
Auto-Tune the News: Remix Video

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Abstract: Convergence culture has redefined television in many ways—from what devices we use to watch TV, to who can make TV and how it can be made. In this essay, David Gurney examines how The Gregory Brothers draw upon news coverage and other online videos as raw material for satirically remixed and reconfigured takes on current events and Internet culture.

Amidst the sights and sounds of Katy Perry’s “California Gurls,” Usher’s “OMG,” and other bubbly hit songs of summer 2010, one unique single and its accompanying video experienced an unexpected moment in the spotlight with its Auto-Tuned chorus of lines including “Hide yo kids / Hide yo wife” and the repeated “We gon find you / We gon find you” becoming instant catchphrases in the pop lexicon. “Bed Intruder Song” by The Gregory Brothers and Antoine Dodson was not novel in terms of its use of synthesizers, drum machines, or even Auto-Tune pitch-correcting software, but rather because of the original source of its vocal tracks. Lifted from a recording of television news originally broadcast by a local NBC affiliate (WAFF in Huntsville, Alabama), the unintentional catchphrases began as statements from Antoine, whose family’s home had been broken into by a perpetrator intent on sexually assaulting one of its female members. Despite sampling’s long history in hip-hop, this peculiar source and the extended use of the sample made this a standout track. For The Gregory Brothers, however, repurposing television news was not so unusual even if it represented a shift from appropriating the words of the powerful to the words of the relatively powerless.

A media phenomenon like “Bed Intruder Song” underscores that when we talk about television in the twenty-first century, we are talking less about a specific media technology and a circumscribed set of behaviors surrounding it, than about an ever-expanding constellation of technologies associated with an increasingly less cohesive set of practices. Really, this has always been the case,



FIGURE 33.1.
Antoine Dodson, auto-tuned
and remixed into “Bed In-
truder” star.

but the continuing proliferation of portable viewing devices (from the Watchman to smartphones) and platforms for content distribution (from VHS to streamed FLVs) has made the object described as “television” less stable and well defined. Alternatingly convergent and divergent digital streams have made television content and conventions increasingly open to audience/user capture and manipulation. While the expanse of online audiovisual media encompasses much more than just reposted and/or repurposed material that was initially designed for television, the medium is a defining presence. This essay will examine television’s circulation through networked digital media platforms that have often been described as “viral” by focusing on a particular set of makers, The Gregory Brothers, and their *Auto-Tune the News* series, which serves as both an exemplary and a unique case of a trend in how television content is drawn in to transmedial activity and what happens to it in such environs.

While most people use terms like “viral video” or “going viral” to refer to the user-to-user spread of media content, virality implies at least one other crucial connotation—viral recombination.¹ The metaphorical basis of media virality, the biological virus, often becomes most potent when it goes through the process of genetic recombination. In simplified terms, when two or more viruses enter the same cell, there is potential for genetic material from each to recombine with the other during their processes of replication. In some instances, these recombined viruses increase significantly in potency, as evident in cyclical fears over “swine flu,” which are recombinations of influenza viruses separately active in humans and pigs resulting in a more resistant strain affecting humans. Similarly, cultural code is subject to such recombinations in many forms even predating digital media. Take, for instance, the narrative structure of an epic poem like *The Odyssey* being lifted and recontextualized over the course of millennia into works as diverse as James Joyce’s modernist novel *Ulysses* and the Coen brothers’ screwball comedy *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* Comedic practices of satire and parody frequently facilitate such recombinant

work, pulling in cultural codes through techniques such as exaggeration, repetition, and recontextualization to render the source material humorous, often with a critical perspective. It has been through such recombinant practices that The Gregory Brothers have risen to a place of prominence within popular culture.

Starting in 2009, their online series *Auto-Tune the News* almost immediately became widely circulated and recognized. Even though it's not the first case of an online video series finding sizable audiences, the series is distinct in that it so wholeheartedly includes viral recombination, as it is built upon a fairly simple recombinant practice: taking television news coverage as raw material for redaction and reconfiguration. True to its title, *Auto-Tune* finds The Gregory Brothers treating spoken voice samples with Auto-Tune audio processing software and mixing them with contemporary music, typically R&B/hip-hop production elements. Like almost all recombinations, though, this has the effect of casting the source materials into satirical relief, with the Brothers taking the opportunity to critique conventions of reportage—not unlike television news parody of the past, including *That Was The Week That Was* (1964–1965), *Saturday Night Live's* (NBC, 1975–present) “Weekend Update” segment, and, of course, *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* (Comedy Central, 1996–present).² However, digital media have allowed the Brothers, a group of makers without the initial backing of a major network or production house, to enter this arena on their own terms. Looking at two popular episodes of *Auto-Tune* will illustrate more clearly the style and critical cut of their satire, as well as how the visibility gained through user-generated content can in some cases shift the balance of power between digital media satirists and targets.

To start, a close examination of the second episode of the series, “pirates. drugs. gay marriage” (April 21, 2009), will bring the satirical potentials of viral recombination into focus. The episode opens with a clip from the “Roundtable” segment of the April 12, 2009, episode of ABC's *This Week with George Stephanopoulos* (1981–present) in which *Washington Post* editorialist Ruth Marcus remarks on the significance of the recent Iowa Supreme Court decision that made same-sex marriage legal in the state. Two of the brothers, Michael and Andrew, are composited into the roundtable scene (superimposed over Stephanopoulos and panelist George Will, respectively) from the very opening. Speaking as if interrupting Marcus in the midst of her attempt to underscore the importance of the court's ruling, they begin repeatedly chanting “boring” in her direction, with Michael insisting, “I'm not feeling any love between us right now. You've gotta do it like this . . . Shawty.” With the move of addressing Marcus as “Shawty” (a particular inflection on “Shorty,” hip-hop lingo for a desirable female), the Auto-Tune effect begins melodizing the spoken dialogue of both the brothers and Marcus. A backing track of tinkling synthesizer accompanies this, effectively rendering the scene with the sonic identity of a contemporary hip-hop track.

FIGURE 33.2.
Andrew, one of The Gregory
Brothers behind *Auto-Tune
the News*, reacts to news an-
chor Katie Couric.



With this, “pirates. drugs. gay marriage.” enacts the basic *Auto-Tune the News* formula: recombining televised news and political commentary with elements of hip-hop production to create uniquely hybridized content that makes critical statements about television news, political rhetoric, and popular culture in a few notable ways. At a basic level, the interruptions and melodizing serve to deflate the air of authority that the hosts and commentators of Sunday morning television news discussion shows often carry. There is also a clear statement being made regarding an aesthetic and rhetorical gulf between a serious news program like *This Week* and large swaths of the citizenry. The interjections of “boring” are obviously joking, but they point to the reality that a Sunday morning panel program is pitched to a limited demographic or taste culture—one that likely divides along lines of generation, class, and race. In another sense, Michael’s use of “shawty” and a subsequent proposal that he and Marcus “get carried away” and “get gay-married today” as a way to steer discussion away from the political stakes of the original clip make a familiar critique of one of popular hip-hop’s most prevalent subjects (i.e., attracting women) and its often casual objectification of females. Furthermore, given mainstream hip-hop’s record of anti-queer lyrical content, the collapsing of getting “gay-married” into a description of a proposed heterosexual coupling may be highlighting a discomfort with homosexual practice. Of course, the switch from earnest political discussion to more eroticized vocalizing also indicates that the sex lives of the body politic are perhaps better suited to musical expression than legislation. Whatever the particular mix of meanings a viewer takes away from this recombination, at the very least, it has the effect of making one aware of the strange mixing of the sexual and the political that the “real” television news has been carrying on in its coverage of same-sex marriage.

Similar recombinations follow in the episode, including one involving footage of CNN anchor Kiran Chetry describing results of a viewer poll on marijuana legalization, in which a wigged and mustached Michael is inserted in split-screen taking credit for the strong support for legalization found in the poll. In this case, the hip-hop context actually syncs even better with the news content, while putting the topic into a state of refraction similar to the same-sex marriage question. A more elaborate segment has Andrew in gorilla costume doing a split-screen duet with Fox News commentator Sean Hannity. Labeled through on-screen text as “Frank McGee—Angry Gorilla,” the character exaggeratedly echoes the already performative anger Hannity is directing toward President Obama for taking “some credit for authorizing the mission” to rescue the captain of the *Maersk Alabama* from his pirate captors. This costume and its associated character subsequently play a recurring role throughout the series, standing in as buffoonish caricature of demagogic pundits attempting to stoke anger and fear in their audiences. With this character, it seems that the series achieves its most transparent critique of television news tropes: a takedown of the blow-hard rhetoric that has come to fill a great deal of the programming hours of cable news networks. While having nowhere near the subtlety of Stephen Colbert, the McGee character does make a shorthand jab at the outrage of pundits overshadowing or, in some cases, supplanting the topics covered by television news.

Including other recombined clips of television news coverage on the *Maersk Alabama* event, climate change, and drug legalization over less than two-and-a-half minutes, the episode operates as a dense interweave of ribald commentary in a tradition consistent with news media parody of the past, yet there are a few key differences. For one, the range of topics covered in this compressed time span means that it moves at a more accelerated pace than much preceding news parody. Furthermore, the hip-hop conceit allows for easy shifting among topics, with clips being treated more as sections of a song (i.e., verse, chorus, bridge) than as rhetorical moments that need logical connections to be made between them. Consequently, the satire is most clearly pitched at television news tropes rather than any specific political issue. Yet what’s changed most is that the tools of digital media allowed media outsiders like The Gregory Brothers to more directly take from the media culture that was surrounding them, reconfigure it, and utilize online distribution to reach audiences far beyond what they might have reached only a few years prior. Essentially, their “production” process involves choosing media that strikes them as being (virally) potent and worthy of satirical treatment, recombining it with other cultural codes both original (e.g., Frank McGee—Angry Gorilla) and borrowed (e.g., hip-hop conventions), producing something novel, and using YouTube’s distribution power to have their construction with multiple layers of mediation seen widely. As a DIY effort, theirs

is clearly a case of the relatively powerless using tools of digital media to take swipes at those with power in television news.

First uploaded only ten days after the first official episode (“march madness. economic woes. pentagon budget cuts.”), this second entry in the series built on the popularity of the first and began to find more transmedial mobility. For instance, shortly after this episode began to circulate, three of the four Brothers appeared on *The Rachel Maddow Show* (MSNBC, 2008–present) to discuss the popularity of and logic behind the budding series.³ This appearance on *Maddow* (as well as coverage in various print publications) stands as a marker of the transmedial nature of viral circulation. While the budding series was being passed around by hyperlink through email, message boards, social networking sites, and political and Internet culture blogs, the interview with Maddow is a clear case of how other media become involved with the spread.⁴ This, in turn, raised The Gregory Brothers’ profile, making them a somewhat recognizable brand, gaining them YouTube channel subscribers and other social media followers, as well as giving subsequent productions an advantage in terms of their initial visibilities.

While “pirates. drugs. gay marriage.” plays out as an exemplary case of the basic template underlying nearly the entire *Auto-Tune the News* series, a later episode, the aforementioned “Bed Intruder Song!” (July 31, 2010) illustrates a shift in the series that sent The Gregory Brothers’ work in a slightly different and more questionable direction.⁵ The episode fits within the basic form of *Auto-Tune the News*, though in a more streamlined way: rather than featuring various topical television news clips, there is only one clip recombined in this episode. In addition, the clip, though certainly a form of television news, stands apart from the material used for preceding episodes given its regional origins in a broadcast by Huntsville, Alabama, NBC affiliate WAFF. Antoine Dodson, a man who had interrupted and thwarted an attempted assault against his sister, Kelly, dominates the original news report in which he emphatically expresses his mix of anger and resolve towards the unknown intruder whom he forced to leave. Given the rather restricted local audience for the original airing, the clip found a larger audience only because a Huntsville-area viewer was so struck by Antoine’s expressiveness that she or he decided to post a link to the video on social news website reddit.⁶ As the video began viral circulation on the day following its original airing, The Gregory Brothers quickly joined in the chorus of viral recombinations that were appearing by offering their musical version only a day after the clip’s initial posting.

However, as a result of injecting musical comedy into such a situation, the satire becomes more potentially problematic. Certainly, here, as in “pirates. drugs. gay marriage.” television news conventions are a target. The original clip is coverage of a crime, a break-in at the Dodson residence that had the potential to be even worse than it ultimately was. Including eyewitness testimony is a common element

of such reporting, and, given that Antoine was the one who stopped the incident from progressing, he is clearly an important witness. Of course, when such events occur, the manner and eloquence of such eyewitness testimony can vary widely. Still, one might want local television news producers to do their part in both preparing their eyewitnesses for the camera and using editing to convey the information as clearly and concisely as possible. In practice, anyone who has seen local television news broadcasts knows that even newsmakers with copious experience in front of cameras have trouble generating flawless, off-the-cuff sound bites. To be sure, the Dodson clip is of the unpracticed ilk; his is an instantaneous response to a violation of his family's safety in its immediate aftermath. His dress, a do-rag and a black tank top, and location, a housing project, belie the Dodson family's limited means. Inasmuch as the reporting of the event is fulfilling the function of notifying the local public of intrusive criminal activity in their community, it can also be seen as exploiting the near tragedy of a poor black family.

What complicates any reading of the original news clip even further is how Antoine's spur-of-the-moment interview actually unfolds. Rather than stumbling over his words or rambling incoherently, he comes across as composed and articulate. He clearly defines the situation in a way that does not cast his family as victims but rather as ever-diligent defenders of their domicile while also urging others to be proactive and issuing an emphatic warning to the perpetrator. His speaking style is charismatically performative, and even rhythmic, with his head swaying back and forth for dramatic emphasis and his pointing at the camera with a rolled tube of paper to underscore his resolve. It is easy to understand why three separate sound bites of his are used in the aired clip: he is a magnetic presence on the camera.

However, while Antoine clearly seized his moment, there is no way to lock down meaning. Especially as the clip began circulating virally online, the initial stakes of the segment (i.e., a report of local crime that a concerned viewer might find alarming) dissipated to the point where Antoine's dress and mannerisms became the main points of focus. The comments resulting from the clip's posting on reddit show that there are significant numbers of viewers who look at Antoine as a cartoonish embodiment of negative stereotypes even as many others see him as an empowered individual asserting defiance. In choosing to recombine such footage, The Gregory Brothers tread a fine line between uplifting their muse and denigrating him. As a self-identified gay African American man living in a housing project, Dodson was a marginalized and underrepresented figure with little control over how he was received by audiences. This led some commentators to question whether the expansive popularity of Dodson and the song were simply because his performative flamboyance played into negative stereotypes, while others worried that the comedy of it obscured or trivialized the terrible event that had spurred

the initial report: the attempted rape of a young woman in her family home.⁷ Such concerns call attention to a core tension within all viral (and social) media: when audiences have the power to choose what they want to circulate and how they want to see that content recombined, the potential for derogatory or, at the very least, unintended meanings to be made by subsequent audiences only increases.

Furthermore, having already spent over a year as a visible presence in Internet comedy and popular culture, the Brothers had moved from being small operators making catchy musical compositions with television news to being recognized as cunning satirists with an audience large enough to gain them profit-sharing through their YouTube channel and a job creating an “Auto-Tune the Ads” clip to act as a viral component of Sony’s 2009 holiday ad campaign. All this is to say that they were no longer so powerless, and in using the footage of Antoine, the power differentials in their work had shifted. In this case, they were established media-makers recombining the words and images of the relatively powerless. In moving from satirical jabs at politically powerful, elite television to engagements with more local news stories and user-generated online content, the dynamics of the Brothers’ work shifted, and eventually they created a new series, *Songify This*, to signal the change. As a bridging entry from their initial series, “Bed Intruder Song” became commercially viable as an audio-only digital download through iTunes. With the Brothers sharing revenue with their unintentional singer, they effectively helped Antoine to monetize his fleeting Internet celebrity. This does not control the way in which the song functions for audiences, who might regard it as a celebration of resilience, a jeering takedown of the disenfranchised, or something above or between. The profit-sharing also does not eliminate the power differential (though it did assist in Antoine attaining the means to move his family), even if it does position the Brothers more as mindful collaborators than opportunistic vultures.

While such engaged transmedial success is not in any way the dominant experience of viral video-makers or their source materials, *Auto-Tune the News* serves as a clear illustration of just how meaningful transmedial recombinations are within the arena of viral video. As more users are able to gain visibility, and in some cases power, through these practices, the meanings and values of their productions inevitably shift. The popularity of such work is undoubtedly impacting increasing numbers of television viewers (and media audiences in general), causing them to watch for moments of television excellence and excess that might be extracted, posted online, and potentially recombined. This seems like a positive development, attuning, if not awakening, audiences to more active, and potentially critical, viewing practices. The popularity of viral recombinations is in some ways just a modern manifestation of the types of borrowing and circulation that took place within folk cultures of the past, but with the tools of digital media allowing makers like The Gregory Brothers to use these practices to cultivate

audiences, it will be important to watch what such empowered makers accomplish with their new pathways to visible commentary.

NOTES

1. An earlier version of this discussion is available in David Gurney, “Recombinant Comedy, Transmedial Mobility, and Viral Video,” *Velvet Light Trap* 68 (Fall 2011): 3–13.
2. For more on precedents of parodying of television news, see Jeffrey P. Jones, *Entertaining Politics: Satiric Television and Political Engagement*, 2nd ed. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2010); Jonathan Gray, Jeffrey P. Jones, and Ethan Thompson, eds., *Satire TV: Politics and Comedy in the Post-Network Era* (New York: New York University Press, 2009).
3. “*The Rachel Maddow Show* for Friday, May 1, 2009,” MSNBC.com, May 4, 2009, <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/30561015/#.TlgVOTswNwW>.
4. Hey Obama—Get in the Fight!! “Auto-Tune the News #2: pirates. drugs. gay marriage,” *Talking Points Memo Reader Blog*, April 24, 2009, <http://tpmcafe.talkingpointsmemo.com/talk/blogs/wadeblazingame34/2009/04/auto-tune-the-news-2-pirates-d.php>; Lindsey Weber, “Auto-Tune: Almost Over? Our Favorite Auto-Tune Parodies,” *Urlesque*, April 24, 2009, <http://www.urlesque.com/2009/04/24/auto-tune-almost-over-our-favorite-auto-tune-parodies/>.
5. This is designated as episode 12b of the series and was subsequently retitled “BED INTRUDER SONG!!! (now on iTunes).”
6. panhead. “This actually aired on my local news today.” *reddit*, July 28, 2010. http://www.reddit.com/r/funny/comments/cuvn3/this_actually_aired_on_my_local_news_today/.
7. Andy Carvin, “The YouTube ‘Bed Intruder’ Meme: A Perfect Storm of Race, Music, Comedy And Celebrity,” *NPR All Tech Considered*, August 5, 2010, <http://www.npr.org/blogs/alltechconsidered/2010/08/05/129005122/youtube-bed-intruder-meme>.

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