All Jokes Are bad If They Are Any Good

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The conference organizers ask a good question: does anything go in humor? My answer is, yes, potentially, anything goes. Does that mean there are no limits in humor? Not at all. Humor depends upon boundaries—if there were no limits, there would be no humor (Lockyer and Pickering 2005, 14). I contend that humor consists in the *artful* and *playful transgression* of boundaries, and I'm going to illustrate this contention by looking at practical jokes.

Many people would agree that practical jokes are transgressive. When people learn about my research topic, one of the most common responses is to observe that some practical jokes can be very cruel. Advice columnist Ann Landers, agrees: "I think practical jokes are for the birds. … In my opinion, something is fundamentally wrong with people who enjoy embarrassing or humiliating others and then expect the victim to be 'a good sport' and laugh it off: {Landers 1988}. Similarly, humor scholar Martin Grotjahn wrote that "The practical joke represents a primitive form of the funny which often is so cruel and so thinly disguised in its hostility that the sensitive or esthetically minded person can hardly enjoy it" (Grotjahn 1957, 40). When something is "fundamentally wrong" with a joke, when its hostility and cruelty are so obvious, then questions of artistry and playfulness go out the window. Indeed, to focus on such matters in the face of moral outrage can seem immoral in itself. However, there are those who appreciate the artistry of practical jokes. "A great prank is like art," according to the compiler of a book of

college pranks (Steinberg 1992, ix, x). To amend his claim, I suggest that a great practical joke combines transgression, play, and aesthetics in a single package.

My first example is the tin foiled desk, a popular practical joke among the millions of people who spend their work days in offices or cubicles. Any office worker who goes on vacation or takes a day off might return to find that their desk, office, or cubicle have been lovingly wrapped in aluminum foil or newspaper, or otherwise adulterated by their coworkers. It is not an original joke—videos, images, and detailed instructions are readily available on the Internet, but tin foiling still offers room for variation, style, and creative elaboration.

Tin foiling is an example of what I call the booby trap subtype of practical jokes. An effective performance requires a more or less elaborate backstage setup that is suddenly sprung on the hopefully unsuspecting target. The target's response at that moment is the climax of the joke, and is often recorded for YouTube immortality:

Play Just Another Office Prank 4.26 min

To wrap the boss's office in newspaper is certainly a transgression of accepted norms for proper behavior in the workplace. It is disrespectful, an invasion of semi-private space, and an obstacle to the demands of the work day. When he came in, the boss had a choice. He could attend to the violation of his workspace, and to the fact that his employees thought it was appropriate to treat him this way. But he chose the alternate response, to treat the incident as humorous. To do so, he had to temporarily suspend his attachment to the applicable norms that had been broken.

Theory of Humor Response

Sociologists Roger Mannell and Lawrence La Fave stressed the necessity of a playful attitude in humor. They pointed out that jokes may be approached either seriously or playfully, and reality can likewise be approached in either way. To take the playful attitude implies a temporary suspension of one's values and norms--in fantasy/play, these are not salient (Mannell and La Fave 1976).[1] A suspension of everyday norms is necessary to appreciate jokes precisely because jokes generally involve the deliberate violation of some norm or other. Indeed, many jokes break several norms at once.

Thomas Veatch proposed a theory of humor that systematized the observations made by Mannell, La Fave, and others (Veatch 1998). McGraw and Warren have renamed this the benign violation theory (McGraw and Warren 2010). It goes like this: humor depends upon of a state of affective absurdity in the observer. This state arises when a situation violates a norm or principal to which the observer is committed but which he or she is simultaneously able to view as normal, tolerable, or acceptable. Put another way, jokes include some transgression that the jokers have framed as play. In performing the joke, they invite audiences to adopt a similar playful attitude and tolerate the transgression, if only for a moment. The violations in jokes are amusing if and only if the audience can find a way to permit them through a temporary playful suspension of their everyday values and norms.

There are several advantages to the benign violation theory. First, it makes the moral and ethical dimension central to the understanding of humor, which both mirrors and explains the frequency with which jokes of all kinds arouse moral and ethical arguments. Moral issues appear in the reception of jokes more than in the reception of other art forms (Kramer 2011).

[1] **CHECK THIS NOT A QUOTE**

The theory also explains why audience reception is so crucial to jokes. While all performers crave an audience, those who perform jokes need audiences in a way that specialists in other genres do not. It is not just laughter that the joker craves, but *humor support*. Jennifer Hay, who wrote a thesis on humor here at Victoria in 1995, proposed this term to designate the looked for responses to jokes. Why? Because, as she observed, laughter is just one of many ways to respond positively to jokes (Hay 2001).[2] Her choice of the term "support" is very telling, I think. Why would we assume that humorous performances require support, specifically? I propose that it is the inherent transgression of jokes that makes support necessary.

Hay suggests that full support of humor involves what she calls *appreciating* the humor, and also *agreeing* with any message associated with it. I suggest simply that support means adopting and/or displaying a playful attitude toward the transgressiveness in the joke. Appreciation and agreement may both be involved, but the essential characteristic is the reigning spirit of play. I will explain.

Recognition

The first requirement for humor support is that the joke must be recognized as such. Joke performers help audiences achieve this recognition by drawing upon culturally specific pool of signals to suggest that what follows is intended as a joke. Hyperbole is a good one, seen here in the title sequence that is modeled after *Star Wars*, including the opening fanfare used in all Twentieth Century Fox films. The next section is sped up to the accompaniment of "Yakety Sax," familiar as the theme from the Benny Hill Show. This allusion to a well-known comedy

[2] Cf Hay, Jennifer. 1995. *Gender and Humour: Beyond a Joke*. MA, Linguistics, Victoria University of Wellington, Wellington.

act signals the play frame. Moreover, the quick tempo in both the video and the music are widely recognized comedy cues, directed at us, the YouTube public.

Most practical jokes have multiple audiences, including usually but not always the targets; anyone who collaborated with the jokers; a wider group that we might call the *joker's circle* who are forewarned of the coming enactment; and finally, bystanders who witness the joke enactment by happenstance. In the video we saw, we ourselves constitute one bystander audience; thanks to digital video and Internet delivery, we can observe the enactment of a joke that originally was deeply embedded in a specific social setting. At such a temporal and social distance *might* help us to find the joke amusing, but it might equally make it seem merely dull. Then there is the audience of one—the target of the practical joke. The boss apparently recognized and understood the joke instantly, perhaps because the tin foiled office cubicle prank and its variants are so widely distributed on the Internet. The jokers gave as one reason for the prank the fact that they "really liked those YouTube newspaper pranks." Since the phase structure of the practical joke is widely known (Bauman 1986), to recognize the joke is also to understand it. When a person becomes aware that they have been the target of a practical joke, they usually have no trouble understanding what happened. What may cause difficulty, however, is that they have to cope with the fact that someone felt it appropriate to treat them in this way. Recognition and understanding by no means guarantee humor support.

Many of the 151 comments that this video received on YouTube praised the boss's forbearance in deciding to laugh rather than firing the jokers. Given this risk, it is not surprising that the jokers added some extra cues to encourage his agreement. The "welcome home boss" sign on the wall signals that the joke has a benign intent and also restores him to his position as boss. The "red carpet" made from paper and the Imperial March from *Star Wars* both use comic

hyperbole to playfully flatter him, signaling play but at the same time symbolically signaling that he is still the boss.

They also sent him a text message that said "Smile, you're on Candid Camera." This formula, used in Alan Funt's reality television show (1948-2004) to close and reveal fabrications to their targets, has become a byword—apparently an international one—for a practical joke or for a comic situation generally. The Candid Camera formula encapsulates what is going on when the target of a practical joke is "let in on" the joke and invited, or rather instructed, to support it. There is something imperious about the way jokes seek support from their audiences.

This proliferation of play cues suggest that in this case, the jokers' goal was to win humor support from their target. His response is nearly two minutes of almost uninterrupted laughter. There is one comment in English: "Funny as fucking hell," he says to someone (one of the jokers?) on his cell phone. If the goal was to get a laugh from the boss, then this joke was a clear success. [3]

The Meaning of Humor Support

When a person becomes aware that they have been contained in a practical joke, the response can be quite complex. We see in this video someone who seems unable, for the time being, to commit to any particular course of action; he circles, picking up objects then setting them back down, moving back and forth, and periodically erupting in loud laughter. As Wallace Chafe points out, laughter literally incapacitates any other action (Chafe 2007). Considering all

[3] This video follows the phase structure of the practical joke in the same way as oral practical joke narratives (Bauman 1986). It begins with an orientation that locates the story in time and place, and also explains the motive for the joke (the boss was away; we like the paper office jokes on the Internet). The backstage domain is shown in great detail. Finally, the denouement—the moment when the joke is enacted, and the reaction of the target are also shown. The video ends with a brief evaluation…"Almost perfect."

that the target of a booby trap joke must cope with at the moment of enactment, doing nothing is not a bad strategy.

In the vernacular ideology of humor, laughter signals appreciation of a joke. When the person laughing is the target of the joke, it is read as a sign of a healthy sense of humor, as well as that the person is a "good sport." Several YouTube comments on this video praise the boss for reacting the way he did. In truth, however, we cannot know everything that was going through his mind for the full two minutes. As I mentioned, recognition and understanding would have been almost instantaneous, but deciding whether or not to countenance the joke's transgression, and the implications of that choice—can be a more convoluted process. In booby trap jokes, the situation is complicated by the fact that the targets usually understands that his or her reaction is being closely watched, and judged, by an audience constituted by the jokers and their supporters.

"Helpless" laughter can be strategically useful in this situation. Vernacular theory posits laughter as an uncontrollable outburst and thus a true reflection of attitudes and feelings. The idea is that funniness is a quality that resides somehow in jokes, and that anyone with the right emotional and intellectual equipment will perceive it; having perceived the humor, the assumption is that laughter is virtually automatic.

This thinking is useful and necessary, because jokes demand that their audiences take a moral position, albeit a playful one. One cannot remain morally neutral about a joke that one claims to understand. Both joke tellers and audiences fear that some of the stigma of transgressive jokes rubs off on them. This suspicion has been dubbed the "moral stickiness" of jokes (Fine and Wood 2010, 313). Jennifer Hay's observations about the pragmatics of humor support grew from her observation that people commonly laugh at a joke but also try to distance themselves from the moral positions that their laughter might suggest. Given this scenario, it is

useful to be able to claim that one laughed because one could not help it. The vernacular theory pushes responsibility for humor support away from the speaker and onto an external source, namely the purported inherent "funniness" of the joke itself.[4]

Bravo

Laughter is just one way of expressing support for a joke. The following YouTube video demonstrates another approach. As the target returns from vacation, his coworkers are waiting for him with a surprise:[i]

Play "Tin Foil Cubicle Prank" http://youtu.be/NyfXQ_HypPc 2.31

Because jokes transgress, they need permission. In practical jokes, some permission may be achieved by enlisting collaborators and witnesses. The video shows several coworkers, generally off-camera but audible, who effectively accept collective responsibility for the trick. It is not clear which of them actually did the tin foiling and which ones were just observers, but even those who were not directly involved clearly ally themselves with the joker. In occupational settings practical jokes are usually group efforts, even when a single individual is responsible for the setup. Whether they actively help or are simply witnesses, this audience signals communal support of the joke.[5]

Tom's reaction illustrates one of the significant points in Hay's theory—the idea that laughter is not the only way to signal appreciation of a joke. There is laughter in his response,

[4] Vernacular ideas about the irrepressibility of laughter reinforce this stance…creating role distance for the audience. See (Mulkay 1988) for refutation of this common perception.
[5] Goffman suggests that bystanders avoid getting too enthusiastically involved in helping the joker because to do so would suggest too much disrespect of the target (Goffman 1974, 88).

certainly—but there is also playful aestheticization (Marsh 2012). He treats his foiled cubicle as the work of art the jokers intended it to be; he literally applauds it, using a culturally-recognized signal of appreciation for an artistic performance. He calls it a masterpiece, and pronounces it too good to touch, as if it were an installation in a gallery.

However, I do not mean to suggest that he literally thought the tinfoiling was an artistic masterpiece. His response is stylized and exaggerated, both signs of play. His "Bravo!" is not so much applause as a playful imitation of applause. However, the strong echoing laughter from his coworkers confirms that they read it as humor support.[6]

Green Beer

It is useful to draw a distinction between effectiveness and success in joke performance, because the two do not always occur together. An effective joke is simply one that is performed or enacted well. In a practical joke, effectiveness means that the jokers' fabrication played out as expected, and the relevant targets were fooled according to plan. Success in jokes, on the other hand, means winning humor support from salient audiences.[7]

The previous two cases were jokes that were both effective and successful. The next example is a joke that is effective, but not successful. The story was told to me by Rob Mills, a resident of Brown, County, a rural area in Indiana, whose family regularly played practical jokes on each other:

[6] Another possible approach the target might have used would have been to offer a critique of the joke on aesthetic grounds—"you missed this tea bag," for example. With the right tone to signal play or humor, such a response would be another way to signal humor support. Cf comments on Looooka video—"None of the mice was newspapered."

[7] It is theoretically possible for an in effective, ill-formed joke to achieve success; if it is an in-group performance and the performer is a well-integrated group member, the audience might offer a show of support, including laughter, if only to avoid hurting the performer. In other words, humor support can be merely a show…we generally do not have independent evidence of what is going on in the recipient's head or heart.

> One of the jokes that Russ played on John was putting green food coloring in some home brew, cause John had developed this system of brewing beer; and he had a refrigerator with a tap on it and everything. So he put green food coloring in his beer, and it worked especially well, because John later had a friend over, who was from out of town and he wanted to impress him with this system, with the tap. So he started taking some beer out of the tap and it came out green. (Laughter) “Oh God what's happened!” So it was impressive but not in the way he had intended. He couldn't figure out what was going on. He did figure it out later because there had been several jokes going on; the tradition had been established by then.
>
> Sometimes when the family gets together we tell joke stories. The green beer joke has not been talked about. I guess John didn't appreciate it very much. That must have been in the mid-seventies. I don't think he enjoyed it. He probably got them back. (Mills 1987)

Initially, John did not recognize that the incident was a joke (“What’s going on?”). He recognized it later, (“he did figure it out”), because this joke was one of a series of reciprocal tricks that had been going on in the family. However, he did not appreciate it.

Here is a family of confirmed practical jokers. They play jokes on each other and share stories about them. In this context, it is very telling that the green beer joke has not been talked about, even though it worked “especially well.” This silence suggests that in the family’s opinion, it was a failed joke. Why? Because their brother was an audience whose humor support was desired and salient, but not forthcoming.

Sociologist Michael Billig has coined the term *unlaughter* to refer to these situations, meaning "a display of not laughing when laughter might otherwise be expected, hoped for or

demanded"(Billig 2005, 192). I find this concept useful because it distinguishes the absence of humor support from the mere absence of laughter. Most of our daily activities are not accompanied by laughter and this absence is neither remarkable nor significant. However, the absence of laughter, or any other form of humor support, is very meaningful. Because every joke is transgressive, the absence of support is an implicit accusation against the joker for having behaved violated some norm or moral code. Recognizing, or suspecting, that John did not appreciate the joke played on him, the jokers could not dodge the fact that they had embarrassed his brother in front of his friends, on a subject that was dear to him.

Disagreement

In a recent analysis of rape-joke arguments on the Internet, Elise Kramer makes this startling observation: “Disagreement...[is] a necessary component of humor: those who find a joke funny and those who do not are mutually constitutive groups that cannot exist without each other" (Kramer 2011, 163). What she is referring to, I think, is more than the fact that many jokes give rise to arguments, especially in public forums. Rather, disagreement is not a contingent, potential outcome of jokes, but a necessary, constituent part of them.

Laughter rests on the hypothetical existence of others who are not laughing or would not laugh if they were aware of the joke. To support a joke is to acknowledge that there is some norm violation towards which one is willing to take a playful attitude. Accordingly, humor support necessarily involves noticing transgression, and to notice a transgression is to posit the existence of someone who would object to it.

Unlaughter can open up the disagreement at the heart of the joke. In small, high context groups, like families, such disagreements can be divisive and are often avoided. In these settings jokers take pains to ensure that their targets can support the joke and “laugh along.” When their

brother did not offer a show of support for the green beer joke, the joke was deemed a failure and was removed from the family repertoire to avoid more divisive unlaughter. Management of unlaughter in in-group settings boils down to avoiding it wherever possible and minimizing it when it does occur.

One and a Half Meters

The final consequence of the benign violation theory of humor is that "nothing is funny to everyone and anything seems potentially funny to someone" (La Fave, Haddad, and Maesen 1976, 85). The theory is silent about which violations lend themselves to playful acceptance. There are as many reasons for humor support and unlaughter as there are individual audiences. This thinking goes against the vernacular ideology of humor, which states that certain violations are never tolerable, and certain topics are never appropriate for jokes. Vernacular thinking suggests that there are limits for humor. The benign violation theory agrees that there are always limits…but it also suggests that those limits cannot be universal, and that we cannot know for certain where they lie.

As an example, consider the following account of a reciprocal joke sequence between two men in a small dairy farming district in New Zealand. The story comes from an obituary of a man named Bill Hathorne, in the *Nelson Mail* in 1997. The location is Anakiwa, small village in Marlborough Sounds, home of the Outward Bound School where Bill had worked as the maintenance man:

> He was a great practical joker, quick to initiate reprisals if anyone played a practical joke on him. Once a Linkwater valley dairy farmer was silly enough to remove a set of steps outside a gypsy caravan…while Bill was inside living it up at a party. They all laughed,

particularly the farmer, when Bill came to leave, opened the caravan door and fell 1.5m to the ground.

Next morning the farmer went out to milk his 200 or so cows. Imagine his surprise when he found someone had been in his unlocked cowshed before him and totally dismantled the milking machine. Hathorne had struck again (Grady 1997).

Did these jokes go too far? If the rule of thumb is to avoid jokes that are dangerous, causing someone to fall one and half meters would be beyond the pale. Likewise, dismantling a farmer's milking machine would cause him considerable trouble and could impact his economic wellbeing. Although the machine could be put back together, it would take some trouble, especially with a herd of 200 impatient cows waiting. Viewed objectively, both jokes arguably go beyond the limits.

Yet it seems that the original audiences to these jokes were ok with them. A newspaper obituary is not the place to raise disagreements. The inclusion of these stories in Bill's obituary suggest that they were a part of the local joking repertoire, which in turn suggest that his acquaintances supported the jokes. In in-group practical joking, the chief criterion for deciding a joke's success is whether or not the target supports it.

Despite sustaining a dangerous fall, Bill kept his composure and perpetrated an extremely effective fabrication of his own. Because it matched the original joke in style and theme, and exceeded it in daring, effort, and impact, his effort made him the winner in what everyone understood was a contest. With attention diverted to this contest of wits, no-one need ask whether he had been really amused at falling several feet to the ground. The humorous mode

leaves such questions unasked and unanswered, allowing reciprocal joking to paper over any actual hurts and dissensions in the joint accomplishment of social solidarity.

I have found that the most common response of practical joke targets is not laughter, or not merely laughter, but revenge with more jokes A retaliatory joke is a kind of metaphorical laughter that kept things within the playful joking frame and suggested humor support.

It is a truism in humor research than distance enables amusement (McGraw, Williams, and Warren 2013). However, distance does not guarantee support any more than closeness guarantees unlaughter. The distant audiences of reported and mediated practical jokes might be expected to see the funny side and take the playful attitude more readily than those directly involved, but sometimes the reverse is true. A joke that is hilarious to those involved often leaves outsiders cold. We began with Ann Landers, who refused any kind of humor support for this type of joke. We end with Bill Hathorne, who exploited the repertoire of possible expressions of humor support to keep the play frame alive.

The practical joke is the most socially embedded of all humor genres because targets consider the nature of their relationship with the jokers in deciding whether to adopt a playful attitude to their discomfiture. Consequently, the meaning and significance of a practical joke is inextricably tied to its social context. For this reason practical joking may be highly valued *within* a particular relationship or small group, but is readily disparaged in the abstract. Considered in the abstract, practical jokes are much more likely to appear simply cruel or puerile and not at all funny, because outsiders have no stake in avoiding the threats to solidarity that such criticism would cause if it came from within the group.

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[i] Statements by people other than the target are in parentheses.