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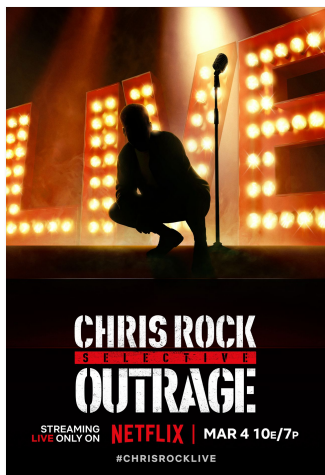
The Algorithmic Hustle: Surplus Comedy and Hollywood Specwork

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LARB CONTRIBUTOR



HERE IS A horrible line of thought. How much monetized comedy is generated in a week? How much more could there be? How much surplus comedy is generated in the process of reaching the current level? How much more would have

to be generated to reach a financial maximum? Does surplus comedy only include nonmonetized comedy or does it include all attempts at comedy, even those that fail? Conversely, does monetizable comedy include the unintentionally funny? Does it include the funny aside in a horror movie? Can you securitize dad jokes?

This way lies the madness of calculations that produce false declarations like “The World Cup causes eleventy billion dollars in lost productivity.” Yet there is a comedy business, and in order to make money in it, aspiring comics have to do so many things that are unpaid or worse: open mics, improv classes, workshopping, beta-testing, rehearsing-in-public, marketing, “guesting,” and a host of other gift-economy rituals. You may never see or hear all that work. But somehow, at the largest scale, the ragged business of comedy serves as a cornerstone of contemporary streamed entertainment.

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All this other comedy, from the ancillary to the not-quite-ancillary, forms part of the domain of entertainment industry labor that John Thornton Caldwell calls “specwork.” In his new book *Specworld: Folds, Faults, and Fractures in Embedded Creator Industries* (2023), Caldwell contends that the formerly limited domain of speculation—of artistic innovation on the one hand and the “spec script” on the other—has nearly swallowed the industry. Work done “on spec” is, by definition, flexible, unsolicited, and unpaid. And specwork has become a bulwark of the system, transmuting the work of aspirant creators—particularly on user-generated content (UGC) platforms such as YouTube and TikTok—into the raw materials the industry can extract, process, and profit from. Alongside gatekept “craftwork” and IP-strip-mining “brandwork” lies the “vast, micromedia speculation stock market” of specwork. Everyone does it, all the time, and under its aegis everything is, or ideally should be, a pilot that will launch an unstoppable money machine.

Yet comedy as a creative endeavor verging on art remains dependent on almost ungovernable moments and utopian glimmers, as Madeline Lane-McKinley has detailed in her recent book *Comedy Against Work: Utopian Longing in Dystopian Times* (2022). Rather than scale up toward the grander issues that critics such as Lane-McKinley, Lauren Berlant, and Sianne Ngai have highlighted, I want to ask a more local, more mediated question. On the one hand, the industry has tried to shift as much risk as possible to its workers, even if that results in the vast wastage of

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Put Some “Mank”

specwork. On the other hand, the comic arts have seemingly always required plenty of surplus and slack to find the funny. What happens when those phenomena collide? How does the industry's more systematic extraction of specwork make sense (or not!) of comedy's excess? Let's climb part of the surplus-comedy pyramid to find out—from crowd-work clips on TikTok to an improvised network sitcom to Chris Rock's most recent Netflix special, *Selective Outrage*.

Since this climb will take a while, I should say up front that the process works roughly like this: at the lowest level, performers are compelled to make strict economic calculations, hoping at the same time to avoid reducing themselves to merely careerist ambitions; at the middle tier, performers can offer a kind of gracious dispensation, only to find themselves abetting the system that locks everyone into the perpetual scramble; and at the highest reaches of the profession, comics and their platforms can achieve a fusion of interests in which, for a moment, it can seem that the whole edifice depends on the very nuances of their uniqueness.

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Every other year—soon to be every year—the University of Southern California, where I work, hosts a weekend [comedy festival](#) that brings together performers (Rachel Bloom, Emily Hampshire), writers (Brittani Nichols), directors (Ruben Östlund), showrunners (Jessica Gao, Steven Levitan), multi-hyphenates (Billy Eichner, Gina

on It

J. D. Connor explains what “Citizen Kane” would look like if it had only industry politics and no real ones: it'd be “Mank.” ...

Yashere), and legends (Catherine O'Hara) to discuss the state of comedy—how it works and how it is broken. Like all such events, the festival serves to publicize the work of the guests (and USC Comedy), cultivate fanbases through the metered dispensation of insider anecdotes and advice, and serve as a ritual of inclusion for aspiring professionals. All that hot-breath precarity is more tolerable because almost everyone involved is very funny.

This year, *Vulture's* Jesse David Fox hosted a panel of stand-ups who have had recent genre-bending specials. Their discussion eventually turned to the work of comedy in the age of algorithmic audience production, in which, as he put it, “there are funny things blasted at people’s faces nonstop.” (You can listen to the podcast derived from that panel [here](#); the chunk I’m discussing begins about 43 minutes in.) But to be part of that fire hose of comedy content, you need to post. The results, wherever you look, are alienating. You can’t post your best stuff, because then it’s gone. So, comics lean into disposable crowd work, already a step down for most of them. “You don’t want to burn your well-crafted joke about the friend zone, so you’re just burning this ‘Oh, you’re from Massachusetts,’” Moses Storm (of *Trash White* on HBO) concluded. Nyles Abston (of *Household Name* on YouTube) concurred: “People are getting a million followers because they guess a white dude’s name in the first row. ‘Your name would be *Trevor*.’” “It’s not even about being good anymore,” Storm went on. “It’s about being consistent.” Comedians find themselves “begrudgingly posting,” “performing for an algorithm, not

an audience.” Christina Catherine Martinez felt sympathetic: “It’s its own grind. And it doesn’t make them happy to do that.”

Yet none of them were above it. Comedy has always been about hustling, and even in the algorithmic hustle there are moments of breakthrough. Jena Friedman (of *Ladykiller* on Peacock) told the story of [a segment](#) about anti-trans activism that didn’t air on her Adult Swim series *Soft Focus* but that now has nearly 5 million views on TikTok. (The [full segment](#) on YouTube, by contrast, has only 45,000 views—that gargantuan discrepancy gives some sense of the reach of TikTok in the comedy world right now.) On the one hand, Friedman’s story is a victory: she had, in classic *Daily Show* fashion, slow-walked a transphobic “straight pride” activist into a logical cul-de-sac and then dropped the hammer. On the other hand, Friedman explained that her own nascent TikTok presence was indeed part of a larger marketing strategy. In her case “the grind” might be handled by other people, paid however well or poorly, on her behalf, but it, too, was specwork. The logic here was one of submission—of a comedy career as an inescapable, fugitive hustle.

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I went to a pilot taping in the Valley that I’m constrained from discussing in detail because you sign an NDA at these things. The NDA is a perfectly reasonable request given how contingent everything is and how distant the finished product is from what the live audience usually

sees. You don't want amateurs offering opinions before the professionals' work is done. There really can be alchemy here.

What I will say to start is that everyone involved seemed enormously talented; everyone seemed to behave with great care and concern for their co-workers; and when it was over, I had absolutely no idea how the hell this was going to end up a TV show. The show's envelope is very old-school: a multi-cam network sitcom designed to run in a typical half-hour broadcast network slot, which means about 22 minutes of "show" each week. It was shot on the set of a *very* traditional network domestic sitcom, and that worked fine. There's a heterosexual couple at the center of it.

Taping in front of a live audience takes a while—you have to do it again anytime someone flubs a line, and then there are alts that the writers or the actors want to try out; there are also costume and makeup and maybe lighting changes—but when there are professionals involved, you have a basic sense of how things are going that day. It'll be a few hours. With a pilot, you'd assume things would take longer because the characters haven't come into shape quite yet, and there would be rougher spots, but again, these are seasoned pros.

Here's where I made my mistake: the pilot taping I attended was entirely improvised. Like, improv-improvised, with suggestions from the crowd to kick things off. (Although everyone called it a pilot, it was not,

technically, a pilot but, [according to *Deadline*](#), a “visual development model.”) There *was* a slim narrative outline, even less than in a Christopher Guest movie, but I went into the taping figuring that, because it was improvised, it would have to be tighter than an ordinary show. A typical improv performance is an hour. A big-time theatrical improv show might be 90 minutes. But improv is *taxing*: the focus and stamina necessary to stay in the zone are not easy to come by.

They taped for six hours. And when they reset, they did not treat the previous improvisation as the outline for the next take—they weren’t “working up a script” from actors’ performances. Not at all—every take, the improvisation was *entirely new*. It. Was. Wild. I have never seen anything like it, and if it ends up on television, neither will the home audience, because the sheer force of the group-infusion will be impossible to convey in an edited version. No one on the couch at home is going to go slack-jawed watching [redacted] break out an entirely new, stunningly profane riff, five and a half hours into the evening. Those of us sticking it out on the soundstage did.

At a live comedy taping, there is usually a warm-up comic, who does crowd work and tells jokes and generally tries to keep the audience’s energy up; there is often a DJ. Given the standing army of creative workers in Los Angeles, these folks can be extremely good, stars waiting for their own breaks, spinning and performing for audiences who absolutely did not come to hear or see them and who will never remember them. We got to know them well. Over

the six hours, we also got to know each other: the singer who crushed it so hard that the cast took appreciative notice; the Nigerian immigrant who had become a stage manager in San Francisco; the older Cuban refugee who fled to the United States in the 1960s for “sex, drugs, and rock ’n’ roll”; the *other* ex-hippie who had been into “sex, drugs, and rock ’n’ roll and politics—until I went to jail”; the actor who made giantess foot-fetish porn videos to make ends meet; the other actor; the other other actor; the film school student who wanted to direct; the other other other actor; members of the performers’ families.

All the false starts and abandoned takes will be surplus comedy. But so will all the crowd work the warm-up comedian did, the audio jokes the DJ dropped, and the moderately funny things the crowd said. “All those moments will be lost in time,” as Roy Batty said, “like tears in rain.”

If the TikTok crowd-work clip is the come-on to convince you to see a touring stand-up, the improv sitcom may have a more systemic role. Hollywood is on the verge of a major [writers strike](#) that will, many believe, last for months. The last time the Writers Guild went “pencils down,” the TV industry responded in part by pivoting harder toward “unscripted” or “reality” series uncovered by Guild agreements. Would this show be exempt? Perhaps the episode outlines would be covered, but those play an *extremely* minor role in the production. The whole season could be broken in a day if necessary.

What about the improvisers themselves? Performers, even performers making up their own dialogue, are not union writers. *Whose Line Is It Anyway?*, perhaps the closest network analogue to this unnamed show, has [never paid its performers as writers](#), to the [public chagrin](#) of Colin Mochrie.

While I may not see how the taping I watched could be reduced to a half-hour show, a network facing a writers strike surely could. In the context of a grinding labor action, this show could be one more new half hour each week, making it that much easier for the network to lobby its conglomerate peers to hold out just a little longer against the writers' demands. And if the network needs it, they could drop an entirely different version of the episode each week, made up of material from the improv-room floor.

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Netflix announced its arrival as a live streaming service with a Chris Rock special that could not have been better timed. Years earlier, Netflix had made a \$40 million, two-special deal with Rock. Now, just a week before the 2023 Oscars, nearly a year after [“The Slap,”](#) he would unload, live. Netflix gave *Selective Outrage* the superstar treatment, with a strange half-hour preshow and an even more bizarre postshow. They knew what they had, structurally, and they would figure out how to deliver it.

While Jeff Ross was opening for Rock in Baltimore,

Ronny Chieng was hosting the preshow in Los Angeles. Those are two very different tasks. Chieng was both an emcee, surrounded by comics who had plenty of time to hang out before their live gigs later that night, and a late-night host operating on the televisual scale: smaller, more intimate, more obviously attuned to the mediation of the event in his gibes at Netflix. Ross, by contrast, was simply trying to get the theatrical crowd hyped. At one point, as if to drive home the difference, Chieng threw to Baltimore—a live look-in that also served as a warm-up for the production team—and the home audience heard Ross booming on about how crime-ridden the city is. For the prospective global audience, that local color would not have landed. Outside the theater, and maybe even inside, it was run-of-the-mill hackery.

But even that little moment with Ross and Chieng highlights two truly strange things about comedy: first, how intensely dependent it is on precise calibrations of scale, setting, rhythm, tone, diction, and more; and second, how obvious it can be when one of those is off. Maybe you find Jeff Ross funny when he's doing his club thing, or hosting a roast, or bumping mics with Dave Attell. Doesn't matter. What he was doing in Baltimore was not going to work for a home audience. Everyone involved with *Selective Outrage*—including, no doubt, Ross—knew that.

An hour in, deep into his closer about “The Slap,” Rock screwed up a joke. He was explaining that, several years before, Jada Pinkett Smith had said that he should back

out of hosting the Oscars because Will Smith was not nominated for *Concussion* (2015). “And then this n—— gives me a fuckin’ concussion.” It’s not a great joke, but Rock blew it. He crossed the *Concussion* joke with a joke about *Emancipation* (2022). (The *Emancipation* joke is that now, when Rock watches it, he roots for Massa.) Live onstage, Rock retold the *Concussion* joke, which helped the *Emancipation* joke, which capped a riff about how much he used to love Will Smith. But it was obvious that he was angry—angry at his own flub.

“Everybody called that man a beeitch.” There is some characteristic Rock repetition: over and over, different people are calling Will Smith a bitch to the point that it seems like the riff is slipping out of control, so much so that when Rock says, “They called his wife a predator ... Everybody called him a bitch,” there is giddy laughing, as if the audience thought we were finally moving away from the anaphora and on to Jada, but, no, we’re back at it. “And who’s he hit? Me. A n—— he knows he can beat. That is some *bitch ... ass ... shit*.” Big applause. He has this audience, at least the clapping version of this audience.

At that point, he messes up the *Concussion* joke—“Not *Emancipation*. *Concussion*. I fucked up the joke”—and circles around to fix it. His affect seems to shift from disappointment-in-Will and jokes about his own size to even more pointed anger at Jada. He almost swallows “They called his wife a predator” as he delivers it. But when he says, “She starts it. I finish it, okay? That’s what the fuck happened. Nobody’s picking on this bitch,” the

tone is different. With those last two words, the audience, the audience that Rock had in his pocket, the audience that had waited an hour for this chunk, pushes back. A little. There are then cheers and whoops for his aggression, but just for a second, even this theater full of Rock partisans wobbles.

It's a slightly dangerous moment, this place where a performance imperfection breaks the coherence of Rock's multilayered justification, the edifice that will allow him to—as he often does—lash out at another Black woman, as he has at Meghan Markle earlier in the special. As a motto, “She starts it. I finish it,” means one thing when it is kept inside the cocoon of being a professional comic, doing his job, telling the truth of (the weakness of) the movie *Concussion*, a little shrug indicating “what did you expect?” But it means something else when it justifies lashing out at “this bitch.” The calibrated difference between everyone *else* calling Will a bitch and Rock saying that Will's *actions* are bitch-ass shit breaks down. Not totally, but audiences are seismographic, and enough of them felt it to make noise—not exactly to object, but to let Rock know that this was getting close to their limit.

Rock will get them all back—at least in the theater—by the end. But the mistake clearly bothered him. So, he—and Netflix—went back into the special and edited that out. By editing out just the mistake, the anger at Jada now seems even more vicious. Does that moment, that feeling, have consequences?

On the one hand, there is simply no way that the fortunes of a gargantuan streaming service can stand or fall on the basis of a single line, or a single moment of unmanaged affect, tucked away inside thousands of hours of original programming. On the other hand, the entire point of using Rock's special to launch Netflix's live era is to make it seem that such moments actually could matter.

Rock's first Netflix special, *Tamborine* (2018), was a departure from his prior work. Directed by Bo Burnham, it leaned heavily on close-ups, the meta-story of the comic making the joke, and something more besides—a surplus not exactly comedic but something that could feel, at times, like the configuration of culture. Rock was not happy with it, apparently, and went back into the footage to recut the whole thing. The result, *Total Blackout: The Tamborine Extended Cut* (2021), has almost half an hour of different material (some of which is repeated in *Selective Outrage*). It reverts to the more familiar shots of Rock striding intently (everyone seems to call this “prowling”; I prefer to stick with “striding intently”) across the stage. The more intimate moments of a private-person-in-public that Burnham foregrounded largely slip away in favor of the record of the operation of Rock's powerful action-at-a-distance. If you want a sense of how direction shapes a comedy special, I recommend watching these two shows with a comparative eye—both are sitting there on Netflix.

Along with hundreds of other specials. Comedy—especially stand-up comedy—is important to Netflix in a

way that is harder to understand than the company's commitment to, say, *CoComelon* or *Stranger Things*. Comedy is a decent business for them, but in practice it matters even more personally to co-CEO Ted Sarandos. The result is that Netflix spends a lot of time trying to make it *seem* like comedy is something more than merely a reliable part of the lineup that attracts some tiny fraction of the subscriber base. Netflix wants someone— exactly who is unclear—to believe that comedy dominance gives them a unique competitive advantage. This is a little tricky to get hold of, but that is because, as I have been trying to say, the “comedy industry” is hard to get hold of.

For a few years before the pandemic, Netflix spent more than any of its competitors on stand-up specials. It paid highly, but it also dramatically broadened *who* might deserve a special: it gave out 15-minute slots on *The Comedy Lineup* (2018), half hours on *The Standups* (2017–21), half hours *just for character work* in *The Characters* (2016). It let Maria Bamford—one of Sarandos's favs—do controlled experiments in audience reaction, and also let her make 20 episodes of the indescribable *Lady Dynamite* (2016–17). It released Felipe Esparza's *Bad Decisions* special (2020) in both English *and* Spanish—an enormous flex for him that was not enormously expensive for them. In 2018, it released Hannah Gadsby's *Nanette*, which became the center of comedy discourse for a year. It signed an unprecedented deal with Dave Chappelle, whose specials brought enormous audiences and whose unwillingness to stop making shitty jokes about trans people eventually sparked a mass walkout at the company.

Along the way, their deal with Chappelle spun off a gut-wrenching half hour—8:46—about George Floyd’s murder, which Netflix [posted on YouTube](#) so that even nonsubscribers could watch it. Early in 8:46, Chappelle says: “The only way to figure out if the shit will actually work is to do the goddamn show.” Netflix certainly believes that.

Netflix’s comedy business *is* a business, then, but it is wildly different from other parts of the company since stand-up does not travel well. The two versions of Esparza’s special only make that clearer. The algorithmic promise of Netflix is that it can find and make hits that allow it to profitably leverage the global entertainment surplus generated outside the Euro-American core (e.g., *Squid Game*) into truly global hits. As things stand, there are real limits to the globalization of stand-up, even according to the older model in which capitalist core nations export their culture to the global (semi-)periphery.

Selective Outrage made the top 10 in the United States (according to Netflix) [but not the top 10 globally](#). Much of that stems from how Netflix ranks its top 10—by total hours viewed during the week (not, as linear television used to be measured, by how many people were watching it at once). An hour-long comedy special might hold its audience for its full runtime and still be crushed by *Outer Banks*, which dropped over 500 minutes that same week. Globally, people watched 99 million hours of *Outer Banks* that week. *Selective Outrage* didn’t even hit 16 million.

Still, data drips aside, live stand-up—not sports or news or opera or Broadway—was Netflix’s programming of choice to launch this era. The network tied itself to Chris Rock’s individual experience, worldview, and comic technique in the way that Amazon tied its recent multibillion-dollar venture into live TV to the NFL’s Thursday night games. On the one hand, even with the rich payday, the Rock special probably cost Netflix a third of what Amazon pays for a single game. On the other hand, there is a new NFL *Thursday Night Football* game every week, and it is very easy to sell lots of ads in the middle of those games. By contrast, it is hard to imagine mounting “a season” of live stand-up specials that could draw nine million viewers week in, week out. Then again, the recorded version of Rock’s special is still meaningful, sitting on the service ready to be streamed on demand. An ordinary football game does not have that sort of long tail. Such differences in flagship ventures shape a host of other decisions at these massive companies.

It is tempting to think that audiences *decide* how small a difference between corporations can be and still be a difference that matters. It obviously makes a difference that Netflix hooked itself to Chris Rock and not Sebastian Maniscalco, or that Chris Rock was going to go after Will and Jada Pinkett Smith and not Serena Williams and Alexis Ohanian. If we chalk those things up to simple logic, then by the time we get to the botched joke, we’re likely to believe that it is just a coincidence that Will Smith has starred in two movies with abstract titles (*Concussion*, *Emancipation*) similar enough they might be

swapped out.

But that is where we would be wrong. Because those abstractions at once name and occlude the perpetual spectacularization of the violence done to Black bodies under racial capitalism, in the very different forms of chattel slavery and the NFL—that same NFL that nearly all of Netflix’s competitors are in business with: Amazon, Disney (through ESPN/ABC), Warner Bros. Discovery (through *Hard Knocks* on HBO), Google (through YouTube), Paramount Global (through CBS), Comcast (through NBC Universal), and News Corp (through Fox). Moreover, it is *not* a coincidence that Will Smith was in both of those movies. In this industry, those movies only got made *because* Will Smith was going to be in them. The split between the movies’ spectacular racialized violence and their abstract titles is no accident. That split is a crucial feature of Smith’s self-deflecting stardom, a unique configuration that held together until that moment last year.

We do not decide where those differences between media brands become significant. That significance was already decided for us by racial capitalism, by the evolution of the star system and Hollywood’s racist representational conventions, by the Oscars’ delayed and still partial reckoning with those legacies, and by Ted Sarandos’s power to transmute ostensibly personal comedy nerdishness into corporate strategy.

In his 1996 book *Blackface, White Noise: Jewish Immigrants*

in the *Hollywood Melting Pot*, political scientist/film historian Michael Rogin claimed that the key transformative moments in the history of US cinema—the coming of narrative (*Uncle Tom's Cabin* in 1903), the feature film (*The Birth of a Nation* in 1915), the advent of sound (*The Jazz Singer* in 1927) and of color (*Gone with the Wind* in 1939)—“all organized themselves around the surplus symbolic value of blacks, the power to make African Americans represent something beside themselves.” This was a surprising insight at the time, and it is certainly subject to serious qualification, but looking now at *Concussion*, *Emancipation*, and, most directly, *Selective Outrage*, why would anyone be surprised that the system of US racial capitalism confronts crises by relying on narratives of, yes, the extraction of surplus economic value from Black labor?

Comedy is Netflix's brand, which is to say that comedy is Netflix's brand of exploitation. A streaming service launching an era of live programming is not a “key transformative moment” in the history of cinematic arts the way *The Jazz Singer* is, but it absolutely depended on Netflix's power to make Chris Rock represent something beside himself. Inside this system of conglomerate comedic storytelling, Rock's botched joke scrambles emancipation and concussion, the partial liberation and enduring violence upon which the system depends.

Still, we think, Netflix would surely have been in the same position with the mistake left in as with the mistake edited out. After all, it's *Netflix*. But the complementary

systems of racial capitalism, entertainment industry specwork, and surplus comedy come together to guarantee there will always be *something* that perfectly serves the corporate purpose while still feeling authentic. What is true about Rock is true at every level. If the writers strike drags on, the broadcast network behind the improv sitcom I saw can cobble together some hidden gems caught on tape. The labor has already been done. If a comic needs to promote a tour, they can find something inessential to burn on TikTok. The calculation has already been made. Yet all that seeming spontaneity promises something even more, some unique comedic moment that demands not our consumption but our witness. Something where you had to be there.

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