

**The Evolution of Sitcoms:
An Analysis of Modern Technology's Impacts on Television Writers and Their Work**

by

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Introduction

Television shows have brought joy into the lives of many people and have provided countless hours of entertainment to audiences since it first found its place in our nation's living rooms in the late 1940s. Television's revolutionary ability to bring universal programming to viewers in the comfort of their homes made it a quintessential part of American life. Some of the most memorable moments in television have been from series categorized as situational comedies or sitcoms. Sitcoms present satirized scenarios based on real life and human relationships that resonate with viewers and continue to do so across time. Shows such as the iconic *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (1970-1977) that explored feminist ideals and *Seinfeld* (1989-1998) which featured the overanalysis of everyday social interactions, have had a huge influence on the television landscape.

The original format of sitcoms, and even the term 'sitcom' might seem out of date, especially in an age when so much of the content viewers access is through streaming platforms. These changes differentiate modern situation comedies from the classic age of television sitcoms, which united generations before the digital revolution. Despite these factors, this beloved genre remains popular with 21st century audiences, who are able to access its rich archives while also engaging with newer situation-based comedy shows.

The role, value, and employment of television writers for sitcoms has evolved with changes in technologies and viewpoints over time. This paper analyzes the shifting environment for sitcom writers, and examines the viability of these writers in the future television landscape. By surveying the history and evolution of employment for sitcom writers as well as actions and strategies for ensuring a future existence within the industry, this project aims to ensure that there is a place for the sitcom writer in television production. In addition, this paper explores the

implications of artificial intelligence on creative processes, analyzing the history of situational comedies, their evolution over time, and the writer's role in the age of streaming.

This paper takes a qualitative approach to examine the history of sitcoms and the technological changes that have impacted the work and livelihood of writers, synthesizing a range of primary and secondary research including academic and industry sources. In examining the history of Artificial Intelligence (AI), research studies on developments of artificial intelligence programs and articles on the history were used to provide a context to the rapid changes and improvements in this field in recent years. Information supporting current issues and activities were primarily sourced from entertainment publications, which reported on and fully covered the Writers Guild of America (WGA) Strike of 2023.

Many factors have contributed to changes within creative processes including changes to the medium itself such as the introduction of cable and streaming. These factors have shifted away from many of the more human aspects of television production. Advancements in Artificial Intelligence may not have as large of an impact on the employment of writers for sitcoms across streaming and cable content. However, it may create a shift in the way writers do their work, as sitcoms are an important facet of the television landscape. The WGA has fought for further protections of writers across the entertainment industry despite changes in technology and new threats towards the livelihood of writers. The role of writers in sitcoms has evolved with changes in technology and perspectives over time, but writers will continue to have an important role within the creation of present and future sitcoms.

Evolution of Writing for Sitcoms

Situational comedies have existed in a variety of forms since the 1920s, bringing laughs to audiences across America and the world at large. The term sitcom was coined as an abbreviation for the entertainment genre situation comedy. The phrase situation comedy was originally used to describe a type of theater. The structure, themes and way in which television shows were produced shared a lot with classical theater productions. Television shows were traditionally recorded in front of a live studio audience. The laughter and reactions of the audience were recorded as well, making the experience seem as if the person watching at home was surrounded by others in a theater (Winkler 4-5). Additionally, traditional sitcoms share similarities in comedic structure to classical plays such as *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Much Ado About Nothing*. Shakespeare's comedic works include a style of jokes and humor that is often mirrored in popular sitcoms, whether it be misunderstandings between characters or the comedic archetypes presented (Simon).

The origin of the term sitcom comes from short comedic shows, plays, and scenes based in daily life experienced originally through radio shows. This type of comedy is described by the Oxford English Dictionary as “a comedy in which the humour depends mainly on the situations or circumstances faced by the characters” that remain consistent throughout the show. It more specifically defines situation comedy as a genre in which humorous situations are presented in half hour episodes that are often “filmed or recorded before a live studio audience” (Oxford English Dictionary). In a more modern context, the term ‘sitcom’ is commonly used to describe both a genre and format of comedy-based television shows.

Sitcoms are usually half hour shows that are episodic in nature. Episodic is a term used to describe shows where individual episodes stand on their own and do not have as much continuity

in plots across episodes. They were designed so that audiences could put on the radio, and later television, to listen or watch at any point within the series. Many sitcoms have continuous plots, but in that case, relevant plots would be briefly summarized for the viewer before the next episode begins, catching them up in case they missed the episode from the week before. Episodic shows are the type of shows that someone can pick up at any point and do not have preferred viewing order of the episodes. This style of television was much more conducive to an average viewer as it did not require individuals to tune in each week to enjoy the show. In present day sitcoms, this has become less common as viewers seek out continuity in the television shows they choose to watch. Recent advancements in digital technologies support convenient and unfettered access to entertainment through streaming. Viewers may prefer streaming over broadcast television shows for this reason.

Origin of the Television Sitcom

Many of the earliest sitcoms evolved out of the radio format, translating existing characters into a visual format. The big three networks, NBC, CBS, and ABC, were originally the major radio stations (Marc 21). *Amos 'n' Andy* and *The Goldbergs* were popular radio comedies that were translated over to the television format (Marc 16). In order to be adapted for television, radio shows had to shift stylistically and the writers had to rethink the way they wrote comedy shows. This is because unlike television, radio is a non-visual medium. It does not share the advantage of having a direct connection with the audience through a visual component. In contrast to television, radio creates imagery in the mind of the viewer through its writing structure, and includes added sound effects, exaggerated voices, and descriptions to properly set a scene (Badenoch & Hagedoorn 2).



Fig. 1. *The Amos 'N' Andy Show*, IMDb.

The humor in radio comedy was heavily reliant on wordplay, similar to that of Vaudeville. These popular radio shows were reflective of the humor of the times, which included characters that were often portrayals of offensive stereotypes. *Amos 'n' Andy* was a very popular radio show that encapsulates the era of radio sitcoms. This show demonstrates the way comedy was written for a radio format. It involved a lot of wordplay, but also featured many white actors portraying black characters. A majority of the jokes were structured around these racist caricatures not understanding proper grammar or messing up phrases that were commonly used in conversation. At its peak, the radio show reached around 40 million listeners. At the time, that was a third of the population of the United States (Douglas 106-107). *Amos 'N' Andy* was later adapted into a television show called *The Amos 'N' Andy Show* (1951-1960). Much of the humor also drew from the structure of Vaudeville in that there was “the straight man,” the character who provides the set up for the joke, and “the stooge,” who delivers the punchline (Douglas 110).

Classic Era of Sitcoms (1940s-1960s)

As television became the more dominant form of entertainment over radio, the popularization of the term sitcom increased (Marc 15). The big three networks in television, ABC, NBC, and CBS were the largest nationwide channels during the classic era of sitcoms (Lotz 23-24). Many popular radio shows including sitcoms were moved onto these television networks. Switching over to a visual format came with its own set of challenges as the style of comedy had to evolve with the format. Converting programs to a visual format meant that the writers no longer had to include narration and sound effects in the writing of the shows. In addition, there was a different audience for television versus radio, resulting in a shift towards a milder and less racially insensitive style of shows (Tredy 11-13). Early television sitcoms were designed to appeal to a wider, more general audience. Many of the popular radio shows did not survive long on television because of these changes in both audience and culture.



Fig. 2. *I Love Lucy*, CBS Television.

In the early days of television, watching shows on these major networks was seen as an event. There was no rewind button, and once an episode aired there would be no guarantee that it would air again. These shows became a community experience and a part of everyday

conversations, or ‘water cooler’ conversations. They were generally episodic, around 22 minutes in length with 30 second advertisements, and lacked continuity in the way that modern viewers are accustomed to. The characters were static and consistent, and experienced different situations in their everyday lives (Landay 87). The popular television series *I Love Lucy* (1951-1957), as shown in Fig. 2., defines this era, as it set the standard for how sitcoms were structured, designed, and written.

Writer’s Rooms in the Classic Era

Writing for television was traditionally seen as a more stable alternative to working in film because of the fixed schedule and steady employment. Each writer’s room had, on average, between four to eleven writers working on a series at any given time. These writers were predominantly white men, which is the general imagery associated with a writer’s room (Kurp). The work schedule and compensation for television writers changed in the 1950s as television began to rise in popularity. Studios viewed television as cheaper and easier to make, making it a highly profitable medium (Fisk 230-231). Conversations soon began between studios and the Writers Guild of America (WGA) regarding compensation and employment. Compensation for writers was per script instead of a more traditional, scheduled paycheck. The average pay for writers of a half hour show in 1952 was around \$800 per a script (Kugel 17). However, information about compensation is often contradictory, as one article argues that wages in 1952 for a half hour show had increased to as high as \$750 per a script (Rasky 20). As certain television shows increased in popularity, the compensation for those who contributed to them reflected their success.

Before the WGA was formed, television writers negotiated under the Screen Writers Guild (SWG). The SWG negotiated their first contract with the Alliance of Television Film Producers (ATFP) in 1941. In 1953, dialogue between studios and the SWG was expanded, discussing residual payments for the re-use of television materials (Fisk 262). SWG members went on strike for 13 weeks (“A History of WGA Contract Negotiations and Gains”). In 1954, the SWG combined with various writing unions for media such as film, television, and radio, officially establishing the WGA (“What Is the Guild?”). As a larger union, the WGA was able to unify and organize for the rights of writers.

The accomplishments in these negotiations began with seeking more rights and attempting to ensure better financial compensation for those involved in writing television shows. The WGA in negotiations with the ATFP was able to establish a new compensation model including residual payments for up to five reruns, payments for any related original media created such as sequels, and a minimum rate of compensation (“A History of WGA Contract Negotiations and Gains”). This established more rights for writers and gave them more control over their original works by creating a precedent in which studios compensated writers for their work and legacy. Residuals became central to many early negotiations as they are of high priority to help ensure financial security in an ever-evolving industry.

Towards the end of this classic era, there were significant changes in the way writers were compensated and treated. In 1960, the WGA secured increased benefits and rights for its writers after a 22 week long strike. The new contract “established an independent pension fund and participation in an industry health insurance plan” (“A History of WGA Contract Negotiations and Gains”). In addition, this contract put into place a standard 4% residual for reruns of television episodes internationally (“A History of WGA Contract Negotiations and

Gains”). In this era of television, the WGA continued to push for further advancements in the treatment of writers beyond their work, and advocated for writers, ensuring they were compensated when their work was being profited from in any capacity. This laid the groundwork for future contract negotiations.

Multi-Channel Era Sitcoms (mid-1980s-1999)

In the 1980s, the medium of television was changed by the introduction of new technology supporting the rise of satellite and cable networks. The introduction of videocassette recorders, or VCRs, led to a shift in television consumption habits, making television shows more accessible (Lotz 25-27). VCRs are devices that were used to record and play anything airing on television. These differ from digital video recorders, or DVRs, in that they were an analogue method of recording television (Merriam-Webster). This invention gave individuals the ability to record a show and watch it later, creating less urgency to watch a show live. This flexibility impacted TV writers, as VCRs allowed more people to view their shows at that leisure.

In contrast to the Golden Age of Television, the multichannel, or transitional, era of television had more fragmentation in its viewership. Satellite channels such as FOX, the WB, and UPN rose in popularity in the 1990s. These networks were extensions of major channels, and often appealed to more niche audiences with their programming. Cable channels were paid add-ons to a television plan, and included channels such as Home Box Office (HBO), Showtime, and Cinemax. As these new types of channels became more prominent, there was less unity in viewing habits across the United States. Television viewing became less of a community activity as some more popular, talked about shows were locked behind subscription fees. Television

shows became more specific in the demographics they were appealing to as viewership spread out across the increased quantity of channels (Lotz 25-27).



Fig. 3., *Sex and the City*, Vulture.



Fig. 4., *Friends*, The Hollywood Reporter.

The genre of sitcoms has evolved over time and similarly the humor has as well. The popularization of shows across cable television created a seismic shift within the entertainment industry across all genres. Fragmentation of viewers began as a larger variety of shows targeted towards different demographics began to thrive (Lotz 41). Network sitcoms faced a significant increase in competition from new channels that had no commercials, less restrictions, and greater ability to take risks in their comedy programming. In attempts to compete with cable and satellite, the networks in turn began to take more risks in their sitcoms, resulting in some of the most well-known sitcoms of modern times. Some examples of popular series within this transitional period of television were *Sex and the City* (1998-2004) on HBO and *Friends* (1994-2004) on NBC, as shown in Fig. 3. and Fig. 4. Both shows follow a group of friends and their relationships, but are drastically different in their content. Since *Sex and the City* had significantly less restrictions, it featured cursing, gratuitous nudity, and overall sexual content. *Friends* on the other hand, had the typical network restrictions, no cursing or nudity, and limited sexual content.

Writer's Rooms Multi-Channel Era

The development of new technology and expansion upon the amount of television being produced caused huge shifts in the production of television. For writers, this meant shorter seasons and less guaranteed income, but an increase in opportunities for a more diverse set of voices. There were more chances being taken on younger writers with the growing production of programs across a much more vast television landscape (Greenberg 3-4). According to a 1990 New York Times article, WGA guidelines required that the minimum salary be \$1,800 a week for a staff writer and \$2,900 a week for a story editor (Greenberg 2).

As cable channels increased in popularity, more money was poured into creating original programming. Cable channels wanted to make sure their series were distinct from the standard network shows. Promising the writers less censorship in their storytelling, these networks fostered an environment that encouraged significantly more boundary-pushing narratives (Perren 132-133). While the structure and process of working on television did not change during this transitional period, these larger investments in content allowed writers to have more freedom in their concepts. Cable shows had reduced writing staffs, produced less episodes, and cut costs by filming on location (Perren 136).

Further negotiations between the WGA and The Alliance of Motion Picture & Television Producers (AMPTP) led to a shift in the way writers are paid beyond starting salary for their work. In 1981, the WGA held a strike that lasted 13 weeks. A key win in this set of negotiations was building a compensation framework for subscription cable channels. Additionally, residuals were changed from a fixed model to 1.2% of gross receipts from the distributor (“A History of WGA Contract Negotiations and Gains”). In 1988, the WGA once again went on strike, this time for 22 weeks, fighting for increases in compensation across television and film. A major gain

resulting from these negotiations was an increase to 2% of gross receipts for residuals for all shows airing on channels paid for through cable carriers such as Comcast, Verizon, and Optimum (“A History of WGA Contract Negotiations and Gains”).

Post-Network and Streaming Era Sitcoms (1999-Present)

Netflix was founded in 1997 and was originally a DVD-by-mail rental service. The company later transformed into a massive television and film streaming service that also produces and distributes original content (Burroughs 6). Streaming services are platforms that provide access to content such as films, television, or music. Some examples of these in film and television are Netflix, Hulu, and Paramount+. Streaming services provide consumers with a sense of power and freedom, as they decide where, when, and how they watch their shows (Fagerjord and Kueng 172).

Customers pay a monthly fee in exchange for access to a streaming service’s library, which varies country-to-country based on IP, or intellectual property, rights (Fagerjord and Kueng 174-175). Plans for these services vary from free with advertisements to paying for a plan where content can be accessed without an advertisement break, usually the highest tier on most platforms. For a while, the streaming giant, Netflix, was willing to pay extraordinary quantities of money to ensure that they would maintain their library for significant time periods. This was because a majority of the content that was watched on their platform was not Netflix originals. A 2018 study found that 80% of the content watched on Netflix was licensed. Licensed content is programming that a company pays to have on their platform, that is owned by a third party. Since then, Netflix has become almost synonymous with watching television, offering a blend of both original and licensed content. Original content is funded or produced by the platform presenting

it (Davis 7). As media conglomerates continue to create their own streaming services, the series they own are removed from streaming platforms like Netflix and put onto their respective services to add value to them (Schomer).

When it expanded into streaming, Netflix was seen as a disrupter to the industry, and its original content and marketing drew comparisons to the cable television channel HBO. The companies were also similar in that they both produced content that was defined as prestige television, or “quality television” (Burroughs 6). Prestige television is defined as television that is often viewed as elevated or of a higher value to the consumer. Prestige television series are typically shows that are highly critically acclaimed and are nominated for and frequently win well-known awards such as Emmys or Golden Globes. Some examples of prestige television series are serial dramas such as HBO’s *The Sopranos* (1999-2007) and *The Wire* (2002-2008) or AMC’s *Breaking Bad* (2008-2013) and *Mad Men* (2007-2015). More current examples of sitcoms under this category would be series such as *Ted Lasso* (2020-2023) on Apple TV+ and *The Bear* (2022-Present) on Hulu.

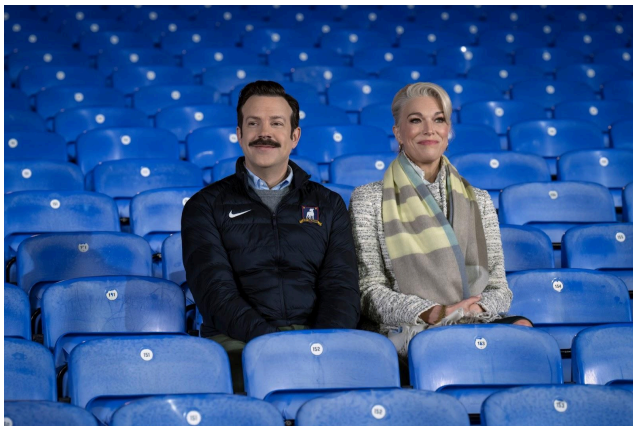


Fig. 5. *Ted Lasso*, Apple TV+ Press.



Fig. 6. *The Bear*, IMDb.

As streaming services rose in popularity, viewers became familiar with the different categories when browsing for shows and movies to watch. A majority of these streaming services placed sitcoms under a larger, more general label of “comedy.” This comedy category

on streaming services encompasses significantly more than just sitcoms, also including stand-up, movies, and drama shows with comedic elements. In addition, popular shows on streaming services have less constraints placed on them, resulting in more flexibility in the length of each episode. On a network, sitcoms must be written to be 22 minutes to allow for commercial breaks and scheduling. Half hour sitcoms on streaming services can be exactly thirty minutes since they have no commercials. These streaming sitcoms can even go longer than 30 minutes, since there is no schedule restricting them. This has led to slower pacing of the jokes and has created more room for dramatic aspects in sitcoms. Shows such as Apple TV+'s popular comedy series *Ted Lasso* have episodes as long as 75 minutes (*Ted Lasso* "So Long, Farewell"). Another popular streaming series, *The Bear* had an episode that was 66 minutes long in its second season (*The Bear* "Fishes"). This more flexible structure has helped redefine sitcoms, and led to the rise of the dramedy television show. Also known as comedy drama shows, dramedies more prominently feature dramatic elements, while still providing humor throughout.

In addition to changes in episode length, many of today's sitcoms are serialized. Serialized is a term used to describe a type of television show in which the plots of episodes are interconnected, where the stories carry over from episode to episode. Many modern comedy shows would be categorized as under this format because they are designed to be binged and watched in order. Binge-watching, the act of watching multiple consecutive episodes of a television series in one sitting, has become a common practice (Pilipets 2). As the practice of bingeing television became more popular, continuity in writing became more valued. Since audiences are watching episodes back-to-back, they appreciate the next episode of a show picking up right where it left off.

Historically, binge-watching was practiced by individuals involved in fandoms, or groups of individuals who follow and discuss specific series or movies. Streaming services such as Netflix have encouraged a culture of binge-watching in the way it releases its programming all at once. This is because unlike broadcast television shows, which were released once a week, streaming services such as Netflix would release all of the episodes in a season at once. People will often binge-watch a show they enjoy when they do not want to have it spoiled for them or wish to quickly join in on the online discourse surrounding it. Dropping all of the episodes at once creates a sense of urgency in those who consider themselves fans of a show or want to participate in the global conversation about a popular series. This pushes the viewer to watch the episodes as soon as possible, bringing high levels of viewership to the platform. Recently, some streaming platforms have begun to release their shows weekly in an attempt to maintain conversations about their shows and retain subscribers. Ironically, this strategy returns shows to the traditional one episode a week distribution model.

A new model of television production was normalized within the entertainment industry as a whole as streaming services became more popularized. After the writer's strike from 2007-2008, streaming platforms were able to appeal to many frustrated creatives who wanted to have fewer constraints and limitations put on their work. These platforms have no breaks for advertisements, which completely shifts the structure of episodes. Netflix treated television episodes like movies, giving them large budgets and more creative freedom. The original series are given the freedom to take more risks in hopes of attracting an audience (Burroughs 5-7). As a result of streaming services, the length of seasons has decreased to as low as eight episodes in a season of a sitcom in contrast to the standard 20 to 26 episodes (or sometimes a 13 episode half-season) in the traditional network model.

Writer's Rooms Post-Network and Streaming Era

In the post-network era, the traditional structure of a writer's room was something that seemed to be dissipating as the cost-saving structure of 'mini-rooms' became more and more normalized. A mini-room is a structure where rather than producing a pilot, a small group of writers plot out and begin to work on the first season of a show or beyond. This includes instances where writers are given a short time period to work on the show. The definition of mini-rooms encompasses differing meanings as the changes within the industry have been quite sporadic in recent times (Press). These mini-rooms can be physical or virtual writer's rooms, varying based on the needs of the show, and the network's available resources. These smaller rooms increased in commonality as the entertainment industry evolved in recent years because it is extremely cost effective and can produce ideas for television shows in a much more streamlined process.

"It's great that we're bringing all these young, diverse writers into the [mini rooms] but we haven't made it possible for these people to stay in the job long term," Cindy Chupack, a two-time Emmy award winning writer told the entertainment publication Variety at the WGA picket line (Littleton). One of the major concerns she expressed was the fact that in attempts to increase productivity with these mini-rooms, entertainment companies found a way to pay individuals less for work that would have once guaranteed a full-time job with benefits.

This new structure for writing began to treat writers as though they were freelance employees, or gig workers, rather than guaranteeing more financial security and stability (Press). Freelance employees are individuals who do not work for any particular company, but work on a more work-for-hire basis. This is a facet of the growing gig economy, a term used to describe the growing market for this line of work. Within certain aspects of the entertainment industry, this

has become the new normal with technological changes and innovations in the past few decades. In a gig economy, newer employees, in this case writers, do not get the same level of job security and protections as those who work full time (Littleton). This all resulted from the traditional structure of a writer's room dissolving in recent years and concerns over pay as those working in this structure get paid significantly less.

Artificial Intelligence and Television Writing

Artificial intelligence (AI) is technology that is able to imitate the nuances of practices found in human interactions, as well as perform a variety of tasks. These programs originally were mainly used in experimental situations. For example, they were often programmed to play chess. AI programs differentiate themselves from other computer programs in that they have the ability to learn with each action (Manning 1). The initial intent behind AI programs was to help people have an easier time with basic tasks, because AI can learn and evolve, accessing a large quantity of data using machine-based learning. Today, AI is changing how people interact with the world in many ways. Individuals can use it to fabricate fake news stories or use it to generate ideas.

One increasingly popular AI program is ChatGPT, produced by the company OpenAI. OpenAI was founded in December of 2015 by a group of six tech entrepreneurs, investors, and computer science experts with a goal of “advancing artificial intelligence in a way that benefits humanity” (Marr). In November 2022, a demonstration of the now well-known artificial intelligence chatbot became accessible to the general public through the release of ChatGPT. This program went viral across social media and quickly became synonymous with a much more

sophisticated usage of artificial intelligence. This was the first major AI chat-based platform that was accessible to the public (Kilkenny and Cho 1).

AI platforms like ChatGPT are not designed to write creatively or generate original content, as the intent of their creators was to design a more advanced search engine that can better communicate with the user asking the questions. ChatGPT's uses can range from providing assistance writing a paper to writing poetry based on a specific prompt. Although AI cannot technically create, it compiles information that is already out there to form something new. AI programs are not entirely new technology; they had earlier uses for more simple operations such as grammar check and translation programs (Morrison 156-7). In most fields, there are few AI regulations, causing a rise in fear surrounding it as a potential threat. In a majority of industries however, the usage of AI is fairly new and largely experimental.

Many critics of AI programs worry that this technology's emergence and rising utilization will affect jobs in creative fields. In various experiments, AI has been used to write novels, movies, and even episodes of television. AI programs learn as they function, and they become more accurate and efficient in their responses. Sometimes this can lead to issues such as AI making up false information to create faster responses or citing sources that are non-existent and created by the program. There have also been concerns surrounding plagiarism, as the technology can only base its responses off work that was inputted into the program or accessible to the program.

In a recent experiment, AI was used to produce television, creating a show called "Nothing, Forever," based on the popular sitcom *Seinfeld* (1989-1998). This AI generated sitcom ran continuously, 7 days a week, 24 hours a day, for a few months in 2023. Skyler Hartle, one of the creators of the project, discussed the intent behind it, describing "Nothing, Forever" as "this

weird, very, off-center kind of nonsensical, surreal art project,” rather than attempting to replace television as a form of entertainment (Di Placido). The show was streamed live on the platform Twitch until it was banned from streaming on the platform for harmful language. Shortly after, it was relaunched with new and improved moderation to ensure that this would not happen again (Valentine). At first, it was an interesting show to watch for maybe a few minutes, but the charm quickly faded as the AI would sometimes become self-aware or the show would feel eerily off. An example of one of these off-putting moments was when one character stated “Time has a flavor and right now it tastes sour” (Valentine). One person described it as “absolutely incapable of writing witticisms, but it is inadvertently hilarious, and sometimes, oddly terrifying” (Di Placido).

In recent years, AI has already been used in an experimental capacity, at times replacing the jobs of visual artists. This has put projects that have used AI in any capacity under extreme scrutiny across social media platforms. AI has been used in the set design of a film and in creating a credit sequence. In 2023, while writers were striking for protections against AI, the Marvel Studios limited series *Secret Invasion* was being released on a weekly basis. Fans were quick to notice that the show’s opening credit sequence was generated using AI programs. It was argued that the usage of AI was to thematically match the series, which is about shapeshifting aliens invading earth (Campione). Additionally, the 2023 horror film *Late Night With the Devil* used AI-generated art, briefly showing it on-screen in title cards and images in the set design. The filmmakers clarified that the art was modified beyond what the AI program originally generated, however, much of its audience felt as though the cost-cutting and time-saving program was unnecessary as they had artists already working on the film (Earl). In both instances, the program required human assistance in correcting or guiding them to the ideal

result. This illuminates how AI has not yet reached the point of threatening creative jobs, because it still requires human intervention for its creations to be deemed acceptable. For that reason, AI has not made it beyond the experimental stage of being utilized in film and television.

2023 Writers Guild of America Strike

The practices discussed in the sections above were some of the major factors that led to the 2023 Writers Guild of America (WGA) strike. This strike was a symptom of the larger issue at hand, the attitude of indifference towards creatives, and devaluation of their art in an age of mass media production and consumption. Many of the new structures put into place in recent years created instability for writers who previously had been able to make a living from writing for television. After lengthy deliberation and talks, the WGA voted to strike on May 2, 2023. The strike occurred with much overlap to the Screen Actors Guild – American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (SAG-AFTRA) strike, which began on July 14, 2023. Both the SAG-AFTRA and WGA strikes arose due to growing concern for the sustainability of careers with the rise of streaming services, smaller residual payments, and studio usage of AI to cut corners. The WGA strike echoed concerns of previous strikes decades ago, aiming to ensure that writers would be fairly compensated for the use of their work. Similar to past strikes, there was new technology introduced that affected the compensation model for television. Additionally, there were concerns over the structure of the traditional writer's room dissipating.

When the 2023 WGA strike began, AI emerged at the forefront of numerous conversations surrounding television writing. This became one of the major contentious issues within the negotiations between the WGA and major film and television studios, as studios pushed for the usage of AI programs across multiple aspects of media production. One facet of

this issue was surrounding the concern that writers would no longer have job security, as many studios sought to have their writers train AI by giving it samples of their work. The studios would then want writers to proofread the AI's scripts, which would be written in the style of their past work. This would then give the studios control over the IP, because it was generated by a program, and the human co-writer would lose control over the work produced. This information was revealed in documents from a meeting in August of 2023 (Cho).

On September 25, 2023, the WGA and AMPTP came to an agreement that set new terms for writers in their payment for works on streaming platforms, including new terms for their residual payments. In this deal, payments per a week were increased by 5% for staff writers. The tentative terms included improved payments for shows that have high budgets, meaning if a streaming show has a budget above \$30 million writers will get a pay bump of 18% and receive a 26% increase in residual payments. Another new term was success-dependent bonuses for shows starting in 2024 of “\$9,031 for a half-hour episode, \$16,415 for a one-hour episode and as much as \$40,500 for a streaming feature over \$30 million in budget” (Timsit).

The agreement also covered the growing concerns over the increasing commonality of the mini-room structure. A new minimum required number of writers hired per series was added to protect the structure of the traditional writer's room. The number of required writers per series is dependent on how many episodes are going to be produced. The overall minimum is now six writers for a show with more than 13 episodes, ensuring that writer's rooms will not disappear. Compensation for writers was divided into different categories based on factors including whether the show has been greenlit or not. In addition to the 5% payment increase for staff writers, staff writers gained a required script fee for each episode that they write. Another part of this agreement added a new tier for writer-producers. A writer-producer is required to be paid on

a weekly basis a minimum of \$11,371 for up to 9 weeks of work, \$9,476 for 10-19 weeks, and \$8,524 for over 20 weeks. For a show that is in development or has not been greenlit yet, the minimum weekly pay for the first 19 weeks of work begins at \$6,959 a week for a staff writer, \$12,978 a week for a story editor or executive story editor, and \$14,214 a week for a writer-producer (“Summary of the 2023 WGA MBA”).

The agreement laid out new regulations surrounding the usage of AI in writing television and film. Both parties agreed that AI cannot be used to “write or rewrite literary material, and AI-generated material will not be considered source material” (“Summary of the 2023 WGA MBA”). An important aspect in this was that writers should have the right to choose when to use AI or not in their work, and they cannot be forced by an employer to use AI as a part of their job. The deal requires that there be disclosure as to whether materials provided to a writer have been created even in part by AI. Using the work of a writer “to train AI” is in violation of this agreement and the law (“Summary of the 2023 WGA MBA”). These restrictions on the use of AI in the creative field of writing provide a vital framework for future conversations surrounding experimentation with these programs. Protections for writers, whose job is heavily reliant on their ingenuity and their understanding of the nuances of human behavior and interactions, is essential.

Conclusion

Sitcoms may have shifted in style and structure, however, they still set out to entertain viewers, and make them laugh. As sitcoms have evolved, audiences have become more interested in serialized, relationship-driven narratives, and less interested in episodic shows that can be started at almost any point. Although sitcom fans and writers have considered it a dying

form of entertainment, it has transformed to continue to thrive. Shows such as *Curb Your Enthusiasm* (2000-2024) and *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia* (2005-Present), and their ability to stay on the air, demonstrate how shows can maintain relevance to modern audiences and their interests and preferences. Newer sitcoms such as *The Bear* (2022-Present) and *Abbott Elementary* (2021-Present) promise to do the same. Sitcoms are here to stay and will continue to flourish as they continue to evolve. Audiences may gravitate towards binge watching their favorite older sitcom or take a chance on a newer one that is being discussed on social media. As watching shows with a weekly release schedule becomes more popular again, hopefully so will more meaningful discourse as the plot unfolds, and characters develop.

Television has evolved throughout the years, adapting to changes in society and technology. From radio sitcoms in the 1920s to modern day dramedies, comedy has shifted not only in format but also in content. The writer's room remains an important aspect of these shows, serving as an essential part of television as audiences know it. With the recent introduction of AI in creative fields, there is concern over job security for all creatives, as studios push to implement this technology. AI programs such as ChatGPT have not yet reached the point where they are able to understand the nuances of human emotions and relationships, but they can at times produce interesting content. Despite looming threats of new technology, the new WGA contract ensures that writer's rooms will continue to exist, and that there will be plenty of room for television writers in the future. Television production will continue to evolve and change throughout the years, but it will always remain an integral part of society, with lasting impacts on the world.

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