

Reet Chatterjee

Mr. Falkner

AP Language, period 6

11 December 2019

“Humanity Has Unquestionably One Really Effective Weapon—Laughter”-Mark Twain (3)

As a groggy-eyed, motivationally-declined, sleep-deprived highschooler with stress weighing me down like a bag of bricks, I need a sanctuary in which I can escape the worries of the dreaded junior year. I find an effective manner to distract myself from such stress is through laughter. Laughter always seems to lighten the burden by figuratively guiding me to a safe haven invigorated with the laughter shared among a community. Specifically, I often find myself traveling to this altered reality while watching comedy talk shows. The very nature of some talk shows—through humor, satire, and skits—completely enthralls me to the extent that I temporarily forget about worldly stresses. What I fail to acknowledge, however, is the substantial impact that such humorists have on my paradigms. From micro dominant paradigms surrounding a mere color choice of clothing ranging to macro dominant paradigms about topical issues, I constantly find myself influenced by humorists who resonate with me (periodic sentence). The process by which humorists—who on the surface appear to solely elicit a laugh—catalyze such drastic paradigm shifts contains more facets than one would typically expect. With their rising influence in modern culture, humorists undertake vital roles in society, taking advantage of their impunity to convey influential messages disguised as humor.

The fundamental nature of humor augmenting the community atmosphere through shared laughter lays the foundation which enables humorists to captivate their audiences. By definition,

humor is intended “to soothe or content someone with comical or amusing relief” (“Humor”).

We experience countless examples of this form of humor to different degrees in everyday situations ranging from a cordial elevator small talk joking about the weather to a well-established late night comedy skit parodying the most recent presidential debate.

Nonetheless, many fail to recognize the very nature of humor; the nature prompting us to chuckle out of pity after a “dad joke” or to burst into gleeful laughter with our friends and family. The underlying nature of humor enabling these scenarios is the perceived sense of togetherness.

Furthermore, leadership consultant Ann Fry contends the bottom line that “humor is the cement or bonding material that connects people” (Fry). Humor is energizing; it is contagious; it alleviates pain and hardship; it enhances a community environment (Anaphora). These characteristics of humor lays the foundation for how humor effectively appeals to an audience.

Advantageously utilizing the rudimentary nature of humor, humorists employ the power vested in themselves to catalyze paradigm shifts to the mass media. Many humorists strive to benefit from this aforementioned “togetherness” to convey their own messages. For example, influential writer and social activist Caty Borum Chattoo recently contemplated an effectual method to send an inspiring, paradigm shifting message in her television series addressing the concerns of poverty. Chattoo shifted from the original documentary plan to a comedy featuring humorist and activist Hasan Minhaj to inspire messages of change through humor. The comedy, called *Stand Up Planet*, proved successful to the extent that Chattoo asserted, “People learned more about the global development issues by watching the traditional somber documentary, but they *felt* more watching *Stand Up Planet*” (Sangillo). The community feeling that the nature of humor brings inadvertently evoked sympathy within the audience, catalyzing them to believe

they are “agents of change,” as Chattoo attests (Sangillo). Humorist Hasan Minhaj successfully aided Chattoo to not only convey her profound messages of global poverty, but also inspire her audience to take action against the issue.

Others may contend that not all modern humorists entertain with covert motives to convey a message. This premise holds true as many modern humorists endeavor solely to uplift an audience without introducing hidden messages or controversial social issues. For example, Brian Kiley, head monologue writer for the “Conan” show, elaborates on Conan O’Brien’s aversion to political humor: “Some want to convince everyone of their political point of view but I think [Conan] just likes silly stuff that makes you laugh and doesn’t have a message to it; it’s just funny and creative” (Kozlowski). Conan, along with many other modern humorists, has built a respectable career in the industry without addressing controversial topics or conveying ulterior messages. Although humorists such as Conan intentionally evade profound messages, that does not necessarily constitute their inability to catalyze social change through their influence as humorists. Based on the “Conan” show’s success in the media, it is safe to assume that Conan could potentially influence his audience if he desired to do so. However, Conan instead chooses to utilize his media outreach for “silly stuff that makes [people] laugh,” contrary to the number of humorists striving to catalyze social change through humor (Kozlowski).

While humorists can disguise deeper messages through humor, the sense of impunity which they are entitled to plays a vital role in allowing them to express concerns otherwise deemed unacceptable. Unlike activists and politicians who may be castigated for speaking out against society, humorists have the ability to bulldoze social constructs and distance the audience from the severe dehumanizing effects of speaking the truth or targeting certain ideals

(“Comedy”). Humorists portray such controversial issues in a different manner by using “laughter as a lubricant for cultural conversations” (Garber). As a result, humorists are covertly bestowed a sense of impunity by masking controversial topics with the veneer of humor. This impunity stems from the unlikelihood of people reprimanding humorists, as they have established reputations of striving to bring laughter to society. Pairing humor with profound messages, Megan Graber of *The Atlantic Magazine* argues that “Comedians are fashioning themselves not just as joke-tellers, but as truth-tellers” (Garber). Due to their sense of impunity from speaking the truth, humorists play vital roles in raising awareness about topical issues and influencing paradigm shifts.

In terms of their vital roles, humorists typically have access to the mass media through various platforms, so their messages can disseminate through society relatively easily and catalyze dominant paradigm shifts. An example of such a humorist strategically implementing his impunity to address a topical issue is Hasan Minhaj. In episode two of his Netflix show *Patriot Act*, Minhaj fearlessly denounced the United States and other countries for looking past the Saudi crown prince’s abhorrent actions solely to preserve political and economic relations with Saudi Arabia (Han). Hasan Minhaj, a Muslim-American raised in the United States who also prays in the direction of Saudi Arabia, had the courage to publicly criticize two countries which have held considerable influence in shaping his character (Crosley). Minhaj’s prolonged rapport with his audience, along with his influence as a humorist, granted him the impunity required to carry out such an audacious yet influential action (Han). His episode about Saudi Arabia held the impact to the extent that the U.S. Central Command issued a formal apology for a manual describing “the Saudi people as indigenous tribes with some later ‘mixture of Negro

blood from slaves imported from Africa” (Husband). Hasan Minhaj exemplified his vital role in society by advantageously using his impunity as a humorist to raise awareness for the topical issue he cared about.

In regards to impunity, some may argue that the nature of humorists’ impunity is changing. This argument holds true as times have changed and humorists can no longer joke about everything. The issue of the changing nature of impunity boils down to one question: How far is too far? (rhetorical question) Unfortunately there is no clear, definitive answer to this question, especially in a world with such a diverse range of sensitivity. Nicholas Barber, journalist for the BBC, comments on this point stating, “What appears to be happening is that audiences are more sensitive than ever to perceived insults, and that they now have the technology to share that sensitivity with the world” (Barber). Barber explains that with the rise of social media and global connectivity, denouncing and even defaming a humorist who crosses the line while speaking the truth has become effortless. To prevent such public outcry, humorists need to speculate the degree of impunity to which their messages are protected by. Additionally, they need to consider modern day context and the sensitivity of their audience. Although humorists lack the impunity to unrestrainedly say anything of their choosing, humorists still hold enough perceived impunity to convey profound messages. Provided that they understand the sensitivity of their audience, humorists must exercise their advantageous impunity—albeit to a certain degree—to speak truths otherwise deemed unacceptable by society.

Hasan Minhaj’s influence with his show on Saudi Arabia presents a prime example of humorists’ substantial potential to catalyze social change. Humorists face the dilemma to either employ their advantageous impunity to convey profound messages or appease the mass media

without addressing controversial topics. Addressing this dilemma, Hasan Minhaj asserts, “Comedians have this platform. Especially right now and especially the platform I have. You can be a provocateur. You can say crazy shit for crazy shit’s sake. Or you can aim that towards something”(Crosley). The role of humorists proves vital to society as they employ the “togetherness” aspect of the nature of humor to appeal to their audience. Humorists then inform their audience through the mass media, conveying messages of truth disguised as humor. By masking societal truths through humor, humorists have the potential to reach unexpected audiences—such as groggy-eyed, motivationally-declined, sleep-deprived high schoolers like me—and play a formative role in shaping the paradigms and social constructs of humanity.

Works Cited

- Barber, Nicholas. "Comedy in the Age of Outrage: When Jokes Go Too Far." *British Broadcasting Corporation*, 4 Aug. 2015,
www.bbc.com/culture/story/20150804-comedy-in-the-age-of-outrage-when-jokes-go-too-far. Accessed 10 Dec. 2019.
- "Comedy." *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, edited by William A. Darity, Jr., 2nd ed., vol. 2, Macmillan Reference USA, 2008, pp. 22-23. *Gale In Context: U.S. History*,
link.gale.com/apps/doc/CX3045300390/GPS?u=jesuiths&sid=GPS&xid=c83475fc. Accessed 3 Dec. 2019.
- Crosley, Sloane. "Hasan Minhaj Goes Into the Lion's Den." *Vanity Fair*, Nov. 2019,
www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2019/10/hasan-minhaj-patriot-act-interview.
- Fry, Ann. "Don't underestimate the power of humor." *Austin Business Journal*, 3 Aug. 2001, p. A14. *Gale OneFile: Business*,
link.gale.com/apps/doc/A78133249/GPS?u=jesuiths&sid=GPS&xid=e2de927e. Accessed 3 Dec. 2019.
- Garber, Megan. "How Comedians Became Public Intellectuals." *The Atlantic*, 28 May 2015,
www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2015/05/how-comedians-became-public-intellectuals/394277/. Accessed 3 Dec. 2019.
- Han, Karen. "Netflix's Patriot Act With Hasan Minhaj is distinct, funny, and truly informative." *Vox*, 4 Nov. 2018,

www.vox.com/tv/2018/11/4/18038954/patriot-act-with-hasan-minhaj-netflix-review-recap. Accessed 3 Dec. 2019.

“Humor.” *Merriam-Webster*. 2019. www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/humor. Accessed 3 Dec. 2019.

Husband, Andrew. "'Patriot Act With Hasan Minhaj' Is Already Having An Effect." *Forbes*, 2 Nov. 2018, www.forbes.com/sites/andrewhusband/2018/11/02/patriot-act-with-hasan-minhaj-saudi-arabia-us-military/#568c1f8d6c00. Accessed 3 Dec. 2019.

Kozlowski, Carl. "'Conan' Scribe: Why O'Brien Avoids Trump Bashing." *Hollywood In Toto*, 14 Mar. 2019, www.hollywoodintoto.com/conan-brian-kiley-interview/. Accessed 10 Dec. 2019.

Sangillo, Gregg. "A Laughing Matter: Comedy's Role in Social Change." *American University*, 5 Dec. 2017, www.american.edu/ucm/news/20171205-comedy-change.cfm. Accessed 3 Dec. 2019.