"All In The Family"
A Television Breakthrough and
A Comedic Success

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Introduction

The situation comedy "All in the Family" has fascinated critics since it first aired in 1971. By 1974, it had become the most empirically researched entertainment show in history. Some experts felt television had no room for harsh characters such as Archie Bunker, or controversial topics such as rape and prejudice. Others, however, thought the changes "All in the Family" brought to the somewhat bland situation comedy scene were refreshing. Regardless of critical views, the program was a hit with the American television audience. It was viewed on a regular basis by almost one-third of America and was in the number one prime time slot for five years.

This essay is an attempt to understand the immense popularity of "All in the Family." Three major topics will be examined. First, an overview of the political and social condition(s) of the time is necessary. The late sixties and early seventies were an emotionally charged period in U.S. history. A new public awareness of politics and race relations set the stage for a highly topical show like "All in the Family." Second, the background of head writer Norman Lear, various research findings and an overview of the show's success provide a basic knowledge of the effect the show had on future television projects and the viewing audience. Finally, an examination of the humor strategies employed by Lear and the cast of "All in the Family" shows why a show that was so controversial remained so popular with the audience.
In the study of American culture, or of television history, it is impossible to overlook the program ‘‘All in the Family.’’ It is considered a milestone in the annals of television because of the changes it brought about. ‘‘All in the Family’’ is a symbol of a new beginning. Shows finally started to respond to what was on the viewer’s mind. The goal of television comedy became more than to simply entertain; the goal became to enlighten. Viewers responded in a positive way to the changes brought about, which altered the face of American television.
Part I:
Political Unrest and Racism:
The Setting For
"All in the Family"

To be able to fully appreciate a television show that had such an enormous impact on the American television scene as "All in the Family," it is important to have a concept of the condition of the nation during its airing. The show, which ran from 1971 to 1978 (eight seasons), centered around Archie Bunker, a narrow-minded bigot. To counteract Archie's strong character, head writer Norman Lear created Mike "Meathead" Stivic, Archie's liberal son-in-law. The frequent references to politics and the race issue make a background discussion of these factors necessary.

At the beginning of the 1970s, America was a nation torn apart by politics. The Viet Nam Conflict, which began to come to a close in 1969, had weakened our strong economy because of the amount of federal funds which were poured into the war effort. Programs designed to eliminate poverty in the United States had to be stopped in order to save money for the war. The racial justice movement, which became strong during the first part of the 1960s, became angry and unresponsive to President Johnson because of his views on Viet Nam. America was tired and drained from the situation overseas.

The worst effect of Viet Nam on the home front however, was not the racial or economic hardship it caused the nation, but rather the fact that the American people had lost faith in
their government. No one seemed to understand why our troops were there, and when the government was questioned, no sufficient answer was provided. No threat of immediate peril had prompted the U.S. to go to war - definitely not the North Vietnamese. Vietnamese forces had never threatened America nor shown any desire to fight against our country. Certainly there was not a strong public desire for war. The conflict arose as events in Viet Nam took on significance for American policy makers. All the public knew, however, was that young American soldiers were being brutally killed every day and there did not seem to be an end in sight.

The United States needed help desperately, and in 1968 they elected Richard Nixon, hoping he could end the crisis and unite the country. Nixon's political views were not well known during campaign. He maintained this vagueness even when referring to Viet Nam during his inaugural speech: "'The greatest honor history can bestow is the title of peacemaker'" (Schell 26). Nixon had never revealed to the public any plan to end the Vietnamese Conflict, but the anti-war public felt they had won a tremendous battle with the retirement of President Johnson. No one really took the time to examine Nixon's beliefs. The public, feeling relief that the war would end soon, waited for the Nixon Administration policies to be drawn up.

For the first few months, the government seemed to be stalling. "'Programs'" and "'policies'" to mend the
nation were promised but never materialized. "The Nixon administration was characterized by, among other things, fragmentation. What the Nixon men thought was unconnected to what they said. What they said was unconnected to what they did. What they did or said they were doing at one moment was unconnected to what they did or said they were doing the next moment" (Schell 6).

In May, 1969, the people found out what the President had been doing. He had expanded the war into Indo China and launched a bombing campaign against Cambodia. This secret information had leaked out somehow and the President arranged to have certain people wiretapped, including both White House staff and newsmen. This plan enabled spot checking of the private conversations of official Washington personnel.

By actions such as these, President Nixon became successful in excluding himself from his own country. His insistence on private actions in the war made the Oval Office an emotionally charged place and turned the Vietnamese Conflict into "his war." He was bound and determined to make sure the U.S. efforts were a success. The President had prolonged the war rather than ending it, and at the same time isolated himself from the nation. The American people were growing more disappointed and disgusted with the administration. The White House lost the respect of the public and eventually exhausted their faith.
The public protests against the war continued, and the President grew very interested in these demonstrations, especially the student organized rallies. These protests became a target of Presidential anger. In a speech at General Beadle State College in Madison, South Carolina, he said, "Our fundamental values [are] under bitter and even violent attack. We live in a deeply troubled time. Drugs, crime, campus revolts, racial discord, draft resistance - on every hand we find old standards violated, old values discarded" (Schell 36).

The President was heightening the conditions for civil war in America and he made it clear that the government would be victorious over the students.

The student protest at Kent State University in Ohio, May 4, 1970, is one of the most famous protests of the time. On May 1, at around noon, a group of history students gathered peacefully at the Victory Bell on the campus commons. The students symbolically buried a copy of the Constitution as a sign of the deterioration of the country. About three hours later, the Black United Students held a rally that lasted about 45 minutes. Nothing unusual happened until eleven o'clock that evening when students blocked off a street and began chanting against Nixon and the war. This really gained momentum and students began throwing beer bottles at police cars and store windows.
When the students began chanting, "One, two, three, four, we don't want your fucking war," Kent Mayor LeRoy Satrom decided to summon the entire police force (Davies 14). The riot calmed down around three o'clock and everyone went home. The protests continued over the next few days and martial law was declared from May 1 through May 4. These demonstrations culminated in the death of four Kent State students at the hands of the Ohio National Guard. The nation was shocked.

Crises such as these set the scene for the seventies. The government finally crumbled with the Watergate Scandal and the resignation of President Nixon. Many of the members of the administration were arrested and the long process of the hearings began. Protests continued on college campuses, many in response to the tragedy at Kent State. It was during this political whirlwind that "All in the Family" emerged. Archie, with his narrow-minded political views, and "Meathead," the college student, with his radical leftist views, played perfectly off one another. During the Ford Administration, Archie and "Meathead" remained the same: Archie was conservative and "Meathead" was alive with the fervor of the early seventies.

The second and final important aspect of this era was the racial issue and its role in "All in the Family." In the early 1960s, blacks were beginning to band together,
hoping to put into effect what the Emancipation Proclamation had promised them one hundred years before. In 1963, two hundred thousand people marched on Washington in a demonstration to protest the black condition. Lead by the teachings of Martin Luther King Jr., blacks participated in "sit-in's" and rallies and refused to give up until they were treated equally.

The gap between the black and white community, however, seemed to be widening instead of narrowing - so much so that some Americans feared a civil war between the races. Racial intolerance was so deep that many people, blacks and whites alike, feared for their lives. The carefree air of the sixties encouraged many speeches and debates on civil rights, patriotism and black power, but few people dared to have these conversations in interracial settings.

As the war dragged on, the threat of military danger and nuclear holocaust seemed less likely than the chance of social deterioration. The government spent so much money and concentrated so hard on the war effort that it seemed no time or funding was left for basic human needs. Plans that President Johnson wanted to put into action after the Civil Rights struggle were put aside for the war. As a result, militant black activists groups were springing up all over the country (Burkey 8). Blacks, who had endured centuries of hardships, seemed to find the white man a scapegoat for all their problems.
Tensions were growing worse and something had to be done. The black community needed to know someone was trying to help their cause. In 1966, the General Assembly of the United Nations adopted a resolution sponsored by the United Nations Institute for Training and Research (UNITAR). The study, which was to be done in several nations, was set up to examine the problems of race relations and to see how to solve them. It was time for the racist whites in America to recognize the black man as an equal.

One major issue of race relations was directly related to the Viet Nam Conflict. A great number of young men sent to Viet Nam were black men. The white middle class college students were not fighting in the jungle - it was the poor, uneducated blacks. Some even went so far as to consider the blacks expendable.

With growing concern for the war, vocalized mainly by college students, the nation began to realize the importance of a united country. Liberals began to speak out against racism and blacks gained support in their cause.

The issue was both shoved aside by the Viet Nam situation and strengthened by young liberal Americans. It is difficult to follow the movement during this time. Segregation ended, the war started and eventually ended, and after that desegregation started again. The blacks were no longer kept out of white society but many were still poor and uneducated.
Certainly Martin Luther King Jr. was the biggest factor in the movement toward equality. Dr. King's message gave blacks hope and frightened much of the white population. President Johnson appointed Otto Kerner Jr. as the Chairman of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, an organization designed to investigate the uprisings in the nation's ghettos during the mid-sixties. One month before Dr. King's assassination on May 4, 1968, the Kerner Commission reported that, "Our nation is moving toward two societies; one black, one white - separate and unequal" (Blauner 3).

After King's death, much of the black movement seemed to lose its fervor, as if their hope for change had disappeared with King. Whites, on the other hand, seemed more tolerant and accepting of blacks, even though much racism persisted. Perhaps the black community seemed less of a threat without Dr. King's leadership.

Much bigotry during this period stemmed from the country's strained sense of nationalism. While the U.S. was attacking the Vietnamese overseas, people at home became paranoid of anything that seemed foreign. If someone was not White Anglo-Saxon and Protestant, they were the target for prejudice. It was this type of racial tension that had an impact on "All in the Family." The nation was in a crisis, and for narrow-minded people like Archie Bunker, blacks (or any minority) were a target for hatred. His racism was dealt with in a humorous manner on the show, but is not very comical
in reality. The other characters, Edith, Gloria, and "Meathead," refused to buy into Archie’s beliefs and aggravated the situation by befriending minority members.

1971 to 1978 was a period of time that encompassed political crisis and racial ignorance. The characters on the show represented differing political and racial views. Without an understanding of the events of this period, it is hard to fully appreciate the talent with which it was produced. This politically active time paved the way for television entertainment that was more responsive to public interest.

The following newspaper reviews are excellent examples of the power "All in the Family" had to stir up controversy over societal issues of the time, in this case the racial issue.

New TV Comedy Takes Hard, Realistic Poke at Bigotry

Pamela Haynes
Los Angeles Sentinel January 28, 1971

You will not believe the new CBS-TV program "All in the Family," which premiered Tuesday night at 9:30 P.M.

You will not believe it because for years we have been snowed under by the nonsensical pap which masqueraded as "situation comedy" on television.

These so-called comedy shows about average American "families" bore about as much resemblance
to real life as Richard Nixon does to Mahatma Ghandi.

But now we have Archie Bunker, hilariously played by Carroll O'Connor. Archie is a damned sight closer to where real "American" lower middle class families are at.

Archie is a racist, a religious bigot, a card carrying member of Spiro Agnew's Silent Majority.

If you saw the movie "Joe," then you know Archie Bunker. If you remember Joe's tirade against "niggers, commies, hippies" and practically everyone else, you will recognize Archie as his soul brother.

"'When I was looking for a job, nobody got out and picketed and marched for me,'" he growled, repeating the chant of the white working class.

"'Yeah,'" put in his wife (the long-suffering Jean Stapleton), "'your uncle got it for you.'"

Archie is the kind of gentle soul who has nothing against "yids." As a matter of fact, he even works with a couple of "Hebes," (his word, not mine). Archie outrages the sensibilities of just about every minority group on Earth. But his ranting serves an important purpose and I hope that these upset liberals or uptight viewers won't lose sight of that fact.
The paramount thing about "All in the Family" is that for the first time, instead of trying to pass off an expensively groomed and immaculately combed Doris Day as "the typical American housewife," and a distinguished, suave and ever so tolerant Robert Young as everyone's father, they have presented a fat, ignorant, angry middle-aged pig who swears at his wife, belches at the table, and gets choked up over sugary tributes on greeting cards. In other words, Archie Bunker is real.

Far from protesting, members of the minorities slandered by Archie should rejoice at this non-cosmetized portrait of the "master race."

It remains to be seen whether, once the shock of seeing and hearing the uglier side of "typical American" attitudes is over, Archie Bunker will be welcomed into our homes as a funny and instructive cat or turned off as a big-mouthed bore.

What is hoped is that the show will be given a chance to go on doing its outrageous thing and not be strangled by the outrage of some narrow-minded, uptight people.

Archie Bunker lives in millions of American homes, and it's about time we saw him in all of his white-sock-wearing glory.
Credit for the authentic ring and general true-to-life bearing of the show must go to Norman Lear, of the Bud Yorkin-Tandem outfit turning out "All in the Family."

It's Lear's genius which shines through and one can understand why he supervises all scripts closely and nurses each show all the through to the TV screen."

"Irresponsible Television Production Aids Racism"

Whitney M. Young, Jr.
Los Angeles Sentinel February 4, 1971

"Recently, bigotry reared its ugly head in a place we least expected it, and disappeared from the platform from which it usually holds forth.

Nationwide television is one place where, at least in recent years, we don't expect to hear racial slurs and insults. But two weeks ago a network unveiled a new situation comedy series, "All in the Family." It has to be a new low in taste. Just about every ethnic group is insulted on this show. Blacks, Puerto Ricans, Jews, Poles and others all come in for their share.

The central character is a bigoted blue-collar worker who drops racial insults like some people drop comments on the weather."
I suppose the show's producers intended to satirize that kind of mentality. They play him off against his cretinous daughter and liberal son-in-law, who mouth the usual platitudes and in general try to make the hero look bad.

But this doesn't compensate for the gratuitous insults that fill the public airwaves.

Even when our hero gets his comeuppance, racial stereotypes predominate. The black youth who makes the bigot look foolish, for example, is given some money and sent on an errand to buy flowers. "Where I get my flowers,"' he says, "this represents clear profit.'"

After all these years, we're back to the stereotyped black who is irresponsible and who steals.

I suppose the people who wrote and produced the show think they're being 'in' by following the trend toward ethnic frankness and honesty.

But all they've succeeded in doing is outraging minority groups and, indeed, all decent individuals, by filling the public airwaves with hate filled epithets.

They probably think that by showing the hero to be a narrow-minded bigot, they're providing a message, but the only message that comes through is
that such a program ought to be taken off the air and
relegated to wherever they’re storing old Amos 'n Andy
programs.

And it’s about time clever liberal writers
started easing up in their portrayal of working-
class whites as bigots. Some are; some aren’t.

Purveying that stereotype is just as
objectionable as the racial slurs we heard. Studies
show that the Wallaceites are drawn from the middle
class as much as from workers, and many of the upper-
class men who control the racist institutions in our
society are more deserving of exposure than workers,
some of whom are used by racists to keep them from
natural alliances with black workers.

It is irresponsible to air a show like this at
a time when our nation is polarized and torn by
racism.

Some future day might find a situation where
such slurs are meaningless, but right now, it is a
luxury we can’t afford.

While the show tries to satirize bigotry, it
only succeeds in spreading the poison and making it
- by repetition - more respectable.

If we don’t expect bigotry from network
entertainment broadcasts, we sadly have come to
expect it from southern politicians.
So all people were deeply gratified when the new governor of Georgia, Jimmy Carter, said in his inaugural address, "the time for racial discrimination is over."

He shook up a lot of die-hard segregationists with a speech that did what no governor of Georgia had ever done before.

He correctly pointed out that the whole state "pays a terrible and continuing human and financial price" for bigotry.

His promise of bold new programs and an end to discrimination set the pace for what we hope will at last be a "New South."

Governor Carter is just one of several new southern governors who seem committed to leading the section out of its terrible heritage of racism.

Governor Holton of Virginia and the new governors of Arkansas, Florida, and South Carolina have also demonstrated that there is a new breed of Southern politician.

We'll be watching closely to see that their promises are fulfilled. The new hope among the South's black citizens is a direct result of their ballot power and political strength.

Let's hope the decency and lack of racism expressed by Governor Carter in the heart of the
South will find its way into the creative liberals who find racism a fit subject for television comedy.

It is obvious from the preceding newspaper reviews that "All in the Family" attracted both praise and criticism for the way head writer Norman Lear chose to deal with Societal issues. There is no denying, however, that the social climate of the late sixties and early seventies allowed such a program to exist and for this type of controversy to become a hallmark of "All in the Family."
Part II:
The Birth and Success of 'All in the Family'

The late sixties and early seventies were a tumultuous time for America. Racism, the ending of the Viet Nam Conflict and events such as Woodstock were causing our nation to be torn apart. And what was on television? Alongside reports of Viet Nam were programs such as 'Bewitched,' 'Hee Haw,' and 'Here's Lucy.'

Network programmers wanted to play it safe. The television viewer could turn to any station and find a nice, socially unaware group of people who never had to make decisions and who always managed to find a perfect ending. The most daring show on the air was Rowan and Martin's 'Laugh In,' which was in fact only somewhat bold. The American audience, as far as the television industry was concerned, did not want to be challenged, but rather wanted to tune to a mild show and simply be entertained. At the end of the sixties, however, the companies that were buying advertising spots came across a remarkable discovery. They found that not all T.V. viewers were alike. While programs with stars such as Jackie Gleason and Ed Sullivan had been drawing the largest audiences, those audiences were not made up of the affluent people advertisers wanted to reach. These audiences were made up of common rural folk.

The CBS network was one of the first to realize this phenomenon. They need something new and exciting to draw the right kind of audience. Robert Wood, the president of CBS in
1969, made a daring move. He did not include Jackie Gleason and Red Skelton in the fall 1970 prime-time schedule. He wanted an innovative show that would capture the consumer audience major advertisers wanted. But what writer could come up with the right program?

In 1970, Norman Lear was not the famous television writer we now know him to be. His first Hollywood comedy job came in 1951 when he sold a stand-up routine to Danny Thomas. After that he wrote for some of the live shows such as "The Colgate Comedy Hour," "The Martha Raye Show," "The Tennessee Ernie Ford Show," and "The George Goebel Show." His next project was an unsuccessful program entitled "Band of Gold," followed by a couple of movie screenplays. Lear kept himself busy and was gaining credibility, but was still looking for a new and fresh writing challenge. Lear found such a challenge one day while browsing through an issue of "Variety." Lear came across something that would make his name synonymous with television comedy in later years. He read about a smash British situation comedy, "Till Death Do Us Part," based on a bigot and his relationship with his family. Lear at once associated this bigot character with his own father and obtained the American rights to the program. In Richard Adler's book, All in the Family: A Critical Appraisal, Lear had this to say about the British show.

"What inspired me was simply reading that somebody had done a show in which a father and son-in-law were
arguing, were totally apart - not just a generation
gap, but were divided on every ideological issue,
and fought about race, religion, politics, economics,
up and down the line. That was all I needed to
excite me, because I had lived that with my father.''

Lear immediately went to work and created one of
television's most loved and most hated shows, "All in the
Family.' The bigot Archie Bunker was born, along with his
leftist son-in-law, Mike "Meathead" Stivic, Archie's
"dingbat" wife Edith, and the empty-headed daughter, Gloria.
It was the risky attention getting show Robert Wood was
looking for. ABC was initially interested in Lear's
invention, but after investing $250,000 in two pilots, decided
it was too racy. Other executives at CBS felt the same way
and the negative tests of the pilot provided a hurdle for
Wood. He wanted "All in the Family" in the schedule so
badly that he set up a private screening for William S. Paley,
the man who had made CBS the giant it was, and the final
decision maker. Paley gave Wood the authority to air the
show...reluctantly. But CBS was now Wood's network and the
failure would be his responsibility. However, "All in the
Family" would have to wait until 1971, and replace another
show in mid-season.

Lear was given the go-ahead, the cast was assembled, and
the thirteen episodes needed were rapidly assembled. But Lear
did not want to produce the show in the normal manner.
Instead of taping and editing in a laugh track, Lear did something revolutionary for the situation comedy. Both the dress rehearsals and the actual taping were done in front of a live studio audience. This technique had been used for variety shows, some of which he worked on, but rarely for sitcoms. The result was a delightfully unique theater-stage effect. The set and props were kept simple, and the content of the script and the acting were the focus of the performance.

It was the content of the script, however, that had the programmers at CBS worried. They argued endlessly with Lear that the show should premiere with the second episode, one less daring than the first. Lear was furious and argued that the audience should know what they were getting into from the start. Lear won the argument, and on January 12, 1971, the first episode, the original first episode of "All in the Family" aired on CBS.

Wood and Lear were the only people with faith in the show. Everyone else, even Carroll O'Connor, who was cast as Archie Bunker, did not think the American television audience was ready for a show of this caliber. In fact, O'Connor thought the show would be cancelled during the first season due to its controversial nature. He moved to California to work on "All in the Family" under the condition that CBS would pay his air fare back to his home in Rome after its cancellation.
CBS’s executive in charge of censoring programs, William Tankersley, was also worried about the audience response to Lear’s creation. His main concern was protecting the reputation of the network and avoiding offending any of the audience. His rule of thumb was to okay programs that supported ‘‘a universal television that played to everyone and offended no one’’ (Adler, Introduction). The scripts for ‘‘All in the Family’’ did not have the potential to offend a certain section of the audience, but had the potential to offend almost everyone. Tankersley found out, however, that Lear would not make concessions in the script. Tankersley was furious, but Lear had Wood’s backing for the scripts’ content.

The night of its premiere, CBS prepared for the worst. They had phone operators standing by to handle the flood of complaints prompted by the pilot. Much to their surprise, they did not receive the nasty phone calls they expected about the first episode of ‘‘All in the Family.’’ Actually, not many Americans watched the premiere. Wood and Lear were bewildered. The newspapers the next day however, contained reviews that lived up to Lear and Wood’s expectations. Critics either loved the show or hated it. Many said it was the best program in history, and many said it should be taken off the air immediately.

No matter what the critical opinions were, the audience grew to love the Bunkers. By the second week in the fall season it was ranked the number one program by A.C. Neilson,
and for weeks after that it was reaching 60% of the viewing audience. It was quickly becoming apparent that "All in the Family" was not a passing show, but more a symbol of a new television trend. Critics continued to scrutinize Lear's style of comedy and in-depth studies were conducted to find out just what effect the Bunkers were having on America. The first research done in this area was conducted by CBS. They took a telephone survey of viewers soon after the show began airing. The results were straightforward—people did not find the show to be offensive and thought it was funny. This was not enough evidence to quell sociologists and in 1974 a plethora of surveys were conducted.

Researchers found that people with racial prejudices tended to see Archie as a hero and the member of the family who won the numerous disputes. They were also unaffected by his use of foul language and racial slurs. Viewers who were not prejudiced saw "All in the Family" as a hilarious representation of bigotry. These studies were surveys, however, not experiments, and failed to prove whether viewers became more prejudiced after watching.

A study conducted by Neil Vidmar and Milton Rokeach suggested that Lear was getting his point across in an effective manner. They found that most viewers thought Mike's (Meathead's) arguments made more sense than Archie's. Four times as many "high prejudiced" viewers thought Mike
expressed his ideas better than Archie, even though they like Archie better. The study also showed that 20% of Canadian participants found that watching the show ‘‘had made them aware that they had prejudices they didn’t know about’’ (Adler, Introduction).

Norman Lear, the man responsible for the most studied and researched show on television history, stressed that his goal was not to end prejudice or elicit social reforms, but simply to entertain. If the show was not funny, and interesting, it would not work, he insisted. Lear was not quick to accept rumors that ‘‘All in the Family’’ was bringing about social awareness.

‘‘To get back to the question of whether we have helped to change attitudes, however, I feel we are like a group of people standing at the perimeter of a lake throwing pebbles into the water. The physicist tells us that each pebble makes the level of the water rise. We cannot see the water rising, we cannot hear it or feel it. Yet the physicist tells us that with each pebble, that body of water is being affected. To carry the metaphor further, if the pebbles we have been throwing into the lake of social awareness have mattered at all, we don’t see it. But we are terribly happy to know that some people do’’ (Adler 256).

Lear’s reputation was growing rapidly, and Tandem Productions, his partnership with Bud Yorkin and T.A.T. Productions, his own company, began cranking out hit programs,
all but two being spin-offs of "All in the Family." The spin-offs were "Maude" in 1972, "The Jeffersons" in 1975, and "Good Times," (technically derived from Maude) in 1974. The remaining programs were "Sanford and Son" in 1974 and "One Day at a Time" in 1975. Scripts written for these shows kept social issues alive in comedy and helped television become a more respected medium. However, struggles with the networks never seemed to end. Lear did not stop fighting them, but the networks seemed to respond by being more restrictive. Finally, the Federal Communications Commission persuaded networks to adopt Family Viewing Time (F.V.T.).

According to the policy, if a show was to be aired before 9:00 P.M., it was to be comprised of material suitable for people of all ages. What this meant was Lear's programs had to be "toned down" or aired after 9:00 P.M. Lear and other program creators were furious and even though Federal Court Judge Warren Ferguson in 1977 ruled the F.V.T. illegal, networks continue to practice it. CBS, however, made one exception, for Lear, and for "All in the Family." It remained on the schedule to air at 8:00 p.m.

Battles such as this were triumphs for Lear, but he was growing tired of constant struggles. After almost nine seasons of intense work on "All in the Family," Lear realized the show would soon come to an end. The social climate had changed dramatically also. The controversy-hungry audience of the early seventies had began to lose the fervor
that came with Viet Nam and civil rights movements. Although "All in the Family" was still in the top ten, programs such as "Happy Days," "Laverne and Shirley," and "Three's Company" filled the top slots. Lear felt he was expected to merely reproduce hit after hit, and was no longer challenged.

The cast, too, was growing tired with their roles. The Bunker’s had endured almost every hardship, exhausted almost every emotion and argued about every conceivable topic since they first came together in 1971. Rob Reiner and Sally Struthers ("Meathead" and Gloria) were the first to leave. They said goodbye at the end of the 1977-78 season. The show was still in the top ten and Lear, along with the rest of the cast, agreed with Reiner and Struthers that it would be a suitable time to end.

Carroll O’Connor and Jean Stapleton were convinced to stay one more season. The new head of Lear’s company and the President of CBS Entertainment wanted to milk another run out of "All in the Family."

At the end of the ninth season, Jean Stapleton left and "All in the Family" did not come back. It was still in the top ten when it ended, so it left America in good standing. "Archie’s Place" was created after that last season. Carroll O’Connor remained to play Archie in the new series, which took place in his bar, but things were never the same without the rest of the Bunkers.

No one involved with the show ever expected it to last as
long as it did or to be so popular. And no one, not even Norman Lear himself, could have fathomed the idea that in September of 1978, after the series ended, the living room chairs of Archie and Edith Bunker would go on permanent display in the Smithsonian Institution as a symbol of a piece of America's cultural history.
Part III: The Humor Strategies of "All in the Family"

The television comedy "All in the Family" has become one of the most successful situation comedies in America's history. When it went off the air, it was the most popular show of the past three decades. The following is an examination of the humor strategies that enabled "All in the Family" to enjoy such great success.

To be able to understand where Lear was going with the Bunkers, a definition of satire is necessary. In Gilbert Highet's book *The Anatomy of Satire*, he defines satire as a style that:

- pictures men and women, often in lurid colors, but always with unforgettable clarity. It uses the bold and vivid language of its own time, eschewing stale cliches and dead conventions. Where other patterns of literature tend sometimes to be formal and remote, satire is free, easy, and direct...[they] have the urgency and immediacy of actual life. In the work of the finest satirists there is the minimum of convention, the maximum of reality.

According to this definition, "All in the Family" is clearly a satirical creation. Lear took the pinnacle of normalcy, a lower class laborer and his family who live in Queens, and through them made a nation more aware of its social problems.

The word satire sometimes brings about thoughts of malicious intent. Highet goes on to explain that there are
two types of satirists; misanthropic and optimistic. The misanthropic satirists dwell on darkness and see man as basically evil. Although their satire is witty, it is macabre. Optimists, on the other hand, like Lear, believe people are not genuinely bad, but rather, misguided. They tend to see the world as a crazy place and are able to laugh at it, and at the same time gently persuade people to keep working to make it better. Their goal is to enlighten and entertain their audience and they usually do so by focusing on people or issues of importance. If their intentions sometimes seem rash, optimistic satirists generally have the intent of helping society to identify its problems.

Lear is an optimistic satirist. Through Archie Bunker, the loveable bigot, he tried to show society how ridiculous prejudices can be. Archie's fears and insecurities about people of other races make him look foolish. Perhaps Lear was attempting to show Americans how foolish their interracial problems were. Sometimes Archie offended people, but he got their attention and made them think about problems in a new light - Lear would say the offense was worth it.

One of the essential elements of communicating through the use of humor, an element "All in the Family" had mastered, is identification. Identification is shared experience or common ground that allows the audience to be drawn in and relate to the communicator. When this relationship is established, it is easier for the communicator
to convey his humorous ideas and perspectives. Comedy is successful when the viewer can say, 'That has happened to me!' The identification element helps the communicator to build a good rapport with the audience, and in the case of 'All in the Family,' keeps them tuning in.

The show created a common ground for viewers by the types of characters that were portrayed, and by the physical setting. 'Its characters are plain working people, instead of gay blades from the flossy suburbs' (Newsweek 21). Archie, the main character, is a boss at a factory shipping yard who chews cigars, drinks cheap and runs a social commentary from his living room chair. He is a far cry from Ward Cleaver. Archie's wife, Edith, lovingly referred to as 'Dingbat,' is generally concerned about her shabby home and her family. Edith, who fails to catch on to most of Archie's rantings, stands by her man faithfully, but every once in a while stands up to him. The Bunker's air head daughter Gloria and her liberal-minded husband, Mike Stivic, live with her parents while Mike is finishing college. This portrayal of a family unit is more down to earth than the 'Father Knows Best' type characters - the average American could relate to the Bunkers.

The setting was also designed to be realistic and easy to identify with. Their home is one of many run down homes in Flushing, New York, or any lower middle class neighborhood for that matter. The chairs are worn, the wallpaper is peeling,
and even light switches are surrounded by grimy fingerprints. The setting is run down, but it is comfortable - it is designed to be realistic. Even the arrangement of the living room furniture creates a common bond between Archie and the television audience. His chair, where he sits a great deal of the time during the shows, is right in front of the television. Archie sits in the same place on T.V. where the viewers at home are sitting while watching him on T.V. Although we do not see the set, we know he is watching because he comments on television shows and movies much of the time.

Jean Stapleton, who portrayed Edith, says of the strategic use of common ground in 'All in the Family,'

I remember when I first read the pilot script I was struck by its content and honesty. These were real characters relating to each other in an authentic way. This was exciting. I said to myself, 'This, on television! How unique!' I believe that this, too, is a key to our success. A foundation of truth, of probability, is always the basis of successful dramatic realism. As we approach each week's episode, we ask ourselves, 'Is this probable? Could Edith, Archie, Gloria, Mike, really experience this situation' (Adler 256)?

The Bunkers are real people and good people, but they seem to get thrown into unfavorable situations. This is the basic pattern for the plots and this makes the show unique. The
Bunkers are a family that is trying to survive no matter what happens to them. The show added a new twist to this kind of comedy. The sugary television programs of the fifties and sixties were over. Happy endings and 'the moral of the story' plots were cast aside. Producers and writers used more creative means to get their messages across, even if it meant ruffling some feathers.

There are two comedy strategies writer Norman Lear employed in each plot: topicality and social taboos. Topicality refers to the use of real life situations and political issues for comedy purposes. Social taboos are those instances when a story line dares to deal with issues that conventional forms stay away from. Topicality and social taboos are closely related to the successful formula of 'All in the Family.' It dealt with subjects such as rape, prejudice, mental retardation, menopause, and breast cancer. The President of CBS/Broadcast Group, Gene F. Jankowski, comments, 'In simple terms, AITF represented an effort by television to treat in a comedic fashion major societal issues of topical interest and concern. The success of the series demonstrated that the concept worked - for CBS, for broadcasters, and most important for the audience' (Adler 259).

However, not every viewer responded in a thinking or emotional way to the topicality of the show. Controversy
arose over episodes, ignoring the entire plot and concentrating on a line or two. For example, CBS received a lot of mail when Archie said the words 'God damn' in one show. What the letter writers refused to notice was that Edith forbade Archie to ever say that again and gave him a lecture.

Another common aspect of controversy was the frequent reference Archie made to Mike's Polish background. After viewing a couple of episodes, and even having it explained by Edith in one, it becomes apparent that Archie uses this derogatory manner with Mike as a defense mechanism. Being an uneducated man, Archie is threatened by his intelligent, college educated son-in-law. However, some viewers only noticed the ethnic slurs.

The most common misconception about the show due to its topicality, is the claim that it endorsed bigotry. This seemed a serious problem to some because Archie comes across as being so lovable, but yet so prejudiced. By the end of every episode, however, his narrow-minded ways had made him look like a horse's ass. When asked about the bigotry in an interview by Playboy magazine, actor Carroll O'Connor, who plays Archie, responded, 'A lot of people write that we're making them understand their own feelings and their own prejudices' (Journal of Communication, Winter 1974). By the same token, the Los Angeles chapter of the NAACP named 'All in the Family' as the recipient of its 1972 Image Award for
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its part in helping race relations. Most experts and even 
those involved in the show do not know if the topicality or 
the approaching of taboo subjects made a change in the 
American society, but it was well received, and it definitely 
made a change in the face of American television.

As far as physical aspects of humor are concerned, "'All 
in the Family'" made excellent use of conversational style. 
The characters were casual and used plain everyday vocabulary, 
completed by New York accents. It was actually as if you were 
peaking into someone's living room every week. This style 
immediately put the American audience at ease with the 
Bunkers. They never had to worry about getting lectured, 
feeling intimidated or having some magical golden rule 
revealed at the end of the program. Instead, viewers could 
tune in every week and see how one family handled the crises 
they were faced with. Maybe the thing that made the Bunkers 
unique was that they actually argued, at least once an 
episode. No one, not even the know-it-all Archie, had all the 
answers. The family struggled together to try and make sense 
of the world.

This brings us to the final communication strategy used 
in "'All in the Family'" - reaffirmation. The purpose of the 
show seems to be to reaffirm the family unit such as those 
portrayed on "'Leave it to Beaver,'" "'The Andy Griffith 
Show,'" or "'Father Knows Best.'" Fred Silverman, President 
of NBC, explains that, "'Before AITF went on the air,
successful family comedies were played out in a world where all the problems were little ones and all the endings were happy. A parade of bumbling fathers, competent mothers and adorable children passed through the American television scene, with the subject matter of each series as well scrubbed and antiseptic as its characters' (Adler 261). On the contrary, 'All in the Family' has managed to praise the American family for its ability to hold together and never claim to be perfect.

One of the reasons the show works so well is that the characters care about each other. Neither marriage nor school has separated the children from the parents. Neither do boredom or social activities force the Bunkers from their home. No matter what situation may invade them, whether a black family moves into the neighborhood, or even if a wife-swapping couple comes to visit, they care enough to argue about the problems. The Bunkers never ignore each other, never maliciously hurt each other and never lay a hand on one another. The Bunker home is not always a calm place, not always a quiet place and not always a happy place, but it is always a place where things are shared. It is also a loving place where two distinct marriages from two distinct generations remain together no matter what threats the outside world poses - and that is why the show worked so originally and so well.
Television is a highly personal medium. It is a part of our everyday life. Unlike the theater or cinema, television is experienced in our daily routine. It is more like our relationship to newspapers, or even to a neighbor. We view television in a casual manner, being able to carry out other tasks or talk while watching. Not very often do we give it our full attention. To create a show with real impact, the writers and cast must be able to combine entertainment and a message into about twenty-six minutes. "All in the Family" did this extremely well.

The show was a success because it combined various humor strategies and controversial issues in an unusual and well accepted manner. The audience was ready for real characters they could identify with, real settings, and topics of importance. It proved the public had some taste and concern for quality programming. The show had satire, bite and a carefree, sort of aloof look at life in a comedic way. Perhaps the most important thing "All in the Family" did was open the door for television comedy, in any form, to deal with real people and real issues.
Bibliography


