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Out of the Mouths of Babes: Animated Sitcoms and Political Incorrectness

by Philip Scepanski

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[The Sarah Silverman Program](#), [Mind of Mencia](#), [Chappelle's Show](#) and [It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia](#) notwithstanding, it would seem that the most popular politically incorrect television shows, as well as those that draw the most flak, are animated. [South Park](#) and [Family Guy](#) are the most prominent and successful among a group that also includes [The Boondocks](#) and [Drawn Together](#); and there are numerous other shows that may include such jokes even if they do not make such consistent use of them as the series listed above.

Before exploring this topic further, it is worth describing the tendencies of the above programs in terms of the targets of their satire. While all of these shows suggest a general rebellion against the strictly enforced politeness of political correctness, they activate this style of comedy to different ends. Indeed, the use of politically incorrect humor in each of these shows is quite different.



Drawn Together

One might set up pairs of shows in opposition to one another. While [Family Guy](#) may aggravate identity politicians with its racist and sexist humor, it maintains a consistent criticism of Republican politicians and American neoconservatism. On the other hand, [South Park](#) is held up by some as the voice of hip conservatism because of its willingness to take on issues like hate crime legislation and environmentalism while skewering liberal figures from the contentious Al Gore to the near-universally loved Bono.¹

Of course, both of these shows contain a decent amount of "I can't believe they just said that!" comedy, but both also make more serious arguments about specific political issues. There are programs however, that operate more exclusively in one or the other style of comedy. Though [Drawn Together](#) occasionally employs directly political humor, it is more often offensive for its own sake. [The Boondocks](#) suggests something of an opposite aim in that the vast majority of its un-PC humor seems directed towards specifically political ends. Most notably, an episode titled "Return of the King," imagines what would happen if Martin Luther King, Jr. awakened from a coma today.

In this episode's climax, Dr. King excoriates the black community using extremely offensive language." Here, King's offensive speech leads to positive ends in the form of increased economic and political power for African Americans. It should be noted however that The Boondocks also attacks those who would use such terms for less positive ends. One character in particular, an African American white supremacist named Uncle Ruckus, serves as the contradictory counterpoint to other characters' more logical positions.



The Boondocks

But what is it about animated sitcoms that makes them such a prominent format for politically incorrect comedy? Though it seems likely that these shows are able to "get away" with more (as far as network execs and standards and practices watchdogs are concerned) because animation suggests a distance from the "reality" of live action, the uproar and popularity surrounding these series seem more related to issues of animation, comedy, and children. Many theorists see logical conflict as the basis of humor, and there is certainly a conflict inherent in these shows.² For quite a while, cartoons were seen as children's programming and though recent trends in television comedy have called this association into question, the concept of combining a children's genre with adult themes still bears an underlying comedic current. Try mentioning cartoon porn to almost anyone and see if you don't get a laugh. But the inherent humor of this conflict also leads to controversy, as people worry about drawing children's eyes and ears to seemingly child-unfriendly content.

Adding fuel to this fire, many of these shows are based around child (South Park and The Boondocks) or childlike (Family Guy) characters or thinly disguised allusions to characters from children's media including Disney and Spongebob Squarepants (Drawn Together). In South Park and The Boondocks, children function as

the voice of reason, though there are other youngsters who do not come off as wise. This suggests the idiom "out of the mouths of babes..." in that these characters are wiser and more honest than the adults who are caught up in the illogic and hysteria of popular discourse. This is most blatant in South Park when, at the end of every episode, a character says, "you know, I learned something today," before doling out a piece of horse sense like how tolerance doesn't mean you have to celebrate people's inappropriate behavior.



South Park

Cartoons do not have a lock on offensive comedy, but they seem to receive more negative feedback from pundits because of their associations with children's programming. Here it would seem there is a push-pull relationship. Though animated shows may be notorious for featuring un-PC content, their offensiveness is still exaggerated to some extent by the seeming conflict between children's programming and adult humor.

It may be difficult to remember now, but at one point The Simpsons was a lightning rod for protestors who objected to its (at the time) edgy comedy. Though it generally steered clear of the politically incorrect comedy that marks more modern shows, The Simpsons nonetheless proves instructive in comparison to live action contemporaries. Viewing popular news articles from the time period, it would seem that tee shirts sporting catch phrases like "underachiever and proud of it" or "I'm Bart Simpson, who the hell are you?" were not so offensive in and of themselves. Parents and teachers were more concerned that this was a bad example for children who watched the show.³ Married With Children, which was another early and controversial Fox show, drew fire for airing during the family hour when children were likely to see it, but not for specifically appealing to children.⁴ And articles from the period do not suggest a backlash nearly as intense as the one associated with The Simpsons, such as schools banning children from wearing Bart Simpson tee shirts.⁵

More recent animated television programs also seem to draw more fire for their brand of politically incorrect comedy. Though Sarah Silverman drew flak for a joke she made on Late Night with Conan O'Brien,

her television program appears to have caused little controversy.⁶ But even shows tucked away in late night slots like Adult Swim's The Boondocks gain enough notoriety to warrant serious discussion of specific episodes like "Return of the King:"

But not everyone reacts negatively to this brand of humor. The popularity of these series is evidence that it produces enjoyment at a broad level, but some find more specific content to celebrate. So-called South Park conservatives are indicative of such fans. Suggested by Brian C. Anderson's South Park Conservatives: The Revolt Against Liberal Media Bias, this supposed demographic who, like Anderson, support the show's conservative politics, see South Park as the offensive voice of common sense in an otherwise liberal-tainted media.⁷ Though I have yet to meet anyone who identifies as a South Park conservative, it is easy to see how this show's reaction against smug leftism could be tied to a perceived symbiosis between politically incorrect humor and honesty.

It is difficult to see an end to the trend of politically incorrect animated shows on the horizon. Though we are a long ways from the most intense days of 90s political correctness, politically incorrect cartoon shows like Family Guy and South Park rate among the most successful on their respective networks. And success breeds imitation.



Family Guy

NOTES

- 1 It should be noted however, that both creators of [South Park](#) consider themselves to be classically conservative libertarians rather than neoconservatives or Republicans. Tierney, John. "South Park Refugees." [The New York Times](#) 29 Aug. 2006, Late Edition – Final: 19.
 - 2 Holt, Jim. [Stop Me If You've Heard This: A History and Philosophy of Jokes](#). New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2008.
 - 3 Castaneda, Ruben. "Bart Simpson: Children's Hero, Educators' Menace." [The Washington Post](#) 29 May 1990: B1.
 - 4 Rousch, Matt. "'Married' With Good Ratings." [USA Today](#) 8 Mar. 1989: 3D.
 - 5 Castanada.
 - 6 For a more detailed discussion of the controversy surrounding the joke, see: Jenkins, Henry. "Awkward Conversations About Uncomfortable Laughter." [Flow TV](#) 3 (2004): <http://flowtv.org/?p=312>.
 - 7 Rich, Frank. "Conservatives (Heart) 'South Park.'" [The New York Times](#) 1 May 2005, Late Edition – Final: 14.
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