

For this week's research I decided to watch the Hulu documentary *Too Funny To Fail: The Life & Death of The Dana Carvey Show*. This documentary follows Dana Carvey and his big career move to try bring back the style of an old comedy sketch show, such as *The Carol Burnett Show*, but with a weird twist. What could possibly go wrong? Well, apparently almost everything.

DK: need historical context. What year(s) did this occur?

JB: The show originally premiered in 1996 and the documentary on it was done in 2017.

Carvey and Robert Smigel (another former SNL writer/actor) pioneered this idea of doing a comedy show that was outside of the box. Their goal was to try and be the American version of *Monty Python and The Holy Grail*. First, they needed a network that would be willing to fund this escapade. Originally, Carvey wanted to try and get HBO to pick up the show because they would have more creative freedom such as cursing; however, in the end they ended up signing with ABC because it was the #1 network. ABC even gave Carvey a primetime time slot after its popular show *Home Improvement* with Tim Allen.

JB: This is was the first of many bad moves made by Carvey. While it is true ABC was the #1 station at the time, Carvey didn't think about the audience he wanted to attract. His show followed a very family friendly show and audiences were not ready for what Carvey wanted to do. This makes me wonder, would the show have been more successful on a network such as HBO which was trying to push the boundaries? I definitely think humor is more successful based on the audience, so having the show on HBO would probably fit his target audience more than it did on ABC...

Once the show got funding Carvey and Smigel were able to begin casting. Although they were not big names at the time, people such as Steve Carell, Stephen Colbert, and Louis C.K were casted in the show. Also, Robert Carlock (writer for *30 Rock* and co-creator of *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt*) and Charles Stuart Kaufman (writer of *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*) were hired as writers. Carvey and Smigel were unaware of it at the time by many of the people that they hired would turn out to be some of the most successful people in present day. Again, the goal of the show was to really do something different. Carvey had made it clear that this wasn't going to be another show like SNL. The goal was to be as ridiculous as possible. Colbert described it as, "The gig of gigs" and that they "...had to be rebels in sweaters." With Carvey wanting to push the limit the cast had creative freedoms and everyone was excited for the show and couldn't see how this could fail.

The first of many things that led to the shows demise was when Disney bought ABC. Disney buying ABC occurred after the show had already started production and a few weeks before the first episode aired. When hearing about *The Dana Carvey Show* the Disney executives assumed they were going to get Carvey doing some of his famous characters from SNL such as the church lady; however, Carvey and the cast were adamant on trying something new and decided to have the first sketch of the first show to be Carvey playing Bill Clinton breast-feeding kittens. Needless to say Disney/ABC executives were shocked at what they saw. Additionally, the audience was completely taken aback. The network executives had paid for a minute by minute

nielsen ratings of the pilot and in the first 10 minutes 6 million people had deserted the show and changed the channel.

TM: People also began reacting negatively when Disney bought Star Wars initially!

KH: I think that the network a show is on *greatly* impacts the way a show is received. When ABC Family transitioned into Freeform, the audience changed from younger children and parents to teens and young adults. I know personally, my parents were upset by this because my brothers were now being exposed to more mature subjects such as sex and drugs on a channel that was previously suitable for children. So I definitely would say networks contribute to audience and thus shift the way shows are written and received.

JB: This was literally record breaking. This was not the sketch ABC audiences were expecting to see at all. The sketch was not the worst thing I have ever seen but many people were offended. Also, the audience who was tuning into the show had just finished watching *Home Improvement* which was completely different. Technically, the sketch followed the incongruity format of humor yet it didn't stick. Again this makes me wonder how much our own perception of things goes into what we see as funny. This reminds me of Kayla's blog last week when she said everyone has a different view on what is considered bad.

In the aftermath of the pilot, the show received extremely negative reviews. Howard Rosenberg, a Pulitzer Prize winning television critic, gave it a heavily damaging review and USA Today's cover referred to Carvey as "Dirty Dana." Executives had told Carvey that he should address the controversy in the beginning of the next show. Instead, Carvey referred to the controversy in a joke in the opening monologue and did not make a big deal out of it. This began the feud between the network executives and the writers. While the network executives wanted Carvey to tone down the weirdness, Carvey kept pushing back with weird sketches such as [Grandma the Clown](#) and [The Gentle Television Network](#). The cast even created sketches where Smigel played an ABC executive in a mocking manner. Carell probably put it best when he said, "We put the pedal down and just went for it."

TM: Something to look at might also be how streaming services like Hulu and Netflix allow certain shows to reach audiences outside of a network. I was reminded of the one Amy Schumer special on Netflix that received so many one star reviews and negative feedback that (allegedly) Netflix changed their rating system to a "Thumbs Up or Down" approach. That Granda Clown was also pretty bad. Have you ever seen Mr. Blobby?

JB: So I did look up [Mr. Blobby](#) and again it was an interesting approach to humor. Personally I will see him in my nightmares. Going in deeper here with the two sketches above. If you watch the clips they are they embody incongruity humor (meaning they combined two things you don't normally see together). I was curious what were your reactions to these clips?

DK: Grandma the clown was unwatchable for me. Scratching my head.

KH: I was cracking up at the Grandma sketch, mostly at the balloon fish part, because I thought it was so random but that's what made it funny to me. I guess also parts were extremely awkward

so all I thought to do was laugh. As for the other one I didn't laugh but I thought it was “cute.” I think this is a good tactic to make harsh or upsetting things seem less heavy. I think it's a great way to soften things, but I feel like humor in general is a way to make “real” life seem less heavy, something to be laughed at or looked at in a different light.

Eventually, the shows outside the box thinking began to draw in audiences. Young comedians, such as Bill Hader, saw the show and were inspired. The show began to gain a fan base and they were loyal. In fact Rosenberg received such a strong hate letter for his previous review of the show that he decided to go back and give it another try. After looking at the show a second time he agreed that he had judged its contents prematurely and gave the show praise for its innovative comedy. Even though the show eventually began to gain popularity, it still struggled following ABC's family show *Home Improvement*. The network decided to cancel the show and the cast was crushed. They decided to go out with a bang in their last show and do a controversial [of reporting Gerald Ford's death](#) sketch; however, ABC didn't even air the last episode.

TM: Since I very rarely watch TV myself, I wonder what stations appeal to which audiences. Have you noticed types of humor that appeal to certain crowds and how one network tries to emulate that type of humor? I know there are a decent amount of shows on Adult Swim that take in shows that have absurd humor.

JB: That has been something that I have started to notice myself. For example these sketches on the *The Dana Carvey Show* were originally aired in what is referred to as a “prime time” spot. This spot is more associated with a family audience. However, when the sketches were shown on *SNL* which hits a late night adult audiences they were more successful.

Although *The Dana Carvey Show* was short lived, most of the people who were on the show ended up having amazing careers. Both Colbert and Carell got their big breaks from being on the show. Also, some of the sketches that aired on *The Dana Carvey Show* ended up re airing on *SNL* and got praised (this includes the Gerald Ford sketch that never got aired). Despite the shows downfall, Carvey says he has, “No regrets.” His biggest concern was that he had ruined the other castmates' careers but that was not the case. Everyone who was a part of the show felt like they were part of something bigger even if not everyone agreed with their sense of humor. This was my attempt to put *The Dana Carvey Show* into the controlling values:

<p>Controlling Purpose: Breaking free from the pressure to conform gives you creative freedom to push the boundaries and try different things.</p>	<p>Opposing Purpose: Following societal trends allows you to belong to a community and feel accepted by others. (possible opposing purpose) This is a good suggestion. I don't think belong “belong to a community” is exactly right because they are already apart of the comedy community. Maybe “following social trends will make you accepted by a wider audience”</p>
<p>Controlling Context: Trying to be acceptable to all only limits what you can become.</p>	<p>Opposing Context: Individualism may result in rejection from others and a struggle to</p>

	<p>“make it” in the creative world. (possible opposing context) I think the word weirdness might be a better fit than individuality.</p>
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This is the controlling value for the purpose behind the creation of the show

In this documentary it was interesting to watch the rise and fall of *The Dana Carvey Show*. It is crazy to think that so many talented people were on the show, yet the show never made it past the first season. Some sketches were controversial and definitely not family friendly. At some point the cast didn't care about the audience or the executives; however, this is what led to the show's demise. So many different aspects led into the show's downfall yet they accomplished their goal which was to do something different in the end which made Carvey have “No regrets.” Honestly, it has given me a lot to contemplate as I continue my research.

DK: and what are you contemplating?

KH: So we see a lot of exploring this source, but what does all of this have to do with your previous research, your project, your life experiences, your disharmony, etc.?

JB: What I am beginning to wonder is how much the landing of a joke relies on the person receiving the joke. From what I have read so far, not much talks about the individual experience. I have an out there sense of humor, but just like Kopp Grandma the Clown was off for me. Also, I feel like the fact Carvey had the show done through ABC in a prime time spot led to its fail. Additionally, many sketches followed the incongruity style but still didn't land. It reminds me of that weird penguin video we watched in class that not many of us knew how to digest. My research so far has been on humor and theories behind it and I sometimes feel like I need to focus more on the individual interpretation of a joke. I don't think there is an exact formula for writing humor and it is almost like a gamble. If you are going to write humor you have to have gumption. You have to realize not everything you write is going to land and be able to meet those consequences. I want to start to shift the focus of my research from the theories of humor to actual comedy writers perspective on writing humor and compare the two.

TM: A lot of this is audience reception! Would *The Dana Carvey Show* have survived if it switched networks or would the audience have simply followed?

KH: After reading the research you and Eric are doing, I too am curious how comedians know what jokes to write and tell, etc. The other day I introduced James Acaster (he has a special on Netflix) to my parents. I think he's funny, especially because he's awkward and to me that makes the jokes better. However, after my parents watched it they said they didn't think he was that funny. They also said they'd have to have known more background on his jokes (I believe he is from England or the UK, so some places and people were unknown to those who haven't been there). So maybe that's a thing too, that some audiences just don't have the background knowledge the comedian thinks they do or should have.

Future Research:

I have a few things on my list for continuing my research.....

1. I have a follow-up meeting with Keri Mikulski Monday April 15th. This year she taught a pilot of CC2 where Satire was the course theme. We did a phone conference back in February where she explained the course setup as well as gave recommended reading for studying humor. On Monday she will show me how the students final projects turned out. Also, I will ask her about how she incorporates humor into her teaching pedagogy.
2. I will begin to read *What Are You Laughing At? A Comprehensive Guide to the Comedic Event* by Dan O'Shannon who was a Writer/Producer of *Cheers* and *Frasier*. He is also a Writer/Producer of *Modern Family*.