

Book Review

Alex Symons. 2022. *Women Comedians in the Digital Age Media Work and Critical Reputations After Trump*. Milton Park: Routledge, 218 pp. ISBN: 9781032215020. USD 128.00.

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In *Women Comedians in the Digital Age*, Alex Symons builds on his previous work (some of which is adapted and reprinted here) to explore the impact digital platforms have on the work of American women comedians. This book contributes to a surge of interest in the work of women comedians and broadens the existing field (which has previously concentrated on stand-ups, comedy writer-performers, and those with established mass media profiles) by addressing the role of digital ‘comedy creators.’ By reframing the field in this way, his work engages with both those who are emerging creators, perhaps only known to their online followers, and those who have already achieved celebrity status.

Symons introduces his study by identifying one hundred American women comedians whom he then categorises based on their level of followers on four digital platforms: TikTok, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube. By collating the follower numbers for individual platforms, he arrives at an overall ‘Total Digital Following’ number which he uses to rank the sample and differentiate between those with a very high digital following (with Colleen Ballinger and Lilly Singh at the top), all the way down to a low digital following. At this end he includes the non-existent digital profiles of four notable *Saturday Night Live* (1975–present) alumni: Kristen Wiig, Tina Fey, Amy Poehler, and Kate McKinnon. The book then proceeds through several case studies drawn from this sample to examine how these platforms are being used, and what impact this has had on the careers of the selected women comics.

The book is divided into four parts to enable an exploration of different platforms and modes of use. Part one considers the rise of video podcasting on the YouTube platform and discusses amongst other examples, *The Sarah Silverman Podcast* and *The Patdown with Ms. Pat*. Audio-only podcasts do not feature amongst the examples used for this chapter. Considering the widespread uptake of audio-only podcasting by women comics, the relative accessibility of the form, and the impact it has had on the careers of many contemporary comedians, the decision to focus only on video podcasting is unusual.

Part two then examines the use of three social media platforms: TikTok, Twitter, and Instagram. Each platform is scrutinised in its own chapter with attention paid to the specific opportunities provided in terms of reaching an

audience, experimentation with form and content, and the aesthetic norms and limitations each space adheres to. It is in this section where we most clearly see the rise of the ‘comedy content creator’ with comedians succeeding on newer platforms and clocking up millions of views, whilst having relatively little presence in mass media forms.

In Part three, Symons turns his attention to the role streaming services have in the new digital comic landscape. He examines how several women comedians have found it difficult to transition from social media success into more traditional media forms. He draws on the work of Iliza Shlesinger to make the case for the career prestige attached to Netflix Specials, and how this has, he argues, replaced HBO’s dominance in previous eras. Finally, Part four looks specifically at the digital comic practice of women during the Donald Trump presidency and how those who assumed a more activist role encountered hostility. Chapters here discuss Trump’s attacks on comedians during his time in office and how Amy Schumer, Roseanne Barr and Kathy Griffin transitioned during his tenure, as a result of participatory audiences, into more politically engaged comedians.

Overall the book is an engaging read, providing detail about the American industrial and cultural contexts in which these women work. There is an interesting array of examples, contextualised through Symons’ data collection and use of charts, to give a wide-ranging overview of the field. The book examines the work and careers of comedians operating across the political spectrum – in the podcast section we have right-wing Christina Pazsitzky and *Your Mom’s House* considered alongside the popular feminism of *Good For You with Whitney Cummings*. When exploring the impact of Trump, Michelle Wolf and Kathy Griffin’s Anti-Trump comedy is addressed alongside the digital media work of Trump-supporting Roseanne Barr, subsequent to the cancellation of her ABC show. The chapter on TikTok is especially illuminating in its analysis of Brittany Broski (who readers may know from the ‘Kombucha reaction’ meme) to discuss how her visceral comic style may potentially limit her reach to digital platforms. Symons makes the case that although assumptions are often made about the need (or desire) to move to mass media forms, Broski is carving out a viable career as a comedy content creator within the confines of digital platforms, where the investment required to produce content is minimal, but the reach substantial.

One of the key strengths of the volume is the examination of how production practices may impact on successful transitions from digital platforms to mass media forms. Symons identifies the way *Broad City* (2014–2019) creators Ilana Glazer and Abbi Jacobson, as well as Issa Rae who produced and starred in *Insecure* (2016–2021), worked in collaboration with others (camera people, editors etc.) from the very start of their YouTube shows. This, Symons argues, enabled a smoother transition into mass media platforms (Comedy Central and HBO respectively). This collaborative approach exists in opposition to the method taken by the majority of online creators

who work in isolation and then struggle to scale up to the required level if picked up for further development. This is exemplified through discussion of the work of Colleen Ballinger whose comedy as character Miranda Sings, has the more immediate and upfront production values typical of digital content, and had a challenging time being adapted for Netflix (2016–2017).

Despite finding the book illuminating, I felt when reading that its perspective skewed towards positivity: for example, when discussing the behaviour, such as trolling, that women (and more specifically women comedians) experience online. In Chapter 4 ‘Witty Women on Twitter,’ Symons draws on case studies to make the astute point that women comedians can turn around online hate campaigns to attract a wider audience and garner publicity. He makes this case clearly and well; however, his examples are Sarah Silverman and Leslie Jones. Both comics, prior to the online experiences being explored, had achieved mainstream success, and thus had a team of people around them (agents, producers etc.) to advise and support them through this kind of targeted misogynistic or racist online abuse. As such this section feels like it misses something in not considering (or sufficiently mentioning) how this kind of behaviour may impact on people below Silverman and Jones’ level of success.

This is perhaps a researcher positioning issue, in that as a woman who engages online with social media it was very surprising to me that there was not a more significant engagement with gendered online hate, as that forms part of my experience of the platforms under discussion. Additionally, from my own research with up-and-coming UK comics I know that experience of gendered online hate is far from exceptional, and that while those women comics with high public profiles attract the most abuse, this hostility impacts on entrants to the field too. Although, Symons does briefly outline the downsides of online hate, he then swiftly moves to discuss how women comedians can capitalise upon such abuse. Why women comedians *have* to undertake this additional labour (managing online hate) in a way not comparable to their male colleagues is not made explicit. Put simply, the book does an excellent job in outlining the positives of turning around online hate, but the negative impacts are not explored with the same level of nuance.

There was also a notable omission in the section exploring the Netflix work of Black women comics, which focuses upon the case study of “Ms. Pat” who ‘voices the broadly neglected experience of a working class, drug afflicted, abused single-mother from a highly impoverished neighbourhood in Los Angeles’ (Symons, 2023: 148). Given this focus on the contemporary American context, it would have been helpful to make reference to a work like Katelyn Hale Wood’s *Cracking Up* (2022), rather than research based on South African and English contexts. Despite the obvious strengths and contributions of the work referenced, Hale Wood’s work much more closely aligns with Symon’s exploration of current comic strategies by Black women

comedians. Nor is this a single case: at other instances across the volume, recent and seemingly relevant literature in comedy studies was not addressed.

Unfortunately, the book also has a lot of minor textual errors that should have been picked up at proofing stage. These can be disruptive, especially where author changes have been made to a sentence, but the original wording also remains, resulting in odd repetitions. Something has gone awry in the production process for there to be so many errors in the published version. Hopefully these issues can be ironed out for the e-book.

In summary, this book provides a good overview of the engagement American women comedians have with digital platforms and how they can use these to shape their careers and reputations. The data collected about followers and differing levels of engagement across platforms offers a timely and comprehensive account of the digital work being undertaken in the contemporary moment by comedy content creators from a range of career levels. Despite the book's, in my view, overly positive, presentation of the way women comics deal with hate online, it sheds new light on contemporary comedy practice and will be of use to researchers and students across media and performance disciplines – especially those looking at newer platforms such as TikTok.

Reference

Wood, Katelyn Hale. 2022. *Cracking Up: Black feminist comedy in the twentieth and twenty-first century United States*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press.