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A funny matter: Toward a framework for understanding the function of comedy in social change

Abstract: Despite its cultural reach and influence, comedy may not be well-understood in communication and public engagement efforts for social justice challenges. Research about comedy's influence in social issues exists across disciplines and lacks common language. This article creates a practical framework toward the understanding of mediated comedy in social change communication by presenting a typology of distinct formats of comedy – scripted entertainment, satire news, humorous ads, and stand-up comedy – and synthesizing multidisciplinary scholarship that deals with the role of comedy in audience understanding of civic and social issues. The resulting framework for comedy's influence in social justice includes: attracting attention, persuasion, offering a way into complex issues, dissolving social barriers, and encouraging message sharing. Implications for leveraging comedy in social change public engagement efforts, as well as directions for future innovation and research, are discussed.

Keywords: comedy, humor, social justice, social change, satire, entertainment-education, narrative transportation

1 Introduction

Comedy is a powerful source of public influence and cultural information, and yet, it may be a little-understood genre for overt social change efforts – that is, within the role of communication and the production of public engagement efforts to positively influence urgent social justice challenges. Scholarly research that examines the intersection of comedy and humor with social, political and civic issues does not share language or a core discipline, nor is it generally translated to a professional audience. Thus, it may not be accessible to organizations that endeavor to promote public engagement in social challenges such as racism and hunger. And indeed, the timing may be crucial, given that

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audiences may be increasingly desensitized to social-justice messages about issues as serious as global poverty, long positioned as "worthy but dull" in media (Cameron 2015: 276).

By synthesizing scholarship that deals with the role of comedy in audience understanding of political, civic and social issues, the purpose of this work is to create a practical framework to explain and assess comedy's influence and potential ability to promote positive change in serious contemporary social challenges; such a framework can be applied, then, by future scholars who aim to research the audience effects of comedy that focuses on social issues, or by communication practitioners who endeavor to leverage comedy in their social-change work. To explicate "positive change," this work follows comedy scholarship in a social justice context, which posits that comedy's influence includes the ability to articulate social criticism to large audiences, and to contribute to shifts in attitudes and beliefs about social challenges by challenging the dominant status quo (Quirk 2015), and to allow marginalized voices and issues to be heard and to re-frame dominant narratives of oppression (Krefting 2014).

With this premise in mind, the present article aims to address several challenges in the existing comedy literature in the context of social change and social justice. First, although comedy has been studied across a range of disciplines, no one body of work curates evidence-based literature about mediated comedy's known audience effects when it comes to communicating about civic, political and social issues. Several notable humor scholars have positioned comedy's *potential* for influence in social justice challenges, but also have called for research to examine whether or not this potential translates into evidence-based effects (Krefting 2014; Quirk 2015). The framework presented here, built from a synthesis of research across disciplines, aims to answer that call. Next, the broad articulation of humor used within many comedy studies – rather than a precise focus on specific mediated comedy genres (i.e. scripted sitcoms compared to faux news satire) – may not be specific enough for researchers and social justice communication professionals to know precisely how different genres of comedy may work when it comes to public engagement about social issues. The comedy genres landscape presented here does not fully answer those questions, but importantly, it raises them and explicates the influence characteristics of mediated comedy genres. Finally, there is scant extant research that presents the influence and effects of intentional mediated comedy campaigns that have been overtly designed to be centerpieces of social justice public engagement efforts. Taken together, these gaps pose challenges for scholars, social justice leaders and communicators who aim to fully understand how comedy might be useful in particular scenarios when it comes to communicating about serious social problems.

To begin to apply research methods to the question of comedy's influence in social justice issues, we must necessarily begin with an evidence-based articulation of comedy's known effects in the context of civic and political issues. This articulation may be utilized to guide future scholarly research that endeavors to not only illuminate comedy's *potential* for influence in social justice, based on its primary characteristics, but its actual effects. Employing this framework can shape future social science and humanities research approaches to studying how audiences respond to comedy focused on social justice issues, thus expanding new directions for comedy research and building a body of scholarly evidence for comedy's influence in service of social justice challenge. And finally, but not insignificantly, for communication and comedy professionals to effectively develop public campaigns and communication tactics to reach new audiences, to persuade seemingly intractable ones, and to capture attention, understanding "what works" and what doesn't is a contribution. In sum, the primary hypothesis generated by this comedy and social justice influence framework is as follows: social justice practitioners who understand comedy's known influence on audiences, in the context of humor and serious social issues, may be more likely to shape impactful public engagement efforts that leverage a comedy approach; in turn, scholars will be better equipped to research comedy's influence in the context of social issues.

The article begins by articulating a definition of social change within the context of mediated entertainment. The work then provides an overview definition of comedy and its traits in context of social justice, followed by a succinct presentation of social-justice-infused comedy's popularity and availability in the digital era marketplace. The next section presents a contemporary typology of four distinct mediated comedy formats by synthesizing known audience effects and limitations of each: satirical news, scripted entertainment, humorous ads, and stand-up comedy. Such a typology may be meaningful, given that extant research focused on the influence of humor examines one comedy format at a time. The next section establishes the need for this work's contribution of an original framework by illuminating humor scholarship that has examined the potential societal function of comedy in social justice, and yet, has called for research on comedy's effect on audiences and media discourse in the context of social justice issues. Derived from this foundation, the final section establishes a framework toward the understanding of comedy's precise influence in service of social justice; the framework comes from a synthesis of research from arenas with relevant insights in civic, political and public health issues, including communication studies, psychology, sociology, political science, neuroscience, marketing, and global development.

From a theoretical perspective, this work draws heavily from narrative persuasion and Entertainment-Education, given a focus on audience persuasion and shifts in attitudes and beliefs, as well as applicability in these arenas within the context of mediated comedy (Singhal and Rogers 1999), along with diffusion of innovations, or the spread of new ideas that influence public opinion, attitudes and beliefs (Quirk 2015), and cultural identity and cultural citizenship (Krefting 2014).

2 Defining social change and comedy

Although social change finds roots across disciplines, the intersection of entertainment, communication, storytelling, and media is the meaningful foundation in the context of comedy. Thus, this work employs a seminal definition of social change within the context of entertainment effects: "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" (Singhal and Rogers 1999: xii). 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 examples, from individual behavior change efforts to mass media stunts to formal entertainment.

Comedy is hardly new. A notable early definition of comedy comes from Aristotle's conception of wit as "a means between buffoonery and boorishness" (Heath 1989: 344). Circa ancient Greece in fourth century BC in ancient Greece, Aristotle described comedy as a societal "corrective" – a mirror for social critique (Hoy n.d.). Comedy's counterculture, deviant nature (Quirk 2015: 15) – as social corrective – and requirement for artistic freedom are essential creative characteristics in the intersection of comedy with social justice. Interpreting Aristotle's early articulation, the foundation of social justice – imagining and correcting a world that should be, not one that *is* – is incorporated into an understanding of comedy: "tragedy imitates men who are better than the average and comedy men who are worse" (Hoy n.d.).

In his seminal work, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, originally published in 1905, psychologist Sigmund Freud focused on comedy's societal role and purpose:

> 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 (Downe 1999, p. 68).

As with Artistotle's original conception, comedy in Freud's view is not a passive art form, but an active way of reimagining a status quo. Further, Freud posited that humor that includes purposeful social critique and challenge to established societal structures and norms are more satisfying than "innocent" jokes without such pointed social commentary (Quirk 2015: 17).

More recently, humor has been defined both by its major descriptive characteristics and the role of the audience, including situational awareness and understanding of context (Allen 2014); an audience's emotional experience with comedy is also meaningful (DeLaure 2011). It also has 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 (Downe 1999). Comedy scholar Critchley emphasized incongruity as key to defining comedy, stating that "humour is produced by a disjunction between the way things are and the way they are represented in the joke, between expectation and reality" (Critchley 2002: 1). Incongruity implies an audience must maintain some shared recognition, then, of the status quo and the distortion – imagining a new idea, or a new way of being – that sparks the laugh. 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.

3 Potential societal functions of comedy in social change

To articulate the nature of positive social change that may be fostered in part by comedy, several scholars have considered comedy's cultural and societal functions in the context of social justice by explicating several core concepts: comedy as positive change agent through reach and spreading new ideas (diffusion of innovations) (Quirk 2015); comedy as source of social commentary and alternative views, counterculture and resistance (Meier and Schmitt 2017); and asserting cultural identity for marginalized groups (Krefting 2014). Comedy is able to influence, also, by "pumping out social criticism to audiences of millions" (Quirk 2015: 152). Thus, comedians have the potential to positively

influence norms and ideas, based on Everett Rogers' diffusion of innovations theory (Quirk 2015: 195). The influence of comedy can be profound, then, based initially on its sheer potential for reach – as it is shared and made viral in the digital era – as entertainment.

Drawing from anthropology, sociology and philosophy, scholar Sophie Quirk presents comedy as "an important form of social comment and dispute" (Quirk 2015: 14). In this way, a steady or even occasional stream of alternative ideas provides additional – new – values for a society to consider (Quirk 2015). Social justice efforts, by considering social problems, thus potentially benefit from a regular expression of new (and critical) ideas that may challenge a current state of affairs. Additionally, implying that the new ideas are "only a joke" allows norms of the status quo to be temporarily set aside, opening a door for cultural influence (Quirk 2015: 38). Comedy is capable of creating a kind of shared community, at least temporarily, regardless of the comedians' intentions, given that "all comedians participate in a process which challenges and rene-gotiates societal norms, whether or not they, themselves, intend or acknowledge it" (Quirk 2015: 2017).

Scholars also consider cultural identity and representation when contem-plating the influence of comedy for social challenges. Meier and Schmitt's edited volume, *Standing Up, Speaking Out: Stand-Up Comedy and the Rhetoric of Social Change*, articulates the power of comedy as a form of expression for traditionally marginalized racial and ethnic groups (Meier and Schmitt 2017). In this context, scholars have argued that comedy provides opportunities for traditionally mar-ginalized individuals to express and articulate their cultural identities (Lowrey and Renegar 2017); interrogate stereotypes to shape new narratives (Morgan 2017); share "a critical perspective otherwise unavailable to mainstream audi-ences" (Gilbert 2017: 57); criticize and confront damaging beliefs about groups (Morris 2017); and "engage in critical self-reflexivity and embrace meaningful social change by revealing concrete examples of white privilege and racism" (Meier and Schmitt 2017: 93).

Scholar Rebecca Krefting articulates a specific sub-genre of comedy – "charged comedy," described as "comic performers who intentionally produce humor-challenging social inequality and cultural exclusion" (Krefting 2014: 2). This perspective positions comedy in the context of social justice and asserts the possibility and *potential*, but not the guarantee, for charged comedy to enact positive social change – that is, shifting audience attitudes, beliefs and inten-tions to behave differently (Krefting 2014: 23). Krefting calls for research and analysis to understand more precisely how audiences respond to comedy focused on social issues, and the need to articulate comedy's persuasive and cultural influence when it comes to social and civic issues (Krefting 2014: 237), a

topic to which the framework of the present work attends. How comedy's influence works on audiences when it comes to civic and social issues, and how future scholars might research them, is the focus of this work.

4 Comedy's influence within a digital media landscape

The cultural, political, and civic landscape of influence has been redefined in the shifting digital media system. As a notable source of political and civic information, the evolution and importance of contemporary comedy has been well-researched (Feldman 2013a; Feldman 2013b; Feldman et al. 2011; Young 2008, Young 2013; Pew Research Center 2008; Baym 2006). Recent and new comedy programs in U.S. entertainment – both online and on TV – are infused with portrayals of social challenges. For example, *Modern Family* and *Black-ish* address gay rights and race relations (Feiler 2011; VanDerrWerff 2015). Netflix and Amazon Studios, two influential digital-native media outlets, have spotlighted new voices on programs like *Transparent* and *Master of None* (Kornhaber 2015b; Poniewozik 2015b; Elan 2015). Satirical news programs like *The Daily Show* continue their dominance as media agenda-setters and sources of viral commentary on social issues in the news (Garber 2015). Online – with sites and content producers that include *Funny or Die, The Onion* and *CollegeHumor* – contemporary comedy's influence and shareability is notable. Indeed, in 2014, then-President Obama turned to *Funny or Die*'s online comedy show, *Between Two Ferns*, to promote the Affordable Care Act and encourage young people to sign up for health insurance (Beer 2015; Blake 2015).

Anecdotally, comedy in the United States has been recognized as a cultural force that contributes to changes in social norms and drives attention to social problems. For instance, in the 1970s and 1980s, Emmy-winning TV producer Norman Lear's TV comedy sit-coms – *All in the Family, The Jeffersons* – entertained millions while discussing the social issues of the day (Bianco 2015). In the present day, the TV program *Transparent* chronicles the life of a 70-year-old professor and his gender transition (Halterman 2015; Berger 2015). The TV comedy sit-com *Modern Family*, along with a steady increase of TV shows with comedic 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 (Kornhaber 2015a; Schiappa et al. 2005).

5 Comedy formats for social change: A typology

Across available research about mediated comedy's intersection with social issues – on the route to social change – four primary comedy formats underlie most examples of comedy's treatment of social issues in the contemporary marketplace: Satirical news, scripted entertainment storytelling, marketing and advertising, and stand-up comedy. Within the context of civic and social issues, this section considers the primary elements of each distinct comedy form, as well as known audience influence, effects and cautionary notes.

5.1 Satire news

Satire is a particular comedy format that uses humor to spotlight and underscore the power dynamics or ridiculousness of a scenario. On the audience's part, satire requires some basic recognition and understanding of the original scenario at the heart of the joke, and therefore, is 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 (Bore and Reid 2014). "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" (Bore and Reid 2014: 455). 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 (Young 2008: 120). With this kind of humor, the audience's focus on getting the joke may reduce careful scrutiny of the message (Young 2008).

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 (Holbert et al. 2011). 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) would clearly fall more in line with the horatian style (Holbert et al. 2013: 182).

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 (Becker and Haller 2014). 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, juvenialian humor compared to an op-ed (Holbert et al. 2013).

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) (Hollander 2005). 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" (Young 2013: 162). And finally, the role of the messenger is central; 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 (Young et al. 2014).

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 (Young et al. 2014). Additionally, when dealing with issues that have well-established ideological or partisan perspectives, satire may not be effective if the objective is to reach individuals who don't already agree with those views. 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 (LaMarre et al. 2009). 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" (LaMarre et al. 2009: 215). That is, individuals 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). For ideologically divided social issues, satire may be, therefore, better suited to motivate a base of supporters than to convince new ones.

5.2 Scripted entertainment storytelling

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. Long established

by cultivation theory, attitudes and beliefs about individuals and social issues are heavily influenced by consistent, long-term media portrayals in both entertainment and news (Shanahan and Morgan 1999).

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 (Singhal and Rogers 1999). Entertainment storytelling's pathway to positive attitudes and behavior change is based on 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 (Singhal and Rogers 1999). A crucial contemporary contribution is narrative transportation, which explains the route by which audiences become immersed in entertainment stories – both scripted and non-scripted (Green and Brock 2000). The more deeply audiences are transported into a story, the less likely they are to push back against messages through counter-argument (Green and Brock 2000; Murphy et al. 2011).

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 (Moyer-Gusé et al. 2011; Nabi et al. 2007). Humor has been found to reduce individuals' counter-arguing against messages experienced through an entertaining, funny format (Moyer-Guse et al. 2011; Nabi et al. 2007).

It's not yet known precisely how comedy treatments of social issues in one-time episodes of entertainment storytelling may impact audiences. In the only existing 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 (Moyer-Guse et al. 2011). 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 (Moyer-Guse et al. 2011). That said, new research about comedy in the context of documentary storytelling found that viewers took the issue of global poverty seriously, even in a comedy context (Borum Chattoo and Feldman, 2017); more research with regard to humor and perceived issue severity is needed.

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 (Schiappa et al. 2005; Smedema et al. 2012).

Cautionary notes apply, however, in the use of humor to communicate about social issues in a scripted entertainment context; leveraging comedy in this way, without trivializing the seriousness of a social issue, is a difficult balance. The value of comedy in entertainment storytelling may best be found in its ongoing normalization of taboo issues and ability to generate new – and consistent– attention to social issues.

5.3 Marketing & advertising

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)" (Blanc and Brigaud 2014: 669). This consistent positive impact of humor is well-established in marketing scholarship (Blanc and Brigaud 2014: 669). Humor in advertising significantly increases positive attitudes toward the ad, attention, and positive affect or emotion (Eisand, 2009) – 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 (Eisend 2009, Eisend 2011). Because it operates through this peripheral route, humor in advertising decreases audiences' counter-arguing against messages (Blanc and Brigaud 2014). 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 due to cognitive processing (Eisend 2009: 200).

Within the context of marketing and advertising appeals around social issues, comedy can act as a cross-cultural communicator, provides 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. In advertising research about humor appeals, the level of audience involvement 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 may be (Zhang and Zinkhan 2006). 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 natively funny, "ad humor is more effective in influencing the audience's attitudes toward both the ad and brand" (Zhang and Zinkhan 2006: 113). 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 (Zhang and Zinkhan 2006). The presence of a serious message can overpower the comedy in the journey to persuasion. Stronger serious messages may actually "overpower the humor and encourage unwanted counter-arguments" (Cline and Kellaris 1999: 72), so letting the humor be maximally funny is the key to unlocking its persuasive impact in this format.

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 impactful than the non-funny messages for all three topics. They concluded that the messages were also more persuasive since audiences also spent more time with them (Blanc and Brigaud 2014: 669). 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" (Blanc and Brigaud 2014: 675).

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 narrative one. The comedic messages were most effective in encouraging people to sign an organ donation card (Weber et al. 2006). 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 (Weber et al. 2006: 83).

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, and it warrants additional study.

5.4 Stand-up comedy

The roots of stand-up comedy are found in American vaudeville of the early 1900s (Montagne 2015; Desowitz 2015; Nesteroff 2015). Stand-up comedy's roots in the U.S. grew out of the traditions and humor of minority groups – Jewish-Americans and African-Americans (Nesteroff 2015) – 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, known for taking on taboo topics directly and challenging the status quo perspective on social issues (Zoglin 2008).

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) began by honing their trade on the stand-up comedy circuit. Between Netflix, YouTube, iTunes and SoundCloud, digital-era stand-up and sketch comedy audiences are no longer limited to live experiences alone, expanding the reach and potential social influence of the form (Kramer 2015; Love 2014; Esposito 2015).

Stand-up comedy's popularity in the entertainment marketplace is undisputed, and neuroscience provides a rationale to help explain why stand-up comedy may be so valued and enjoyed by various cultures. 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 as a mental reward the more amusing they find the stand-up comedy to be (Franklin et al. 2011).

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 (Quirk 2015: 36). 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 (Mintz 1985). 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 (Amarasingam 2010; Michael 2013).

Reducing stigma around sensitive topics is yet another potential influence for 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 lower feelings of stigma than the other group after the show, although the long-term effects are not determined (Jones et al. 2014).

As with other humor formats, there are inherent limitations for stand-up comedy. By pointing out power dynamics inherent in social issues such as poverty and inequality, stand-up and sketch comedy may inadvertently reinforce power dynamics instead of effectively skewering them – including perpetuating racial stereotypes (Cohen and Richards n.d.). Finally, stand-up comedy is culturally specific; material that is understood and appreciated as funny in one country or culture may not translate at all to another (Beam 2015). And yet, stand-up comedy in the contemporary era is widely available through digital platforms and voraciously sought by audiences – an important potential vehicle for messages about social issues.

6 Comedy as change agent: Influence framework

Underscoring comedy's influence is the foundational idea that individuals in the niche-channel Internet Era are not sedentary blocs, passively awaiting information; they seek out comedy. Individuals actively choose particular sources of information and entertainment to serve individual psychological needs, such as learning or regulating moods (Katz et al. 1974). The same elements are true for comedy. Audiences who seek out smart, civically-focused comedy and entertainment may do so for more than one reason – to be entertained *and* to make sense of serious information (Young 2013). 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 across multidisciplinary scholarship, this framework explicates an understanding about how comedy works as an influencer in the context of public engagement toward social change in five ways: attracting attention and facilitating memory; persuasion; opening a door to complex social issues; dissolving social barriers; and encouraging sharing with others.

6.1 Attracting attention & facilitating memory

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 (Blanc and Brigaud 2014). Beyond extensive evidence of the effects of humor in commercial advertising (Eisend 2009, Eisend 2011), this level of impact has been demonstrated in the context of political and civic communication (Xenos and Becker 2009), and in response to humorous public health messages (Blanc and Brigaud 2014). 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 (Moy et al. 2005).

6.2 Persuasion

Learning more is not necessarily a precursor to developing a favorable attitude or taking action (Chaffee and Roser 1986). 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 (Blanc and Brigaud 2014: 670). 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 (Kim and Vishak 2008: 357). 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 (Petty and Cacioppo 1986), 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 (Zhang 1996; Cameron 2015; Nabi et al. 2007). 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 (Nabi et al. 2007). 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 (Cline and Kellaris 1999). In terms of long-term effects, research 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 (Nabi et al. 2007).

6.3 Entering complex social issues

Comedy offers a way for audiences to engage in complex social and civic issues by simplifying and making them accessible. The cost-benefit analysis involved in actively seeking new information (Popkin 1994) about complicated social and civic issues is thus mitigated by entertainment. In the area of civic issues, some research has 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 (Baum 2003). This concept has borne out in comedic 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 (Feldman et al. 2011). Piggybacking complex issues onto entertainment media treatments – including comedy – can have two major effects, therefore: 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 (Feldman et al. 2011: 31).

6.4 Dissolving social barriers

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. According to the parasocial contact hypothesis, based on the intimate relationships we experience with mediated characters, exposure to positive, humorous entertainment portrayals of minority groups can decrease individuals' levels of prejudice toward those groups (Schiappa et al. 2005). For example, 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" (Schiappa et al. 2005: 98). 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 (Schiappa et al. 2005: 98).

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 (Smedema et al. 2012). As is the case in other complex social issues, particular portrayals of individuals with challenges may serve to drama-tize and widen the gap between them and the audience, inadvertently evoking pity rather than encouraging connections (Smedema et al. 2012). Comedy in serious social issues helps to reduce taboos and open conversation (Allen 2014; Cooper & Dickenson 2013).

6.5 Sharing with others (amplification)

Sharing a funny media product is a way to express individual values and iden-tities, and to commemorate shared cultural moments – and in so doing, allows comedy to exert influence. 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 (Campo et al. 2013). 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 (Campo et al. 2013). 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 (Fraustino and Ma 2015).

7 Discussion

Comedy in the digital information age may be enjoying an unprecedented era of influence. Comics are seen as truth-tellers, public influencers and

information providers. Comedy attracts attention and encourages sharing, and it 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. When it comes to social and civic issues in particular, comedy's core influence 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 new audiences about daunting social justice challenges.

But comedy may be specific in its likely 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. Most importantly, comedy is not a simple, predictable tactical tool. Its art form must be taken seriously. Comedy is culturally specific and often misunderstood when it is ambiguous, as in some forms of satire. Similarly, comedy can be interpreted differently by different audiences. Moreover, comedians may absolve themselves of responsibility for anything other than simple entertainment; such a contradiction may prove challenging for social justice leaders and communicators hoping to work within existing comedy formats and people to create intentional social change efforts. And finally, social change can take place gradually over the course of years, particularly when it comes to social norms; mediated comedy, then, is not a magic tool able to guarantee immediate and long-lasting effects, even if some examples provide a sense of immediacy when it comes to change.

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, given both daunting challenges and an increasingly fragmented, polarized society in which comedy may be equipped to break through. Ultimately, understanding mediated comedy's evidence-based audience effects and media agenda-setting properties may be useful for social justice leaders, communicators and scholars to build intentional justice efforts that leverage comedy at the fore.

Notably, this work attempts to create a framework by which scholars and communicators working in social justice can readily understand the evidence-based influences – on both audience and ability to set a media agenda – of various forms of comedy. Such a framework is designed to be accessible and utilitarian, offering both paths for social justice leaders and comedians to

consider working together on overt campaigns to engage audiences in urgent, daunting social issues, and for scholars to shape and disseminate new research. And yet, the framework is, as yet, untested. Its ability to serve in these purposes, and the refinement of ideas, will come only in the application of these ideas, ideally through pairings of comedians and social justice leaders working together, creating new comedy examples that can be researched, in turn, by scholars. Scholars who leverage this framework and its ideas to shape future research may wish to utilize it in the following ways: By investigating the extent to which any one of the five forms of influence (attracting attention and facilitating memory, persuasion through emotion, opening a door to complex social issues, dissolving social barriers, and encouraging sharing with others) is demonstrated in a mediated comedy work that focuses on a social justice issue; by examining which form of influence may be most meaningful when it comes to shifting attitudes and beliefs or setting a media agenda around marginalized individuals or issues; and by examining possible interactions between the forms of influence. This is largely the work of quantitative and qualitative social science approaches. Pragmatically, social justice communication practitioners would leverage the framework as they shape new efforts to engage publics in serious social justice challenges, particularly those that have been framed in singular dire ways over recent years, thus increasing the challenge to reach beyond a choir of the already converted.

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, several 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, and indeed, difficult to study. Next, although research about the civic influence of political satire news programs is well-established, almost none 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, the vast majority do not include evaluations of social impact beyond metrics of reach. Research about comedy within the context of social justice issues should intentionally examine the formats of comedy as distinct, thus helping social justice communication professionals and others to leverage these types more purposefully.

Moving forward, expanding these lines of work – and creating intentional conversations between scholars, social-change strategists and thinkers, and comic talents – would inform and shape our public engagement solutions to social issues that matter.

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