freedoms because it cannot air something that controversial without upsetting either the network, censors, viewers, or advertisers. CBS had to cancel *The Reagans* and later edited it because conservatives threatened to protest the show, which initially scared off advertisers. *The Simpsons* does not have the capability to reanalyze the death of Jesus Christ, but it has the ability to poke fun at that movie and look at the movie in a different light; this is how *The Simpsons* and television more generally reflect society. Although, *The Passion of the Christ* example is hypothetical, *The Simpsons* has satirized actual events and movies that cause controversy.

Pulp Fiction, for example, had the freedom to exploit language, sex, drugs—and a completely new way of looking at organized crime and society more generally. The rawness of the movie makes it impossible for it to have aired originally on network television because it would have undoubtedly offended audience members and would never have gotten through network censors. Television could not produce that movie, but *The Simpsons* could openly critique it as they devoted an episode to satirizing *Pulp Fiction* in “22 Short Films About Springfield.”⁸⁴

The Simpsons allows viewers and scholars to comprehend not only why the show has been considered so revolutionary and satirical, but it also allows understanding of why television is limited and can reflect only its time period. This animated family changed how one views the modern family and society more generally on television, but these images must be understood as reactions to greater societal changes. *The Simpsons* and television shows more generally cannot air and be successful without network, censor, and advertiser approval—and also must have audiences constantly coming back for more entertainment. It remains remarkable that *The Simpsons* overcame the limitations of television and aired any controversial material, but the medium as a whole can only mirror the images and mores that society presents to it—and not create those images.

⁸⁴ www.thesimpsons.com

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