THE LAUGHTER EFFECT: THE [SERIOUS] ROLE OF COMEDY IN SOCIAL CHANGE
The Laughter Effect: The [Serious] Role of Comedy in Social Change is the second in a three-part investigation about comedy and social influence. All were directed and written by Caty Borum Chattoo, produced under the auspices of the Center for Media & Social Impact at American University’s School of Communication. All three projects were funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. The first project, Entertainment, Storytelling & Social Change in Global Poverty, an experimental design study that examined the persuasive impact of the comedic documentary film, Stand Up Planet, was published in February 2015; it was funded under the auspices of Learning for Action, LLC. Borum Chattoo was also the executive producer and producer of the documentary, which premiered in 2014 in the United States and India.

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The Center for Media & Social Impact (CMSI) at American University’s School of Communication, based in Washington, D.C., is an innovation incubator and research center that creates, studies, and showcases media for social impact. Focusing on independent, documentary, entertainment, and public media, CMSI bridges boundaries between scholars, producers, and communication practitioners who work across media production, media impact, public policy, and audience engagement. The Center produces resources for the field and research; convenes conferences and events; and works collaboratively to understand and design media that matter. www.cmsimpact.org
Comedy is a powerful contemporary source of influence and information. In the still-evolving digital era, the opportunity to consume and share comedy has never been as available—both in the United States and around the world. And yet, despite its vast cultural imprint, comedy is a little-understood vehicle for serious public engagement in global poverty and other urgent social issues—even though humor offers frames of hope and optimism that encourage participation in social problems.
For several decades, comedy has been anecdotally credited with shifting social norms on social and civic issues through campaigns, charity efforts, and TV portrayals, ranging from *All In the Family* to *The Jeffersons* in the 1970s and ‘80s to *Modern Family* and *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver* today. Beyond anecdotal reflections, precisely how and why might comedy be a unique force for change in pressing social justice challenges, including global poverty? How do comedy appeals and portrayals work to inform, persuade, and motivate audiences? How have distinct forms of comedy been leveraged to engage audiences in civic and social issues?

*The Laughter Effect* synthesizes and translates highlights from published scholarly and market research across disciplines, including media and communication studies, sociology, psychology, political science, neuroscience, global development, advertising and marketing. The report creates a contemporary typology of comedy formats within the context of social change: Satire, scripted entertainment storytelling, marketing and advertising, and stand-up and sketch. Although the comedy formats work in distinct ways within the context of social change—that is, shaping knowledge, attitudes and intended behaviors—they exert five common forms of influence: (1) Attracting attention, (2) persuading through emotion, (3) offering a way into complex social issues, (4) breaking down social barriers, and (5) encouraging sharing (multiplier effect). Perhaps most useful for social change efforts, contemporary comedy is uniquely able to set media agendas by creating shared cultural watercooler moments in an increasingly cluttered information age. Comedy doesn’t only preach to the choir—audiences actively seek out comedy as a vital form of entertainment and even as a source of information to understand the world. Comedy’s ability to reach unexpected audiences is crucial.

Through a synthesis of relevant research, as well as portraits from contemporary case studies, this report aims to illuminate how and why comedy builds awareness, encourages peer sharing and can shift attitudes with regard to social challenges. It also reveals comedy’s limitations in social change. Ultimately, *The Laughter Effect: The [Serious] Role of Comedy in Social Change* offers strategic recommendations about leveraging comedy or comedy appeals in pursuit of social justice—for change-makers (NGOs, foundations, government agencies, communicators), professional storytellers (media executives, producers, writers) and researchers.

**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**
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In July 2015, one month after a scathing, viral exposé of New York City’s bail bond system and its outsized impact on poor, low-level offenders, Mayor Bill de Blasio took action. In a swift move, he took steps to correct an institutional process that Human Rights Watch and other social justice advocates had long maligned. In a statement echoing the muckraking indictment, Mayor de Blasio said: “Money bail is a problem because, as the system currently operates in New York, some people are being detained based on the size of their bank account, not the risk they pose.”

The source of the media fury that assuredly contributed to the mayor’s action? A comedian’s 17-minute video on a satirical faux news TV program.
Just one month before the mayor’s history-making announcement, on the June 8th, 2015, episode of HBO’s comedy satire news show, Last Week Tonight with John Oliver, comedian and host John Oliver took on the bail issue with his trademark eye-popping fervor as an outraged, bemused social justice advocate. Between rapid-fire humorous clips in a video montage, Oliver got serious: “Increasingly, bail has become a way to lock up the poor, regardless of guilt.” Millions of YouTube views and social media shares later, amplified by attention from media outlets including Salon, The Washington Post, Reddit and more, New York City officials changed the city’s bail protocol, immediately impacting 3,000 poor and low-level offenders in the short-term, and thousands more in the long run.

Was this a home run for comedy? Is comedy a promising way to meaningfully engage audiences and leaders on pressing social justice issues? Perhaps. But perhaps it’s not so simple.

Consider another story: In 2011, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention decided to try a new approach to a public health marketing campaign. Rather than imploring the American public to follow somber instructions to prepare for a looming natural or human-caused disaster, the agency’s strategists launched a humorous campaign, “The Zombie Apocalypse.” The effort focused heavily on social media engagement with funny messages, relying on the metaphorical connection between a real-life disaster and an apocalyptic zombie attack. The campaign was considered an attention-grabbing, social-media-sharing success for a public health effort. In a study that examined the campaign’s effectiveness, researchers Fraustino and Ma concluded that the major campaign objectives—to build buzz and encourage message-sharing—were achieved. Thanks to the social media strategy, more than 5 million people engaged directly with the campaign. However, the same research revealed a distinct juxtaposition. In a deeper analysis, looking beyond the metrics of reach, the research team concluded that people exposed to the comedic zombie risk messages, relative to more serious risk messages, were significantly less likely to take protective actions in the face of an impending disaster. The reasons are speculative, but the case highlights an important mandate in contemporary digital-era communication designed for social impact: the need to delve more deeply than exposure metrics to understand why—or why not—an approach may engage an audience in pursuit of some kind of civic, political, or social activity.

The two stories illustrate the promise and paradox of comedy in service of serious social challenges. On the one hand, it’s not revelatory to claim, based on compelling anecdotes alone, that comedy can cut through the clutter of today’s unrelenting supply of digital news and information. Comedy may even be able to help set the media agenda in a way that impacts policy, as illustrated in the bail story. On the other hand, to ascribe monolithic, one-size-fits-all characteristics onto comedy risks possible backfiring. Comedy comes in many forms, it is often culturally specific, and its appeal for communicating serious issues depends on many factors, including the role of the audience and the issue itself.

**THE MORE AN AUDIENCE CARES, THE HARDER IT LAUGHS.**

**NORMAN LEAR, COMEDY PRODUCER, DIRECTOR & WRITER**
WHY COMEDY—AND WHY NOW?

A Contemporary Panorama of Influence

A decade and a half into the Information Age, characterized by a rapidly shifting media landscape, we are reimagining the cultural, political, and civic panorama of influence. Sources of information and news are varied, delivering increasingly customized material via curated news feeds and individual search behaviors. Information is sliced, shared, parodied, and re-created. Admired truth-tellers are found beyond elected officials and legacy news leaders.

When the new century began, half of American adults were Internet users. Today, about 9 in 10 American adults report using the Internet. As of 2015, about 7 in 10 Americans own a laptop (73%), and about the same proportion possesses a smartphone with video capabilities (68%). Around the world, Internet access to information continues to increase. An estimated 3 billion people around the world are regular Internet users, and global mobile Internet penetration is expected to reach 71 percent by 2019.

Contemporary media consumers are shaping new forms of news and information through their media habits, and traditional legacy media brands compete with digital natives. According to the Pew Research Center, YouTube—not a journalism institution—has become a major source of news for users in both the U.S. and around the world, rivaling legacy news brands. New sources of news and information targeted at Internet-savvy consumers include digital natives like Vice Media, credited with engaging about 130 million users per month, particularly young people, in serious investigative news stories, and The Young Turks, which left traditional television a decade ago only to climb to more than one billion views over a decade being exclusively online.

Competing with a legacy media ecology of established brands and sources of information—The New York Times, The Wall Street Journal, The Guardian and broadcast behemoths like CNN—are the young upstarts whose very DNA is based on a blurring of entertainment and information, given business models partially fueled by Web traffic and viral sharing.

But the explosion of information owes as much to the voracious appetite and behavior of the audience as it does to technology advances. In the Information Age—where views, peer-to-peer shares, follows and likes can set the legacy media agenda—news and entertainment continue to blur. The political and civic environment is a merger of entertainment and news in the contemporary era; where one begins and ends is hard to distinguish. In an effort to tap into audience desires—now easily apparent to editors and producers through simple Web metrics—audiences are given more of what they want. And what they want often is fast, short, funny, and shareable.

Against this backdrop, the evolution of contemporary comedy as a recognized source of political and civic information is well documented by research. In 2007, when Americans were asked to name their “most admired journalists,” Jon Stewart—not a journalist but then-host of Comedy Central’s satirical comedy program, The Daily Show—rose to the top, along with reporters from traditional news outlets. At its height, use of The Daily Show as a source of news and information—not just entertainment—rivalled that of traditional news programs, and its coverage was found to ideologically balance topics and perform a de facto watchdog function, particularly for civic issues, politicians, and the media.

Researchers at the Pew Project for Excellence in Journalism observed:

At times, The Daily Show aims at more than comedy. In its choice of topics, its use of news footage to deconstruct the manipulations by public figures and its tendency toward pointed satire over playing just for laughs, The Daily Show performs a function that is close to journalistic in
nature—getting people to think critically about the public square. In that sense, it is a variation of the tradition of Russell Baker, Art Hoppe, Art Buchwald, H.L. Mencken and other satirists who once graced the pages of American newspapers.21

Perhaps due to the popularity of the comedic civic engagement on The Daily Show from the late 1990s to the present day, the media landscape has witnessed a surge of comedy programs—both on TV and online—and the cultural influence of comedy is profound. While other former powerhouse media outlets like MTV continue to search for elusive young, TV-cord-cutting audiences,24 cable juggernaut Comedy Central continues to increase its influence, along with HBO and Showtime, both of which now feature major comedy programs.

The present-day U.S. comedy ecology includes a heavy dose of social-issue consciousness, including TV comedy sketch programs that skewer race, gender politics, gun control, and social class, such as the Peabody-Award-winning Inside Amy Schumer. Network TV shows like Modern Family and Black-ish take on gay rights, race relations, and gender equality. Influential digital-native media outlets like Netflix and Amazon Studios are bringing bold new comedy voices and social-issue perspectives through programming like Transparent and Master of None. Satirical news programs like The Daily Show and HBO's Last Week Tonight with host John Oliver continue their dominance as media agenda-setters and sources of viral commentary on social issues in the news. As The Atlantic put it:

The stuff of late-night LOLs used to be quippy monologues, vapid celebrity interviews, Stupid Human Tricks both official, and less so. It still is, to some extent. More often, though, TV comedy that self-consciously defines itself as “comedy”—the stuff that originally airs on Comedy Central and FXX and HBO, the stuff that is firmly rooted in traditions of sketch and standup—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.25

It is the Internet, however, that helps explain comedy's present reach and influence. Along with their full appointment-viewing episodes, TV comedy programs produce short-form video clips designed for easy online sharing. Online comedy sites churn out humorous short-form sketches, faux public service announcements, and other humorous treatments of the news and issues of the day. The major influential powerhouses garner billions of audience views between them: Funny or Die, Between Two Ferns, The Onion, and CollegeHumor, along with BuzzFeed and Upworthy.

In the online realm in particular, contemporary comedy's influence lurks well beyond the traditional boundaries of entertainment: When First Lady Michelle Obama wanted to promote higher education to young people in the United States, she skipped the serious appeal and appeared in a comedic rap music video along with Saturday Night Live comedian Jay Pharoah, espousing the merits of getting a college degree—for CollegeHumor.26 In a formal nod to comedy's reach and potential influence on U.S. policy, a senior staffer with the White House Office of Public Engagement now directs the Washington, D.C., office of Funny or Die. The comedy office’s capitol city mandate is to attract policy leaders and the public to engage in social and civic issues in accessible, funny ways.27

Coinciding with a moment in which fewer than two in 10 Americans say they trust government, about 30 percent describe elected officials as “honest,” and not even half (45%) describe business leaders that way,28 are comedians, indeed, the new public intellectuals, as suggested by The Atlantic29.
Comedians are acting not just as joke-tellers, but as truth-tellers—as guides through our cultural debates... comedians are doing their work not just in sweaty clubs or network variety shows or cable sitcoms, but also on the Internet. Wherever the jokes start—Comedy Central, The Tonight Show, Marc Maron's garage—they will end up, eventually and probably immediately, living online. They will, at their best, go "really, insanely viral." The frenzy to post a John Oliver rant after it airs on HBO has become a cliché at this point; its effect, though, is to create a kind of tentacular influence for an otherwise niche comedy show.... Comedy, like so much else in the culture, now exists largely of, by, and for the Internet. Which is to say that there are two broad things happening right now—comedy with moral messaging, and comedy with mass attention—and their combined effect is this: Comedians have taken on the role of public intellectuals.

Within this contemporary environment, does comedy cut through the zeitgeist? In the absence of shared watercooler moments of the analog era's gatekeeper-controlled media systems, might comedy act as a connector? In the midst of a merger of entertainment, politics, and news in the contemporary information ecology, and a decline in perceptions of authenticity about elected officials and leaders, are comics—the observers and savants of the cultural landscape—seen as the true authentic truth-tellers?

If any element of this is true, the process by which comedy is understood and shared within the context of social issues—and the impact on audiences—is worth understanding more precisely.

**COMEDY'S [POΤENTIALY POWERFUL] ROLE IN SOCIAL CHANGE**

As a phrase, "social change," in the context of clarifying comedy's possible role, is deliberatively broad and inclusive. Social change has roots in sociology, psychology, political science, public health, international relations and other disciplines, but the intersection of entertainment, communication, storytelling, and media is the meaningful foundation in the context of comedy. Therefore, the appropriate workable definition of "social change" comes from seminal entertainment-education scholars Singhal and Rogers: "The process in which an alteration occurs in the structure and function of a social system. Social change can happen at the level of the individual, community, and organization or a society." This approach allows an expansive investigation of comedy and social change, regardless of disciplinary boundaries. It also allows an inclusive look into a full array of case studies, from individual behavior change efforts to mass media stunts to formal entertainment, and across a range of social-change contributors: personal attitudes and persuasion, media habits, choices and motivations for consuming entertainment, and media agenda-setting.

Comedy has been defined for thousands of years, and studying comedy is not new. However, conclusively attempting to understand its connection to potential social change is relatively nascent.

A notable early definition of comedy comes from Aristotle's work espousing the dual cathartic forces of tragedy and comedy; Aristotle's conception of wit is "a means between buffoonery and boorishness," and a sense of imitating people who are morally inferior in some way, poking fun at what is so disgraceful it becomes laughable. In 1925, in his book, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, the psychologist Sigmund Freud focused on the role comedy can play in society: "Freud identifies three primary social functions of jokes: first, they provide a nonthreatening way to raise culturally taboo subjects; second, they serve as an adaptive strategy to adverse conditions; and third, they provide a benign outlet for repressed aggression and hostility."
More broadly and recently, humor has been defined as “everything that is actually or potentially funny, and the process by which this ‘funniness’ occurs.” In present-day terms, comedy has been defined by its major characteristics and the role of the audience, including situational awareness and understanding of context, understanding the “real” scenario in order to find its distortion—comedy—amusing) and emotional response, like joy and hope. It has also been recognized as uniquely positioned as a tool of the oppressed, by providing an opportunity to mock dominant ideologies and provide the powerless with a form of communication and catharsis. These qualities—attracting attention to raise tough topics, situational awareness requiring a kind of shared cultural literacy on behalf of the audience, providing a voice for the powerless, catharsis—serve as a helpful guide for a contemporary understanding of entertainment comedy in service of serious social issues.

In the U.S. and around the world in recent decades, comedy has been a force anecdotal attributed to shifts in social norms and attention for pressing societal concerns. In 1970s America, amidst the tumultuous terrain of the Vietnam War, women’s equality movement and civil rights, stand-up comics and other comedy provided sarcastic, perhaps cathartic, social commentary on the juxtaposed absurdness of reality and the ideal. In the same time frame—well into the 1980s—Emmy-winning TV producer Norman Lear’s brand of socially-relevant scripted TV comedy dominated Americans’ living rooms with sharp satire and comedy about issues that reflected the fraught time in the country. Programs like All in the Family, The Jeffersons, Maude and others delved into topics as deeply sensitive as race relations and bigotry, gay rights and identity, gender relations and equality, war, abortion, and menopause. And almost 40 years ahead of the Emmy-Award-winning Amazon Studios TV show, Transparent, which chronicles the life of a 70-year-old professor and his gender transition, Lear’s show, All That Glitters, focused on a transgender character. More recently, the TV comedy sit-com Modern Family, along with a steady increase of TV shows with favorable portrayals of gay and lesbian characters from the 1990s through the 2000s—including Will & Grace, Ellen and Glee—has been credited with helping to positively shape public opinion about gay and lesbian individuals and couples in the United States.

As another comedic form and approach to social issues, satire is well-documented in published research, and examples abound in the contemporary entertainment marketplace. Globally, Bassem Youssef, a surgeon-turned-satirical critic, launched a YouTube and TV program in Egypt in 2011, comically skewering then-President Mohammed Morsi on the heels of the country’s populist revolution. Quickly labeled “Egypt’s Jon Stewart,” Youssef faced arrest and intimidation, leaving the country amid safety concerns. In South Africa, International-Emmy-nominated satirical news program, Late Nite News (LNN), hosted by comics Kagiso Lediga and Loyiso Gola, enjoyed huge popularity throughout its five-year run and frequently satirized apartheid and its legacy.

When it comes to attracting audiences to think about daunting social issues like global poverty, comedy has been leveraged in recent years primarily in the form of benefit concerts or overt campaigns. In these instances, comedy has been used to attract attention via a classic public relations approach, but not to persuade or lampoon global poverty as a set of social issues. Comic Relief is one notable example. Based in the UK, Comic Relief launched in 1985 on the BBC as a televised comedy relief program—modeled after the impact of Live Aid months before—designed “to use comedy to raise money and change lives in Africa and the UK.” However, comedy has not been used widely as an audience engagement force for global poverty and development issues. Perhaps, understandably, it’s too difficult to imagine anything funny or absurd about hungry or sick people. On the other hand, perhaps storytellers and change-makers don’t know enough about how to harness the power of comedy—or when to avoid it.

Bassem Youssef, a surgeon-turned-satirical critic, launched a YouTube and TV program in Egypt in 2011. He was named one of Time magazine’s 100 Most Influential People in 2013. © Time Magazine
Comedy evokes hope and joy, emotions not typically imagined in more somber storytelling about complex social issues. But is emotional response enough to propel attitude change, beyond sharing and setting a media agenda? Will change-makers and storytellers be willing to take the risk, and if so, what should they know in order to make the attempt? And, importantly, what kind of “change”—along a spectrum of learning, feeling, sharing, and acting—is a feasible objective in terms of comedy’s role? These questions lie at the heart of the remaining chapters.

Although the available research is scarce when it comes to mediated comedy’s overt, evidence-based impact on social issues, this project extrapolates from and highlights research from arenas with relevant insights: Satire and civic engagement, entertainment comedy portrayals, overt marketing and advertising of social issues via comedy, and the influence and reach of contemporary stand-up and sketch comedy. Importantly, this report does not attempt a comprehensive full history or landscape of all entertainment comedy—this would be an entirely different project. Instead, given the focus on social change, the investigation maintains a precise lens and spotlight on the intersection of comedy and social, political, and civic issues.

The following chapters first synthesize and translate existing research that explains how comedy’s influence works in the context of social and civic issues. The next section delves deeply into an explanation and case studies of distinct forms of comedy: satirical news, scripted entertainment, advertising and marketing, and stand-up and sketch. Next, the role of comedy in the context of global poverty is unpacked—along with socially-conscious comedy profiles of two countries, India and South Africa. The work culminates in a set of strategic recommendations for change-makers, strategists, storytellers and humanitarian organizations that would benefit from comedy in their efforts to improve the world.
Despite comedy’s culturally amorphous nature and its various formats, existing research helps to paint a picture of how comedy impacts audiences—crucial to understanding humor’s potentially influential role in social issues. Comedy has been shown to attract attention, spark conversation, encourage sharing and reduce stress. But how is comedy sought and understood by audiences? And how do individuals come to experience contemporary mediated comedy in the first place? Do we learn through comedy, or is comedy a realm for emotions and attitudes—or both?
How Influence Begins: Actively Seeking Comedy

Underscoring comedy’s influence is the simple—yet powerful—foundational idea that people actively seek out comedy. Even if other forms of storytelling work to persuade audiences on social issues, they often have limited value if audiences won’t intentionally watch them in the first place.

Audiences in the Internet Era are not sedentary blocs, passively awaiting information. In a niche-channel media environment, audiences intentionally seek genres of media, including comedy. They have choices, and they make them. According to the uses and gratifications framework for understanding media audiences, individuals actively choose particular sources of information and entertainment to serve individual psychological needs, like learning or regulating moods. The same elements are true for comedy. Audiences who seek out smart, civicly-focused comedy and entertainment may do so for more than one reason—to be entertained and to make sense of serious information.

For example, audiences who regularly seek out programs like The Daily Show and the former Colbert Report have reported specific reasons for actively choosing to watch, dominated by the desire to be entertained and in a good mood; but those who actively seek out this kind of comedic entertainment also use it as a way to acquire information and to help make sense of serious news. Notably, even individuals who watch comedy news to be entertained “also cite it as a source of information—suggesting that viewers perceive this genre as satisfying multiple needs or gratifications simultaneously.” When given a choice of media genre to experience, audiences do not necessarily always seek out entertainment—including comedy—for purely escapist reasons. And when audiences seek and use entertainment with active “truth-seeking motivations,” they process the civic information in such a way that sparks “reflective thoughts…issue interest, and information seeking.” In seeking out comedy and entertainment, and then finding social issues there, audiences may stumble across new information to which they would not otherwise be exposed.

Synthesized, there are five ways comedy is able to work as an influencer in the context of social change:

1. Attracting Attention & Facilitating Memory
2. Feeling: Comedy’s Route to Persuasion
3. Entering Complex Social Issues
4. Breaking Down Social Barriers
5. Sharing with Others
ATTRACTING ATTENTION & FACILITATING MEMORY

Comedy can expose audiences to new messages—and can help them remember the information.

Comedy attracts audience attention. 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.53 Beyond extensive evidence of the effects of humor in commercial advertising,54 this level of impact has been demonstrated in the context of political and civic communication,55 and in response to humorous public health messages.56 Given possible desensitization and predictably somber media treatments of serious social issues—including global poverty57—messages that cut through the clutter and capture attention can be valuable. Notably, in the context of political issues, humor has been found to fuel a priming effect: Individuals experienced media messages about political issues and candidates in a comedy context, which then influenced their future judgements based on the characteristics that had been primed, or made salient, from comedy.58

FEELING: HUMOR’S ROUTE TO PERSUASION

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.59 In the context of developing attitudes and perspectives about civic and social issues through comedy, learning may be an incomplete and unsatisfying goal, even if a certain level of cognitive ability is needed to understand why something is funny.60 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.61 In this context, persuasion is key—through a peripheral route that emphasizes emotion and liking the source of the message, rather than a central cognitive route. According to the elaboration likelihood model (ELM) of persuasion,62 when individuals experience serious information and news—and are able to process the information and are highly motivated to do so—they use a central cognitive route of processing by focusing on the merits of the message itself. But in a humor context, attitude shifts may occur in response to peripheral or heuristic cues—such as emotional reactions, liking the message source and believing the source is credible and believable.63 Persuasion then moves through a different route than the one employed when encountering a strong message delivered in a serious way. 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.64

And in fact, by letting the audience in on the idea that the comedy message is designed to be “a message”—overt persuasion—the comedy becomes (perhaps ironically) less effective, triggering the cognitive route to persuasion, including scrutinizing the information or counter-arguing against the messages. For comedy to be a successful vehicle for persuasion in service of a serious social issue, it can’t be seen as trying too hard to explicitly persuade even if it comparts serious information.65 In terms of long-term persuasion, at least one study points to a possible sleeper effect of comedy—remembering and being influenced by the content of a funny message longer than a serious one, although more research is needed in this area of long-term effects.66

ENTERING COMPLEX SOCIAL ISSUES

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

At the individual level, comedy offers a way for audiences to engage in social and civic issues by simplifying them—and making complex issues accessible. By using comedy and therefore lowering individuals’ barriers to entry into complex political and social topics, the mental constraints to making sense of them may be decreased. The cost-benefit analysis involved in actively seeking new information67 about complicated social and civic issues is thus mitigated by entertainment. 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.68 This concept has borne out in several studies about comedy portrayals of serious civic and social issues; as individuals experience comedy media treatments of serious issues, they then pay more attention to traditional news sources on the same issues.69 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.70 In this way, comedy can complement—rather than compete with—traditional sources of news, increasing the potential for audience engagement.71

**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.

Comedy can influence individuals’ real-world perspectives about unfamiliar people and often divisive social issues or cultural norms by allowing them into personal worlds in non-threatening ways. Although this impact primarily occurs in the domain of entertainment portrayals, in general, it is also seen in response to comedy specifically. According to the parasocial contact hypothesis, based on the powerful “para-social,” 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.72 For example, one study showed that seeing positive portrayals of gay men on the comedy TV program, *Will & Grace*, was related to decreased prejudice toward gay men; in fact, the level of prejudice toward gay man was lowest, as a consequence of viewing *Will & Grace*, for individuals who had the fewest numbers of gay friends or other real-life encounters with gay and lesbian people, leading researchers to conclude, “such data strongly suggest that parasocial contact may function in an analogous manner to interpersonal contact.”73 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.74

In a similar fashion, in a study that examined students’ perspectives about individuals with physical disabilities after exposing them to either a funny film or a serious film about disabilities, researchers concluded that humor can have a normalizing effect. People who were exposed to the funny film reported more positive attitudes toward people with disabilities than people who were exposed to the serious one. As is the case in other complex social issues, particular portrayals of individuals with challenges may serve to dramatize and widen the gap between them and the audience, inadvertently evoking pity rather than encouraging connections.75

**SHARING WITH OTHERS**

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

Along with seeking comedy, sharing it also points to humor’s influence. The contemporary era is dominated by media that is shareable, and by media moments that illustrate individual and cultural identities. Sharing a funny media product is a way to express both individual values and identities, and to commemorate shared cultural moments. In the process, sharing with peers anchors and amplifies the original messages. In this context, humor in the digital era has been shown to drive individuals to share funny messages with peers, inviting and sparking conversations.76 In the context of serious social issues, one study focused on a campaign about unintended pregnancy concluded that funny messages were more likely to be shared and amplified than non-humorous ones. The humorous messages then produced a multiplier effect, as people were more likely to share the campaign information with others—leading to additive conversation-based effects and not just message-based effects.77 Similarly, a CDC campaign focused on funny appeals to disaster preparedness found similar sharing impacts, multiplying a viral message; even though the campaign did not spur direct behavior change, raising awareness and amplifying the message through sharing were the effort’s main goals.78
From satirical faux news programs to comedic public service announcements, media comedy that deals with complex social and civic issues is produced, distributed and experienced in distinctive ways. Across available research about mediated comedy’s intersection with social issues—on the route to social change—four primary comedy formats are vital. These four formats also underlie most examples of comedy’s treatment of social issues in the contemporary marketplace.

- Satirical News
- Scripted Entertainment Storytelling
- Marketing & Advertising
- Stand-Up & Sketch Comedy

To understand—and perhaps even apply—each format in service of social issues, it’s crucial to ask and attempt to answer: What are the primary elements of each type of comedy? What are the known audience effects? What are the cautionary notes to consider? What are the notable examples of each format?
SATIRICAL NEWS

How It Works: Pointing Out—and Re-Framing—Life’s Absurdities

Satire is a particular comedy format that uses humor to point out the absurdness or inherent power dynamics of a situation. On the audience’s part, satire requires some basic recognition and understanding of the original scenario at the heart of the joke, and is, therefore, culturally specific and relatively sophisticated. 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. “Satire uses humor as a weapon, attacking ideas, behaviors, institutions, or individuals by encouraging us to laugh at them. It may be gentle or hostile, clear-cut or ambiguous, aimed at “us” or “them”—or it may oscillate between different approaches, remaining flexible and surprising.” 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. With this kind of humor, the audience’s focus on “getting the joke” may reduce careful scrutiny of the message.

Satire’s Impact

Satire has been defined as two distinct forms: juvenalian, a more hostile, “other-directed” form of humor that relies on aggression and judgement, and horatian, which relies on and emphasizes elements of laughter, play and self-directed, self-deprecating humor; one is inherently negative, and the other involves more positive attributes. Consider a TV program like Parks & Recreation, horatian-satire-style lighter content that exposes foolishness, relative to an acidic juvenalian tone that exposes evil through scorn and ridicule (like a satirical roast, for example). But, “In today’s political media environment, horatian satire is dominant relative to juvenalian satire. The vast majority of satirical works offered on programs like The Daily Show, The Colbert Report, Saturday Night Live, and the monologues crafted for various late-night talk show hosts (e.g., Jay Leno, David Letterman, Conan O’Brien) fall more in line with the horatian style.”

Does the kind of satire matter in terms of influencing audiences’ attitudes toward a social issue? In one study involving the use of self-deprecating humor vs. “other-directed” humor in TV satire about a social issue (blindness), viewers responded more positively to the positive—horatian—humor and developed more positive attitudes about the social issue than when the issue was depicted with the more aggressive, judgmental juvenalian humor. However, in a separate study also involving political TV satire, viewers perceived the horatian satire as a lower-strength message than a traditional news op-ed, but found no differences with the harsher, juvenalian humor compared to an op-ed. This examination may help to explain the impact of John Oliver’s satirical rants on Last Week Tonight with John Oliver, however. Audiences may be thoughtfully considering his messages and arguments in a similar fashion to scrutinizing a more traditional news opinion piece.

PART OF THE MAGIC OF COMEDY IS THAT YOU CAN FORCE PEOPLE WHO DISAGREE WITH YOU—OR EVEN HATE YOU—YOU CAN FORCE THEM TO LISTEN.

JAMES ADOMIAN, STAND-UP COMIC

part of the magic of comedy is that you can force people who disagree with you—or even hate you—you can force them to listen.
Ultimately, how much people actively learn from satire—at least in the context of satirical faux news programs—depends in part on how people perceive the format in the first place. Do they see it as news or entertainment, or a mix of both? Research has demonstrated that people who think of The Daily Show as both entertainment and real information are able to learn more than people who perceive it as only entertainment.87

But persuasion and learning may not be the only ways to think about the influence of satirical comedy. Importantly, satire comedy content can serve an agenda-setting function. By focusing on particular civic or social issues through satire, audiences have been shown to recognize social and civic issues, rather than to fully “recall” them, or gain specific knowledge (learning).88 One of the most important audience impacts of satire is a “gateway” effect, allowing audiences to gain entry into complex social issues and then pay greater attention to more serious news about them over time; in fact, this impact has been shown as particularly great for those with less formal education and less understanding of or exposure to the issue in the first place.89 Satirical news shows have also been actively sought and used by audiences hoping to make sense of the world and public affairs, and also because they see it as unbiased, “truthful and real.”90 And finally, the role of the messenger is key. For satire to work, the audience has to believe the source has some credibility in the issue he/she is discussing, and that he or she is authentic.91

**Cautionary Notes About Satire**

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.92

Additionally, when dealing with issues that have well-established ideological or partisan perspectives, satire may not be effective. 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.93 This was demonstrated in the case of Stephen Colbert’s ironic and deadpan style of satire on The Colbert Report: “Because satire is often ambiguous, biased information processing models provide an excellent framework for understanding how audiences see what they want to see in Colbert’s political satire.”94 In the face of ambiguous messages (i.e., political satire), individuals process or understand the information through a motivation for “political affiliation or self-enhancement.”95 In other words, people see what they want to see, and believe what they already believe, when they are confused (or, more precisely, when there are no external cues available to help them to interpret a message). Hoping satire can change someone’s mind about a hot-button civic, political or social issue—rather than hoping to engage the individual or place a new issue on a mental agenda—is likely futile.

Satire can backfire for other reasons, as well. For example, satire—as well as other forms of comedy—can risk inadvertently trivializing the severity of a complex issue.96 And not all issues or people may be seen by the audience as fair game for satire: “To be effective, there needs to be an agreement between the satirist and satire that the satirized is worthy of and appropriate for attack...the audience has the ultimate agency in determining what can and cannot be treated in a humorous or satirical manner.”97 And what is ripe for satire is usually—at least as illustrated in case studies—the individuals and institutions with power.
THE DAILY SHOW

*The Daily Show*, the Comedy Central faux comedy news show, created a format with far-reaching implications for young news consumers from the late 1990s to the current day. Beyond its direct impact, the show’s popularity and format sparked a prominent group of similar satirical political news shows both in the United States (*The Colbert Report, Late Show, Last Week Tonight with John Oliver, Nightly Show* with Larry Wilmore) and around the world (*Bassem Youssef’s Al-Bernameg* in Egypt, *Late Nite News* in South Africa). At the show’s height, many young people said they understood the news of the day through watching *The Daily Show*, and while young people aged 18 to 29 made up only 23 percent of the public in 2012, they comprised 39 percent of the program’s regular audience. The show’s consistent coverage and humor directed at criticizing the Iraq War and then-President Bush have been credited with creating a favorable public opinion climate that “provided the conditions for the rise of anti-war candidate Barack Obama in 2008.” Additionally, scholars have supported the idea that *The Daily Show* acts as alternative form of journalism that effectively interrogates power. The secret to the show’s influence was its leader, Jon Stewart, widely regarded as an authentic, likeable, trustworthy source of information; according to a *Time* magazine poll in 2009, Stewart was the top choice as “most trusted news-caster” after Walter Cronkite’s death, a feat considering Stewart is not a journalist and has not claimed to be one. The impact of *The Daily Show* is seen now in its imitators as much as its continued scrutiny of the absurdity of media, politicians, and the culture.

THE COLBERT REPORT

Comic actor Stephen Colbert’s show, *The Colbert Report*, used a very particular kind of satire—a droll faux news host always in character, never letting guests in on the joke. The show ran for nine years on Comedy Central (2005-2014), featuring Colbert as a faux conservative media pundit in pursuit of “truthiness” in social, political and civic issues. In terms of the program’s impact, Colbert coined a term himself—“the Colbert bump”—to describe the very real phenomena of increased media coverage and public attention paid to issues and guests who appeared on his show. In one 2008 study, a very real impact of the “Colbert bump” was revealed: 30 days after they appeared on the show, Democratic electoral candidates cultivated about 44 percent more in campaign donations than candidates who did not appear on the show.

LAST WEEK TONIGHT

When John Oliver, former correspondent for *The Daily Show*, takes on a social issue on his HBO comedy news satire show, *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver*, it usually goes viral in the form of short-form video packages. News outlets pick up on his material and cover it in new—and serious—ways, amplifying the tremendous media-agenda-setting effect of the original material. Attention given to social issues on Oliver’s comedy show have been known to “crash websites, boost donations and inspire legislation” on issues ranging from bail bonds to net neutrality to corruption inside FIFA, the global soccer organization. Among other notable moments, Oliver’s comedic rant and video explainer about net neutrality resulted in a crashed FCC website due to a flood of almost 80,000 public comments a week after the program aired. In fact, according to research by the Pew Research Center, Oliver drove the spike almost single-handedly. The video, which has been viewed more than 8 million times on YouTube, was timed in a strategic way that made sense in the ongoing policy advocacy around the issue—and the timing was crucial in amplifying messages from existing advocacy groups: “Oliver gave us a great moment to rally around, and a hilarious video to share,” Tim Karr, senior director of strategy for Free Press, an advocacy group that has been fighting for net neutrality for more than a decade.

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.
In a recent symposium designed to illuminate potentially effective uses of satirical comedy, researchers offered these five pieces of advice for strategists:

1. **Reconceptualize meaningful outcome measures**: Possible impacts of satire for social issues should include the positive impact of sharing, play, laughter, creating shared popular culture experiences—instead of overt knowledge gain or behavior change.

2. **Be Transparent & Authentic**: For the audience, believing the messenger is crucial for satire to work.

3. **Let the Comedians Be Comedians**: Creating something only mildly amusing defeats humor’s potential for impact; attempting humor means truly allowing the comedians to be funny about social issues.

4. **Identify a Call To Action When You Have the Credibility to Do So**: With credibility and authenticity from the source, satire should include a call to action for the audience.

5. **Recognize the Boundaries of Political Satire and Parody**: Some topics aren’t seen as fair game for satire, recognized when the person or issue doesn’t seem worthy of satire or is unfairly targeted. Be careful about the tone of the satire—who and what does it poke fun at?

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**SCRIPTED ENTERTAINMENT STORYTELLING**

**How It Works: Transporting Audiences, Creating Relationships with Characters, Normalizing the Unfamiliar**

Comedy in entertainment storytelling has been a staple of the popular culture diet since the dawn of TV in the mid-20th century, and earlier in other forms of popular entertainment. Entertainment storytelling, with its unique ability to transport audiences deeply into other worlds, works in specific ways when it comes to audience impact and persuasion. As a component of entertainment storytelling, humor may play a particularly distinct role by attracting attention, encouraging entry into tough topics, normalizing people and issues and shifting social attitudes and norms.

The nature of episodic TV storytelling and the consistent, long-term introduction and portrayal of particular characters and social issues is a meaningful characteristic that distinguishes this form of comedy from others. In the 1970s and 80s, the communication scholar George Gerbner and his colleagues at the University of Pennsylvania developed and researched a theoretical approach—cultivation—that helps to explain the long-term impact of media portrayals on individuals’ real-world attitudes about people and social issues. According to Gerber's groundbreaking work in cultivation studies, our attitudes and beliefs about individuals and social issues are heavily influenced—“cultivated”—by consistent, long-term media portrayals in both entertainment and news. What is seen as normal in ongoing mediated portrayals is seen as the norm in the real world.

The more precise ability for entertainment storytelling to fuel social change, in the context of public health and social issue norms, is well-documented in the realm of Entertainment-Education (EE), or the use of entertainment to inspire social change. Entertainment storytelling’s pathway to positive attitudes and behavior change is based on an evidence-based media effects and production model, the Sabido model, which emphasizes underlying principles to explain entertainment’s unique social effects: parasocial relationships (the deep relationships audiences experience with media characters), emotional appeals and connections, social modeling, and, when used overtly for social change, a call to action for the audience. Over more than four decades since this model was formalized, researchers have created and tested important new developments. Perhaps the most important evolution in this area is

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ABC’s hit sitcom, *Black-ish*, about a two-generation African-American and bi-racial family, has comically spotlighted issues including gun control, the environment and race relations in the United States. © ABC
the evidence-based concept of narrative transportation, which explains the route by which audiences become immersed in entertainment stories—both scripted and non-scripted. Narrative transportation works by “transporting” audiences deeply into the entertainment story, sparking empathy, a connection with characters, connections to their own lives and an emotional response; the more deeply audiences are transported into a story, the less likely they are to push back against messages through counter-argument. Built upon a deep understanding of the elaboration likelihood model (ELM) of persuasion—and the possibility of persuasion through a peripheral route that emphasizes emotion, empathy and connection with characters, rather than cognitive processing of the message—the role of entertainment storytelling in fostering attitude and even behavior change is well documented.

Humorous Entertainment Storytelling’s Impact

As a persuasive force—influencing attitudes and perspectives about social issues—humor in entertainment storytelling is generally processed through a peripheral route, rather than a cognitive route in which individuals process arguments more deliberately based on the strength and merits of the message. In other words, for comedy in entertainment portrayals, persuasion is based on audiences 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.

It’s not yet known—with confidence—precisely how comedy treatments of social issues in one-time episodes of entertainment storytelling may impact audiences. The research in this area is almost nonexistent. In the only apparent study that examines the effects of one episode of comedic entertainment-education on perceptions of social issues, researchers found that humor about unintended pregnancy in an episode of the TV sit-com Scrubs did reduce counter-arguing, or arguing against the message, consistent with entertainment’s transportation and persuasion principles. However, when the comedy was directly focused on the pregnancy storyline, the audience was less likely to take it seriously than in an alternative version of the episode that incorporated comedy but did not include any issue-related humor. In other words, simply having comedy in the proximity of the issue—that is, in the episode, but not focused on the social issue itself—might be effective, but making fun of the precise issue may lead viewers to not take it as seriously.

To understand the potential power of comedy entertainment’s impact over time, it’s important to consider consistent entertainment portrayals (including comedy) of potentially divisive or unfamiliar characters and social issues and norms. 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. That is, humorous, lighthearted portrayals of characters in entertainment storytelling can emphasize and provide connections, rather than division and “othering.”

Cautionary Notes about Humorous Entertainment Storytelling

Humorous treatment of social issues in entertainment portrayals is memorable. Humor in this context also attracts attention, evokes emotions and works to suppress message counter-arguing. But to engage comedy in this way without trivializing the seriousness of a social issue is a difficult balance. There’s some evidence, as in the Scrubs study discussed earlier, that humor about a social issue in this context—as a one-time reference vs. a recurring portrayal—may inadvertently make the issue itself appear to be one that doesn’t need to be taken seriously. The value of comedy in entertainment storytelling is its ongoing normalization of taboo issues and ability to generate new—and consistent—attention to social issues. Overt, explicit behavior change on the part of the audience after watching one episode of a program, as suggested by research, might not be the most appropriate way to measure the impact of entertainment storytelling.
a typology of comedy formats for social change

ALL IN THE FAMILY

TV writer and producer Norman Lear’s groundbreaking work in the 1970s and ‘80s resides in a notable historical place in the consideration of contemporary comedy and its potential to fuel social change. Not only did his half-hour sitcom shows—including All in the Family and the spin-off The Jeffersons, along with Maude and several others—focus squarely on taboo social issues of the day, along with little-seen individuals (African-American, gay, transgender), but they have been credited with inspiring a generation of contemporary comedy writers and producers who have infused social issues into their award-winning comedy programming, including Amy Poehler (Parks & Recreation), Seth McFarlane (Family Guy, Bordertown), Ryan Murphy (Glee), and Trey Parker and Matt Stone (South Park). Reaching more than 120 million viewers a week, unattainable in today’s niche-targeted media environment, Lear’s work has been credited with shifting social norms, particularly around race and gender; President Clinton stated, while bestowing upon Lear the National Medal of Arts, “Norman Lear has held up a mirror to American society and changed the way we look at it.” And yet, in a seminal study of All in the Family viewers in 1974, researchers found that viewers understood the role of satirical bigot Archie Bunker differently depending on their existing levels of racism; for the more bigoted viewers, Archie reinforced their views, but for the less bigoted, his views were understood as satire and the depicted racist scenarios appeared ridiculous. As another paradox of comedy, this historical study is worth recalling, and Lear himself has addressed this issue, saying of the audience, “I don’t know that you change minds, but you get them talking, and in the course of a longer conversation, longer than a 26-minute television show, somebody may change somebody else’s mind. But the talking, the airing of it, is all to the good.”

MODERN FAMILY

The sitcom Modern Family premiered on ABC in 2009 to high ratings and fawning TV critics, becoming a rare program that was immediately both critically-acclaimed—with six Emmys in its first two years—and watched by a large number of viewers. Focused on the colorful lives of a patriarch and his trophy second wife, the extended family includes a gay couple and their adopted Vietnamese daughter. The program made TV history when the gay partners got married in the emotional 2014 season finale. With ongoing storylines featuring the minutiae of daily life for a family anchored by gay parents, the program has been credited with shifting public opinion toward gay individuals over its six seasons, in part by normalizing their experiences to audiences who might not otherwise be exposed, albeit in a funny, non-threatening way. Indeed, even more specifically, the show may have contributed to favorable public opinion about gay marriage, which preceded the U.S. Supreme Court’s June 2015 landmark decision that opened the legal path to gay marriage in America. An analysis of Gallup’s data trend line reflecting the change in Americans’ feelings about gay marriage over the last two decades shows a steady increase in support beginning with Modern Family’s 2009 debut, following a decline for years prior to the program’s launch.

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.”
As issues facing GLBT individuals in the United States have garnered continued attention, thanks to ongoing media portrayals (Glee and Modern Family, among others) and media coverage of gay marriage, the daily lives and challenges facing transgender people have only recently entered a pop culture spotlight in the realm of comedy. Transparent, the Amazon Studios comedy-drama that premiered in 2014, has been referenced as “one of the banner artworks about the recent ‘transgender moment’ in popular culture.” The show stars Jeffrey Tambor in the role of an adult man transitioning into a woman, a part for which he won the Emmy Award for Outstanding Lead Actor in a Comedy Series. The show’s Emmy-award-winning creator, Jill Soloway, has leveraged the program for social change overtly and called for the passage of the transgender Equality Act during her Emmy acceptance speech in 2015. Tambor has also recognized the show’s intertwined mission as both entertainment and a vehicle to enable social change: “I always thought there was teaching in the laugh and the humor; with the laughter and with the humor you can kill prejudice.” Soloway has hired transgender people to work on the show to help inform the issues, and she has called the program part of a new civil rights movement. Members of the trans community have praised the show, saying that more representation of trans characters will have a positive impact on public attitudes—and hopefully help decrease violence directed at trans people.

In a foray into longer-form comedy programming, Funny or Die’s Web TV comedy series, Halal in the Family, picks up on the sitcom format with the its portrayal of a Muslim-American family living in the United States—a first for American entertainment. Created by Aasif Madvi, the show has already featured comedic storylines skewering Sharia law, Muslim stereotypes, and the ongoing challenges of cultural assimilation in post-9/11 America. Madvi has said he took the idea to an Internet-only outlet because he wasn’t sure he would find a receptive audience on a traditional TV network. According to one critic, the show works precisely because it is not politically correct and it never “turns its episodes into PSAs,” but instead: “Through humour, the show gives its viewers a sharp and witty picture of what it means for today’s generation to understand ‘Muslim’ and ‘American’ as two parts of the same identity.” Of its ability—and desire—to reduce discrimination facing Muslim-Americans through the program, co-creator Miles Kahn said in an interview that “the idea first came from a comment that journalist Katie Couric made, that maybe what American Muslims needed to combat stereotypes was their own Cosby Show.”
A Typology of Comedy Formats for Social Change

Marketing & Advertising

How It Works: Capturing Attention & Memory

Humor is a well-established, effective tactic of the commercial advertising world. Generally speaking, 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).” This consistent positive impact of humor is well-established by many studies in the commercial advertising realm. As summarized in a meta-analysis, humor in advertising significantly increases positive attitudes toward the ad, attention, and positive affect or emotion—and humor in advertising is also memorable.

The same principles of persuasion via humor in other formats apply to short-form video-based advertising and marketing appeals—that is, the peripheral route to persuasion is activated, emphasizing the impact of emotional appeals and source liking over a serious cognitive contemplation of the message. Because it operates through this peripheral route, humor in advertising decreases audiences’ counter-arguing against messages. Corresponding with a consistent evidence-based line of thought about comedy and persuasion, humor in advertising is persuasive because of its “affective” ability to spark emotions, not because individuals are processing information cognitively.

Impact of Funny Marketing & Advertising Appeals

Within the context of marketing and advertising appeals around social issues, comedy can act as a cross-cultural communicator and provide a comfortable way into sensitive topics, and may create conditions for longer-lasting message/memory recall.

In short-term persuasive messages—as in commercials and PSAs—the success or failure of humor in advertising has a great deal to do with the active role of the audience. Are audience members highly “involved” in the message—meaning, do they know something about the topic to begin with or is it a message that presents a strong serious argument? Or is the audience involved at a lower level? In advertising research about humor appeals, this concept is key; the more deeply audiences are engaged in processing the cognitive messages in an ad-based use of humor, the less persuasive the ad is. At lower levels of involvement, the peripheral route of persuasion is activated, and funnier messages are more effective.

When it comes to thinking about how short-form advertising-type comedy appeals may apply to serious social or civic issues, this concept of audience involvement and the nature of the comedy is crucial. When an issue (or product) isn’t funny to begin with, “ad humor is more effective in influencing the audience’s attitudes toward both the ad and brand.” But for this process to work, the audience’s level of “involvement”—or close attention paid to the arguments of the ad—needs to be relatively low, not high. The presence of a serious message can overpower the comedy in the journey to persuasion. To extrapolate in the context of social and civic issues—inherrently not funny—for an uninitiated audience or one that is not “the choir” or already paying attention deeply to complex issues, humor may be the most powerful tool of all. Stronger serious messages may actually “overpower the humor and encourage unwanted counter-arguments,” so letting the humor be maximally funny is the key to unlocking its persuasive impact in this format.

How might this impact hold up in the case of ad messages about a social issue or health-related topic? In an experiment examining audiences’ responses to both humorous and serious ads about three health topics—obesity, alcohol and tobacco—researchers found that the funny ads were more...
The laughter effect: the [serious] role of comedy in social change

The role of positive emotions also contributed: “In other words, in the presence of humor, individuals may adopt a positive attitude towards the health ads, instead of engaging in a critical disagreement of the message arguments.” ¹⁵⁶

In addition to memory and recall, some research has also found that audiences were more willing to take an action as serious as organ donation in response to a funny short-form commercial-type message compared to a serious one—a higher-level of impact than attitude and message recall. In an experiment, individuals were exposed to either a funny message or a sad message, with different levels of focus on the “narrative” components vs. use of statistics. Researchers found that the funny messages were the most effective in encouraging people to sign an organ donation card, and that the narratively-focused messages were more effective than statistical ones.¹⁵⁷ The study authors speculated, based on past research, that “people have a tendency to ignore messages that cause them distress,” thereby contributing to the relative effectiveness of the funny messages.¹⁵⁸

Cautionary Notes About Funny Marketing Appeals

As with other comedy formats, cautionary notes exist. 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 and attitude. Evidence for the importance of this distinction was found in an evaluation of the CDC “Zombie Apocalypse” humorous digital PSA campaign about disaster preparedness. Even though the campaign was successful in terms of reach and buzz, an experiment revealed that people were less likely to take protective action after experiencing the funny message.¹⁵⁹ Overt behavior change might be too high a bar for this comedy format in service of serious social and civic issues, although much more research should be completed to make the case.

Additionally, the tone and content approach of the humor in this format, as with others, is not a one-size-fits-all approach. What works on some issues may not work for others. What works on some issues may not work for others. In a study examining funny appeals designed to reduce unintended pregnancy, researchers found through formative research that “unfriendly humor” belonging to ironic or satirical messages, in this short-form message context, would not have worked relative to more “innocent humor” that did not preach a health message or “victimize women” but instead used elements of clownish behavior and absurdity.¹⁶₀
WATERAID: IF MEN HAD PERIODS

Launched in 2015 as an awareness and advocacy campaign to highlight the challenges facing more than 1 billion women around the world who lack access to toilets during their periods, WaterAid’s If Men Had Periods campaign uses a humorous video and messages to re-frame the issue. One of its three centerpiece funny short videos, “If Men Had Periods—Manpons,” was viewed approximately 1.5 million times on YouTube. According to the campaign’s architects: “Our Make it Happen petition called on world leaders to make sure that the [UN Sustainable Development Goals] included a target on safe water and sanitation, so that every woman and girl has access to water, sanitation and hygiene by 2030. We wanted to raise awareness about the importance of menstrual hygiene and increase the number of signatories to the petition, which was to be delivered to the British government ahead of the UN summit.” The campaign garnered global media coverage, including from Time magazine and Buzzfeed, and generated more than 115,000 petition signatures in the year leading up to the UN Sustainable Development Goals.

MALARIA NO MORE: SERIOUSLY, SERIOUS PSA

To bring attention to the continuing plight of malaria in vulnerable parts of the world, comedic actors Ed Helms, Aziz Ansari, and others voiced a PSA on behalf of the non-profit organization Malaria No More. The short video takes on a mildly funny tone to poke fun at the charity PSA trope, although it doesn’t attempt comedy about the issue itself. The video garnered only about 44,000 YouTube views. Although the PSA failed to generate media coverage or dramatic view numbers, YouTube credited the effort in its decision to choose Malaria No More in 2012 as an invited “first class of 20 non-profits to participate in its Next Cause program, a day-long summit in San Francisco that will teach non-profits best practices on the social video platform.”

PATHFINDER INTERNATIONAL: NO JOKE. CHOICE MATTERS.

To illustrate the reproductive health challenges and constraints faced by women in vulnerable parts of the world, the international humanitarian group Pathfinder International produced a short comedy YouTube video PSA depicting Western women facing issues like spousal consent for birth control and traveling long distances for health care. The 2012 video, a centerpiece of the group’s public awareness campaign about reproductive health challenges facing women around the world, received 55,000 views and not much media coverage until 2014, when Upworthy picked it up and amplified its reach.

THE AFFORDABLE CARE ACT: LUCK HEALTH PLAN WITH THE ONION LABS

To encourage young people to sign up for the Affordable Care Act, the state of Illinois turned to Onion Labs, the advertising arm of the comedy media company, The Onion. The comedy team created a digital humor campaign focused on the faux Luck Health Plan, with the slogan, “You’ll be okay. Probably.” According to an Onion Labs’ spokesperson, the match between a Millennial audience and comedy was key: “They wanted to sell this fairly serious topic in a way that would cut through to Millennials, which is an audience that actively rejects advertising. Speaking down to them or doing dull work is the fastest way to get ignored.” The approach worked. Sign-ups for the Affordable Care Act...
health insurance in Illinois beat federal estimates by more than 50 percent, and almost 30 percent of the 8 million who signed up in Illinois were young people between the ages of 18 to 34.\textsuperscript{171}

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 disease\textsuperscript{172}—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.\textsuperscript{173} 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.\textsuperscript{174}

RADI-AID: AFRICA FOR NORWAY

Based on the premise that portraying Africa and Africans living in poverty as the stereotypically passive “exotic other” encourages harmful public apathy and disengagement,\textsuperscript{175} a Norwegian organization, The Students’ and Academics’ International Assistance Fund (SAIH), used parody in a scathing short video that spoofed traditional calls for aid and action. The 2012 YouTube video, Africa for Norway, which parodied patronizing stereotypes of Africans by portraying Norwegians as a country of freezing people in need of radiators from Africans,\textsuperscript{176} received positive media coverage from The Guardian and NPR and garnered more than 3 million views. Bolstered by the viral spread and positive response to the video, in 2013, the group created the Rusty Radiator Awards, which comically honors the global development relief videos that employ the worst stereotypes as, according to the group, “This kind of portrayal is not only unfair to the persons portrayed in the campaign, but also hinders long-term development and the fight against poverty.”\textsuperscript{177}

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE: DON’T BE THAT GUY

To address a high rate of binge drinking among young enlisted men serving in the U.S. armed forces, the U.S. Department of Defense and its health insurance program, Tricare, endeavored to create an effective approach to encourage this specific target audience to change its behavior. Using a research-based social marketing approach, the effort launched as a humor-based behavior-change campaign, Don’t Be That Guy. The multiyear campaign, which launched in 2007, focused heavily on a comedic peer-disapproval message and featured funny sketches, digital videos and social media messages.\textsuperscript{178} By conducting research in military installations that implemented the campaign and comparing information with those that did not, the campaign concluded that its efforts reduced binge drinking among the target population exposed to the messages. The campaign was adopted in 23 countries and 800 military institutions.\textsuperscript{179} The campaign’s success has been attributed to the humor—appropriate for the target audience—and its peer-to-peer nature, rather than a chain-of-command, top-down approach.
STAND-UP & SKETCH COMEDY

How It Works: Critical Social Commentary, Breaking Down Taboos

Comedian George Carlin summarized stand-up comedy succinctly: “Stand-up comedy is a vulgar art. It can be vulgar in the usual way we use that word. But vulgar really means ‘of the people.’ It’s the people’s art.” Stand-up comedy is an American form of entertainment that has expanded around the world in recent decades. The format is relatively simple: A comic stands on stage and entertains a live audience with jokes and social commentary, with minimal or no props. The roots of stand-up comedy are found in American vaudeville of the early 1900s, when a comic named Frank Fay first took to the vaudeville stage without props or a costume and told jokes, influencing other comics who would follow from stand-up into radio and TV, including Milton Berle and George Burns. Additionally, stand-up comedy’s roots in the U.S. grew out of the traditions and humor of minority groups—Jewish-Americans and African-Americans—providing a foundation focused on critiquing power dynamics. Picking up in the United States as a contemporary live art form in the 1970s, 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. According to one scholar, stand-up comedy serves similar purposes in various cultures:

*Stand-up comedy is arguably the oldest, most universal, basic, and deeply significant form of humorous expression (excluding perhaps truly spontaneous, informal social joking and teasing). It is the purest public comic communication, performing essentially the same social and cultural roles in practically every known society, past and present.*

Although stand-up comedy is its own distinct form of entertainment, it underlies much of the comedy marketplace, and a vast majority of current U.S. comedy TV performers (scripted comedy, sketch comedy, satire) began by honing their trade on the stand-up comedy circuit, including Amy Schumer, Trevor Noah, Aziz Ansari, Hasan Minhaj and others. In terms of sheer reach and availability, stand-up comedy’s influence may be even more profound today than in earlier decades given the evolution of the digital era, with stand-up comedy and comics available in various formats on YouTube, podcasts and streaming online. Comedy is a dominant genre on both iTunes and Soundcloud, and the most popular humor podcasts are dominated by stand-up comedy, comics interviewing funny guests, and sketch comedy that evolved from stand-up, including *Improv4Humans* (with comic Matt Besser), *Put Your Hands Together* (with comic Carmen Esposito), *Comedy Bang! Bang!* (sketch comedy), *How Did This Get Made?,* and *WTF with Marc Maron.* Powerhouse streaming network Netflix brings stand-up comedy specials to broader audiences through its Netflix original stand-up comedy specials, featuring stand-up comedy from talents ranging from Aziz Ansari to Marc Maron to Chelsea Handler. Between Netflix, YouTube, iTunes and SoundCloud, digital-era stand-up comedy audiences are no longer limited to live experiences alone, expanding stand-up’s reach and potential social influence. Additionally, stand-up comedy tours and festivals are big entertainment in the U.S. and internationally, with events like the Aspen Laff Festival in the U.S., the Just for Laughs Festival in Canada, and the Edinburgh Fringe Festival in Scotland held over several days, with millions of people in attendance.

Stand-up comedy’s popularity in the entertainment marketplace is undisputed, but the audience appeal is explained by science. Neuroscience provides a rationale to help explain why stand-up comedy may be so valued and enjoyed by various cultures. According to one notable study, regardless of the precise comedy style and attributes (including gender) of stand-up comics, audience members who regard the comedy as very funny actually 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. The researchers concluded that “dynamic social displays of humor do engage reward responses” when it comes to watching and experiencing stand-up comedy.
Impact of Stand-Up & Sketch Comedy

From inception to the present day, stand-up comedy finds its humor in observational commentary and social critique. Indeed, 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. Consequently, stand-up comedy and its evolution into other comedy forms (scripted, sketch) is naturally positioned, in other words, to spotlight pressing social issues and offer audiences a way to commiserate, laugh and re-frame. In the intersection between this comedy genre and social change, stand-up comedy’s impact can be found in its particular characteristics: (1) social commentary on social issues and power dynamics, (2) breaking down cultural barriers, (3) reducing stigma for marginalized people and ideas, and (4) its use by racial minority groups to normalize and express their experiences.

Directly addressing and poking fun at power positions and inequity—inherent in many deeply entrenched social challenges—are the mainstays of stand-up comedy. Around the world, stand-up comics are illustrating this function directly—and in areas where power dynamics and social challenges are acute. In Nigeria, stand-up comedy is now the country’s third-biggest form of entertainment, following only music and movies, and the comedy is dominated by commentary on power dynamics in the country. The biggest comics—Basketmouth and Ali Baba—are taking on political corruption and Nigeria’s prevailing social inequality and poverty directly in sold-out shows across the country.

In Saudi Arabia, the past few years have ushered in a “tsunami” of new stand-up comedy channels on YouTube, with the top ones featuring more than 9 million views per episode in a country in which young people are “chronically bored” and the online comedy content remains free of government censors. In fact, the new YouTube stand-up comedy in Saudi Arabia is characterized as a different genre than TV comedy, given the digital format’s ability to tackle taboo topics, including political power, free of censorship. In Gaza, where violence dominates daily life, a new sketch comedy TV show, Com-eLogia, began from a successful comedy YouTube channel hosted by five young male Gazan comics; the YouTube channel has garnered more than 8 million views to date, as well as approximately 100,000 Facebook fans. The comics’ material focuses on their commentary about the economic and social challenges facing Palestinian young people, including violence and high youth unemployment, in an ongoing critique of the area’s leaders.

To the contrary, in the early days of stand-up comedy in China, comedians are looking for safe material free of power critique, and those who have not abided have been disciplined by government officials.

For marginalized or minority groups, breaking down the cultural barriers of stereotype and difference is a valuable element of social impact on the road to understanding. Following the 9/11 events in the United States, with heightened incidents of misunderstanding and condemnation of Muslims and Muslim-Americans, Muslim comics in the U.S. took on the issues directly. According to several studies, Muslim stand-up comedy skewered stereotypes, attempting to influence perceptions about Muslims and Muslim-Americans. According to one researcher, Muslim stand-up comedians helped to break down “cultural barriers, promoting inter-religious and inter-cultural dialogue, as well as tackling the misperceptions about Muslim and Arab Americans in the United States,” taking on a role of public intellectual to correct misinformation.

Reducing stigma around sensitive topics is yet another potential impact of stand-up comedy in social change. In a study that examined audience members’ feelings of stigma around mental health topics (attitudes about seeking help for mental health and accurately understanding mental health topics), study participants were exposed to two different stand-up comedy shows: One included mental health information within the comedy, and the other show did not include the health information.
Participants who experienced stand-up comedy with mental health information reported less stigma than the other group after the show, although the long-term effects are not determined. The existing peer-reviewed research on this stigma-reduction impact is scarce, but stand-up comedy’s unique characteristics point to this kind of effect, which should be examined further.

Beyond its appeal to audiences, stand-up comedy’s social change potential is illustrated also in a different way—by the impact on the comedians’ representative groups. Members of underrepresented or marginalized societal groups—particularly vulnerable racial groups—use stand-up to help to normalize and express their experiences to audiences outside their racial groups—a process leading to tolerance and acceptance. When Dave Chappell, an African-American comic, played a blind white supremacist in a sketch comedy routine, he was able to comically unleash the worst, most sensitive stereotypes of African Americans in a way that re-framed the issue for audiences:

*Beneath the humor lies a rich layer of social commentary about race relations in the United States. While comedians will make everyone uncomfortable at some point, good comics are playing an important function in society by holding up a mirror and forcing us to confront realities that we would often prefer to ignore. For minority groups, humor also serves as a tool to neutralize the power of stereotypes that obstruct their path to equal participation in society. Stand-up comedy can give social critique and instigate transformation in a way that leaves many audience members wanting more.*

**Cautionary Notes About Stand-Up & Sketch Comedy**

As with other comedy formats, there are inherent limitations to leveraging stand-up and sketch comedy for overt social change efforts around pressing social issues. The nature of much stand-up and sketch comedy is its ability to push the boundaries of decency and taste, and what’s funny to one may be offensive to another. By pointing out power dynamics inherent in social issues such as poverty and inequality, stand-up comedy may inadvertently reinforce power dynamics instead of effectively skewering them—including perpetuating racial stereotypes.

But to be overly sensitive and safe is to muzzle the power of stand-up comedy in the first place—its role is to be funny first, so attempts to water down jokes or material in order to deliver perspectives that are safe to a broad audience will likely not be effective. Finally, this kind of comedy is culturally specific. The stand-up comedy that can be understood and appreciated as funny in one country or culture may not translate at all to another—and given that so much stand-up comedy focuses on commentary about complex local political and social issues, this consideration may be more true of stand-up than other forms of comedy. Indeed, “Comedic tastes differ by region, and most jokes don’t translate well. (A Japanese interpreter once translated a joke that Jimmy Carter delivered during a lecture as: “President Carter told a funny story. Everyone must laugh.”).” And yet, stand-up and sketch comedy in the contemporary era is more widely available through digital platforms, sought by audiences, and attention-getting—an important potential vehicle for messages.
INSIDE AMY SCHUMER

Amy Schumer’s contemporary cultural influence spans across film, sketch TV, and stand-up comedy, and critical acclaim originates from both traditional news sources and pop culture alike, culminating in both a journalistic Peabody Award and entertainment Emmy Award within the span of a few years. In 2014, the Peabody Awards committee said of Schumer and her Comedy Central sketch comedy TV show, Inside Amy Schumer: “Inside Amy Schumer is a sketch show with all sorts of purpose. The fleet-footed Schumer will satirically embody vacuous white privilege in one sketch before pivoting to comically interrogate rape culture, body image norms or sanctimonious savior narratives in the next.”207 After premiering in 2013 to little notice, the show is increasingly taking on greater risks with social issues—including rape, gender relations, and more—as public attention has increased, and yet the comedy remains intact: “Comedy with a message can also easily turn didactic—or, worse, smug. Luckily, Schumer’s show feels built to withstand this pressure, even as it expands its reach, touching on subjects like reproductive rights and equal pay.”208

KEY & PEELE

Comedy Central’s sketch comedy show, Key & Peele, which ran for five seasons from 2012 to 2015, has been heralded as: “one of the best comedies on television to deal with race, it also excelled at finding laughter in otherwise seemingly humorless topics—slavery, suicide, terrorist attacks.”209 Starring creators and comics Jordan Peele and Keegan-Michael Key, the show’s stark, yet comedic, skits focused predominantly on racism and race relations in the United States. There is, perhaps, no better indication of the show’s cultural imprint than its recurring sketch about a character named “Luther,” President Obama’s “anger translator.”210 At the 2015 annual White House Correspondents Dinner, President Obama asked Keegan-Michael Key to portray Luther as he gave his tongue-in-cheek address to the Washington VIP and media representatives in attendance. 211 One critic pointed to the importance of Key & Peele’s run at a crucial moment in time, in which two self-identified bi-racial men were able to point out some of the tricky issues for a country re-defining itself in a so-called post-racial America.212

BETWEEN TWO FERNS

Epitomizing the booming era of short-form videos, the Emmy-winning comedy website Funny or Die was created in 2007 by a group of comedians and producers, including Will Ferrell, Adam McKay and Chris Henchy.213 Supporting both user-generated content and brief videos, the site is known for its sketch comedy content, often featuring celebrities. As a recurring Web series, the Emmy-nominated Between Two Ferns faux talk show—sketch comedy style—pokes fun at the format of the talk show genre but frequently takes on serious social issues in a humorous way. In March 2014, when President Obama needed help engaging young people to sign up for healthcare coverage as part of the Affordable Care Act two weeks before an important public deadline, he appeared on an episode of Between Two Ferns, with comic actor Zach Galifianakis. His appearance resulted in a traffic increase of 40 percent to healthcare.gov.214 The episode was nominated for an Emmy Award, and executive producer Mike Farah attributed the success to the comedy’s ability to engage: “I think one of the smartest things about it is that the Affordable Care Act stuff doesn’t even come into it until at least 60 percent through...
the video. So I think it was smart to let the comedy lead it and then get into the statement he [Obama] wanted to make about the Affordable Care Act. It was so funny leading up to that part that it just made its impact that much better because the audience was already engaged.”215

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.”216 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.”217

GOODMUSLIM BADMUSLIM
Launched in January 2015, the comedy podcast #GoodMuslimBadMuslim, hosted by Iranian-American comedian Zahra Noorbakhsh and Bengali-American activist Tanzila “Taz” Ahmed, takes on Muslim stereotypes and life both within a culture and from the outside looking in, as both Americans and Muslim-Americans.221 The monthly shows range from comedy chats about current events to a recurring “Ask-a-Muslim” segment in which the two comically detail moments of cultural misunderstanding. The hosts have pointed to their influence, including emails from young Muslim-Americans sharing their own experiences and asking for advice.222 The podcast, which has received positive media coverage, including from NPR, Public Radio International (PRI), BuzzFeed and NBC News, started as an ironic Twitter hashtag that took off when, according to Ahmed, “we realized that people wanted to hear more.”223 Through their funny takes on Islamophobia, feminism, religion and race, the two hope to provide a “window” into their lives—and primarily to make people laugh.224
From chronic malnutrition to devastating illness, few social problems are as difficult to communicate as global poverty. And yet, public engagement is a required element in sustained social change. One researcher describes public engagement in the context of global poverty in terms of “width, depth, and height,” a spectrum that distinguishes between capturing widespread attention (width), encouraging targeted groups to think differently (depth), and efforts to amplify initiatives that are already at work (height).\textsuperscript{225}
Comedy, despite its vast cultural influence, is a little-understood vehicle for serious public engagement for global poverty. And yet, the timing may be urgent, given the potential desensitization and numbing of a global audience:

...efforts in the global North to generate public engagement in global justice have rarely used humour. Perhaps as a result, stories about international development are often relegated to what one news editor called the ‘worthy but dull category’...Analysis of the reasons behind the relative lack of engagement of Northern publics in issues of global justice is widespread. Some analysts have highlighted the lack of serious efforts by development organisations to invest in public engagement work. Drawing on research in the field of psychology, other scholars have highlighted the phenomena of ‘compassion fatigue’ and ‘psychological numbing’ that stem from the predominantly negative, crisis-oriented representations of the global South in the news media in the global North. A growing body of research on the ‘public faces of development’ also examines the ways in which the media and NGO marketing campaigns represent development issues in ways that may sell newspapers and generate donations but which also encourage paternalistic, charitable responses to global injustice at best and indifference and disengagement at worst.

Considering the possibilities from the few rare examples of humorous appeals used to engage audiences on global poverty, can comedy be imagined and taken seriously as a public engagement strategy?

This section includes highlights about particular issues that fall under the global development umbrella—such as HIV/AIDS, sanitation, sexual health and the like—to ask: How might comedy work specifically in the context of global poverty engagement? What can we learn from notable examples? And, seen through an even more targeted lens, two case study countries share both burgeoning media and comedy scenes, and yet deeply entrenched global development challenges: India and South Africa.

**FUNCTIONS OF COMEDY IN GLOBAL POVERTY**

Deep, systemic poverty continues to pose a daunting challenge to an increasingly interconnected world. As of 2015, about 700 million people live in extreme poverty—an income level of about $1.90 per day. Collectively, preventable illnesses like malaria and HIV/AIDS, along with malnutrition, a lack of access to clean water, and poor sanitation contribute to the deaths of thousands of children every day. This dismal status quo poses challenges for the resources, peace, and security of all nations, not only those impacted directly by disproportionate levels of illness, malnutrition and lack of opportunity. And yet, progress continues, due in large measure to the global commitment to extreme poverty alleviation through the United Nations’ Millennium Development Goals of 2000 and now the Sustainable Development Goals of 2015.

Against this backdrop, storytelling about global poverty—within the context of building awareness and inspiring social change—is a particular quandary. Not only are stories about hunger, disease and illness often difficult to watch, but the solutions can be hard to translate for lay audiences.
From a communication and storytelling perspective, the sheer magnitude of such a challenge can be overwhelming, prompting “psychic numbing,” in which individuals can’t fully comprehend the vast numbers of people living in such devastation, thus making active engagement difficult to attain. Media stories related to global poverty often have followed a familiar theme: Depicting passive, voiceless victims of poverty, or overwhelming facts and statistics offered with often Western voiceover pleas for help, such a storytelling frame “evokes the idea that the poor are helpless and incapable of helping themselves, thereby cultivating a culture of paternalism.” Two consequences may result, both of which are anathema to engaging people with a hopeful perspective. First, a kind of chronic stress may settle in on the part of an audience continually faced with stories about seemingly insurmountable challenges, leading to disengagement. Further, these visual frames may inadvertently paint a portrait of those living in poverty in faraway places as “the other”—people so different that we cannot identify with them—or as challenges too huge for individuals to tackle, justifying a kind of disengagement from the topic.

Although humorous appeals have been used to attract attention to global poverty topics as marketing tactics, as in Comic Relief, a deeper use of humor to engage audiences in global justice is rare. And yet, given the known influence of comedy—to capture attention, to break taboos, to offer an entry into challenging topics, to alleviate chronic stress, to promote hope and to break down social barriers—it may be well worth the attempt. As one scholar posited:

...humour can be both an ethical and an effective way of attracting and sustaining public engagement in struggles for global social justice, particularly for challenging prevailing charity-based frames for understanding poverty and development. There are both practical and ethical risks and limits to the use of humour to represent issues of poverty and injustice but, given the low levels of public engagement in these issues, I argue that humour is a risk worth taking.

The particular pairing of global poverty characteristics from an audience point of view—fear, overwhelming topics—with the influence of comedy may combine to create an especially vital synergy. Comedy’s positive emotional impact plays a part: “Evidence also suggests that humour could play important roles in helping to sustain engagement in global justice struggles through the reduction of stress and the promotion of hope.” In other words, humor can be used to create and solidify collective identities, to foster hope, and to reduce stress in the face of insurmountable odds.

### Entry into Difficult Topics

For groups dealing with sensitive topics such as HIV/AIDS, stigma and inability to communicate with peers pose major barriers to change. With sexual topics in particular, humor offers an entry way for discussion about sensitive, intimate issues. In one notable study, using comedy in school to tackle sexual education was effective in engaging young people to talk more openly, but the humor also reinforced more “serious” material they had already learned. In South Africa, where one in 10 people is infected with HIV/AIDS, the topic is even more sensitive, and yet here, too, using humor to discuss sexual health, and HIV in particular, with peers was found to be effective. In a separate study, a comedy approach to discussing sex and HIV allowed young South Africans to talk more openly with their peers and captured their attention; however, the study authors caution that this approach alone might not be enough to allow individuals to delve more deeply into the subject matter. The role of peer conversations and campaign approaches in sexual health topics is vital and powerful, considering the stigma and taboo that often exists. To capture attention, allow shared laughter and honest conversation, pairing comedy with more serious additional information points to an effective route.
A Coping Mechanism for the Powerless

For individuals living in poverty, comedy serves a cultural connection function. It allows them to communicate, to commiserate, and to find optimism and hope. Given the importance of culturally-appropriate messages to reach those most impacted by global poverty, this offers a useful re-framing of comedy as a tool. One study that examined the lives of poor, marginalized women in Costa Rica—with little opportunity beyond sex work—found that using humor messages and forms of communication empowered them in their daily experiences with sexual violence and reproductive health challenges. Pointing out the inherent inequities in their situations allowed them to use the subversive power of comedy to survive and rise above their found situations—a form of engagement to improve their conditions.239

Offering Frames of Hope & Optimism

When it comes to engaging audiences over the long term, research in global poverty and other areas supports the idea that dire hopelessness as a communication frame isn’t ultimately effective—optimism and believing that “positive change is possible” is key.240 A mixed diet including positive media and communication frames that offer optimistic perspectives and emotions, rather than exclusively (or near exclusively) negative and dire scenarios that can lead to chronic exhaustion and disengagement on the part of the audience, may be a path to new engagement; indeed, “a large body of research indicates that humour is an important mechanism for coping with stress and reducing its negative impacts.”241 One notable study expands on this idea, examining the contribution and role of a comedy documentary film and book, “No Impact Man,” which follows the journey of a man hilariously attempting to live for a year without making an impact on the climate. For climate change in particular, which has been dominated by chronic doomsday messaging that may inadvertently lead to disengagement, the study concludes that “comedy is a useful rhetorical tool for addressing global warming, as it enables us to see ourselves not as helpless victims in a tragic doomsday scenario, but as imperfect actors who are both guilty contributors to the problem and agents responsible for its amelioration.”242 In other words, comic frames may be employed to offer more hope and active human agency in deep social problems, relative to dramatic frames that may imply there is little hope of change with such high stakes.

Creating Memorable Messages About Taboo Topics

Comedy serves as a safe, memorable way to open the door to culturally taboo topics. Research from marketing and advertising documents the ability of humorous messages to cut through message clutter, attract attention and be more memorable than non-funny messages. The same principle has been upheld beyond commercial advertising, in ads that deal with public health issues—obesity, smoking, alcohol; one study found that humorous messages were persuasive precisely because they were funny, as the comedy reduced counterarguing, and the ads were more memorable over time.243 In a study related to a comedy campaign focused on STD prevention targeted at gay and bisexual men—“Stop the Sores”—researchers found that the campaign was successful in encouraging men to get tested, and it was particularly successful among men who were HIV positive.244 Importantly, the campaign’s success credits the memorable humorous messaging.

Amplifying Awareness Through Sharing

As illustrated by the majority of evidence-based studies involving comedy—across all formats—comedy’s ability to attract attention is paired with its ability to encourage sharing. In the cultural zeitgeist, amidst the clutter of information, sharing information or videos with peers serves an important function
beyond a marketing one. In fact, in the digital era, “humor has been found to be an important determinant in sharing.” Sharing clearly expands a message beyond its original recipients, but beyond the sheer reach, sharing amplifies a message by creating multiplicative “conversation-based effects,” not simple exposure. A campaign focused on teen pregnancy found this level of impact—both interpersonal sharing and communication. In this way, the ability of humor to promote sharing is profound, as “sharing can potentially multiply the effect of the campaign on the exposed as well as increase the reach to the unexposed.”

**Reinforcing Existing Calls to Action**

Humorous appeals and serious information and calls for support and engagement in global poverty can serve reinforcing roles, not competitive ones. It’s safe to assume that solutions to global poverty will always include some kind of charity in the form of calls for individuals, governments and organizations to support people in times of acute or ongoing crisis. Employing comedy to quickly attract attention and bring audiences into a cause—to donate or take some other kind of action—works in service of a serious goal. As one researcher notes, “it is clear that humour can also be used simply to reinforce charitable responses to global poverty, as in the case of Comic Relief. Humour is simply a means that can be put to many different ends.” To use this tactic effectively, however, research supports a distinct call to action while leaving the comedy intact as comedy.
GLOBAL POVERTY CASE STUDIES

COMEDY GIVES BACK

Since 2012, social enterprise company Comedy Gives Back has connected charities directly to comics and entertainment industry professionals to produce live-streamed online comedy shows and telethons that raise money and awareness for daunting social issues.\(^{249}\) Relying on comedy to capture attention, the project has partnered with groups tackling racial justice, hunger, and malaria, including a notable 2013 digital event with livestreamed comedy shows from New York, Los Angeles, London, and Australia, to benefit global development organization Malaria No More.\(^{250}\)

COMIC RELIEF

Comic Relief is the original—and likely best-known—charitable effort that links comedy, global poverty and media to bring attention to some of the world’s most pressing issues, using a large-scale media campaign and comedy to attract attention. Through sketch comedy bits combined with interstitial serious videos and information about extreme poverty, malaria, pneumonia and starvation, the organization’s Red Nose Day TV special, broadcast on the BBC, has raised upwards of $100 million to benefit global development charities in past years.\(^{251}\) The approach is a classic call to charity through comedy as attention-getter, although it does not directly use humor to discuss the central social issues.

CONDOMS AND CABBAGES: MR. CONDOM

In the small nation of Thailand, where HIV infections reached 143,000 in 1991, a Thai senator and business owner decided to get the stigma out into the open by using humor. Nicknamed “Mr. Condom” in his home country, Sen. Mechai Viravaidya created a restaurant and resort group called Condoms and Cabbages, and he launched his country’s campaign that aimed to achieve 100 percent condom use beginning in 1991, using humor to take the stigma out of HIV and sex.\(^{252}\) Thailand is known as one of only a few countries that was able to stem the increase in new HIV infections, and Viravaidya’s efforts—using humor and comedy appeals to break down stigma—are credited with helping to bring the rate of infection down to only 19,000 just 13 years after his campaign launched.\(^{253}\)

WORLD TOILET ORGANIZATION: MR. TOILET

Singapore entrepreneur and former contractor Jack Sim founded the World Toilet Organization to help solve the deadly sanitation-related illnesses that confront more than 2.5 billion people in poor parts of the world without access to toilets. In order to raise money to bring toilets to vulnerable corners of the world, and also to tackle the necessary behavior change to encourage people to use them when they are available, Sim, nicknamed “Mr. Toilet,” uses “potty humor” to break taboos and inspire people to listen.\(^{254}\)

TELFAZ11: NO WOMAN, NO DRIVE

When a group of Saudi comics known as Telfaz11—Hisham Fageeh, Fahad Albutairi, and Alaa Wardi—posted a short video on YouTube that comically parodied Saudi Arabia’s ban on women drivers, not only did it go viral with more than 3.5 million views in two days, it inspired Saudi women to protest the ban by driving and posting Web videos of themselves. Sparked by the funny video, No Woman, No Drive, the 2013 online
protest was reportedly the largest of its kind in the region.\textsuperscript{255} One reason for its viral nature—beyond the humor—may be the growing comedy scene and large population of young people in Saudi Arabia (60 percent are 30 and under), who were responsive to the funny message and its underlying critique of the discriminatory government policy. To date, the video has received more than 13 million views.\textsuperscript{256}

**THE SAMARITANS**

In *The Samaritans*, a mockumentary TV program—filmed in the style of the U.S. hit, *The Office*—a Kenyan filmmaking team parodied stereotypes of large global development organizations through the portrayal of a faux, ineffective, bureaucratic NGO called Aid for Aid. The TV show made comedy out of Western-directed NGOs operating in Africa, but also highlighted effective local development work through the characters.\textsuperscript{257} Hilariously highlighting scenes based on real stories from the global development industry, which thrives in Nairobi, the program inspired NGO employees to spotlight and share their own stories of well-meaning ineptitude. According to the show’s creator, Hussein Kurji, the show was partially funded by an NGO, who “thought comedy would be a great way to highlight those issues of credibility and accountability” in the NGO world.\textsuperscript{258} Kurji also noted that the program highlights a rival NGO that illustrates effectiveness and good governance, balancing out the negative portrayal.\textsuperscript{259} The program received international media attention, including from BuzzFeed, CNN and Al Jazeera.

**STAND UP PLANET**

*Stand Up Planet* was a 2014 documentary TV show, transmedia series and digital campaign that showcased life in some of the toughest places on Earth—in parts of India and South Africa—through the lens and experiences of stand-up comics.\textsuperscript{260} The two-part documentary TV series premiered on three networks in May 2014: independent satellite network KCETLink, cable network Pivot, and a top broadcast network in India, NDTV. *Stand Up Planet* leveraged a comedy format and travelogue documentary style designed to reach a younger audience and those who might not have already been paying attention to global development issues. In addition to the broad journey to meet and experience people living in poor corners of the world, the program focused on two particular global development topics in specific places: Sanitation-related illness and behavior in India, and HIV infection, prevention and awareness in South Africa. According to the project’s mission, the topics were both strategic and intentional for the global development storytelling and the entertainment angles.\textsuperscript{261}
GLOBAL SPOTLIGHT
COMEDY & SOCIAL ISSUES
IN INDIA

In India, the contemporary comedy scene works outside the edges of the light, escapist fare found in Bollywood films and television. In contrast, India's stand-up comics, satirists and Internet comedy celebrities are taking on the dark truths of India's current political and social issues. India's comic talents are brash and uncensored outside traditional TV, and judging by the millions of YouTube views and viral social media activity around its hottest upstarts, audiences are loving the sharp-tongued jokes. The stand-up comedy scene in India, while still new, is, according to a top female comic, Radhika Vas, “...poppin’! It is growing at the speed of light.”262 Amidst a contemporary backdrop of political corruption, gender-based violence directed at women and girls, and extreme poverty in many parts of the country, the new digital-era comics are taking on the issues directly—and recognizing their role as social influencers.

In September 2015, in a partnership event between Asia Society and the U.S. Consulate Mumbai, executives from the U.S. comedy powerhouse Funny or Die, along with Indian comedy influencers—comedian Radhika Vaz and producer Ajay Nair—discussed the potential influence of comedy on India's social issues, along with the limitations. Comedy can be a powerful vehicle for social change and influence in India, asserted the Funny or Die executives, using the example of President Obama's successful appearance on the Internet comedy program, Between Two Ferns, to raise awareness of his new healthcare program to a young, bipartisan U.S. audience. At the same time, according to Nair, the context in India is distinct, given that comedians in the country are “being dissuaded from taking a stance on socially relevant issues in India.”263 Recognizing the distinction between the U.S. and India in the context of comedy and social influence, along with the role of censorship, is key, and yet the young comedy scene's reliance on the Internet points to the future; a spokesperson for Funny or Die concluded that, “you're not going to solve every problem in India with comedy videos, but it's baby steps.”264

Indian audiences have watched the faux news satire program, The Week That Wasn't (hosted by comic Cyrus Broacha) since 2006; mirrored after The Daily Show, the hit program is established and well-recognized.265 But the contemporary edgy sketch and stand-up comedy scene in India is new—only a little more than a decade old, owing its roots to a TV program that premiered in 2005, The Great Indian Laughter Challenge, which made breakout stars out of its participants.266 When Mumbai opened its first comedy club in 2009, other cities followed suit, leading to a thriving comedy scene with clubs in many Indian cities and still more opening. But India's comic talents are taking on political and social issues, despite threats of death lobbed at comics who comment on topics typically considered taboo to Indians, including gender, sex and political topics.267

LAUGHTER IS ONE OF THE
PILLARS OF A DEMOCRACY—
WHEN DISSENT IS
ALLOWED AND IT'S
EVEN CELEBRATED. AND
NOTHING CUTS STRAIGHT
TO THE CRUX OF A MATTER
LIKE AN ELOQUENT JIBE.

ADITI MITTAL, INDIAN COMEDIAN
While comedy in India ranges from slapstick to insult humor, comedians’ reflections on social challenges are found largely in the still-evolving stand-up comedy club scene and Indian comics’ digital-channel expansions. The irreverent, bold All India Bakchod (or, as translated from Hindi, “senseless fucker”), launched by four stand-up comics in 2012, has been credited with starting and epitomizing the trend. Created as a comedy podcast that immediately spotlighted salient Indian political and social issues—poverty, political corruption, terrorism—AIB’s founders quickly moved to host the program on iTunes, where its fan base exploded into the millions, allowing expansion into a YouTube channel in 2013, social media platforms, and the 2015 launch of a TV program broadcast in both English and Hindi, On Air with All India Bakchod, that mirrors the U.S. show, Last Week Tonight with John Oliver.268

Over the past several years, co-founder Tanmay Bhat and his colleagues have taken on sensitive social challenges, including ongoing dissent between India and Pakistan, the dowry system, political corruption and whistleblowers, net neutrality, and sexual violence and attitudes toward women. But AIB achieved global notoriety in 2013 with its scathing indictment of India’s rape culture and sexual violence portrayed in the short faux PSA-style YouTube video, Rape—It’s Your Fault. The video, which has garnered more than 5.5 million views on YouTube269 to date and received global media coverage, depicts Indian women in various forms of clothing, from regular school clothes to a fully covered astronaut suit, in a successful effort to re-frame victim blame. Responding to media coverage about the video in The Guardian, one public commenter mused about the potential impact:

The satirical video about rape in India ‘It’s your fault’ probably caused more people to rethink their values and this situation than any amount of campaigning would do. It has been viewed more than 2 million times on YouTube—do you think any organisational campaign video could achieve that much? Comedy like this makes us face our fears, we break through taboos, we say and hear things that people try to hide. Using humour gives people back control, it gives them a place to speak about issues and talk about problems in a way that feels comfortable. And as such, comedy is not only an appropriate tool to use in development, it is a vital one—one that can help break down those barriers we dare not talk about. One that gives a voice back to those who can’t talk. One that helps us deal with situations too hard to believe.270

A local editorial pointed out the program’s value precisely given its agenda-setting power and intersection between taboo social issues and comedy: “As they use humor and satire to reach their target audiences, spreading awareness of the social atrocities rotting our India….Let us not discuss HIV/AIDS because even after so much awareness, that topic is a stigma among the masses. This is why their show should be renewed, as On Air with AIB might succeed where words fail. Their show might be successful in shaming and ridiculing people to a point where people decide to change and talk real. Regardless of the method, that is what is important: a better India.”271 Indeed, the intersection of comedy and social change has been recognized in India as a kind of genre in the online digital-video arena specifically, sparked by All India Bakchod and a few immediate successors, busily creating funny videos that deliberately challenge social issues, including net neutrality and gender violence.272

In a Bollywood culture still dominated by men, the socially-conscious comedy environment in India is also heavily male-centered. But notable female comics like Radhika Vaz and Aditi Mittal have cut through the clutter over the last few years in the stand-up scene—and both take on social issues. Vaz, who has sold out stand-up shows in her native India, along with Los Angeles and New York, takes on gender politics and identity and social conformity in a conservative culture through her Web series, Shugs and Fats, and book, Unladylike. On spotlighting sensitive social issues, Vaz points to the need to provide an entry into challenging topics: “Gender issues need to be addressed, don’t you think? We women stay silent on so much—at least with comedy I can talk about all those things and we can laugh
at them. Once you laugh at something its stops being so important and then less painful….We will know things have changed when politicians stop saying ‘boys will be boys’ when a woman is raped. We will know it has stopped when people stop insisting girls get married and have children as a lifestyle choice.”

Shugs and Fats, the Internet series produced with another comic, Nadia Manzoor, won the Breakthrough Series Short Form Award in the 2015 Gotham Independent Film Awards in New York, cementing the material’s cross-cultural resonance. Similarly, Aditi Mittal, one of India’s only female comics, has addressed issues of gender equality and violence over the past several years since the debut of her 2013 solo show, aptly titled Things They Wouldn’t Let Me Say. Deliberately taking on traditionally taboo topics, Mittal has said of the importance of newly socially-conscious comedy in India:

And as much as we’re learning to take a joke, we’re also great at taking offence. My question is: How can one take offence at a joke about poverty, when one should be offended at poverty? How can one be offended at a joke about discrimination when one should be offended at discrimination? But that’s the best part of dissent—we are free to laugh and agree, or remain silent and disagree and we are free to be the ones to get up on stage and be the ones to make a joke. All three at the same time.

Perhaps in recognition of the potentially powerful role of India’s new socially-conscious, boundary-pushing comedy scene as a tool for tolerance, the U.S. State Department sponsored a seven-city Indian stand-up comedy tour, Make Chai, not War, in 2012. As part of a “regular global cultural exchange program,” according to the State Department, the trip was “intended to stem religious prejudice and encourage tolerance.” And as India’s comics find new digital outlets and venues, India-native comedy tours and festivals are playing to millions, beginning with the launch of India’s largest comedy festival, the Weirdass Pajama Festival. Launched in 2014 by comic notable Vir Das, India’s first comedy-only entertainment festival has exploded into a three-city tour (Mumbai, Pune, Delhi) that includes 100 comics from India and around the world.

With a growing presence that spans from a more conservative TV marketplace to a boundary-pushing digital and live comedy scene, India’s young, urban audience is registering its enthusiasm with views and tickets, likely fueling the growth of an increasingly sophisticated—and socially-conscious at its roots—art form influenced by U.S. comedy forms but native to India.

GLOBAL SPOTLIGHT

COMEDY & SOCIAL ISSUES IN SOUTH AFRICA

Comedy in South Africa is booming. Over the two decades since the demise of apartheid, a groundswell of comics and comedy shows has steadily erupted. From 1997 to the present day, the number of established comedians has more than tripled, and comic talents are now in demand for entertainment ranging from commercials to faux satire news programming. The trend has been attributed to the increased openness of the country and a gradually decreased level of censorship, resulting in a scene characterized by both a talent pool and audience of young, diverse urbanites.

The comedy boom in South Africa is a break from the past, both in terms of the safe content allowed in a censored apartheid environment, as well as who is allowed to tell the jokes. Over the past 20 years, the entertainment marketplace for South African comedy has moved from a predominantly white comedy scene to a post-apartheid environment with many prominent black comics—with material that takes on sensitive topics head-on. South Africa’s comedy reflects the backdrop of its history and
current moment, with a strong undercurrent of race. Racial disparity is also the backdrop of South Africa’s dominant public health challenge: HIV. About 19 percent of South Africans aged 18-49 is infected with HIV,\textsuperscript{282} although the trend is improving. However, HIV rates for black South Africans are dramatically higher than whites or other racial groups, revealing a persistent challenge amidst the intersection of race and poverty.\textsuperscript{283}

In this newly open entertainment marketplace, ripe for humor and satire skewering South Africa’s social challenges, how does one of the globe’s hottest comedy scenes incorporate social and civic issues? Broadly speaking, South African comedy spans from political satire to more innocuous forms of comedy, examining serious issues such as poverty, high crime rates, the country’s vast socio-economic divide, and HIV; in fact, among South African comics, “there is a strong sense that the social, political and economic conditions in South Africa hand them real material because they were and still are a matter of life and death.”\textsuperscript{284} Functionally, a special breed of comedy in South Africa relies on comparisons of its profound social issues with other countries, but the comedy genre known as “South Africa is hard-core” serves a purpose: “Given the enormous and numerous social problems facing South Africa, perhaps this form of gallows humor is carving out a place of momentary and much needed reprieve, a moment of much needed sheer enjoyment.”\textsuperscript{285}

South Africa’s comedy scene is dominated and shaped by talents who began as stand-up comics. A godfather of South Africa’s particular brand of civically-engaged comedy is the entertainer and activist Pieter-Dirk Uys, considered a legendary satirist known for his work speaking out against apartheid in darkly amusing fashion, managing to avoid the heavy censorship of the era. When asked how his comedy managed to cut through the censors and have an impact, Uys said, “You can find a way of dressing it [comedy] up and making it look like entertainment, and get people to laugh at the thing that they don’t want to think about. I learned during the apartheid years, that the truth is funnier. Humour is a great weapon of mass distraction.”\textsuperscript{286}

Similarly, one of the first women comics in South Africa, Mel Jones, has stated that comedy in South Africa, which tends to be unapologetically direct when it comes to discussing race and apartheid-related issues, serves a purpose in a rapidly-progressing civic culture beyond just entertainment: “It’s about changing the perception, the mindset. We plant a seed. We can’t force people to embrace the change, some of us are walkers, some of us are runners, but I think we are in a better place for comedy now. We are even talking about gay or transgender topics, it’s part of who we are, as South Africans.”\textsuperscript{287} But Jones and other comics caution that their comedy is quite culturally specific and known to offend audiences from other countries—including the United States and Britain—given their lack of lived experiences in other countries.\textsuperscript{288} Despite the fact that local jokes may be confusing to outsiders, the use of race as a kind of surrogate for social inequality may act as a global connector; “race is often shorthand for social differences, whether in South Africa, the United States or many other places.”\textsuperscript{289}
Trevor Noah, now well-known in the United States and around the world since taking over *The Daily Show* hosting job vacated by Jon Stewart, rose through South Africa’s stand-up comedy ranks largely due to his provocative humor focused on race, albeit from the perspective of a mixed-race man (as he characterizes it, “born a crime”). In an interview, he was precise about the differences between the U.S. and South African brand of stand-up comedy and its role in civic issues:

*I think there’s a beautiful thing in that we haven’t seen the mass commercialization of comedy in South Africa, so we still operate from a place of passion. Obviously, that’s changing every day. In America, there have been a few comedy bubbles. They burst. But you know where you could not watch a sitcom without seeing a stand-up comedian being the face of that, and so on? Stand-up comedy was always seen [in the U.S.] as a platform to get you to another level of stardom. Whereas I come from a world where stand-up comedy is the platform to a place of truth.*

In South Africa, despite the vast entertainment value of comedy, it may be seen more overtly as a cultural “pain reliever” than in the U.S. According to the perspective of comedy promoter Takunda Bimha, in South Africa, “Comedy comes from pain and because of that people need an outlet.”

Bridging stand-up comedy and satire, *Late Nite News*, a wildly successful half-hour TV faux political news program that premiered in 2010, mirrors the formula of the U.S. program *The Daily Show* and has made stars of its creators. Considered “pioneers of black comedy in South Africa,” Kagiso Lediga and Loyiso Gola created the show and have since leveraged it as a funny mouthpiece to take on the country’s politics and social progress. The program features commentary and sketches by Legida and Gola, along with other young black stand-up comics and a mixed-race puppet political analyst character named Chester Missing, played by an award-winning comedy ventriloquist. At its height, the program attracted more than a million viewers per episode, and in 2015, it was nominated for its second International Emmy Award. But according to one of its creators, *Late Night News* is notable for another reason: “Until this show, no consistent black voice had been on a television channel poking fun at the government,” said Lediga. According to its creators, the comedy on the show turned the power dynamics of the country upside down, allowing people of color to comment on politics and civic issues in ways that had been previously closed to them.

Similarly, in 2012, comedy duo Nik Rabinowitz and Tats Nkonzo—one white, one black—created a hit South African stand-up show that played to sold-out theaters. The comedy was characteristically direct, taking on topics including religion, race and polygamy, “to help South Africans accept uncomfortable truths.” As Rabinowitz puts it, the comedy serves an overtly purposeful role in the context of pressing for continued social change in the backdrop of South Africa’s racist roots: “We do need to poke our fingers in certain places and say, ‘well, this is still going on,’ and I think particularly around Africa we need to do that—and we do.”

South Africa’s stand-up comedy scene shows no signs of slowing down. In December 2015, Comedy Central Africa hosted the continent’s largest-ever international comedy show in South Africa, with plans to continue annually. The Comedy Central International Comedy Festival, hosted by Trevor Noah, was held over six days, featuring more than 60 comedians and a range of sketch, satire and stand-up comedy acts broadcast by Comedy Central Africa. The goal of the festival is far-reaching for Viacom International Media Networks (VIMN), with stated plans to produce local comedy that can resonate in international markets. With a new international spotlight due to the global crossover appeal of Trevor Noah, South Africa’s comedy influence may be well-equipped to push beyond country lines into international discussions about race, poverty, and inequality.
LEVERAGING COMEDY FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER:

WHAT?
What are you hoping to accomplish by leveraging comedy? What are the objectives?
- Raise awareness?
- Re-frame a known issue?
- Encourage critical thinking?
- Change minds or behavior?
- Encourage sharing?

WHY?
Why is now the right time?
- Is the timing strategic in the issue?
- Can a timely call to action be used?

WHO?
Who are the audiences you hope to influence?
- Do they know something about the issue already?
- Do they have strong opinions about it?
- Are they new to the issue?

Who is the messenger?
- A trusted and liked source?
- A new face?

WHERE?
Where is this effort taking place?
- Is the effort global?
- Or local?
HIGHLIGHTS & STRATEGIC RECOMMENDATIONS

Let the comedy be comedy. Don’t make it do a heavier lift.

The precise way in which comedy works as persuasion means its power is diluted if audiences are aware they are being “messaged to” or persuaded. But comedy’s ability to amplify a message is well-documented across comedy formats and research. Leave the comedy alone, and let it be optimally hilarious, without diluting it with overly massaged, safe constraints. This is hard to achieve in practice, but comedy may be useless otherwise. Send users and audience members to a website for more information, direct them to a separate serious place, and consider pairing the comedy appeals with other more serious information. At almost all costs, the serious information should be separate from the comedy. In other words, pair the comedy with the serious information and even a call to action, but don’t embed the serious information within the comedy itself.

Behavior change might not be the right objective for comedy in the context of social change.

Leverage comedy to capture attention, cut through the clutter, provide access to new information, offer a way into complicated social issues, encourage sharing, and make memorable messages stick. As illustrated in research about both satire and comedy appeals in marketing around social issues, raising awareness and attracting attention to a social issue through comedy is a worthwhile pursuit. In this way, comedy can serve a reinforcing, amplifying role alongside serious news and information about social issues. And attention leads to sharing, fueling a multiplier effect of the original message. But behavior change may not be the most realistic objective for comedy when it comes to social issues.

Comedy alone is not a magic formula. Leverage comedy’s attention-getting power with strategic timing.

Comedy’s attention-getting power is most effective when paired with key advocacy moments or milestones—a call to action that makes sense and is optimally timed. Examples include President Obama’s discussion about the Affordable Care Act on Between Two Ferns before a crucial sign-up deadline, and the If Men Had Periods video campaign to encourage awareness and signatures around the Sustainable Development Goals. Simply producing and distributing a comedy piece—without the infrastructure for change (specific call to action) or the appropriate urgent moment—likely won’t lead to influence that can make a difference.

Comedy is a powerful media tool. The audience is not just the public, but media.

In the context of social change, we seek to engage an activated, motivated audience—a group we want to learn, feel or do something—but the role of media outlets as amplifiers is crucial. Comedy’s ability to actually set a media agenda—making something into news or keeping an issue in the media agenda in a prominent way—is well-documented by research and in practice. If comedy content leads to news and media outlets picking up the message and engaging in additional reporting, the effect of one comedy piece is magnified infinitely, increasing its ability to reach both target audiences and decision-makers who are able to directly impact the issue.
Use satire to mobilize a base of supporters, but don’t count on it to change minds around deeply polarizing issues.

Using satirical comedy for social issues with well-established ideological or partisan perspectives will do little to re-frame the issue for people who don’t already agree. In other words, satire about a well-established social issue with sides—gun control, climate change—may serve to validate a perspective, but it won’t work to turn naysayers into the choir. Research supports the idea that people with deeply-held partisan or ideological beliefs will retain them in the face of satire. Satire’s role is to serve as a gateway to more complicated information. Explain it, satirize it, invite people to laugh at the situation, but don’t expect them to change their minds about issues with deeply-held ideological perspectives. For issues that are new or nascent—or for which ideological or partisan camps have not already divided the culture—satire can be a good tool. Mobilizing a base of supporters is also a valuable way to use satire, particularly when the timing is strategic to coincide with a meaningful call to action.

Want to build empathy and connection to people? Consistent entertainment portrayals of characters can normalize people and ideas over time.

Don’t count on one episode to do it all in the long term. In entertainment programming, the power is in the connection audiences develop with characters over time. Seeing unfamiliar characters or divisive issues portrayed regularly builds a level of identification, even in a comedy format. Normalizing the existence of people and ideas happens best through consistent portrayals, not necessarily one episode of a fuller series.

A consistent trusted messenger may be the most powerful mouthpiece.

A close parasocial relationship with the consistent messenger or host may explain the overt social-action impact of examples like John Oliver’s bringing down the FCC site, or the viral impact of the bail bond videos. He is trustworthy and liked. Research documents the importance of the trusted messenger for the comedy to be persuasive.

Comedy is culturally specific. Issues of representation matter in comedy’s effectiveness for social issues.

Humor is culturally dependent on the ability of the audience to understand and identify. When using comedy or humor for public engagement around locally-specific issues, it won’t work to create the humor without local voices and perspectives. Be very sure about your audience—local, national, international? It matters in the talent who creates the comedy and the messages it promotes.

Self-deprecating humor is more powerful than mean-spirited humor in the context of social issues.

If the goal is to attract attention and help raise awareness about a new issue, self-deprecating humor is more powerful than mean-spirited or sharp-tongued humor. Be careful about the target of the humor—it should never be the oppressed or powerless, even in pursuit of the laugh. Doing so risks backfiring.

Comedy and news sources can be powerful allies, working together to fuel social change.

As research documents, comedy does not have to compete with news—instead, it complements news coverage about social issues. In fact, comedy can open the cognitive doors for people to make sense of complex social issues, thus helping them to understand more serious news and information about them in the future. With careful partnerships between comedy game-changers and sources of serious news and information, this powerful connector role can be optimally synergistic in pursuit of social change.
Thanks to a confluence of factors—including the transforming digital media era and its influence on audience behavior, and converged forms of entertainment and information—comedy may be in the midst of a golden era of influence, both in the U.S. and around the world. Comics are seen as truth-tellers and public influencers. We get news from comedy sources, comedy attracts attention and encourages sharing, comedy amplifies the insights we gather from more serious forms of news and information. Comedy can both set a media agenda and intellectually open doors to complex topics, helping us to pay attention to more serious information over time. We learn and are entertained through comedy, but comedy’s influence is less about learning and more about caring and feeling. It can help us to think about other people and somber issues in ways that inspire hope and optimism. When it comes to social and civic issues in particular, comedy’s superpower may be its simplest—that is, its ability to attract audiences to topics to which they might not otherwise choose to expose themselves—or about which they have disengaged. This is not merely a simple marketing function, but a potentially powerful impact to seriously consider as we contemplate ways to engage audiences on daunting challenges.

But comedy is specific in its persuasive impact. Its influential muscle comes from its ability to entertain and absorb us into the humor itself—it won’t work for audiences who know they are being “messaged to” through only mildly funny material. Comedy must, in other words, be permitted to go all the way. It may be too much to hope that comedy can change minds—at least right away, in the short term. Most importantly, comedy shouldn’t be imagined as a simple tactical tool, as that thinking reduces it—falsely—to a lab-created mechanism able to create predictable effects. Comedy is culturally specific and often misunderstood when it is ambiguous, as in some forms of satire. That said, we can and should expand our purposeful study of comedy and its intersection with social change on the pressing social issues of our time.

Despite what we now know, there is a tremendous amount we don’t know, which points to future innovation and inquiry. Within the context of comedy’s intersection with social change, three particular gaps are worth examining: First, research about the long-term impact of comic portrayals of people and issues in entertainment programming is almost non-existent. Next, although research about the civic influence of political satire news programs is well-established, there is almost none that examines the intersection of social issues such as global poverty and the role of comedy. And finally, despite many notable case studies of comedy appeals or stunts attempted in social change, most do not include evaluations of social impact beyond reach.

Moving forward, expanding these lines of work—and creating intentional conversations between researchers, social-change strategists and thinkers, and comic talents—would inform and shape our public engagement solutions to issues that matter the most. Considering the challenges we face as global citizens, it may be well worth the risk.

YOU HEAR PEOPLE SAY, ‘THERE’S SO MUCH SUFFERING IN THE WORLD, JOKES ARE INAPPROPRIATE.’ I SAY HUNGER IS INAPPROPRIATE. POVERTY IS INAPPROPRIATE. LIES AND HYPOCRISY FROM GOVERNMENTS, THAT’S INAPPROPRIATE.

HASAN MINHAJ, STAND UP PLANET
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Spinger, 2015.
Spinger, 2015.
Ellis, 2012.
Dreisinger, 2015.
Dreisinger, 2015.
Sood, 2015.
YOU CAN TELL A LOT ABOUT PEOPLE BY THE JOKES THEY TELL.

HASAN MINHAJ, STAND-UP COMIC, CORRESPONDENT ON THE DAILY SHOW