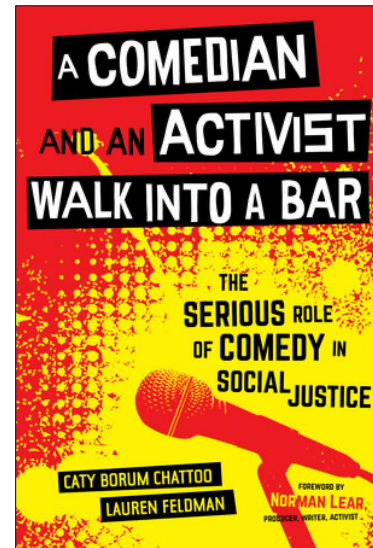


Caty Borum Chattoo and Lauren Feldman, **A Comedian and an Activist Walk Into a Bar: The Serious Role of Comedy in Social Justice**, Oakland: University of California Press, 2019, 296 pp., \$29.95 (paperback), \$85.00 (hardcover).

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Comedy disseminated through popular media, or mediated comedy, has attracted significant curiosity regarding its relevance and positioning in the contemporary sociopolitical culture. In the United States, popular televised comedy programming focused on topical sociopolitical issues like *The Daily Show with Trevor Noah*, *Full Frontal with Samantha Bee*, and *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver*, have generated spectacular levels of public engagement around social justice topics. Cultural influence of such shows is a phenomenon that has captured the imaginations of communication experts and social justice advocates alike. Growing affordances of the digital era of media to comedians and artists, in conjunction with increasing consumer interests in social justice struggles, have newly created fertile grounds for the production of comedic content, which is at once entertaining as well as bolstered with a socially aware, socially critical spine.



In ***A Comedian and An Activist Walk Into a Bar***, authors Caty Borum Chattoo and Lauren Feldman bring together a collection of case studies, historical perspectives, interviews, and some of their original experiments that shed light on this widely discussed and burgeoning intersection between social justice advocacy and comedy in the United States. Borum Chattoo, a documentary producer, strategist, and professor at American University, together with Feldman, political media scholar and professor at Rutgers University, pair academic perspectives on the growth of social justice-oriented comedy with prescriptions for social justice practitioners on how to collaborate with comedians meaningfully.

The book begins by looking at the current moment in American comedy, where comedy is both contributing to and produced by an evolving entertainment environment. Developments in digital technologies have allowed for both greater dissemination of and generation of comedic content. The same technological developments have transformed individuals' abilities to direct media attention to social justice topics and shift cultural narratives. Comedy, an art form that the authors consider inherently socially critical, can aid social justice issues in public outreach and engagement in the current highly networked digital media environment. The authors draw from theoretical accounts and empirical studies of sociopolitically inspired American comedy to demonstrate that comedy can increase attention to social justice issues, lubricate contentious intergroup communication, lower the impulse to counterargue, and stimulate sharing and discussion among friends and family.

In refreshing contrast to a large number of humor effects studies cited in the book, the authors do not use “televised satirical news” synonymously with “comedy.” Instead, they break down mediated comedy into five broad genres: stand-up comedy, scripted episodic television, satirical news, sketch comedy, and comedic documentaries. Each genre’s historical significance, utilities, and pitfalls in the context of social issue awareness and mobilization are discussed. For example, while satirical news can often get divisive, it can also help mobilize like-minded people. Similarly, while comedic documentaries can strongly connect with audiences with its portrayals of real life, they might not be as convenient to share on digital media platforms as short-form comedy sketches.

The authors accumulate abundant pieces of evidence on the role of social justice-oriented contemporary comedy in raising awareness, creating engagement, and changing media agendas. Among many social justice issues, they primarily analyze the role of contemporary American comedy in promoting awareness and urgency around issues of poverty, climate change, sexual assault, gun violence, and eldercare. Adding two of their own original experimental works in the mix, they demonstrate that comedic content (sketch comedy about climate change and a documentary about global poverty) created greater entertainment value and, by association, greater political engagement, awareness, and knowledge than that by noncomedic content (traditional news content and serious documentary, respectively). Traditional communications around issues like climate change and sexual assault are perceived as too ominous and scary, while those for poverty and eldercare are seen as too sad, which can drive audiences away. The depravity of this state of affairs, where oblivious audiences lack the empathy to face the horrific lived realities of other humans and need to be tickled into taking an interest in them, is a matter for another book. Within the context of this book, the authors infer that comedy can help make such topics easier to take in and share with friends, and if done in a way that does not overtly attack any person or group, can lead to breakthroughs in engagement.

The most compelling parts of the book come in the third section, where the authors listen to social justice practitioners, as well as emerging and established comedians. Scholarly perspectives on comedy’s role in politics and social justice, while essential, are often devoid of perspectives from practicing comedians. The authors cover such scholarly perspectives leading up to the third section, where they discuss perspectives of comedians and social justice advocates and real stories of collaboration between the two. Comedians largely expressed how the new digital media environment lets them hone their skills and comedic identities, and that the contemporary political climate has created a market for political comedy. Stand-up comedians saw online audiences as fundamentally different from those in comedy clubs, where comedians would often feel the need to reinforce the lowest common denominator. Without assuming the activist identity, comedians tended to see value in comedic work that would support the conditions for social change. Like social justice practitioners, comedians saw the value of comedy as a “sweetener” for difficult social justice topics. The authors surmise that socially engaged comedy can be created by providing entertainment value to audiences along with a way to think about issues, making fun of those in power and not of the underprivileged, and connecting to the audiences with honest personal storytelling.

The strength of the book lies in its breadth of topics, the specificity of observations, and the directness of recommendations. With clear and accessible language, the authors advise social justice organizations to collaborate with comedians while giving them creative freedom, and embracing the

messiness of the creative process and challenges of the digital media environment. Appointing a “creative gatekeeper,” someone who mediates such collaborations, is also recommended. The authors also suggest that philanthropies should set up funding channels for social justice-oriented comedians, parallel to existing commercial funding channels for comedy projects.

The characterization of comedy as “deviant,” and an appeal to preserve it as such, is one of the book’s central themes. The authors argue that comedians need to be creatively free and that comedy should not be treated as a “lab-generated” mechanism. Preserving the playfulness of comedy can come at odds with the controlled messaging and serious communication strategies often part of social justice organizing efforts. However, space must be made for creative serendipity in collaborations between social justice advocates and comedians to generate content with great entertainment value as well as great public awareness potential.

The book does not delude itself or mislead readers by claiming that comedy is a silver bullet for sociopolitical issues. Rather, the authors balance their language to clarify the supplemental benefits of comedy as an additional communication strategy. Throughout the book, the authors clarify that comedy must act in conjunction with existing communication, organizing, and mobilizing strategies for social justice groups.

The authors conclude their book with a somber admission of comedy’s limitation as a tool for change, especially given the social inequities that plague the comedy industry itself. With a nod to non-U.S. social justice-oriented comedians, the authors identify comedy and social justice activism as “twin arts” with shared values of deviance. A symbiotic relationship between the two is by design, and thus must be fostered.