

Don't make me laugh
Harry Thompson



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Television has been an unusual medium, historically speaking at least, because of its remarkably narrow range of outlets controlled by a very small number of people and subject to, in many cases, a public-service ethos. Access to the majority of would-be contributors has always been denied. Television is now on the cusp of change, mainly because of the technology that has seen the creation of hundreds of digital channels, and a consequent competition for ratings and revenue.

How will the TV industry develop over the next ten years? Other creative industries show us some models. There is no reason to believe that TV will not follow a similar pattern to the record industry, or the publishing industry. There will be more overtly business-driven commissioning, with managerial experience being considered more important than editorial experience. People who make comedy programmes will increasingly find themselves having to convince managers with backgrounds in selling biscuits or washing powder to make creative decisions, rather than people with a background in TV.

However, at the same time there will be a technological revolution counter-cultural to the money-making. At present the Internet is where you can post humorous prose, or find funny websites, or occasionally see flickering bits of VT. With the growth of broadband, the Internet will become the place where you will be able to post your own homemade TV show and view other people's homemade TV shows. Viewers will even be able to have a portable DVD player or PC in the street. Word on the street will direct viewers to a whole new world of homemade TV.

That's where we will find the new talent coming through, posting their own material on line. It is going to get harder and harder to get on the main channels, because the people making editorial decisions will know less and less about comedy. Knowing less, they'll be interested more and more in big stars. You know, 'This has to have Steve Coogan in it or I'm not commissioning it'. They'll be less interested in reading scripts, they'll be less interested in original projects; they'll be more interested in projects that they regard as safe bankers.

Even now there is a growing army of talent who can't get their material read because TV companies have not got the cash to allocate the resources to read all the thousands of not-bad-but-not-brilliant scripts, and develop the talent therein. In the future these people will find their outlet on the Internet and through low-budget cottage-industry technology. Television will be analogous with the record industry in this respect, because the major record companies have got millions of pounds to spend on their banker acts. They will pump money into pushing big bands such as U2 and they'll spend thousands on costumes and lighting and souvenirs. They're in it for the money not for the love. They don't actually care about the music. So as a consequence they're

quite incapable of finding new bands. And it's the people who love music, who go and make their own music in bars and church halls, or who start up little independent record companies and find new talent that actually break new acts. By word of mouth the best of these acts become popular and then, eventually, make the transition to the big league. I think we will see a similar process in the TV industry.

It's the same in publishing: the big publishing houses are interested in the great big blockbusters and they're less interested in the less obviously bankable talents, but there's always somebody willing to set up a little publishing cottage industry that does interesting work and is creative. Television is simply going to fall into line with other creative industries: it's going to become another big business, and the big boys are going to take their pick from the seething mass of wannabes.

People who make comedy are passionate about their work. It drives them mad to sit in a meeting with somebody who knows nothing about comedy other than what they have gleaned from consuming it. Unfortunately, anyone who's a consumer of comedy thinks they understand everything about it. Anyone who watches comedy on the telly believes they know all there is to know about comedy - and that goes from people in the street to the most senior broadcasters. But, like making music, making TV comedy is a real skill. If you ask any good writer or stand-up about the mechanics of a joke, they will have worked hard on the phrasing, they'll have chosen the exact adjectives, they will have chosen the order of the words with care. For people who don't work in comedy, they just see a funny bloke - 'He's funny, just put him on the screen'. This lack of understanding of the mechanics of comedy will become more widespread as TV is driven by marketing. Branding and sponsorship may enhance TV as a business opportunity, but the little craftsmen will get frozen out. But because they're passionate, they'll find another way through, using the opportunity created by broadband distribution.

Although television will be driven by business, it will remain a regulated industry. The Government may not be capable or interested in stopping the march of naked capitalism into TV, but it is still capable of imposing one or two well-meaning political limitations. One of the soft ways to be seen to be doing something vaguely morally decent is to impose pointless regional quotas.

At present most comedy is in London. Most successful or influential comedians live in London. In the short term at least, regional quotas will deliver some truly appalling comedy shows made in the smaller regional cities. They will get the commissions but there won't be anyone decent there to fulfil them. Manchester will be able to handle the burden, but we'll probably end up with Norwich and Bristol turning

in some God-awful rubbish. In ten years' time, the airwaves will probably be awash with shitty regional comedy.

So expect to see lots of big spectaculars starring very expensive celebrities that have been brought in without the faintest idea of what to do with them when they get there. For instance, an enormous amount of money has just been spent moving Graham Norton to the BBC. When he got there, they said: 'What do we do with him?' Answer: 'Haven't the faintest idea.' It seems as though it never occurred to anyone to plan what they would do with Graham Norton when he arrived at the BBC. That's the way of the future. In ten years' time we'll see a lot of these big-money comedy transfers. It'll be like the Premier League, except that in the Premier League (Chelsea excepted) if they buy an expensive player they've generally thought in advance about what they're going to do with him.

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Really good comedy will be made in garages and in the street by guys with portable cams and mobile phones and they'll be sticking it out on the Internet. Then the good comedy will bubble up alongside the awful 'big star' spectaculars. The next ten years may be tough for those of us who don't want to be part of a big branding business, but generally true creative talent manages to rise to the top.

The spread of programmes on demand will also change people's viewing habits. Sky Plus and TiVo have created a world where people are no longer bound by schedules. Such technological innovations will encourage the growth of celebrity-driven comedy: it will impose demands on commissioners to look for big names, because they will reason that people simply won't find the shows without stars. This will not apply in all areas of TV. At the same time the fragmentation of channels will cause a celebrity shortage, leading to the creation of more instant celebrities of the worthless reality-show type. The current rash of 15-minute celebrities will be as nothing to the panoply of 15-minute celebrities we'll have in ten years' time. Children leaving school 20 years ago wanted to be a fireman or a train driver: now they just want 'to be famous' because they've seen the riches and the attention heaped on people who are simply mildly extrovert and sit in a house. I actually think the creation of instant celebrities will increasingly make viewers, especially young viewers, begin to feel unfulfilled in their personal lives.

Once, the telly was mere entertainment, like reading a book or listening to a piece of music. But now, seeing the fame that TV brings, thousands of people grow up craving fame like a drug. TV may be causing a social problem for the future. As TV executives become more articulate, however, they'll become more adept at devising jargon to intellectualise the very poorest TV. They will become past masters at defending the indefensible.

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As to the content of the comedy that we'll be watching in ten years' time, I believe that comedy reflects social trends. The changes in society that bring in a right-wing or a left-wing government are echoed in our humorous tastes. British post-war humour has been cyclical and has been partly driven by politics. TV satirists tend, almost without exception, to attack from the left; so there has been a satire boom whenever there's been a Tory government. Satire died an instant death when Harold Wilson was elected; it came back with a bang when Thatcher was in power. Satire is now in an odd limbo because the present government claims to be left-wing but isn't. Comedians such as John O'Farrell, whose natural instinct is to be satirical and to attack right-wing governments, are hamstrung at present.

The alternative to straight satire, under a left-wing government, is a more surreal type of humour. *The Goons* were a product of the Attlee years and *Monty Python* was a product of the Wilson years. The Blair years have given us vaguely surreal televised humour, with satire largely confined to the hard left comedians in the clubs. Of course, these political/humorous parallels are not absolute. I'm not claiming that the world turns at midnight on General Election night. But there is a broadly observable cycle, turning about once a decade.

So, the immediate future of TV satire depends on whether the Tories really are dead, or can resurrect themselves to their former status as comedy demons; or whether the Liberal Democrats will arise on the left to turn Blairite Labour into the rightful object of another satire boom.

Just as the political environment is reflected in humour, so social change creates new sensitivities in the use of language within comedy programmes. The language of broadcast comedy has been liberalised recently and that trend will continue over the next ten years. The word 'fuck' has become acceptable on virtually all mainstream TV; soon

I expect the word 'cunt' will probably join it. I would not be surprised too, if a sex-comedy genre does not develop. Conversely, there will be increasingly strict boundaries limiting the areas of race, gender and disability. I recently watched a Ken Loach play about football fans made in 1968, which was repeated on BBC Four. It was fascinating because it was very well observed and, of course, realistic, gritty and Northern; the fans on the terraces were absolutely true to life, except that nobody was allowed to swear, not even slightly. They couldn't even say 'damn' or 'blast'. Their language was as pure as the driven snow. But conversely, when the boss of one of the protagonists would not let him leave work early to go to the game, the worker said: 'I hope when you get home there's a big coon on your wife'. That was an astonishing line to hear, suddenly coming out of a drama made 40 years ago. You think, 'Jesus Christ, did I just hear what I thought I heard?'

If that was one end of the scale, I think the next ten years will see us get to the opposite end, and three cheers to that. My only caveat would be this: I think that in ten years' time nobody will be allowed to use discriminatory language of a racist or sexist character. It'll simply be so taboo that it won't even be permitted.

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Overall my instincts are invariably to be pessimistic about the future of TV comedy. I think most producers, writers and comedians are the same: but this is the content of their private conversations borne of frustration. I'm just less diplomatic than most. But history has taught us that some good comedy, at least, will always find its way to the surface. Take *The Office*. It was subject to violent official objections, because Ricky Gervais was only slightly famous (from the *11 O'Clock Show*), but enough people championed it for it to win through. Now Gervais is a massive star, and all those managers who opposed it are loudly pretending that they supported it from the start. A lot - an awful lot - of similarly talented people will fall by the wayside in years to come, but some of the good stuff - some of it - will fight its way through the barricades.