

Not for the Easily Offended ...

The Necessity of Controversial Humor

*“If you can't joke about the most horrendous things in the world, what's the point of jokes?  
What's the point in having humor? Humor is to get us over terrible things.”*

— Ricky Gervais

The function of humor is complex, ambiguous and at times even paradoxical. While some seek the use of jokes as a simple distraction from reality through easy punchlines and one-liners, others search for more elaborate humor that addresses taboos, politics or seemingly unfunny topics. Comedy has always divided opinions and will always continue to do so because of its subjectivity – there is not a single joke in the entire history of comedy everyone will find funny. Therefore, the function of the comedian is contentious. Are they supposed to be the buffoon that entertains the crowd or do they take up the role of the social commentator to use humor as a vehicle for raising awareness? It is the professional risk of the comedian to fall flat or to even draw criticism, especially when addressing social justice issues or shocking and almost unbearable topics. But it has also been proven that a comedic take on a complex topic can educate and increase knowledge. Humor addressing societal problems can inspire, it can change minds and it can shape public conventions. Renaissance theories have already stressed comedy's moral function through imitating "the common errors of our life" (Kastan). Albeit common, these errors do not have to be superficial but can mirror deep-rooted problems of our current and past society. The question of what is acceptable does constantly arise. Are there any taboos? Can you make fun of anything and anyone?

Before diving into this matter, it is vital to understand how humor works, what it is that makes something funny. Although many studies have been published on the nature of humor,

researchers agree to a greater or lesser extent that "humor is typically characterized by some form of incongruity – a conflict between our expectations and the reality of the joke" (Chattoo, Feldman). Psychologist Willibald Ruch comments: "humor involves the bringing together of two normally disparate ideas, concepts, or situations in a surprising or unexpected manner". This incongruity is embedded in a playful, non-edifying and non-threatening context which clarifies that it is intended for enjoyment. The embedding is crucial for the conveying of the fun-element: "humor requires a visual or linguistic cue that shifts us into a playful, rather than serious, state of mind—at least momentarily" (Chattoo, Feldman).

The playful state of mind and the understanding of the jokes is exactly why comedy is the perfect method to address issues of every description. The audience does not perceive what is being said as a lesson, it does not bore or instruct them, but makes them laugh. Nevertheless, it still educates because it sticks and ideally makes you think, rethink or question. The comedian can use his set to comment on issues that might be inaccessible for the wider public. Comedy helps to draw attention to the message itself but also to the issue at the root of the joke. The positive emotion that is evoked through the laugh expands the audience attention and promotes deeper thinking. When Stephen Colbert, host of *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert*, used his former *Comedy Central* show *The Colbert Report* to create his own Political Action Committee (PAC), he managed to make campaign finance law comprehensible. Starting in 2011 during the U.S. presidential campaign, he used his satirical humor to educate his audience about the influence of PACs, "the lack of transparency in the U.S. campaign finance system and the corrupt role that money can play in democratic politics" (ibid.). For almost two years, he used his PAC *Americans for a Better Tomorrow, Tomorrow* to outline the importance of understanding how PACs work and why they are so influential, simultaneously mocking the American campaign finance system. Colbert therefore used his platform to humorously approach the lack of knowledge about the procedure and importance of a boring and dry, yet

important topic: PACs. Nevertheless, the audience was educated and felt entertained instead of being taught.

Evermore comedians are using their outlet to include politics, especially in the United States. It is not surprising that more and more jokes about the President are being written when Donald Trump is such a laughingstock and delivers enough material for several hours of stand-up comedy – the jokes write themselves. Michelle Wolf even took it a step further when she publicly made fun of the president-elect and his administration at the 2018 White House Correspondents' Dinner. Trump was mocked by Wolf for his second unattendance with the words: "Of course, Trump isn't here, if you haven't noticed. And I know, I know, I would drag him here myself but it turns out the President of the United States is the one pussy you're not allowed to grab". While being booed by the audience, Trump's supporters, she reminded them that he was the one who said it first, addressing the issue of his misogyny that lead to Women's Marches all over the country and world. After luring the audience into a game of *Call and Response* where she says: "Trump is so broke" and the audience answers: "How broke is he?", Wolf called out his connections to Russia, especially during the campaign period: "He had to borrow money from the Russians and now he's compromised and susceptible to blackmail and possibly responsible for the collapse of the Republic. Yay, it's a fun game!". During her twenty-minute routine, Wolf fired shots at absent people as well as people sitting directly in front of or next to her including Kellyanne Conway, Ivanka Trump, Sarah Huckabee Sanders or Mike Pence. About Sanders Wolf says: "We are graced with Sarah's presence tonight. I have to say I'm a little star-struck. I love you as Aunt Lydia in *The Handmaid's Tale*. Mike Pence, if you haven't seen it, you would love it". Again, referencing the extreme lack of respect for and degrading treatment of women from several Republican politicians. After taunting every higher-ranked person of Trumps administration, she sat back down amongst all the people she just offended.

But the point is that she is not wrong, and this is not a matter of perspective. Like Ricky Gervais said: "Just because you're offended, doesn't mean you're right". Michelle Wolf used her free-speech rights to critique several different issues by being partly messy and impolite. She referenced facts that only insult the people who do not want to hear them. The risk of offending your audience with your jokes is always present, particularly when using controversial material. Therefore, the comedian does not only have to think about the content but also about the context. Do they want to educate by provoking the views of the audience or by shocking through addressing taboo subjects? Fact is that the comedian has huge potential to inspire people and actually make a change. Their entertainment value decreases the discounting of the message and can work more persuasively: "if audiences are deeply entertained by comedy, they no longer see the message as merely a joke but as something worthy of serious consideration" (ibid.). Playing safe does not work as effectively as almost overstepping boundaries. Therefore, the risk of offending somebody has to be taken.

Ultimately, this means that any person and any issue should be allowed to be used as material for jokes as long as the comedian punches up. Focus should be on the comedic intention, that is the message they want to propagate. Marginalized or less visible groups of society, whether due to race and ethnicity, religion, sexuality and so forth, can use humor as a platform to voice their opinions which they often cannot do in mainstream media or culture. In his 2016 stand-up special *Michael Che Matters*, Michael Che addresses police brutality towards African-Americans: "I like to start with race stuff because I feel like right now there is a lot of tension. Blacks and cops aren't getting along. I don't know if you've seen the news in the past 400 years but ... Apparently we have hit a rough patch". Even in the light of the current *Black Lives Matter* protests arisen from the murder of George Floyd by police officers, Che's statement is funny because it does not make fun about the actual brutality but about the fact that nothing has changed and some people are only just now realizing the maltreatment of people

of color. It is funny because it is sad. He even mentions that he, as an African-American, finds it "hysterical" to joke about it. Continuing his set by talking about *Black Lives Matter*, Che makes fun about the anti-movements aka racists:

"We can't agree on anything anymore. As a country, we just can't agree. [...] We can't even agree on Black Lives Matter. That's a controversial statement. Black lives matter. Not matters more than you, just matters. Matters. Just matters. That's where we're starting the negotiations. Matters. We can't agree on that shit? What the fuck is less than matters? Black lives exist? Can we say that?"

Again, Che uses his voice, platform and humor to convince his audience about the ridiculousness of the inequality that people of color are experiencing in the United States. He even includes the controversial *All Lives Matter* movement and humorously explains why it is ludicrous and only supporting the racist thought:

"They don't tell you black lives don't matter. [...] That's not the argument. They hit you with that slick shit. Like 'Well, all lives matter'. Really? Semantics? That would be like if your wife came up to you and was like: 'Do you love me?'. And you were like: 'Baby, I love everybody. What you talking about?'"

Including your own background and tackling deep-rooted societal injustice is a way of improving the viewers' attitudes towards an issue that might not concern themselves. But, as already mentioned, the intention is what matters. Depending on the analogy the comedian is telling, it can be a distraction from the actual issue rather than an engagement with it. It would be pointless to bluntly make fun of stereotypes and only feed into the problem. The intention should be to foster more open-minded views and minimize social divides.

"Humor can help us confront and deny social problems; it can attract and repel, and it can bridge social divides just as it can ostracize and malign" (ibid.). Comedy can act as a useful and promising tool to make audiences more responsive and less critical towards political, social

critical or complex information. While humor does have a valuable function, it is important to bear in mind its unpredictability. One can never know if the joke lands or if its message is of use. Although comedy offers a unique platform which can address many different groups of society, there is no guarantee: "comedy is not an airtight, infallible remedy to the challenges faced by social justice advocates both now and in the future" (ibid.). Comedians are not journalists, they are entertainers – they do not have to fact-check everything they say or are bound to accuracy. Nevertheless, they can establish a certain credibility and believability which they can use to incorporate serious matters and educate.

People have to stop being offended by every little thing everyone is saying, especially by what comedians are joking about, and think about their intentions. Of course, humor is always subjective and dependent on social and cultural backgrounds. One does not have to find every joke funny but taking up everything offensively completely misses the point. Humor has to be controversial. It has to break with taboos. And it has to polarize. Otherwise, it is entirely meaningless and forgettable.