

History of Television and Radio

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Animation madness: *The Simpsons*

The animated sitcom *The Simpsons* has captivated American families nationwide of all races, ages, and ethnicities. *The Simpsons* influenced the evolution of animated situational comedies and paved the way for other animated shows like *Family Guy*, *King of the Hill*, *Beavis and Butt-Head* and *South Park*. The animated series gained success as it crossed lines by parodying while also projecting a wide range of subject matter and satirizing all kinds of aspects of everyday life--family, television, religion, friendships, politics, technology, education--among many other subject matters, ultimately achieving the true essence of satire against the typical sitcoms that were on television during that time.

Despite the parodies of these subject matters the FOX network has been the home of *The Simpsons* for over two decades, which evidently helped the network in becoming a powerhouse of animation for subsequent years. FOX began as the newest network in 1986 and Rupert Murdoch was the man behind it, creating the latest competition against the three network powerhouses of NBC, CBS, and ABC (Doherty, 1). The FOX network was known to break the mold on programming by targeting younger audiences with shows that appealed to them, gaining viewers into their network by catering to them programming that wasn't available on other networks. A young cartoonist named Matt Groaning caught the attention of James L. Brooks, who was serving as a producer for the FOX variety show *The Tracy Ullman Show* in 1987, he hired on Groaning with the idea of making "bumpers", which were small 30-seconds short animations that would be shown before and after the commercials (Tucker, 1). The cartoons became quite favorable among viewers. Brooks saw the potential of the animated family and inquired Groaning about launching an entire half-hour show for FOX. Groaning agreed to the

creation of the show with the condition that FOX would not interfere nor influence over the creative aspects of the show. Groaning discusses in “Not Just Another Sitcom”, “ From day one they minded their own business. Other than the occasional note from the censors, we have been given free reign. However, I understand that I may have been in the right place at the right time in TV history with FOX which was a fairly new network” (Scheider, 2). As FOX was known to take different routes in regards to its programming for younger audiences, it was no surprise that FOX was willing to take a risk with an animated show not quite targeted specifically to the children but to rather both—children and adults. Therefore, on December 17, 1989 the dysfunctional nuclear family of five made their FOX half-hour format debut.

It was evident from the shows’ days during *The Tracy Ullman Show* that *The Simpsons* was designed and created in such a specific way that caused audiences to become intrigued by the violation of the norms seen in animation. No other animated cartoon had been able to reach such popularity, as stated by Tom Russo and Dan Snierson in their article, “King of Comedy”, “The Flintstones—which debuted as a prime-time series in 1960—represented the birth of adult animation on television” (2). Groaning an avid TV fan since childhood, understood fist-hand about the lack of variety of programming during that time. Brian L. Ott of “I’m Bart Simpson, who the hell are you? A Study in Postmodern Identity (Re) Construction”, verifies this claim by stating, “The Simpsons has always represented as a sort of anti-show, spoofing, challenging, and collapsing the traditional codes, structures, and formulas of network television” (59). Therefore, Groaning proved that if animation was done right, it could thrive in prime-time television again—which it did, and obviously helped along build FOX into a fourth network powerhouse.

Although it is evident that the show began lampooning pop culture and satire, it managed to become an icon of itself within pop culture. Brooks and Groaning formulated a visionary

aspect for the show that consisted on the idea of breaking away from what had already been done, they wanted the content to have a specific point, which Groaning discusses in an interview with Brian Doherty, “ The message of the cartoon over and over again is that your moral authorities don’t always have your best interests in mind. Teachers, principals, clergymen, politicians—for the Simpsons, they’re all goof balls, and I think that’s a great message” (3). It is clear that the show’s unorthodox approach to programming may have caused some hostile commentary by some conservative viewers including government figures like ex-president George W. Bush Sr., in which Groaning responds:

“He (Bush) said something about American families needing to be more like the Waltons and a lot less like the Simpsons. We thought it was hilarious, so we wrote that in. We showed what people weren’t used to seeing. Our characters drink, smoke, don’t wear seatbelts, and litter. On the other hand, right-wingers complain there’s no God and religion on TV. Not only do the Simpsons go to church every Sunday and pray, they actually speak to God from time to time. We show him!” (Doherty, 3).

Groaning always seemed to keep in mind about the specific format and construction pertaining the written content of the show. It is obvious that the show’s success relies as well on the clearly manifested pedagogical values (e.g. literature, science, mathematics, religion, psychology) the show holds a certain educational value; however, the viewer just needs to know how to read through it.

The Simpsons are far from ordinary and the animated family skyrocketed into world popularity, which was not only great for Groaning and everyone employed through the show, but to the entire FOX network especially its chairman Mr. Murdoch. The family became a merchandising entity not only in American pop culture, but also in overseas countries that ran

syndication of the show. The show's appeal to a variety of different demographics broke the mold from previous American animations. Bob Greenblatt, before becoming NBC's chairman was FOX's Entertainment executive president and when speaking of *The Simpsons*, he states: "The Simpsons became one of those rare shows that defined a network", it's no wonder that the brand of *The Simpsons* has ballooned into a \$1 billion property when factoring in syndication and merchandising revenues (Foege, 2). Any fan of the show can distinguish that the show depicts a relentless and blunt view towards a capitalist culture; however, it has become endeared in the advertising community. Sandy Grushow, former chairman of FOX Entertainment Group states, "besides the obvious financial benefits to the studio and network. The Simpsons was the series that really branched FOX [...] more than any other show on the network. The Simpsons speaks to who we were as a creative outlet and a company" (Foege, 3). The show became a global pop culture phenomenon which has allowed for FOX to create relationships with over 500 companies worldwide, that are licensed to use the beloved family on their advertising and merchandise (Foege, 3). The show's success could also be credited to the use of celebrity guest voiceovers as a promotional device, due to the willingness of celebrities, "lending ones voice and image became the equivalent of spoofing yourself on Saturday Night Live. It allowed the show to create this PR overlay that kept the show very fresh and relevant" says Caraccioli-Davis from SMG entertainment (Foege, 3). The show's triumph and popularity has even allowed for the shows writers to take a jab at FOX's own Rupert Murdoch who has been depicted in the show lording over an executive team of robots--among other different jokes--which shows no surprise of the content allowed from the show since the dysfunctional family has helped Murdoch create a lucrative network.

The show's success has enabled many talented writers and producers to pass through the

show to greater fame, from the famous late night talk show host comedian Conan O'Brian, to executive producers Josh Weinstein, Bill Oakley, and Mike Scully--just to name a few. The show's massive success demonstrated to other networks that older audiences did in fact enjoy cartoons. Mike Scully explains this by stating, "other networks made the mistake of thinking the reason it was so popular was because it was animated [...] so they rushed a whole bunch of shows into production without concentrating on content" (Russo & Snierston, 2). However, there were a couple of future up-and-coming cartoonists that did managed to create animated successes like MTV's Mike Judge with *Beavis and Butt-head*, Comedy Central's Trey Parker and Matt Stone with *South Park*, *Ren and Stimpy* in Nickelodeon, or Seth McFarlane's *Family Guy* and *American Dad*. Although, it may have taken FOX a couple of more years to create a second hit animated cartoon targeted for older audiences, it finally managed to get a hit with *King of the Hill*, which was a co-creation between *Beevis and Butt-head* creator Mike Judge and *Simpsons* writer Greg Daniels. The show was picked up by FOX and evidently ran the show for 13 seasons, which strategically followed its debut after a *Simpsons* airing. This marked, "the first time two prime-time animated series had been so successful simultaneously" (Russo & Snierston, 1). Evidently, *The Simpsons* untapped a market that gave massive success when done right, and which is clearly manifested nowadays by the wave of adult-oriented animation now washing over our TV screens.

The Simpsons gave the broadcast industry a new form of storytelling, and which proved that animation could actually thrive in the primetime block after the success of the *Flintstones*. *The Simpsons* came at a point and time in which FOX was willing to take chances on a brand new idea and which Groaning is quite thankful for being given such an opportunity. However, the show spoke to audiences from all over the world to different demographics which allowed

for the cartoon to become cathartic to one's own personal life and which FOX happily capitalized upon. But more importantly, it also gave other future cartoonists, writers, animators the possibility of becoming part of the adult-themed animation cult. Trey Parker and Matt Stone from South Park pay homage to *The Simpsons* in their six season with the episode, "The Simpsons already did it" in which the character of Butters thinks up of several schemes but realizes that each one has already been a storyline on *The Simpsons*. Seth McFarlane's creations *Family Guy*, *The Cleveland Show*, and *American Dad* all share a line up with *The Simpsons* on "Animation Sunday" nights on FOX along with Loren Bouchard's and Jim Dauterive's *Bob's Burgers*, which is the newest animation addition to FOX. Groaning explains the longevity of the show and the audiences who have grown up watching the show as, "This kids who have grown up with the show age and realize a whole new level of jokes they didn't understand the first time around" (Scheider, 5). Which I myself find to be quite true, as I find myself laughing over new bits that I hadn't noticed before. The show impacted TV audiences and helped build a fledgling fourth network. The family of five may be dysfunctional in their own terms and rough around the edges but they all eventually come around and managed to be a loving family. Behind all the profits and marketing, *The Simpsons* are really just a satiric reflection of American family life through the vast creation of the fictional animated universe found in the town of Springfield, USA.

Works Cited

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