FUNNY IS FUNNY

DEVELOPMENT MODELS FOR DIVERSE VOICES IN STAND-UP COMEDY

ZAHRA NOORBakhSH, SENIOR FELLOW

POP CULTURE COLLABORATIVE | SEPTEMBER 2019
My name is Zahra Noorbakhsh, and I’m just another comic trying not to quit. I am a queer Muslim, Iranian American woman who likes to keep her narratives complicated. I know, I know! It’s the best time to be a complicated comic! In just the last few years, comedians like Ali Wong, Hasan Minhaj, and Hannah Gadsby have come out with innovative specials that garnered mass media appeal.

But comedy doesn’t change because of any one individual. In my 15-year career in stand-up, being tasked to speak on behalf of my people, I know all too well what it’s like to push a message without a movement. In my “I’m with her campaign,” no one was with me. As the “pork-eating, alcohol-drinking, premarital sex-having, bisexual-and-married to an atheist white man” type of Muslim, I wasn’t Muslim enough to represent or speak as an authority.

Meanwhile, my impression of my parents’ accents got laughs. The laughs got me gigs. The gigs garnered me legitimacy as a comic.

Laughter shapes a comedian’s career. Now, more than ever, social justice social justice movements need to understand the elements that craft a joke before it makes it to the stage, and the key players that vet comics before they make it “big” whether in stand-up, television, or movies. Despite all the arguments that there is an expansive “alt-comedy” scene, and that comedy clubs are a fragmented industry, you need to be aware that the bar and club comedy pipeline is polluted by white supremacy and toxic masculinity, and you need to know how it sets a standard of “funny.”

Thousands of comedians—like me—need an alternative pipeline, not just for the sake of our careers, but because the future of culture depends on it. I’m going to tell you what those pipelines for diverse comedians could look like, and how we can build them.
Why Comedy?
Comedy wields a lot of influence on what we know, what we believe, what we pay attention to, how we characterize people, or groups, and how we understand the world.

- Jokes and humor reveal the common denominator of culture—the stuff we agree on, or agree to disagree on.
- Our sense of humor roots us in a shared identity.

In Hulu’s “Ramy,” comedian Ramy Youssef tells his coming of age story, subverting the expectation that a show about a Muslim character should speak to a singular experience.
Jokes are Social Capital

- More than 3 billion people are on social media—consumers are spending millions of hours consuming funny television shows and movies.

- Comedic news shows have become a regular source of political analysis and civic education.

- Comedy club revenues have increased by 16.8% between 2013 and 2018, as streaming stand-up specials reach ever-increasing audiences.

- Stand-up comedy sends talent into a broad range of career opportunities, like staffing television writers rooms, marketing, and even running for office.

Comics win Oscars, run for office, and make up a large portion of television writers rooms.
The Burning Questions
Homogeneous Comedic Voices Dominate Mainstream TV

For every breakthrough comedic voice with a nontraditional perspective, we can name dozens of familiar white male comics peddling humor rooted in “common sense” and “conventional wisdom.”

It reinforces the notion that mainstream America is white, hetero, and male.
What is it about the system of developing comedic talent that is weeding out so many of the talented, funny people who happen not to be heterosexual white men?

How can we ensure career access and sustainability to diverse comedic voices who aren’t currently getting their due—and maybe make the world a little better for everyone?

How do we align comedians with social justice values without inhibiting them?
Three Elements to Comedic Success

Three elements operate interdependently, shaping comedians as well as our ideas of what is and isn’t funny.

SOCIAL DISCOURSE
Topical issues that are emerging present an opportunity for new jokes and voices.

VETTING PROCESSES
Comedians and audiences are discovering what’s funny in real time — and bookers and producers notice.

PRACTICE FOR THE PRACTITIONER
The more a comedian performs, the more they get to find their voice, tighten their writing, and sharpen their delivery.
Along the pipelines that can catapult a comedian’s career are gatekeepers—comedy club bookers, talent scouts, producers, television executives—who are critical to a comedian’s success, because they:

- Decide who and what is funny;
- Determine who gets to help mass audiences make sense of and interpret society; and
- Determine who can make a successful career in the multimillion dollar business of comedy.

All too often, these pipelines and gatekeepers accelerate the careers of homogeneous comics as they displace diverse comics. But we can create new pipelines and support systems for diverse comedians.
How Comedy Works
(but not for all of us)
If you want to be a social justice comedian there isn’t a scene for you that also serves as a pipeline to Hollywood.

—W. Kamau Bell, Comedian, Host of *United Shades of America*
At the end of the day, comedy cares only about being funny.

- The quantity of laughter that a comedian generates—how quickly and how often—is the metric gatekeepers use to determine if a comedian is funny.

- Very rarely are qualitative concerns taken into consideration, like who the audience is or if the comedian is thought-provoking.
A joke that “kills” with an audience that “gets it” might bomb with audiences that don’t share or understand the context. So a comedian uses the knowledge, truths, narratives, and conventional wisdom that are understood by the largest possible percentage of their audience to craft jokes.

Some comics are rewarded with network sitcoms, movie vehicles, or talk show appearances for perpetuating stereotypes and otherizing, while others use stereotypes as a starting point to reveal racism or sexism and lead audiences into a new way of thinking.

Meanwhile, comics who don’t want to traffic in stereotypes are at a disadvantage. Either they address the tension being generated by their inhabiting the stage, or they ignore it, slowing down their jokes to explain background and context.
Bookers encouraged me to tell jokes about terrorism, because they would “slay,” and they were right. In press photos, I decked myself in the American flag, making fun of the “safe Muslim” trope. But critics used these photos, along with clickbait titles, to ask if my comedy was enough to answer for 9/11.

Any mention of my Muslim identity was a distraction—people wanted to hear more about that than my jokes. When I didn’t mention it, my ethnically ambiguous face was a distraction—audience members wanted to know where I was from, how my parents got here, and what they thought of my comedy.

Then W. Kamau Bell showed me how to use one-person shows, storytelling, and act-outs to develop my material and voice. It was the first time anybody told me that I didn’t have to please the crowd or satisfy their curiosity. His mentorship and the cohort he created with his weekly classes, the “Solo Performance Workshop,” kept me from quitting comedy.
What’s a Joke?

A joke establishes a shared context that generates anticipation. Then, it delivers a surprise that, ideally, alleviates tension and has a lingering impact on its audience.
But what happens when you don’t have a shared context with your audience? Or when a joke alleviates tension for some, but amplifies it for others?

Our simplistic joke formula is based on what works for most. Many diverse comics disinherit themselves from their political identity so they can “just tell jokes”—because their identities in themselves are distracting to the audience.
You Gotta Put in the Time
Pipeline Factors and Vetting Processes
Stand-Up comedy can only be developed in front of an audience.

- The location (bar, comedy club, theater) affects who the audience is, what their expectations are, and what a gatekeeper believes is funny or will make money.

- It takes a bare minimum of five minutes in front of an audience, five nights a week, for two years, to develop enough skill to claim basic legitimacy as a comedian.
A Comedian’s Typical Career Timeline

A Look at Stage Access and Skill Development

0–3 years

Here’s a likely trajectory of growth for a stand-up comedian these days:

Comedy Open Mic Nights
A low-stakes learning environment that provides much of the foundational skill-building that makes a stand-up (work ethic, tight writing, tempo, audience engagement, and hecklers).

- Booked by showing up and signing up. Sometimes signups available online. Usually hosted at bars, these are where most comics start out.
- Audience is mostly other comics, some of whom are bookers at other mics.
- Opportunity to get booked on other showcases.
- Unpaid. Sometimes there’s a fee to perform or to be put in a lottery to perform.

Showcases
A pre-booked and selected lineup of new, emerging, and established local comics.

- Booked by word of mouth, producer saw the comic at another venue, or sometimes with a video clip.
- Usually at a bar, nightclub, or theater. Sometimes at a comedy club. Audience is usually paying customers.
- Opportunity to get booked on more showcases.
- Mostly unpaid. Sometimes, costs money, especially if self-produced.
Career Path at a Glance
(continued)

Showcases
A pre-booked and selected lineup of locally and sometimes nationally established comics.
- Usually at a comedy club, nightclub, or theater.
- Audience is mostly paying customers, and can include talent scouts, agents, and managers. Opportunity to get booked on more showcases and be seen by scouts, managers, and agents. But these are mostly unpaid gigs and some even require comedians to spend their own money to do, when producing on their own (e.g. venue rental, equipment, promotion costs, etc).

Audition Ready
- Entering the world of television and film, a comic needs to position themselves as “audition ready,” which is not typical for those with only 3 years of experience.
- Booked by word of mouth, producer saw the comic at another venue, or sometimes with a video clip.
- Usually at a bar, nightclub, or theater. Sometimes at a comedy club. Audience is usually paying customers.
- Opportunity to get booked on more showcases.
- Mostly unpaid. Sometimes costs money, especially if self-produced.
The Bar Effect

- Most open-mics are held at bars or spaces that are made to feel like we’re watching comedy at a bar.

- The bar scene tends to shape a comedian’s material to be more bawdy, more shock-oriented, more willing to say anything for a laugh.

- This can be alienating to comics who are women, people of color, LGBTQ, or from another historically marginalized group.
The Great (Bar) Escape

BAR COMEDY SCENE

COLLEGES

THEATERS

VIRAL MEDIA
Alternative Development Spaces for Stand-Up Comedians

It’s not possible to avoid the bar comedy scene and be a successful comic. But alternative stage spaces are more popular than they used to be.

- Comedy shows in community theaters, cafés, bookstores
- Variety shows, storytelling shows, and game shows
- Self-produced online video or solo theater performances
- Colleges, museums, nonprofit organizations, and conferences
- Viral tweets and other social media

However, these alternative spaces and pipelines, while incredibly important, continue to deplete diverse comedians as they lack sustained career infrastructure.
Some diverse comics create one-person shows, where they can establish context on their own terms and work outside the restrictive tempo and topics of bar comedy. However:

- Self-producing alternative showcases, video content, or theatrical productions are costly and depleting;
- There aren’t enough alternatives to allow anyone to succeed as a professional comic and circumvent the bar scene entirely; and
- There’s no pipeline from there to mass audience entertainment venues.
Alternative Spaces in Standup Comedy Need Sustainability
Recommendations
If we want a dominant culture that immerses us in the diversity of jokes, memes, and “common sense” of 21st-century America, we need to support diverse comedic voices. We need to find ways to give space, influence, and career sustainability to comics who aren’t getting their due in our current comedy development system.

Opportunities for intervention include:

- Supporting artist development and mentorship
- Providing alternative performance opportunities
- Organizing audiences and opinion leaders
Support Artist Development

Identify existing and/or developing new programs and partnerships that could work directly with diverse comedians on:

- **Skills development.** Create and fund alternative development spaces for standup comedians that take into account the funding needed for a marketing, dramaturgical, and technical team.

- **Residencies.** Comics sometimes produce alternative showcases as a labor of love; financial support will allow them to launch comedy events without depleting their own time, energy, and funds.
Support Artist Development (continued)

- **Collaboration and mentorship.** Comedians who care about social justice need a cohort to help develop context and punchlines, and learn how much educating they need to do or should do to make their material work. As diverse comics gain experience and new tactics, they can swap notes, build on the lessons of one generation, and gain from the energy of a community of like-minded performers.

- **Career prospects.** Developing a career in comedy takes years. How do we support diverse comedians who weave social justice values on stage? Social justice stakeholders and comedians could work together to identify ways to build new career pipelines for these artists.
Provide Alternative Performance Opportunities

Identify and build the infrastructure and stakeholders who can:

- Build alternative development spaces, such as community-based theater. Comics sometimes produce alternative showcases as a labor of love; financial support will allow them to launch comedy events without depleting their own time, energy, and money.

- Promote and book. Establish a “speaker’s bureau” with a business model and touring schedule that is specific to diverse comedians who share social justice values.

- Support emerging television pipelines to scout, train, mentor, and provide real-world experience for diverse comedians to develop their own creative TV projects and/or work inside writers rooms.
Organizing Audiences and Opinion Leaders

How we can work together to reframe what defines “successful” comedy.

- **Change the room.** Comedy audiences that are regularly comprised of diverse people with social justice values can contribute to shaping material by being a part of the live audiences that shape standup routines early in the careers of comedians. (or shape standup routines in the first place).

- **Change what’s funny.** Social justice movements need to stay in-community with comedians, their critics, their agents and managers, as well as the producers and bookers of comedy shows at every stage of a comedian’s career. We need more intersecting learning spaces than Twitter and critical Opeds that only come after a comedian has mainstream pull. Those who evaluate a comic’s success or potential must have an awareness of how social justice comedy is being measured.

- **Change the discussion.** Audiences themselves need to change their relationship to “difference” when it’s presented on stage. We’re often habituated to learn from a speaker of a different background. It makes it challenging for diverse comics to be measured for their narrative agency, when they’re being valued for their ability to represent a whole population’s perspective.
I took the development of my comedy special out of the bar scene and collaborated with a small theater company to develop, debut, and film my one-hour standup show, “On Behalf of All Muslims: A Comedy Special” in the span of two years. In June of 2019, on the same weekend as Comedy Central’s Clusterfest, we sold out both nights, drawing 700 audience members to San Francisco’s Brava Mainstage Theater. The development process was a rare opportunity for me to recenter my narrative and curate the audiences that shaped my material in its nascent stages.

I pitched the show in 2015 and it premiered in 2019, trailblazing and relying on trailblazers at each stage of the way. Now, in post-production, the pipeline building continues. It doesn’t have to take that long. We can increase our talent pools of comedians by streamlining the development of comedy specials for performers committed to social justice. Let’s keep pipeline building!
Zahra Noorbakhsh is a comedian, writer, actor, and co-host of the award-winning podcast #GoodMuslimBadMuslim. The theatrical world premiere of her up-and-coming stand-up album, “On Behalf of All Muslims: A Comedy Special,” was in June, in San Francisco. She works at the intersections of social justice, strategic narrative engagement, and comedy, and her writing and performances shift paradigms and bridge intergenerational and intercultural divides.
Special thanks for input and feedback of this analysis:

W. Kamau Bell
Caty Borum Chattoo
Luis Castro
Maha Chehlaoui
Sameer Gardezi
Randa Jarrar
Terry Marshall
Mik Moore
Atsuko Okatsuka
Dr. Kelly Rafferty

Ryan Senser
Aisha Shillingford
Shawn Taylor
Dave Thomason
Irene Tu
Golden Thread Productions
Intelligent Mischief
The Opportunity Agenda
Tracy Van Slyke
Bridgit Antoinette Evans
The Pop Culture Collaborative Community
Established in 2016, the Pop Culture Collaborative is a philanthropic resource and funder learning community that uses grantmaking, convening, narrative strategy, and research to transform the narrative landscape around people of color, immigrants and refugees, Muslims, and indigenous people, especially those who are women, queer, transgender, and disabled. The responsibility—to build a field capable of shaping popular culture to reflect the complexity of the American people and make a just and pluralistic future feel real, desirable, and inevitable.

Pop Culture Collaborative Strategy Director: Tracy Van Slyke
Report Editor/Producer: Yolanda Hippensteele
Copyeditor: Elinor Nauen
Design Direction: Big Bowl of Ideas
www.popcollab.org | @popcollab
ZahraNoorbakhsh.com
@zahracomedy