Stirring up a good comedy

THE RECIPE FOR FUNNY CHILDREN'S TELEVISION

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Can we create a scientific formula for good children's comedy? This text presents such a formula as a synthesis of academic analyses of humour and practical advice from scriptwriters.

What is funny, and how can we produce humorous television for children? It is difficult to find a topic which is more difficult to grasp than the production and reception of comedy and humour. Scientists in different disciplines have attempted to uncover the principles for the production and effects of comedy, as well as to set up categories and theories for various types of comedy. Their arguments are usually based upon abstract constructions and complex theories and offer little practical assistance. There is also no theoretical research explicitly focused on humour in media or communication studies (Prommer, 2012). However, one can assume that the general principles of humour production also apply to humour production in media. How, then, can one create a scientific formula for good children's comedy? The following text presents such a formula as a synthesis of academic analyses of humour and practical advice from scriptwriters.

THE COMIC PREMISE

Fundamental for the production of comedy is the comic premise which is the gap or the divergence between 2 realities. Something unexpected happens, for instance a norm violation, the clash of different frames of reference, a completely inappropriate and exaggerated answer, contrasts and contradictions, a provocation, or the breaking of a taboo. Elements, which do not fit together, are combined in order to create comedy. While scriptwriters refer to this as the comic premise, scientists call this incongruity. However, they all agree on one point: the fundamental element for comedy is inconsistency or incongruity. German philosopher Immanuel Kant is generally seen as the original author of this theory, also referred to as incongruity theory. Kant asserts that the source of comedy is always an inconsistency. We laugh when something does not fit together or when a plot takes a surprising turn. "Laughing is an effect of when an expectation in suspense transforms into nothing." (Kant, 1790, cited in Bachmeier, 2005, p. 25) Different forms of comedy, such as situation comedy or wordplay, are all based on the absurd, the illogical, and elements that do not fit together.

Incongruity is the basis of humour

Incongruity is the basis of humour; it is the conflict between that which a person expects and that which he or she actually experiences. There are studies on the neurological activities in someone's brain while he or she is laughing or comprehending a joke, in which researchers can even recognise the impulse to laugh as a reaction to a conflict; which then can be either resolved with laughter or with opposition. This basic idea, however, is not new. Already in 1669 the book *Simplicius Simplicissimus* (by Grimmelshausen) states the following: "It is the failing of ideals due to the practical constraints of reality which brings about cynicism." This comment describes the basic principle of comedy, that is, incongruity.
Children's understanding and decoding of this incongruity develops as they develop. McGhee (1980) describes the development of how incongruent humour becomes appreciated. Building on Piaget, he explains at which ages children can understand particular forms of comedy. Small children enjoy simple incongruities, while older children can laugh about more complex incongruities starting at about 5 years old, because at around this age they begin to independently figure out the meaning of jokes (ibid.). So the understanding of incongruities develops with one's level of cognitive development.

Children and adults laugh about different things

Also Prommer and her colleagues see a relationship between cognitive development and the understanding of humour. They found that preteens and adults laughed about different things in the same television show. When 10- to 13-year-olds watched *The Simpsons*, they mainly found the slapstick humour funny, while adults were amused by the societal and inter-textual references (Prommer et al., 2003).

Knowing this, how can we create humorous or comic media content? It is important to differentiate between 2 levels of comedy. On the overriding level, a comic premise needs to be set up based upon a comic conflict and comic characters. These are the comic narrative macrostructures. On the micro- or dialogic level, gags and jokes are integrated as comic microstructures, and these are based, in turn, upon small incongruities.

COMIC CONFLICTS

In order to integrate a comic premise dramaturgically, a story needs a comic conflict about a comic character. Also in this case, incongruity is the main feature of comedy. The sitcom-author and textbook writer John Vorhaus (2001) says that discrepancies are the prerequisite for comedy. He claims that these discrepancies are the most important element. There must be a gap between the comic and the actual reality; only then is something funny. For him and for many other authors this is the fundamental principle of comic conflict.

According to Vorhaus, there are 3 types of comic conflicts, based upon the classic drama (cf. Ill. 1). First, man against nature. This can be a normal person in a comic world, such as a person in a drawn comic world or a comic character in a normal world. The character of Lisa in the series *The Simpsons* is a normal character in a comic world. In the youth series *Pedro & Bianca*, 2 unusual or comic characters are confronted with a normal world. Pedro and Bianca are funny, because even though they are twins, their skin colour is different. With this the story alludes to the conflicts in Brazilian society, but at the same time produces incongruity. The second comic conflict is man against man or normal person against comic character. Third, man against himself, that is, the inner conflict. For instance, in the movie *Big*, a child becomes the head of a company (cf. Ill. 2).

Comic conflict	Explanation	Examples
Man against nature (global conflict)	Normal character in comic world or comic character in normal world	*Pedro & Bianca* *Back to the Future* (normal boy in a past which is strange for him) *The Amazing World of Gumball* (cf. Ill. 3)
Man against man	Normal character against comic character	*Wizards of Waverly Place* (wizards in a normal world with normal people) *The Big Bang Theory* (Sheldon as nerd vs. the others; Penny, the blonde, vs. the geniuses)
Man against himself	Inner conflict	*Big* or *Freaky Friday* (child in the body of an adult) Homer Simpson, who fails due to his own appetites

Ill. 1: The 3 types of comic conflict

COMIC CHARACTERS

Comedy handbooks also analyse the importance of the comic character. According to Vorhaus (2001, pp. 57 ff.; cf. Ill. 4), in order to be funny, a story needs a comic perspective. This other perspective is the unfamiliar view upon the normal. This unusual view of the world must be clearly different from the common one. The comic perspective should also be exaggerated, in order to bring the funny character further into the comic world. An example of a comic perspective upon the world could be to see it with "fear." The exaggeration for this would be that the character jumps at the sight of his or her own shadow.

The comic character also needs a character flaw, in order for the audience to find the person's troubles funny instead of just feeling sorry for him. This creates a distance between the

Element	Example	Effect
Comic perspective	Fear	Not funny yet
Exaggeration	Jumps at his/her own shadow	A little funny
Failings	Complains all the time	Glee
Human qualities	Helpful	Empathy and sympathy
Total ingredients	=	**The comic character**

Ill. 4: "Ingredients" of the comic character

Technique		Examples
Comedy involving language	Nonsense, exaggeration, wordplay and jokes, funny language, irony (not appropriate for all age groups)	*Horrible Histories* (cf. Ill. 6)
Situation comedy	Clowning, clumsiness, slapstick	*Tom & Jerry, Mickey Mouse*
Comedy involving action	Repetition, imitation	Anke in *The Show with the Elephant* (cf. Ill. 7)
Character comedy	Animals with human characteristics, making faces, changes in the body or body form	*The Amazing World of Gumball*

Ill. 5: Comic techniques

comic character and the viewers. The character does not only jump at the sight of his or her own shadow, but also complains constantly. His failings result in chain reactions, leading to absurd situations. The comic figure also has to have human qualities, which connect him or her with the audience. This is a tip given in all scriptwriting handbooks, underlining the fact that the hero of a film must not only provoke sympathy, but also empathy.

Vorhaus developed over 20 categories on what makes characters or actions funny. These include exaggeration, inappropriate reaction, comic oppositions, truth, tension vs. resolution, inter-textuality, conflicting frames of reference, comic perspectives, lies, and repetition (Vorhaus, 2001, pp. 82 ff.).

Assuming, as Vorhaus does, that comedy is mainly driven by characters, then this can also be applied to real people and television hosts. For example, in the German shows *TV total* (*The Stefan Raab Show*) or *The Harald Schmidt Show* comedy is developed directly by the moderators or other actors such as studio guests. This also applies to the film clips in *TV total*, because media characters are presented with their weaknesses.

COMIC TECHNIQUES

After establishing the comic premise, that is, the comic character and his or her comic conflict, then comic tools at the micro-level generate further incongruities. These comic tools include jokes, hoaxes, gags, and many other techniques. Depending on the author, the categories of these techniques may be differentiated even further or defined differently in detail. Authors who do a more intensive analysis of these comic techniques or tools include Palmer (1994) and Vorhaus (1994). Berger (1998, pp. 3 ff.) even describes 45 different techniques for producing comedy. These may be combined at will and may be used in different comedy genres, such as stand-up comedy, literature, comics, and comic film (ibid., p. 2). It is possible to divide these comic techniques into 4 main categories: comedy involving language, situation comedy, comedy involving action, or character comedy (cf. Ill. 5). Ideally, different techniques are combined with each other.

Berger's list of techniques involving language includes the use of allusion, bombast, definitions of words, exaggeration, facetiousness, insults, infantilism, irony, misunderstandings, over-literalness, puns, wordplay, repartee, ridicule, sarcasm, and satire (ibid.). He emphasises that these techniques usually appear in combination, and also that they let us know what people are laughing about, but not why they are laughing (ibid., p. 4).

Most books written as handbooks for comedy authors include similar lists and formulas (e.g. Vorhaus, 1994). If we are focussing on the analysis of comedy on television, then these 4 major categories in Berger's discussion of techniques are helpful. All these authors assume that in order for jokes, irony, and satire to be funny, they must break the frame of reference. In telling a joke, a narrative first presents a known frame of reference including familiar stereotypes, but then it introduces an unexpected difference within that frame of reference. The recipient must recognise the stereotypes and the frame of reference, as well as the variation of the frame of reference; for

this reason, understanding the joke is dependent upon understanding particular societal norms and taboos. This is another aspect of how children's television needs to consider children's different phases of development.
In short, both the scientific and practical media discussions on the production of comedy make it clear that a joke or funny comment can only function as comedy if it works with incongruities as well as with changes and breaks in a frame of reference (cf. Ill. 8).

SUMMARY

In his text on "The Logic of the Absurd," Palmer (1987) asks whether comedy is an immanent aesthetic quality of a text or if it arises only after it has been negotiated and appropriated by an audience (ibid., p. 20). Palmer, too, assumes that a funny comment must first be understood and then accepted as a joke, making for 2 processes. Whether or not an audience finds something funny is not completely random, but rather occurs in specific moments or at particular points in a plot. For Palmer such moments include familiar semantic and paralinguistic markers (1987). Following his logic, the particular social context, the media reception, as well as the media content play an important role in the production of comedy. Comedy always takes place in the context of a social interaction between the producer and the consumer. It requires that the audience process this interaction in 2 ways. On the one hand, the funny comment or action must be understood cognitively; on the other hand, it must also be placed in relation to a particular social context. Until then, it is not funny.
Ziv (1984) also sees comedy as a social message: "As with any social message, it fulfils certain functions, uses certain techniques, has a context and is used in certain situations." (ibid., p. 9) In his essay on the comparison of humour of different countries, Ziv especially highlights the importance of the social context: "As mentioned above, the greatest difference among cultures should be found in the context and situations of humour." (ibid., p. XI) These findings underline the importance of the reception process in humorous communication.

Comedy develops from the viewer's perspective

Humour and comedy can therefore only develop from the perspective of the recipient, since that person must have the appropriate cultural and societal knowledge about morals, taboos, what is acceptable, and what is forbidden. With regard to children, it is especially important to consider the knowledge which they have and which they do not yet have. For most scientists and practitioners, the main characteristics of comedy are incongruities in the form of comic surprises, contradictions, and comic actions.
Despite all of this good advice, however, this comment by German comedian Herbert Feuerstein is probably the truest: "While there are clear dramaturgic rules for mysteries, soaps, and musicals, humour must rely on the principle of hope: 'Hopefully someone will laugh.'" (Feuerstein, 2003, p. 31) ■

Basic principle of comedy = incongruity = comic premise	
The comic conflict =	The basic story with an unexpected turn
The comic hero =	The comic character in a comic conflict
Style tool for children =	Comic tools should be as simple as possible

Ill. 8: Comedy for children – a checklist

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