

The Democratization of Comedy: What It Means for Professional Comedians

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The notion that everyone will at some point have their fifteen minutes of fame is pretty old at this point, but it seems that it relates to current time more than any other. Out of any group of people, at least a few are bound to have had one of their tweets blow up. Or maybe they uploaded a mundane-looking video to YouTube and had it viewed by millions in some weird work of the underlying algorithms. It even relates to the new forms of occupations created by social media. Any ordinary person can try to become a social media influencer, and Gods know millions of them are trying, and all they have to do is to post on social media and try to get as large of a following as possible. They do not have to appeal to some producer or manager or go through some audition or selection process. Instead, they will simply go through the filters of groups of people who are potential followers. This gives an aspect of brevity to those jobs, however, where a person can be an influencer one moment and out of a job the next as they fall from favor and have no one to back them up.

It is a general development, but it has impacted comedy the most. Trying to get people to laugh has been a staple of all social media platforms, from Facebook to Vine, from Twitter to Tiktok; any person could get famous if they consistently delivered good humor, and any person could get a flash of fame if they had a good joke. But having a good original joke is not the only road to internet fame; in many platforms, one can simply ride on the current wave, making slight variations of the same joke. With some luck, it is easy to get massive returns compared to the minuscule effort put in. This has a few implications, but most importantly, it creates an overabundance of people trying to cash in on the popularity of one joke or topic that is popular at the time. This means that the “humor market” is flooded with variations of the same joke or strand of humor, the implications of which we will discuss later.

But before that, we also need to mention that the supply here is not without its demand. Put simply; it is easy to consume the kind of humor that social media platforms encourage. Simple plays on current topics and easily followable variations on ongoing trends are not too confusing and can be shared widely since many people are receptive to the jokes on the subject because of its familiarity. It is not as if these jokes are bad either. Many of them can hit a relatable string or subvert expectations in an efficient way; they do not look good when viewed as a group because of the repetition but can be quite good when examined individually. Also, it is still possible to exhibit unique humor on these platforms and even gain a decent following with that, so it is not all bad.

So, there is both supply and demand for following a trend to its death on social media platforms, which is exactly what happens, generally. This is not a development sparked by the advent of social media. In older times, it was comedians, scriptwriters, comic book artists, and the like who were beating jokes to death. After all, someone has got to do the job. With social media, however, humanity as a whole has begun to progress the state of a current joke from fresh to death. This certainly does speed up the process and also devalues dedicated comedians; after all, everyone is doing the same thing that they are doing. Of course, this does not mean the average Joe is just as funny as a comedian now, but they are taking the

same actions on a fundamental level. The status of the comedian has been brought down to the level of the common people, not completely, but certainly by some amount.

This might seem like a meaningless thing to ponder. After all, people making jokes on Twitter does not mean that Ricky Gervais is going to be out of his job, surely. The distinction between “real” comedians and ordinary people making jokes online can be seen quite clearly. Yet the matter of fact is that the job of a comedian is much harder now. Since the production and reproduction of comedy have been democratized, any new observation that lends itself to comedic purposes will be stale long before any comedian can run with it. It has come to the point of a comedian not being able to make the same joke twice without it getting stale in the time it takes to reuse the joke. That is, unless the comedian is presenting to an audience who does not expect quality from their comedy, the market for that has more or less stayed the same, sans the obvious growth caused by the development of information technology.

So what does this ultimately mean for comedians? Can they just not do their jobs anymore? Well, of course, they can. It is not as if comedians do not come up with jokes that work the best in their style, and besides, a good comedian would be able to make you laugh with the oldest of jokes. The difference is that comedians who try to appeal to more distinguished audiences now have to try harder to be original and to develop more distinct styles. You could say that all this helps separate the chaff from the wheat, so far as humor is concerned. But it is not all bad for comedians, they do get to see what jokes work and what jokes do not through social media, and they can also appeal to a wider audience than ever. In conclusion, the democratization of comedy has raised the quality necessary to become a professional, but those who can accomplish this are rewarded more handsomely than ever.