

The Dark Psychology of Being a Good Comedian

New research shows that the best humor is both a little bit wrong and a little bit right. Is there something about comedians that makes them better at subversion?

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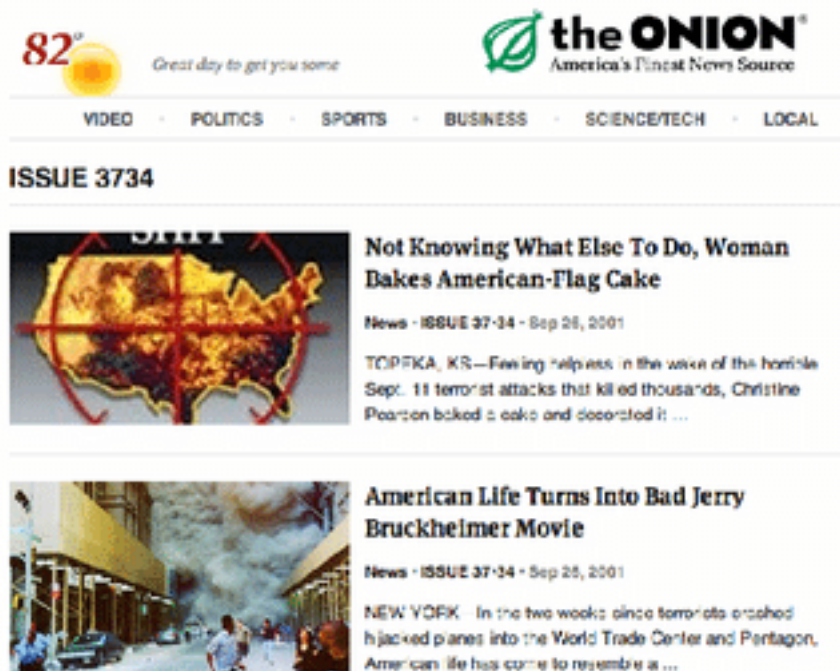
Comedian Tin Vodopivec performs. Camera on autopilot/flickr

OLGA KHAZAN FEB 27, 2014

Immediately after 9/11, comedy ground to a halt. The *Daily Show* went off the air for nine days. *Saturday Night Live*, whose 27th season started 18 days later, featured a somber cold-open with Lorne Michaels asking New York mayor Rudy Giuliani, "Can we be

funny?"

The staffers of *The Onion*, the satirical paper that had just relocated to New York, weren't sure how to answer that question. Even three weeks after the attack, the comedian Gilbert Gottfried was publicly hissed at for joking that he was taking a flight that would make a stop at the Empire State Building.



The screenshot shows the website for 'the ONION', described as 'America's Finest News Source'. The page is for 'ISSUE 3734' and features two news items:

- Not Knowing What Else To Do, Woman Bakes American-Flag Cake**
News - ISSUE 37-34 - Sep 26, 2001
TOPPEKA, KS—Feeling helpless in the wake of the horrible Sept. 11 terrorist attacks that killed thousands, Christine Pearson baked a cake and decorated it ...
- American Life Turns Into Bad Jerry Bruckheimer Movie**
News - ISSUE 37-34 - Sep 26, 2001
NEW YORK— In the two weeks since terrorists crashed hijacked planes into the World Trade Center and Pentagon, American life has come to resemble a ...

Screenshot: *The Onion*

The Onion staffers agonized, but they eventually settled on publishing an entire paper devoted to 9/11 on September 26. As described by psychologist Peter McGraw and journalist Joel Warner in their upcoming book, *The Humor Code*, the issue was smash hit. The *Onion* writers aimed their bile at the hijackers, whom they depicted being tortured by “tusked, asp-tongued demons” in Hell. One headline read, “God Angrily Clarifies 'Don't Kill' Rule.”

The paper was deluged with fan mail from readers

who seemed to find catharsis in the terrorists' derisive rendering.

The Onion's triumph reflects McGraw's long-held theory that comedy is equal parts darkness and light. The best jokes, he believes, take something awful and make it silly. Go purely light-hearted and you risk being toothless. Too edgy, and like Gottfried, you'll make people uncomfortable.

This "benign violation" theory of humor is central to *The Humor Code*, which Warner and McGraw, a professor at the University of Colorado at Boulder, researched by digging into comedy trends around the world. The book comes out on April 1 (obviously).

McGraw's thinking expands on the work of Stanford psychologist [Thomas Veatch](#), which in turn builds on past explanations about why we laugh. Great thinkers have been trying for centuries to figure out the evolutionary purpose of comedy. The theories that have emerged are all very different, but one thing they share is a tendency to hint at the art form's shadowy side.

Hobbes and Plato took the playground perspective, suggesting that making fun helps us feel superior to others. Kant and later psychologists [though it was about](#) a cognitive shift that moves a serious situation into playful territory. In 1905, Freud suggested that humor was the fun-loving id making itself known

despite the protestations of the conformist superego. A few years ago, psychologist Daniela S. Hugelshofer suggested that humor [acts as a buffer](#) against depression and hopelessness. And evolutionary psychologists have suggested that humor is a way to subtly outshine our competitors for mates. Nothing says “pick me” like having an entire office/bar/dorm double over at your imitation of Shosh from *Girls*.



These approaches have a lot in common, though: You can't make a joke without inserting a wicked twist, and you can't be a comedian without holding a small amount of power, for even a short period of time, over the audience.

And if that's the case, is there something about the psychology of comedians that makes them better able to tap into these “violations”? Do they enjoy wielding that kind of power? Or do funny people just know something the rest of us don't?

One of McGraw's favorite quotes [is from Mark Twain](#): “The secret source of humor itself is not joy, but sorrow. There is no humor in heaven.” It's this juxtaposition of injury and cheer that McGraw has studied in depth, both in his book and at the University of Colorado at Boulder's [Humor Research](#)

Lab (acronym: HURL).

“Humor is something people inherently enjoy,” he told me. “But there also needs to be something wrong, unsettling, and threatening in some way. We call those violations.”

Our caveman ancestors lived in a world rife with physical threats. There was relief in discovering that a rustling in the darkness was a mouse rather than a saber-toothed tiger.

“Before people could speak, laughter served as a signaling function,” McGraw explained. “As if to say, ‘this is a false alarm, this is a benign violation.’”

Tickling, the basic form of humor that even non-verbal primates use, is a perfect example: “There's a threat there, but it's safe,” McGraw said. “It's not too aggressive and it's done by someone you trust.”



Today, our threats are less likely to be four-legged, but humor still serves as a way to overcome them. Jokes ease tension; they help us deal with life's injustices, both minor and large. But like the *Onion* staffers after 9/11, jokes have to air these wrongs before making them right.

When jokes are too gentle or anodyne, like this picture of a **cat**, we don't laugh; there's no violation.

(“You can't tickle yourself,” McGraw explains.)

Meanwhile, something that's too offensive, like, say, **this**, is *purely* a violation. (“Like if a creepy guy in a

trench coat tried to tickle you,” he said. “That’s terrifying!”)

RELATED STORY

Some cultures avoid these types of blatant transgressions by restricting the topics that can be fodder for jokes. But Warner, McGraw’s co-author, noticed that while some cultures compartmentalize humor by subject matter, others do so by geography. When they were in Japan, for example, they noticed that the comedy in clubs was as raunchy as it gets, but certain settings were entirely off-limits to joking: “In the office or at school, that’s not okay,” Warner said. “It was not okay to laugh in the office of the humor researchers, even. But in bars and karaoke theaters, anything goes.”

In the HURL lab, McGraw has been trying determine what exactly flips a joke from offensive to funny. Or in research terms, what puts the “benign” in “benign violation?”

Through clinical studies, the lab has found that tragedies—think earthquakes, deaths, and the like—are funnier when they’re either physically or socially distant. “Mishaps” meanwhile, are funnier when we’re closer to them, which is why Anthony Weiner’s Twitter misadventures featured prominently on American late-night shows, but comparable foibles by, say, an Indonesian politician would not have. Likewise, [participants found](#) a picture of a man with a frozen

beard (mishap) funnier than a man with his finger stuck through his own eye socket (tragedy.)



Psychological Science

The lab has also identified that jokes can, indeed, be “too soon,” as [my colleague Julie Beck described](#): One study by McGraw and researchers at Texas A&M University found tweets about Hurricane Sandy to be least funny 15 days after it struck, most funny 36 days after the fact, and once again not funny 99 days later. The passage of about a month, they wrote, creates a “sweet spot” in which poking fun at sadness is neither too neutered nor too sharp: “A tragic event is difficult to joke about at first, but the passage of time initially increases humor as the event becomes less threatening. Eventually, however, distance decreases humor by making the event seem completely benign.” It's even better if the comedy can put the audience physically on edge, which is why most comedy clubs cram people into a tiny room and force them to sit on hard stools, he said—it's best if the audience doesn't Last year, the comedian Stephen Fry publicly discussed [his bipolar disorder](#) and suicide attempt. In describing his quiz show, *QI*, Fry has said, “There are times when I'm doing *QI* and I'm going ‘ha ha, yeah,

yeah,’ and inside I’m going ‘I want to fucking die. I ... want ... to ... fucking ... die’”

“I’ve seen a lot of miserable guys do pretty amazing stand-up,” [Marc Maron once told](#) a fellow comedian. There’s always been an anecdotal link between comedy and inner turmoil, but the empirical evidence has started to back it up. In the 1920s, the psychologist [Lewis Terman found](#) that children rated as having a good sense of humor by their parents and teachers died younger as adults. A longitudinal study of Finnish police officers found that the funniest among them [were more likely](#) to be obese and to smoke. And an [analysis of *New York Times* obituaries](#) found that performers died nearly eight years younger than members of the military did.

Is there something unusually taxing about the process of dreaming up violations and deploying them to crack people up?

Last month, a group of British scientists found that comedians are more likely than regular people to exhibit psychotic traits, or the characteristics associated with people who have schizophrenia or bipolar disorder.

British Journal of Psychiatry

Writing in the [British Journal of Psychiatry](#), the authors describe how they administered a questionnaire to 523 comedians, 364 actors, and 831 people with non-performance jobs. The survey asked about experiences with magical thinking, antisocial behavior,

distractibility, and “introverted anhedonia,” or not deriving pleasure from others.

Comedians and actors alike scored higher than the non-performers across almost all of the traits. The only difference was that comedians were more likely to experience a reduced ability to feel social and physical pleasure, but the same wasn't true of actors. Comedians, more so than the regular folk or even actors, were more likely to have a mild distaste for humanity.

“Comedians had an introverted set of traits, which is rather counterintuitive,” Oxford psychologist Gordon Claridge, one of the authors, told me. “Actors were outgoing in a consistent way.”

It's important to note, Claridge said, that this doesn't mean comedians are mentally ill. In fact, few of the subjects actually experienced psychotic symptoms; they just shared some traits with people who suffer from psychotic ailments.

These characteristics might help comedians “tap into some sort of out-of-the-box thinking,” he said. “Together, they underpin a creative cognitive style.”

McGraw is skeptical, though. He thinks the study supports a certain “crazy comedian” stereotype but **isn't definitive**.

NBC

“People think comedians are kind of screwed-up people, but that they have developed a sense of humor to cope with it,” he said. “That's a compelling idea, but there's not great evidence for that.”

He points to the fact that the comedians scored roughly on par with the actors. Comedians, he says, are just actors starring in their own play.



“It's more about the kind of person who is drawn to a

world of theater more than comedy specifically,” he argues. “Gilbert Gottfried doesn't talk like that all the time. Lewis Black doesn't walk around outraged at the bus stop.”

Besides, no one gets ahead in comedy by being “an asshole,” as McGraw puts it. Such a competitive field demands attentiveness to showtimes, hours spent perfecting jokes, and being cordial to club owners. The HURL lab once studied 600 novices and experts in the Upright Citizen's Brigade, an improv comedy troupe, and found that the only difference was that the experts were more conscientious, McGraw said.

“The really screwed up people aren't comedians, they're criminals. They're in jails, and they're not funny. They're sad and angry,” he said.

“No, there's something else that predicts success in comedy.”

Gil Greengross, a University of Mexico anthropologist, thinks the secret to being funny is being smart. In fact, he's written that humor itself is an “intelligence indicator.”

For a 2011 study published in the journal *Intelligence*, Greengross gave 400 undergrads a series of verbal and abstract-reasoning intelligence tests, and then measured them against history's greatest yardstick of hilarity: writing captions for *New Yorker* cartoons. The captions were then rated by the judges, who were blind to any of the participants' identifiable information.

As he expected, the students who scored higher on the intelligence measures also created the funniest captions. This makes sense. According to all of the theories of humor, wit involves putting discordant ideas together quickly, all while being perceptive enough to offend your audience a little, but not too much.

“You need to be clever to see the things that are wrong in the world and to make them okay,” McGraw said. “Smart people are better-read and they know more about the world. They can connect these dots.”

“Men are trying harder than women to make others laugh. They tend to produce or try to produce more humor in the presence of women.”

Greengross said that when he’s run the same tests with professional stand-up comedians, they produced much higher vocabulary scores than the students did. And of course, the professionals “were able to produce caption after caption that were really funny.” But—prepare to cringe, fellow feminists—Greengross

found that the male students wrote more and funnier captions than the female students did, even though the men had only slightly larger vocabularies on average.

Of course, it could be that writing *New Yorker* captions isn't how women best express humor. Or it could be that women don't feel as comfortable spouting a bunch of violations, however benign, in a clinical setting.

The evolutionary explanation, though, is that women use humor as a proxy to select the cleverest mates from a crowd. It's apparently how we determine mental fitness without forcing men to tattoo their SAT scores on their foreheads.

One key part of the experiment, though, was that the men were actually *attempting* more jokes. They wrote more captions overall, so they had more total successes.

"Men are trying harder than women to make others laugh. They tend to produce or try to produce more humor in the presence of women," Greengross said. "On the other hand, women tend to laugh more than men in general, and especially when men are present." But humor can function as a mate-luring strategy for women, too: The authors found that the female participants who had started having sex earlier or had a greater number of sexual partners were also the ones who produced the funnier captions.

And of all of the different purposes of comedy, this

might be the most subversive of all. It could be that office-cooler witticisms, stand-up routines, and sitcoms are just part of one big pickup line you never saw coming.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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