

# Humorists analyze human condition, use mass media to make their points

WASHINGTON - The quote is ascribed to poet Robert Frost. Even if he never said it, the point made is telling: "I am never so serious as when I am joking."

And it may always have been thus. Humorists use their chief weapon - humor - to analyze the human condition. They make us laugh at ourselves, and they make us laugh with each other.

"Humorists" is the word used here because not every stand-up comedian is interested in finding out what makes us tick.

But the best of the lot have used the mass media to make their points - or jabs. They didn't know it, but they were also quite likely the first media critics.

The first such humorist to break through in this way was Will Rogers, who was full of pithy yet homespun one-liners. "I'm not a member of any organized political party. I'm a Democrat," he once famously said.

But Rogers also, somewhat less famously, uttered these telling lines: "Advertising is the art of convincing people to spend money they don't have for something they don't need" and "If advertisers spent the same amount of money on improving their products as they do on advertising, then they wouldn't have to advertise them."

Rogers also turned his keen eye to his own profession: "Everything is changing. People are taking their comedians seriously and the politicians as a joke."

Sadly, Rogers died in 1935, well before television became a fixture in American homes. But he capitalized on radio and movie newsreels to get across his message.

Perhaps the first made-for-TV comic was Johnny Carson, who held sway over "The Tonight Show" for 30 years.

Carson had a team of writers, of course. But the writers were simpatico with Carson's timing and delivery. And they had an acute awareness of the headlines – and how the headlines were made.

The crowning example of this was in 1973, as Americans coped with a Middle East oil embargo, resulting in gasoline shortages throughout the country. TV and newspaper coverage was saturated with stories about the shortage and price hikes.

Then along comes Carson, late-night's Everyman, talking a week before Christmas about a toilet paper shortage in his opening monologue. There was no shortage. But Carson was so believable that Americans emptied store shelves the next day. Even after Carson said it was just a joke, it took weeks for supplies to return to normal.

It was then that Americans realized just how much power TV had to influence the cultural landscape. From then on, Carson's feuds and pranks became regular news fodder.

The latest inheritor to this mantle is Jon Stewart of Comedy Central's "The Daily Show." Even though Stewart and others connected to the show contend that it is nothing more than a "fake news" show, younger Americans have grown increasingly dependent on "The Daily Show" to be their news source, and quite possibly their news filter.

Ever since Stewart called out the contrived liberal-conservative haggling of CNN's "Crossfire" program in 2004 while a guest on the show – leading to the cancellation of "Crossfire" a few months later – Stewart has been viewed as one of the principal on-air critics of today's media culture, even as he profits from it.

Stewart took the Fox News Channel to task in 2009 for inserting footage from an earlier "tea party" rally in Washington into coverage of a subsequent rally, making it look like more people were on hand than the number who actually attended. In response, Fox's talk show host Sean Hannity admitted Stewart was right but said the old footage was included by mistake. Stewart regularly, with the approval of a loyal studio audience, castigates news outlets for missing the real story by covering serious topics so superficially.

Where did Rogers, Carson and Stewart get their inspiration? Don't look now, but it might have been 19th-century humorist Mark Twain, whose belated autobiography - not published, at his instruction, until 100 years after his death - is scaling the best-seller lists since its release in mid-November.

Reviewers have found the autobiography to be pointedly political, which may not be how most Americans regard the gently grizzled white-haired gent.

The country's most prestigious award for humor bears his name - the Mark Twain Prize. It is presented annually by the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts and broadcast on PBS. This year's winner was Tina Fey, creator and star of NBC's "30 Rock."

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