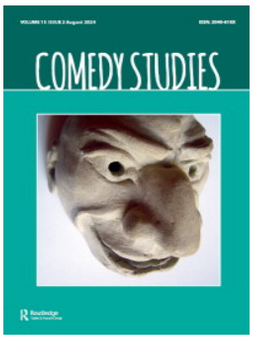

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Cancel culture: the decline of political comedy on British television in the early 2020s

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ABSTRACT

The early 2020s saw a string of cancellations of British political comedy programmes: *Mock the Week*, a topical panel show; *The Mash Report*, a news parody; *Frankie Boyle's New World Order*, a comic debate; and *Spitting Image*, a short-lived reboot of the much-loved 1980s/1990s puppet caricature sketch series. This appeared to be the culmination of a long-standing prediction of the 'death of satire' given its apparent superfluity in an extreme, sometimes absurd political culture. Taking the cancellations of the above programmes as a case study, the article examines three intersecting causes for the decline in UK political comedy. First, it will examine the context of the UK 'culture wars', with its inherent paradox in which 'wokeness' is figured as humourless and therefore antithetical to comedy yet satire, critical of the conservative mainstream, is itself too 'woke'. Second, it will consider the political interference with British broadcasters from right wing campaigners and governments, and its impact on political comedy. Third, it evaluates industrial change in the television sector, and the shifting value of satire as content for an increasingly competitive media ecosystem.

KEYWORDS

TV comedy; political comedy; satire; culture war; woke; culture wars; TV industry

Introduction

In September 2021, UK free-to-air digital channel Dave broadcast the first episode of *Late Night Mash* (2021-2), a spin-off series of *The Mash Report* (BBC Two, 2017-20) which the BBC had, controversially, decided not to renew earlier that year.[1] It opened with a monologue by its host, comedian Nish Kumar, who had become something of a bête noire of the British right-wing tabloids. In it, he addressed the change of venue for the show:

> Hello and welcome to *Late Night Mash*. Like the Taliban, despite popular demand, we are back. … I'm Nish Kumar, and, yes, I was cancelled by the BBC. And like everybody who's

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> been "cancelled" I got a new television show on a different channel and I'm more unapologetic than ever.[2]

Like the title for this article, Kumar's joke is a play on words for the term 'to cancel'. In television industry parlance, it means the cessation of a programme's commissioning contract, the end of a series. It is a conventional use of 'cancel's' general meaning: to terminate something, often abruptly. 'Cancel', though, has developed an additional connotation in the contemporary vernacular: the social punishment of (putatively) problematic figures through various 'cancel practices' (Ng 2022) including admonishment, boycott or even the attempted removal of individuals and their works from public life.

The growth of so-called 'cancel culture' is associated with broader social and political divisions along the liberal/conservative axis, often characterised as '(anti-)wokeness'. The politics of comedy is a key feature of this cultural environment. Whereas progressives are often accused of humourless political correctness, conservative comedy – especially satire - is too frequently treated as an oxymoronic impossibility by critics on the left (Sinkiewicz and Marx 2021). The latest staging post in the ongoing 'culture wars', 'cancel culture' and the opposition to it have been analysed as a distinctive conjuncture (Clarke 2023), one which Phelan (2023) cautions should not be dismissed as frivolous media spectacle but taken seriously for its political consequences. One of these, we argue, is the cancellation of a series of British political television comedies in the 2020s, including *The Mash Report*, *Mock the Week* (BBC Two, 2005-22), *Frankie Boyle's New World Order* (BBC Two, 2017-22) and the reboot of *Spitting Image* (Britbox, 2020-22). This appeared to be the culmination of a long-standing prediction of the 'death of satire', given its apparent superfluity in an extreme, often absurd political culture (Williams, 2016). If these cancellations indicate that TV satire in the UK is indeed dead, this article will attempt an autopsy.

We begin with an exploration of the conjuncture in which the cancellations under investigation took place, the '(anti-)woke' culture war. We then consider the impact of this divisive rhetoric on British television's most prominent institution, the BBC, and attacks it faced on its ability to deliver on its vaunted promise of impartiality. We conclude by further investigating the challenge of delivering political comedy as programming in a twenty first century television ecosystem that privileges certain styles of content apt to global distribution and de-emphasises the production of popular genres that sit outside these economic models. Taken together, these factors help to make sense of the various comedy cancellations in the 2020s, and the precarious place of political comedy in the context of 'cancel culture'.

Political comedy during the 'anti-woke' culture war

'Woke' has undergone significant changes in meaning in its journey of misappropriation from a mid-twentieth century signifier of Black awareness and solidarity, to a generic badge of subscription to the cause of social justice, to a catch-all conservative bogeyman (Allen 2023). Growing British consciousness of 'woke', as well as uncertainty about its definition, is indicated by Google Trends, which shows a steady increase in UK users searching the term from mid-2016, reaching its peak in January 2020.[3] This

timeframe coincides with the country's bitterly contested exit from the European Union (concluded on 31 January 2020) and the passage into a new decade in which a backlash against 'wokeness' would come to prominence in British political discourse. During the first years of the 2020s, the increasingly beleaguered Conservative government employed 'anti-woke' rhetoric as a tool to deflect criticism of its policy failures on the economy, immigration, education and healthcare. This corresponds to increasing awareness of the term 'being woke', rising from 49 per cent in 2020 to 60 per cent in 2022 (Duffy et al. 2022, 8), and 74 per cent in 2023 (Duffy and Skinner 2023, 3), according to polling data. It is against this backdrop that the 2020s development of the ongoing 'culture wars' has played out across British media.

'Woke' has proved a capacious, amorphous scapegoat for media outlets in the distinctive 'outrage economy' that underpins the contemporary culture wars (Phelan, 2025, 79). For a right-wing press with declining circulations, the 'war on woke' was a means of generating commercially expedient public anger (and clicks). Newspapers like *The Daily Mail*, *The Daily Telegraph*, *The Daily Express* and *The Sun* form part of a content-hungry media ecosystem which also includes social media, right-wing websites and blogs such as *UnHerd* and *Spiked*, podcasts and online video, as well as new opinion-based digital television news channels GB News (which began broadcasting in June 2021) and the short-lived TalkTV (2022-4). Davies and MacRae describe the combined force of these voices as the British 'anti-woke community', which constructs itself as a 'righteous in-group' fighting a 'malign out-group' (2023, 39). The ideological effect is to 'pathologise[] social justice campaigns by likening them to dangerous and violent extremism' (Davies and MacRae 2023, 39), 'othering' and effectively constructing them as an enemy within (Cammaerts 2022).

The 'anti-woke community' has seemingly seized discourse to its ends. A 2023 survey found that 42 per cent of respondents looked on 'woke' as an insult, with all age groups becoming more likely to see it as a pejorative term over a two-year period (Duffy and Skinner 2023, 5). Smith et al. (2023) observe that in the UK press and on Twitter, 'woke' was almost universally deployed negatively. While in some cases, it aligns with the original sense in Black slang to indicate alertness to social injustice, its proponents are more commonly presented as emotionally immature 'snowflakes' unable to withstand any form of offence (Smith et al. 2023) Wokeness has also been critiqued as the superficial adoption of fashionable causes either for cynical corporate purposes, or by social elites engaging in 'performative allyship' (Sobande, Kanai and Zeng 2022). Right-wing media narratives posit these various iterations of 'woke' as constituting a conspiratorial agenda enforced by an authoritarian 'mob' determined to stamp out free speech, rewrite history, and impose lifestyle restrictions on the public. This can lead to faintly absurd stories, such as the accusation that the National Trust, a heritage charity whose raison d'être is inherently conservative, is serving 'secretly woke' vegan scones in its on-site tearooms (Swerling 2024).[4] Such critique has the ironic effect of stifling debate, as Steel argues: 'by delegitimising their opponents and by ascribing to them a derogatory status as moaners and "woke", "politically correct" censors, they are themselves asserting their power to silence those with whom they disagree' (Steel 2023, 240). It is this relationship between 'cancel culture' and freedom of expression that has had the most impact on TV comedy.

The weaponisation of free speech discourses by the anti-woke community has frequently centred on a supposed 'right to offend'. Cammaerts presents a burlesque on a typical 'political correctness gone mad' framing: 'nowadays you cannot say anything any longer, you're not allowed to laugh at anything, whereas in the good old days we could be unashamedly racist, sexist and/or homophob[ic]… how awful.' (2023, 739). Here, he shows the entanglements of these arguments with the politics of humour. An 'inability to see humour' was a common theme among the participants in the 2022 Kings College/Ipsos survey when asked for their associations with 'woke' (Duffy et al. 2022, 12). 'Woke' is thus positioned as a hysterical, mirthless overreaction to acceptable, harmless offence.

In response to 'cancel culture', comedians such as Ricky Gervais, Dave Chapelle or John Cleese have positioned themselves as free speech campaigners, discussing sensitive subjects with the intention of (or insensibility towards) causing offence (Goldstraw 2023). Comedians have long been key voices in censorship debates. In a well-known *cause célèbre*, American stand-up George Carlin was arrested in 1972 for 'disturbing the peace' while delivering his censorship-themed routine 'Seven Words You Can Never Say on Television', followed in 1973 by a US Supreme Court case against a radio station that aired it (Nicolaï and Maeseele, 2024). More recently, in October 2012, comic actor Rowan Atkinson delivered an influential speech, 'Feel Free to Insult Me', on behalf of pressure group Reform Section 5, which successfully campaigned to remove the word 'insulting' from two sections of the UK Public Order Act 1986 over concerns about its potentially deleterious effect on free expression (Logan 2012). As Nicolaï and Maerseele (2024) have shown, these debates can have a disorienting effect on comedians, who may find that, in advocating for the free speech necessary to perform their function as social critics, they 'run the risk of invoking associations with contemporary discourses of, for example, alt-right or conservative leaders who often rhetorically exploit the myth of an "unchecked culture war"' (2024, 65).

Following a trend that began in the 1980s with tabloid critiques of Alternative Comedy and its supposed commitment to 'political correctness' (Washbourne 2022), right-wing critics have more recently attacked comedians for being 'too woke'. A good example can be found in tabloid backlash against comments made by Sophie Duker on *Frankie Boyle's New World Order* in September 2020. During a panel discussion on the effectiveness of Black Lives Matter protests, Duker riffed on the term 'kill whitey' which had been offered by the host as a prompt for the segment. Her repetitions of this phrase were picked up some days later by right-wing blogs and tabloids. The 'anti-woke community' concocted sufficient controversy for more than 1300 complaints to be made to the BBC, for the Greater Manchester Police to investigate the incident as a 'hate crime', and for Duker to be targeted directly on social media with racist and misogynist harassment and abuse (Duker 2020). Daily Mail columnist Sarah Vine was a prominent voice. Her assessment of *New World Order* is representative of the right-wing response to topical TV comedy in general: 'everything you would expect: unoriginal, tribal rants full of tasteless jokes aimed at the approved targets of the self-congratulatory Left' (Vine 2020). Familiar beats are reiterated here. Left wing comedy is posited as predictable, vulgar, partisan, and smug. Vine's description leaves implicit an idea that is usually loudly propounded: that 'woke' comedy like Duker's is unfunny.

This line of critical argument is epitomised in right-wing responses to *The Mash Report*. Writing about the series in 2017, the *Daily Mail's* Tom Utley argues that the source of its failed humour is its repeated targeting of right-wing figures. Of course, it is not unusual for a piece in a right-wing outlet to take this position. However, Utley's contention about why jokes against these targets are unfunny is particularly resonant of the 2020s 'anti-woke' conjuncture. He identifies *The Mash Report*'s place in a lineage of British television satires, from *That Was the Week That Was* (1962-3) to *Not the Nine O Clock News* (1979-82), noting that those programmes mocked an Establishment that was then, as he describes it, still 'vaguely Right-wing'. By contrast, the contemporary Establishment, according to Utley, are 'members of the politically correct elite', with comedians like Kumar acting as their mouthpiece (Utley 2017).

This casual slippage between cultural and political elites, framing the Establishment as a vaguely defined middle-class 'woke' liberal-professional cabal, was common in the late 2010s, a moment marked by a global tide of anti-elitism driven by strategic political-ideological organisation on the right (Ege and Springer 2023). Brassett (2024) describes the post-Brexit formation of a 'comedy establishment', a supposed liberal comic hegemony, which enacted a (perceived) 'cultural discipline' through the censorship of 'politically incorrect' humour and the promotion of anti-Brexit joking. Comedians were also charged with perpetuating racist, misogynist and classist exclusions through their Brexit jokes, by making Leave voters and politicians their butts. The right-wing critique of anti-Brexit comedy ingeniously turns 'liberal comedy's' self-perception inwards, such that: 'when faced with a challenge to their hegemony, the 'comic class' has actually turned against the working classes they purport to sympathize with' (Brassett 2024, 128). This depends on a (dubious) alignment between pro-Brexit views and working-class identity, and the positioning of powerful right-wing figures (for instance, Boris Johnson) as avatars for the 'the people' (implicitly, white working-class people).

For Utley (and other critics on the right), since 'woke' culture belongs to the elite, it should be the target, not the source, of comedy. This is an interesting mutation of normative ethical evaluations of humour, wherein the acceptability of a joke hinges on the power dynamic between teller and butt. Jokes that 'punch up' against those in power are usually assumed to be more morally tolerable than those whose targets are of lower status than the teller. This aligns with 'comic moralism', a position which holds that jokes are less funny when they are morally bad (Butterfield 2023). Proponents of right-wing comedy, alongside a significant number on the left, often adopt the opposite position, 'comic immoralism', which holds that comedy is funnier when it violates ethical norms (such as the mockery of marginalised social groups), either *via* sheer incongruity, or because it enables the temporary release of socially suppressed speech and thought. Utley and Vine's critiques do not adopt the 'comic immoralist' position that Duker or Kumar should select more daring choices of comic butt from less powerful social groups, but rather a 'comic moralist' position that their comedy is unfunny because their superior position as members of the new (comedy) elite renders them more powerful than their political targets. This logical switch enables right-wing journalists, seemingly without irony, to position comedians Kumar and Duker (both, not coincidentally, people of colour) as more powerful than government ministers.

The response of the 'anti-woke community' to the cancellation of *The Mash Report* in March 2021, was, predictably, jubilant. Headlines such as *The Sun*'s 'NISH MASH BOSH!: Kumar's show has last laugh' (Halls 2021) exemplify the 'war on woke' framing, one in which a battle against 'woke lefties', is personalised against a specified enemy (Kumar). Three recurrent themes can be detected. First, that the show deserved to be cancelled because it was unfunny (Sixsmith 2021; Slater 2021). Second, that it demonstrated a flagrantly left-wing bias, with the underlying presumption that such an orientation is, through its banality, improper for political comedy (Durrant 2021; Revoir 2021). Third, reports highlighted that its cancellation was part of a strategic drive instigated by new BBC Director General Tim Davie to improve perceptions of its institutional impartiality (Gardner 2021; Halls 2021). The cancellation was read by *Spiked* editor Tom Slater (writing in *The Spectator*) as a cynical move on the BBC's behalf to appease the institution's right-wing critics:

> [Davie] seems keen to create the impression he is trying to bring more political balance to BBC comedy without actually doing much. Now he can gain some credit with the right-wing press by ditching a not particularly popular show (Slater 2021).

In this assessment, he was joined by an unlikely supporter: Kumar. He told an *Observer* interview in May 2021 that 'the concern for me is that it's a useful myth for Tim Davie to have out there, because it placates the British right. It gives the sharks a bit of blood. And when do sharks ever stop at a bit of blood?' (Lamont 2021). That the cancellation of this political comedy can carry such an institutional burden speaks of the connection between the anti-woke culture war and the political scrutiny of, and interference in, the BBC.

Political comedy and the fight against 'BBC bias'

Davie became Director General of the BBC in September 2020, at a moment of maximum precarity for the UK's oldest and most powerful broadcaster. It had been struggling for a decade against a series of damaging funding cuts imposed by successive, increasingly hostile, Conservative governments (Barwise and York 2020). The polarising Brexit campaign and its aftermath had proved treacherous for an institution whose constitutional requirement for balance was stretched to breaking point. Divisions were exacerbated by the Covid 19 pandemic and its attendant surge of disinformation, against which the BBC's reputation for accuracy, trust and impartiality was highly tested. Davie, a former Conservative political candidate, was the most overtly politicised appointment to the position of Director General in decades. His stated priority was to address the widespread perception of bias at the BBC, and to return to the core principle of impartiality from which the institution had always drawn much of its public legitimacy. This new policy responded to persistent, organised attacks on the BBC by its detractors who object to it on ideological, commercial, and moral grounds (Barwise and York 2020). Manufactured controversies popularised the perception that the BBC was institutionally biased to the left.

While the 2010s saw an amplification of these attacks, animus against the BBC among conservatives in the UK is not new. In the 1960s and 1970s, for example, 'the claim that the BBC was biased to the left … became part of a broader mobilising

narrative adopted by the conservative movement, which claimed that a privileged, metropolitan elite was imposing its liberal values on the public' (Mills 2016, 110), a framing which rings familiar in the contemporary moment. As Phelan notes, antagonisms, such as the right-wing opposition to 'mainstream', 'liberal' or 'woke' media institutions, are a core feature of the contemporary culture wars, fuelled by a 'fragmented media ecology', wherein 'asserting antagonistic opposition to some media cultures becomes an important psychic element in shaping the identity of other media cultures' (2023, 78). Mills counters the common misapprehension (as he sees it) of the BBC as a liberal, left-leaning organisation, by arguing persuasively that its organisational culture, personnel, recruitment practices and editorial policies have been drawn from or modelled after the British Establishment. For Mills, the BBC's interpretation of impartiality 'has been routinely … skewed towards the interests of powerful groups' (2016, 3). Far from an objective absence of politics, the concept of 'impartiality' and its mobilisation is profoundly political.

While historically the bulk of accusations of BBC bias have focused on its large, influential journalistic operation, the anti-BBC campaign of the 2010s was more expansive. Patrick Barwise and Peter York argue that:

> right-wing attacks now involve a checklist of more elusive cultural bogeymen, such as the BBC's alleged obsession with multiculturalism and political correctness (or, now, 'wokeness'). Here, the critic see bias in the characters and issues in a drama, the focus of an arts programme like Imagine, or the lineup of contributors to a comedy panel – such as QI, Have I Got News for You? or Mock the Week - or even a chat show like Graham Norton's. The BBC's choices at every level are constantly being accused of left-liberal, politically correct bias. (2020, 127)

Widening the scope of attacks on BBC bias afforded a larger volume of output for critique, including, as Barwise and York highlight, comedy panel shows. This opened a convenient new avenue for content creation, necessary to feed the tabloids' rapacious online platforms. Controversies centred on comedy programming were effective, since routines could be clipped, shared and commented on, as we have seen in the case of Sophie Duker's 'kill whitey' gag. Comedy also provided another source for 'evidence' of BBC bias. For example, in December 2020, research by right-wing think tank Campaign for Common Sense, reported on in the *Sunday Telegraph* and *Mail on Sunday*, found that 74 per cent of audited comedy slots across BBC One, Two and Radio 4 featured comedians 'with publicly pronounced left-leaning, anti-Brexit or 'woke' views' (Hope and Singh 2020, 5). Based on a content analysis of a sample week's programming, this research took a quantitative approach to demonstrating comic bias. However, textual analysis can also show how television style, structure and performance can deliver the sense of a comic consensus.

A joke analogy about Brexit delivered by comedian James Acaster on an episode of *Mock the Week* that aired on 21 July 2016 provides a useful example.[5] It is delivered mid-way through a back-and-forth round on the theme of events in the final weeks before the referendum. Acaster's joke goes as follows:

> The whole 'in and out thing' – everyone's finding it difficult. In and out is a very hard decision. It's like the other day, my flatmate was making me a peppermint tea and he said

> 'would you like the bag leaving in [laughter from the audience, Acaster pauses] or taking out? [more laughter, longer pause]
>
> And it's very hard because if you leave the bag in then, over time, the cup of tea itself as a whole will get stronger. And it might appear like the bag is getting weaker, but it's now part of a stronger cup of tea. [Laughter, applause]
>
> Whereas, if you take the bag out, the tea is now quite weak, and the bag itself goes directly in the bin. [Laughter, applause]

This takes around a minute of screentime, longer than the fast-paced show would usually spend on a single joke. More than half of this is taken up with medium close ups of relatively long duration (8 – 10 s) of Acaster, enabling the television audience to view his demonstrative facial expressions and precise hand gestures. This allows for the delivery style of the joke in a slow, measured pace, with long pauses that build up the comic anticipation as the audience and other guests on the show await the punchline. The success of this comic strategy can be measured in how well it lands, resulting in three waves of laughter and applause. This is not only due to Acaster's skill as a comedian and likely rehearsal of this joke prior to this appearance as part of stand-up sets, but also an unusual ceding of the floor by other performers on the programme. *Mock the Week*'s format is somewhat combative, a factor that led to its critiqued exclusions of marginalised comic voices, especially women (Lawson and Lutzky 2016). That Acaster is not interrupted is an assertion on the part of the other participants on this episode (and its director and editors) of the value and importance of his observation. Reaction shots of the other participants are interspersed throughout the sequence, in which they audibly laugh, nod and applaud their assent. These are clear enough cues of agreement, but the final flourish is the host Dara Ó Briain's concluding remark, 'that may be the smartest thing anyone has said in the last two months.' The jokes that precede and follow Acaster's riff on the topic without staking a claim for either side of the 'Leave/Remain' binary, relying on wordplay or whimsy as their comic mechanism, but none could be construed as pro-Brexit. Sequences like this one contributed to the impression of an anti-Brexit comic hegemony being fostered by the BBC *via* its flagship topical comedy show.

In a context in which there is a widespread belief in BBC comedy's liberal-left bias, it is not surprising that it quickly came under scrutiny under Davie's impartiality policy. Right-wing outlets trumpeted a 'crack down' on left-wing comedy (Gardner 2020), which Davie strongly rebutted, stating instead that the principle was about ensuring a balance across the institution, such that 'the BBC should not come from a platform from when there's an assumed point of view' (reported in Chortle 2020). Initially, this manifested as a debate not about removing left-wing comedians but adding right-wing ones to panels to provide balance. A *Guardian* article presented a refutation of the idea that BBC comedy deliberately rejected right-wing performers. It quoted an industry 'insider' who claimed instead that sufficiently talented conservative comedians were hard to find: 'we are constantly on the look out but there aren't many people who have those viewpoints on the comedy circuit' (Waterson 2020). This mirrors assumptions about the incompatibility of a conservative political orientation with comedy (Bauer 2023), but equally lends credence to Brassett's (2024) 'comedy establishment' thesis, implying that the professional circuit is unwelcoming to those with

political views outside an approved range. To address the 'problem' of a lack of balance across comedy, a quota for the inclusion of conservative voices on political comedies was suggested, similar to a controversial policy that begun in 2014 that ended the practice of all-male and all-white panels. (Chortle 2020). One problem is that the two 'quota' policies may contradict one another, as the BBC 'insider' noted: 'if you've got a woke panellist talking about Black Lives Matter how do you marry that with someone who is ideologically against that?' (Waterson 2020). Another is that the BBC's Entertainment department had signalled as early as August 2017 a desire to move away from commissioning panel shows as a means of refreshing its comedy output (Moore 2017).

The cancellation of *Mock the Week* in August 2022 was presented by the BBC as regrettable, but necessary to make room for new content. The decision was widely interpreted as resulting from Davie's impartiality agenda (Lewis 2022; Singh 2022). The BBC director of unscripted programmes, Kate Phillips, was obliged to repudiate the idea that hesitancy about satire as a genre was behind the cancellation: 'there was no decision about "we can't do so much satire, we have to behave ourselves"–absolutely not' (Jeffery 2022). Although a denial, Phillips's phrasing raises the spectre of self-censorship. That the removal of satire might amount to 'behaving ourselves' does imply the policing of political comedy, this time not from the supposed liberal-left comic hegemony, but in response to right-wing attacks that use accusations of BBC bias as a tool with which to dismantle the institution.

Criticisms of the BBC had consequences beyond the creation of a hostile environment for the broadcaster. Chief among these was the legitimation of a series of reductions in the institution's funding, which was cut in real terms by 30 per cent over the course of the 2010s (Barwise and York 2020). This was achieved through freezes in the licence fee level and the addition of extra financial burdens to the institution, such as paying towards Welsh-language channel S4C, or covering the costs of free licences for the over-75s (Lotz, Potter and Johnson, 2022). The Conservative government's obvious hostility towards and willingness to punish the institution economically meant that the BBC was in a weakened position in the lead up to Charter renewal negotiations in 2016-7. [6] In 2022, Culture Secretary Nadine Dorries, looking ahead to the 2026-7 round of renewals, threatened first to freeze then to abolish the licence fee (Waterson 2022). The move to a subscription-based funding system remains an option for the current Labour government (Sweney, 2024). BBC policy changes, such as an emphasis on 'impartiality', can be seen as motivated by self-preservation *via* political appeasement, weakening its ability to hold the government to account effectively (Mills, 2016). The political climate in which the BBC operates has, through the Charter renewal process, a direct, material influence on the economic viability of the broadcaster and its ability to produce and disseminate content, especially politically contentious programming.

The straitened finances of the BBC in the 2010s and early 2020s meant growing pressure on programming to deliver audiences. By 2021, *Mock the Week*'s viewing figures had halved from a peak of more than three million in 2009 (BARB 2024), though this was in line with a broader decline in broadcast audiences throughout the 2010s and early 2020s (Ofcom 2023, 9). In response to financial limitations and the new affordances of digital distribution, UK broadcasters began to adopt a

'360-degree commissioning model', with programming expected to perform outside of its original broadcast context and work as content for a range of other platforms and markets (Doyle 2010). Programmes were expected to create additional value, either as part of the content library of the BBC's on-demand service, iPlayer, or by generating revenue in ancillary markets such as, for example, *Mock the Week* and other panel shows' (selective) export, and continued circulation on the UK's second-run digital channels. Though panel shows like *Mock the Week* enjoy a surprisingly buoyant post-broadcast afterlife, topical comedy's referential link to a particular time and space renders it a weaker fit for a 360-degree model than other formats, especially scripted ones. While political pressures on UK broadcasters worked against political comedy, economic factors related to the rapidly changing industry were just as significant.

Political comedy in the post-post-broadcast TV industry

Television historians have charted the medium's industrial development in the West in four phases. TVI, from the 1940s – 1970s, describes an industry led by broadcast oligopolies serving mass audiences. In the 1970s, the addition of cable and satellite enabled expanded choice and narrowcast functionality, heralding the era of TVII. In the 1990s and 2000s, TVIII was marked by digital television's greater user control, timeshift availability and brand marketing. The current era, TVIV, is dominated by subscription video-on-demand (SVOD) services and their offer of huge content libraries, maximum consumer choice, and audience habits such as binge-watching (Jenner 2016). TVIII created the conditions of control and partisan selectivity for a 'post-broadcast' democracy, in which current affairs viewing choices can align with pre-existing political orientation (Prior 2007). The addition of internet intermediaries, driven by user data and algorithmic recommendation, as primary sources of information engender a 'post-post-broadcast' context in the era of TVIV (Stier et al. 2022). This has exacerbated the political polarisation that began in the 'post-broadcast' era, by creating 'filter bubbles' that shape radically political different realities for individual citizens. Where broadcast television addresses a nationally defined public which can reasonably be expected to have a similar set of knowledges about the political world, 'post-post-broadcast' media is accessed by individualised consumers exercising a degree of control (albeit algorithmically channelled) over their encounters with reality. This has a clear impact on the ability of TV satire to perform its traditional function of providing a comic reflection and moral judgement on the workings of power.

These industrial changes apply not only to news and information but also to entertainment. The 2010s and 2020s were marked by rapidly intensifying competition for television audiences and high quality, impactful content. FX Networks chief John Landgraf coined the now widely used term 'Peak TV' in 2015 to capture the sense that television had reached unsustainable levels of production leading to consumer choice fatigue (Littleton 2015). One of the causes was a huge growth in demand for television programming to fill the content libraries of SVODs, which, following market leader Netflix, had developed an expensive strategy of commissioning high cost original content to entice new subscribers and discourage consumers from cancelling existing memberships. In the late 2010s, this developed into the 'Streaming Wars', in which a series of global media conglomerates launched proprietary SVOD services to

extract value from their intellectual properties (Ferchaud and Proffitt 2024). Taken together, these factors led to massive cost inflation for television production and ever greater audience fragmentation.

One effect was that expansion into global markets became economically crucial to SVODs, resulting in a need for television content that could serve multiple territories. For example, Netflix originals display a 'grammar of transnationalism', through the genres, aesthetics, and value systems adopted by its programming (Jenner 2018, 227-31). Content that is so culturally specific as to be untranslatable has reduced value in this economic model. Politically sensitive material can also fall foul of censorship regimes in export territories, as was the case for *Patriot Act with Hasan Minhaj* (Netflix, 2018-20), which had an episode removed in Saudi Arabia in January 2019 because it contained criticisms of Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman. SVODs also operate a predominantly non-linear model (that is, not bound by a temporally organised schedule), and thus is best served by content that is not time-sensitive. Satire's topical and local referentiality, alongside its critical, politically risky content, can render it a weak economic proposition in this industrial model.

The short-lived reboot of *Spitting Image* gives a useful illustration of these changes. Since the end of its original series run in 1996, there had been repeated calls for the return of the popular caricature sketch show, and the extremity of the political culture of the 2010s and its cast of colourful leaders seemed to lend itself to satire. Prompted by these circumstances, series originator Roger Law worked with independent production company Avalon to produce a pilot in September 2019. Though it was targeted at broadcast networks in both UK and US, the series was picked up by Britbox, an SVOD co-founded the BBC and ITV. Britbox launched in the UK in November 2019, aiming to compete as a major player in an already saturated British TV market (Lotz, Potter and Johnson, 2022). To this end, like other SVODs, it commissioned exclusive original content to entice subscribers. With *Spitting Image*, it adopted a tried-and-tested strategy of rebooting, reducing risk by capitalising on audiences' familiarity with and nostalgia for old TV (Osur 2022). There was a clear logic, then, behind commissioning *Spitting Image*: it was widely recognisable, fondly remembered, and, through its caricatures of the famous and powerful, capable of generating much-needed publicity for Britbox, which had been struggling with brand recognition (Oliver and Ohlbaum, 2020). *Spitting Image* was initially presented as successful in this aim, with a reported tenfold increase in subscribers to the service during the week after its premiere in October 2020 (ITV Press Office 2020).

Critical reception for the reboot was lukewarm. Three themes recurred. First, that in its attempt to appeal to a wide audience, it pulled its punches and was too safe, or, for right-wing critics, too 'woke' (Malik 2020; Moir 2020; Singh 2020). Second, reviewers put forward the 'death of satire' argument that political targets like Johnson or Trump were so excessive as to nullify satire's exaggerations (Lawson 2020; Malik 2020; Singh 2020). Third, *Spitting Image*'s sketch format prompted inevitable comparison with structurally similar social media satire, which could be produced more quickly and much more cheaply than TV comedy (Maxwell 2020; Reade 2020). Because political comedy spreads quickly *via* social media, the humour of *Spitting Image* could appear dated even if it was released within days of an event. The show's traditional function as political satire was diminished in a context where 'humour as a widespread

political communication device emerges as not unique to the internet but distinctly of the internet' (Davis, Love and Killen 2018, 3899). Television comedy released on a weekly schedule cannot keep up with a high-speed news cycle, whereas social media's immediate responsiveness to current events renders it more satirically effective.

Viewing figures of 4.23 million for the *Spitting Image* Election Special broadcast on ITV in November 2020 (BARB 2024), or of more than 200 million global views for *Spitting Image* content online (Avalon 2021) suggest reasonably strong audience interest in the series. However, across both platforms, content that performs similarly can be produced for much smaller budgets.[7] An episode of *Have I Got News for You*, the BBC's long running topical panel show, broadcast in the same week as the *Spitting Image* special achieved a larger audience (4.24 million according to BARB), where satirical campaign group Led By Donkeys were reported in 2019 to have achieved more than 200m views on social media for images of their public installations (Lewis 2019). As a sketch show produced for an SVOD, *Spitting Image* was caught in the middle of these two models, old and new, for the delivery of political comedy. It lacked TV's large audience reach and address to a nationally defined public, as its viewership was limited to Britbox subscribers. And it lacked the even greater immediacy of social media satire, as it was produced (laboriously and expensively) as weekly content for a television provider.

Spitting Image underperformed as content for Britbox, which made a venture loss of £61m in 2021 (ITV PLC 2022, 44). It was quietly removed from the service after the death of Queen Elizabeth II in September 2022, since she was a prominent caricature that could not be easily edited out of the series. Its formal cancellation in October 2022 coincided with the integration of Britbox into ITV's new streaming service, ITVX, and the cessation of commissioning new original content for the streamer. Its short life demonstrates the inhospitality of the online TV industry to political comedy. As content that is (usually) locally and temporally specific, TV satire no longer suits the economic and industrial models through which television is produced and received.

Conclusion

In previous generations, British political comedy made for broadcast television addressed a geographically defined public simultaneously and immediately. This allowed it to effectively satirise political and social elites. While these programmes were never far from controversy, TV's industrial infrastructure, regulatory regimes and institutional orientation was equipped to support and defend them. The contextual factors relevant to the 2020s explored in this article - the polarisation marked by the 'anti-woke culture war', the political interference with television institutions, and the economic reorganisation of the television industry – mark a significant shift away from these traditions. Under the contemporary conjuncture, there exists little agreement about who might constitute a legitimate target for satire, and how to identify the social, cultural or political 'elites' that may previously have been the butt of such joking. 'Woke culture' is held responsible for the censorship of comedy, though the more effective means by which British television political comedy has been suppressed is right-wing pressure on its traditional patron, the BBC. Perceptions of left-wing bias at the institution are generally inaccurate (Mills 2016), but political comedy is a rare example where programming is more likely to come from a progressive or liberal

orientation. A renewed emphasis on 'impartiality' at the institutional level, driven largely by political pressure from hostile opponents and governments, has resulted in a reduction of political comedy.

One of the distinctive features of the contemporary conjuncture, is what Phelan characterises as a 'culture war economy' (2023, 79), where a changing media ecosystem, with attention as its main currency, incentivises the polarisation of opinion and manufacture of controversy. The right-wing press had an economic motivation to target political comedy as an example of so-called 'BBC bias': it was a good topic for generating user outrage and driving web traffic, contributing to the larger 'war' on the BBC, a market-dominant competitor (Barwise and York 2020). These changes to the media landscape have also revolutionised the economic model through which the television industry operates. Commercially viable content now demands an atemporal address to multiple, overlapping and, ideally, international publics. Political comedy, with a tradition of referentiality to the here and now, is less compatible with this industrial model than other content. Put simply, political comedy's economic value has diminished for the television industry. There has been insufficient political incentive – or simply political will - on the part of the BBC and other UK broadcasters to override these commercial considerations.

The persistence of satirical content across social media platforms demonstrates that there is still an audience for it, as Nicholas Holm observes: 'the popular appetite for comic comment on politics seems to be showing little sign of slowing even as its expression shifts to better fit the advantages and affordances offered by new media forms' (Holm 2023, 83). Television's traditional claim to immediacy has been superseded by a quicker, more agile medium for topical comedy. Social media can make televisual political comedy appear slow and outdated. It is also well able to serve political comedy that is precision targeted to appeal to users' pre-existing ideological orientations. There is no regulated requirement for balance or impartiality (or basic decency) on these media formats as there is on British television. One outcome, as Sienkiewicz and Marx (2022) have shown, is the proliferation of far-right political comedy online. While those engaging in this humour culture may be 'cancelled' in the contemporary sense of the word, the content itself cannot be 'cancelled' out of existence. To return to the joke we started with, while much television political comedy may have been 'cancelled' in the 2020s, audiovisual satire will return on new channels, more unapologetic than ever.

Notes

1. *The Mash Report* itself was a television adaptation of an online satirical newspaper, *The Daily Mash* (in operation since 2007).
2. The reference to the Taliban relates to the political situation in Afghanistan after the withdrawal of the US military (and its allies) in August 2021. 'Cancelled' individuals who later appeared on new TV shows included actor turned 'political activist' Laurence Fox and television host Piers Morgan.
3. Google Trends data can be viewed here https://trends.google.com/trends/explore?date=all&geo=GB&q=woke&hl=en [Accessed 18 October 2024].
4. Despite the date on the article, this was not an April Fool's joke.
5. The episode was due to broadcast on 16 June 2016, one week before the referendum. It was postponed after the assassination of MP Jo Cox. A video clip of the joke is available here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DENLFFgTTVI [accessed 22 October 2024].

6. The Charter renewal process takes place every ten years. It consists of negotiations between the BBC and government over the institution's role as the UK's public broadcaster, including its terms of reference and financial settlement via the "licence fee", an annual mandatory charge for British television viewers that provides the bulk of the BBC's funding.
7. While production budgets for the series have not been publicly disclosed, ITV wrote off £9 million of costs in relation to the series after its cancellation (ITV PLC 2023).

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