

DISCUSSION & REVIEW QUESTIONS:

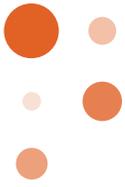
- Towards the beginning of the video, Mr. Benjamin points out that, “In today’s hyper-sensitive world, it’s hard to know what’s funny anymore. And as someone who makes his living as a comedian, that’s a big problem.” What do you think Mr. Benjamin means by ‘hyper-sensitive world?’ Why is not knowing what’s funny anymore a problem? Explain.
- Mr. Benjamin goes on to explain that, “Comedy is important. Why? Because it’s a pressure valve that allows us to discuss uncomfortable truths in a friendly way – laughs are better than punches. But identity politics is killing the gag.” Who is the ‘us’ that Mr. Benjamin is referring to here? What do you think Mr. Benjamin means by ‘uncomfortable truths?’ Explain. In what ways are identity politics putting such a heavy damper on being able to use comedy as a friendly avenue for discussing ‘uncomfortable truths?’
- Later in the video, Mr. Benjamin notes that, “Comedy only works when we agree on certain realities... The problem is that today, fewer and fewer people seem to agree on the basics; you know, shared common assumptions.” Why do you think that more and more people are unable to ‘agree on certain realities’ and on ‘common assumptions’- i.e. what factors might be contributing to such a massive disparity in terms of understanding and agreeing on what the ‘basics’ are?
- After sharing the example of Twitter backlash from prominent black actors in response to a joke, Mr. Benjamin laments that, “I was releasing a little social stress through satire. That’s what comedians are supposed to do. Releasing social stress used to be the special task of late night comedy, the place that everyone could meet at the end of a long day. But that’s dead, too. Nobody takes themselves more seriously than these former comedians.” What do you think Mr. Benjamin means by ‘social stress?’ Explain. Why do you think that the late night comedians take themselves too seriously now? Explain.
- Mr. Benjamin concludes the video by stating, “There’s no shortage of things to laugh about. We just need to find them. Together. And if we don’t, we’ll explode. And that’s not a joke.” What do you think Mr. Benjamin’s point is here? Do you agree with his thesis? Why or why not?

EXTEND THE LEARNING:

CASE STUDY: College Campuses

INSTRUCTIONS: Read the articles “Why some comedians don’t like college campuses,” then answer the questions that follow.

- Why won’t many comedians perform on college campuses anymore? What did Mr. Nice refer to as running ‘amok’ on college campuses these days? Why is the fact that a show like All In The Family could not be made these days a bad thing- i.e. what does it show society has lost? Why did a woman run out of a comedy club screaming? Who is Anne Libera, and what odd dichotomy does she point out?
- The author quotes comedian Jerry Seinfeld as having, “...cited his 14-year-old daughter’s use of the word ‘sexist’ as evidence of how people – presumably, those between his daughter’s age and college age – misuse the words ‘racist,’ ‘prejudice’ and ‘sexist’ because they don’t know ‘what they’re talking about.’” Do you agree with Mr. Seinfeld? Why or why not? The author goes on to quote comedian Chuck Nice as stating, “The landscape of cultural norms is always changing, and comedy changes along with it... Everything in life is a tradeoff. Everything has a price. The price of advancing to racial equality and understanding is, we’re going to be a more sensitive nation.” Do you agree with Mr. Nice’s assertion? Why or why not? Kelly Leonard is quoted in the article as stating, “What has changed is that people have the ability to speak their minds loudly and instantly through the megaphone of the Internet... and that’s a whole new ballgame now.” What impact do you think the internet has had on comedy, in terms of how comedians connect with their audiences? What about social media? Explain. Mr. Leonard goes on to explain that, “It’s a nuanced comedy conversation that requires on everyone’s behalf an attempt to look at the context... That requires nuanced thinking and patience, and that’s in short order in the current arena of public discussion.” How does Mr. Leonard’s point relate to the point Mr. Benjamin makes in the video about comedy only working if the audience has a common ground of understanding to begin with? Why do you think that thinking and patience is currently in such ‘short order?’ Explain. The article quotes Anne Libera as saying, “One of the biggest difficulties working with college-age comedians is that they are very sensitive to the idea of offending someone... There’s a lot more judgment and a lot less acceptance... There’s the segment that’s afraid of laughing, the segment afraid of being offended and another segment that’s afraid of other people being offended.” Why do you think that offending someone is seen as such a necessarily bad thing? Why do you think that many progressives are so ‘uptight’ and overly sensitive, to the point of not being able to recognize, or to let themselves be entertained by, obvious satire or joking?
- Which points made in the video are supported by text from the article? Give three specific examples. Do you think that comedy can ever be ‘resurrected’ again? Why or why not?



QUIZ

THE STRANGE DEATH OF COMEDY

- 1. Why won't comedian Jerry Seinfeld play college campuses?**
 - a. They don't pay enough.
 - b. He doesn't want to deal with the political correctness.
 - c. Their venues aren't large enough.
 - d. They aren't sensitive enough.

- 2. Comedy only works when _____.**
 - a. nobody's feelings are hurt
 - b. it comments on the political landscape of the day
 - c. Jerry Seinfeld is performing
 - d. we agree on certain realities

- 3. The special task of late night comedy used to be _____.**
 - a. releasing social stress
 - b. making political commentary
 - c. launching comedians' careers
 - d. reviewing movies

- 4. Identity politics is killing comedy.**
 - a. True
 - b. False

- 5. Mr. Benjamin's joke about the movie Black Panther was _____.**
 - a. racist and insensitive
 - b. stolen from Jerry Seinfeld
 - c. a satirical take on identity politics
 - d. None of the above.



QUIZ - ANSWER KEY

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<https://www.cnn.com/2015/06/10/living/seinfeld-comedy-colleges-feat/>

Why some comedians don't like college campuses

By [Emanuella Grinberg](#), CNN

Updated 12:53 PM ET, Wed June 10, 2015

(CNN)

Did you hear the one about the comedian and the college?

The two usually go well together. Indeed, colleges are popular venues for comedians, with agencies devoted to booking performers on campus. Comedy Central even has a college tour.

But, sometimes, it's as if students and comedians are speaking different languages.

Take comedian Chuck Nice. He told a bit about getting on his knees at the playground and giving his young daughter a dollar for swinging on a pole in a manner that reminded him of a stripper.

It was satire, he says, meant to show that the last thing he wanted was his daughter to become a stripper. The next day, he received a letter telling him he was not welcome back to the institution, he said.

"That's what comedians are talking about when they say college campuses have become places where sensitivity has run amok," he said. "There are tons of stories like that."

Apparently, some of those stories are getting back to Jerry Seinfeld, who told ESPN Radio's Colin Cowherd that he's been cautioned against playing colleges. Cowherd asked Seinfeld whether he was worried that the overall media "climate" was too sensitive for comedians, citing comments from Chris Rock and Larry the Cable Guy, who said they don't want to play college campuses.

"I hear that all the time," Seinfeld said. "A lot of people tell me 'don't go near colleges.' They're so PC." He cited his 14-year-old daughter's use of the word "sexist" as evidence of how people -- presumably, those between his daughter's age and college age -- misuse the words "racist," "prejudice" and "sexist" because they don't know "what they're talking about."

The Internet reacted, as it's known to do, with many an opinion piece. Comedians debated his perspective on social media, but no clear consensus was reached.

Still, some comedians say there's no denying the perception of college campuses as dicey territory for comedy. Comedy is meant to be provocative, but they observe that offending jokes are being amplified and acted on faster and more frequently in the digital age than in previous eras -- especially on college campuses.

'We've lost our taste for satire'

Part of it has to do with people posting offending snippets of acts online with an incendiary caption, sometimes taken out of context.

Other times, what's funny to some is simply offensive to others as cultural norms change. "The redefining of 'funny' for each generation is a constant of our humor," wrote Ben Schwartz in *The Baffler*.

Words and ideas fall out of favor as they change in power and meaning. People today think twice today before saying "that's so gay" or calling someone "retarded." That probably wasn't the case even a decade ago.

It's not necessarily a bad thing, says Nice.

"The landscape of cultural norms is always changing, and comedy changes along with it," he said.

By way of example he offered up Norman Lear's "All in the Family," the popular 1970s sitcom about a working-class family and its bigoted patriarch, Archie Bunker.

The show would never get made today, he said, and "part of that's a bad thing, because it shows we've lost our taste for (its) satire."

On the other hand, "it's a good thing, because it shows we're aware of the need to be sensitive to those outside the cultural majority," he said.

"Everything in life is a tradeoff. Everything has a price. The price of advancing to racial equality and understanding is, we're going to be a more sensitive nation."

'A whole new ballgame'

Kelly Leonard, executive vice president of Chicago's Second City improv theater and school, observes that context also changes.

A famous Second City bit features a person running across the stage as an officer shoots him in the back and then yells, "Freeze." In the aftermath of Ferguson and Baltimore, that probably wouldn't go over with audiences.

Another sketch spoofing privilege shows three women working late in the office, complaining about how they can't meet their husbands for an expensive dinner or show. A cleaning lady joins them to commiserate, lamenting the horrors of her home country, where she was raped and brutalized.

The troupe performed the second skit on a college campus recently, only to find out through Twitter that a member of the audience didn't appreciate the "rape joke," Leonard said.

The troupe wondered whether the material had aged poorly or if the person felt that a comedy show on a college campus was an inappropriate venue for that kind of satire, he said.

Another time, a woman ran out of a club screaming during a sketch about the Columbine High School shootings one year after the incident. The woman turned out to be a survivor of the massacre.

What has changed is that people have the ability to speak their minds loudly and instantly through the megaphone of the Internet, Leonard said -- and "that's a whole new ballgame now."

"There's no right or wrong answer to these discussions about whether an act works. It's a nuanced comedy conversation that requires on everyone's behalf an attempt to look at the context," he said. "That requires nuanced thinking and patience, and that's in short order in the current arena of public discussion."

There's still plenty of room for comedians to push boundaries, he said. But the old adage still holds: "You can tell a d**k joke, but it better be the most clever d**k joke in the world."

More judgment, less acceptance

Seinfeld and Rock have reached a point where they can bemoan the state of affairs and avoid college campuses with little impact to their careers, Leonard said. Today's generation of comics "has different points of stress" for things that matter or don't matter, and being culturally sensitive isn't necessarily one of them.

Comedians in their 20s grew up with the Internet and its instant feedback loop, and they've probably been stung by it, Leonard said. If they're good, they know how to use social media to their advantage to build their comic voice and fan base.

Second City partners with Chicago's Columbia College to offer a bachelor of arts degree in comedy. One of the biggest difficulties working with college-age comedians is that "they are very sensitive to the idea of offending someone," said Anne Libera, director of Second City's comedy studies.

Most of the time, they don't feel personally offended, she said. "It's more a sense of the fear of being called out, the fear of being shamed," she said.

It's an odd dichotomy, she said. Judging from the crowds at comedy shows and the popularity of online comedy platforms, the appetite for comedy among college students appears to be bigger than ever.

Would she play a college campus? Probably not, she said. Not worth the risk.

"There's a lot more judgment and a lot less acceptance," she said. "There's the segment that's afraid of laughing, the segment afraid of being offended and another segment that's afraid of other people being offended."

But Nice is willing to take his chances.

"I'll do a show for the KKK for the right amount of money," he said. (That's a joke.)

"It doesn't make a difference what the venue is or who the people are," he said. "I'm gonna go ahead and do it. Look at it as a challenge."