



CULTURE & ARTS

Does Stand-Up Comedy Still Have The 'Right To Offend?'

A new A&E docuseries examines uncompromising Black comics throughout history, and compels us to consider how they and others like them fit into today's culture.

By Candice Frederick

Jun 30, 2022, 05:42 PM EDT





ILLUSTRATION: CHRIS MCGONIGAL/HUFFPOST; PHOTOS: GETTY IMAGES

Stand-up comedy seems to be in a precarious place right now. That's not to say that there aren't specials popping up on streaming services like Netflix all the time. In fact, Cristela Alonzo's "Middle Classy" dropped just this week, to probably end up being couched between myriad others like Joel Kim Booster's "Psychosexual" and Katt Williams' "World War III."

But as reliable as those specials all are, riskier stand-up comedy that more directly challenges popular opinion is nearly extinct in today's cultural zeitgeist. It makes you wonder: Can we still appreciate stand-up comedy that offends?

ADVERTISEMENT

This question, and its particular use of the word "offend," comes to mind after watching A&E's new docuseries, "Right to Offend: The Black Comedy Revolution." In it, directors Jessica Sherif and Mario Diaz examine the long and meaningful history of Black comedians — from Moms Mabley and Dick Gregory to Whoopi Goldberg and Chris



they would face.

Featuring interviews with comics and historians, “The Right to Offend” traces how, for instance, Goldberg confronted prevalent pro-life opinion in the early ’80s with an unapologetically incisive and hilarious act about having a DIY abortion. And she did it while affecting a white woman’s voice and mannerisms — in front of a largely white audience.

Similarly, the series looks back at Richard Pryor’s signature comedy that “changed the game,” as interviewee Steve Harvey describes it. Because despite club producers’ many efforts to convince Pryor to make his humor palatable to more conservative white audiences, the comedian made a decision early in his career to include his experiences with addiction, racism and sex in his act.

The two-part docuseries serves as a necessary reminder of comedy’s most critical objective: to disrupt societal conversation and what is accepted.

ADVERTISEMENT





Whoopi Goldberg and photographer Roger Ressmeyer are reflected in the bathroom mirror of her home near San Francisco. ROGER RESSMEYER VIA CORBIS/VCG VIA GETTY IMAGES

For Sherif, it's "really looking at this lineage of Black comedians, specifically, and how much pushing boundaries and pushing against the power structure was so inherent to their work," she told HuffPost. "Because of the very nature of who they are."

It's true. As the series documents, the fact that Black comedians even took the stage at all was considered an affront to many white audiences who frequented minstrel acts and rallied with the KKK. So, for Black comedians to confront, and even make light of, those same sensibilities and systems of oppression was considered controversial.

If you really think about it, though, Black comedians' acts were as profoundly unsettling as their white counterparts', but for entirely different reasons. Yet, Black comedians, dating back to Gregory and



FOR IT.

“There’s always been the societal constraints for comedians dating back to, well, slavery but [also] minstrelsy,” Diaz said. “If you go back to the vaudeville era, the audiences were white and this is what popular culture was: ‘Let’s go see these people with cork on their faces act a fool.’”

Never mind that that was offensive. For their audiences, it was also hysterical. But toeing the line between what society largely considered unacceptable material and what genuinely cracked up many audiences was ultimately the space Black comedians sat in.

“So, you have the two things,” Diaz added. “You have society restrictions and then you have the audience who may have been a little bit more liberal, but they were still pretty much also constrained by what society dictated. And I think that happens even today.”

Very much so. Comedians are still feeling pressure to negotiate their comedic provocations for today’s most popular and powerful societal mindsets. But that’s no longer exclusive to the power structures that enable racism or restrict women’s rights. It’s that plus a multitude of other issues that, when fomented, could potentially upset audiences across the identity spectrum who have greater platforms today than ever.

So, that means that comics today have to recalibrate the lines they want to cross and why and the role they ultimately want their comedy to play.

After [tripling down](#) on his transphobic remarks, the once widely beloved provocateur Dave Chappelle, like many other comedians, is



been compelled to evolve.

What does that say about him and other comedians who have the ability to be acute observers of society? “I think that they are struggling to articulate what the differences in today’s world are,” said Tiffany E. Barber, assistant professor of Africana studies and art history at the University of Delaware.

“I think there’s this old model of comedy that hasn’t changed, such as the roast,” she said. “Or, there’s these tropes like, ‘Oh, I’m going to pick on somebody in the crowd’ or ‘I’m going to poke fun at political correctness.’ That has always been a part of the comedy toolkit.”

But Barber says that some comedians haven’t shown enough interest in reevaluating how their comedy can reconnect with today’s world.





“I think that society has shifted, even though there are all these isms that persist — racism, sexism, misogyny,” she continued. “But there’s a vocabulary that I think everyday folks are able to access and marshal, even if they misuse it, that is causing the disconnect.”

But how should today’s more mindful audience impact contemporary stand-up comedy? Even with their detractors, comedians like the late Paul Mooney, D.L. Hughley and Keenen Ivory Wayans’ entire vision for “In Living Color” were decidedly uncompromised.

The latter two are interviewed in “Right To Offend,” in which one comedian [says](#), “If you’re comfortable, we’re not doing our jobs.”

“I think there are [comedians] who just don’t care, and I think that’s great,” Diaz said. “I think that ultimately they are sort of the heroes of the story, aren’t they?”

Certainly in many instances, yes. Ali Wong, for another example, railed against an aspect of modern feminism from Sheryl Sandberg’s [“Lean In”](#) advice that encourages women to step up in the workplace. “Well, I don’t want to lean in, OK?” Wong [says in her 2016 special, “Baby Cobra.”](#) “I want to lie down. I think feminism is the worst thing that ever happened to women.”

Similarly, when conservative censors sought to limit the late George Carlin’s use of the words “s**t,” “piss,” “f**k,” “c**t,” “c**ksucker,” “motherf**ker” and “tits” in his act, he said them anyway — and [all at once](#) in 1972.



George Carlin's comedy legacy is examined in the recent docuseries "George Carlin's American Dream." COURTESY OF GEORGE CARLIN'S ESTATE/HBO



right to rattle societal norms in a way he thought was necessary, even at the risk of repercussion. That's the same impetus as many of the Black comics explored in "Right to Offend."

"That's not new," Sherif agrees. "Keenen Wayans talks about how 'In Living Color' executives were like, 'Let's remove all what are still the iconic sketches and see if we build an audience.' And he just went for all or nothing."

That's even with the fate of "In Living Color," which ultimately became a groundbreaking sketch comedy series, in his hands. "He says, 'If they cancel me after one episode...' then at least it was authentically what he wanted to do," Sherif added. "And it made me think of what's the lashing out going to be if you completely commit to your voice?"

That's a valid point. And, to be fair, many comedians like Wayans have managed this terrain quite well. Mooney and many others are even still revered today.

"The right to offend was his total thing," Barber said about Mooney. "His brand of comedy was leaning into the discomfort or even going to the extreme point to alienate his audience. Like, 'I'm going to talk about these issues. You can get on board or not.'"

It's a bold statement when you think about it through today's lens in the age of social media. Harvey admits that he approaches his comedy with a lot more hesitation than he did in the past with specials like "[Kings of Comedy](#)," in which he excoriates the critics who called him "a piss-poor example for your kids."

Still, his concern about today's social audience is a common one. It's relatively new terrain for comics who didn't come up with Twitter or



directly to those like Netflix who distribute these specials.





Comedian and social activist Dick Gregory speaks at the Village Gate, New York, New York, May 22, 1966. FRED W. MCDARRAH
VIA GETTY IMAGES

While those like Goldberg, Pryor and Gregory were certainly targets of rampant racist and sexist detractors not only in their audiences but media at large, social media has added another layer. A comedian's words today, as Barber notes, carry such a weight that people feel compelled to more assertively police their language as we see with both [Rock](#), who's also interviewed in "Right to Offend," and [Chappelle](#).

"I think that that's one of the key differences that people are reacting to when they're either physically assaulting someone or wanting to shut down Dave Chappelle for his jokes against trans people," Barber said.

As disturbing as that is to witness in an era when clips like that go viral, Barber added that as a society and consumers of culture, we're in a "transition period" where audiences are grappling to decide what is and isn't appropriate.

"Because the things that Dave Chappelle tripped down on, even if intellectually as a thought experiment make sense, the real-life



could potentially be inciting someone to transgress upon someone.

She thinks about that before adding: “On the other hand, I also think that we have to give audiences more credit to be like, ‘We can discern between a joke and an invitation to violence.’ I don’t know. It’s complex.”

That it is. And so is the trend of social media users resurfacing comedians’ old content — like Rock’s “[Black People vs. N****z](#)” joke from his 1996 HBO special, “Bring the Pain” — to criticize it with today’s context.



Comedian Steve Harvey performs at Russell Simmons' Def Comedy Jam on June 10, 1993 in New York City. AL PEREIRA VIA GETTY IMAGES



their eras, Sherif and Diaz included Rock's now notorious joke in their series. But they do this thoughtfully.

"If you're looking at it through today's lens, there's a lot of minefields, political correctness," Diaz said. "Certainly 'Def Comedy Jam' — sexism. From a documentary filmmaker's perspective, some of the jokes don't connect. They're a little flat."

Diaz even points to one of the most revered comics of all time.

"Some of Dick Gregory's jokes are not as fresh because the circumstances were specific to their time," he said. "Can we let go of all those things that are problematic? I mean, the circumstances were different. It's not for me to judge. It's just for me to present."

It's a very nuanced conversation, Sherif adds. "If we're talking about one joke that kills [in] every screening, which is Dick Gregory talks about the Ku Klux Klan and it's 'free to hate me,'" she said. "That still kills. But that isn't offending anyone else who's been othered to."

That's a critical difference, especially as there's been more effort to elevate marginalized voices that have been disempowered for so long. Should a comedian's jokes punch down today, they would and should be censored.

"Because the comedian today lives in this context [and] should know better," Sherif continued.

"I think it's when looking back and attacking that, or even trying to suppress, that does us a disservice because we can only learn from our past. I think, as documentarians, that's what we set out to do. It's not our job to erase that."



unthread the needle, without alienating their audience. There's a way to do it where you're still challenging social norms and you're not pushing people away, and there are some people who do that very well," he said. "I think Wanda Sykes is somebody who does."

The mention of Sykes brings to mind another question inside of this conversation: Where do women fit into the right to offend? So much of it, especially today, seems more self-effacing and confined to their own lives. Sykes is one example, as is Wong, and certainly Amy Schumer.

It illustrates the type of constraints applied to women that aren't considered for male comics. "I think that the demands on women comics are different than they are for men," Barber said. "I don't think that audiences would take too kindly to women comics doing offensive bits in the same ways that men are allowed to do them."





The "Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour" featuring guest Jackie 'Moms' Mabley. CBS PHOTO ARCHIVE VIA GETTY IMAGES

That goes back to the days of Mabley and Goldberg, who were constantly subjected to disdain that was quite gendered. “Right to Offend” devotes entire segments to both, and rightly so.

“They didn’t even have the platform to be able to be offensive,” Sherif said. “In the research that we’d done, I think someone like Moms was allowed to be offensive, but she had to do so under the banner [of a character](#). So, they’re always half a step behind, no matter what they do.”

Mabley talks about taboo topics, like sex, while wearing an old woman’s costume.

“So, while Dick Gregory was standing flat-footed and being himself — so was Godfrey Cambridge, so was everyone at her time — she was still in character,” Sherif said. Goldberg was as well, and she talks about the meaning behind [her characters](#) in the series. “Whoopi Goldberg says it so eloquently how her characters are her way of being able to say things.”

Just as that was a smart way for women to combat the frustratingly stricter parameters women faced, and still face, maybe it’s time for their mostly male counterparts today that encounter scrutiny to think of ways that they can reconfigure their own art for today’s world.

“As our so-called social sensitivity increases, so does the potential for productive social tension and the opportunity to write better jokes,” Barber offered. “So, it’s really an opportunity for comedians to develop new, more engaging material that keeps pace with how



evolving.



RELATED...



Netflix Debuts New Reality Show Bashing 'Snowflakes' After Comedy Controversies



Ricky Gervais Grilled For Anti-Trans Jokes In New Netflix Special



Dave Chappelle And Chris Rock Brutally Mock Their Onstage Attackers At 'Secret' Show



Candice Frederick 
Senior Culture Reporter

[Suggest a correction](#)

CHRIS ROCK

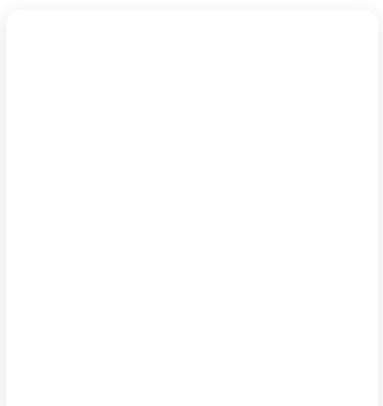
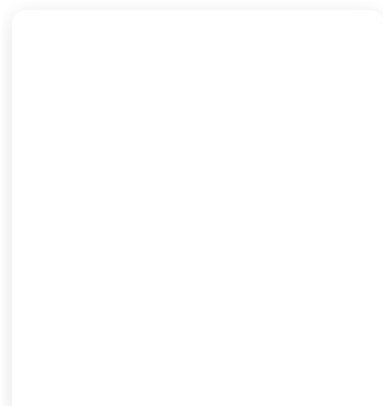
WHOOPI GOLDBERG

DAVE CHAPPELLE

COMEDIANS

RICHARD PRYOR

Popular in the Community





You May Like



China Just Bought These Major US Companies

Novelodge · Ad

12 Foods You Can Eat a Lot of Without Getting Fat

Housinglover · Ad

Put A Bottle In Parked Car Tire If Traveling Alone

Housecoast · Ad

Her Annual Salary Has the Internet Buzzing

Financial10 · Ad

Hilarious Lost And Found Signs People Have Seen

Articlestone · Ad

Jhené Aiko And Longtime Partner Big Sean Reportedly Expecting First Child Together

HuffPost

Kanye's Most Kanye Moments

HuffPost



Loneliness Ends Here

Dating.com · Ad

Why You Should Always Put Plastic Bottle on Tires

Cleverst · Ad

At 75, Jane Birkin Is Truly Irresistible

Crowdyfan · Ad

Man Finds Tiny Creature In Backyard

Housejogger · Ad

Research Independent Senior Living In Reykjavik

Senior Healthy Living Life | Search · Ad

Ricky Martin Denies Domestic Abuse Allegations Following Restraining Order

HuffPost

Donald Trump Admits He's The One 'On Trial' In Jan. 6 Hearings

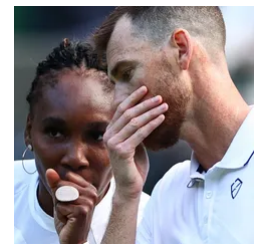
HuffPost

The Love Of My Life Has Terminal Cancer — And We Just Got Married. Here's What I Learned...

HuffPost

WHAT'S HOT

Venus Williams Has Perfect Response To Tennis Reporter's Ridiculous Question



Crooklyn Stille & Noelle Music Returns To





Girl, 10, Reportedly Forced To Travel Out Of State For Abortion



2 London Cops Fired After Racist Post About Meghan Markle

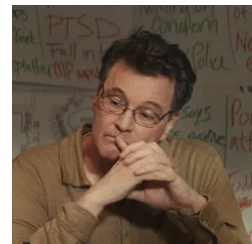


MORE IN CULTURE & ARTS

4 Coming-Of-Age Stories Helping Queer Youth of Color Find Joy



How Much True Crime TV Is Too Much?



'Menudo: Forever Young' Looks At The Exploitative Nature Of Boy Bands

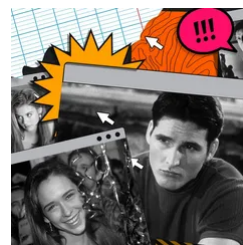




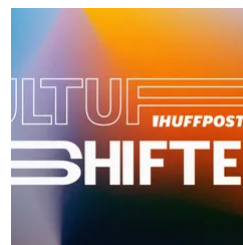
Why These Queer Writers Are Die-Hard Fans Of 'Jennifer's Body'



How '90s Teen Movies Reflected The Real-Life Homophobia Throughout The Decade



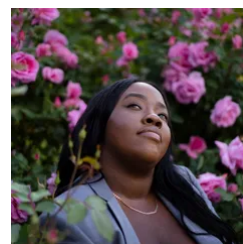
The Culture Shifters Who Are Changing The World



How The Tribeca Film Festival Underscored The Resilience of Filmmaking



Katelina Eccleston Is Giving Black Latinas In Reggaeton Their Flowers

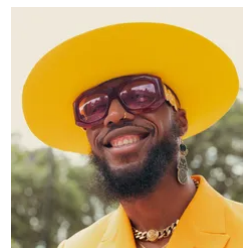


Filmmaker Alike Tengan Is Giving Native Hawaiians A Bigger Spotlight

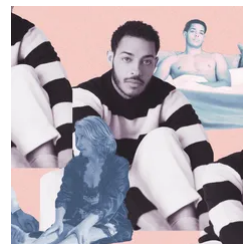




Kay Ruffai Has Created A Safe Space For Black Boy Joy



What “Good Luck To You, Leo Grande” Star Daryl McCormack Understands About Intimacy



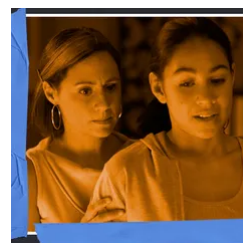
Shonda Rhimes Put Abortion On Screen When Few Shows Did. Here’s What It Took To Get It On TV.



'Sex And The City' Deftly Portrayed The Complexity Of Choice



Teen Abortions On TV Are Still Taboo, But 'Degrassi' Depicted It Nearly 20 Years Ago



'Ms. Marvel' Is A Turning Point For Muslim





‘Fire Island’ Remixes A Classic Jane Austen Tale — While Blazing Its Own Path



A Former Journalist Is Detailing The Racism She Experienced At MTV



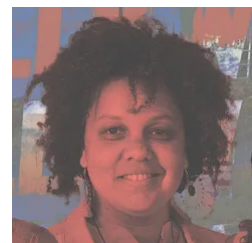
These Queer Asian Performers Are Breaking Stereotypes By Embracing Sex Work



How ‘Hacks’ Turned A Cow Giving Birth Into Something Deeply Profound



Pacific Islanders Deserve To Be Represented On Screen, But There's A Caveat





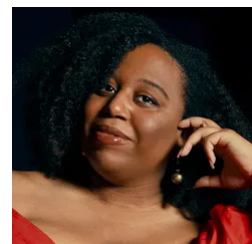
**Deep Rooted Feelings My Family Never
Spoke Of**



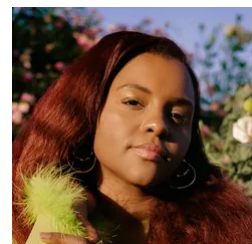
**Inclusion And Equity In TV Writing Is Still
Largely 'Performative,' Report Finds**



**Maya Cade Has Carefully Curated More
Than 200 Black Films All In One Place**



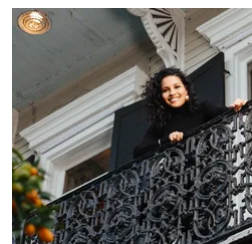
**Rapper Latashá Is Creating A Space In
Crypto For Indie Artists**



**Keyon Elkins Is The Voice Behind Some Of
The Most Viral Tweets And TikTok Sounds**

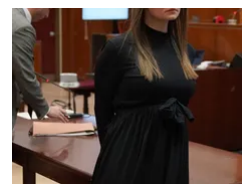


**'Real World: New Orleans' Star Melissa Beck
Is Still Giving Us Comic Relief**





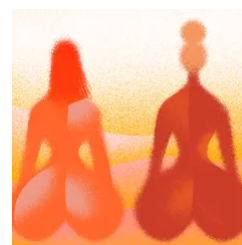
I Went To Anna Delvey's 'Art Show.' It Was Nothing More Than Whiteness At Work.



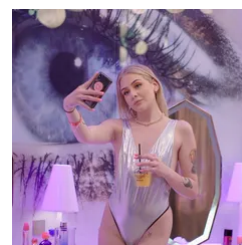
'For Colored Girls' Continues To Be Black Women's North Star



The Rise Of The BBL: Why So Many People Are Getting Their Butts Enhanced



The Porn Star Protagonist In 'Pleasure' Is A Woman Of Fascinating Contradictions



Introducing: This Made Me



How BTS Brought These Korean American Families Closer Together





For This Child Of Immigrants, Pop Culture Became A Guide To Life In America



What Frank Ocean's 'Thinkin Bout You' Meant To A Black Queer Boy In The South



Alison Leiby's Abortion Wasn't A Big Deal. So Why Is It Still So Hard To Talk About?



'Hacks' Creators On The Comedic Gold Of Taking Deborah Vance On The Road



Andy Warhol 'Blue' Marilyn Monroe Portrait Up For Auction For Estimated Record \$200 Million



How '90s Clothing Brands Sold Us On The Myth Of 'All-American'





Why The '90s Was The Last Great Decade For Film Soundtracks



After The 1992 L.A. Uprising, Black Comedy Was As Provocative As It Was Disappointing



NEWS

ENTERTAINMENT

COMMUNITIES

VIDEO

ABOUT US

CONTACT US

FAQ

ARCHIVE

COMMENT POLICY

HUFFPOST PRESS ROOM

PRIVACY POLICY

POLITICS

LIFE

HUFFPOST PERSONAL

NEWSLETTERS

ADVERTISE

RSS

CAREERS

USER AGREEMENT

DMCA POLICY

ACCESSIBILITY STATEMENT

CONSENT PREFERENCES

Part of HuffPost Entertainment. ©2022 BuzzFeed, Inc. All rights reserved.

The Huffington Post