

Calling Attention to Blackface:  
An Analysis of the Entertainment Industry's  
Reaction to the Black Lives Matter Movement

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The year 2020 will be one of the most memorable years of the 21st century. It was just over two months after the New Year when the spread of COVID-19 came to America and caused the population to stay indoors and apart from one another. And it was just over two months after this when the entire world saw an American cop kill a black citizen in cold blood. Unable to fathom the sight of this, unable to even start writing this paper without coming to tears, the world changed. In an already polarized country, caused by a president who thinks they can do and say anything, a near-civil war began to break out.

“It’s either COVID is killing us, cops are killing us, or the economy is killing us,” said a protestor during a peaceful demonstration just four days after the death of George Floyd on May 25, which the world was able to watch as a passerby took and shared a video of the event (Altman, 2020). People began making peaceful protests across the country and even across the world (as America is not the only country with racial issues), creating what we now know as the “Black Lives Matter” movement (Altman, 2020). Everyone wanted to do their part in order to either push forward or push against this idea, with the former of those, this included the entertainment industry.

While there are a great number of avenues that could be taken on this subject, this paper will explore and analyze the entertainment industry's reaction to the death of George Floyd with a focus on television in particular. It should be noted that much more could be written if one were to expand the subject to movies and other aspects of entertainment. After investigation, the analysis of this paper will be covering the various perspectives on both the use and the removal

of blackface in comedy shows as it has been discovered to be the majority of the entertainment industry's reaction.

## **History**

The use of blackface became popular as entertainment after the American Civil War “as white performers played characters that demeaned and dehumanized African Americans,” with skin painted black, “enlarged lips and other exaggerated features” in response to slaves being emancipated (Clark, 2019). Blackface can be dated back to Shakespearean times and was brought to America in the 18th century by the term “blackface minstrel shows—which became central to American entertainment in the North and South” by the 19th and early 20th century due to the Civil War (Clark, 2019). Minstrel shows “perpetuated a range of negative stereotypes about African Americans including being lazy, ignorant, superstitious, hypersexual, criminal or cowardly;” a professor in ethics and social studies found the actors who would play in minstrel shows were often Irishmen and used blackface to “distance themselves from their own lower social, political and economic status,” and with this, the professor considers blackface to be a way for people to feel both superior and more conformative (Clark, 2019).

“African Americans also performed in blackface given it was the only way to be in the entertainment industry,” this offered black actors an opportunity to portray black people as being intelligent, counteracting the industry largely “dominated by white actors,” including America's sweetheart Shirley Temple (Clark, 2019). Blackface in entertainment started to decline after the Civil Rights Movement began, can be seen in media commonly into the 1950s, and has been seen periodically used in entertainment as latest as 2012 (during the Oscars Awards) (Clark, 2019). More and more backlash has come from the consumer side of this issue, the audience to

the entertainment, and can also be explored under the name “cancel culture,” where it can be seen that growing groups of individuals will call attention to moments in history and demand for justice towards it.

Knowing the “toxic culture of racism” that surrounds blackface in entertainment (Clark, 2019), this paper will first touch on four moments that came before the death of George Floyd. When analyzing the entertainment industry’s reaction to the event, it can be seen that members in the industry were already taking steps to call attention to and/or making reparation for the use of blackface in comedy and entertainment.

In 2014, Amazon Prime Video added warnings about racial stereotypes and dated prejudices to multiple shows including “Tom and Jerry” that informed viewers that the show “may depict some ethnic and racial prejudices that were once commonplace in American society,” including blackface (Coughlan, 2014). To this, a sociology professor shared that Amazon’s warning is “a type of censorship which ‘seems to be sweeping cultural life’” as well as an empty gesture on Amazon’s values (Coughlan, 2014). Amazon’s view on the show is not new however, “in the 1960s some scenes were edited” for US television, and changes were often made (Coughlan, 2014). In the mid-2010s, university students started to push for “trigger warnings” for grotesque images; according to an animation professor, these dated and stereotypical images are not shocking to students, and editing these works hinders the educative process as students want to know more about the history of blackface and “representation of women and other nationalities in animations from the 1940s” like “Tom and Jerry” (Coughlan, 2014). And to the sociology professor, “trigger warnings [are] a form of ‘narcissism’, with the concerns not really being about the content of a book or work of art but about individual students

asserting their own importance. ‘A tolerant society needs to discuss disturbing art’” (Coughlan, 2014).

In 2015, actors from Comedy Central’s show “Stella” came forward about an episode that included blackface during “the show’s 10-year cancelversary” (Berkowitz, 2015). Starring a trio of actors who played “total idiots,” the show itself was not well taken during its initial airing and only lasted for a short while, (Berkowitz, 2015). The single incident in which the actors put on “19th-century style blackface” was briefly in an episode from 2005 and was used to cover up bruises from bullies, and when asked why, they answered: “Obviously, because we’re protesting racism. We’re making an ironic statement about racism and how wrong it is” (Dessem, 2020). During the “cancelversary,” the actors shared: “we just thought it was a classic example of how the Stella guys think. They don’t understand how horrible they are. It seemed delightfully offensive and idiotic. I think we all sort of thought it was edgy, and funny and silly” (Berkowitz, 2015). No action has been taken on the “Stella” episode that included blackface and it is still available to watch in certain locations on streaming (Dessem, 2020).

In 2018, the main actor from Comedy Central’s show “The Sarah Silverman Program,” Sarah Silverman, brought attention to her 2007 episode of the show where she wears blackface for nearly the entire duration of the episode (Dessem, 2020). The reason for her doing this in the show was “to prove that being Jewish is harder than being Black by spending a day as a Black woman,” where the audience is given a montage of professional makeup equipment, Silverman is then revealed to be in “exaggerated 19th-century blackface” and proceeds to confuse the reactions she is getting as “manifestations of racial prejudice” (Dessem, 2020). During Silverman’s 2018 “campaign to neutralize her haters,” as her show took great heat throughout its airing, she said that “comedy by nature is not at all evergreen. So if you're doing it right, you

look back at your old stuff and you're horrified. [...] I don't stand by the blackface sketch. I'm horrified by it, and I can't erase it. I can only be changed by it and move on.” (Magary, 2018). While the episode cannot be erased from our DVDs and memories, it is “no longer available” to buy on online purchasing platforms like Amazon Prime Video (Dessem, 2020).

In 2018, the actor Hank Azaria opened up that he was “‘perfectly willing and happy’ to stop voicing Apu on ‘The Simpsons’” as the show had been receiving years of growing backlash toward the character as Apu is shown to be a stereotype of Indians in America and is not voiced by an Indian actor (Jensen, 2018). The show “Simpsons” was acquired by the streaming service Disney+ in late 2019 and was remastered with a wide aspect ratio that cut out most of the show’s visual jokes (Hersko, 2020). In January of 2020, Azaria retired from voicing Apu after 30 years, leaving the rest up the show’s producers and creators: “Once I realized that that was the way this character was thought of, I just didn’t want to participate in it anymore. [...] It just didn’t feel right.” (Henderson, 2020). The show’s producers respected the actor’s decision and “journey in regard to Apu” and told the world to “stay tuned” for Apu’s future (Henderson, 2020). In mid-May of 2020, Disney+ announced that “The Simpsons” will have a corrected aspect ratio version available for streaming on May 28th (Hersko, 2020).

After the death of George Floyd on May 25th, 2020, these acts of apologies, reasonings, edits, and removals of blackface on television and TV streaming services started to come onto the news daily, in addition, to support for the Black Lives Matter movement. With thorough research, it has been found that Jimmy Fallon was the first of many actors, creators, producers, and streaming service companies to formally apologize for the use of blackface in comedy, for Fallon this was in a sketch on Saturday Night Live (SNL) as he was already taking heat online for this online at the time (Garcia, 2020). “In 2000, while on SNL, I made a terrible decision to

do an impersonation of Chris Rock while in blackface, [...] There is no excuse for this. I am very sorry for making this unquestionably offensive decision and thank all of you for holding me accountable” (Garcia, 2020). Fallon also apologized on his show “The Tonight Show” before discussing the events with “NAACP president Derrick Johnson” (Dessem, 2020). According to an audit by *Slate* writer Mathew Dessem, there are 64 episodes of SNL where an actor is portraying a person of color in what could be considered modern-day blackface, where actors “darkened [their] skin to impersonate” famous people, however, the vast majority of old SNL seasons (6-29) have not been made available for streaming, online purchasing, or DVD (2020), and modern SNL skits have pointed to how wrong this is and was.

After May 25th, 2020, Netflix had numerous “top-level meetings in Los Angeles over the weekend to determine an appropriate response to the sustained Black Lives Matter protests” (Quinn, 2020). Netflix’s official statement to the Black Lives Matter movement came through a post on Twitter on May 30th: “To be silent is to be complicit. Black lives matter. / We have a platform, and we have a duty to our Black members, employees, creators and talent to speak up.” (Moore, 2020). With this, other “streaming giants” followed – Hulu posted: “We support Black lives. Today, and every day. You are seen. You are heard. And we are with you,” HBO Max posted with a quote from a famous 20th-century black writer and activist: “‘Neither love nor terror makes one blind: indifference makes one blind.’ – James Baldwin / We stand with our Black colleagues, employees, fans, actors, storytellers — and all affected by senseless violence. #BlackLivesMatter,” and Amazon Prime Video shared a photo post with text in all caps on a black background: “Together we stand with the black community – colleagues, artists, writers, storytellers, producers, our viewers – and all allies in the fight against racism and injustice. / #BlackLivesMatter” with the service’s logo and Amazon Studio’s logo at the bottom (Moore,

2020). With these responses, the next step Netflix, Amazon Prime Video, and Hulu took was to create Black Lives Matter genre pages on their platforms, Netflix also prompted this page with a message “More than a Moment” for its users when they opened the app after the genre was created (Willis, 2020).

A few days later, Paramount Network removed and canceled continuations for the docuseries “Cops,” while A&E unofficially canceled its newest docuseries “Live PD,” both of which were due to the Black Lives Matter movement, a movement calling for “radical changes to the relationship between police and civilians” (Andreeva, 2020, Dessem, 2020). The next day, now June 10th, Netflix took down the comedy shows “The Mighty Boosh” and “The League of Gentlemen,” British television shows where the show’s actors have painted their faces black to create new characters, and four shows created by Australian actor Chris Lilley, who has the same method to create new characters (Dessem, 2020). Netflix kept one early 2000 Lilley show as it does not have characters in blackface, Netflix also kept the 2019 Netflix original series “Lunatics,” which does include Lilley portraying a South African woman, to this, “the show’s producer [said that she] is a white character.” (Quinn, 2020).

Netflix’s decision to forgo the majority of Chris Lilley’s work has caused the Australian Broadcasting Corporation to conduct a “‘harm and offence’ audit of its past and present programming” (Quinn, 2020). “Indigenous writer and performer Nakkiah Lui offered cautious support for moves against content that was [...] offensive to people of colour” to *The Sydney Morning Herald* in the midst of this political climate:

“You don’t want to police other people’s art, [...] But this isn’t about censorship, it’s about a private company deciding what it wants to put up to reflect its own values. I think they have a right, especially at this time, to decide they don’t want

to endorse material that has blackface. They have a right to practise their company values” (Quinn, 2020).

In looking at this view of removal versus the offering of context, as seen with the “Tom and Jerry” cartoons, an Australian historian suggests that context can be far more useful: “If we expunge negative histories then we assume they don't exist – and if we assume they don't exist we no longer have the language or knowledge framework to talk about them” (Quinn, 2020). As it stands, two of Lilley’s shows are unavailable to stream or purchase worldwide, being deemed as stereotypical and “racist portrayals” (Bakare, 2020).

These British and Australian comedy show removals were the first of many, where other instances also exclude individual episodes or scenes from American comedies like “Always Sunny in Philadelphia,” “W/ Bob & David” (a Netflix original), and “Community,” all three of which have scenes that use blackface in a way to poke fun at the use of blackface, similarly to the meta-satirical use of blackface in “Stella” (Dessem, 2020). And to an actor today, Jack Carroll, this response to the Black Lives Matter movement is “an arbitrary gesture that means they don’t have to put any real work into combatting actual instances of racial discrimination and comedy history is getting smashed in the process” (Bakare, 2020).

From the creators of well-loved and well-established comedies like “30 Rock,” “Scrubs,” and “The Office,” they took matters into their own hands by removing and editing their own episodes (Dessem, 2020). Creator of “30 Rock,” Tina Fey shared “I understand now that ‘intent’ is not a free pass for white people to use these images. I apologize for pain they have caused. Going forward, no comedy-loving kid needs to stumble on these tropes and be stung by their ugliness,” making four episodes no longer available online or on “syndicated television” (Adalian, 2020). The creator of “The Office,” Greg Daniels, explained his use of blackface was

to “criticize a specific racist European practice” and apologized, saying that “blackface is unacceptable and making the point so graphically is hurtful and wrong. I am sorry for the pain that caused” and edited the scene out of the show officially (Dessem, 2020). While the creator of “30 Rock,” Bill Lawrence gave similar statements, taking three episodes off of streaming and television (Dessem, 2020).

Following the corrections of the aspect ratio of “The Simpsons” as well as Hank Azaria retiring as voicing a character of color that was also deemed as stereotypical, by the end of June 2020, “the people behind the animated shows ‘The Simpsons,’ ‘Family Guy,’ ‘Big Mouth’ and ‘Central Park’” decided they will be replacing all characters of colors with people of color while the actors have “stepped down from their respective roles” (Flook, 2020, Trepany, 2020). As actor from these shows, Jenny Slate, opened up on her Instagram about the issue: “In me playing ‘Missy,’ I was engaging in an act of erasure of Black people. Ending my portrayal of ‘Missy’ is one step in a life-long process of uncovering the racism in my actions.” (Trepany, 2020). The summer of 2020 was the peak of “cancel culture” in the entertainment industry for comedy shows and their availability on streaming platforms, and their fluidity in change with edits and new actors.

### **Status Quo & Analysis**

The different perspectives in this situation include those from streaming services, creators and producers, actors, as well as professors and activists. Being nearly a full year after the death of George Floyd, it can be seen that the momentum to the Black Lives Matter has simmered in the realm of entertainment and comedy shows. Currently, the shows mentioned above are the

majority of comedy shows that have been affected by the death of George Floyd and none of the shows mentioned have been further altered from where they were a year ago.

In analyzing the entertainment industry's reaction to the Black Lives Matter movement, as well as the history behind blackface, it can be seen that the members of the industry used deductive reasoning and formal logic to place their focus on the use of blackface in entertainment. If the premise is this: the use of blackface in comedy can be traced back to Civil War movements stirred by racism, and further back with harmful and derogatory stereotypes from Europe (Clark, 2019). And a racist act of prejudice stereotyping caused George Floyd to be killed and the Black Lives Movement to start (Altman, 2020). Then the logical conclusion would be to address stereotypes that have been born out of the use of blackface in entertainment as these depictions would be perpetuating the problem, just as Jimmy Fallon did the day after George Floyd's death with "NAACP president Derrick Johnson" (Dessem, 2020), sparking the rest of the world to follow suit.

Streaming services, like Netflix and Hulu, have not made formal statements on taking shows off of their platforms. However, the writer Nakkiah Lui made an effort to argue for the services: "this isn't about censorship, it's about a private company deciding what it wants to put up to reflect its own values" (Quinn, 2020). The largest difference now is between people like Tina Fey ("30 Rock" creator), and actors like Jack Carroll and various professors who have shared their thoughts, where the Fey's think that "no comedy-loving kid needs to stumble on these tropes and be stung by their ugliness," (Adalian, 2020); and the Carroll's believe this is putting not "any real work into combatting actual instances of racial discrimination and comedy history is getting smashed in the process" (Bakare, 2020). And then there are the creators behind

“The Simpsons” and other animations who have decided to change their shows from here on out to have only actors of color play characters of color (Trepany, 2020).

It is clear that behind every one of these intentions is a virtue-based argument to (attempt to at some level) make the world more mindful and respectful toward black people as well as all people of color. When following the logical conclusion of members of the entertainment industry, the foundation of the issue is that blackface, in any context, can be deemed as morally wrong and should be addressed. Lui points directly at the values of the streaming services, as the shows on the services can be considered to be reflective of the service’s character and ethical stance on controversial issues. And this can be turned to the actors like Silverman, Azaria, Fallon, Fey, Slate, and others who have performed in a form of blackface on television, and felt that the use of blackface was a misrepresentation of their character and have since apologised for this as they want to be seen as a person with better ethical values than they once had.

### **Typology**

With this issue, the disagreement revolved itself toward questions on policy and what the right course of action would be to solve the problem. For streaming services and production studios, policies can be written in black and white. As an example, “our service will not stream any episodes with depictions of blackface in any context or manner,” or “only in historically accurate manners,” or as Amazon Prime Video chose, with a contextual warning in the description of shows with blackface. For television show creators and producers, these were the people to create the show and to edit or remove episodes from circulation would be at their own discretion. For actors, being willing or unwilling to act in shows in the future or to apologize for acts in the past are two policies one could take to their agent or current place of employment.

And finally, in the eyes of the public and academic professionals, there is no direct course of action to take but a stance on the issue and to offer opinions and better alternatives. Professional, private ethical policies in the entertainment industry do have to keep the opinion of the public in mind as this is the audience of entertainment and to this there is one last, double-edged question: is keeping blackface in the entertainment industry perpetuating stereotypes, or, is removing blackface a censorship over American and comedic history? In answering this question, corporations are taking an ethical stance on the Black Lives Matter movement and this may be why the streaming industry has stopped removing shows and episodes from their services and others from making changes to their shows.

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