At a time when 24/7/365 fails to adequately quantify the world’s information-gathering capacity, people cannot be blamed for finding themselves in need of a good laugh more than knowledge of the events that spawned it. Nevertheless, a small but growing segment of the American television audience is discovering that keeping up with The News is more necessary than ever. Why are people young enough to know better putting themselves through the horror show of disappointments, brutality, dysfunction, stupidity, and greed that plays out daily on video screens and, if rumors are true, newspapers? There simply is no other way to follow a monologue by Jon Stewart or Bill Maher or to separate the absurd from the ridiculous on *King of the Hill* or *South Park*. Preparation for topical entertainment has joined celebrity trials, natural disasters, and product recalls among the attractions that have thus far saved The News from going the way of the variety show on English-language channels.

As may be the case with life itself, the definition of “satire” is becoming more obscure as its fan base expands. In its long development from ancient Greek theater to the inky page, satire was a term reserved for a particular kind of humor that makes fun of human folly and vice by holding people accountable for their public actions. Darwinists and other nonbelievers might be tempted to ask, “Accountable to whom?” But they usually don’t. Laughter—a visceral, involuntary reaction that feels good—is a more rewarding experience than pointing out yet another proof of humanity’s pathetic, aimless existence. Samuel Beckett knew this when he consented to the casting of Steve Martin and Robin Williams as the leads in Mike Nichols’s 1988 New York production of *Waiting for Godot*.1

To find oneself laughing at an outtake of George W. Bush playing president on *The Late Show with David Letterman* is evidence of a personal moral context for viewing events—and no Camus novel can refute it. If you laughed, you have discovered what you might have already known if you hadn’t skipped Walt Whitman in college lit: the president of the
United States is personally accountable to you for his actions, whether he's waging war on terror, health care, education, the national debt, national solvency, or the English language.

Many Americans born before Al Gore failed to invent the Internet find it surprising to see satire carving out a place for itself on television. TV became diffuse at a particularly unpropitious moment for satire—what history profs and buffs sometimes refer to as the McCarthy era (the quantitatively inclined count it as the early 1950s). But there was more to it than that. Madison Avenue had made a stunning success of commercial radio broadcasting during the unlikely economic climate of the Great Depression. Flush with the profits after World War II, the ad agency chiefs began to believe that their real job—the big job, the job for guys too real and big to even have jobs—was not so much to sell people one of these or a half dozen of those, as it was to sell people a life organized around buying things. Work on that project, they told the junior account execs, and the details—hamburger-buying, car-buying, cigarette-buying, and so on—will, by and by, take care of themselves.

The sitcom, which ran a poor second to comedy-variety shows in the lost world of radio comedy, became the dominant format for humor on television during the 1950s. Far from satirical, sitcoms then, as now, tend to flatter their viewers by ridiculing personal behavior rather than the people who run things. In the sitcom world, nonconformity—whether it is found in Cliff the postal worker in Cheers, Endora the mother-in-law witch in Bewitched, or Newman the postal worker in Seinfeld—is often indistinguishable from antisocial behavior. That puts a writer in a position about as far away from the satirist’s barbed word processor as virtual space will allow. Norman Lear’s attempt at sitcom satire during the 1970s, All in the Family, is an exceptional proof of this rule. While Lear was no doubt pleased to have produced one of the biggest hits in TV history, he was dismayed to find that a fair share of the show’s audience did not see anything satirical about the principal character, Archie Bunker, or his outspoken racist and sexist views. Quite to the contrary, these viewers appreciated the TV exposure for their otherwise suppressed political positions, and many of them articulated that sentiment by slapping “Archie Bunker for President” bumper stickers on their cars. Lear had adapted the show for U.S. commercial television from a British sitcom, Til Death Do Us Part (BBC, 1966–75), where the show had been successful for the politically correct reasons. There may have been more of a context for satire in the kingdom of Monty Python, Punch magazine, and Jonathan Swift.
But there didn't seem to be a context for satire in a broadcasting system whose bread was buttered by making unkeepable promises about the satisfactions of keeping up with one's Joneses.

What changed?

For one thing, the means of transmission. Cable improved the atmosphere for TV satire in too many ways to list in a limited memory format. It suffices to say that by expanding the channel spectrum to a bandwidth that mocks the dreams of old-time believers in ultrahigh frequency, cable made more room on television for virtually everything. Cable actually began in the 1950s as a technologically modest way of selling people out in the sticks a couple of extra stations that could be picked up off an industrial-size antenna. But once the Earth was encircled by more satellite transponders with stable footprint than anyone knew what to do with, cable morphed into a big tent, inclusive and diverse.

Before cable remade life as we view it, television was more reliable as an object of satirists than a medium for the presentation of their work. Nonetheless, primitive television was not without satirical avatars. Ernie Kovacs, for example, is said to be among the first to surmise the essential nature of television, and he was certainly the first of the early surmisers to actually appear on it, beginning as a local station morning guy in Philadelphia in 1950. “You can tell that TV is a medium,” Kovacs said. “It’s neither rare nor well-done.” Kovacs moved through a succession of TV genres that could neither contain nor package him, and constrained by a Federal Communications Commission (FCC) that could actually yank a station’s license at renewal time, he did very little material that would be considered political by current standards. But in making fun of TV’s conventions when it was hardly old enough to have any, he invoked a kind of bohemian _artiste’s_ angle of vision that implicitly mocked the medium’s painfully overscrubbed face. He didn’t need to criticize John Foster Dulles; he _was_ criticism of John Foster Dulles. Besides, as a creative taxpayer (he owed millions to the Internal Revenue Service), Kovacs was more comfortable flying below government radar.

During a period when live television seemed to hold most of the best possibilities, Kovacs was already advancing into the realities of the prerecorded future. He hosted his monthly ABC prime-time comedy specials in 1961–62 from a TV director’s booth, presenting sketches in a style and with an attitude that would be adopted over the next decades by avant-garde performance artists. As might be expected, critical notices were higher than ratings. In perhaps his greatest work of genius, he managed
to stay on the air by always appearing on camera with a lit cigar, which was all his sponsor, the Dutch Masters Cigar Company, required of him. There are, however, some systems you cannot beat; he died in a car accident in 1962.

Jack Paar, who hosted the Tonight Show (1957–62) and later did a prime-time talk-variety hour for NBC (1962–65), ran a somewhat unorthodox green room. It included Fidel Castro, who came on to promote revolutionary Cuba in 1959; Jack Douglas and Reiko, TV's first American husband-and-wife comedy team and frequent guests; and John F. Kennedy and Richard Nixon, who appeared on separate episodes during the 1960 presidential campaign (in the run-up to the first-ever televised presidential “debate”). Asked why he chose to tape a show at the Berlin Wall while it was under construction, Paar said, “The public always enjoys going behind the scenes in show business to see how sets are built. Besides, having Fidel on made people call me a leftist. Having on the East Germans building this wall will make people say I’m on the right, though I can assure you that William F. Buckley will not be one of them. I’ll let them argue it out until I’m restored at the center.” Paar got out while the getting was good, buying a TV station in Poland Springs, Maine, where he lived for the next 40 years.

That Was the Week That Was (NBC, 1964–65), like All in the Family, was an American adaptation of a BBC series. The American TW3, created and sometimes hosted by its British producer, David Frost, debuted in January 1964. It was the first no-doubt-about-it political satire show on U.S. prime-time network television, offering a “news-of-the-week-in-comic-review” format for its entire half hour each week, more than a dozen years before Saturday Night Live’s “Weekend Update” segment hit the air. Regulars whose careers survived included Buck Henry, Alan Alda, and Tom Bosley. Appearing during the TV programming nadir of the mid-1960s (the heart of “least objectionable” programming darkness), TW3 attracted attention, and sometimes audiences, with sketches that included a news send-up featuring United Nations paratroopers sent to rescue civil rights activists in Mississippi and some unflattering ditties about the pope, nuclear weapons, and suburbia by satirical song stylist and Harvard professor Tom Lehrer. Barry Goldwater, today the iconic grand-daddy of contemporary political conservatism but then just a right-wing senator from Arizona, was a frequent target of jokes on the show. After Goldwater’s nomination as the 1964 Republican presidential candidate that summer, viewers tuning in for TW3 were disappointed most weeks
to find the talking heads of politicians, unmocked by satirical comment. “Perhaps by chance, perhaps by design, TW3 was repeatedly pre-empted during the fall and replaced with low-rated political speeches and documentaries paid for by the Republicans,” wrote former NBC executives Tim Brooks and Earle Marsh. Given all existing data about the degree of care that network television programmers take in placing shows in prime-time slots, the “perhaps by chance” scenario is a call for a documentary best handled by the Sci-Fi Channel. By the time TW3 was back on the air with any regularity, Petticoat Junction (CBS) and Peyton Place (ABC) had cannibalized its audience.

A few years later, The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour (CBS, 1967–70) introduced jokes about recreational drug use and U.S. foreign policy in Southeast Asia to prime-time television. Guests included Pete Seeger, a blacklisted, unplugged-in folksinger who performed a tune he wrote about a powerful country that gets involved in an overseas war from which it can’t extricate itself because of a president who seems more beholden to the military-industrial complex than the Constitution he has sworn to uphold. What crazy times those were. Pat Paulsen, a previously little-known comedian who was a regular on the show, began a recurring sketch as a double-talking presidential candidate, which became his life’s work. The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour did well in the ratings, but the CBS brass, still bringing home megabucks with The Beverly Hillbillies and Green Acres, thought it wasn’t worth the trouble and cancelled the show on a contract technicality when the producers failed to get a tape of the next episode to the network censor on time.

Premiering a year after The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour, Rowan and Martin’s Laugh-In (NBC, 1968–73) was number one in the Nielsen ratings for two of its five seasons. It marked the first time that the highest-rated comedy show on television wasn’t a sitcom since Milton Berle had turned the trick with his variety show in 1951. Laugh-In pulled off one of the greatest feats possible in the American mass media environment of its time: it was topical, irreverent, and funny but contained few written jokes that could be described (by a network censor or anybody else) as “political.” George Schlatter was among the first prime-time television producers—and certainly the first comedy producer—to explore the emerging possibilities of videotape editing technology, and he created a kind of visual political slapstick, custom-made to chase the vanishing attention span. Richard Nixon, for example, performed on the show while running for president (that’s a quarter of a century before Bill Clinton
wailed sax on Arsenio or talked underwear on MTV). In an unintroduced three-second spot, Nixon stared at the camera and said, “Sock it to me?” ’Nuff said.

Curiously, the success of Rowan and Martin’s Laugh-In did not spawn a recipe for making more dough with the prime-time cookie cutter. The series generated no spin-offs or imitators, but its socko ratings—a weekly audience averaging from 26 to 32 million—demonstrated conclusively that making jokes about The News was more popular on television than was The News itself. Moreover, Laugh-In proved that McCarthy-era fears of organized product boycotts and licenses lost over political content—the reasons that network executives had always trotted out to explain their timidity—were not just weightless but groundless.

Having overturned these long-held axioms of network thinking, Laugh-In helped smooth the way at NBC for late-night comedy shows that made topical humor part of viewer expectation. These included Lorne Michael’s Saturday Night, which premiered in 1975 and added “Live” in its second season, and SCTV Comedy Network, a Lorne Michaels–related Canadian video troupe whose half-hour syndicated show was supersized by the network to 90 minutes for its 1981 Friday late-night schedule.

From its earliest days out of the laboratory to the end of three-network rule, American television had always been better at satirizing itself than politics. Since that time, cable, direct satellite, and the Internet have turned the political life of the nation into a form of video, and as the essays in this volume show, made The News fair and often entertaining game on the rising tide of satire upon whose waves we now surf.

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Notes
1. For a penetrating discussion of this subject, see Louis Menand, “Now What Do I Mean by That?” Slate, 26 August 1996, at http://www.slate.com/?id=3319.
2. To get in the mood for this kind of thinking, read Hans Enzensberger, The Consciousness Industry (New York: Seabury, 1974); for compelling dramatizations, see A Face in the Crowd directed by Elia Kazan (1957).