

# COMEDY AS FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

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## INTRODUCTION

Information Science is a broad, inclusive disciplinary area. If rather than looking to define or delimit it, we look for its driving principle or ethical rationale a good choice would be Article 19 of the UN Universal Declaration on Human Rights. This is a powerful statement on intellectual freedom encompassing freedom of opinion, expression and access to information. Without the freedom to generate, organise, access and use information there would be very limited scope for information science. However, despite this, intellectual freedom issues have never been a substantial preoccupation of the information science literature: freedom has been taken as a given. An obvious reason for this is that in the past the bulk of information science literature has been generated in the USA, and northern Europe. In these parts of the world and historically related countries such as Canada, Australia and New Zealand, there has been such a long, and largely unquestioned tradition of free speech (Grayling, 2007) that the struggles to obtain and preserve intellectual freedom in other parts of the world can easily escape notice. In a globalised communications environment, intellectual freedom necessarily moves to the centre of professional attention and can then become explicitly, instead of implicitly, a central focus for academic study.

The present article enters the area of intellectual freedom to examine freedom of expression (more traditionally, but rather unhelpfully, referred to as free speech): the aspect of intellectual freedom that concerns the generation of information and the voicing of opinion. All of the information (in any form including numerical data, text, images, sounds, electronic and optical communication) that is the subject matter of information science is protected by the principle of intellectual freedom. It is usual to talk of intellectual freedom as concerned with politics, science, other academic research, religion, and social commentary but it also covers all the forms of artistic expression. Although it may not be the first topic that one might deal with under the heading of intellectual freedom, a definition of this breadth naturally includes comedy and this is the area on which the present article focuses.

There is a very good specific reason for that. The Danish cartoons affair of 2005, arising from the dissemination of a set of cartoons that allegedly defamed the Prophet Mohammed, the Muslim religion and Islam's believers, has hung like a cloud over subsequent discussions of freedom of expression. The fervent and, indeed, violent way that publication was contested has naturally caused information professionals to

question how far it was legitimate, and safe, to make content available when it caused such measurable harm. A review of the issues (Sturges, 2006) adopted the language of human rights and drew on a series of Articles from the UN Declaration including Article 19. It also took the opportunity visit the literature of comedy (cartoons being a comic form that combines graphics and text to tell stories and make points) so as to introduce approaches used in comedy to soften or moderate the force of satire. In particular, it introduced the concept of *decorum*, which ‘can be defined as a decision about the form of expression which is publicly judged appropriate for a given setting and theme’. (Palmer, 2005, p.80) However, there need to be clear ideas on how and why this is done if expression is to be assessed as to whether it is appropriate for a given setting or theme. If that is not the case, there is increased potential for indirect means of suppressing urgent and necessary comment. These types of indirect suppression, including self-censorship, are sometimes referred to as soft censorship.

What is offered in the present article is an account of how comedians (stand up comedians mainly) assess their own material and performance. The idea is that if we look at an area of expression that is frequently on the cutting edge of risk, we can begin to form ideas of how far expression generally is subject to similar processes and encounters forms of indirect censorship. Comedy is sometimes treated as if were inconsequential, a means of amusement, merely merriment. The contention here is that the preponderant bulk of comic expression, possibly everything except the most whimsical and light hearted, is actually a highly necessary commentary on life. Comedy begins with personal reflections on the oddities and anomalies of life in which any individual indulges, but it takes on a broader, and even universal, significance when a writer, performer or visual artist structures that reflection into a comic form. Dismissing comedy as just a laughing matter misses this point. Comedy will be treated seriously, but not solemnly, in this article: its status as free expression deserves that much respect. The question that this article will address is ‘How can we identify reasonable limits, if any, to freedom of expression through an analysis of the perceptions of comedians?’ The implicit purpose is to examine the extent to which this enables those, such as information professionals, who work with the products of freedom of expression to clarify their perceptions of restrictions on acquisition and access to controversial materials.

## **DEFINITIONS AND CONTEXT**

So far we have been proceeding more or less on the assumption that everyone knows what comedy is. This section will, in the process of defining and contextualising comedy, introduce the themes that will be present in the following sections. Definitions are very much necessary with something as ubiquitous and embedded in the culture as comedy. One way of approaching at it is first of all to identify a broad domain of humour. This is the area of the funny or amusing in life, whether accidental or deliberately contrived, whereby a smile or laugh might be provoked. Thus, on the one hand, kittens playing in their entirely uncontrived way may be humorous, whilst on the other, so is an elaborate mime by Marcel Marceau (allegedly). Comedy can then be seen as the sub domain of the humorous in which humour is turned into art by mime artists, dramatists, television writers, cartoonists, music hall singers, stand up comedians and many others, including millions of ‘funny people’ who bring comedy into everyday life. Not all writers on the topic make this distinction and it is quite

common to find the term humour used in the way that comedy is here – to mean the contrived aspects of humour.

Thus Oring (2003, p.145) uses the term humour in this more limited way in a valuable passage on the contexts of humour. He says that:

These contexts include the experiences that an individual brings to the humour that he or she hears and performs; the social interaction in which the humorous performances are embedded; the social and historical conditions in which jokes arise, proliferate and disappear; the cultural knowledge upon which humour depends and with which it plays; and the range of experience, both within and beyond a society's boundaries with which localised humorous performance may be compared or contrasted.

What Oring is doing here is to show that an instance of comedy, or humour as he calls it, is not a universal phenomenon. It occurs in a specific cultural context and may very well not be seen as comedy at all in a different context. We can safely accept Oring's point as meaning, at least to some extent, that there are different senses of humour in different cultures. What is more there is a suspicion, which only cultural anthropologists could fully confirm, that the density of comedy varies from place to place. To illustrate the point, if one listens to a cheerful exchange between a group of African friends, there will certainly be much laughter and many cheerful remarks, but very few actual jokes. The introduction of a good joke into an African conversation will certainly receive an ecstatic welcome.

This brings us to the joke; the vehicle through which comedy is communicated. A working comedian's thoughts on the subject can be found in Carr and Greeves (2006). This is very definitely not a scholarly work, but it makes its points with hundreds of good jokes. Holt (2008)'s elegant essay on jokes also illustrates the form very effectively. Freud (2002) is still probably the most quoted authority on the joke. He called the joke a combination of [comic] technique and [humorous] thought. Though this sounds banal, it works. The thought is a perception of something arguably humorous (the sort of verbal coincidence that makes a pun, someone who walks in a strange way, a relationship that functions badly, or even a gross political or social injustice). The technique is the presentation of this perception in a way that points up its comic quality. The technique may be physical (a pose or a rolled eye), is most commonly verbal, but can be graphic or musical; there is no real restriction. The joke is usually regarded as a discrete comic structure that can stand independently, but it can be embedded in an extended comic performance the related elements of which can sometimes be referred to together as a joke. A joke is most effective when delivered with the judgement and timing of a practiced comedian and when emerging convincingly from a natural or well realised comic persona. Jokes are usually regarded as existing in a realm not wholly governed by the everyday requirements of tact and consideration for others but Freud himself, as Willis (2005) points out, distinguished between innocent and contentious jokes. Phrases such as 'Just joking' or 'Only a joke' are often introduced in conversation when there is a perception that offence may have been caused and there is a need for distance from a particularly contentious joke.

The potential offensiveness of a joke or comedy more generally, is considerable and this is the focus of our attention here. The reason for this lies in the content of perhaps the most central strand of comedy, which is the carnivalesque celebration of

disrespect and contempt for the usual restraints and icons of polite life. True, there is purely playful comedy: puns and other wordplay, gentle whimsy and the less aggressive manifestations of physical comedy, or slapstick. But Jacobson (1997, p.137) draws our attention to the dangerous side of comedy and suggests a role for it:

In hostility and aggression is our beginning. Comedy cannot hope to change that. But by making a play of our incorrigible combativeness, it propitiates it, harmonizes us with it. And more than that, reminds us of our inexhaustible capacity to evade the burden of sympathy and the compulsion to suffer.

Bakhtin (1968)'s analysis of carnival identifies a space granted by civil and religious authority in the medieval and early modern period in which this aggression was temporarily given license. At carnival time people feasted and drank and participated in comic celebration in which 'the body copulates, defecates, overeats, and men's speech is flooded with genitals, bellies, defecations, urine, disease, noses, mouths and dismembered parts' (p.319). This is still the central core of uninhibited comedy and it is, in itself, offensive to those who hold authority and to members of polite society who deny their own earthy origins and needs as much as they are able.

As Henkle (1980, p.13) puts it: 'Comic works characteristically expose pomposity and smug self-deception, and undermine dull and inhuman mores. By toppling those authorities comedy encourages us to understand what is masked by rigorous, sombre approaches to human behaviour.' The problem is the virtual certainty that unrestrained comedy will give specific offence and produce outraged reaction from individuals and groups sooner or later. Some comedians will claim that there is both a right and a necessity to offend. Rowan Atkinson in commenting on the schedule in the UK Serious Organised Crime and Police Bill of 2004 that sought to outlaw speech, publication or performance that would incite religious or racial hatred, claimed that 'the right to offend is far more important than any right not to be offended'. (Left and Happold, 2004) Roy 'Chubby' Brown, a performer whose material is seldom if ever broadcast, but whose live performances are a tumultuous rally of powerful feelings that can not usually be given voice, sings a song (not a very good song, but a significant one) called *The Right to Offend*. Andy Medhurst says of him that his importance is that 'He gives a voice to people who don't have one. He sticks up two fingers at the liberal-progressive consensus, and stands up for the white, predominantly northern working class.' (Arnot, 2007) The Italian comedian Sabina Guzzanti, threatened with prosecution in 2008 for insulting the Pope, argued that 'I believe that in a democracy there is no right not to be offended. I think that anyone ought to be free to say whatever he or she likes at any moment.' (Hooper, 2008).

In contrast, there are many, members of religious denominations in particular, who believe quite the opposite. Christians protested in enormous numbers, some of them very threateningly, against TV transmissions of *Jerry Springer: the Opera* (with its disrespectful comic presentation of Christ) and Sikhs in Birmingham halted the run of the play *Behzti* because it included scenes of crime in a *gurdwara*. Muslims have demonstrated against Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* as well as the Danish cartoons. In September 2008 there was similar controversy over Sherry Jones's novel *The Jewel of Medina*, on the life of Mohammed's last wife Aisha before it was even published. (Khaleeli, 2008) There is a divide here between the believers in free expression at all costs and the religious (or political) believers who put faith and social stability before full freedom of speech. This article offers commentary on this thoroughly uncomfortable fault line at the edge of free expression. As Lockyer and

Pickering (2005, p.5) put the question, 'So how do we negotiate the perilous terrain that lies between humour and offensiveness, or free speech and cultural respect, in a pluralist society?'

## **METHODOLOGY**

The present study is based on four sources: the literature of comedy, current reportage of specific controversies, observation of comedians in performance, and interviews with comedians. The literature of comedy is vast and growing. Medhurst (2007) is a recent work that builds on a good selection from this wealth of choice. Works by Legman (1968), Moreall (1983), Palmer (1994) and Billig (2005) are worth mentioning as providing particularly relevant context. As comedy is a national preoccupation in Britain, coverage of comedians and their clashes with those who would restrict them are common in the press and significant stories occurring while this study was in progress have been taken into account. For instance, a performance by Johnny Vegas in 2008 led to a public controversy on what was comedy and what was sexual abuse of an audience member. (O'Hara, 2008) Any attempt at comprehensive observation of comedy in performance in Britain would require a major study. The number of comedians appearing at regular comedy clubs and giving solo performances in major public halls is too great for a small exploratory exercise such as the present one. The quantity of comedy transmitted on television or available via the Internet is also enormous, but has been largely ignored here because of the role of editors and producers in making it less of an individual art form.

During the first half of 2008, for the purposes of this study, a selection of comedians was observed at several venues in the English Midlands but mainly at the Derby Funhouse Comedy Club (or, in other words, the author attended comedy gigs in his home town). Thanks to the kind cooperation of promoter/comperes Spiky Mike, interviews and short conversations were obtained with a number of comedians (12 in total, plus an interview with Spiky Mike himself). In order not to overload the text with notes, the various performances observed and the interviews are listed in the Appendix. The reader can use this to check whether it is a performance or interview that is used as the source of an opinion attributed to a comedian. The interviews were informal, allowing the interviewees to express their own thoughts on two questions: what restrictions they perceived to their comedy, and what they identified as the sources of these restrictions. The interviewees included both male and female comedians, experienced performers and beginners, comedians with national profiles and others with mainly regional exposure. Particular help was provided by one comedian, Dave Longley who followed up a long and interesting interview with an equally long and interesting email.

The comedians were fluent and willing talkers. Interview notes were taken and written up within 24 hours in each case, but this means that there are no verbatim quotes in this article: it is reported speech only. Furthermore, the results of this interview programme are not presented as a definitive statement on comedians and freedom of expression. The interviews offer an insight into what some comedians say about their material and performances, which does no more than offer scope for a sketch of their motivation and the outcomes of their personal interface with controversy. This content of this sketch has a certain consistency, which suggests that

a major, structured survey might not reveal anything strikingly different. What this type of study does definitely do, of course, is to offer plenty of clues as to lines for further investigation should anyone require them.

The comedians interviewed for this study often tended initially to find it a little difficult to see their work in terms of restrictions. There is a body of law in the UK that could be used to investigate and prosecute on charges such as obscenity, blasphemy and defamation. In practice this body of law has seldom been used since the 1960s when there were a few high profile cases concerning publications (*Lady Chatterley's Lover*, *Oz*, etc) and when film and theatre censorship was generally discredited through the manifest social irrelevance of the interventions of the Lord Chamberlain's Office, the British Board of Film Censors (now Classification) and local licensing committees. Performances on premises licensed for entertainment are today unlikely to attract any official or police attention. Performers delight in pressing at the boundaries; swearwords are used for punctuation and emphasis; and sex, previously one of the greatest taboos, is celebrated and profaned by them all. An American movie *The Aristocrats* (Jillette and Provenza, 2005) gives a flavour of this as comedians compete to make a single joke more obscene with every telling. Material not so different from this can be heard in British comedy clubs every night of the week. A survey of what might be called the problem topics (effectively the whole content of stand up comedy) will be followed by an account of the restraining impulses that do effectively define limits to comedians' freedom of expression.

## **THE AREAS OF CONTROVERSY**

It is clear from the interviews that comedians do make clear and conscious selections of material and choices of modes of expression. What is described in this section is a description of what one might have heard in small comedy venues with a predominantly young audience, in the English Midlands in the year 2008. The reader must judge whether it seems typical of what might be experienced in other venues at other times. The important thing is not whether it is entirely typical (it may not be), but that it definitely shows comedians choosing their material on the basis of some kind of reflection on what they want to say, and the possible limits that might apply to that. Their reflection, as represented in this study, resulted in material with a pattern that can be outlined as follows.

First of all, politics, in the sense of commentary on parties, government and policy was almost entirely absent. This undoubtedly represents a cynical sense that politics is beyond a joke. It is in sharp contrast to the perception that comedians should have a political message, which was prevalent in the 'alternative' comedy of the Thatcher years (broadly the 1980s). In 2008 the comedy club material observed in this study more or less entirely lacked the kind of engagement that produces political satire. Comedians seldom felt it worthwhile even to introduce personal abuse towards politicians. Social comment with political implications was also not particularly apparent. Commentators actually detect a tendency towards abuse of the underprivileged and disaffected, often referred to as 'chavs'. (Williams, 2008) Issues with political resonance, such as homelessness and domestic abuse were largely ignored, and Gareth Richards and Reeves Peterson agreed that this was usually too risky an area for comedy. Global warming and environmental issues were also more

or less absent and Russell (2008) quotes the comedian Marcus Brigstock to the effect that audiences can positively reject this type of material.

Religion was a frequent topic possibly, it seemed, because the idea of a god and body of faith was considered inherently comic. There was also a powerful sense that religion was not a force for good, and that its leaders, priests, practices and beliefs ought to be subject to deserved ridicule. The most obvious target was the Catholic Church, but despite the comparatively large number of its adherents in relation to other denominations and religions in an otherwise unbelieving Britain, it does not actually seem a subject of urgent interest to comedy club audiences. Thus Dave Longley's tirades against Mother Teresa and the Pope appeared to be merely amusing to the audience. Richard Herring's gentle satire on Christ's Ascension, discussing it in terms of space travel, at the same gig produced a similar response. Jim Jeffries' scathing assault on Christian belief, including Creationism ('magic', in his words) was also happily received. This is in contrast to the move, later abandoned in the face of international ridicule, to prosecute Sabina Guzzanti for 'contempt of the Pope' under a superseded treaty between the Vatican and the Italian state. (Hooper, 2008)

In contrast, the human body was both celebrated and deplored. Jokes that target people for distinctive features of their appearance, for instance, red haired people (gingers), are in wide circulation and appeared in the performances observed. Taunts at ugly people were common, despite the risk that audience members might have found them deeply wounding. Drunkenness was both celebrated and used as a route to comedy of discomfort. Gluttony was another classic element of carnival-type comedy that was a rather less frequent subject. Its consequences were, however, present in many comedians' material. A comedian such as Jethro has built a highly successful career on an incontinent stream of scatological material. Jibes at fat people are frequent. Both Chubby Brown's name, and the ecstatic chant with which his admirers greet him (You fat bastard! You fat bastard!) indicate that his mockery of the obese is based on complicity between his fat self and theirs. Yet, the jokes are cruel and the real responses underlying the laughter of the many overweight people in his audiences would be interesting.

Disablement was also a target that many of the comedians were unable able to resist. A disabled performer such as Gareth Berliner explored the comic implications from the inside, but most other comedians regard it as beyond their limits. Spiky Mike told of a comedian with cerebral palsy who caused an audience member with the same condition to walk out. Despite their shared difficulties she was not amused by his material. Danny McLaughlin found that some material on a one-armed person was softened by making the character his grandfather. Disease, particularly cancer, which almost everyone seems to encounter directly or indirectly, is regarded as a risky area, but Mel Moon pointed out that cancer-sufferers themselves often use black humour about their condition. The comedians found this a difficult line to tread, but interestingly AIDS was regarded as sufficiently far from most audience members' experience to make it an occasional subject of jokes.

In contrast, the healthy body was celebrated by all the comedians and sex dominated their content. The comedy club audience is young and they clearly welcome very explicit comedy on the whole spectrum of what people do for sexual gratification. When pressed, young female audience members admitted to owning and using

vibrators. The comedians talked freely about masturbation, usually making no secret that it was their own experience that they were describing. Homosexuality was not handled very sympathetically and audiences seemed to accept derogatory references to gay people. This was not always the case, however, and Zoe Lyons' magnificently comic routine comparing homophobia to arachnophobia was a superb example of delicate handling of the topic. (Darling, there's a homosexual in the bath, please could you get rid of it for me).

The aspect of sex that was considered most problematic was rape. Some comedians admitted that they quite consciously steered completely clear of it, and Danny McLaughlin had decided not to use a rape joke that was otherwise 'good' in terms of its structure and effectiveness. Sarah Millican, recounted an occasion when a woman who had just suffered an incidence of sexual violence and had been brought out 'to cheer her up', was distressed by some material with a rape theme. Millican was not happy about this, but felt confident that if the woman had been able to listen more closely, she would have realised that what was said came from a solidly feminist perspective. At the same time Jim Jeffries appeared to celebrate rape in parts of his material. It is true that his material could be read as commentary on the blanket distrust of men, and a related view of women as automatically candidates for victim status, that is current in some circles. The overwhelming male audience on this occasion might not have perceived this subtext.

Interestingly, paedophilia was an area of sexuality which occurred frequently in the material observed. Spiky Mike as a promoter confessed that he finds this inexplicable. Danny James in an exchange with audience member Jessica was intrigued to find that she openly objected to a disparaging joke about Community Police Support Officers (because she valued their work) but (as a mother of three) let material on paedophilia pass without objection. In conversation with the author after this she said the difference was that the paedophilia material seemed less real, more distant. Tyson Boyce had a joke linking paedophilia to the high profile news case of the abduction of Madeleine McCann. He regarded this as risky, but possible because of the 'screwed up' comic persona from which it emerged. Dave Longley's reference to the same case, which caused a press controversy, will be discussed later.

Possibly the most consistent message that the comedians offered was that they regarded race as a topic that must be touched on with sensitivity and offence avoided. Performers in the Northern comedy clubs of England have had a reputation for using racist material, with the late Bernard Manning often cited as genuinely racist (though this is disputed by intelligent observers of his live performances). Chubby Brown's deliberately chosen status as a defiler of taboos leads him into the area of racism, but his material is seldom vicious and sometimes even almost affectionate. Tellingly, Jim Jeffries, a stand up comedian who thrives on the brutality and darkness of his material, prefaced the section on Islam in an onslaught on religions and their believers with careful remarks making it clear that he intended no racial insults. In fact his jokes about Islam amounted to little more than incomprehension that anyone could choose to deny themselves beer and bacon. The comparative restraint on this one topic, despite popular opinion, does go back a long way. The author remembers the late Mike Reed interrupting a club performance in the early 1970s to check with the only black audience member as to whether a comic West Indian accent would offend him.



However, the black comedian Lenny Henry has argued that this ‘tolerance’ is more a case of neglect than a genuinely positive spirit. (Gibson, 2008)

Finally, on gender the field is more open. The days of mother in law jokes are not entirely over; Spiky Mike says that they are more common in ‘mainstream’ comedy venues than in the type of comedy he promotes. What many of the comedians observed did was to build substantial parts of their performance on commentary on their relationship with an often imaginary or re-imagined partner or ex-partner. The comment was usually mordant and full of explicit detail on sexual and relationship matters that obviously struck chords with audiences because of their essential truthfulness. Rhod Gilbert’s account of the tribulations of an older man with a very sexually demanding younger female partner was both funny and had a ring of truth. Some of the comedians’ material could undoubtedly be classified as sexism, though possibly an ironic commentary on sexism. Stereotypes were played with in a way that challenged the audience, but in terms of disparaging the opposite sex, female comedians were clearly licensed to go rather further than men might.

## **THE SOURCES OF LIMITATION**

When given time to think about the material they performed (as characterised above) in terms of restriction rather than freedom, the comedians had pertinent thoughts. As noted earlier, their initial reaction to the topic of limitations was to ask ‘What limitations?’ The point was that they did not feel themselves censored: the restrictions were internalised and seen as part of their judgement of what was successful comedy. They judged whether what they might say in performance was funny and would therefore prove acceptable to an audience. Whether this is as true in the period after the Brand/Ross controversy of late 2008 is a matter for speculation. Comedians Russell Brand and Jonathan Ross left ‘prank’ phone messages on the actor Andrew Sachs’s answering service. BBC radio broadcast these taunting phone calls. He protested and the publicity resulted in the broadcaster receiving approximately 42,000 complaints against Brand, Ross and the BBC itself for permitting the broadcast. (Chancellor, 2008) Ross was subsequently suspended from his contract and Brand resigned. This case may well have altered the balance between performers and audiences that applied during the course of this study.

When interviewed in the first half of 2008, some of the comedians denied that their material had much significance beyond amusement. Mel Moon was quite categorical that comedy was not ‘educational’. To her it was personal, and her relationship-based material was intended to amuse. Nevertheless, she made it clear that she intended her material to have the potential to arouse deeper emotions (the tragedy that comedy can expose). A contrary view is that of Omid Djalili, who suggests that ‘There is a responsibility to be something a bit more than just funny. You have to be entertaining, educating and enlightening’. (Djalili, 2005, p.107) Jonathan Elston, Matt Hollies and Danny James agreed with each other that while they deliberately sought to shock, they intended to stop short of giving offence. Gareth Richards and Reeves Peterson both said that jokes must be true to the persona that the comedian presented to the audience and that this could be the basis of acceptability for ‘dark’ material. But they were clear that they believed it was possible to go too far, alienate an audience, and no

longer be comic. The audience has to be assessed, understood and addressed in ways which it will accept, even if that acceptance sometimes involves a thrill of horror.

This can be seen as an amoral approach, based on giving the audience what it wants. But what the audience wants is definitely not bland. Audience response in comedy clubs clearly suggests that they get what they are looking for. They roar with laughter and applaud when a telling blow has been struck against taboos and those who support or seek to enforce them. Their audible intake of breath at something almost too daring indicates recognition of thoughts they might have had, but scarcely like to admit. Comedy definitely exposes and permits sharing of the most dangerous and disturbing feelings. As Jacobson (1997, p137) puts it when describing a 1994 performance by Chubby Brown in Blackpool 'After an hour and a half of unremitting filth we go back out quietly into the rain and vinegar and bingo calls, touched miraculously by a beneficence.'

In fact, there is a moral dialogue between audience and comedian in progress. Medhurst (2007, p.33) says that 'The bond of belonging that unites comic performers and comedy consumers is very much one of tacit codes and knowledgeable, locatable voices'. Spiky Mike, as a promoter, wants to feel that the audience will be divided between those happy with what they hear and those likely to be offended on no more than a 90/10 ratio, but is prepared to accept 80/20, or even 70/30. How the comedian receives and handles messages or the anticipation of messages from the audience is another matter. Sarah Millican uses a test of both the effectiveness of comic material and its acceptability to audiences by which if a joke is successful three times out of five she will keep it in her act. Other performers may not actually use a formula to test their material, but they are constantly alert to audience reaction. Danny James in performance, on picking up the negative reaction from Jessica, mentioned earlier, kept up a dialogue with her during the rest of his act. So, understanding that the comedians are intensely aware of the response they evoke, what else do we discover when we ask them to talk about this`?

Dave Longley's experience of comedy that misfired makes an instructive case study. At a gig in Liverpool he was annoyed by an indifferent and unresponsive audience and made an ostensibly comic remark about the Madeleine McCann kidnapping (McCann's mother is from Liverpool). Although this did not arouse too much anger at the time, there was a fairly intense flurry of press interest and suggestions that he had caused extreme offence. Longley is a comedian who deliberately risks offence in his material, even toying with the appearance of racism by saying 'I hate Blacks because they are rude and they have s\*\*\* footwear'. He then allows it to emerge that he is referring to the outdoor wear chain Black's whose staff training he thinks is inadequate and whose stock of boots he thinks is poor. The Liverpool experience caused him to examine what had happened very carefully and give an account of it onstage that was distinctly apologetic. His explanation is that he came to realise that his remark was essentially an expression of anger at the audience and had no comedic intent. In his own words 'Anyone can say anything on stage, but being deliberately offensive is comedically lazy'. (Email to author)

This distinction between what has comedic intent and what is merely offensive is important, but he then takes it further pointing out that the intent is not enough by itself. For a remark or a routine to be classed as a joke it has to be accepted as such by

an audience; Longley calls this their 'interpretation' of the material. This then leads him to a question on quantification of positive interpretation which asks 'What percentage of people should laugh at it to make it a joke?' Longley's tentative formula is useful because if reversed it forms the question 'What percentage of people should object to it for it not to be a joke? This question could then be applied to the 42,000 protests received by the BBC on the Brand/Ross controversy. Whilst this was a massively unprecedented level of protest, it threw no light on what percentage of the audience of millions actually accepted the broadcast calls as a joke. By Longley's measurement there is the strong presumption that we could indeed call this material a joke, even though it had more than a whiff of gratuitous offence about it.

This question of numbers and percentages becomes important in a society of minorities. We can return to the question of the Danish cartoons and the other cultural events that have been the subject of protest by religious minorities (and it is important to remember that in Britain and a number of other countries all religious groups are minorities, whether they be Catholic, Evangelical, Muslim, or any other faith). They are effectively saying that it is not a matter of whether a majority consider something a joke, or some other form of valid artistic expression, the strength of minority protest should have a decisive influence. The dangers of this are obvious and there are no obvious easy resolutions for such disputes. What does help to some extent is a point made by Rhod Gilbert. He observed that what is acceptable to a small self-selected audience in a comedy club may well not attract the same response when exposed to a much wider audience. He was not referring to TV or radio, where editors and producers create a buffer between comedian and audience: a buffer which effectively slips into censorship on occasion. (Preston, 2008) Gilbert was talking about Internet, where UTube and other forums allow video clips to be seen, commented on, and possibly given a hostile response to by an audience of thousands and hundreds of thousands. The distinction seems obvious but no less important for that.

What Gilbert's observation does is to point us towards the traditional distinction between free speech (made to an audience notionally in earshot of the speaker) and a more general free expression (disseminated through the press, broadcast media and interactive media). (Sturges, 2006) What has been accepted by society and its institutions in free speech has always tended to be much broader than in free expression via media. This is both an issue of size of audience and homogeneity of audience. The important thing is that within their usual forums (such as comedy clubs) stand up comedians recognise an imperative to push the limits of free expression as far as they will go. They do not easily surrender to the arguments of tact and decorum (Palmer, 2005) that tend to moderate both social and artistic expression. In this sense, if no other, comedians perform a vital role in defining and populating the realm of free expression. However, the way in which scaling up the size of audience may well increase the significance of minority views is not necessarily a comfortable conclusion in relation to freedom of expression. It is clear that it suggests different approaches according to the size and homogeneity/diversity of the audience. Is this different from the alertness to audience that is part of the equipment of the stand up comedian? The answer to this is 'Probably not - in principle'. In practice the mass audience is not merely invisible and inaudible, but its make up can only be guessed.

## CONCLUSIONS

To return the discussion to the more accustomed areas of information science, we can look finally at the problems experienced by information service institutions over access to information and ideas. For instance, the question of controversial material is one that has troubled the American library profession throughout the twentieth century and continues to do so. America's religious minorities (which cumulate to form America's religious majority), are a continual source of challenges to stock selected, or potentially selected by librarians. At the end of the twentieth century the question of using software filtering systems to limit users' access to websites with 'unacceptable' content joined this as a source of controversy. The American Library Association's Office for Intellectual Freedom has asserted the values of freedom of expression and freedom of access to information, as has IFLA's Freedom of Access to Information and Freedom of Expression (FAIFE) Committee since it was set up in 1997. (Byrne, 2008) In the UK, CILIP has ventured to comment on 'controversial material in libraries. (Mezey, 2008) Does the experience of comedy offer any useful lessons? A sequence of six conclusions is offered here with that in mind.

1. Freedom of Expression is an absolute principle but the Universal Declaration on Human Rights' Article Nineteen and other such statements do identify limits that might reasonably be applied in practice. These possible limitations do open the door to censorship when administered by systems of law and justice unsympathetic to free expression. Those who exercise their right to free expression have to do so in awareness of possible limitations and ultimately they must accept responsibility for what they say, and understand the possible consequences to themselves, friends and family, society as a whole (including its minorities) and international relations. By extension, those who act as intermediaries for communication, be they publishers, broadcasters, Internet services providers, or information professionals, must understand this clearly too.
2. It is possible to exercise freedom of expression with minimal offence in a social context by using tact, consideration and decorum. A calculation of how to achieve a desired effect (whether comic, philosophical, or political) is feasible, and comedians incorporate this in their professional practice.
3. The calculation is capable of being made with considerable accuracy with a small, self-selected live audience, such as those to be found in comedy clubs. Dave Longley's reflections crystallise comedians' thinking on this. Gratuitous offence that has no comedic intent can be avoided by careful reviewing and testing of material and the application of tests such as Sarah Millican's 3/5 test.
4. When the audience is scaled up, minorities are more likely to be present and their number is scaled up with the total size of the audience. Their protests can then be sufficiently numerous to look like a general revulsion at some otherwise generally accepted material. The consequences for mass media are difficult and require clear thinking and conviction on the part of managers and owners.
5. Information service institutions such as libraries are not mass media, but because they seek to offer the whole spectrum of print and online access they can be used like mass media. They also acknowledge a mission to serve the whole of society, with minorities frequently receiving specific reference as

part of this mission. This is an inclusive policy (material that will serve everyone including minorities) not an exclusive one (material that will serve everyone except those who object to some of it). Offence is likely to be caused by some of the material made available libraries and this will require policy decisions and responses.

6. Just as comedians take trouble to calculate the effect of their material by exercising decorum, information professionals also have to devote careful thought to how they deal with such problems. If there is a general answer it is that they must balance the compelling need for free expression when directed at the powerful, religious and secular alike, whilst exercising patience, tact and consideration when dealing with expression that might offend the weak and powerless.

The substance of the information professional's defence of intellectual freedom is essentially that of the comedians whose practice is discussed here. The difference is that comedians, like authors and journalists who pursue difficult and dangerous subjects, are obliged to work through their personal position on the issues as a matter of prime personal significance. They do, as has been illustrated above, work out compromises through a kind of dialogue with their audiences. This is surely compromise enough. The information professions, as a secondary level of freedom of expression 'actors', have a responsibility to respect the decisions made by writers and other creative artists as to what should be set before the public. The point is that they do not ignore protest and the voicing of outrage, but that they assess it both in terms of volume (number of protesters) and intensity. A response may be appropriate when protest reaches some sort of level, but identifying what level and what response requires careful judgement, not a panic withdrawal from providing access to the challenged material. The comedians give this their careful attention and information professionals need to do that too. Indeed, since libraries often invite writers, publishers and artists to meet their users, they might also usefully invite comedians. Like the comedians, they need to protect the spirit of free expression, even though the comedians are defending their right to expression and information professionals are defending the rights of others.

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## **APPENDIX – PERFORMANCES AND INTERVIEWS**

The performances listed are those observed for the purposes of this project. DFCC stands for Derby Funhouse Comedy Club, which is held at two venues, the Brunswick Inn, and the Blessington Carriage.

Gareth Berliner (Performance, DFCC 12<sup>th</sup> Mar 2008)

Tyson Boyce (Interview and Performance, DFCC 21<sup>st</sup> Jan 2008)

Roy 'Chubby Brown (Performance, Derby Assembly Rooms Feb 20<sup>th</sup> 2008)

Jonathan Elston (Performance and Interview, DFCC 12<sup>th</sup> Mar 2008)

Rhod Gilbert (Performance and Interview, DFCC 23<sup>rd</sup> June 2008)

Richard Herring (Performance, Nottingham, The Approach 22<sup>nd</sup> June 2008)

Matt Hollies (Performance and Interview, DFCC 12<sup>th</sup> Mar 2008)

Danny James (Performance and Interview, DFCC 12<sup>th</sup> Mar 2008)

Jim Jeffries (Performance, Derby Assembly Rooms 27<sup>th</sup> Sept 2008)

Jethro (Performance, Derby Assembly Rooms 20<sup>th</sup> Feb 2008)

Dave Longley (Performance, Nottingham, The Approach, 22<sup>nd</sup> June, 2008, Interview, Derby 25<sup>th</sup> June 2008, Email 27<sup>th</sup> June 2008)

Zoe Lyons (Performance and Interview, DFCC 14<sup>th</sup> May 2008)

Danny McLaughlin (Performance and Interview, DFCC 23<sup>rd</sup> June 2008)

Spiky Mike (Interview, Nottingham 17<sup>th</sup> June 2008)

Sarah Millican (Performance and Interview, DFCC 21<sup>st</sup> Jan 2008)

Mel Moon (Performance and Interview, DFCC 14<sup>th</sup> May 2008)

Reeves Peterson (Performance and Interview, DFCC 21<sup>st</sup> Jan 2008)

Gareth Richards (Performance and Interview, DFCC 21<sup>st</sup> Jan 2008)