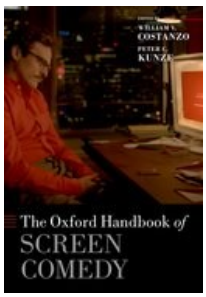

The Oxford Handbook of Screen Comedy

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CHAPTER

26 The Tech-onomy of Stand-Up Comedy

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Abstract

Emerging technologies and our use of them shape the production, distribution, and consumption, or the economy, of stand-up comedy. New media change the ways fans experience and access comedy, placing pressure on stand-up comics to adapt their content across platforms. Fans will have to be at least as technologically savvy as their favorite comics to get the content they seek. Digital and online technologies have allowed comedy to be self-produced and distributed to a widespread fan base. Increasingly fans can consume streaming media unencumbered by traditional broadcasting barriers to access. Such immediacy changes consumer expectations and purchasing patterns. Consumers, content producers, and entertainment vendors learn to adapt and engage with new media. This chapter examines those material and digital measures of social progress that users deploy to irrevocably change the economy of comedy (e.g., cable TV, VCRs, podcasting, social media, and digital streaming media). A variety of primary sources —newspaper and magazine articles, interviews with comics and industry professionals, histories published on stand-up comedy, comedians' memoirs and diaries—offers a story of the ways comedians use technologies to transform the production, distribution, and consumption of stand-up comedy.

Keywords: stand-up comedy, technologies, new media, economy of comedy, participatory media

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Introduction

It is not as if they are confiscating your phone. They are merely rendering it unusable. That is what it has come to. And really, we deserve this intensive monitoring. When nearly every person over the age of ten carries their own portable video camera with the capacity to communicate with people the globe over, there is bound to be one who cannot control the impulse to alert 458 of their closest friends that they are watching a live comedy performance. After years of harrumphing about stolen comedy and material being posted before it was ready, comics are taking dramatic measures to protect their intellectual property. Thus, over a thousand people, I among them, assented to slipping their smartphones into plastic pouches sealed for the duration of Hannah Gadsby's performance in the Eisenhower Theater at the Kennedy Center in Washington, DC. Emerging technologies and users' creative uses of them from the mid-twentieth century to the early twenty-first century have changed every aspect of the economy of stand-up comedy: its production, distribution, and consumption.[1] I use the terms "emerging technologies" and "new media" interchangeably to refer to the variety of material mediums (hardware like TVs, VCRs, and computers), software (i.e., channels, VHS tapes, social and shared media platforms), and their associated digital (electronically shared) proliferation. From the microphones that transformed stage entertainment in the early 1900s to long-playing records that aurally transported stand-up from the club into homes, to VHS cassettes that catapulted live performance to our televisions, emerging technologies and new media shift the experiences of stand-up comedy for producers and consumers and open new possibilities by rearticulating industry expectations, capabilities, and practices. New technologies threaten the old with obsolescence, and producers and consumers alike must be savvy enough to figure out how to harness existing technologies and adapt to new ones. This is the history of that tech-onomy.

p. 546 As producers of consumable content, stand-up comedians must understand modes of content circulation and determine best uses of those modes depending on their professional goals. New media scholars Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford, and Joshua Green argue that mass media dominates our lives and proffer the term "spreadability" as a way to imagine the circulation of new media, which they define as "the potential for audiences to share content for their own purposes."[2] This *potential* to share "refers to the technical resources that make it easier to circulate some kinds of content than others, the economic structures that support or restrict circulation, the attributes of a media text that might appeal to a community's motivation for sharing material, and the social networks that link people through the exchange of meaningful bytes."[3] Treating media's circulation as spreadable confers agency on the consumer, giving primacy to the "social networks through which audience members play active roles in spreading material."[4] As material spreads, it is remade; reappropriation and recirculation of content are part of a participatory culture, and of course users can change the meanings of messages and influence others to do the same. User agency is "a mixture of technical capacities (being able to 'act with a tool and on that tool') and social capacities ('the user's perception of their ability and right to do so')."[5] Comics embrace every new technology and use it to their advantage—trying to elevate the art of comedy but not always succeeding. Vincent Meserko argues that "comedians have become technology shapers by understanding how the properties of various media can be used to their benefit."[6] I emphasize comedians' agency (cautiously) while paying attention to the ways user-generated content is co-opted by corporations in the service of capitalism and de-emphasizing the democratic potentiality of new media. For example, throughout the latter part of the aughts, larger corporations guzzled up early social networking sites like MySpace, Facebook, and YouTube, eager to profit from these grassroots platforms proven to be popular and, therefore, lucrative. Lionizing the internet (and the social media platforms it sustains) as a free, democratizing force ignores its great potential for corruption, misuse, and manipulation. Evgeny Morozov tracks recurring narratives of over-celebrated technologies such as the telegram, the airplane, the radio, the television, and the computer, arguing that America persistently projects its greatest hope and agenda on every new technological invention, trying to reflect in these new tools the vision it has always had for itself: of a free, democratic, minimally regulated (if it all) nation.[7] Just as each widely adopted technology is susceptible (at least eventually) to corporate regulation, control, and data mining, each technology offers comedians opportunities to adapt

comedic content to the platform. This may mean learning new skills or refashioning existing ones but not necessarily for everyone in the biz. Well-known comics like Chris Rock, for example, need not maintain an active Twitter/X account to enlist more fans, but for some it is crucial to do so. Status and fame determine the need for comics to incorporate new technologies into their repertoire of comic production. It isn't only the creators and producers of new media who will have to be nimble. So will the consumers.

Perhaps less obvious, new media changes the ways fans experience and access comedy. New media places pressures on stand-up comics to adapt their content across platforms, and fans will have to be at least as
p. 547 technologically savvy as their favorite comics to get ↳ the content they seek. Digital and online technologies have allowed comedy to be self-produced and distributed to a widespread fan base. Our modern modes of circulating information are "a mix of top-down and bottom-up forces [that] determine how material is shared across and among cultures in far more participatory (and messier) ways."[8] Increasingly fans can consume streaming media unencumbered by traditional broadcasting barriers to access. Those same fans can become creators by developing a podcast and uploading it to Spotify or amassing content to post on a YouTube channel. But this is predicated on being able to afford the technologies and having the inclination and aptitude to become adept with new technologies. Unequal access is a result not just of affordability of hardware (computers) and network connection (internet services) but one related to skills and literacies, that is, exposure, familiarity, and comfort with new media.[9] Immediacy of information and access issues change consumer expectations and purchasing patterns. In the 2010s, a portion of dollars paid to comedy clubs in the 2000s was redirected to arena shows and streaming services that deliver entertainment. Socioeconomic status may dictate how you access a stand-up comedy performance—live or streaming—but you will still be sharing the same content. It is a boondoggle of possibilities for those creating comedic content and for those consuming that content.

Technologies are in a constant state of waxing and waning, demanding our attention whether we like it or not. I may not be interested in learning the educational potential of artificial intelligence technologies like ChatGPT, but I certainly must be aware of the implications it has for student learning in higher education. With few alternatives but to innovate, "social media and the digital revolution have weakened the power of large television and movie studios, but at this moment, it appears that these new technologies will force the old institutions to evolve and collaborate rather than usher the dinosaurs toward extinction."[10] Consumers, content producers, and entertainment vendors learn to adapt and engage with new media. Tracking a sea of shifting communication mediums is one of many ways to tell the history of stand-up. It is to the specific technologies that I turn, those material and digital measures of social progress that users deploy to irrevocably change the economy of comedy (e.g., cable TV, VCRs, podcasting, social media, and digital streaming media). I use a variety of primary sources—newspaper and magazine articles, interviews (my own and published) with comics and industry professionals, histories published on stand-up comedy, comedians' memoirs and diaries—to offer a story of the ways comedians use technologies to transform the production, distribution, and consumption of stand-up comedy.

Technologies during the Booms

Up until the mid-1970s, the technologies used in the service of distributing stand-up comedy were limited to microphones, long-playing records (LPs), and network television. From that time, emergent technologies created a buffet of mediums able to transmit and widely distribute comedy, changing the ways comics produce
p. 548 comedy ↳ and the ways we consume it. This is old hat. New communication technologies constantly emerge, noodging the market to evolve and changing how we experience social life and entertainment. The television industry is notorious for seeking formulaic means of arriving at a fat bottom line, and nothing disrupts these so much as new platforms for disseminating content siphoning profit from television. In the 1980s, the technologies most responsible for changing the economy of comedy were the explosion of cable television, syndicated programming, and VCRs, along with their trusty software Video Home System (VHS) cassettes that allowed for temporary rental or purchase for the sake of rewatching visual content. In the 1990s, the internet was a useful tool for many, and by the turn of the century and into the twenty-first century it became essential to most. The rise of podcasting, social media, and digital streaming in some cases eliminated the middle-people, the gatekeepers of comedic success, by awarding comedians professional agency and autonomy like never before, making indelible changes to the industry and the content of comedy. All these new mediums and the ways comedians deployed them determined and fundamentally changed how producers distributed and how masses consumed comedy; they also aided in the institutionalization and routinization of comedy during the first comedy boom and groomed an army of consumers hungry for the comedy that whet their appetite while coming of age in the 1980s. People like me.

Cable TV

Stand-up was the diet du jour in the 1980s, and cable TV served as the premier supplier for Americans' appetite for comedy. Richard Fields and Rick Newman are the men responsible for the Catch a Rising Star franchise that began in Manhattan, grew to Boston, and later moved to Universal Studios in California. In an interview, Fields states, "Everybody has his own theory on the reason for the explosion of comedy… . Mine is cable TV. Cable TV has created a national audience for comedy, and it has given opportunities to comedians who for one reason or another couldn't do their acts on regular television."[11] He and Newman were among other comedy club owners able to profit from the first comedy boom, but because of the explosion of cable networks supporting comedy programming, theirs and others' clubs fizzled out during the comedy recession in the early 1990s. Likewise, *Boston Globe* journalist Jim Sullivan credited stand-up comedy for being "a major contributing factor in cable's current success."[12] It was a win-win situation for comedians and producers. With the growth of cable television came the need for content, and lots of it. Comedy was cheap to produce and easily satisfied the mad dash for programming. This alongside growing compensation at comedy clubs meant respectable pay for many comics during the 1980s, especially for those well-established.[13] Industry expectations shifted, and success was no longer guaranteed simply by a single television experience. During the boom, getting guest appearances on late-night shows did not have the same effect as it had in the 1970s—their value diminished due to the glut of comedy opportunities out there.[14] There was a greater payoff in being able to perform longer sets in televised
p. 549 comedy showcases, and comics sought ↳ to lasso those opportunities when possible. Kickstarting this new trend was *Make Me Laugh* (1979–1980) and A&E's *An Evening at the Improv* (1982–1996); copycat shows helped to spur the boom.[15] The rise of cable TV ushered in a new aesthetic for televised comedy line-ups and many channels with their own version of that line-up—each with requisite mic stand on an empty stage with a brick wall in the background. This worked to replicate the intimacy of smaller live venues famous for housing stand-up performances. The lonely microphone on set for such showcases belied the bandwidth of nationally syndicated programming that could—unlike a single performance at the Sutler in Nashville—give you television credits and exposure that would ensure at least feature status on the comedy club circuit for years to come.

Cable created more opportunities for performing and ensured that comedic content reached wider audiences, but the newness of this business model meant it was easy to exploit comics who had little experience with legalese or negotiating with television executives. Comic Gary Mule Deer says of arrangements in those days, "We didn't get the money we were supposed to. No matter what they say, we got screwed on that—especially when it went into syndication. They were shown over and over and we never got a penny for any of it. It was good publicity for a while, but we never made a dime."[16] Comics plucked from comedy clubs across the nation were so thrilled to get the airtime that they seldom quibbled over the fine print in contracts, resulting in scant payment to the artists relative to the number of times the episode aired on the channel. Shows featuring stand-up comedy were an easy way to build content that could be repeatedly aired. Moreover, this content would be syndicated for years afterward, and for sitcoms syndication could last indefinitely, as with *Seinfeld* or *Roseanne*. As Mule Deer indicates, syndication did not always coincide with prosperity for the comics performing.

About the time the comedy boom was peaking, television executives saw fit to cash in on the demand by creating a channel devoted exclusively to comedy. More than one person had the same idea, and so we got two television channels devoted to the art of stoking laughter. HBO launched The Comedy Channel on November 15, 1989. Shortly after, journalist Richard Kogan raised concerns about the volume of content needed to populate a channel and the possibility of saturating the comedy market: "But when does one hit the too-much-of-a-funny-thing wall?"[17] Viacom pitched Ha! shortly after, on April Fool's Day in 1990. Just as Kogan surmised, filling "17,000 hours a year" with programming proved difficult for both, and a year later, on April 1, 1991, the two channels merged into Comedy Central, which has proved its staying power since then.[18] Throughout that time, Comedy Central has produced sketch comedy shows, stand-up showcases, and animated cartoons, mainly steering clear of the traditional sitcom, which was the province of the major networks. Original programming focused on late-night talk show formats featuring stand-ups as stars, bringing viewers political infotainment, and often interviewing comics as guests.[19] Consumers flocked to animated gems such as *South Park* (1997–) and *Dr. Katz: Professional Therapist* (1995–2002) and tuned in to check out the latest shenanigans of deadpan comic turned gameshow host Ben Stein on *Win Ben Stein's Money* (1997–2003) and quirky Amy Sedaris in *Strangers with Candy* (1999–2000). Of course, the bread and butter of Comedy Central was its endless array
p. 550
↳ of stand-up comedy line-ups capitalizing on the public demand for laughter-inducing entertainment.

Between Comedy Central, network, cable, and premium channels there were oodles of stand-up comedy showcases on television; however, sitcoms offered the most traditional vehicle through which comics might find long-term success—their popularity buoyed because of the lack of competition from other entertainment platforms vying for our time and money. In the 1980s, cable TV and major networks had a far more captive viewing audience than today, when television competes with so many other media for attention. American studies scholar Michael Jeffries aptly describes the 1980s as "an unprecedented time in comedy," when "networks had a stranglehold on viewers … until the mid-1990s," when the internet became more widely accessible.[20] Plus, sitcoms are less expensive to produce and more successful than dramas in syndication since each episode of a sitcom can stand alone. Early 1970s sitcoms featured stand-up comics cast as funny characters in the show. *Sanford and Son* had Redd Foxx and Marla Gibbs; Jimmie Walker played the son in *Good Times*. Getting cast in a sitcom was a way of making a lot of cash and enhancing visibility, but as comedy historian Richard Zoglin points out, "it neutralized your best talents by putting you at the service of formulaic scripts, ensemble casts, and network restrictions on language and content."[21] While 1970s sitcoms featured comics playing funny characters, sitcoms in the 1980s were based on the lives of comics themselves, such as *The Cosby Show* and *Roseanne*.

The promise and possibility of the sitcom cash cow was enough for comics to adjust their content to appeal to the family-friendly programming that networks sought.[22] Nancy Perkins, casting director for NBC and HBO, recalls the industry pressure to find the next sitcom star among stand-up comics in the 1980s. In the television industry, standard protocol required screen tests for actors before offering a sitcom deal. However, she reports, "because there was so much competition for them, people would say no [to the screen test]… . So, people were

making deals with people and making them tons of money with really no knowledge of whether they would be able to really act in the confines of doing a show."[23] This may appear to benefit the comic but, in fact, could be and was detrimental to careers. Rushing into such an arrangement meant some did not have the requisite time to incubate their material. When their respective shows were unsuccessful, they were invariably disappointed and discouraged when producers moved on to the next best thing. To make matters worse, an unsuccessful run in a sitcom could have an adverse effect on obtaining roles for major motion pictures, another entertainment form ballooning like television and seeking to capitalize on growing interest in all things humorous.

Discourses in popular media at the time indicate the widespread belief that comedians at the mercy of medium and moral constraints trafficked in the formulaic. Kliph Nesteroff writes, "The estimate[d number] of working comedians was one thousand. How many of them were actually qualified was another matter."[24] Unoriginal comedy can be linked to the medium and equipment use; once a network found a profitable formula, they stuck to it. A generally disgruntled person who is annoyed at some of the professional hits he has taken, comedian
p. 551 Michael O'Donaghue complained that ↳ TV was too traditional and told a teenage Judd Apatow that there was a better way to do live television, that is, "Shoot it all with creepers," which is to say put handheld cameras on stage with the people.[25] In some respects, this came to pass with the filming style of serial mockumentary shows like *The Office* (2005–2013) and *Parks and Recreation* (2009–2015). The quality of comedy decreased during the comedy boom, and the cornucopia of opportunities to perform meant fewer filters and a lowering of standards in the profession in order to satisfy consumer demand.[26] Nevertheless, the boom ensured that comics could command jaw-dropping salaries for acting like nincompoops on camera. This had less of an impact on the economy of comedy than did the number of homes that added VCRs to their home entertainment system after they were placed on the market in 1975.

VHS/VCR Hardware

VCRs and the VHS tapes played in them irrevocably changed how we got our laughs in the 1980s. Early campaigns for this technology emphasized its subversive potential "as a corrective to the rigid schedules of television and a challenge to the status quo."[27] The VCR offered a material response to consumer frustrations with the limitations of network television. A distinct advantage of VHS tapes was that they allowed viewers to watch movies repeatedly and on their own time. Comedy films like *Animal House*, *Caddy Shack*, and *Airplane!* teemed with physical humor, raunch, and memorable one-liners. As film producer Ivan Reitman reflects, "It was the marking point. I always felt it [*Animal House*] changed the comedic language… . It felt like the floodgates were open. Something new and exciting was happening."[28] That was in 1978, just three years after the release of Sony's Betamax (aka VCR). By 1981 elite monied consumers owned a VCR, and by 1984 they were in almost all households.[29] Large-scale commercial success for comedy-centered entertainment proved to be a sign of times to come. Celebrated stand-up comics in blockbuster films stoked the flames of the first boom, as did the technology that brought the films to our homes. The ability to repeatedly watch stand-up comedy specials by Steve Martin, Joan Rivers, and Richard Pryor and comedy films with stand-up comics starring in them, like *Police Academy*, *9 to 5*, and *Beverly Hills Cop*, meant aspiring comics and comedy writers could study routines and sets and whole bits could be memorized and performed for friends. This unfettered access sowed the seeds of comedy worship among Generation X and Millennials whose interest in and consumption of comedy, once financially independent, was directly responsible for the second comedy boom, in the twenty-first century.

The ability to record from the television changed the economy of comedy in important ways, including the ability to distribute specials to an audience already groomed to appreciate albums in the 1960s and '70s. Instead of playing charades with friends, people watched the most recent comedy special released to VHS. Plus, specials began being released in both LP record and VHS formats. Richard Pryor's 1979 release to theaters of his comedy
p. 552 special *Live in Concert* was one of the first to be made available on LP and ↳ on VHS, ensuring that consumers with either technology would have a means to enjoy the show. Soon, though, the VHS tape, tape cassette, and

DVD would supplant circulation of LP records. *Chicago Tribune* reporter Larry Kart wrote in 1988 "that the era of the comedy album is over, a victim of the videocassette. After all, who would want to buy a copy … when the same performances of those very visual comics not only are available on video but also can be rented for a dollar or two?"[30] Stand-up comic and author of *The Comedians* Kliph Nesteroff affirms the importance of VHS tapes and adds that "video stores stocked entire stand-up sections and fly-by-night companies released stand-up compilations" as swag for consumers buying cars, for instance.[31] VHS recordings introduced the first, convenient, visual means of consuming stand-up comedy outside of the comedy club, in the comfort of one's home. We have had trouble leaving home since, and producers of the internet and streaming services and the comedians using those platforms have scrambled to appeal to that impulse.

Podcasts

Social media ensured podcasts had the broadest audience possible when they emerged as a cultural offering in 2004. There are reasons podcast creators prefer this form to radio or television: reduced reliance on advertisers, high production values relative to low production costs, and relaxed restrictions on speech. Podcast patrons enjoy the intimacy, authenticity, and creativity allowed by the medium to convey information and tell stories in unique ways. Whether you listen to podcasts every day or joined the cultural frenzy to consume the true crime podcast *Serial* (2014–), podcasts are officially considered a mainstream media format. Over 73% of Americans have listened to podcasts, and 55% consume podcasts at least once a month.[32] Radio listening has remained consistent over the years, while podcast downloads have gone up, meaning podcasts are not siphoning patronage from radio; instead, they are enticing fresh ears.[33] Based on over three hundred categories of advertisers measured, podcast consumers are most likely to purchase bottled water, tea, baby food, pet needs, and beer.[34] This marketing survey indicates that advertisers continue to find ways of overlaying consumption patterns of material goods with consumption of entertainment for the ultimate target advertising. Podcasts work in the service of target advertising because they appeal to a narrow swath of consumers. Put differently, the "relational frames [of podcasts] allow comedian podcasters to find niche audiences who are drawn to the podcast's form and function."[35] Brand advertisers' support of podcasts ensure they reach broader *yet specific* markets and will lengthen the lifespan of this medium. On the upside, podcast creators have far more agency over delivery of promotional material than does broadcast radio or television. It did not take long for comics to realize the potential for podcasts to engage loyal fans, attract new devotees, try fresh comic approaches, and enhance profitability.

If podcasting has demonstrated anything, it is that stand-up comics have a lot to say. As important, there is an audience for their unfiltered, uncurated, and zany observations. Human ingenuity and technology did the rest.
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Apple wisely allowed podcasts to be ↳ uploaded to its iTunes platform, which sent droves of comedy fans their way for free downloads. As soon as possible, pioneering comics launched comedy podcasts ranging in scope and content and appealing to a self-selecting eclectic tribe. Early comedy podcasts included *Doug Loves Movies* (2006), *Never Not Funny* (2006), *Jordan, Jesse, Go!* (2007), *Comedy Death-Ray Radio* which became *Comedy Bang Bang* (2009), *WTF with Marc Maron* (2009), *Nerdist* (2010), and *Professor Blastoff* (2011). These shows illustrated what was possible and were the trickle to today's fountain of comedy podcasts that flooded North America throughout the 2010s. Comics produce podcasts in droves, and even in the absence of their own podcast, they flock to podcasts for interviews. In an analysis of comedians' use of podcasts, Vince Meserko writes, "While the podcasts have been particularly effective for mid-level comics who are aspiring to acquire more fans, an appearance on a popular podcast can also rejuvenate a floundering career or jumpstart a nascent one."[36] This gestures to the immense influence podcasts have—on the individual finances of comics and, on a macro level, on the economy of comedy. The comedy podcast has two key functions. One is to entertain listeners, also a prized objective for a comedy performance. Another is to "show what this comedy means economically, aesthetically, and socioculturally," in other words, to lay bare the processes behind humor production—the artistic, cultural, and industry demands.[37]

When it comes to aspects of production, comics like podcasts because they offer a chance to contextualize their approach to the art of comedy. Podcasts serve as vehicles for comics to discuss their craft—literally how they develop content, their process for building and testing material. These shows illustrated what was possible and paved the way for the cavalcade of comedy podcasts that flooded North America throughout the 2010s.[38] *The Good One* with Jesse David Fox, for example, sits down with comics to discuss a crowd-pleasing bit. Often for over ninety minutes. Comics explain choices around alliteration, assonance, rhythm, and timing. Few mediums expose the process of production itself in the way podcasts have shown themselves capable. This medium also allows comics another way to expand their tribe. Veteran comic Dana Gould explains the limitations of the old formulas for success and how podcasts have helped him drum up a fan base for a style of comedy that seems like a better fit for him:

> "The problem with the old days was that Johnny Carson dictated who was famous," said Acme favorite Dana Gould. "My style didn't lend itself to the five-minute format on talk shows, so I was always handicapped." In 2012 he launched "The Dana Gould Hour," a monthly podcast. "With the podcast, I just went around that. There's a great, punk-rock, DIY aspect to it that I really like."[39]

Podcasts take time to produce, but they tend to improve the bottom line. If fans tune in for a comic's podcast they are even more likely to be beguiled by the prospect of seeing them perform. Investors like podcasts because they offer metrics that inform wiser financial investments. Plus, podcast listeners have something that any producer wants in their viewers: they are intentional; they "seek out favorites and remain loyal. In the
p. 554 new, atomized world of Internet show business, a cult following is a sustainable ↳ achievement."[40] Comedy gatekeepers know that those cult members will most eagerly follow their comic hero across mediums to a television series. In an interview with *Vulture*, Hannibal Buress corroborates the reality that folks get television deals as a result of strong metrics for podcasts.[41] Stand-up comic Phoebe Robinson notes that successful web series and podcasts illustrate to industry deciders that you can manage creative development of a show which gives them metrics that make them confident enough to invest in the individual or concept. Moreover, it gives her more autonomy: "You can be more in charge of your destiny, rather than, 'I hope someone will cast me as something.' "[42] In other words, podcasts (and social media) offer a gateway to professional autonomy in production and financial gain beyond.

Podcasts have altered aspects of consumer experiences, like the joy of hearing someone drop an uncensored "F" bomb and the intimacy that unscripted dialogue can breed between comics and listeners. Unlike network television, podcasts allow comics to circumvent the limitations of Federal Communications Commission regulations. This allowance feels far more comfortable for comics who wish not to be censored in either language or content. The ability to speak freely and at length means more confessional moments delivered honestly and earnestly to fans already invested in the podcaster, ostensibly because they enjoy their stand-up. Journalist Alison Herman argues that the second comedy boom in the 2010s dates "back nearly a decade when the rise of media like podcasting lowered barriers to entry and strengthened the connection between audience and performer."[43] For comics and fans alike, relatively unedited intimate conversations can be quite satisfying, conveying an aura of authenticity and strengthening identification with the comic.[44] When comics are off script or are being "themselves," identification with them feels more genuine and profound. Meserko writes that "the comedians using these podcasts have seen the resulting immediacy, intimacy, and direct relationship forged between artist and fan contribute to an ever-broadening fan base that drifts fluidly between physical and virtual places."[45] Stronger connections breed loyalty that pays off in revenue for the comics able to lure podcast listeners to their live performances, which are increasingly streamed to global audiences—yet another medium allowing the industry of stand-up to flourish.

Social Media

Demonstrating technological prowess with social media became a prerequisite for professional success in stand-up comedy in the twenty-first century.[46] Nashville native and longtime funny man Keith Alberstadt describes social media savvy as instrumental to his career in stand-up: "My job as a comedian is not only to be funny, but to get more people to see my sense of humor. So, if I don't use the social media platforms I'm only hurting myself. I'm not doing my job."[47] Social media inflects how comics live their lives and engage in their profession; tweeting or sharing jokes and posting clips of stand-up all became viable ways of test-marketing material. Comic icon hopeful Bryan Miller from Minneapolis illustrates the industry imperative of social
p. 555 media, saying that he ↳ "dedicates hours each day to social media while performing regularly at Acme, writing jokes for Costaki Economopoulos' 'Quick Snaps' podcast and guesting on 'The Bob and Tom Show,' available as a podcast and a syndicated radio program. 'You've got to do it all.' "[48] These days the "all" is ever-expanding and changing rapidly.

Comics have long wrestled with recording technologies, but new mediums tasked them with building web pages along with all the other requirements for establishing and maintaining an online presence. This was more easily accomplished if you had the money to outsource the work to professionals or to your friend who was a future Geek Squad member. As a comic, even if you were fortunate enough to get assistance in creating a web presence, you still had the daily work of learning to maximize the capabilities of new social media platforms as they emerged: Myspace, Facebook, Twitter, Vine, Buzznet, Instagram, and TikTok. Other kinds of technology that offer means to distribute comic materials have and continue to aid comedians in pursuit of professional success, such as YouTube, Tumblr, Funny or Die, Vine, iTunes, LinkedIn, Skype, Spotify, and Zoom. All of these (and more) have proven valuable for self-promotion and connecting with fans, ultimately aiding the success of stand-up comics. The explosion of so many distinctive social media platforms allowed comics to reach audiences in new ways, expanding respective tribes and contributing to the second comedy boom that was soon to arrive. These technologies assisted in the ascendency of comics to the ranks of cultural icons and public intellectuals and in the same breath introduced puzzles and challenges for comics and fans.

Technologies can transform how we produce and distribute content, and the technologies on the market in the latter twentieth century increasingly placed the power to harness these into the hands of comedians and consumers. The extent to which comedians can capitalize on new modes of production depends on the capital they have to foot the bill up front. Innovative use of new technologies to jettison comedy to the masses meant more opportunities for comics to entertain and broaden their fan base, oftentimes carving out new pathways for achieving mainstream success. Elayne Boosler was at the vanguard of self-producing comic content in the 1980s. She used her own money to bankroll a special after HBO declined the opportunity to do so. Though she could not move her special for another year, when Showtime finally aired it in 1986 it was wildly popular, so much so that they started *Women of the Night*, a stand-up showcase featuring exclusively women comics.[49] Often a source of humor among industry professions, Dane Cook's rise to stardom is a curious one, and few concur that it was predicated on talent. Cook was savvier with technologies than he was at crafting jokes; in the early phases of the platform, he uploaded audio recordings of his jokes on Myspace. He was also one of the first comics to supply his fans with a professional website that alerted them to his tour schedule. Working in the entertainment industry for decades, Joe Arancio describes his specialty as "both distribution and technology." People in the industry watched Cook closely, and Arancio affirms that Cook "was one of the first ones who had a huge social media following and he saw direct transaction into ticket sales and an online following that bought DVDs."[50] Andrew Dice Clay was the first comic to sell out Madison Square Garden, using a misogynist
p. 556 shtick that played well ↳ with disgruntled white men. Twenty years later, Cook did the same, but his show at the Garden sold out based not on the message but on the messaging.[51]

Bo Burnham used YouTube in its infancy to post a song that went viral and assured him an opportunity to sing for his supper on the comedy circuit at the age of nineteen. In his early twenties at the time, Burnham is one of the youngest comics on record (along with Eddie Murphy) to be offered a full-length comedy special, and smart

use of technology played a hand in that. Trendsetters in the comedy industry self-producing shows or deftly using popular mediums like podcasting to circumvent traditional avenues for reaching a critical mass include folks like Margaret Cho, Louis CK, Joe Rogan, Tig Notaro, Bill Burr, Aziz Ansari, Bo Burnham, Marc Maron, and Maria Bamford. This new arrangement placed comics as brokers of their own content so long as the fans didn't steal it first.

Social media puts power back in the hands of comedians seeking to self-produce and/or experiment with distribution models, and it also problematizes the contract between comics and their fans. These platforms inform the exchange of content and information and, in doing so, pose questions and concerns around ownership, valuation of content, immediacy, and accountability. People gravitate toward social media because it offers ways to connect and share about your life—that brunch you ate, the ten-foot monochromatic scarf you knitted, and the comedian you saw perform—with damn near everyone. Smartphones and social media were not designed to bootleg comedy without someone's permission, but that is exactly what happens in performances across the country. The owner of Caroline's on Broadway, Caroline Hirsch, confirms that comics "don't want anybody on their devices. They don't want their jokes going out there unless they are the ones that do it."[52] Debates over ownership of material have been the subject of conversation for centuries because new eras introduce new forms of communication and, therefore, fresh conundrums. Placing my phone in a protective pouch prior to Gadsby's performance is a reactionary behavior meant to thwart fans filming and uploading content without permission. When fans post content from a performance without permission, it adds to the concern that with more content and easy access, the value of comedy will decline. What happens to the economy of comedy when the product itself is plentiful, free, and easy to access?

With the availability and affordability of the smartphone, social media use has gone mobile and along with that so has the consumption of stand-up comedy. We can watch the latest stand-up special in the gym on the elliptical machine or riding public transportation to work. How does it change the viewing experience to watch snippets of comedy wherever and whenever one has Wi-Fi? Technologies have also changed the nature of consumption across forms of entertainment, like our willingness to hold people accountable for hate speech. We have more platforms allowing for feedback than ever to voice our opinions and a highly literate and entitled populous ready to exercise their First Amendment right to speak.[53] Our rapidly changing global media landscape has moved us from "networked communication to become interactive two-way vehicles for networked sociality"; these platforms and related social practices are "mutually constitutive."[54] Put simply, Web
p. 557 2.0 introduced social platforms offering applied services ↳ (or social media) that allowed users to build online communities and customize those interactions. Social media platforms as well as the content distributed on them get tweaked in response to users' needs and feedback. Stand-up comic and educator Micia Mosley comments, "[This means] you're held much more accountable to what you say and do, which I think is good."[55] Not everyone would agree this is good, but no one would dispute that technologies have edged us into new manifestations of what media scholars call "participatory culture."[56] In what ways are the relationships between comics and fans altered by the allowances social media affords for fans to comment on (questionable) material? The answer depends on who you ask. As the economy of comedy collides with social media, it begs a number of questions and presents challenges and rewards for all parties in this economic arrangement. It allows comics to cultivate a uniquely loyal fan base that could provide a living wage for a lifetime and for fans ample avenues for engaging with and providing (critical) feedback to the artists and entertainers they love (to hate).

Social media shifted the economy of comedy by destabilizing traditional patterns of information sharing, such as top-down models and third-party filters. This, among other factors, inspired growing public respect for comics as voices of authority and even as public intellectuals.[57] The rise of bloggers and podcasters as legitimate sources of information coincided with growing public trust in stand-up comics to inform, educate, and even agitate. Anyone can generate content and share information, but most cannot command the attention and gravitas that professional comics do. Comics have immense powers to persuade. For example, in a comedy

set at Trocadero Theater in Philadelphia Hannibal Buress excoriated Bill Cosby for drugging and raping women. A rogue recording went viral, launching public interest and outrage about the allegations against Cosby, which had been found to be true but were quietly being overlooked in news outlets.[58] Michael Jeffries examines this cultural flare-up and writes, "The sequence of events that led to Cosby's unraveling, however, could not have occurred without new tools and rules of celebrity."[59] Advances in social media and our capacious use of them are the "new tools" allowing for a comic's set to be produced and distributed in a matter of minutes. These tools allow comics to reach a global audience instantaneously. This, coupled with increased public respect for comics as cultural soothsayers in this zeitgeist, means they hold a great deal of power to inform and sway public opinion.[60]

Streaming Digital Media

Between comedy podcasts and streaming digital media, new platforms offered patrons the equivalent of an intravenous dose of comedy delivered at regular intervals. In the early aughts, Comedy Dynamics, the largest independent producer and distributor of stand-up specials, "produced about five specials yearly"; in 2017 "they made 52, available on outlets such as Netflix, Seeso and Hulu."[61] The rise in productions by Comedy Dynamics corresponds to a rise across the nation in demand that signaled the second boom, taking hold in the early
p. 558 2010s. Among Amazon, Hulu, Peacock, HBO Max, and ↳ other entertainment providers, Netflix's risk-seeking programming has proven effective with comedy and difficult for other streaming vendors to compete with. *The Netflix Effect* is both an accurate description of how the company has transformed distribution of entertainment and the title of an edited collection, one of a mounting number of books being published about this popular entertainment vendor. Netflix offers a case study for a rapidly changing entertainment landscape; most agree that "if there is a singular Netflix effect, it may simply be that technology and entertainment are merging at an accelerating rate and seriously impacting the business and economics of mass media."[62] The windfall of this content-heavy market buoyed the second comedy boom.

It is not an exaggeration that Netflix has cornered the market on producing comedy specials. In fact, the first piece of original content Netflix financed was *Comedians of Comedy* (2005); part documentary and part stand-up comedy, this film follows a comedy tour across the country.[63] The headlines for articles about comedy alert readers to the behemoth that is Netflix when it comes to streaming media. RD of *The Economist* boasts that "Netflix is driving stand-up comedy's second boom," and Josef Adalian likens Netflix to a "binge factory" for comedy.[64] They are noticing what everyone else is: Netflix is not just leading the pack; this technological trendsetter has lapped the pack. In 2013 and 2014, Netflix produced five comedy specials each year. In 2015, that number jumped to twelve, then doubled to twenty-six in 2016, and doubled again in 2017 for a grand total of fifty-four specials. The decision to ramp up production of comedy reflects consumers' increasing curiosity; indeed, in 2017, 63% of Netflix subscribers watched at least one comedy special.[65] The numbers in 2018–2019 were in the fifties, but it is no surprise that the years impacted by a global pandemic curtailed production of comedy specials. In 2020, Netflix released thirty-eight specials; likely many of those had already been filmed and were in the editing phase, as people were instructed to stay indoors and entertainment venues went dark. In 2021, the numbers dipped even more, with only fifteen comedy specials released. But as the economy recovered and comedians went back on tour, Netflix was able to produce sixty-eight specials in 2022 and remains a powerhouse producer of standup.

All of the many articles published on the topic resoundingly cite Netflix as changing comedy by not only supporting the production of robust comedic content by varied comic artists but by offering comics the freedom to perform the content they want without censorship.[66] For many comics the lifting of censorship begets ultimate comic freedom. People all over the world are leaning in to hear the cultural musings of Dave Chappelle, Patton Oswalt, Wanda Sykes, Chris Rock, Bill Burr, and Hannah Gadsby. Other comics carry on as before, the relaxing of censorship leaving their comedy unchanged—Jim Gaffigan has proven to be the ultimate family-friendly comedy franchise, and Jerry Seinfeld has been such a fixture in American homes that we will

tune in just to see him ride in cars with other comedians. An increase in comedy festivals and booking comics to perform in smaller music venues alongside huge payouts to comics recording their specials for Netflix, HBO, Amazon, Hulu, and Comedy Central means fewer comics are available to fill the line-ups in comedy clubs. With more opportunities to see the comedy of their choosing online, televised, or streaming, fans feel vindicated in
p. 559 their choice to consume comedy in the comfort of their own home. If they do come ↳ out for performances, they are more likely to be lured by a well-known comic or someone for whom they have a deep affection. Typically, that affection is shared with millions the world over and at least enough fans within a hundred-mile radius to fill the thousands of seats for the stadium shows that have become more common. It is only high-ranking comics like Trevor Noah, Iliza Shlesinger, or John Mulaney who can motivate homebodies nowadays to travel for their jollies.

Conclusion

The history of technology reflects and informs the economy of stand-up comedy as much as it changes forms of cultural participation and the parameters of public discussion and exchange. There is no question that technologies and the comedians who use them have altered the economy of comedy. Critical and popular reception attests to this, just as everyone agrees that the preeminent technologies of the 1980s, like cable TV, hindered and neutralized creative and heterogeneous comedic material. Yet in the twenty-first century, as we coexist with more technologies than ever before, an interesting debate has emerged. On the one hand, some take the familiar stance that technologies inhibit the quality of comic material; on the other hand, some wage a fresh refrain that the new techno-glut *enhances* the quality of stand-up comedy. In other words, the technologies upon which stand-up comedians rely are blamed for inspiring uninspired comedy and are lauded for improving the craft and boosting popularity for comedians.

Amid the second comedy boom, one might expect that, as in the first boom, consumers must sift through an unreasonable volume of comedic content, much of which will be crap. Some people are loudly echoing the complaints waged in the 1980s, like Jason Zinoman of the *New York Times*, who writes that comedy needs to lie fallow for a bit to get some better content brewing.[67] Nesteroff concurs: "Whenever there is a comedy boom like that, there's more bad comedy being produced. Sometimes you watch the Netflix specials, and you think, 'This person probably wasn't in a position yet to be doing an hour. They should have waited ten years and it would have been much better. But there's a pressure on comedians to cash in when they can.' "[68] Nesteroff and Zinoman agree that the quality is decreasing in the second comedy boom, but just as many if not more people argue that what they are seeing in this boom, in particular, is *more* innovation and ingenuity.

A comic for over thirty years, Andy Kindler says, "I make my living off of making fun of bad comedy, and I don't have as much to make fun of these days."[69] The implication is that new venues for comedy content have not diluted the substance of comedy. Many argue that this is a fertile time for innovation because of the new platforms for content and the lifting of censorship that has long weakened broadcast comedy. What happens to comedy when censorship or the old rules no longer apply? One of the obvious answers is that people are going to start dropping "F" bombs whenever they want, but more generally it means that comics are being invited to
p. 560 experiment, to laugh outside the box. To stand out in the crowd of specials, especially if you are not Chappelle, ↳ comics are getting more and more adventurous. Nick Chen suggests, "The solution, for many, is to experiment with the form. Hence the recent spurt of nontraditional specials, each with a visual device to punch up, not distract from, the humor. That's not to say stand-ups haven't deviated from the same tried and over-tested formula in the past."[70] Maria Bamford performed her special at many unexpected venues, including a bowling alley and a bookstore, with her family and friends as her roaming audience. Chelsea Peretti put live animals in seats at her comedy special, and Drew Michaels had no audience at all.

This debate illustrates an experience many have had: we can all be consuming comedy but in realms completely foreign to one another, across podcasting, streaming media, and social media. This means if you gravitate to experimental comedians, the platform will serve up more to you; same goes for schlocky content. While there is a ton of comedy content out there ready to satisfy any kind of appetite, the technologies and creative use of them have allowed for diffusion, changes, and experimentation in the field of stand-up. Brian Volk-Weiss doubts that we will see a bust anytime soon: "I hear all the time the bubble's going to pop. But there is no bubble... . You can watch anything you want, whenever you want."[71] In other words, technologies like social media and streaming platforms have irrevocably changed the rules of this game, a game in which there is copious content whenever you want to enjoy it. The endless possibilities for experimentation with the form and a bevy of digital technologies at our disposal mean the comedy machine will continue to whirr so long as there is consumer demand for it.

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