



Joke economics: the low profile of comedy in the economics of arts and culture

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Abstract

Despite being a globally significant form of art and culture, the performance of comedy has seemingly maintained a very low profile in cultural economics. The case for greater research scrutiny of this art form is advanced alongside some possible reasons for the relatively low academic attention devoted to comedy. The scope for considering comedy in economic terms is also considered, and a range of research questions are raised to stimulate debate and further enquiry on the topic.

Keywords Comedy · Jokes · Humour · Cultural economics

1 Introduction

It is not difficult to argue that comedy performances are currently a globally significant feature of the cultural landscape and that many comedy performers are high profile and influential figures in theatre, film, and television settings. Many comedians and comedic performers have become high profile film and television actors such that many comedy performers are multimillionaires (see Fig. 1). Comedy shows, festivals, films and television programmes generate enormous global revenue streams. Within economics, the scope for the practice of comedy might seem limited, but there is media visibility through an annual dedicated economics and comedy festival (kilkenomics.com) as well as the presence of comedy stand up economists (standupeconomist.com) and the annual awarding of ‘Ignobel’ prizes for economics (improbable.com).

This paper seemed like a good idea at the time and was originally delivered (far better) as the Presidential address for the 21st ACEI International Conference on Cultural Economics, July 6–9, held online due to the Covid-19 pandemic. You had to be there.

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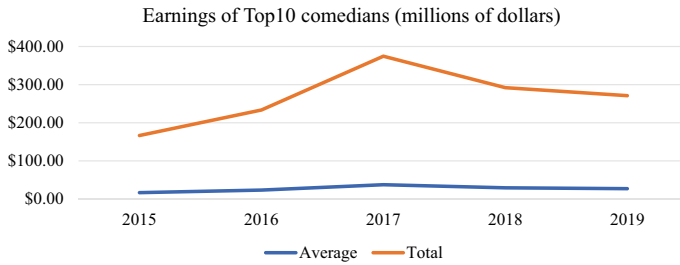


Fig. 1 Earnings of the top 10 comedians. Source: Forbes (2019). The Highest-Earning Stand-Up Comedians of 2019 (Accessed 10 October 2019)

In the light of such a pervasive popular media presence several questions on the nature and extent of comedy warrant economic scrutiny. For example, given the vast number of comedy performances across venues around the world, why are there so few female performers? What accounts for the apparent contemporary Anglophone dominance of successful comedy performers? Given the substantial focus on well-being within economic and social science research, why is relatively little attention devoted to comedy, jokes, and laughter, which, in principle, provide direct injections of happiness to individuals? More generally, can comedy be readily analysed in standard economic terms like other performance arts and thus be evaluated and considered with respect to policy matters such as subsidy, labour supply, and technological progress.

With these questions in mind, this exploratory study investigates the standing and range of comedy in the economics of arts and culture. It is found to occupy a rather low profile and some of the reasons for this situation are considered. While there is a far more substantial and rich extant literature on comedy, humour, and laughter in many other academic fields, even in those respective domains there are also observations and exhortations also suggesting an unduly low profile too. This suggests that the neglect evident in cultural economics has some topic based, as well as potentially discipline-based explanations.

This paper uses and extends the definition of comedy provided by Lowe (2008) as ‘performed humour’ intended to generate a response from others, mainly comprising (but not exclusively) laughter.¹ Various reasons have been considered to explain in evolutionary terms why we laugh and construct humour (Silvertown, 2020). Martin and Ford (2018), however, focus on humour arises in their definition,

“...a broad multifaceted term that represents anything people say or do that other people find funny and tends to make them laugh, as well as the mental processes that go into both creating and perceiving such an amusing stimulus and also the emotional response of mirth involved in the enjoyment of it”. [p.4]

¹ Stott (2004) highlights the role of laughter as the “...most immediate meter of comedy’s success or failure” but notes that it does not belong to it uniquely since it can also be induced by non-performed humour as well as “...embarrassment, fear, guilt, tickling, or laughing gas.”

The paper is organised in the following manner. The next section offers a brief conspectus of the development of comedy and comedic forms. This naturally leads into the following section on some consideration as to why there is relatively little ‘economics of comedy’. Neglected research questions and the beginnings of some economic thinking on comedy are then offered followed by some concluding remarks.

2 The development of comedy

There is no evidence of comedy performance in the prehistoric era but considerable evidence from the classical era (see, for example, Fontaine and Scafuro (2013) and Csapo (2010)). In terms of real visual and documentary evidence to address the direct question of who ‘invented’ comedy, this is considered by Rusten (2006). He argues that the formal beginning of comedy can be dated back to the *Dionysia* of 486 BCE. We know that comedy comprises one of the three main dramatic forms in the theatre of classical Greece with such *Athenian* comedy being typically divided into ‘old’, ‘middle’ and ‘new’ periods by classical scholars. The earliest ‘old’ comedy survives largely through the 11 known plays by Aristophanes of Byzantium, featuring extensive scatological and sexual innuendo. More broadly, his technique of camouflaging political dissent through dramatic buffoonery is contended to have influenced many later European writers (including Miguel de Cervantes, Jonathan Swift, François Rabelais, and others). Playwrights of the ‘new’ comedy genre (such as Menander) focussed more explicitly on everyday life and are said to have influenced most directly the comic drama of William Shakespeare, Ben Jonson, and William Congreve, among others.

Beyond dramatic form, performed humour in many countries has long been enacted individually, in duos, or small touring groups, or circuses, using various job titles including, fool, jester, clown, and various stock character roles in Italian *Commedia dell’arte*, such as Harlequin and Pierrot. Some of these roles persist to the current day as niche performers cognizant of their historical legacy. However, out of these roles evolved comedy performers and performance styles within a variety of subsequent traditions, venues and media around the globe. These range from ‘nachspiel’, ‘vaudeville’ (Glenn, 1995), ‘burlesque’, ‘Chat Noir’, ‘Moulin Rouge’, Weimar Kabarett (Casadevall, 2007; Ritchie & Harris, 2007; Segel, 1977), ‘musical hall’, ‘variety theatre’ performances, ‘comedy revues’, ‘boulevard comedy’ theatres Meyer-Dinkgräfe, 2009) and radio comedy to their modern incarnations of stand-up comedy, sketch comedy and situation comedy (Friedman, 2014; Medhurst, 2007).

In the UK stand-up comedy can readily be seen as evolving from three traditions (Alexander, 1984), namely musical hall/variety show ‘turns’, acts at working men’s clubs (particularly in the North of England) and more latterly appearances in comedy clubs on the alternative comedy circuit (which has morphed into just the ‘comedy club circuit’ (Campbell, 2017). The latter seems now to provide a high volume of seedbed talent to feed the seemingly insatiable demand for comedians to appear on television comedy panel shows and quizzes such as the UK state television broadcaster’s (British Broadcasting Corporation) BBC “*Have I Got News for You*”,

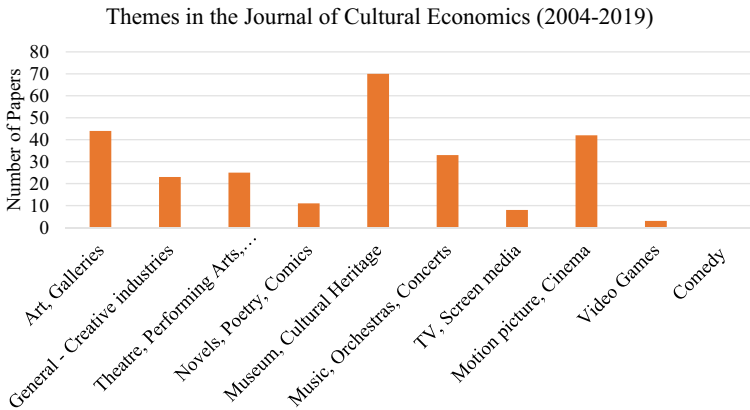


Fig. 2 Themes in the Journal of Cultural Economics (2004–2019). Source: *Journal of Cultural Economics* (Accessed 10 October 2019)

“*Mock the Week*” among many other shows across many other television broadcast channels. This routeway to wider audiences and comedy fame features or is replicated across and well beyond the English-speaking world (Colleary, 2015).

3 Why is there little ‘economics of comedy’?

Numbers of articles in the *Journal of Cultural Economics* focussed on comedy as a subject are as Fig. 2 indicates non-existent.

Friedman (2014), though a sociologist, offers a detailed exposition and survey-based empirics to explore how taste in comedy functions as an expression of cultural capital. Yet beyond the work of Angrisani (2017) little formal academic comedy economics has appeared. Yet, in truth given comedy’s significance to people’s lived leisure experiences there is arguably a relatively low volume of *any* academic attention to comedy.² Lowe (2008) offers a possible explanation which I describe as the ‘Eco Conspiracy Premise’. Umberto Eco’s, 1980 novel *Il Nome della Rosa* (translation: *The Name of the Rose*) features as a plot device that there is a lost sequel to Aristotle’s *Poetics* that concerns the subject of comedy. The existence of such a book is central to a ‘monastic conspiracy’ attempting to keep humour out of religion. Indeed, Ritchie (2010) notes that “...many philosophers and writers have praised comedy, but there have been as many opposed to it for religious, moral, political and sexual reasons”. The underpinning purpose of Eco’s fictional religious conspiracy was to inhibit Aristotelian authority. Such authority was deemed to give comedy its intellectual value and substance. In the novel *Jorge de Burgos* is the abbey librarian and killer who is fearful that if comedy were to be a respectable focus for academic

² That said, there are several specialist field journal specifically devoted to humour and comedy but arguably their cross disciplinary reach is not great.

scrutiny, then the religious and philosophical basis of the church and its place in society would be threatened. According to Lowe (2008) even though Eco's conspiracy is purely fictional", ... it is the case that comedy has been denigrated in the academy, especially in comparison with tragedy, due in part to the absence of an important treatment of it in the Classical tradition".

Hence, comedy is widely perceived as trivial, intellectually lightweight and offering limited opportunity for academic endeavour, even though it has occupied the attentions of a small body of classical scholars, psychologists, linguistic theorists, media studies scholars and some sociologists. For example, in terms of theorisation there is a long history of some technically dense sophisticated work on the linguistics and psychology of humour (See, for example, the work of Kline (1907), Martin and Ford (2018). Nielsen (2008) summarises the underpinning theory of comedy framing it as contingent on the non-mutually exclusive constructs of (i) superiority, (ii) tension relief and (iii) incongruity. The comedic relationship between the characters of Basil Fawlty and his Spanish waiter employee, Manuel in the BBC comedy series *Fawlty Towers* is built around the supposed superiority of Basil to Manuel. Tension relief might be seen around the 'hair gel' gag in the movie "*There's Something about Mary*" and incongruity is the unsubtle but basic plot premise of the movie '*Twins*' based around the physical and personality character differences between the supposed twin brothers played by (tall) Arnold Schwarzenegger and (short) Danny De Vito. Shouse (2007) critiques the existing body of theory on comedy and calls for an extension to include the concept of 'affect'. By this he means that stand-up comedy is an 'embodied experience' and is thus contingent on the transmission of emotional reactions (hopefully involving laughter) through audience interaction and its context.

4 Thinking economically about comedy

Following Carr and Greeves (2006) jokes are often central to an oral culture and specifically are a verbal or physical communication intended to deliberately evoke amusement. There is a formulaic construction in that there is typically a 'set up' followed by a verbal or physical punchline. So, a set up to a classic old joke might be: Why was astrology invented? With a subsequent punchline: So that econometric forecasting would seem accurate. The joke, per se, is not the source of utility to a consumer—they may even be sources of negative utility—where they are vehicles of racist, sexist, or homophobic sentiment or a major contravention of the social mores held by the individual. The resultant chuckling, smiling, laughter provides some measure, however, short-lived, of positive uplift to wellbeing and thus utility.

There is a high cultural discount factor for comedy. The obstacles and nuances of language and (secondarily) culture matters in appreciating comedic value. So, it is likely that the largest domestic market will likely give rise to higher absolute numbers (and possibly density?) of well-paid comedians. The overwhelming majority of the comedians in the data in Fig. 1 are American. This may also help account for the contemporary Anglophone bias in rewards to comedy performers.

On the consumption side several basic research questions about comedy exist which have not been subject to research attention despite the media prevalence of comedic outputs and performers. What is the role of comedy in relation to subjective wellbeing over the short and long term in both therapeutic and (various) non-therapeutic settings. Is 'escape' utility from the seriousness and hardships of life durable? Various medical sources suggest comedy offers positive uplift to physical and mental health and thus broader general wellbeing. It has even been the subject of the biographical USA film *'Patch Adams'* starring Robin Williams in the title role. Specific impacts identified include, immune system boosts, pain relief, stress reduction, release of endorphins, mitigating anxiety and fear, among many other effects. Van der Wal and Kok (2019) suggest, however, that 'simulated' (non-humorous) laughter can be more effective than 'spontaneous' (humorous) laughter in therapeutic contexts. For them, laughter-inducing therapies can improve depression. In an environment of rising health care costs, there is a potential for low-cost simple interventions, involving minimal training and no contraindications (i.e. no harm even if there is no therapeutic benefit).

What is the relationship between performance quality, laughter volume and density patterns and quality assessment/post-performance willingness-to-pay for comedy gigs?

Attendance at comedy performances is rarely formally scrutinised. We do not know if comedy performance attendance helps taste formation, builds consumption capital, or offers beneficial addiction. We do not know if there are conspicuous differences between collective versus solo consumption. We do not know if audience size matters to the enjoyment of comedy and whether there are threshold effects? Too small an audience might mean too much tension, shared embarrassment in failure or risk of eroded anonymity in audience interaction. In connection with these phenomena, it is often the case (anecdotally) that the front rows in stand-up comedy performances are the least preferred seating options. We do not know unambiguously if comedy is a consumption univore or omnivore activity (Sintas & Álvarez, 2004; Snowball et al., 2010). We do not know the extent to which 'comedy' audiences and 'serious drama' audiences overlap. We do not know whether the 'Eco conspiracy premise' may be impacting on some individual consumption choices.

Given the way comedy performances (in particular, situation comedy) are broadcast we do not really know whether individual judgements of performance quality are boosted or impaired by 'canned' laughter.

On the production side, very little has been articulated about making comedy. Given jokes are output for writer (or writer/performer), intermediate output in production of sketches, what is the nature of the comedic production function? Do we know anything about what sustains or inhibits the erosion of property rights in jokes? Are jokes 'leaky' club goods or just impure public goods? What is the impact of style and delivery in the telling of the same joke. We do know that there are some 'social norms' (including ostracization by other comedians) that help protect intellectual property rights in jokes but what about re-telling by audience members and the transmission of a comedian's jokes on various joke aggregator internet sites.

Very little work has established how comedic talent emerges in different countries and for the very successful, whether Rosen (1981) or Adler (1985) best account

for comedic superstars? Further notwithstanding the earlier psychological work considered economists might be well placed to re-examine by survey, natural or laboratory experiments whether gender matters in comedic production and to explore any gender disparity in numbers of comedians. Some seemingly robust empirical work in psychology has suggested that for evolutionary and environmental reasons, women are consistently perceived (by both men and women) to be less funny than men (Greengross et al., 2020). That said, Huxley and David (2012) find that contrary to the assertion of women not being funny, female comic performers were far more widespread, at least before World War 1, and this disparity has developed further in subsequent eras for whatever reasons.

5 Summary and concluding remarks

This paper has reflected on the relatively low profile of comedy in the economics of art and culture and offered some possible explanations for its status as a relatively under researched theme in our field. In some ways, it is surprising given the global reach and scale of comedy shows and performers across multiple media. An attempt has also been made to begin thinking about comedy in economic terms and raise a range of research questions which seem to warrant scrutiny and endeavour.

The lack of economic attention essentially seems to revolve around a lingering sense that the topic is less worthy of scrutiny or more trivial than other art forms because of its intrinsic nature. Hopefully, a reading of this paper would suggest this is not the case. Arguably, it presents a potentially very fertile opportunity for a wide range of empirical analyses on the consumption and production side of the sector as well as in terms of quantifying economic impact locally, nationally, and internationally.

Declarations

Conflicts of interest The author confirms there are no conflicts of interest with the research set out in this paper.

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