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Performativity, mediarchy, and politics: the sitcom's anonymized critique

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ABSTRACT

How do the media critique the media? How do comedy and fiction advance political critique? A British and American format, here identified as the "parliamentary sitcom," illustrates the continued advantages of episodic television in a hyperpolarized environment. Located between the immediate reaction of daily programing and the long-term production of film, the sitcom's popularity and anonymity allow this often-overlooked genre to address some significant societal concerns. Parliamentary sitcoms, in particular, leverage the advantages of comedy and fiction to underline a crucial inversion of media and political representation that is engendering a potentially post-democratic, post-factual mediarchy in which politics is subsumed into the media (Citton, 2019. *Mediarchy* (A. Brown, Trans.). Polity). The sitcom's form as a staged and fictional entertainment reflexively comments on similar constructions in politics, while its overt caricaturing tests acceptable levels of performativity. In a fragmented attention ecology, I suggest that the sitcom's broad, longitudinal reach, as well as its license to extrapolate and enact, merit more attention as a form of satiric expression.

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Introduction

There is increasing recognition in Anglophone and European cultures that popular satire should be taken seriously as part of the public's understanding of, and relationship to, professional politics. A largely overlooked form of satiric expression is one of television's most critically discounted genres: the sitcom. The sitcom's status as comic fiction, its mass appeal and mode of production, have distinct advantages for political critique. Recognizing this, some of television's most acclaimed writers have leveraged these modalities to expand the genre's role, one result being what I term the *parliamentary sitcom*, so named because its action takes place in or around the seat of government. By tapping into comedy's accessibility, sustainability, and license to both anonymize and exaggerate, these popular dramas are able to address some of the most serious issues a nation can face—and in a hyperpolarized and fragmented attention ecology the sitcom's broad reach is of considerable value. Located between the immediately reactive mode of daily programming and the long-term production of film, these television formats are

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able to mount topical but systemic analyses that track longitudinal trends. In so doing, they disrupt the notion that the sitcom genre is a domestic and introverted diversion from the big issues.[1]

Since the pronounced neoliberal marketization of politics in the 1980s, TV writers have increasingly adopted an *intra-media* critique, meaning they satirize media production within their media productions. In particular, and with increasing insistence, they point to an inversion of power and a perversion of epistemology that are undermining democratic practices. A common trope is mocking politicians who desperately obey media logic, the implication being that, to an unhealthy degree, media companies, and in particular news media conglomerates, control the relationship between politicians and their constituents and have perhaps begun to swallow politics whole. This enormously significant trend is part of what Yves Citton has characterized as the transition from democracy to "mediarchy" (or mediarchies)—that is, to thoroughly mediated cultures in which politics has all but been subsumed into the media, where both the power and "the people" are constituted by it, and where, ironically, we have to rely on media texts themselves for critiques of how media technologies modulate our experience and constitute our reality (2017/2019, p. 89). Whether or not the media is as yet all-encompassing, some sitcom writers have been using popular media to monitor the harmful effects of highly mediatized politics. And if understanding the news media's role is essential to understanding modern politics, then these texts contribute significant and specific insights into the kinship between politics and drama, between governance and entertainment, and between political and fictional representation.

These are heavy themes for a comedy of manners: but the sitcom is being leveraged, not made permeable. In these acclaimed series, the genre's form, intent, and conventions remain largely intact and follow an ancient tradition of satire rather than constitute a new form of political communication such as the full-fledged "discursive integration" of news and entertainment identified by Baym (2005). Unlike "fake news" shows or stand-up monologues that more readily and urgently enter into political discourse, the attacks launched by parliamentary sitcoms are hard-hitting but *anonymized*, meaning they don't name real people or events. Walters distinguishes the "immediate resonance" that drama creates through recognizable contemporary issues—the mix of fact and fiction that is a primary viewing pleasure—from the "wider resonance" of themes that transcend specific socio-historical circumstances (2016, p. 4). My contention is that parliamentary sitcoms can work well on both frequencies.

While these formats have likely influenced perceptions of politics within and outside the profession, they display more cool irony than passionate engagement, resulting in more "imitative" than "argumentative" texts (Corner et al., 2013, p. 33). Trying to make someone laugh is a curious and mutually revealing relationship: traditional methods include touching on taboos, shocking with exaggeration, and subverting expectations. Given that they are intended to provoke laughter, political sitcoms can function as bellwethers for what has or has not been normalized and what is or is not known or acceptable in political style and practice.

Much scholarly attention has been paid to satire in the form of fake or faux news in *The Daily Show* (1996–present) and parody in *The Colbert Report* (2005–2014), (e.g. Amarasingam, 2011; Baym, 2009; Day, 2011; Gray et al., 2009; Jones, 2010; McClennen,

2011; Tryon, 2016). There has also been considerable interest in late-night comedy (e.g. Baumgartner & Morris, 2008; Farnsworth & Lichter, 2020; Lichter et al., 2015; Peterson, 2008; Wild, 2019a) or in more prolonged political commentary such as *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver* (2014–present) (Ulrich, 2019; Wild, 2019b). While most of these studies employ a cultural studies/textual analysis approach, other scholars are interested in media effects/audience reception: indeed, in the last decade there have been articles, too numerous to mention, that seek to gauge the influence of *The Daily Show* (1996-) on political knowledge or voter attitude. Less has been written about political sitcoms, although Fielding (2014) includes these in his comprehensive overview of British political satire, and Basu (2014), Tryon (2016), Holm (2017), Wallace (2018), and Dyson (2019) devote some space to British and American examples.

The parliamentary sitcom

Some of the best-written and most enduring sitcoms have had a strong political flavor. This is true of classics like *Till Death Us Do Part* (1965–75), *All in the Family* (1971–79), and the more filmic *MASH* (1972–83); animated series like *South Park* (1997-); recent woke suburbia in *Black-ish* (2014-); and mockumentary approaches like *Tanner '88* (1998) and *Parks and Recreation* (2009–15). But parliamentary sitcoms go beyond occasional political content or messaging to focus on politics as an institution and profession. They are less interested in mocking particular politicians or policies than about critiquing the entire system. While in other sitcoms political issues may arise, or representation itself bear a political charge—as when previously stigmatized identities become normalized—these series focus overtly and centrally on the political world and provide an inside view of politics in the making. The TV format began with the British *Yes Minister* (BBC, 1980–84)[2] and its sequel *Yes Prime Minister* (BBC, 1986–88), both written by Antony Jay and Jonathan Lynn. Jay, a conservative, had experience in TV production, public relations, and some exposure to Whitehall bureaucracy, while Lynn, a liberal, both acted and wrote for TV and film. Their series, in turn, inspired the mockumentary-inflected *The Thick of It* (BBC, 2005–12), whose creator Armando Iannucci went on to develop the American *Veep* (HBO, 2012–19).[3] Each of these era-defining series has been widely acclaimed and widely distributed around the world.

Yes Minister initiated a distinct type of sitcom that with sophistication and wit, along with wavering angst, delivers an incisive critique of behind-the-scenes professional politics. Earlier politically inflected sitcoms offered lay views, but with *Yes Minister* there is a more interior and nuanced satire of a political elite by another elite (Oxbridge all). *Till Death Us Do Part* and *All in the Family* demonstrated that a humble domestic comedy could deliver a clever political punch by way of a non-threatening working-class buffoon (later re-animated in *The Simpsons*, 1989-).[4] When Lynn and Jay decided to skewer the inner circle who created the problems that others complained about they no longer had an innocuous decoy, so embedding their anti-establishment critique within a clever farce was, in part, for political protection. Lynn reveals that its creators regarded the popular format and the demonstrable enthusiasm of its live studio audience as a way of staving off government officials who might claim the satire was not funny and use this to cancel the show (Lynn, 2011, p. 150). The main official pushback Lynn suspects was a three-year audit by Inland Revenue tax inspectors who pressured the

writers to reveal their government sources (Lynn, 2011, pp. 124–25). The series' popularity allowed them to resist.

Yes Minister was conceived in the late 1970s, which means its writers were early to bring certain trends to the public—or at least to this program's educated, lay audience. Most members of the public had no knowledge of Whitehall and its interface with government, nor much insight into ministerial affairs. However, its writers knew people who knew people and got the inside scoop from senior politicians and administrators, in addition to recent political memoirs (Chapman, 1978; Crossman, 1974). Already we see the advantage of fictionality, since this information sharing was based on fiction being able to contain fact but not needing to acknowledge or prove it. The result is inner access to a world most viewers rarely glimpse yet whose effects they feel all their lives. Appearing well before the internet and daily accusations of fake news, *Yes Minister* immediately identified systemic weaknesses that were the germs of problems to come. Coming before the wave of British and American political satire in the mid 1990s and beyond (e.g. as catalogued by Day, 2011), it focused in some detail on government weaknesses that resonated with both right-wing and left-wing viewers: the one side attributing dysfunction to over-spending and bureaucracy, the other to elitist and self-serving politicians. The series' distinctive style combined farce and erudition, and its viewer devotion (even to this day) suggests the writers were correct in ignoring the notion that the sitcom requires a dumbing down. Their smart and emblematic work identified almost universal themes that have resonated in re-broadcasts around the world, everywhere from Sweden to China.[5]

Another indicator of the popularity and prestige of these comedies are the cameo appearances by real politicians and journalists, or, conversely, real-life appearances by actors alongside politicians. When real-life journalists or news media outlets are incorporated, they bring to the sitcom's commercially safe generalities the pleasure of recognition and contemporaneity. More transgressional is the migration of fictional characters into real life, which occurred as early as *Yes Minister* when actors responded to political questions posed by the press (Adams, 1993, p. 69). Margaret Thatcher, after declaring *Yes Minister* her favorite show, awkwardly performed a sketch with its cast at a 1984 awards event. By trying to borrow some of the TV show's popular capital, she ironically demonstrated the entertainment turn in politics the series satirized: indeed, Wallace notes she hired dramatists, including Anthony Jay, to write her speeches (2018, p. 137). The mockumentary series *Tanner '88* (1998) was notably saturated with real-life politicians, and a more recent reality-fiction conflation occurred in a 2014 White House Correspondents' Dinner video starring both "VP" Louis-Dreyfus and (then) real VP Joe Biden.

A broader influence on the general population is suggested by Fielding (2014) when he asserts that political fictions contribute to our "imagined political capital," to how we generally perceive our system of government (16). But political scientist Dyson (2019) is more specific when he attributes to *Yes Minister* the crucial swing away from relying on civil servants and toward media advisors in the Blair administration and beyond (86). Of course direct causality is generally difficult to prove, but certainly politicians do watch these shows and have adopted some terminology: most notably, "omnishambles," first used in *Thick of It* in 2009, was by 2012 the OED's Word of the Year. And while Malcolm Tucker enjoyed an extra-diegetic presence in the British press and social media (Wallace, 2018, pp. 130–31), Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn echoed Nicola

Murray's fictional initiative involving "ordinary people doing extraordinary things," a borrowing noted by Iannucci (Edwardes, 2015). Still more examples of this fictional-factual osmosis can be found in Walters (2016) and Wallace (2018).

The potential relationships between text and real-world practice are multifarious and include uncovering, reflecting, predicting, and likely shaping actual political performance. While official politicking still happens most often in news programming and current affairs, today's popular entertainments can and do play a role in political culture; indeed, due to the highly privatized nature of media companies and of political life—and the profitability of being entertaining in both sectors—this is increasingly the case. To understand how the sitcom specifically accommodates political critique, it is worth delineating the general advantages of comedy and fiction.

Fictionality

Real-life individuals don't generally symbolize anything, whereas a fictional character is intentionally and wholly created at one juncture by an author who has some broader significance or illustrative power in mind. Much the same applies to any element of fiction, such as narrative plot. The compression of drama and its need to signify drive out the random and meaningless. Things don't just happen; they represent. This representativeness produces an awareness of systemic issues, allowing the writer to amplify structural problems or bring latent structures into view. Moreover, since they typically don't specify characters' party affiliations, political sitcoms may allow some rare commonality of viewing, even if viewers attach blame and responsibility for the same problems according to their own biases. In a fictional drama, the specific becomes representative and so potentially of greater significance.

When dramaturgical enactment individualizes the generic, it encourages viewer engagement and familiarity. Fiction is emblematic, meaning it can in various ways fuse the specific and the generalized: but whether generalizing the specific or individualizing the generic, the key thing is that fictional references are anonymized. Unlike journalists, dramatists don't have to name real names, which doesn't make their ability to inform audiences any less real. Whereas journalists describe and analyze, dramatists demonstrate and enact, and if today's information load appears oppressive as well as unhinged and shallow, engaging with composite characters and situations over many seasons could transcend hit-and-run satire and encourage viewers to find larger and more personally won political and ethical insights than in one-off stand-up or film.

Fictional portrayals, not being tied to fact, are largely asymptotic to real life: they approach without having to touch. So where factual reporting demands immediate proof and accountability, a fictional account may make deeper, because unsubstantiated and unabashed, criticisms. Fiction's legal status enables political insiders to convey information that would otherwise remain hidden and allows writers to skewer their own industry as well as the politicians who regulate them. If dramatists *do* reference real persons or historical events this can create a marketable frisson, but not being subject to the terms or even ideals of professional journalism they may speculate about how politicians might behave behind the scenes—albeit shaped to some extent by the needs of entertainment. These are not impersonations or ad hominem mimicries. Nor are they

re-enacted "approximations" of historical reality: the mixing of fictional narrative and actuality footage, of interpretive distance and indexical proximity, in the political biographies examined by Bruzzi (2020).

Parliamentary sitcoms are self-referential when focused on the media but don't display the ontological self-consciousness of meta-fictional texts or the genre-wide simulation of mockumentaries.[6] Writers simply refer to other media practices within their own diegetic worlds, and while there is some implicit self-consciousness in this technique characters don't beak the fourth wall or in a moment of hypostasis realize their fictional status: that one wing of the media (entertainment) is castigating another (news) just adds to the irony so beloved of satirists. But on a more fundamental level, parliamentary sitcoms are inherently reflexive since they are not only media about media but also performances about performances and speech about speech. The performativity of both the media and politicians are on show, and whether or not a focus on intense conversations with limited cast and limited spaces is due to modest budgets, the almost claustrophobic setting underline that politics is in its most essential form a discourse, an ambiguous realm where closely scrutinized language is vitally important and where speech acts can profoundly alter socio-material reality. When TV politicians employ techniques like scripting and staging, viewers may be reminded of how modern politicians emulate the professional actors who play them. The text's ontological state is, therefore, itself a shadow critique.

A final advantage for political critique is the freedom of imagination that permits conjuring alternative realities or making predictions in the form of thought experiments or implicit advocacy, as when writers portray a female president in countries with no real-life precedent. Fictional narratives may inspire or warn—and certainly political dystopists from Thomas More to Margaret Atwood have done so. However, political sitcoms are less interested in going beyond satire into models of reform.

Comedy

Comedy has long provided a way for the less powerful to safely attack those on top. Apart from enjoying legal protections, in many cultures satire provides a safe cover because it is considered a form of play that its targets are not supposed to take too seriously. Indeed, the freedom to satirize is often taken as a key measure of larger democratic freedoms: as is seen in extreme collisions like the Charlie Hebdo killings. If, however politically managed, seeking amusement is nevertheless a common human trait, comic forms have the potential to attract large, bipartisan audiences, both as broadcast and as extended by online sharing. Comic caricature and amplification draw attention without being didactic—and the degree to which viewers find extreme examples *comic* will measure public perceptions of how far certain trends have advanced. Comedy suits political critique also when it lowers resistance and produces a receptive audience. At the same time, emotional distance may lessen the viewer's feelings of shame or guilt when a figure is attacked and thus allow authors to sharpen their barbs and tackle otherwise upsetting or daunting topics. Laughing from a safe distance at what otherwise causes fear or anxiety is generally considered therapeutic or cathartic. It may also distract from or defuse real-life protest. So whether comedy is ultimately more often conservative than radical is a matter for debate.

Sitcom genre

Positioned between long-term film production and daily or weekly sketches, TV sitcoms can reflect recent events and, if necessary, be re-written close to filming: an extreme example being *Drop the Dead Donkey* (1990–98) which inserted that day's news. At the same time, a season's-long sitcom can offer a sustained critique through the development of character and plot. Stylistically, the sitcom's somewhat staged delivery is appropriate for critiquing political performances. It doesn't offer the melodramatic sweep of some television drama, nor the intense action or extensive outside locations of more expensive film; instead, it presents indoor, slippery negotiations involving small or large acts of deception. The frequent verbal or physical gaffs so beloved of sitcom writers are easily adapted to illustrate the daily humiliations and missteps individuals will endure in order to hang on to power. Whereas political dramas can portray the extremes of nihilism or idealism, the sitcom traditionally focuses on the middle ground of foibles and flaws. Neither heroic nor evil, its characters typically inhabit the sub-tragic realm of frustration, minor betrayal, and individual or institutional incompetence. The genre's long history of capturing everyday mediocrity and embarrassing failure therefore works well to depict a politician's life, although in parliamentary versions the politician's family is often not a strength but a liability and romantic or familial plots are translated into the intense and precarious love of power.

Of course, grafting politics onto the sitcom isn't guaranteed to be successful and can confound audience expectations. Sitcoms are conventionally perky, solution-driven, and optimistic, whereas the parliamentary sitcom's darker "comedy of errors" often end in failure and exhaustion—of people and processes (Holm, 2017, p. 77). Regular one-liners and accompanying laugh tracks don't always gel well with clever and even intellectual scripts—unless one argues that the sound of collective laughter could be cathartic and be experienced as a form of instant justice. In any case, there are limits to the artistic freedoms mentioned above. These are professional shows produced by private or public corporations and some censorship or inhibitions exist even with non-commercial broadcasters. To date, they are also the creations of high-status, white men, a factor that produces its own blindnesses.

Slouching toward mediarchy

Sometimes only dysfunction brings relationships into sharp focus and one could argue that this explains some of the increased attention in popular and academic discourse to the pivotal role of the media in democratic culture and politics (without wishing to strictly distinguish these two concepts). In parliamentary sitcoms, an increasingly dysmorphic relationship between the news media and politics has been a long-running theme: evidence that a seemingly trivial genre can identify and alert audiences to one of the most critical relationships of our era. For four decades, writers have depicted a crucial reversal whereby politicians prioritize media representation over constituent representation to the point where politics seems to have become another form of media production. Indeed, in some instances it appears to have become a branch of the entertainment industry with an assumed license to produce fiction.

Sitcom writers are no doubt attuned to these political trends because they see aspects of their own profession taken up in politics: the stagey performances, the exaggerated character development, the impetus to entertain, plus the hypocrisy and fabrication. By depicting politicians as traditional sitcom characters, they have already drawn attention to the problem. Of course, politicians have always been expected to give a public performance of some sort: this is part of their job description and this practice alone does not make them charlatans. Scholars of rhetoric will point out that adjusting content to attract a particular audience is also as old as democracy—though from the time of the ancient Greek Sophists media handlers have had an unsavory reputation. That said, parliamentary sitcoms employ comedy's traditional identification of mediocre hypocrisy to portray the spread of an all-absorbing *pseudo-politics*— pseudo in Boorstin's (1962) sense of actions-planned-in-order-to-appear-in-the-media. Their writers are anxious to demonstrate how performing publically has begun to eclipse any other meaningful activity, so that politicians follow a media-centric rather than ideological impetus. They portray a politics-as-theater in which audience-tested personae read scripts that have less and less connection to reality but are professionally designed to attract certain kinds of attention: the difference being that professional actors are known to pretend whereas politicians still trade on their access to truth. As early as the 1970s, Raymond Williams noted that while in our "dramatised society" everyone performs to some degree, the acknowledged, different, and intermittent roles undertaken by professional actors makes them less problematic and more authentic than the real-life and increasingly continuous performance of politicians (Wallace, 2018, p. 137).

Already in *Yes Minister,* a central theme is the prioritizing of media image over good government. In Season One, Hacker's vanity in courting the press is largely regarded as a character flaw, albeit one common to politicians. We are reminded that politicians, like entertainers, depend on ratings/polls and regard press attention as the soundest measure of success. Hacker's chief advisor Sir Humphrey quips: "I sometimes think our minister doesn't believe that he exists unless he is reading about himself in the papers" (Jay & Lynn, 1981): quite an insight for 1981. Hacker—whose party affiliation is never declared—begins with idealistic notions of an "open government" but gradually learns to outsmart the press by revealing as little as possible. He is still to some extent motivated by ideology or principle, but a typical ending is the minister suddenly reversing or abandoning legislation to preserve his own image—and not admitting to this motive. Popular newspapers appear to take cheap shots at every opportunity in order to create entertaining (i.e. profitable) stories and this press hunger for infotainment already has a chilling effect on policy, especially with the comically skittish Jim Hacker.

A significant shift occurs in Season Two when Hacker's idealistic political advisor is replaced by a less conscience-driven "press officer." Until now, the minister was more reactive than proactive in his press relations, but this new advisor more deliberately orchestrates good PR and sometimes overtly engages in news production, arranging pseudo-events that defer to media logic. A similar depiction of the-politician-as-self-serving-actor emerges when Hacker periodically launches into his imitation of Churchill's swelling rhetoric, a momentary caricature that again suggests much of the politician's life, even his relationship with himself, is a performance. The sitcom's traditional embrace of buffoonery allows this key point to be enacted rather than discussed and the irony of a professional-actor-pretending-to-be-an-amateur suits the comic mode.

In the sequel, Prime Minister Hacker's preoccupation with his media image is still partly attributed to personal vanity but is more openly acknowledged to be a necessary political strategy, especially for a leader. While British Prime Ministers are chosen by colleagues and not elected directly by the public (they are technically appointed by the monarch), they increasingly need to bank media capital to retain power. One of Hacker's first priorities is planning a television address, not because he has some policy to announce but because he wants to be on TV. He is instructed on how to choose journalists or TV programs according to the persona he wishes to project and media advisors micromanage his props and delivery: e.g. glasses, tie, posture, facial muscles, background music, lighting, even sentence length.[7]

Even more media-focused is Iannucci's *The Thick of It*, where the Horatian wit of *Yes Minister* has soured into Juvenalian despair. In this more desperate setting, Iannucci's increasingly sharp barbs appear aimed at the government style of Tony Blair (1997–2007), especially the migration of the media expert from tangential advisor to central controller as illustrated by the real-life ascent of former tabloid journalist Alastair Campbell. While ordinarily good PR is invisible PR and opaque to the public, this fictional drama provides an inside view of media advisors exercising more power and authority than the elected politicians they mercilessly subjugate. More than in Hacker's day, firings and resignations are a direct result of bad press and political careers are determined by media strategist Malcom Tucker, once described as Iago with a Blackberry (Blackwell et al., 2012). While *Yes Minister* generated laughs from the exquisite and patrician circumlocution of Sir Humphrey, Tucker blasts everyone with scorching profanities. Iannucci repeats this technique in *Veep*, where the comic degradation of linguistic decorum implicitly indicates a larger dismantling of code and conduct.

Iannucci observes that, thanks to media advisors, politicians "no longer act like real versions of themselves. Instead, they come over as replicants of an idealised, fictional version of what they think a politician should be. They perform politics, rather than practise policy" (Iannucci, 2016). The politicians' relationship with their public appears to have shrunk to mere public relations. Although in *Thick of It* we see some old-guard politicians scoffing at the reliance on jargonistic marketing gurus, who are indeed portrayed as largely ineffectual. These professional politicians' discontent voices a criticism being aimed at contemporary and future British administrations, both Conservative and Labor, who were seen to have adopted some of the more slick marketing techniques of American politics. At least to political insiders, the focus on media management and the triumph of PR over ideology were becoming too prominent in the Blair era. Iannucci's highly successful sitcom gives the real and potential consequences of this trend a sustained public airing across party lines.

Precession: media-induced Policy

In earlier series, media-driven politicians were comic due to breaking a norm or taboo and hypocritically hiding this from their peers. A regular laugh was earned when Hacker or his staff recited potential newspaper headlines and weighed policies in this currency. By *Thick of It* the rise of pseudo-politics is well understood, but the reverse causality and resultant *precession* are still hidden from the public: "precession" being used both in the sense of change in orientation due to outside forces (astronomy) and

seeming reverse causality (Baudrillard). The two usages—spin and ontological preemption—describe how media coverage comes first and therefore changes the orientation of the political sphere as it is spun within the culture at large.

The absurd logic of political precession can take many forms: the reverse causality of using news coverage to preemptively make policy before it otherwise existed (e.g. Jay & Lynn, 1980. Season 1, Episode 4; Mandel & Addison, 2016. Season 5, Episode 39); providing journalists with post-event communiques prior to the event (e.g. Jay & Lynn, 1982. Season 3, Episode 18); or generally letting potential media reception determine policy decisions. We see media-driven policy begin to build in *Yes Minister* and by *Thick of It* politicians and staffers routinely invent policy on the hoof to impress or distract journalists. Iannucci signals this theme's centrality by opening the series with the chief media handler telling a minister to drop an initiative just before a press conference. He and his advisors have to scramble to invent a substitute policy on the way to this event, only to be ordered later to convince the press that they *did* announce the original policy at this event, even though they didn't. Spin-doctor Tucker justifies this surreal imperative with equivocation worthy of a philosopher and the incident serves as the kickoff to a whole series of makeshift media-driven policymaking whose manic nature becomes a main comic engine. An even more cavalier attitude to policy evolves in *Veep,* whose protagonist eventually becomes the apotheosis of the fake politician in an all-consuming mediarchy who compulsively grasps at the hollow crown while suppressing her half-conscious but growing awareness that it has cost her, and her democracy, too much. It is a profound realization that imports almost more weight than comedy can bear and is conveyed best in poignant glimpses of Meyer alone between satiric dialogues.

Post-fact

In 1980s programming, politicians practiced some forms of deception that may be endemic to those who negotiate for power, but there was as yet no fundamental destabilization of fact: lies were still being hidden or disavowed. More recent sitcoms reflect the contemporary concern that politicians have begun to treat fact and truth as irrelevant and therefore expect from voters something like the viewer's suspension of disbelief: another disturbing equivalence between sitcoms and real life. We saw Hacker and his staff resorting to dizzying prevarication, equivocation, and temporizing in order to obfuscate policy or hold back information. Viewers laughed at the effort and at the reassuring failure rate. In *Thick of It*, constant comic energy is generated by ideologically and physically exhausted politicians and staffers trying to leak, hide, or fabricate information with methods and results that range from the silly to the absurd. This is the comedy of failure for those who don't deserve success—but here with grave consequences. Most notable is what we might call a *media exposure paradox* whereby the more politicians seek media attention—as they must to survive—the more fake they and their proposals become, which means that media attention may result in more fakery and performativity, not less.

In both *Thick of It* and *Veep*, comedy is still generated by old-fashioned lying, but the new turn is watching politicians create part or whole fabrications to win favorable media attention—the only principle being that of self-preservation, a motive unsullied by complications due to any genuinely held beliefs or ideological affiliations. Once again, party affiliations are unstated, leading to the anonymized implication of a plague in both

houses. In *Veep*'s final season, Meyer replies to speechwriters who urge her to be genuine: "If you want me to use my own god-damn words then write me something to say" (Morton & Mandel, 2019). Since she exhibits much the same ruthless deception and appalling inauthenticity in both political and family life, the comedy relies more on breaking taboos than identifying inconsistencies between public and private selves. Indeed, we are left wondering whether public/ private hypocrisy will become an outdated concept when authenticity is mediated away along with truth. *Veep*'s uncomfortable caricaturing resembles the comic grotesqueries of *The Colbert Report* (2005–14) where there was an uneasy and retreating hope that the performances are indeed exaggerated. This is distinct from the more boisterous and cathartic embrace of hyper-caricature in *Spitting Image* (1984–96, 2020) and the long-running French *Les Guignols* (1988–2018).

Veep focuses on power brokering in a more or less permanent campaign mode, as reflects American politics where predetermined election dates are always in mind and campaigners constantly chase funding. The series gradually extends the politicians' adversarial relationship with the press into online media where political operators can by-pass journalism altogether to generate disinformation. In an even more relentless attempt to shape reality to match their ambition, politicians now consider being honest with others or even oneself a quaint liability (except for the absurd aberration of Richard Splett, perhaps a meta-satiric jab at easy cynicism). Iannucci depicts a post-factual, pre-Enlightenment, and thoroughly mediatized world which still appears extreme enough to provoke laughter, uneasy though it may be. For example, there is the outrageous outburst when a rival politician confesses to an affair and Meyer's campaign manager feels cheated: "Crap! If there is any dirty trick I cannot stand it is honesty," she protests (Iannucci, Quantick, & Roche, 2014). Then there is the deliberate embrace of fake news when Meyer participates in a podcast to preemptively create a false rumor about her opponent that is *actually true of herself* writers presumably rely on the direct and overt hypocrisy to secure a laugh. We notice also that Meyer is now being aided by a once hard-hitting *Washington Post* reporter who appears to have suddenly jettisoned all journalistic principles. Whether this is an example of media shaping politics or politics media is perhaps no longer a significant distinction.

However, in some instances, facts still survive as a disruptive and comic force. In one example of a PR simulation gone awry, Meyer invents an immigrant story that subsequently outs a real person with same name and situation who is consequently deported. This leads to a humiliating press conference when the immigrant woman is returned in the flesh. Then there is the buffoonish Jonah Ryan whose blind antics have been relied on to generate broad farce. In the final series, now-candidate Ryan attracts supporters by arguing that mathematics was invented by Muslims and hence its teachers are "terrorists." However, by sheer coincidence, a Muslim math teacher is later arrested for terrorist activities, a preposterous joke perhaps aimed at sanguine viewers who still think fake and fact are easily and permanently distinguishable.

Conclusion

Political life has long entailed performance and even to some degree entertainment, but dramatists, who more legitimately engage in these activities, have alerted us to their increased presence in modern politics. As we have seen, parliamentary sitcoms have

identified three related trends: policy being shaped more by media needs than by ideology; media strategists becoming ever more central to both campaigning and governance; and premediated deception becoming a central requirement of statecraft. That the depiction of these trends intends and succeeds in provoking laughter is perhaps reassuring—for as long as they do appear exaggerated.

As a culture worries about its politics becoming a form of entertainment and, even more worrisome, becoming in some ways fictionalized, it is interesting that fictional entertainment is alerting us to these trends. Interesting but not entirely surprising, for it is the honest *make-believe* of fictional texts that can expose the more deceptive *making people believe* of politics. It is fiction's license to escape accusations of lying that helps it highlight the abuse of fact. And it is comedy's apparent geniality and even impartiality that allows oblique but incisive critiques. The mass appeal of the sitcom and its now global accessibility (whether broadcast or streamed) offers millions of viewers with a range of political affiliations a backstage pass to their own or another political culture. Being a comedian's, not a documentarian's, pass, it allows the deliberate, illustrative exaggeration that can highlight and forecast. For some viewers, as politicians lose credibility comedians acquire it: as when late-night monologists' genuinely felt political scrutiny enters news feeds and reaches a potentially global audience through intimate online performances.

The fictional scripts of parliamentary sitcoms have at times turned out to be accurate and predictive—even unintentionally, as when deliberate caricatures unexpectedly become normalized in real life. This convergence of fiction and fact is hard to miss in the era of populist politicians who illustrate every day the media-driven policy, fake news, and outrageously inauthentic performances previously seen on these sitcoms. Indeed, *Veep* producers eventually acknowledged the difficulty of caricaturing current trends and at the 2016 Emmy Awards Julia Louis-Dreyfus ruefully remarked: "Our show started out as a political satire but it now feels more like a sobering documentary" (Snierson, 2019). This conceit still provoked laughter, but only just.

Notes

1. Mills (2009) observes and disputes this conventional understanding of the sitcom as "small-time."
2. A concurrent US sitcom *Benson* (1979–86) featured some gubernatorial politics.
3. *Whoops Apocalypse* (1982), *The New Statesman* (1987–1994), *No Job for a Lady* (1990–92), *Spin City* (1996–2002) and *Alpha House* (2013–14) are also worth mentioning. An earlier Whitehall satire was the radio sitcom *The Men from the Ministry* (1962–1977).
4. Although sometimes the satire backfired due to different viewers' sympathies.
5. I am not aware of original parliamentary sitcoms outside Anglophone countries, though multiple broadcasters have adapted *Yes Minister*, even decades after the original: e.g. India (2001), Turkey (2004), Holland and Ukraine (2009).
6. Though primarily sitcoms, *The Thick of It* and *Veep* also have strong mockumentary elements: as highlighted by Wallace (2018).
7. For a more detailed analysis of this episode's socio-historical context, see Adams (1993).

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