

# 2017 Emmy Awards: Sean Spicer, self-congratulations and identity politics

David Walsh  
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The American media was more or less agreed Monday that the highlight of the 69th Annual Primetime Emmy Awards, honoring television programming over the past year, was the brief appearance by Donald Trump's former press secretary, Sean Spicer.

The Emmys, sponsored by the Academy of Television Arts & Sciences, are the equivalent for the television industry of the Oscars (film), Grammys (music) and Tonys (theater).

That a walk-on by Spicer, an extreme right-wing, thuggish and culturally backward figure, should be even considered, let alone staged, gives an indication of the level of artistic and intellectual unseriousness of those running the Emmys.

Comic and late night television talk show host Stephen Colbert, the host of Sunday's three-hour program on CBS (whose ratings continue to sink to all-time lows, according to *Variety*) has consistently attacked Donald Trump from the right since the November 2016 election. As we noted earlier this year, it was entirely predictable that Colbert and his well-heeled talk show host confreres would join the reactionary campaign to depict Trump as an ally or outright pawn of Russia's Vladimir Putin.

On Sunday, Colbert avoided the anti-Russian theme, but his introduction of Spicer to the generally astonished crowd spoke volumes—about him and the event as a whole.

Spicer became notorious in the first few months of the administration for his blatant and unapologetic lying on behalf of Trump, beginning with his absurd claim January 21 that the audience witnessing the new president's inauguration the day before “was the largest audience ... ever ... period” for such an event, “both in person and around the globe.”

*Saturday Night Live* (SNL), comic actress Melissa McCarthy made a name for herself this spring by pillorying Spicer as stupid, angry and bullying.

At the Emmy awards show, Colbert facetiously introduced Spicer, who left the White House in July, with the words, “Unfortunately, at this point we have no way of knowing how big our audience is. I mean, is there anyone who could say how big the audience is? Sean, do you know?”

Spicer wheeled out a portable lectern and told the crowd, “This will be the largest audience to witness an Emmys, period. Both in person and around the world.”

Even in the narrow, fetid confines of the entertainment industry, Colbert's decision provoked some expressions of outrage. These were some of the responses on Twitter:

“Sean Spicer is not funny or forgiven. If you lie in the name of fascism you are permanently stained. Go away,” “The only acceptable reason to invite Sean Spicer on stage is to have a trap door open up under him,” “Acting like Sean Spicer is just another funny guy is the same blurring of entertainment and politics that led to Trump becoming president,” “Five months ago, Sean Spicer denied that Hitler gassed people during the Holocaust. Sorry, but I'm not seeing the humor in that,” and “The audience at the Emmys should have booed Sean Spicer. As artists, we should have no interest in normalizing his hatred, fear and lies.”

The decision by Colbert and company to provide Spicer with even a modicum of legitimacy (according to CNN, the talk show host proposed the idea just days before the award ceremony) is not surprising, but that does not make it any less shameful. The differences between the top figures in the entertainment industry and the Trump administration are largely cosmetic.

The crimes of the Obama administration did not, as far as one could tell, trouble the sleep of anyone in these circles. The allegiance of the wealthy Hollywood crowd to the Democratic Party remains unbroken. To a considerable and unhealthy extent, the gathering Sunday was not an assembly of serious artists, but a celebration by wealthy celebrities.

Overall, in terms of public pronouncements, the 2017 Emmy award program, held—appropriately—in the Microsoft Theater in Los Angeles, was dominated by self-congratulation and racial and gender politics.

US television, according to its creators and top figures, has entered a new Golden Age, both in regard to quantity and quality. *Entertainment Weekly* noted Monday, for example, that in 2016 alone, “there were 455 original scripted television shows to choose from, compared with 182 in 2002. From 2011 to 2016, the number of scripted television shows—on broadcast, cable and digital platforms—increased by 71 percent.”

Without question, contrasted to the vacuous and debased state of feature filmmaking, television programming seems a shining light. Some genuinely gifted performers, creators and series were nominated and honored Sunday night. Television programs at this point are prepared to comment, if only in a limited manner, on the ghastliness and absurdity of American politics, the endless wars and military-intelligence conspiracies, and the moral and economic disaster produced by “free enterprise” in a fashion beyond the grasp of Hollywood big-budget filmmakers.

However, the advances that have been made are endangered by the constricted outlook of the creators, writers and directors. “Opposition” and “protest” are still by and large identified in the film, television and music universe with racial and gender politics.

Hence, according to the *New Yorker*, “The let’s-pat-ourselves-on-the-back montage about diversity in television was unnecessary. Diversity was evident in the people up on the stage. [Donald] Glover became the first African-American to win for directing a comedy. Lena Waithe was the first black woman to win for comedy writing, for the exceptional ‘Thanksgiving’ episode of ‘Master of None,’ which she wrote with Aziz Ansari. ‘The things that make us different—those are our superpowers,’ she said, thanking her ‘L.G.B.T.Q.I.A. family.’”

Commenting on the growing number of women who

took home Emmy awards, *Veep* star Julia Louis-Dreyfus said, “Let’s hope that this is the beginning of something even better in our country and in the world because I think the world would be a better place if women were in charge.” Talented, veteran actress Laura Dern (*Big Little Lies*) observed, along the same lines, “Thank God we’re seeing more and more women [on-screen and behind the scenes]. When I started at 11, even the makeup artist was a man.”

No one would oppose television programming becoming more reflective of the population as a whole, but this new “breadth” does not as of yet include, for the most part, the vast layers of the American people, women and men, of every ethnicity, suffering from the destruction of decent jobs, benefits, health care and education.



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