

# **What is Humor's Role in Persuasion?**

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## *Introduction*

One afternoon, when I was eleven years old I was playing in my parent's den when I came across an old milk crate full of albums that I had never seen before. Being fully entrenched in the cassette-generation at the time, the mysterious cold discs seemed like a strange new medium for disseminating information. As I thumbed through the collection, passing by the monotonous psychedelic cover art, I was taken aback by a handful of records that were clearly different. These albums featured individuals on the covers, each face looking like they had something interesting to say. One even featured a man dressed in an all-white suit with an arrow piercing through his head. I quickly collected as many of them as I could and walked into the kitchen to ask my mother for an explanation.

When I presented them to her, she immediately asked, "Where did you get those?!"

"They were in the den," I said. "Can I listen to them?"

"No!," she yelled. "Those are for adults." But I knew what that meant.

The subtitle to that direction was that these records contained information that was valuable, knowledge that was being withheld from impressionable minds and, if I wanted to know the true secrets of the world, they would clearly become a vital resource in my pursuit of the truth. I decided that I had to listen to them as soon as possible.

So, each night I would wait until my parents were asleep and I would sneak back into the den to quietly place an album onto the record player, slowly plugging in the oversized headphones and carefully resting the needle onto the record as it started to spin. Sitting there in the dark, I would hang on every word Steve Martin, Bob Newhart, Bill Cosby, and George Carlin had to say. I obsessed over their jokes, these wonderful observations, desperately trying to memorize every word they were willing to provide.

At that time, especially as an introverted kid from a small town in Indiana, these experiences changed me. They persuaded me in a real way, convincing me that I wasn't alone – that others might see the world the way I did. In those intimate moments laying on the floor at night by myself in secret, I was convinced why irony mattered, felt urged to appreciate the importance of irreverence, and was inspired to romanticize the practice of critical thought (no matter the silliness of the topic). Their ability to intellectualize the realities of the everyday in a way I could understand and appreciate changed how I processed the world around me. I had never enjoyed something so fully in my entire life and I desperately wanted to be that persuasive once I had something to say.

### *Comedians vs. Anthropologists*

The standup comedian fills the role of the storyteller in our contemporary culture, of a conveyor of the cultural consciousness. It's a role that consists of equal parts entertainment and anthropology. However, while both anthropologists and comedians practice human observation, the comedian relies on hyperbole and humor to create a safe space in which sensitive socio-political topics can be explored. They present a dynamic, oral narrative that allows for interactions between current events and the audience.

Each of these professions study living cultures to distinguish habits within a social framework, doing so to reveal hierarchies of power and critically engage with established ideologies. The anthropologist, by training is a "sympathetic outsider" while, in contrast, the comedian is, "by temperament, a cynical insider."<sup>1</sup> This positions the anthropologist and the

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<sup>1</sup> Stephanie Koziski, *The Stand-up Comedian as Anthropologist: Intentional Culture Critic*, *Journal of Popular Culture*, (18):57-76, 1984.

comedian in very different, if not opposite roles within cultural discourse. As the anthropologist is trained to remain reflexive and skeptical of human biases, the intense subjectivity of the comedian relishes in exploring these same habits by actively working to alter the perspective of the audience.

Furthermore, since the comedian is assumed to be providing their own personal opinion, intense use of humorous cynicism deflects from the critical response that their message might otherwise invite. Unlike the anthropologist, the comedian is allowed to speak bluntly, requiring no ethical review or academic qualification. The anthropologist is trained to be accurate and responsible in the pursuit of established truths. The comedian, however, is conditioned to be sarcastic and irreverent in the pursuit of evolving truths.

The provision of humor as a persuasive act isn't simply a pursuit to evoke laughter. Comedians aren't necessarily happy individuals by nature. No more than nurses aren't abnormally healthy people. They both simply possess a unique skillset – in the case of comedian, they possess a talent for appraising the level of self-awareness of a given audience and openly challenge them to evaluate if it coincides with their proclaimed value structure. It is a skill that seems to be growing in influence.

Currently, our society finds itself within a dramatic transformation in how it disseminates information, entertainment, and technology while simultaneously, transitioning itself into an era of social justice activism augmented by digital advocacy. Thanks to a confluence of factors, humor may be in the midst of its newest golden era of experimentation and influence. In the still-evolving digital age, the opportunity to consume and share comedy has never been more readily available. Yet, despite its vast cultural imprint, comedy is a little-understood vehicle for serious public engagement in urgent social problems. Moreover, in the midst of a merger between

entertainment and news, a rapidly-evolving entertainment media, and a decline in trusted traditional institutions,<sup>2</sup> comedy may be a unique force for influencing social causes, such as global poverty, immigrant rights, gender equality, and climate change.<sup>3</sup>

Comedy's prominent role in popular culture – this shared platform where “we absorb the majority of our beliefs, ideologies, and cultural narratives”<sup>4</sup> – solidifies its position of influence. Comedy is watched, shared, and discussed by millions. It is where authority arises and often where it is secured. Dominant shared values are increasingly fluid, and these modern messages both reflect and shape societal values at an increasingly growing rate.<sup>5</sup>

For its part, comedy, positioned prominently in the current entertainment marketplace,<sup>6</sup> has used social media platforms to expand ways of witnessing the “modern arena of resistance.”<sup>7</sup> This form of humor operates “as a social conduit that participates in communicating values and ideas within a culture by telling stories and conveying information that reflects, challenges, and responds to shared debates and concerns.”<sup>8</sup> To the extent that contemporary comedy overtly includes social justice topics, it also provides a steady stream of cultural criticism.

Comedians are using their voices to assert cultural identities and combat oppressive power dynamics. As a partial consequence of the shifting entertainment marketplace, the voices of traditionally marginalized people and groups – racial and ethnic minorities, women, and sexual

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<sup>2</sup> Pew Research Center, *Beyond Distrust: How Americans View Their Government*, November 23, 2015.

<sup>3</sup> For more see Katy Borum Chattoo and Lauren Feldman, *A Comedian and an Activist Walk into a Bar: The Serious Role of Comedy in Social Justice*, University of California Press (2020)

<sup>4</sup> Amber Day, *Satire and Dissent: Interventions in Contemporary Political Debate* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011), 11.

<sup>5</sup> Isabel Molina-Guzmán, “#OscarsSoWhite: How Stuart Hall Explains Why Nothing Changes in Hollywood and Everything Is Changing,” *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 33, no. 5 (November 2016): 438–454.

<sup>6</sup> A. Lotz, *The Television Will Be Revolutionized*. New York: New York, University Press (2007).

<sup>7</sup> Stuart Hall, “Notes on Deconstructing ‘The Popular’,” in *Cultural Resistance Reader*, Stephen Duncombe, ed. (London: Verso, 2002), 185–192.

<sup>8</sup> A. Lotz, *The Television Will Be Revolutionized*. New York: New York, University Press (2007), 37.

minorities – are not just increasingly seen in comedy, but also are rewarded by critical acclaim, media coverage, and attention.

Within the context of a cultural moment marked by struggle and calls for social equity, comedians themselves serve as social justice influencers in a range of ways. They are overtly calling for remedies to social problems, re-framing news issues, asserting cultural identities, sharing experiences of discrimination, and unmasking taboo topics. Coinciding with a moment in which fewer than two in 10 Americans say they trust government, and not even half (45%) describe business leaders as honest and trustworthy,<sup>9</sup> a 2015 article in *The Atlantic* magazine (“How Comedians Became Public Intellectuals”) prescribed an antidote to the situation:

“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.... 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.”<sup>10</sup>

Satirical news, perhaps the most immediately recognizable form of such humor, is well-documented as a source of political and civic information and is undeniably popular with audiences, receiving millions of views and shares every day.

At its height, the *The Daily Show* was a source of news and information – not just entertainment – for enough people that it rivaled that of traditional news programs. Its coverage was found to ideologically balance topics and perform a de facto watchdog function, particularly

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<sup>9</sup> Pew Research Center, *Beyond Distrust: How Americans View Their Government*.

<sup>10</sup> Megan Garber, “How Comedians Became Public Intellectuals,” *The Atlantic*, May 28, 2015.

for civic issues, politicians, and the media.<sup>11</sup> The show was largely effective because of its presumed motive. Surging in popularity after the events of 9/11, viewers didn't want predictable information consoling the audience that everything was all right, they wanted a trusted source who seemed brave enough to let them know that it certainly wasn't (and to provide some humor to soften the blow of that admission).<sup>12</sup>

The cultural imprint of comedy programming is amplified by the viral-sharing nature of new media platforms, which allows content to reach well beyond the audiences who tune in to watch the full extent of the performances. Indeed, along with their full-length content, comedy programs produce short-form video clips designed for easy online sharing. Of course, the peer-sharing, participatory properties do not encompass the full spectrum of social-change possibilities, but they exponentially increase the audience's ability to share these messages and allow humor to easily extend the conversation to their respective communities.

However, this phenomenon isn't new to the cultural impact of comedy. Humor has always existed at the intersection between a message's relevance and its accessibility. It provides a critique of current cultural manifestations in a relatable and contagious fashion. As the message spreads, so does the idea.

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<sup>11</sup> Lauren Feldman, Anthony Leiserowitz, and Edward Maibach, "The Science of Satire: The Daily Show and The Colbert Report as Sources of Public Attention to Science and the Environment," in *The Stewart/Colbert Effect: Essays on the Real Impact of Fake News*, ed. Amarnath Amarasingam (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2011), 25–46.

<sup>12</sup> Dannagal Goldthwaite Young, "The Privileged Role of the Late-Night Joke: Exploring Humor's Role in Disrupting Argument Scrutiny," *Media Psychology* 11, no. 1 (March 2008): 119–142.

## *What is Humor?*

The concept of humor can be a confusing topic – even in an academic sense, and it has a variety of definitions. It can refer to (1) a stimulus that elicits laughter and amusement (e.g., joke), (2) an individual’s tendency to laugh or to amuse others (i.e., a habit of telling or laughing at jokes), (3) the act of creating something funny (e.g., telling a joke), and (4) a psychological state associated with laughter and amusement (e.g., a response to a joke).<sup>13</sup> It’s the connection between the last two occurrences that this essay intends to explore as it relates to persuasion at the individual and societal level.

To utilize humor as a persuasive tool requires an agile skillset that empowers the messenger (the comedian) to engage with an audience in unique ways depending on the topic. It is a nimble practice that has many facets and styles. “Often considered only informally as an approach for communicating levity, there is actually a science to humor, one that can be effectively applied as a serious tool.”<sup>14</sup> While it functions as a beneficial tactic for encouraging laughter and building camaraderie; it also serves as an effective way to persuade the behavior and culture sensitivities of a specific group.

The comedian does not offer scientific or literal representation without embellishment or distortion. But these exaggerations of the truth are often used to revisit the baggage of long-held prejudices in such a way that their audiences are confronted with themselves. In many cases, the message touches on topics that would seem too sensitive to discuss otherwise, situating the comedian, and their audience, along the boundaries of normative morality within the fluid perceptions of our current culture. To maneuver this landscape successfully requires a clear

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<sup>13</sup> Caleb Warren, Adam Barsky, A Peter McGraw, Humor, Comedy, and Consumer Behavior, *Journal of Consumer Research*, Volume 45, Issue 3, October 2018, Pages 529–552.

<sup>14</sup> Eric J. Romero and Kevin W. Cruthirds, “The Use of Humor in the Workplace,” *Academy of Management Perspectives*, May 2006 (58-69).



understanding of the full spectrum of humor and the tools offered to its practitioner – a methodology that can be summarized by four different styles.

The first style is *self-enhancing humor* – benevolent comedy intended to improve personal well-being. This is a positive humor style in favor of oneself where people exhibit a view of life where they are not overly distressed by its inevitable tribulations. This style tends to be a coping mechanism for dealing with stress and misfortune, which assist in maintaining a positive perspective (e.g., laughing to yourself after reading a pun on a recent restaurant review).

The second is *affiliative humor* – positive comedy intended to improve group cohesion. This style focuses on interaction that works as a social lubricant to ease out interpersonal nervousness and instill enthusiasm into specific social occasions. It's most effective in shortening mutual distance and creating solidarity within group settings (e.g., laughing with friends about a recent restaurant experience).

The third style is *aggressive humor* – negative comedy that disparages others in an attempt to improve personal well-being. Aggressive humor is a negative humor style detrimental to others in an attempt to define some sense of superiority over the targeted audiences. Individuals that apply aggressive humor often aim to manipulate other by an implied threat of ridicule. This can be in the form of brash comments or more milder in the form of satire of moderate teasing (e.g., laughing at the incompetence of a restaurant in a recent review).

Lastly, the fourth style is *self-defeating humor* – self-disparaging comedy intended to earn approval from others. This strategy is a negative humor style detrimental to oneself where people utilize self-deprecating ridicule to amuse and seek acceptance from others (e.g., laughing at your own stupidity with friends at a restaurant).

Hybrid strategies consisting of various combinations of these styles or simply by using them in isolation can provide numerous ways in which persuasive messages can be offered in humorous ways. It's a dynamic endeavor that benefits from understanding how our brains process humor when confronted with a new or counterintuitive message to be consistently effective.

### ***The Brain's Response to Humor***

Persuasion has been defined as a successful, intentional effort to influence another's mental state through communication.<sup>15</sup> One theory of persuasion that is well established, despite occasional challenges, is the elaboration likelihood model. According to this theory, receivers assess persuasive messages differently depending on (among other things) their involvement with the issue. If the issue is salient to them, then they will focus systematically on the message itself and analyze it accordingly. If they find the point of view compelling, they will become convinced. This is known as systemic processing or the central route to persuasion.<sup>16</sup> It also identifies the exact place where humor and persuasion intersect.

Neurological research argues that when understanding humor, the listener engages in a phenomenon referred to as *frame-shifting* – interpreting new information in light of old information to redefine one's identity to improve group coherence.<sup>17</sup> Intellectually, it is a metamorphosis of sorts that actively transforms an old belief into a new idea, to belong to the group that seems to support such a message, like a caterpillar transforming into a butterfly.

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<sup>15</sup> D.J. O'Keefe (1990). *Persuasion: Theory and Research* (Vol. 2). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

<sup>16</sup> R.E. Petty & J.T. Cacioppo (1981). *Attitudes and Persuasion: Classic and Contemporary Approaches*. Dubuque, IA: Brown.

<sup>17</sup> Dannagal Goldthwaite Young (2008) The Privileged Role of the Late-Night Joke: Exploring Humor's Role in Disrupting Argument Scrutiny, *Media Psychology*, 11:1, 119-142

These theories suggest that effortful cognitive processing is required to understand humor, often involving information repression and high memory loads. Actively engaging humorous messaging is uniquely complicated for the human brain. The task of suppressing information recently activated in working memory and replacing it with an alternative script that must be retrieved from long-term memory is undoubtedly complex.

People have limited capacity to process information in their working memory and, when demand is high, will likely use shortcuts when making judgements – relying on pre-existing knowledge structures and stereotypes when cognitive resources are scarce.

Given the high cognitive load involved in humor comprehension, it is fair to say that comedy requires these high processing demands and can reduce the cognitive resources needed to scrutinize specific arguments.

A few factors contribute to the unique forms of cognitive processing at play within the context of humor. Comprehension and appreciation are forms of processing aimed at actively working to reconcile two competing messages to see the intent of the joke. It's a process that is enhanced in the face of humor, especially through styles such as satire and irony. Another form of processing is a concept described as *argument scrutiny*, a process that can reduce an individual's ability to critically challenge the underlying premise of the message.

Responding to these findings, two realities exist when attempting to understand the role humor can play in persuasion. First, humorous messages increases the extent of cognitive comprehension compared to what would occur in the face of non-humorous messages. We retain information better when it's delivered in a humorous way. Secondly, humorous messages reduce the extent of argument scrutiny compared to that which would occur in the face of non-humorous

messages. We are less critical of situations that make us happy, especially when the source of that happiness is generated by a trusted source.

More simply put, humor has the tendency to strain our brain's ability to process complex ideas while simultaneously reducing our ability (and often willingness) to challenge such ideas. This is a critical distinction. However, the process here isn't simply a relationship that can be summarized solely with neurological research. There is an emotional response to humor as well.

Effective messages delivered in a humorous manner allows one to critique without producing negative effects, working to aid in subverting the resistance that people usually feel when their values are being critiqued. Specifically, affiliative humor can increase group cohesiveness by associating positive emotions, generated by humor, with group membership. This may be due to the relationship between interpersonal attraction and humor appreciation – efficiently developing a cohesive group with diverse individuals, especially within larger audiences.<sup>18</sup>

The act of engaging in humor, of responding to specific messages with laughter, is an instantaneous response – one that legitimizes the respective topic as a relevant subject within the group's current value structure. It's that reaction that makes humor so integral to the persuasion of new and different ideas. Similar to how the act of screaming is an instinctive reaction to a seemingly legitimate danger, laughter is an instinctive reaction to a seemingly legitimate perception of a new idea – a response to the ego's exciting admission that this new notion is a message that had never before been considered.

One of humor's unique features is that, due to its ambiguous nature, it can allow one to critique and persuade without producing negative reactions.<sup>19</sup> Sharing humor is inconsistent with

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<sup>18</sup> Romero, E. J., & Cruthirds, K. W. (2006). The Use of Humor in the Workplace. *The Academy of Management Perspectives*, 20(2), 58–69.

<sup>19</sup> Grugulis, I. 2002. Nothing serious? Candidates' use of humour in management training. *Human Relations*, 55(4): 387-406; and Graham, E. E., Papa, M. J. & Brooks, G. P. 1992.

being offended and consequently, it facilitates honest and freer communication (e.g., humorous stories about miscommunication often promote improved communication within teams).

This application of humor can be leveraged to great effect in a variety of settings ranging from public health to corporate teams in order to persuade refined ideas and group values. Humorous interactions have consistently shown a positive impact on several key attributes, including:

- *Stress*: There is strong evidence that humor can reduce stress, allowing participants to take control over a stressful situation by group mockery and play (e.g., soldiers singing songs about death while marching). Humor makes people feel that they are not afraid; without fear they feel a greater sense of control and focus.<sup>20</sup>
- *Creativity*: Research shows that humor is linked to creative thinking. Individuals that find themselves in a humorous environment are more likely to engage in creative problem solving – especially when using self-enhancing and affiliative humor.<sup>21</sup>
- *Cohesion*: Humor has proven to serve as an effective tool for groups to establish and affirm shared cultural values. Scenarios where individuals are ridiculed for engaging in improper behavior can successfully indicate that such conduct should not be repeated. Humor is also an efficient way to reduce social distance within hierarchical structures and promote a connection across power structures. Executives and politicians often use these strategies to make themselves more appealing and approachable.<sup>22</sup>

While the use of humor has proven to be effective in various settings, its ability to persuade social change, especially in the current digital environment, rests in the spoken word of the comedian. Their ability to instigate a larger conversation around shifting cultural values and, in

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<sup>20</sup> Caudron, S. 1992. Humor is healthy in the workplace. *Personal Journal*, 71(6): 63-67.

<sup>21</sup> Isen, A. M., Daubman, K. A., & Nowicki, G. P. 1987. Positive affect facilitates creative problem solving. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 52(6): 1122-1131.

<sup>22</sup> Holdaway, S. 1988. Blue jokes: Humor in police work. In C. Powell, & G. E. Paton (Eds.), *Humor in Society: Resistance and control*. Houndsmills, England: McMillian.

the process, challenge a larger audience to explore if these new messages align with their personal beliefs provides an invaluable resource to social progress.

### *Humor as a Change Agent*

In a culture long criticized for its anti-intellectualism, stand-up comedians in the United States have become one avenue for the exploration and promotion of a range of ideas, whether one is discussing gender roles, immigration, racism, or mental illness. Even if the idea is not specifically theirs, “it is hard to dismiss the valuable work being performed by such comedians in rendering these ideas public, accessible, and (perhaps most impressively) funny.”<sup>23</sup>

Over the course of modern events, the role of the comedian has remained important. During the Civil Rights movement of the late sixties, artists like Dick Gregory provided brave and honest depictions of the African American experience.<sup>24</sup> Over the last decade, Dave Chappelle has challenged stereotypes around the LGBTQ+ community and received both critical acclaim and harsh criticism for his comments.

More recently, Hannibal Burris ignited a public uproar when he ridiculed fellow comedian Bill Cosby. While there had been sexual abuse accusations surrounding Cosby for decades, the viral moment of Burris mocking him on stage<sup>25</sup> inspired a public outcry that led to his ultimate incarceration.

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<sup>23</sup> Champion, Jared N. and Peter C. Krunze, *Taking a Stand: Contemporary US Stand-Up Comedians as Public Intellectuals* (Jackson, MS, 2021; online edn, Mississippi Scholarship Online 19 May 2022).

<sup>24</sup> Greene, Grace F. (2012) “Rhetoric in Comedy: How Comedians Use Persuasion and How Society Uses Comedians,” *The Corinthian*: Vol. 13, Article 11.

<sup>25</sup> Eye sight. (2014, October 29). Hannibal Buress Called Bill Cosby a Rapist During a Stand up. Retrieved April 26, 2016, from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dzB8dTVAlQI>

Perhaps no other single piece of comedy in American history has had the enduring cultural impact of George Carlin's "Seven Words You Can Never Say on Television." Released on his 1972 album *Class Clown*, which was added to the National Registry in 2015, the seven-minute routine established Carlin as a comic rebel, a philosopher with a microphone who questioned all of his era's conventional wisdom to great effect.

The piece focused on profanity and our hypercritical reactions to it. "There are 400,000 words in the English language, and there are seven of them you can't say on television," he joked. "What a ratio that is!"<sup>26</sup>

Carlin took it upon himself to identify the offending expressions, making a memorable summary of a short list of words that apparently would, accordingly to television executives, "infect your soul, curve your spine, and keep the county from winning the war."

It was a powerful claim. In the midst of an ongoing conflict in Vietnam with an ever-increasing death toll, civil unrest, and a looming recession, seven random words were arbitrary selected and labeled so offensive that, depending on the context, their usage could result in criminal prosecution. The delivery was flawless, and the humorous message was a masterclass in persuading an audience to question the seemingly absurd way in which groups can define taboos. The routine was a turning point, one could argue both for better and for worse, in a culture that has grown far more permissive and open-minded.

Carlin spent his entire career challenging the role that language plays within power structures, offering elaborate and refined arguments that forced his audiences to question the impact strategies in advertising, politics, and public discourse had on shaping their respective world views. Another notable example of his persuasiveness was in 1990 when he offered a

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<sup>26</sup> Carlin, George. "Seven Words You Can Never Say on Television," *Class Clown*. Little David /Atlantic, 1972.

theory on the impact of what he called “soft language” on his special *Doin’ It Again* where he commented:

"I don't like words that hide the truth. I don't like words that conceal reality. I don't like euphemisms, or euphemistic language. And American English is loaded with euphemisms. Cause Americans have a lot of trouble dealing with reality. Americans have trouble facing the truth, so they invent the kind of a soft language to protect themselves from it, and it gets worse with every generation. For some reason, it just keeps getting worse. I'll give you an example.

There's a condition in combat. Most people know about it. It's when a fighting person's nervous system has been stressed to its absolute peak. It can't take any more input. The nervous system has either snapped or is about to snap. In the first world war, that condition was called ‘*shell shock.*’ Simple, honest, direct language. Two syllables, ‘*shell shock.*’ Almost sounds like the guns themselves. That was seventy years ago.

Then a whole generation went by and the second world war came along and the very same combat condition was called ‘*battle fatigue.*’ Four syllables now. Takes a little longer to say. Doesn't seem to hurt as much. Fatigue is a nicer word than shock. ‘*Shell shock!*’ ‘*Battle fatigue.*’

Then we had the war in Korea, 1950. Madison avenue was riding high by that time, and the very same combat condition was called ‘*operational exhaustion.*’ Hey, were up to eight syllables now! And the humanity has been squeezed completely out of the phrase. It's totally sterile now. ‘*Operational exhaustion.*’ Sounds like something that might happen to your car.

Then of course, came the war in Vietnam, which has only been over for about sixteen or seventeen years, and thanks to the lies and deceptions surrounding that war, I guess it's no surprise that the very same condition was called ‘*post-traumatic stress disorder.*’ Still eight syllables, but we've added a hyphen! And the pain is completely buried under jargon. ‘*Post-traumatic stress disorder.*’

I'll bet you if we'd of still been calling it ‘*shell shock,*’ some of those Vietnam veterans might have gotten the attention they needed at the time. I'll betcha. I'll betcha. But it didn't



happen, and one of the reasons is *soft language*; the language that takes the life out of life. And somehow it keeps getting worse.”<sup>27</sup>

This isn't a joke. Not in the conventional sense. There is no punch line here to be identified. It serves as an attempt by a trusted source to reveal a truth that we would struggle to admit unless we were giggling at ourselves.

This message is more than a humorous observation of linguistic evolution or medical terminology. It's an effort to persuade us to see the use of euphemistic language as a dangerous strategy commonly used to distract us from the otherwise obvious misfortunes of the world. It leaves the audience wondering – “where else has language persuaded me to accept unwelcome situations as normal occurrences?” The more you look for it, the more you seem to find.

Take for example the phrase “soccer mom,” a phrase often affectionately used to describe a mother who spends an inordinate amount of time transporting her children back and forth to specific functions. It sounds harmless, if not encouraging. It's a phrase that promotes the idea that my children are involved, and I support their desire to participate in a variety of activities. But that's not what Carlin's joke is persuading us to see. It's not a term of affection. It's a term of concealment, used to soften the despair resulting from the fact that the average stay-at-home mother generates thirteen unique car trips every day. It's an existence that, when isolated to the primary identity of an uncompensated chauffeur, assumes a quality of life few would eagerly embrace. But with such a pleasant descriptor, any motivation to challenge the status quo is quickly soothed by the willingness to accept this “soft language.”

Humor is a social lubricant, an effective medium to deliver new ideas and social critique in a palatable and consumable way. At its best, it empathizes with the state of current cultural values

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<sup>27</sup> George Carlin, *George Carlin: Doin' It Again*, HBO (1990).

and pushes to understand how they should evolve. It's power in its efficiency – acting as a real-time litmus test for identifying the line between conventional wisdom and progressive notions. With each audience reaction, with each laugh, the message's relevance is, in some way, validated. And while it can sometimes be hard to identify the value position within specific humor styles or absurd anecdotes, the messages that resonate with an audience and evoke a sense of amusement signal a sentiment that reveals something about us we didn't previously understand. And in the moment, it persuades us to reevaluate the way in which we see the world.

### *Conclusion*

In the spring of 2015, my brother and I happened to be sitting on my couch as the first Presidential GOP debate was being televised. Moderator Megyn Kelly opened the night with a pointed and critical question directed at then-candidate Donald Trump. She said, “One of the things people love about you is that you speak your mind and you don't use a politician's filter. However, that is not without its downsides, particularly when it comes to women. You've called women you don't like ‘fat pigs,’ ‘dogs,’ ‘slobs,’ and ‘disgusting animals.’” And before she could finish her question, Trump interjected by saying, “Only Rosie O'Donnell.”<sup>28</sup> The room erupted in laughter. The response was so loud it became difficult to hear the next few comments from the panel.

Seeing their reaction, I turned to my brother and said, “He's going to win.”

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<sup>28</sup> Stahl, Jeremy, “Watch Donald Trump Receive Enormous Applause for Horribly Misogynistic GOP Debate Answer,” *The Slate*, August 6, 2015.

He calmly responded that a Trump presidency was highly unlikely and that there wasn't a single pollster at the time that thought his victory was even a remote possibility.<sup>29</sup> But I knew there was a chance when I heard how that audience reacted. That response, the visceral connection to a particular sentiment, is more than just laughter. It's a tell that a perceived truth is being unveiled, that an unrealized value has been identified and expressed publicly. It's a sign, in some small way, that signals that an idea has been validated as a new ingredient for group cohesion.

In that moment, in that brief reciprocal exchange, we saw a glimpse of the how humor would define that election moving forward and, despite your political ideology, the legitimacy of the message with that audience was undeniable. In hindsight, we didn't need to review data to predict a winner or rely on polling analytics to see how his performance was perceived by potential voters. His chances of victory were real the moment that audience reacted.

I knew he would win when I heard them laugh.

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<sup>29</sup> Goldmacher, Shane, "Trump pulls off biggest upset in U.S. history," *POLITICO*, November 9, 2016 (<https://www.politico.com/story/2016/11/election-results-2016-clinton-trump-231070>)