

Examining Trans-media/-national Networks

“Examining Trans-media/-national Networks: the case of *SNL Korea*”

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Comedy is the entertainment genre most powerfully predisposed to creating ingroups and outgroups. The visceral nature of comedic laughter, as well as its tendency to target those in power, ruthlessly sorts individuals by whether or not they have the requisite background experience to understand and enjoy shared jokes. This is particularly important at the level of both national identity and cross-cultural conversations. Nations, regardless of how natural and eternal they may feel, are social constructions, as Benedict Anderson famously posited, making any prospective laughter quite unlikely to have first hand experience with every member of her national comedic ingroup. Thus, in order to feel really a part of something, co-nationalists must imagine themselves as a group of people who, while different in many ways, share a certain set of common ideas and experiences. Comedy, by creating a set of national “inside jokes,” can play an important part in this process. A nation, at least in some small way, might be understood as a group of people who, for the most part, share a sense of humor, group of comedic referents, or certain understanding of their place in the global community.

At the same time, and perhaps counterintuitively, comedy often travels well. The conventional way of conceiving of comedy’s global distribution follows the logic of media imperialism--a one way flow of broad, blockbuster-y texts like *The Hangover* franchise or *Friends* from the United States to the rest of the world. Yet myriad revisions to this thinking, such as John Tomlinson’s conception of “complex connectivity,” have opened up new avenues of inquiry that better account for how comedic texts travel today. Digital access to non-North American markets has exposed domestic audiences to foreign senses of humor, diasporic communities carry their homeland’s comedic sensibilities with them in the United States, and the ever-expanding universe of niche television outlets provides a home for foreign imports and formats of global comedy.

Given comedy’s increasingly bifurcated nature--intensely nationalistic and “inside” on the one hand, but amenable to cross-cultural flows on the other--the case of *Saturday Night Live Korea* represents a unique opportunity to continue interrogating comedy’s role in negotiating global media flows. The central question of this contribution to the roundtable, then, is: how and why do hegemonically American comedic sensibilities persist, and under what circumstances are they undermined?

SNL Korea is the American late night sketch comedy program’s longest-running and most successful international adaptation, having recently completed the first half of its seventh season. The program maintains an official relationship through a licensing agreement with Lorne Michaels’ production company, Broadway Video, and with NBC. Accordingly, all of the

familiar *SNL* bells and whistles are there--the opening theme music and title sequence, the familiar logo and set, even the English-language titles for segments such as “Digital Shorts” and “Weekend Update.”

Through participant observation and interviews with cast and crew, though, I discovered several key aspects of the show that started out in mimicry of the American version, only to skew more toward a re-working for local and regional circumstances. The program’s first season, for instance, was based heavily in the sensibilities of American “satire tv” like that of Comedy Central’s *The Daily Show* or the now-cancelled *Colbert Report*. Every season since the first, however, has veered sharply away from explicitly political content. Interviews revealed predictably safe answers, such as a general desire to expand the show’s audience, but further inquiry revealed a dual impulse both to avoid retribution from Korean politicians who might be lampooned and to gain a foothold in the lucrative Chinese market with “safe” comedic content. The case of *SNL Korea* represents a small entry point into examinations of transnational media networks, but I believe its unique success and regional ambitions have much to tell us about the continued evolution of global formatting practices.