

# Typology of Comedy Formats [for Social Change]



[www.CMSimpact.org/Comedy](http://www.CMSimpact.org/Comedy)

## OVERVIEW

**Comedy is a powerful contemporary source** of influence and information. In the still-evolving digital era, the opportunity to consume and share comedy has never been as available—both in the United States and around the world.

And yet, despite its vast cultural imprint, comedy is a little-understood vehicle for serious public engagement in urgent social issues—even though humor offers frames of hope and optimism that encourage participation in social problems.

## FIVE WAYS comedy can act as an influencer:

1

### Attracting attention

Comedy can expose audiences to new messages—and can help them remember the information.

2

### Feeling

Audiences can be persuaded through comedy—but comedy's route to persuasion is more about feeling and caring than learning.

3

### Entering complex social issues

Comedic treatment of serious issues helps make complex civic topics accessible—and amplifies serious information.

4

### Breaking down social barriers

Comedy can introduce people, social issues and new norms in non-threatening, “non-othering” ways that encourage identification and connection, rather than alienation.

5

### Sharing with others

People share comedy to create shared cultural moments and display personal identity, amplifying serious messages.

## Typology Of Comedy Formats

From satirical faux news programs to comedic public service announcements, mediated comedy that deals with complex social and civic issues is produced, distributed and experienced in distinctive ways.

Across available research about mediated comedy's intersection with social issues—on the route to social change—four primary comedy formats are vital. These four formats also underlie most examples of comedy's treatment of social issues in the contemporary marketplace.



**Satirical  
News**



**Scripted  
Entertainment  
Storytelling**



**Marketing &  
Advertising**



**Stand-Up  
& Sketch  
Comedy**

### 1 | Satirical News

Pointing Out—and  
Re-Framing—Life's Absurdities




#### OVERVIEW

Satire expresses humor by pointing out the absurdness or inherent power dynamics of a situation. On the audience's part, satire requires some basic recognition and understanding of the original scenario being lampooned, and therefore, is culturally specific and relatively sophisticated.

#### CAUTION

Researchers have cautioned that the bar for potential audience impact might be too high for satire in social issues. Rather than *learning* and persuasion, the important effects of cultural connection, raising awareness and adding an element of play into serious social issues might be the more realistic objectives.<sup>1</sup>



"When humor works, it works because it's clarifying what people already feel. It has to come from someplace real."

- TINA FEY, COMEDY PRODUCER, DIRECTOR & WRITER

## CASE STUDY: FULL FRONT WITH SAMANTHA BEE

With the February 2016 premiere of the late-night TBS faux news satire show, *Full Frontal with Samantha Bee*, the comic and former correspondent for *The Daily Show* made history as the sole woman host in the late-night-satire genre. Like the other hits of the genre, Bee's show takes on social issues of the day with a now-familiar editorial tone characterized by biting wit, deadpan satirical commentary, interviews and video montages that have quickly racked up hundreds of thousands of views. But in a departure from her fellow faux-news brethren, Bee's satire is also distinctly feminist, with frequent treatment related to gender politics.<sup>2</sup>

## 2 | Scripted Entertainment Storytelling

Transporting Audiences, Creating Relationships with Characters



### OVERVIEW

As a component of entertainment storytelling, humor may play a distinct role by attracting attention, encouraging entry into tough topics, normalizing people and issues and shifting social attitudes and norms.

### CAUTION

Humorous treatment of social issues in entertainment portrayals is memorable.

Humor in this context also attracts attention, evokes emotions and works to suppress message counter-arguing. But to engage comedy in this way without trivializing the seriousness of a social issue is a difficult balance.

## CASE STUDY: BLACK-ISH

ABC's hit sitcom, *Black-ish*, about a two-generation African-American and bi-racial family, premiered in 2014 to critical acclaim and high viewership. The show has comically spotlighted issues including gun control, the water crisis in California, sustainability, and of course, race relations and racial history in America. In September 2015, the program broke cultural taboos by devoting its season premiere episode to a scenario in which the younger son character uses the "N-word" in a school talent show by quoting from a Kanye West song, "Goldigger." The family discusses the history and contemporary use of the word in a broader discussion about race relations and racism in the United States. The episode was covered by several media outlets, and one review summed it up: "It's rare that an episode of television can tackle an important topic and find a way to demonize no one, while staying funny. 'THE Word' [*Black-ish* episode title] works because it's not an episode with answers; it's one with questions."<sup>3</sup>

## 3 | Marketing & Advertising

Capturing Attention & Memory



"The more an audience cares, the harder it laughs."

- NORMAN LEAR, COMEDY PRODUCER, DIRECTOR & WRITER



**OVERVIEW**

Humor in advertising decreases audiences' counter-arguing against messages, allowing a different persuasive route to operate. Humor in advertising is persuasive because of its "affective" ability to spark emotions.<sup>4</sup>

**CAUTION**

Message appeals in a short-form ad-like context are not monolithic—encouraging overt behavior change or some kind of action on behalf of the audience is a different task, for example, than encouraging a positive level of awareness and attitude.

**CASE STUDY: ALS ICE BUCKET CHALLENGE**

In the summer of 2014, millions of people clicked on funny videos—posted and shared on social media platforms—to raise awareness and money for ALS, or Lou Gehrig's disease, to benefit the ALS Association. The effort expanded to celebrities and non-celebrities alike, eventually culminating in \$200 million raised for ALS research and services to individuals living with the disease<sup>5</sup>—an increase of more than 7,000 percent from the association's \$2.8 million raised during the same time frame during the year before.<sup>6</sup> Although the videos were amusing, the reasons for the campaign's donation success have been attributed less to the humorous approach and more to people's need for self-identification with a worthy cause; the precise, goal-setting 24-hour "call to action" for the challenge; and a mildly painful approach that allowed participants to feel like martyrs—and share selfies and videos of themselves.<sup>7</sup>

## 4 | Stand-Up & Sketch Comedy

Critical Social Commentary, Breaking Down Taboos

**OVERVIEW**

Stand-up comedy's roots in the United States grew out of the traditions and humor of minority groups<sup>8</sup>—Jewish-Americans and African-Americans—providing a foundation focused on critiquing power dynamics.

# FUNNY & DIE

**CAUTION**

As with other comedy formats, there are inherent limitations to leveraging stand-up and sketch comedy for overt social change efforts around pressing social issues. The nature of much stand-up and sketch comedy is its ability to push the boundaries of decency and taste, and what's funny to one may be offensive to another. By pointing out power dynamics inherent in social issues such as poverty and inequality, stand-up comedy may inadvertently reinforce power dynamics instead of effectively skewering them—including perpetuating racial stereotypes.<sup>9</sup>

**CASE STUDY: FUNNY OR DIE**

Beyond its faux talk show, *Funny or Die's* short-form comedy videos have directly engaged in serious social issues, leading to media coverage and renewed public scrutiny. After allegedly dumping many tons of toxic waste into Ecuador's water system, failing to take responsibility and instead producing and distributing a new image-focused advertising campaign called "We Agree" a few months after the BP oil spill in the Gulf, the oil company Chevron was in the hot seat in 2010 when *Funny or Die* parodied the campaign with a comedy video and website of its own, "Chevron Thinks We're Stupid."<sup>10</sup> The sketch comedy campaign received media coverage from outlets including *The Huffington Post* and the *Los Angeles Times*, and the "counter-campaign" supporters created their own comedy ad spoofs to share with *Funny or Die*. Amazon Watch and the Rainforest Action Network distributed a joint press release to media about the sketch comedy video, calling it "the latest chapter in a national grassroots media campaign that has overshadowed oil giant Chevron's new multi-million dollar PR effort."<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Young, D. G., Holbert, R. L., & Jamieson, K. H. (2014). Successful practices for the strategic use of political parody and satire: Lessons from the P6 Symposium and the 2012 election campaign. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 58(9), 1111-1130.

<sup>2</sup> Paskin, W. (2016, February 9). Full Frontal with Samantha Bee. *Slate*. Retrieved from [http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/television/2016/02/full\\_frontal\\_with\\_samantha\\_bee\\_reviewed.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/television/2016/02/full_frontal_with_samantha_bee_reviewed.html)

<sup>3</sup> VanDerWerff, T. (2015, September 27). The Black-ish season premiere was the best episode of TV this week. *Vox*. Retrieved from <http://www.vox.com/2015/9/27/9403993/blackish-season-2-premiere>

<sup>4</sup> Eisend, M. (2009). A meta-analysis of humor in advertising. *Journal of Academy of Marketing Science*, 37, 191-203.

<sup>5</sup> ALS Association. (2015, April 20). Impact of the Ice Bucket Challenge. Retrieved from <http://www.alsa.org/news/archive/impact-of-ice-bucket-challenge.html>

<sup>6</sup> Diamond, D. (2014, August 29). The ALS Ice Bucket Challenge has raised \$100 million—and counting. *Forbes*. Retrieved from <http://www.forbes.com/sites/dandiamond/2014/08/29/the-als-ice-bucket-challenge-has-raised-100-million-but-its-finally-cooling-off/>

<sup>7</sup> McGugan, I. (2014, November 14). The ice-bucket racket. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from [http://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/16/magazine/the-ice-bucket-racket.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/16/magazine/the-ice-bucket-racket.html?_r=0)

<sup>8</sup> Nesteroff, K. (2015). *The comedians: Drunks, thieves, scoundrels and the history of American comedy*. New York, NY: Grove Press.

<sup>9</sup> Cohen, R. & Richards, R. When the truth hurts, tell a joke: Why America needs its comedians. Retrieved from <http://www.humanityinaction.org/knowledgebase/174-when-the-truth-hurts-tell-a-joke-why-america-needs-its-comedians>

<sup>10</sup> Donovan, T.W. (2010, October 28). Funny or Die: Chevron 'We Agree' ad spoofed for 'Chevron Thinks We're Stupid' Campaign. *Huffington Post*. Retrieved from [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2010/10/28/funny-or-die-spoofs-chevr\\_n\\_774893.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2010/10/28/funny-or-die-spoofs-chevr_n_774893.html)

<sup>11</sup> Chevron Toxic. (2010, November 17). Press Release: Comedy video rips Chevron's new "greenwashing" PR campaign. Retrieved from: <http://chevrontoxico.com/news-and-multimedia/2010/11/17-comedy-video-rips-chevrons-new-greenwashing-pr-campaign>

