

Origins of the Genre

In Search of the Radio Sitcom

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The introduction of a mass communication medium normally occurs when an economically viable commercial application is found for a new technology. A third element necessary to the launch, content (i.e., something to communicate), is often treated as something of an afterthought in this process. As a result, adaptations of popular works and of entire genres from previous media tend to dominate the introductory period, even as they mutate under the developing conditions of the new medium. Such was the case in the rise of the television sitcom from the ashes of network radio.

While a dozen or more long-running network radio series served as sources for early television situation comedies, it is in some ways misleading to describe these radio programs (e.g., *Father Knows Best*, *Amos 'n' Andy*, or *The Life of Riley*) as “radio sitcoms.” According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, neither the term “situation comedy” nor “sitcom” achieved common usage until the 1950s, the point at which this type of entertainment had become completely absent from American radio.

TV Guide appears to be among the first general circulation publications to use the term “situation comedy” in print with the following passage cited by the *Oxford English Dictionary* from a 1953 article: “Ever since *I Love Lucy* zoomed to the top rung on the rating ladder, it seems the networks have been filling every available half-hour with another situation comedy” (*TV Guide*). The abbreviated form, “sitcom,” which probably enjoys greater usage today, has an even shorter history. It is dated in print by the *OED*

only as far back as a 1964 *Life* magazine article announcing Bing Crosby's upcoming (and ill-fated) attempt to work in the genre: "Even Bing has succumbed . . . and will appear in a sitcom as an electrical engineer who happens to break into song once a week" (*Life* magazine).

The integration of the term "sitcom" into the American language, like much of popular culture, was driven by the promotional needs of the entertainment industry. The *Life* article cited above provides a case in point. One of the most popular singers in early twentieth-century American show business, Crosby was well known to the public, first through his records and then as a radio personality and movie star. As the star of a radio variety show in the 1930s and 1940s, he demonstrated abilities to deliver gag lines, play the straight man, and trade snappy banter with guests that led to his pairing with Bob Hope in the Paramount "road" pictures.¹ While variety programming was as popular on early television as it had been on radio, the genre went into a gradual decline in the 1960s, which eventually led to its virtual absence from prime time.²

With feature film production also in decline during the 1960s, many aging, studio-era movie stars—including Crosby, Donna Reed, Robert Young, Ida Lupino, Fred MacMurray, and Jimmy Stewart—attempted to reinvest their celebrity in situation comedy, a genre that had been experiencing a continuous surge of growth since 1951, when *I Love Lucy* sprinted past Milton Berle's *Texaco Star Theatre* and half a dozen other comedy-variety shows to the top of the prime-time ratings. Furthermore, residual fees from reruns of sitcoms were proving to be an extraordinary cash cow (Schatz).

Though a situation comedy may be accurately described as a "comic drama" or a "narrative comedy" to distinguish it from variety (or comedy-variety) programming, such terms were no doubt considered too eggheaded for promoting the product. Thus, "situation comedy" emerged from its origins in back-office show-biz lingo to become part of popular discourse.³ Its abbreviation to "sitcom" was perhaps all but inevitable in accordance with the grammar of public relations.

DIALECT COMEDIES

Two of the longest-running and most popular "radio sitcoms" to be adapted for television were *The Goldbergs* (premiering on the NBC radio network in 1929 as *The Rise of the Goldbergs*) and *Amos 'n' Andy* (premiering locally in Chicago in 1928 and going national on NBC the following year). Both series began as live 15-minute programs that aired Monday through Friday, a broadcast format more akin to radio soap opera than television sitcom,

and both were restructured into weekly half-hour series during the early 1940s. Both were adapted for television early in the life of the medium (*The Goldbergs* in 1949; *Amos 'n' Andy* in 1951) as weekly, half-hour, filmed series with audience response tracks, all characteristics that became basic to the genre. The two programs shared significant content attributes as well. Both made primary use of ethnic dialect comedy, a source of popular humor traceable in American culture to the nineteenth-century minstrel and vaudeville stages.⁴

The Goldbergs was written and produced on both radio and television by its star, Gertrude Berg, one of only a very few women who produced their own network programs.⁵ The thick Ashkenazic (i.e., eastern European) Jewish accents of the program's immigrant generation characters provided much of the show's humor while the younger, born-in-America characters spoke something more akin to standard radio English, sporadically adding inflections to acknowledge the series' Bronx location. Plotting was generally based on the exploitation of character stereotypes, especially live-in Uncle David's failure to catch the gist of things American (in one episode we learn that he has named his goldfish "Karl Marx" because of his respect for philosophers). But, despite its reliance on stereotyping, *The Goldbergs* could rarely be accused of anything more noxious than a kind of chicken-soup sentimentality in its content.

Amos 'n' Andy, centered on African American characters living in Harlem, was written, produced, and performed on radio by Freeman Gosden and Charles Correll, Whites who had grown up in the Jim Crow South. The pair had performed blackface "race humor" onstage in vaudeville and had done stints with several of the surviving minstrel shows of the early twentieth century. Their *Amos 'n' Andy* radio series—loosely based on "Sam and Henry," two earlier characters they had created—grew from a local program on WMAQ-Chicago to what was arguably the most listened to prime-time entertainment series in the history of radio.⁶

When the television adaptation of *Amos 'n' Andy* came under attack by the NAACP and other civic organizations following its 1951 premiere, Gosden and Correll claimed to be nonplussed, even hurt, by claims made about the show's perpetuation of negative stereotypes. They argued that they were performing the same type of dialect humor in their depiction of "Negroes" as other sitcoms used in their comic depictions of any number of ethnic groups (*The Goldbergs'* Jewish characters being a prime example; *I Love Lucy's* Hispanic character, Ricky Ricardo, being another). In viewing *Amos 'n' Andy* today, it is difficult to ignore the series' unrelenting focus on negative stereotypes derived from the slavery era. The level of stupidity that emerges from the relentless use of farfetched malapropisms makes it



Figure 1.1. Spencer Williams, Jr. as Andy Brown, Tim Moore as George “The Kingfish” Stevens, and Alvin Childress as Amos Jones in *Amos 'n' Andy*. 1951–1953. Photo courtesy of Movie Star NewsFair.

difficult to characterize the effect of the sitcom as anything but racist at its core (Cripps 33–54).

The efforts of civil rights organizations to pressure CBS into canceling *Amos 'n' Andy* in 1953, despite the program’s bankable Nielsen ratings, is

counted by some as among the first battles won in the post-World War II Civil Rights Movement. If there is tragedy in the incident, it fell upon the African American performers. Gosden and Correll, who had performed as the title characters in three feature films for MGM, were dissuaded from taking on the roles in the television series and had replaced themselves and others in the cast with African American actors.⁷ As these performers had predicted in arguing for the continuation of the show, the cancellation left them without any role to play in “all-White” television.⁸ An ensemble of masterful African American comedians, including Tim Moore (as The Kingfish), Ernestine Wade (as Sapphire), and Johnny Lee (as Algonquin J. Calhoun), simply disappeared from public view. Amanda Randolph (Mama), Kingfish’s hilarious “battle ax” mother-in-law, was the sole exception. She took the part of the family maid on *The Danny Thomas Show*.⁹

Sitting atop the radio ratings with audiences numbering in the tens of millions, comedies such as *The Goldbergs* and *Amos 'n' Andy* seemed obvious choices for television, as were other radio hits that depended heavily on dialect humor. These included *Life with Luigi* (Italians in Chicago); *I Remember Mama* (Norwegians in San Francisco); and *Beulah* (African American servants in Middle American suburbia).¹⁰ While dialect humor was a natural for an aural medium, what had had been a staple on radio proved to be a short-lived phenomenon on television and a poor fit for the emerging culture of postwar America.

The ethnic sitcoms suffered from the popular promotion of assimilationism that accompanied the mass migration of immigrant and second-generation White families from inner-city neighborhoods to suburban tracts. The exaggerated accents and malapropisms of radio comedy might have become more embarrassing than funny to a significant segment of the early television-viewing audience, which was located almost exclusively in large metropolitan areas.¹¹ Thomas Cripps has suggested that African American war veterans played a significant role in opposing the television adaptation of *Amos 'n' Andy*, which they saw as an instrument for perpetuation of the longstanding stereotypes that stood behind Jim Crow laws.

Though it had run for two decades on radio, *Amos 'n' Andy* was gone from television in two seasons. *The Goldbergs* managed to remain on the air for six seasons, but this was largely due to Gertrude Berg’s savvy as a producer. She repeatedly made new deals to save the show, switching television networks three times and even agreeing to change the 25-year-old format by moving the family from the Bronx to the suburbs and renaming the sitcom *Molly*. In the end, ridding the show of what was now seen as its Depression-era, immigrant baggage left it a limp imitation of itself. Following *Molly*’s



Figure 1.2 Gertrude Berg as Molly Goldberg in *The Goldbergs*. 1929–1954 (radio 1929–1948 & television 1949–1954). Photo courtesy of Photofest.

cancellation in 1955, not a single radio dialect comedy was left on the air. Suburban families with names such as Stone (*The Donna Reed Show*) and Anderson (*Father Knows Best*) moved in to dominate the genre.

THE SITCOM-VARIETY SHOW HYBRIDS

Like *The Goldbergs* and *Amos 'n' Andy*, *The Jack Benny Program* and *The George Burns and Gracie Allen Show* were among radio's most popular hits.

These shows present complex genre problems when considered as sources for the television programs of the same name. On radio, *Benny and Burns and Allen* made frequent use of seamless aural segues to shift rhetorical modes between direct-address presentation (i.e., the vaudeville-derived variety format) and representational narratives of domestic life that seem very much like radio prototypes of contemporary television sitcoms.¹² Genre theory has thus far been unable to account for these shows in any satisfying way, and so they are treated as “radio sitcoms” by a kind of critical default.¹³

The purposeful confusion of the two principal genres of broadcast comedy (sitcom and variety), which radio accomplished by a mere shift of language, required much more work for presentation on television. *I Love Lucy* and *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet*, two sitcoms featuring bandleaders as husband-fathers, made use of “backstage” narrative in order to work variety elements, such as music, song, and dance, into the dramatic framework.

In *I Love Lucy*, Lucy’s husband Ricky is a nightclub performer, and she is a hopeless showbiz wannabe. A plurality of episodes concerns her efforts to sneak into shows at the Tropicana. The nightclub stage functions to allow variety segues. In *Ozzie and Harriet*, Ozzie’s son, Ricky Nelson, has a garage band and performs at parties or practice sessions. *Ozzie and Harriet* was a pioneer in cross-media promotion with Ricky Nelson launching a string of Billboard Top Ten hits on the show.

It is worth noting that *The Bing Crosby Show* (1964–65), which inspired *Life* magazine to use the word “sitcom” in print, incorporated a backstage device as well. A closer look at the failed effort reveals an evocatively frenzied attempt at generic, masscult cookie-cutting with subgeneric elements borrowed from a half-dozen sitcom hits of the period. Like Danny Thomas (Danny Williams in *The Danny Thomas Show*) and Andy Griffith (Andy Taylor in *The Andy Griffith Show*), Crosby invokes persona in the sitcom narrative as “Bing Collins.” His character is a suburban suit-and-tie professional, married with children (à la Robert Young in *Father Knows Best* and other archetypal sitcom dads). His daughters are a study in contrast between boy-crazy, bobby-soxer Janice and child prodigy Joyce in what seems to be a nod to the contrast between Patty and Cathy Lane of *The Patty Duke Show*.

The narrative thrust of the series has Bing eschewing stardom for the higher calling of being a “normal” family man, a familiar and popular theme in American mythology that perhaps reached its film apogee in Frank Capra’s *It’s a Wonderful Life* (1942). Using Bing Collins’s aversion to fame and fortune as a diversion, the storyline incorporates Bing Crosby through the backstage door. Bing’s wife (Beverly Garland) is, like Lucy,

an incorrigible show business wannabe. She attempts to drag Bing back onstage as a way of realizing her suppressed ambitions. Borrowing another tactic from *The Danny Thomas Show* for the episode finish, Bing breaks into song as he delivers dad's weekly words of wisdom, with appropriate musical accompaniment rising from behind kitchen appliances, living room furniture, or garden tools.

IMPROVING THE HORSE AND CARRIAGE

When searching for the roots of situation comedy and other television genres in radio, it is worth remembering that radio enjoyed an extremely short moment as a primary (or *the* primary) medium for commercial American entertainment, perhaps too short to fully realize any genres of its own. Invented just before the turn of the twentieth century as a “wireless telegraph” whose purpose was to provide two-way communication systems for ships at sea and for places not reachable by telegraph cable, it was improved to carry analog sound in the 1910s. This led to a wave of hobbyists (known as “hams,” another word for “showoffs”) who began performing for each other with the new desktop communication system: telling jokes, reading poems, creating false identities, and otherwise prefiguring Internet chatting by the better part of a century.

It was not until after World War I that the mass production of cheap, downstream receivers for the consuming public was attempted. The first commercially owned local radio stations were put on the air in the 1920s by electronics manufacturers to stimulate sales of these models. In 1927, the Radio Corporation of America, the country's biggest maker of sets, launched its subsidiary, the National Broadcasting Company, thus imposing centralized quality control on broadcasting entertainment products by feeding content to a network of cross-country stations from its corporate studios.

Radio achieved a position at center stage of American culture during the national traumas of the Great Depression and the Second World War but went into decline after 1948, as the three major network broadcasting companies (NBC, CBS, and ABC) accelerated their commitment of the medium's profits to the development of another medium—television. Radio's “golden age” ends with a whimper in 1953 when its last great star, Jack Benny, gets the word from CBS that his radio show must go. Dying in its twenties and dead at around thirty, prime-time entertainment radio was only beginning to define its generic texts when they were either killed, kidnapped, or subjected to forced mutation in the service of the needs of visual representation on television.¹⁴

The case can be made that the artistic life of radio was hampered throughout most of its existence by the anticipation of television, which was patented in 1927, the very same year that network radio went on the air.¹⁵ As early as 1929, David Sarnoff, the RCA executive who founded NBC, gave an address at the Harvard Business School in which he announced the existence of television, expressing a belief that it would “replace” radio (Morgenthau). By 1939, television broadcasting was within the capabilities of RCA, which publicly demonstrated it through daily telecasts from the New York World’s Fair. There were more than a thousand set owners in the New York metropolitan area at the time, though most were employees of either RCA and/or several other companies at work on the technology.

World War II delayed television’s implementation as a mass medium until after 1945, but the handwriting was already on the cue cards for radio. At the very height of its popularity, with daily audiences for specific programs numbering in the tens of millions, radio was functioning as little more than a stepping stone to television for the people who controlled the money that might have been used to develop radio art.

Henry Morgenthau, III, a pioneer maker of documentary films for television and the producer of Eleanor Roosevelt’s syndicated television talk show during the 1950s, heard Sarnoff express his views on the future of radio in person in 1947. Morgenthau had just read Charles A. Siepman’s *Radio’s Second Chance*, in which the author argued that radio was only beginning to suggest its artistic and educational potentials. Inspired to want to work in radio by Siepman, Morgenthau had his father, then Secretary of the U.S. Treasury, arrange a meeting for him with Sarnoff, who was now chairman of the board at RCA. Morgenthau described it this way:

I have a memory of walking down endless corridors, sort of like approaching the Sun King at Versailles, and meeting Sarnoff and talking to him briefly about my ambition to go into FM radio, which was new. I talked about the static-free sound and the opening of new channels and how exciting this all seemed to me. He stopped me and said that he thought going into radio was the worst possible thing to do. He said FM radio was like inventing an improved horse carriage just at the time that automobiles were coming in. “Forget radio and get into television!” he said and walked away, as if I were the mad man.

Though radio was already being dismissed as an obsolete technology in the late 1940s, the phenomenon it had done so much to create—mass

audiences—had grown more valuable than ever to those who had the future of radio in their hands. Accordingly, they cannibalized the medium for its content. It is remarkable, however, to see how little attention was paid to the intricacies of adaptation, even for hit shows.

According to Paul Henning, who began writing radio scripts for *The George Burns and Gracie Allen Show* in 1942, the show's staff was sent a memo in April of 1950 informing them that they would be doing "the show" on television beginning in October. "I remember George saying, 'Let's all go down to Palm Springs and we'll sit around the pool and talk about what we're going to do for television,'" Henning said. "Ralph Levy, the producer, evolved the idea for the show: a simple situation comedy with the cut-out set of the Burns's house, and another one for their neighbors, and, downstage, an area where George could stand and talk directly to the audience, to explain about his wife, Gracie, and predict what was going to happen [in the plot], and comment on his daily life in and around their neighborhood" (Wilk 176–77).

When Henning's wife, Ruth, suggested to Levy and Burns that they might need something more "visual" to interest audiences that were *seeing* the action, Burns came up with the idea of placing a television in the "den" of George and Gracie's television house. When the plot of the sitcom got too convoluted, the writers had the option of sending George up to the den to watch an action picture on television, usually a Western, which played on the screen during broadcasts for as long as ten seconds. "You could do that kind of stuff back then, because nobody knew what a sitcom was," Paul Henning said. "We just did comedy."

NOTES

1. The *American Heritage Dictionary* lists "variety show" but does not list "comedy-variety" or "comedy-variety show." The *Oxford English Dictionary* lists neither. What we would today call a "comedy-variety show" was, during the radio era, usually called either a "comedy show" (if hosted by a comedian) or a "variety show." The term "comedy-variety" became useful or perhaps necessary during the television era to distinguish this type of programming from two proliferating forms: the situation comedy (e.g., *I Love Lucy*) and the variety show (i.e., "vaudeo" shows hosted by noncomedians, such as *The Ed Sullivan Show*, also known as *Toast of the Town*).

2. While dormant in English-language American television, the comedy-variety and variety genres remain vital in Spanish-language programming in the United States and elsewhere.

3. Several radio comedy writers, including Everett Greenbaum and Paul Henning, recall the use of terms such as "situational comedy" and "situation com-

edy” in shop talk as early as the 1930s as a way of distinguishing comic drama from the more popular vaudeville style of that era, which today is remembered as comedy-variety. See the oral history collections of the Center for the Study of Popular Television, Syracuse University.

4. See Robert Toll, *Blacking Up: The Minstrel Show in 19th Century America* (NY: Oxford University Press, 1974) for a detailed discussion of the minstrel show and its extraordinary role in American culture.

5. Irna Philips (1901–1973), who virtually invented the daytime soap opera for radio and single-handedly adapted it for television, was the most prolific and influential of the handful of women producers in broadcasting. For a useful concise biography of Philips, see the entry concerning her in Oxford University Press’s *American National Biography Online*.

6. For more detail on *Amos ’n’ Andy*, see Melvin Patrick Ely, *The Adventures of Amos ’n’ Andy: A Social History of an American Phenomenon* (NY: Free Press, 1991).

7. There were three “Amos ’n’ Andy” movies, with the title roles performed by Gosden and Correll in blackface: *Check and Double Check* (1930), *The Rasslin’ Match* (1934), and *The Lion Tamer* (1934).

8. See J. Fred Macdonald, *Blacks and White Television* (Chicago: Nelson Hall, 1983) for the most comprehensive history of African Americans on early American television.

9. No criticism of *The Danny Thomas Show* is meant here. The show’s producers, Danny Thomas and Sheldon Leonard, insisted on employing African American performers at a time when almost none were on television. Leonard and Thomas made another political statement by knowingly employing writers who had been blacklisted for their political beliefs. For example, Frank Tarloff (credited with the pseudonym “David Adler”) wrote for at least three of their sitcoms, *The Danny Thomas Show*, *The Andy Griffith Show*, and *The Dick Van Dyke Show*. Tarloff recounts this in an interview in the oral history collections of the Center for the Study of Popular Television at the Syracuse University Library.

10. *Beulah* (ABC, 1951–53), whose title female character had been played by a White man on radio, was less popular than *Amos ’n’ Andy* and was therefore less of a *cause celebre*. It was also cancelled in 1953, however, under similar circumstance. After its first season on television, the program’s star, Ethel Waters, had quit because of the negative stereotypes she felt were perpetuated in her character.

11. The FCC issued 108 television station licenses before 1948, almost all of which were allocated to cities in three megalopolitan regions: the northeast coastal corridor stretching from Boston to Washington, D.C.; the Great Lakes rim, from Cleveland to Milwaukee via Chicago; and urban California, including Los Angeles and San Francisco. In 1948, the FCC put a freeze on new licensing that lasted until 1952.

12. For a detailed discussion of modes of television narrative, see the author’s *Demographic Vistas* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996), pp. 11–33.

13. In the 1990s, *Seinfeld* attempted to reintroduce the technique of creating genre tension between situation comedy and comedy-variety by opening and sometimes closing the show with stand-up clips.

14. For a rare account of the process of imagining content for television, see Gilbert Seldes, “The Errors of Television,” *The Atlantic Monthly* (May 1937), pp. 531–41. Seldes, a Harvard-educated popular culture and radio critic, was hired by CBS in 1935 as a consultant to its television development program.

15. In 1927 Philo T. Farnsworth patented his image dissector, which included key elements of the cathode ray tube. That same year, the Radio Corporation of America, whose company research and development team was led by Russian emigré Vladimir Zworykin, patented its *eikonoscope*.