

How Comedy Works [to Change the World]



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OVERVIEW

Comedy is a powerful source of influence and information. In the digital age, comedy is more available than ever before. At the same time, the need to engage the public in social problems is profound. How can comedy be taken seriously as a method to bring people into social issues?

FIVE WAYS can be strategic in public engagement about serious social challenges:

1 **Attracting Attention**

Comedy attracts audience attention – and holds it.

In advertising about commercial products, humor is a well-established tactic given its ability to cut through message clutter, capture audience attention, and improve the audience's ability to remember the messages.¹ Beyond extensive evidence of the effects of humor in commercial advertising,² this level of impact has been demonstrated in the context of political and civic communication,³ and in response to humorous public health messages.⁴

2 **Feeling**

Audiences can be persuaded through comedy—but comedy's route to persuasion is more about feeling and caring than learning.

Comedy's ability to persuade is a central element that connects with social change. Learning more is not necessarily a precursor to developing a favorable attitude or taking action.⁵ While comedy and entertainment are

not the dominant media genres for audiences to learn purely factual information, they are important vehicles to fuel audiences' attitudes and perceptions.⁶ As individuals enjoy the comedy message and the messenger, they are less likely to scrutinize and counter-argue against the information, which improves the conditions for persuasion.⁷

3

Entering Complex Social Issues

Comedic treatment of serious issues helps make complex civic topics accessible—and amplifies serious information.

In the area of civic issues, researchers have demonstrated a “gateway” effect, in which entertaining or comedic portrayals of serious issues open the door for audiences to pay increased attention to subsequent serious treatment of issues in traditional news media.⁸ Piggybacking complex issues onto entertainment media treatments – including comedy – can have two major effects, according to this thinking: providing minimal (new) exposure to complex issues, and providing an available knowledge framework that can help audiences make sense of serious information about the same issues in the future.⁹

4

Breaking Down Social Barriers

Comedy can introduce people, social issues and new norms in non-threatening, “non-othering” ways that encourage identification and connection, rather than alienation.

According to the parasocial contact hypothesis, based on the powerful “parasocial,” or pseudo, relationships we experience with mediated characters, exposure to positive entertainment portrayals of minority groups can decrease individuals' levels of prejudice toward those groups.¹⁰ In other words, encountering social issues and norms through light-hearted entertainment and comedy portrayals can be a pathway to breaking down barriers to acceptance. Suggested by existing research, this impact may be greatest for social issues and people with whom the audience has the least amount of real-world contact.¹¹

5

Sharing With Others

People share comedy to create shared cultural moments and display personal identity, amplifying serious messages.

Sharing a funny media product is a way to express both individual values and identities, and to commemorate shared cultural moments. In this context, humor in the digital era has been shown to drive individuals to share funny messages with peers, inviting and sparking conversations.¹² Sharing funny messages online – including messages about a serious topic – can multiply the reach of the message.^{13 14}



“When humor works, it works because it’s clarifying what people already feel. It has to come from someplace real.”

- TINA FEY, COMEDY PRODUCER, DIRECTOR & WRITER

Comedy Genres

1 | Satire



THE BASICS

As a longtime tradition in popular culture, satire entertains through humor while also offering a mechanism for political or social commentary on a state of affairs. To understand satirical jokes and to find them funny, individuals engage in active, involved processing known as “frame-shifting” – making the connection with the original information that is the target of the joke.¹⁶ With this kind of humor, the audience’s focus on “getting the joke” may reduce careful scrutiny of the message.¹⁷

CAUTION

Researchers have cautioned that the bar for potential audience impact might be too high for satire in social issues. Rather than learning and persuasion, the important effects of cultural connection, raising awareness and adding an element of play into serious social issues might be the more realistic objectives.¹⁸ When dealing with issues that have well-established ideological or partisan perspectives, satire doesn’t really change minds. When information delivered via satire is ambiguous – often the very characteristic that makes satire amusing – individuals respond in ways that correspond with their original attitudes about the issue.¹⁹

CASE STUDY: FULL FRONTAL WITH SAMANTHA BEE

With the February 2016 premiere of the late-night TBS faux news satire show, *Full Frontal with Samantha Bee*, the comic and former correspondent for *The Daily Show* made history as the sole woman host in the late-night-satire genre. Like

the other hits of the genre, Bee's show takes on social issues of the day with a now-familiar editorial tone characterized by biting wit, deadpan satirical commentary, interviews and video montages that have quickly racked up hundreds of thousands of views. But in a departure from her fellow faux-news brethren, Bee's satire is also distinctly feminist, with frequent treatment related to gender politics.²⁰

2 | Scripted Entertainment Storytelling



THE BASICS

For comedy in entertainment portrayals, influence comes from liking the characters, feeling connected to them, and experiencing emotions (joy, laughter, amusement). Humor has been found to reduce individuals' counter-arguing against messages experienced through an entertaining, funny format.²¹ By normalizing controversial social issues and marginalized social groups, the underlying power of entertainment storytelling kicks in as audiences develop parasocial relationships with characters, finding human connections and decreasing feelings of prejudice.²²

CAUTION

To engage comedy in this way without trivializing the seriousness of a social issue is a difficult balance. There's some evidence that humor about a social issue in this context may inadvertently make the issue itself appear to be one that doesn't need to be taken seriously.²³ There is other evidence that shows comedy does not necessarily mean viewers do not take the issue seriously.²⁴ In other words, every topic and example is probably different. Regardless, normalizing the exposure to characters is meaningful and important, and comedy can help.²⁵

CASE STUDY: BLACK-ISH

ABC's hit sitcom, *Black-ish*, about a two-generation African-American and bi-racial family, premiered in 2014 to critical acclaim and high viewership. The show has comically spotlighted issues including gun control, the water crisis in California, sustainability, and of course, race relations and racial history in America. In September 2015, the program broke cultural taboos by devoting its season premiere episode to a scenario in which the younger son character uses the "N-word" in a school talent show by quoting from a Kanye West song, "Goldigger." The family discusses the history and contemporary use of the word in a broader discussion about race relations and racism in the United States. The episode was covered by several media outlets, and one review summed it up: "It's rare that an episode of television can tackle an important topic and find a way to demonize no one, while staying funny. 'THE Word' [*Black-ish* episode title] works because it's not an episode with answers; it's one with questions."²⁶



"TV comedy that self-consciously defines itself as "comedy" is taking on subjects like racism and sexism and inequality and issues including police brutality and trigger warnings and intersectional feminism and helicopter parenting and the end of men. Its jokes double as arguments."

- THE ATLANTIC ²⁷

3 | Marketing & Advertising



THE BASICS

Humor is used in commercial advertising for specific reasons: “to attract individuals’ attention; to promote a positive attitude toward the ad and toward the brand; to enhance purchase intention; and last but not least, to improve the memory for the content of the ad (i.e., arguments, slogan).”²⁸ Humor in advertising significantly increases positive attitudes toward the ad, attention, and positive affect or emotion²⁹—and humor in advertising is also memorable. Comedy in advertising is persuasive because of its “affective” ability to spark emotions.³⁰

CAUTION

Message appeals in a short-form ad-like context are not monolithic. Encouraging overt behavior change or some kind of action on behalf of the audience is a different task, for example, than encouraging a positive level of awareness or attitude about a serious issue.³¹

CASE STUDY: ALS ICE BUCKET CHALLENGE

In the summer of 2014, millions of people clicked on funny videos—posted and shared on social media platforms—to raise awareness and money for ALS, or Lou Gehrig’s disease, to benefit the ALS Association. The effort expanded to celebrities and non-celebrities alike, eventually culminating in \$200 million raised for ALS research and services to individuals living with the disease³²—an increase of more than 7,000 percent from the association’s \$2.8 million raised during the same time frame during the year before.³³ Although the videos were amusing, the reasons for the campaign’s donation success have been attributed less to the humorous approach and more to people’s need for self-identification with a worthy cause; the precise, goal-setting 24-hour “call to action” for the challenge; and a

mildly painful approach that allowed participants to feel like martyrs—and share selfies and videos of themselves.³⁴

4 | Stand-Up & Sketch Comedy

FUNNY or DIE

THE BASICS

Evolving from Vaudeville in the United States, stand-up comedy’s influential breakout household names were social commentators, including George Carlin and Lenny Bruce, known for taking on taboo topics directly and challenging the status quo perspective on social issues.^{35 36} Stand-up comedy is able to occupy a “marginal safe place” in which normally “subversive ideas” are granted license to be openly heard and discussed.³⁷ Regardless of the precise comedy style of stand-up comics, audience members who regard the comedy as very funny activate “reward processing” in the brain – that is, audiences experience a feeling of pleasure, a kind of mental reward, the more amusing they find the stand-up comedy to be.³⁸

CAUTION

By pointing out power dynamics inherent in social issues such as poverty and inequality, stand-up comedy can inadvertently reinforce power dynamics instead of effectively skewering them – including perpetuating racial stereotypes.³⁹ It’s important to see and hear stand-up and sketch comics with different perspectives. Stand-up comedy is also culturally specific and may not travel well across country borders.⁴⁰

CASE STUDY: FUNNY OR DIE

Beyond its faux talk show, *Funny or Die's* short-form comedy videos have directly engaged in serious social issues, leading to media coverage and renewed public scrutiny. After allegedly dumping many tons of toxic waste into Ecuador's water system, failing to take responsibility and instead producing and distributing a new image-focused advertising campaign called "We Agree" a few months after the BP oil spill in the Gulf, the oil company Chevron was in the hot seat in 2010 when *Funny or Die* parodied the campaign with a comedy video and website of its own, "Chevron Thinks We're Stupid."⁴¹ The sketch comedy campaign received media coverage from outlets including *The Huffington Post* and the *Los Angeles Times*, and the "counter-campaign" supporters created their own comedy ad spoofs to share with *Funny or Die*. Amazon Watch and the Rainforest Action Network distributed a joint press release to media about the sketch comedy video, calling it "the latest chapter in a national grassroots media campaign that has overshadowed oil giant Chevron's new multi-million dollar PR effort."⁴²



“The more an audience cares, the harder it laughs.”

- **NORMAN LEAR, COMEDY PRODUCER, DIRECTOR & WRITER**

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