

Stand-Up Comedy Open Mics and Sexual Harassment in Local Production Cultures

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While comedy research within media studies tends to prioritize comedic texts and performances, sociologists, anthropologists, and folklorists have increasingly explored the working conditions of the production of stand-up comedy; however, they rarely interrogate how gender intersects with the labor of becoming a successful stand-up comic. To focus on this gendered labor, I argue that studies of women in comedy should focus not only on those comics who have succeeded, but also those who are struggling to succeed within a highly masculine field. As the #MeToo movement has made visible the number of women across media production that have left or been forced out of the industry due to sexual harassment and hostile work environments, I have been exploring how comics marginalized by gender, race, age, class, and sexuality face such hostility at the local level. Specifically, I theorize open mics as the start of the comedy industrial pipeline, not just embedded within the cultures of the regions or cities in which they operate, but also deeply embedded within industrial discourses of national comedy and media production. If we're interested in understanding how sexual harassment works to keep women and other marginalized folks out of media production, I argue that we need to focus not only on harassment within major studios, national networks, and high profile productions, but also at the very earliest stages of an entertainment career.

The gendered labor of breaking into, navigating, and succeeding within local stand-up comedy scenes provides a robust case study through which to understand the ramifications of the ongoing #MeToo moment within local production cultures. Not only is stand-up comedy a historically masculine-dominated industry, local open mic scenes are a particularly fruitful site in which to explore slippery boundaries between local and national production logics, performers and audiences, and professional and amateur artistic production. Stand-up is a form that is both live and mediated, in which aspiring professionals perform alongside folks who are checking the experience off their bucket list, and in which there are relatively low material barriers to entry. Further, as part of the cultural industries, comedy careers are marked by short-term precarious employment, the myth of creative meritocracy, fierce competition, informal networks of entry, and the lack of managerial structure or formal policies on diversity and inclusion. Comedy as an industry has therefore tended to produce and exacerbate gendered and racial inequality, especially at the local, least structured levels. Studying the most precarious part of the comedic pipeline allows us to see why women and other marginalized performers and production workers might leave the industry due to hostility and harassment long before they move to Los Angeles or New York.

I have interviewed over 40 comics performing in Illinois, Los Angeles, and New York about their experiences breaking into local stand-up scenes. Most of my interviews took

place in the months leading up to the #MeToo movement, and so provide a snapshot of ambivalent attitudes around sexual harassment in creative production cultures right before the discourse began to quickly shift. These interviews paint a picture of an environment in which women, especially queer women and women of color, are treated as outsiders who must ceaselessly prove their worth through a slippery set of aesthetic and cultural norms that reinforce masculine dominance both on and off stage. The stories comics told me didn't sound much different than the stories of women in politics, tech, entertainment, academia, or any other field, but the conflation of working, drinking, hanging out, performing, and mentoring makes for an environment with extremely tricky gender politics and a constant blurring of the lines between professional and non-professional behavior. Many acknowledged that harassment, from dealing with sexist jokes to outright violence and sexual assault, came with the territory. Learning how to deal with harassment was seen by many comics as a necessary skill to master alongside writing and performing. While men do face ribbing by other comics, harsh crowds, and bombed sets, women must deal with these typical hardships of becoming a comic *in addition to* constantly negotiating a space that was not built for their success.

These stories help paint a more complete picture of why women are under-represented within the upper-echelons of comedic success. The history of women in comedy is, understandably, a history of women who have achieved the level of success required to be watched, studied, remembered, and archived. However, the #MeToo movement highlights the need to seek out those who didn't make it and who were forced out of the industry at the start or middle of their careers due to harassment, hostility, or failure to break into the boy's club of entertainment. Only then will we be able to construct a more complete picture of the voices that have been lost.