

No Respek: Sacha Baron Cohen's Trio of Broadcast Journalists

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Abstract

This work examines the characters Ali G, Borat and Brüno, the three broadcast journalists played by British comedian Sacha Baron Cohen. Discussing the three over-the-top personas and the stereotypes they embrace will reveal preconceptions viewers have about different kinds of broadcast journalists, from the foreign correspondent to the fashion reporter. Using the details of Cohen's newsgathering technique and the Society of Professional Journalists Code of Ethics, this piece will discuss the ethics behind Cohen's approach to journalism. The work focuses on comedy's current role in shaping the image of the television reporter and how comedians and legitimate reporters have become more alike in their attitudes and methods. This article shows how Cohen's particular brand of performance art—melding documentary, mockumentary, comedy, newsgathering, and performance—creates an image of the broadcast journalist that bleeds into real life.

Introduction

British comedian Sacha Baron Cohen first garnered attention in America in 2000 when he took the image of the broadcast reporter to new comedic heights (or lows) on his *Da Ali G Show*, broadcast on HBO. His three characters—rapper wannabe Ali G, clueless Kazakh journalist Borat, and superficial fashion show host Brüno—made appearances on *Da Ali G Show* and each has starred in his own movie.

The films and television series employ a simple premise. Cohen disguises himself as a journalist and interviews unsuspecting people who take him for a reporter, not a comedian. Ali G, the urban bad boy, often interviews uptight politicians and important businessmen. Brüno, the fashion journalist, usually speaks with celebrities and “gay converters,”¹ a term he uses for pastors who aim to steer members of their congregation away from homosexuality. Borat likes to speak with more conservative people, from etiquette coaches² to such politicians as Alan Keyes.³

The 2006 film *Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan* was an unexpected hit. It earned almost \$130 million domestically and \$260 million worldwide,⁴ a huge success for a film that cost merely \$18 million to make and employed only four actors.⁵ The movie earned Cohen a Golden Globe for Best Performance by an Actor in a Motion Picture - Musical or Comedy and an Oscar nomination for Best Adapted Screenplay.⁶

To follow *Borat*, Cohen released the 2009 hit *Brüno* with Universal Pictures (or as the film calls it, Üniversal Pictures). The movie opened in theaters at No. 1 and earned about \$60 million domestically.⁷ In fact, Cohen’s films have made him so popular that he has considered retiring his characters—they are too recognizable to function properly.⁸ Cohen’s two films⁹ and

roles in other movies, such as *Talladega Nights*, have increased his visibility in the entertainment industry.

Of course, Cohen's characters have elicited strong reactions, both positive and negative from viewers and the press. In her review of *Borat*, *New York Times* movie critic Manohla Dargis explains:

It gets better or worse, sometimes at the same time. Whether you rush for the exits or laugh until your lungs ache will depend both on your appreciation for sight gags, eyebrow gymnastics, sustained slapstick and vulgar malapropisms, and on whether you can stomach the shock of smashed frat boys, apparently sober rodeo attendees and one exceedingly creepy gun-store clerk, all taking the toxic bait offered to them by their grinning interlocutor.¹⁰

Those who love Cohen's on-screen antics argue that they offer more than "sustained slapstick." Instead, they endeavor to reveal American feelings about foreignness, homosexuality, misogyny, and anti-Semitism. Some accuse Cohen of embracing these stereotypes too readily while others call them a postmodern look at what terrifies Americans.

Cultural critics have penned countless articles and essays exploring the implications of Cohen's caricatures. From movie reviews to academic journals, writers have explored the sociological and artistic relevance of the comedian's unique brand of comedy. Scholars have written almost nothing, however, about what it means that all three characters work as journalists.

Character Profiles

The three journalists whom Cohen plays are probably more recognizable than the actor himself. He transforms his body completely—from the way he conjugates verbs to the manner in which he carries himself—for each persona. Some of these biographical details change during Cohen’s improvisations and it is possible to find minor contradictions. Below are the basic life stories of each character.

Ali G “The Rapper Wannabe”

"When me came out me mum's poom poom bush, me immediately started crying in a junglistic riddim. Me first word was 'ho.' "—Ali G¹¹

Ali G is the foul-mouthed British wangsta. He flaunts flashy athletic gear and appendages bedecked with gold rings and chains. Sporting a pair of tinted shades and hiding his hair beneath a tight cap, Ali G unsettles his guests with his cluelessness. His journalistic style centers on “youth outreach.” A viewer might need a dictionary to understand the euphemisms and colloquialisms he throws into his speech. He begins most skits by snapping his fingers and hollering the slang salutation, “Booyakasha!”

A good number of Ali G’s interviews take place as roundtable discussions in his studio. His set looks like an urban street corner, with graffiti scrawled across the brick walls and a fence around the perimeter.

Ali G is incredibly dumb, uneducated, and practically illiterate.¹² He confuses words and phrases, mixing references to “Watergate” with the movie “Water World”¹³ and “anthrax” with “Tampax.”¹⁴ He thinks the country Jordan is named after the basketball star Michael Jordan¹⁵ and asks such poorly thought-out questions as “What harm has violence ever done?”¹⁶

Although he is supposed to be a role model for young people, Ali G clearly uses drugs and engages in unprotected sex. During one episode, in which he aims to educate his youthful audience about illicit substances, it becomes clear that Ali G knows more about the street terminology and effects of recreational drug use than his “expert.”¹⁷

Ali G is vehemently heterosexual and likes to boast about his sexual conquests, often making guests uncomfortable. He claims to have lost his virginity at age 11 to a 24-year-old model.¹⁸ He also impregnates his girlfriends and knows almost nothing about birth control, asking a safe sex expert on his show, “For young people who can’t afford condies [condoms], would you recommend they use a Doritos bag?”¹⁹

Ali G often injects rap into his interviews. In possibly the oddest moments, he literally puts his words into his guests’ mouths, composing lyrics for buttoned-down politicians while beat-boxing in the background (probably the only time audiences will hear Boutros Boutros Ghali, Secretary General of the United Nations, say, “I am Boutros Boutros Ghali, put down your gun and listen to Bob Marley.”)

Borat, “The Clueless Kazakh Reporter”

“My mother never love me...She tells me sometime, she wished she was raped by someone else, so I was never born.”—Borat²⁰

Borat Sagdiyev is a naive journalist from Kazakhstan. He always wears the same gray suit and has a mop of curly hair. Although his autobiography changes for comic effect, it seems that his first wife, Roxana, died while walking his mentally disabled brother Bilo in the woods. A hunter mistook her for a bear (she was very hairy) and shot her.²¹ Borat is now remarried.

His sister is one of the most popular prostitutes in Kazakhstan although her ranking shifts during Cohen’s improvisations.²² It appears that the siblings have an incestuous relationship when Borat kisses her passionately on the lips.²³ At 43, Borat’s mother is the oldest woman in

his town of Kuzcek. She looks old and wizened. Borat's father was Boltak the Rapist.²⁴ So was his wife's.²⁵ He has three children, including an 11-year-old son named Huey Lewis, who already has two children.²⁶

Borat's hometown of Kuzcek (actually filmed in Glod, Romania)²⁷ is a small, dirty village. Anti-Semitism is commonplace, especially during the "Running of the Jews,"²⁸ and incest is shockingly casual. Borat has a cluttered home and a cow in his living room. The journalist is constantly trying to outdo his neighbor, buying simple goods, such as glass windows and a radio alarm clock when his neighbor cannot afford them. He claims to be the fourth most famous person in Kazakhstan.²⁹ His hobbies include playing ping pong, sunbathing (in a skimpy outfit), disco dancing, and watching women "make toilet" without their knowledge.³⁰

With probably the worst job created for comedic effect, Borat works as an "animal-puller," exciting animals in order to collect semen. He also mentions that his brother, Bilo, has a child with hair all over his face, which they put in a cage.³¹ He is anti-Semitic (a running joke with Cohen's characters since the actor is Jewish) and hates Uzbekistan, which he claims has run a disgusting smear campaign against his country.³²

Borat's show is an educational guide to America. He travels through the United States (In Borat's words, "The U.S. and A"),³³ teaching his imaginary Kazakh audience through his "reportings" about such American customs as going to the gym and taking comedy classes. He claims to have a movie career in Kazakhstan, even acting in the film *Dirty Jew*.³⁴

In reality, there is not much about Cohen's portrayal of Borat that is culturally accurate. He speaks a bit of Polish, Russian, and Hebrew while his producer, Azamat Bagatov, speaks Armenian.³⁵

When it comes to discussing sex, Borat never knows what to keep private. He shows his interviewees naked pictures of his wife and sister. During a gay parade, he kisses men on the lips, seemingly oblivious to the sexual nature of his actions. He opens his movie by joyfully announcing, “My name is Borat. I like you. I like sex. It’s nice!”

Like Ali G, Borat is extremely dumb, not just socially, with his strange comments about sex and fecal matter, but with simple concepts as well. When he decides to learn about American gyms, he doesn’t understand how a treadmill works, constantly slipping off while his trainer attempts to hold him on.³⁶ He cannot even walk through an antique store without destroying it, knocking glass and china all over the floor.³⁷

During his film, Borat travels with his obese producer to educate his Kazakh audience about America. Borat sees an episode of *Baywatch* on television and goes in search of Pamela Anderson, with whom he has fallen in love. He journeys across America in a second-hand ice cream truck to find her, running across various characters along the way. When he eventually finds Anderson and attempts to kidnap her, she rejects him. So, he marries a prostitute named Luenell whom he met during his travels.

Brüno “The Fabulous Fashion Reporter”

"In the first ever ultrasound picture taken of me in my mutti's womb, you can clearly see zat I've taken the umbilical cord and wrapped it around my chest like a sash."—Brüno³⁸

Brüno is a gay Austrian fashion reporter, always resplendent in an über-tight ensemble with the tips of his hair frosted. He hosts *Funkyzeit mit Brüno*, an Austrian television show, where he interviews fashion designers and celebrities about what is in and what is “aus.” Brüno’s father is a talented cuckoo-clock beak maker in Schleswig-Holstein.³⁹ His brother runs a laminating company in Salzburg. After a falling out with his family, Brüno began working at

Klub Apartheid in Vienna as a human urinal where a successful television producer urinated on him. Brüno made a witty remark and got a job hosting *Funkyzeit*.

During the film, Brüno is fired from *Funkyzeit* after a debacle at a fashion show during which his all-Velcro ensemble snags on the expensive clothes and he stumbles onto the runway. Disgraced, he decides to come to America to find fame and fortune. “Ich realized that night that the fashion world was superficial and vacuous,” he says. “Ich was going to be the biggest Austrian super star since Hitler.”

Brüno claims to be 19, clearly a comment on the importance of youth in the fashion industry. He says that he has known true love twice in his life. Once for seven minutes with Milli from Milli Vanilli and another time with his flight attendant boyfriend with whom he has experimental sex.⁴⁰ After his disgrace, however, the boyfriend dumps him and the only person who will accompany him to the United States is his assistant Lutz.

During his trip to America, Brüno stages several attempts to become famous. He adopts a baby from Africa, along the lines of Madonna or Angelina Jolie. He attempts to make a sex tape with Ron Paul. His coy seduction (“Has anyone told you that you look like Enrique Iglesias?”) doesn’t work on the politician, who storms out of the room shouting, “He’s queer. He’s crazy. He hit on me. He took his clothes off.”

After a one-night stand with Lutz, the two have a row and Brüno renounces his homosexuality. He becomes the host of a homophobic show called *Straight Days*. When he runs into Lutz while hosting his show at a cage match, the two passionately embrace, infuriating the conservative crowd and allowing Brüno to experience love for the third time in his life.

Stereotypes: Nobody Is Safe

Stereotypes constitute a key weapon in Cohen's comedic arsenal. Ali G, Borat and Brüno embody over-the-top personifications of what Americans fear about homosexuality, foreignness, urban culture, and, yes, journalists.

Some viewers find Cohen's stereotyping offensive. His anti-Semitism, misogyny, and racism have prompted critics, such as Stephen Marche, a columnist for *Esquire* magazine, to write, "The laughter is a little too easy in its cruelty and too pernicious in its influence ... Why do we love to watch the public humiliation and betrayal of perfect strangers?"⁴¹

Others find Cohen's brand of in-your-face political incorrectness enlightening. Journalist and stand-up comedian Paul Krassner describes Cohen as a "contemporary version of a professional prankster" who can walk the line between believable and insane.⁴² "People don't like to be lectured at, but if you can make them laugh, their defenses are down, and if there's truth embedded in that humor, they've accepted it for the moment by laughing," he writes in his collection of essays *Who's to Say What's Obscene?*⁴³

Cohen claims altruistic motives. "I think part of the [*Borat*] movie shows the absurdity of holding any form of racial prejudice, whether it's hatred of African-Americans or of Jews," he told *Rolling Stone* magazine in 2006.⁴⁴

Although the bulk of Cohen's caricatures fall outside the realm of journalism, he certainly does mock reporters.

His three journalists act like buffoons in the style of Ted Baxter from *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*.⁴⁵ For professional communicators, not one has a grasp of English. Borat's speech is littered with malapropisms. He calls black people "chocolate faces" and refers to using the bathroom as "making toilet."

Ali G, the only native English speaker of the three, reveals some of the worst grammar. In addition to being almost illiterate, his speech contains so many incorrect verb conjugations and misnomers that journalist Andrew Rooney angrily asks him, “What is your basic language? English?”

“Yo, English. For realz, I’m from England,” Ali G offers.

In addition to his poor grammar, Ali G confuses similar sounding words. He mistakes “euthanasia” for “youth in Asia,”⁴⁶ veteran for veterinarian,⁴⁷ and WMD’s for BLT’s.⁴⁸ He utters the invented word “racialism” when he means to say “racism.”⁴⁹

When Ali G interviews Rooney, he opens the interview with his laboriously trying to spell Rooney’s name. “Have you ever done this before?” Rooney asks, barely masking his disgust. Most journalists know that, although it is crucial to correctly spell a subject’s name, high profile interviewees want reporters to know how before entering an interview.

Cohen uses the cluelessness of his characters to unsettle and infuriate his interviewees. Some blow up while others patiently explain simple concepts. For the audience, Ali G’s misnomers may seem funny but they also reveal a journalist with very limited brain power. Like a parrot, Cohen’s journalists use snatches of sound bites, bits of key phrases, and current clichés without thinking. Ali G does not really understand what euthanasia is or why the media discusses it. He simply cannot fight the compulsion to mention it during the interview.

Brüno, who embraces the stereotype of the typical gay fashion reporter, acts unkindly and without empathy. Like the journalists from *The Devil Wears Prada* or *Sex and the City*, Brüno is vacuous and unnecessarily cruel. His discussions about the ins and outs of fashion often go beyond his subjects’ comfort levels. During his “fashion polizei” segment he takes trendiness too far, asking, “Ricky Martin: Keep him in the Ghetto or train to Auschwitz?” and “Jack Black:

candy or cancer?”⁵⁰ While trendiness is the lifeblood of some style reporters, most do not publically wish death upon unpopular celebrities.

At one point, Brüno invokes the name of columnist and fashion writer Carrie Bradshaw from the *Sex and City* series. As he sits around the campfire with a group of tough hunters, he suggests, “Look at the four of us. We are so like the *Sex and the City* girls.”

Brüno works less as a reporter than as a celebrity wannabe. He comes across as a talentless narcissist, desperate for international attention. Journalism serves as a vehicle for his vanity and appetite for exposure. He imitates celebrities in the hopes of gaining recognition and concerns himself less with the quality of his reporting than his shot at becoming a superstar.

Borat and his clumsy “reportings” go against the image of the classic foreign reporter. Typically, the foreign correspondent is a heroic figure. He is “the exotic reporter traveling in distant lands, the cynical observer, the dashing soldier-hero, or the careful scribbler of history.”⁵¹ Borat reverses this role because he works as a foreigner in America, not an American abroad. Instead of heroically defending American ideals and morals in a distant, battle-torn land, he pushes his offensive, supposedly Kazakh, values on an American audience. He may be a dashing hero to his Kazakh countrymen but American audiences see him as a bumbling idiot.

Turning the Tables: When Cohen Interviews Journalists

During a segment of *Da Ali G Show*, Ali G interviews James Lipton, the host of *Inside the Actor's Studio* and a talented interviewer. The two men sit together on a white couch, Lipton wearing a neatly pressed suit while Ali G sports a bright red tracksuit with the word “Player” stamped across the front.

Ali G opens the interview with a question: “What is acting?”

Lipton shifts in his seat. “What a good question,” he says appreciatively, beginning to compose an answer. It soon becomes clear, however, that Ali G simply has no idea what acting is.

Cohen takes a journalistic tool—that vague opening question—and turns it on its head. He does not pose this question to get Lipton thinking about the profession in a new way. He does not ask it to break the ice or to lay some basic informational groundwork before the interview takes off. Ali G does not know the answer.

In a simple, witty moment, Cohen reveals his character’s idiocy, mocks a common journalistic device, and implicates a respected journalist, who seemingly has no idea that Cohen is teasing him. Even the moronic Ali G can ask brilliant interview questions.

Although he is a journalist, Ali G is completely clueless about the media. During an interview with ABC news anchor Sam Donaldson, Ali G asks some basic questions, revealing the character’s misconceptions about broadcast news. “So how does you stop journalists from putting little words in that is hints of how they actually feel?” he asks before giving the example: “President Bush, who is a dong, talked about the economy.” Donaldson responds, “If I was your boss, I’d fire you!”

Ali G suggests other unethical or bizarre methods, such as running the headline “War Begins” on a slow news day or printing tomorrow’s news the day before. Donaldson points out that this would be impossible.

Ali G’s cluelessness about his own industry reveals a lot about his character. He does not bother himself with news production or ethics. He simply acts as a talking head. And his journalism is anything but authentic and unbiased. He wants to sneak his opinions (that President Bush is a dong) into his news segment without anyone noticing.

Cohen's caricatures continue to implicate journalists, even after the release of his films. Because he gives interviews in character,⁵² Cohen has drawn reporters into the charade. Joel Stein writes:

I love that Cohen is using his performance art on journalists themselves, who are willing to e-mail him questions in advance and then print Q&As with a fake character as if it were a real-time interview. I believe journalism should be entertaining. But not in the Stephen Glass/Jayson Blair/Loch Ness monster way.

Journalists who recognize his shtick have interacted with Cohen as if he were actually his character. They have high-fived him over the death of his wife, wrestled him on television, and patiently chastised him for his misogyny and racism. Cohen uses this technique not just to entertain his audience and maintain his brand but to dodge more difficult questions. Any sticky question can simply dissolve into a joke.

CNN reporter Becky Anderson interviewed Cohen as Borat, at first attempting to connect with him as a fellow journalist before ending the interview with, "I wondered whether there was any opportunity for me. I have plow experience, I have no retardation in the family, and I am not Jewish."⁵³

This may be the final stamp on the image of journalists in popular culture that Cohen has affected. He hardly has to imitate journalists to critique the profession. He simply allows himself to appear on television and lets the "real" journalists implicate themselves in his disparagement of their craft. Stein writes, "The excuse is that it's only entertainment journalism. But popular culture has dramatic effects on our society."⁵⁴

Comedy and the News

Comedy and broadcast journalism are old pals. From *Saturday Night Live* to the *Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, American audiences have become accustomed to watching parodies of television news.

As satiric news shows become more popular and look like real news shows, it becomes easy to confuse real journalists with comic ones. In fact, when the Pew Research Center asked Americans to rank the journalists they admire, *The Daily Show's* humorous host, Jon Stewart, placed fourth.⁵⁵ When *Colbert Report* host Stephen Colbert was asked what he finds to be most shocking, he said, "People mistaking me for real news."⁵⁶

These comedic news segments are wildly successful and have made celebrities of their anchors. Colbert is now a bestselling author and his 2006 speech at the White House Correspondent's Dinner reached 2.7 million views *YouTube* within two days.⁵⁷ He has turned spoofing the news into a wildly successful career.

And he does not have to look far for comedic inspiration. Broadcast journalism is ripe for satire. Audiences feel as if they know the local and national television correspondents on their TV screens every day.⁵⁸ Some might act clueless while others may work very professionally, but the parodies remain the same.

For Cohen, broadcast news does not simply present itself as an easy target for mockery but its methods of production are essential to creating Cohen's final product. First, masquerading as a reporter allows Cohen to film his unsuspecting subjects. His interviewees must appear willingly appear on camera, and Cohen's guise as a reporter makes this possible. Secondly, Cohen's parody of a clueless reporter allows him to ask basic and often insulting questions. His disguise also allows him to interact with a variety of people, from singer Paula Abdul to small-town "gay converters." Lastly, appearing as a reporter gives Cohen room to

explore sensitive political and social themes, from American views on anti-Semitism to attitudes towards celebrity adoptions. Because reporters can ask difficult questions and sometimes offend, Cohen can take this method to a different level for both comedic and satiric purposes.

Some critics argue that Cohen's brand of satire is important to our political process. Krassner comments on the necessity of satire in our political world. "Irreverence is my only sacred cow, and the more repression there is, the more need there is for irreverence toward those who are responsible for that repression," he writes.⁵⁹ By approaching topical issues, Cohen elevates his comedy from mere slapstick to something much deeper: real satire.

In her paper "Political Satire and Postmodern Irony in the Age of Stephen Colbert and Jon Stewart," English professor Lisa Colletta explains the importance of satire in today's news climate. She writes, "In itself, satire is not a comic device—it is a critique—but it uses comedic devices such as parody, exaggeration, slapstick, etc. to get its laughs. Humor is satire's art and its power and what saves it from the banality of mere editorial."⁶⁰

Confusion in the Fusion

During the comedic climax of "Borat," the Kazakh journalist emerges from the shower to find his obese producer masturbating to a picture of Pamela Anderson. Hurt and jealous (Borat hopes to marry the actress), he attacks the producer and the two men engage in a heated, naked wrestling match.

A savvy viewer may instantly recognize that the wrestling is planned and the anger is false. These scripted moments aim at driving the film's thin plot. Still, the parts that stand out are unstaged. As the two men fight their way through the hotel lobby and tumble into a conference room, the shocked reactions from hotel guests and violent response from hotel

security are real. This strange melding of the scripted and unscripted puts Cohen's work in a category of its own.

Cohen's brand of humor and way of piecing together his material defies categorization. His movies and television shows have the characteristics of comedies, documentaries, mockumentaries, and performance art. In her essay "Cultural Learnings of Borat Make for Benefit Glorious Study of Documentary," University of St. Andrews film studies lecturer Leshu Torchin writes:

In an era in which digital manipulations and suspect documentary practices call the truth-status of the mode into doubt, Borat illustrates a difficult middle ground: a thrilling yet slippery territory that defies easy dichotomies of truth and fiction, us and them, primitive and civilized mockumentary and documentary, reference and performance.⁶¹

Sometimes Cohen's productions appear to be documentaries. Indeed, his crew markets them to potential interviewees as "documentary-style films."⁶² Then again, his productions contain long chunks of staged action, resembling mockumentaries, movies that present fictitious events in a seemingly non-fiction format. To confuse things, Cohen's hesitance to speak with the press without adopting the traits of his characters takes on the attributes of performance art.

Cohen elevates his performance to even stranger levels when he presents his shows as if they actually hail from the locations where Cohen's characters claim to live. For example, Borat's Kazakh news spots contain English subtitles superimposed over Kazakh-language captions. Although the audience is wise to Cohen's charade, they see a faux version of what the shows might look like if they were real.

Even when Cohen is not conning an interviewee, Borat and his producer speak to each other in their false version of the Kazakh language (actually a mixture of Polish, Russian, Hebrew, and Armenian). Their gibberish is translated for the audience with subtitles. Likewise, Brüno's *Funkyzeit mit Brüno* contains subtitles and a voice-over in his ridiculous accent. And

Ali G's greetings to the audience on *Da Ali G Show* remain in character although the audience recognizes that the host is merely a caricature. Just as the journalists who invite Cohen onto their television shows must suspend their disbelief and play along with his character, the viewers must play along as well.

These characteristics may make Cohen's portrayal of his three journalists more potent than an image created for a book or movie but without a counterpart in the outside world. Cohen's characters bleed into real life. They interact with journalists and celebrities. They grace the covers of magazines. They sit for interviews. They even hold press conferences.⁶³ The general public understands the joke, but the separation between reality and fiction becomes hard to pin down.

In her essay, "Hoaxing the 'Real': On the Metanarrative of Reality Television," Alison Hearn describes "metanews" shows that "report on the manipulative elements of the news itself, and, in so doing, produces viewers who are simultaneously flattered by this knowing mode of address and assured that, as viewers, 'they remain sovereign.'"⁶⁴ They feel "hip" and see themselves as on the inside of the production process.

Cohen's audience aligns its perspective with the producers, not the interviewees. Just as Cohen's characters mingle with the real world, audiences project themselves into Cohen's environment. His fake news spots ask the audiences to plunge into his made up universe and feel "in" on the joke. Just as his characters integrate themselves into our society, the audience becomes knowledgeable behind-the-scenes collaborators, almost a part of the crew. Every time Cohen introduces a scene or an interviewee, the viewers mentally rub their hands together. They know what delicious chaos and bizarre conversations await.

Because Cohen's characters exist on the boundary of fiction and reality, his portrayals of broadcast journalists are especially persuasive. The tenuous line between make-believe and reality makes Cohen's shtick work while creating confusion between the real and the staged. As Krassner puts it, "Sometimes I feel like I am making up the news. Reality has become so bizarre that I seem to have lost the ability to tell the difference between truth and fiction."

Unethical Journalism

When Linda Stein, a feminist artist in New York City, first heard of One America Productions, something seemed fishy.⁶⁵ A woman named Chelsea Barnard, who claimed to work for the production company, sent Stein an email. Barnard explained that she worked with a Belarusian television channel and a foreign correspondent, creating a "documentary-style film about America." Stein recalls speculating with a friend that the broadcast company might be a right-wing cover.

She learned later that "One America Productions" was not a conservative front. The reporter who showed up was Borat. Stein did not recognize the actor but ended up storming out halfway through the misogynistic interview.

Descriptions of suspicious journalistic practices and sleazy front companies have peppered the lawsuits and recollections of those who have fallen victim to Cohen's tricks. Stein is not the only person to point out that the comedian's techniques closely mirror shoddy journalism.

Marche writes that:

Brüno's producers used more than two dozen shell companies, with professional-looking Web sites and boring names like "Amesbury Chase Productions" and "Chromium Films": Complex labyrinths in which trusting victims were ensnared. Sound familiar? Like Bernie Madoff and Allen Stanford, Baron Cohen preys on fundamental realities of human nature: that we tend to trust other people and that we want to be on TV almost as much as we'd like a 10 percent return on our investments.⁶⁶

Of course, this pre-interview baiting is invisible to audiences. The clueless characters seem to stumble into their interviews, completely unqualified and unaware of how they pulled it off. In reality, Cohen uses a team of smooth, tricky assistants behind each interview, setting up smoke and mirrors off-screen.

This trickery, no matter how invisible, has an effect on viewers. Even if they are not familiar with the Society of Professional Journalists' series of ethical guidelines, they can see that Cohen disregards these rules. He does not "avoid undercover or other surreptitious methods of gathering information except when traditional open methods will not yield information vital to the public."⁶⁷ He doesn't care to "minimize harm." In fact, the purpose of his interviews is to create embarrassment or as Krassner more kindly puts it to "reveal the state of [the interviewees] own humanity, for better or worse."⁶⁸

The success of Cohen's comedy relies on disregarding basic journalistic principles. As Cohen's portrayals of journalists merge with how viewers see real reporters, his dodgy techniques seem more commonplace, his disregard for journalistic ethics appears routine. In a Pew Research poll, 72 percent of Americans responded that "Most news sources today are biased in their coverage."⁶⁹ When slick production companies back opinionated journalists, even in fictional comedy, it alters our view of journalists, for better or worse.

Conclusion

It hurts a little to watch hour after hour of Cohen's comedy. As he accuses his subjects of not flushing the toilet backstage or makes eyes at Ron Paul, he inspires pure, seething *hatred* in his interviewees. People detest his characters and it aches to watch their blind, furious disgust.

Of course, Cohen designs his interviews to generate the most hatred possible. He flaunts his gay character before social conservatives, his foreign correspondent in front of American patriots, and his gangster before the educated elite. Disgust is the punch line, hatred constitutes the climax.

Because they act so boorishly and immaturely, Cohen's journalists do not make sympathetic characters. Interviewees hate them and the viewers cannot relate to them. The audience feels distant from the reporters who hardly speak their language (even Ali G's slang sounds like another dialect), do not dress similarly, and act ridiculously. Cohen might star in his films but he is not the hero.

Krassner argues that the key to Cohen's comedy lies in his ability to identify with the villain. "Sacha can be compared to several other performers. Like Lenny Bruce, his sense of irreverence enables him to communicate from the villain's perspective," Krassner writes.⁷⁰

Today real journalists have become villains in the media, from Ann Coulter, the right-wing "professional reactionary and Stepford pundit"⁷¹ to Michael Moore's bloated, angry rabble-rouser. Television pundits possess large personalities and a knack for showbiz but are magnets for scorn and derision.

As journalists become caricatures of themselves, the people who mock them have an easier time blending in. The only reason Cohen's humor can exist is because journalists, with their big personalities and service to entertainment, have laid the groundwork for him.

Of course, this uncomfortable feeling associated with Cohen's routine has a purpose. Characters that make us uncomfortable can often accomplish more than lovable buffoons. Krassner argues, "Good satire should have a point of view. It doesn't have to get a belly laugh, it just has to be good criticism, which is the classic definition of satire."⁷²

Endnotes

¹ *Da Ali G Show*, Season 2, Episode 1.

² *Da Ali G Show*, Season 1, Episode 1.

³ *Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan* (84 minutes).

⁴ "Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan." *Box Office Mojo*. <http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=borat.htm> ⁴ <http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=borat.htm>.

⁵ Neil Strauss, "The Man Behind The Mustache [sic]," *Rolling Stone*, Nov, 14, 2006: 12-22. http://www.rollingstone.com/news/coverstory/sacha_baron_cohen_the_real_borat_finally_speaks. Accessed: March 2010.

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⁷ "Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan." *Box Office Mojo*. <http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=borat.htm> ⁷ <http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=borat.htm>.

⁸ The Man Behind the Mustache [sic]. http://www.rollingstone.com/news/coverstory/sacha_baron_cohen_the_real_borat_finally_speaks.

⁹ Cohen's *Ali G Indahouse* opened in 2002 and received little attention outside Britain. Most American viewers were introduced to Cohen's performances through Borat.

¹⁰ Manohla Dargis. "From Kazakhstan, Without a Clue." *New York Times*, (New York, NY) Nov. 3, 2006.

¹¹ Strauss, "The Man Behind the Mustache," *Rolling Stone*, Nov. 14, 2006.

¹² *Da Ali G Show*, Season 1, Episode 6. Ali G looks at the Hollywood sign—he can't read it.

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- ¹³ *Da Ali G Show*, Season 2, Episode 1.
- ¹⁴ *Da Ali G Show*, Season 1, Episode 2.
- ¹⁵ Ibid.
- ¹⁶ *Da Ali G Show*, Season 1, Episode 4
- ¹⁷ *Da Ali G Show*, Season 1, Episode 3.
- ¹⁸ *Da Ali G Show*, Season 2, Episode 6.
- ¹⁹ *Da Ali G Show*, Season 2, Episode 5.
- ²⁰ *Da Ali G Show*, Season 2, Episode 1
- ²¹ *Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan*.
- ²² *Da Ali G Show*, Season 2, Episode 1 and *Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan* (84 minutes).
- ²³ *Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan*.
- ²⁴ *Da Ali G Show*, Season 2, Episode 1.
- ²⁵ Sacha Baron Cohen, "Borat's Press Conference on Kazakhstan National Television," 8:00; YouTube, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nuW4OoY_jH0&feature=fvw (Accessed March 28, 2010).
- ²⁶ Ibid.
- ²⁷ Bojan Pancevski and Carmiola Ionescu. "Borat Film 'Tricked' Poor Village Actors." *Daily Mail*, (London) January 11, 2006.
- ²⁸ *Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan*.
- ²⁹ Sacha Baron Cohen, "Borat's Press Conference on Kazakhstan National Television," 8:00; YouTube, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nuW4OoY_jH0&feature=fvw (Accessed March 28, 2010).
- ³⁰ Ibid.
- ³¹ *Da Ali G Show*, Season 2, Episode 2.
- ³² Silverstein, Ken. "A Recap From the World's Leading Boratologist." *Harper's Magazine*, October, 2006.
- ³³ *Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan* (84 minutes).
- ³⁴ *Da Ali G Show*, Season 1, Episode 4.
- ³⁵ Leshu Torchin. "Cultural Learnings of Borat Make Benefit Glorious Study of Documentary." *Film & History*, Vol. 38 (2008): 53- 63.

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- ³⁶ *Da Ali G Show*, Season 1, Episode 3.
- ³⁷ *Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan*.
- ³⁸ Robbie Collin, "When Brüno Met Röbbie." *News of the World*, (London) May 7, 2009.
- ³⁹ *Ibid.*
- ⁴⁰ *Brüno*.
- ⁴¹ Stephen Marche. "A Thousand Words About Our Culture: can We Stop With All the Prank." *Esquire*, July, 2009.
- ⁴² Krassner, 65.
- ⁴³ Paul Krassner, *Who's to Say What's Obscene?: Politics, Culture, and Comedy in America Today*, San Francisco: City Lights Books, 2009.
- ⁴⁴ The Man Behind the Mustache [sic].
http://www.rollingstone.com/news/coverstory/sacha_baron_cohen_the_real_borat_finally_speaks.
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- ⁴⁵ Terry Anzur, "The Real Ted Baxter: The Rise of the Celebrity Anchorman." (USC Annenberg,) December 8, 2000. http://www.learcenter.org/pdf/anzur_notes.pdf (accessed March 28, 2010).
- ⁴⁶ *Da Ali G Show*, Season 2, Episode 5.
- ⁴⁷ *Da Ali G Show*, Season 2, Episode 2.
- ⁴⁸ *Da Ali G Show*, Season 2, Episode 5.
- ⁴⁹ *Da Ali G Show*, Season 2, Episode 8.
- ⁵⁰ *Da Ali G Show*, Season 2, Episode 3.
- ⁵¹ Joseph Saltzman, "Analyzing the Images of the Journalist in Popular Culture: A Unique Method of Studying the Public's Perception of Its Journalists and the News Media," Los Angeles: The University of Southern California, 2005, <http://www.ijpc.org/AEJMC%20Paper%20San%20Antonio%20Saltzman%202005.pdf> (Accessed March 2008)
- ⁵² Neil Strauss, "The Man Behind the Mustache," *Rolling Stone Magazine*, Nov. 14, 2006.
- ⁵³ Becky Anderson, "Borat Interview on CNN," 3:30; YouTube, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2JGxl-QEbVg> (Accessed March 28, 2010).
- ⁵⁴ Joel Stein, "Who's Borat Kidding?" *Los Angeles Times*, (Los Angeles, CA) November 14, 2006.
- ⁵⁵ Krassner, 5
- ⁵⁶ *Ibid.*
- ⁵⁷ Cited in *A Citizen's Guides to Democracy Inaction: Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert's Comic Rhetorical Criticism* Don J Waisanen. *The Southern Communication Journal*. Memphis: Apr 2009. Vol. 74, Iss. 2, 120.

⁵⁸ “The Real Ted Baxter: The Rise of the Celebrity Anchorman.” http://www.learcenter.org/pdf/anzur_notes.pdf.

⁵⁹ Krassner, 4.

⁶⁰ Lisa Colletta, “Political Satire and Postmodern Irony in the Age of Stephen Colbert and Jon Stewart,” *Journal of Popular Culture*, Bowling Green: Oct 2009. Vol. 42, Iss. 5; pg. 856

⁶¹ Torchin, 61.

⁶² Linda Stein, “How I Was Duped by Ali G.” *Downtown Express* (New York, NY) October 13 - 19, 2006.

⁶³ Sacha Baron Cohen, Borat’s Press Conference on Kazakhstan National Television, 8:00; YouTube, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nuW4OoY_jH0&feature=fvw (Accessed March 28, 2010).

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⁶⁵ Stein, “How I Was Duped By Ali G.”

⁶⁶ Marche, 44.

⁶⁷ Society of Professional Journalists. Code of Ethics. 1996. <http://www.spj.org/ethicscode.asp> (accessed March 2, 2010).

⁶⁸ Krassner, 66.

⁶⁹ The New News Landscape: Rise of the Internet. Understanding the Participatory News Consumer.” Pew Research Center Publications. <http://pewresearch.org/pubs/1508/internet-cell-phone-users-news-social-experience?src=prc-latest&proj=peoplepress>. March 1, 2010.

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⁷¹ Krassner, 183.

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Filmography

Da Ali G Show 2003-2004

(Source HBO.com,
<http://web.archive.org/web/20051024013303/www.hbo.com/alig/episode/>)

First Season

Episode 1: "Law" February 21, 2003

Ali G explores the job of a police officer for a day at the Philadelphia Police Department.

Borat visits a dating agency.

Brüno interviews "PR guru" Paul Wilmot and visits New York for Fashion Week. He exposes the superficiality of fashion world. He calls Wilmot "The God of Seating Plans." Reveals his journalism of "in and out": Mary Anne Faithful was "Ish don't think so for 20 years."

Interviewee: Former astronaut Buzz Aldrin.

Episode 2: "War" February 28, 2003

Ali G visits the United Nations where he interviews Secretary General of the United Nations Boutros Boutros-Ghali, who does his rap at the end. He asks such questions as, "Which is the funniest language?" "How do you say 'shit' in French?" He thinks Jordan is named after Michael Jordan.

Ali G leads a roundtable discussion on religion.

Borat hosts a guide to etiquette.

Ali G talks with former U.S. National Security Advisor General Brent Scowcroft. He asks, "When should a nation nuke another one?" "That's a very good question" is the response.

Episode 3: "Politics" March 7, 2003

Ali G talks with former House Speaker Newt Gingrich.

Brüno visits New York for Fashion Week. He asks leading questions, forcing his interviewee to contradict himself.

Ali G attempts to interest investors (including Donald Trump) in his ice cream glove. One investor says, "This may be the worst idea I've ever heard."

Borat hosts a guide to American hobbies.

Ali G learns about drugs.

Episode 4: "Art" March 14, 2003

Ali G learns about art from James Lipton. He asks Lipton, "What is acting?" Lipton thinks it is a deep question but soon learns that Ali G has no idea what acting is.

Borat goes to an acting class.

Ali G leads a roundtable discussion on the media. He asks the inane question, "What harm has violence ever done?"

Brüno visits Los Angeles. He engages in some unethical journalism, convincing a store owner to lie during a conversation about the singer Madonna.

Bruno: What was it like when Madonna came in here?

Owner: Well she never really came in.

Bruno (explaining that his audience loves Madonna.): “They’re crazy about Madonna though.”

Owner: Yeah, it was amazing. It was unbelievable.

Bruno: And did she come back many, many times.

Owner: Yes

Bruno: And is this her favorite shop?”

Owner: Yes.

Ali G interviews former astronaut Buzz Aldrin. Ali G is woefully unformed. He asks, “What was it like not being the first man on the moon?”

Episode 5: "Science" March 21, 2003

Ali G hosts a roundtable discussion on science and technology. Ali G’s case for evolution is: “Have you ever eaten a banana?” He berates his guests, asking, “Who didn’t flush the toilet backstage?” A guest responds, “Why you’re talking about this on national TV blows my mind.”

Borat visits a spiritual healer and an exercise instructor. He falls off a treadmill.

Ali G interviews political activist Ralph Nader, and attends an anti-nuclear protest.

Ali G talks with former U.S. Surgeon General Dr. C. Everett Koop. Ali G knows nothing about medicine, asking, “Why are all skeletons involved in evil stuff?” He also does not believe he will die.

Episode 6: "Belief" March 28, 2003

Ali G attempts to interest Hollywood producers in his James Bond television show concept. In this segment he reveals his illiteracy: he cannot read the Hollywood sign.

Borat visits the South.

Ali G hosts a roundtable discussion on sex.

Brüno visits Alabama, which he calls “The gayest part of America.”

Ali G interviews former U.S. Secretary of State James Baker and former White House Press Secretary Marlin Fitzwater. With Fitzwater, Ali G thinks a press secretary is like a receptionist. Fitzwater ends the interview early, exclaiming, “The guy’s an idiot!”

Second Season

Episode 1: "Respek" July 18, 2004

Ali G interviews ABC anchor Sam Donaldson. He confuses Watergate with Water World. When Donaldson tries to correct him, Ali G insists, “It’s Water World, you’re confusing it with *Star Gate*.” And finally asks, “Why don’t they make that clearer to young people?” Donaldson praises, “That’s what we’re doing. That’s what you’re doing!”

Bias in journalism: "So how do you stop journalists from putting in little words in that hints of they actually feel?" Ali G asks. Example he gives: "President Bush, who is a dong, talked about the economy." Donaldson responds, "If I was your boss, I'd fire you."

Ali G: What does you do when there ain't nothing that's happened in the news that day?

Donaldson: There's always something that happens.

Ali G: But if it's a bit of a boring day for news, do you sometimes make headline on the newspaper that says, "War Begins"?

Borat experiences wine tasting.

Ali G learns about the U.S. criminal justice system.

Brüno interviews Pastor Quinn the "Gay Converter." The question Bruno asks: "Why is being gay so out zis season?"

Episode 2: "Rekognize" July 25, 2004

Ali G talks with political commentator and author Pat Buchanan. Pat Buchanan repeats the rap at the end: "Listen up me name be Buchanan. Me knows enough tings about politics. Get involved, mac daddies. Ya'll better realize dat nothing be a better way to get your kicks, west side, aiight."

Borat learns about American politics with politician James Broadwater. He confuses BLTS with WMD's and asks the question, "Is it ever worth fighting a war over sandwiches?"

Ali G leads a roundtable talk about family.

Ali G explores animals on a farm.

Episode 3: "Peace" August 1, 2004

Ali G pitches his book ideas to literary agents and publishers.

Brüno leads the "fashion polizei." He is unnecessary cruel and superficial, asking, "Ricky Martin: Keep him in the Ghetto or train to Auschwitz?" And offering, "Jack Black: candy or cancer?"

Interview with President of the US Olympians Association John Naber.

Ali G hosts a roundtable talk about politics.

Borat learns "how to be country music star." This includes Borat luring a crowded bar into singing the invented song "Throw the Jew Down the Well."

Episode 4: "Realize" August 8, 2004

Ali G talks with former head of the Immigration and Naturalization Service James Ziglar.

Borat learns about American hobbies by visiting a self-defense expert, a yoga teacher, and a New Age dance class.

Ali G learns about the environment from Republican politician Christine Todd Whitman and advocates of Earth First!.

Brüno visits Miami.

Ali G leads a roundtable about animal rights.

Episode 5: "Jah" August 15, 2004

Ali G interviews writer Gore Vidal about history and visits Mt. Vernon. He confuses Gore Vidal with hair product company, Vidal Sassoon. Ali G has a tenuous grasp of history. He asks, "How involved was Moses with the Constitution?"

Borat learns about buying a house.

Ali G talks with sex educator Sally Epstein.

Brüno attends a barn dance in Georgia.

Ali G leads a roundtable talk about medicine.

Episode 6: "Realness" August 22, 2004

Ali G learns about gender issues by getting relationship advice from author John Gray and attends a pro-choice rally in Washington, D.C..

Borat goes job-hunting, learning about American work ethics from various employment agencies.

Ali G talks with former presidential economics adviser Charles Schultze.

Brüno gets wrestling lessons from a college team on Spring Break in Daytona Beach.

Ali G interviews pundit Andy Rooney. He laboriously spells his name beforehand. Rooney corrects his grammar. "How has journalists ever put out tomorrow news by mistake?" When Rooney eventually kicks him out, he asks, "Is it because I's black?"

Ali G Indahouse, 2002 (85 minutes), color, Universal Studios Home Video.

Directed by Mark Mylod. Written by Sacha Baron Cohen, Dan Mazer

Ali G becomes a pawn in the evil chancellor's plot to overthrow the U.K. Prime Minister.

Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan, 2006 (84 minutes), color, 20th Century Fox.

Directed by Larry Charles. Written by Sacha Baron Cohen, Anthony Hines, Peter Baynham, and Dan Mazer.

Borat travels the United States to find Pamela Anderson.

Brüno, 2009 (81 minutes), color, Universal Pictures.

Directed by Sacha Baron Cohen, Anthony Hines, Dan Mazer, Jeff Schaffer.

Brüno goes to America to seek international fame after being fired from *Funkyzeit mit Brüno*.