

The Production of Comedy: The Joke in the Age of Social Media

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Abstract

The joke is an essential comic format, and since great volumes of jokes circulate unattributed and without explicit context, the question of their origin requires answering. The current production of jokes is explored in this article, using interviews with stand-up comedians and the current literature of comedy. Comedians reveal a serious devotion to their joke writing, spending working time trawling their own experience and cultural exposure for potentially comic material which they then can structure as jokes. In carrying out this task, they are strongly concerned that the material they create will represent a message that is true to themselves (or “authentic”) rather than merely amusing. They use social media to test material and build their profile with potential audiences. In doing so, they accept the collateral effect that their jokes will quickly enter the communally owned resource of comic content that circulates orally and electronically.

Keywords

communication studies, communication, culture, technology, cultural communication, new media, performing arts

Introduction

This article explores the processes by which a specific form of new content is generated. The form is comedy, as represented by the joke. Two intermingled themes dominate this exploration: comedians’ need for their jokes to be recognized as their own personal (or authentic) creations, and the media environment in which the production of comedy is shaped. Omid Djalili’s comment on his own performance “This shit doesn’t write itself” (Nottingham Playhouse, February 20, 2012) introduces the topic very effectively. If comedy doesn’t write itself, where does it come from? Freud was interested in precisely this question. He remarks that “The great majority of jokes . . . are circulated anonymously; one would be curious to learn from what sort of people such productions originate” (Freud, 1905/2002, p. 193). This was precisely the source of the author’s own interest in the question when on the school playground in the 1950s he heard jokes that had clearly been given an elaborate structure by someone who fully understood how to contrive something that used conventional comic technique to prompt laughter. At the same time, they were of such infantile stupidity and filthiness that it was impossible to believe that they had ever been intended to appear in print or be performed in front of a paying audience, live or broadcast. Both Freud and the author were essentially asking their question in a pre-mass communication environment when most jokes were normally an anonymous oral phenomenon.

Freud (1905/2002) is still probably the most quoted authority on the nature of the joke itself. In his second chapter, on *The Technique of Jokes*, he discusses them as a combination

of [comic] technique and [humorous] thought. The thought is a perception of something anomalous whether in language (the sort of verbal coincidence that makes a pun), human behavior (someone’s quirks or tics), beliefs, relationships, political and social circumstances, culture both high and low, religion, and science. The comic technique is the presentation of this perception in a way that points up what the comedian identifies as its humorous qualities. The technique is most commonly structural and verbal, although comedians emphasize and illustrate their jokes with facial expressions and their body language. Even the most inspired and best structured joke is usually most effective when delivered with the judgment and timing of a practiced comedian and when emerging convincingly from a natural or well realized comic persona. What Freud said in 1905 holds true even today.

The second half of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st has become the era of the stand-up comedian (a performer who literally stands in front of an audience to deliver comic material). In this era it is possible to uncover much more about the creation of comic content than is true of earlier periods. In the United Kingdom particularly, and elsewhere to a significant but lesser extent, there is an enormous output of comedy in a range of different communication

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formats. Much of this is created by the stand-up comedians who perform it. It is not especially difficult to obtain insights into the creative processes of stand-up comedy. Many of the current creators of comedy are very self-conscious and open about this. Twenty-first century comedians would like to think that their jokes are correctly attributed to them and that their professional skills and abilities are properly understood. Jokes still circulate unattributed, with the Internet as chief medium for this. But the nature of the medium often permits anyone who is sufficiently interested to trace them back to a specific creator. An effect of this is that writers can now be more effectively judged as artists who make authentic personal statements through their comedy. What follows will explore the outpouring of new comic content, as far as possible through the words of comedians themselves, with the themes of media influences and authenticity as the main foci.

Methodology and Literature

The method adopted here is to develop a narrative in the manner usual in historical and literary studies. Use is made of original testimony derived from the author's ongoing program of interviews with comedians, earlier examples of which provided the evidence for a previous article (Sturges, 2010). In what follows, the date and location of an interview is given on its first use in the text, but not subsequently. Effectively, a small number of interviews and conversations is used to suggest something about the activity of a large community of performers. An estimate would suggest that Britain has hundreds, maybe thousands, of professional comedians constituting a higher number per capita than any other country, including the United States. To place this in proportion, the 5 million Danes support as few as 20 to 30 full-time comedians (Russell, 2013). Making a clear distinction between stand-up comedians and comic performers of theatre plays and films or radio and TV series and sketch shows is not possible. There is too much overlap. However, the main focus here is on individual comic performance rather than scripted sketch and full-length drama comedy on stage, radio, TV, and movies. We should, however, note that stand-up comedy routines are also recorded and broadcast on radio and TV and sold as videos.

In addition to interview material, much of the argument developed here is based on a reading of selected titles from the literature of comedy. Naturally using the literature begins with the essential insights provided by the scholarly classics. Freud (1905/2002) has already been cited and there is Bakhtin's (1968) analysis of carnival and Legman's (1968) tireless cataloguing of, and commentary on, the dirty joke. More recently, the literature of comedy has grown swiftly. Works by Moreall (1983), Palmer (1994), Jacobson (1997), and Lockyer and Pickering (2005) are worth mentioning as providing particularly relevant context. Henkle (1980) sets English popular comedy in a cultural context, as does Medhurst (2007) who draws on a rich selection from the

wealth of recent commentary. Specifically on the joke, Holt's (2008) elegant essay illustrates the form very effectively. A working comedian's thoughts on the subject can be found in Carr and Greeves (2006). This is very definitely not a scholarly work, and indeed much of the source material for a study such as the present one is popular in intent rather than scholarly. Thus, there are relevant general accounts of comedy during the period from Nathan (1971) and Fisher (1973). There is an account of a pioneering scriptwriting collective from McCann (2006); many textbooks on scriptwriting such as Wolfe (1992); and others on performance, of which Ritchie (2012) is a recent example. The outstanding contribution to this literature, however, is the remarkably candid and informative commentary on stand-up comedy of the performer and writer Stewart Lee (2010). What Lee does is to annotate transcripts of his own live comedy performances with a dense body of comments, explanations, confessions, challenges, and additional comic content. His contribution to the literature of stand-up comedy, and comedy in general, is a landmark.

Comedy and Broadcast Media

Before examining the current mode of production of comedy, it is necessary to look back at the immediate past. The past 70 years has seen the mutation of comedy from an art or entertainment performed entirely to live audiences to a form also disseminated by mass media and now, in particular, by social media. This process of change took place in the mid-20th century. In the 19th century, comedians were heard in the music halls: performance spaces known for their vulgarity and vitality and found all over Britain. Vaudeville was probably the closest American equivalent. Music hall declined and died away in the early 20th century, with variety theatre providing a new outlet for comedy. Variety in turn declined, but this time in competition with the early manifestations of broadcasting in the second half of the century. Live comedy in the United Kingdom largely retreated to the northern workingmen's club circuit. As will be explained later, the comedy of the clubs was generally considered unsuitable for media dissemination. Mid-century radio and TV essentially incorporated the blander and more acceptable content that characterized the variety tradition into sketch shows and situation comedy. With the exception of the clubs, comedy writing and performance continued to be driven by broadcast media until social media and a new comedy club circuit stimulated the fresh waves of comedy that are the subject of this article.

It is more or less a cliché that before mass media a comedian could build a long and successful career with little more material than was needed for a single performance, which could be presented in front of different audiences up and down the country. It might be a cliché, but the evidence suggests that it is essentially true. George Robey, 1869-1954, known as the Prime Minister of Mirth, was so preeminent in

the musical hall days that detailed commentary on his comic style and content has survived to be collated, for instance by Harding (1990). What becomes immediately obvious is that Robey did not depend on the strength of his jokes: It was his comic persona, his mode of delivery, and his songs, linked by comic patter, that were the source of his success. Audiences regarded this patter as sublimely funny and it is here that we might expect to find jokes. However, to the modern reader, transcripts of his material contain hardly any. He interacted with the audience through poses, gestures, facial expressions, and indignant accusations that they were reading unintended meanings into what he said.

A very different set of demands began to apply in comedy in the 1940s and 1950s. After the foundation of the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) in 1923, variety, as an entertainment form, transferred to radio more or less intact. The strains this created for comedians were apparent from the beginning, with an official view from the BBC in 1931 being that “few comedians are capable of writing their own material and the dearth of clever humorous writers is even greater” (Parker, 1977, p. 41). Comedy was nevertheless successful in radio. During the 1939-1945 War, comedy programs, most notably *It's That Man Again* (frequently referred to as *ITMA*), were scheduled almost every evening. The extent to which the catchphrases of broadcast comedians became part of the currency of everyday conversation shows how popular comedy was, and why it was regarded as an important contribution to national morale. The mass taste for radio comedy that had been nurtured in war time meant that in the post-war years, there was a continuing need for new comic output. Some of the response was predictable, drawing on the undemanding merriment, catchphrases, wordplay, and stereotypical characters already popular. This material was fed into half hour shows, or slots in longer radio variety programs, and used sketches, conversations, and monologues to deliver a flow of jokes.

Some of the material was developed by the performers themselves, but some was from writers who provided material of differing levels of quantity and quality. Thus Bob Monkhouse began his career in comedy as a teenager in 1945, selling pages of his jokes to comedians for a few shillings at theatre stage doors (Monkhouse, 1993).

The career of Frankie Howerd exemplifies the struggles of a great performer who was not himself a writer. During his short first radio season in 1946, he effectively used up the entire resources of material that he had been touring around variety theatres for years. At first his response was “studying a pile of joke books, cannibalising their contents and then inserting enough stutters, hesitations and digressions to ensure that every single joke could be relied on to go a long, long way” (McCann, 2004, p. 80) Eventually Howerd's improvised research proved inadequate for his needs and in November 1947 he hired Eric Sykes to write for him. Howerd understood his debt to Sykes and those who wrote for him subsequently. “When it came to writers, he knew that no

other comedian in the country had shown them, both as individuals and as members of a profession, so much trust, respect and support” (McCann, 2004, p. 163). Howerd and his writers later successfully adapted to television. BBC Television, which had a tentative beginning before the war, began to broadcast in earnest after the end of hostilities, but did not become a significant vehicle for comedy until the 1950s.

What was distinctive about the early years of mass media, compared with the previous age of live performance, was that the creation of comedy became a major aspect of performers' work, and indeed the whole profession of the scriptwriters who served them. This theme of comedy writing as work has become even more significant in the period as stand-up comedy has become the dominant mode. What has changed in the age of stand-up comedy is that the balance has shifted toward a concept of the comedian as a kind of *auteur*. There is thus a tension that will be apparent in the following sections between the creation of jokes as a form of artistic endeavor and as an occupation serving the demand for novelty of mass media audiences. The contemporaneous development and growth of social media has both raised levels of demand and permitted the comedian to interact with audiences in a way that offers unprecedented reach and speed.

The Joke in Stand-Up Comedy

Probably the dominant theme of commentary on comedy today is the search for what we will call “authenticity.” An overarching idea of what authenticity might mean emerged in its British version with the “alternative comedy” of Alexei Sayle, Jo Brand, Ben Elton, and others in the 1980s. It was first heard in London's Comedy Store, and it still dominates the content of routines heard in venues up and down the country. If it was alternative to anything, that was to the two comic traditions that emerged from music hall and variety. These were light comedy, as broadcast on mainstream radio and TV and as performed on stage, and the comedy of the northern workingmen's clubs. The former set out to amuse but not challenge. The latter tapped into a coarser, crueller strain of comedy in which there is a kind of disgust for the body and its functions, and women and all kinds of minorities might be insulted and demeaned. It was perhaps for the workingmen's clubs that the coarse and ugly jokes of the 1950s playground had been created. This form of comedy was seldom if ever broadcast in unexpurgated form, although a few comedians such as Bernard Manning and Roy “Chubby” Brown built careers that partially lapped over into the media world from the grubby, male-dominated live venues of the north of England. Commentators generally draw attention to alternative comedy's rejection of political and social establishments in favor of human values, the honest way it embraced even the most taboo of subject matter, and its angry, expletive-laden voice. It is personal comedy created in this spirit that we mean when we talk of authenticity.

But we use the term in a rather broader sense to cover the comedian's ownership of both content (Freud's "thought") and expression (Freud's "technique"). In this article, authenticity refers much more to jokes that reveal a personal voice than it does to jokes that embody a social critique.

When we talk of the work of creating comedy and the artistic pressures, we also need to talk of the incentives and rewards. Audiences noisily express their intolerance of stale and familiar material. According to Bethany Black (Interview, Manchester, November 28, 2011), a few comedians do still behave as if they were in the music hall age and tour what is basically a single set or routine round small venues season after season. However good this set might be, the lack of new material means that they have no genuine prospect of breaking through into the world of radio, TV, stadium gigs, and DVDs. All of these demand novelty. At this point, it is important to stress that although the payment offered for a 20-min slot in a small comedy club might scarcely cover the expenses incurred in travelling there, in contrast, the financial rewards of success are enormous. A few very successful comedians such as Peter Kay, Jimmy Carr, and Michael McIntyre earn annual sums measured in millions. The basis for this level of success usually involves a regular TV spot, corporate entertainment gigs, tours of major theatres and even stadiums, DVDs of live performances, book contracts, voice-over work, and other peripherals. Even just a smaller impact in some of these forms can represent a comfortable middle-class income level. Comedians who care both about the quality and integrity of their material and hope for major success effectively commit themselves to produce great numbers of new jokes each year. This is impossible without both skill and application, but working with social media does facilitate the process in ways that will be illustrated.

The Tension Between Effort and Authenticity

Comedy writing is characterized very effectively by Schneider (2009):

It takes a lot of work to make a good joke. I know it's not work in the sense of a seven-year old child down an Angolan tin mine, but I also know some jokes just pop out spontaneously. But more often than not, the birth of a joke is a long, painful process, without gas and air, or epidural (p. 3).

Ritchie (2012, p. 157) quotes John Cleese as saying that it might take him and Graham Chapman 2 hr to generate 2 min of material. Bethany Black describes similar levels of work. Using her own life and observations as her main sources, she sometimes finds readymade jokes emerge. Her experience is that these tend not to be as good as those that require work (for instance to set them in character). She aims to devote at least 3 hr per day to writing and tests material via social media, reckoning that about 20 favorable responses indicate

that a joke will work. A comedian such as Gary Delaney (Interview, Derby, October 18, 2010) whose material consists of those tiny comic units we call "one liners" has to generate enormous numbers of jokes. Delaney records them on his phone as they occur to him. He calculates that only about 1 in 20 is worth persisting with for his own routines (though he may use the best of the rest in scripts for other comedians).

The nature of this persistence, which turns a comic idea into a well-formed joke, naturally varies from comedian to comedian. Lee (2010) suggests that "even though critics and TV Commissioners always talk about our art form in terms of its content, it is the rhythm, pitch, tone and pace of what we do—the non-verbal cues—that are arguably more important" (p. 299). So we can envisage the work as first identifying or creating content and then giving that content the form in which it can be performed successfully. Bethany Black identifies a threefold formula—[writing] skills, turnover [of content], and a Unique Selling Point [or comic persona]—which provides for this. Turnover might merely be based on the resolution to create fresh material, but skills include both the writing of jokes and embedding them in a persona. The persona tends to be presented to an audience as if it is a truthful representation of the comedian's attitudes, beliefs, behavior, but in fact it is always more or less artificial. Stewart Lee (2010) puts it in the following way: "The personal is absent from my work. The me you see on stage is largely a construct, based on me at my worst, my most annoying, my most petty and my most patronizing" (p. 249). Despite what he says, this is, of course, intensely personal and, indeed, authentic even if it only represents part of his personality and part of his natural voice.

Lee, always the most trenchant of commentators, calls those performers whose comedy is written for them as "cheats." For the comedian to avoid being a cheat, in Lee's terms, is not an easy assignment. It is important to emphasize the point that this represents a break with the past. Griffin (2005) says of Ken Dodd, the great survivor of the old-school, that he does not reveal himself in his comedy.

This point of view is one of the schisms between comics of the old and newer schools. The younger breed clearly thinks that comedy has to be about something and to say something about the comedian; the old pros of Dodd's generation think the opposite is true. Funny is funny: no more no less. (p. 201)

Nowadays, there is a core audience, a body of critics, and a community of fellow writers and performers that does not share Dodd's view. This community demands that comedians should not merely deliver highly polished new content, but also speak with their own personal voice.

New comedy is expected to avoid the familiar themes (mother-in-law jokes, racial stereotyping, etc.) of the pre-stand-up era, but where can the comedian look for inspiration? The idea, sometimes expressed, that only the experience

of conflict and the awareness of death produce great comedy is unhelpful, given that most British and American comedians have enjoyed comparatively trouble free lives. A few comedians, who have grown up in harder circumstances, do have experience that offers insight into the extremes. Zoe Lyons (Interview, Derby, May 14, 2008) has interesting things to say about the caution with which she exposes her own experience as a gay woman to public view. Bethany Black does not shrink from developing comedy as a transgendered lesbian woman. For the majority of comedians, there is a choice of big social and political themes and the exploration of daily and domestic experience. Many of them avoid the big themes and risk banality in the small scale and personal. An alert comedian observes the daily life with an eye for the bizarre. Delaney's starting point could be a cliché, a neologism, something heard on the radio (particularly late night talk shows), song lyrics, or other "found" material. Black might see the unintended comedy in an overheard conversation or the "inspirational" statements people place on Facebook. Comedians also structure jokes around phrases and jingles from familiar advertisements or popular TV shows. This is material requiring transmutation from its essential triviality. Twisting and manipulating it into viable joke form is work, and the effectiveness of that work needs to be tested.

Testing New Comedy and Social Media

Much of the testing of new material today is no different from what it might have been in the 19th and 20th centuries. It is done in small venues where quite well-known comedians will perform work in progress to small audiences for a negligible fee. Sarah Millican (Interview, Derby, January 21, 2008) follows a personal rule that if material she tests on an audience succeeds on three out of five occasions, it is strong enough to take its place in her regular live routines. What is distinctive about the current age of comedy is that social media now offer a powerful alternative to this process. Exposing new jokes via social media has two values—it is both an invaluable testing ground for material and a means of building up a profile with a potential audience. Delaney acquired 12,000 Twitter followers in 18 months and was able to track about 25% of ticket sales for his 2010 Edinburgh run to this following. He finds that using Twitter (not Facebook which has too static an "audience") works better than just sitting in front of a screen or a sheet of paper. However, there are two downsides to this. Delaney calculates that if one of his jokes gets so re-posted that it goes viral, within little more than 24 hr it is circulating without attribution. After 72 hr audiences can be heard commenting "that just an old pub joke," rendering good material almost unusable. However, some material transcends this and works despite the familiarity. He hopes to make an audio CD of this "evolution-tested" material as a kind of heritage of his comedy.

The second downside to exposing new material on social media is that other comedians may appropriate the jokes. This is a common occurrence which occasionally surfaces publicly: Delaney, Tim Vine, Marcus Brigstocke, Phil Jupitus, and others have discussed this (Schneider, 2009). Their response varies from largely impotent anger expressed via the networks and in the media but also, more directly, protests directed at audience members who appear to be recording their act. This is not new and the author well remembers the late Mike Reid at a private club performance in the early 1970s refusing to continue while an audience member made notes. At the other end of the spectrum of responses, there is a resigned acceptance that this "borrowing" is just an incentive to make their own comedy unique and less likely to be passed off as someone else's. This is a problem. Originality is hard to achieve precisely because jokes take standard forms, and because they circle around familiar topics. The comedians of the past did not worry too much: the familiarity of much of their material might well have been reassuring for audiences. They were naturally borrowers, purchasers, and recyclers of jokes. If they used someone else's joke, audiences would probably not notice, or maybe even relish its familiarity. As we have already pointed out, here were many willing sellers of jokes, and published jokes and other comic material could provide ideas and inspiration. The comedian as researcher is not a completely unknown phenomenon and Ken Dodd, for instance, is both a great archivist of comic material and an enthusiastic user of libraries (Conversation after performance at Derby, June 5, 2010). Today, the competitiveness of the comedy world and the media exposure of new jokes make the question of originality a more urgent concern.

The ultimate intention is to create a complete comic routine from newly-written jokes (and carefully prepared improvisations). This requires a further input of hard work. Stewart Lee creates what he calls "Epic shows full of call backs and cross references or supporting shifts of mood or emotional gambits" (Lee, 2010, p. 95) that rely on a narrative or conceptual through line. It is something akin to this that a comedian must create to have any hope of more than just small venue exposure. The testing ground is likely to be a month's residency at the Edinburgh Festival in August of the year. It is here that critical attention and the chance of high-profile bookings can be generated. Edinburgh comedy shows are expected to last for an hour, which means that a comedian's normal 20 min set will need to be replaced or expanded into something much more like one of Lee's epics. The extra work this demands is obvious, but a comedian's professionalism points in this way already. Black believes that the life cycle of any comedy set, short or long, should be no more than 6 months. This means that while touring one set, another must be in preparation.

For the comedian who performs one-liners, the demands are very much greater. Gary Delaney, one of the outstanding one-liner comedians, knows his material works best in a

20-min format, describes the structuring of an hour-long Edinburgh set. He aims to give the material an upward trajectory, starting gently before introducing a more shocking theme or a mini-narrative. He will package different parts of the set with contrasting “voices.” Occasional songs or bits of stage business can be used as punctuation between the parts. The aim is to create rises and troughs, light and shade, with some fixed and some floating breakpoints to avoid the flagging of audience attention. Yet at the same time as he subtly shapes his material, he employs total openness, telling the audience that “these are just jokes and some are in bad taste.” The elaborate artifice of his Edinburgh-length routine is considerable even though the consistent tone of his personal voice is always apparent. The virtue of a fully realized routine suitable for presentation at Edinburgh is that if it is good enough, it can be used for a tour of major venues and an eventual commercially available DVD.

Concluding Remarks

There is, in Britain and the United States and to a lesser extent in other countries, a content producing community that creates the thousands of small, often ephemeral, works of commentary on human life that we call jokes. We have illustrated how in response to the demands of mass media the writing of jokes became a painstaking professional process, despite the process’s essential playfulness. The possibilities presented by social media now, in turn, allowed comedians to engage with an extensive public, not limited by presence at a specific venue, while their work is in the process of creation. Social media are both an outlet for content and a stimulus for fresh production. Services such as Facebook and Twitter disseminate content at a rate which, given the requirement for novelty in comedy first noted by Freud, might seem to threaten to exhaust the production capacity. Indeed, critics periodically speculate that the resources are becoming exhausted and that new comedy is no longer of the same quality as before. It is reasonable to suggest that the demand for authenticity, which comedians and critics impose on the task of writing comedy, actually contributes strongly to more and better quality comic material. Certainly, the production capacity seems to respond with fresh material constantly appearing from both new and established writers and performers.

On every night of every year, comedians try out new material which they themselves have created in their own authentic voice in pubs, clubs, and small theatres, but crucially this is only part of the story. The extent to which this material has already withstood the test of exposure via social media makes it possible to suggest that the media environment itself is a kind of engine for stimulating new comedy. This might make it sound as though ideas plus social media equals jokes. This is far from the case. Whether a comedian explores the most problematic recesses of human behavior, as does Lee, or generates inspired wordplay, like Delaney, it

is expected that there will be an underlying truth and coherence to the material. Comedians who are seen to be giving something of themselves are valued more highly than those who just seek to amuse. The comedian in the age of social media is both an artist and a technician employing a range of creative and communication skills to produce new jokes with the flavor of authenticity. Some of the new material that they create is rubbish: some is gold. Today this distinction can emerge fast and decisively. Social media are both a challenge and a stimulus for the comedian. There is only one consistent feature between the pre-media age, the age of broadcasting, and the current age of social media. This is that someone somewhere is exploring their own responses to life and polishing this into new jokes that can be offered up to audiences. Style, scale, and media vary, but the joke remains.

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Author Biography

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