Introducing Vigilant Audiences

This ground-breaking collection of essays examines the scope and consequences of digital vigilance—a phenomenon emerging on a global scale, which sees digital audiences using social platforms to shape social and political life. Longstanding forms of moral scrutiny and justice seeking are disseminated through our contemporary media landscape, and researchers are increasingly recognising the significance of societal impacts effected by digital media.

The authors engage with a range of cross-disciplinary perspectives in order to explore the actions of a vigilant digital audience—denunciation, shaming, doxing—and to consider the role of the press and other public figures in supporting or contesting these activities. In turn, the volume illuminates several tensions underlying these justice seeking activities—from their capacity to reproduce categorical forms of discrimination, to the diverse motivations of the wider audiences who participate in vigilant denunciations.

This timely volume presents thoughtful case studies drawn both from high-profile Anglo-American contexts, and from developments in regions that have received less coverage in English-language scholarship. It is distinctive in its focus on the contested boundary between policing and entertainment, and on the various contexts in which the desire to seek retribution converges with the desire to consume entertainment.

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Cover Design by Anna Gaš.
Introduction

Comedy evokes strong emotions, and though it is generally intended to create a positive response, jokes can sometimes cause offence or other harmful effects. This chapter will investigate the line between what is tasteful and what is not — and, of course, who has the right to decide this. Due to the subjective nature of comedy, it is possible to create distasteful comedy without it being intentionally harmful, but audiences may take issue with work in which they consider the lack of taste to be harmful or potentially harmful, either to themselves or to others. This chapter discusses examples of when audiences have acted as digital vigilantes towards comedy, particularly in online spaces, and it questions when it is appropriate for audiences to react in this way. The debate is not a new phenomenon, but with the rise of social media and the ease with which information and vitriol can be shared and de-contextualised, it is now becoming an even more important topic to address. Audiences can easily take to the Internet and air their grievances about a snippet of comedy, and this can often spread faster than the initial text (for the purpose of this chapter, ‘text’ will refer to a performance, video, joke or event). This can then lead to audiences forming an opinion about it, and potentially feeling outrage towards it, having never experienced it first-hand. Due to the way that information is shared, digital audiences
are increasingly engaging in commentary on a subject to which they were not originally exposed. Audiences, and therefore digital vigilantes, can criticise something that did not originally concern them, or has been taken out of context, and this can be problematic for both audiences and comedians/creators.

The majority of cases discussed in this chapter focus on satire, attempted satire, or events that were framed as satire after the event. An early example relevant to this research is *The Great Dictator* (dir. Chaplin, 1940). The film was critically received but years after its release, Chaplin stated that “Had I known of the actual horrors of the German concentration camps, I could not have […] made fun of the homicidal insanity of the Nazis” (Chaplin, 1964, p. 392). Though there was no digital media at the time, Chaplin went through a similar type of self-reflection as that which will be discussed in many of the examples in this chapter. In modern times, practitioners cannot have this delayed response to their text, and as such often become engaged in discussions with fans, audiences and digital vigilantes directly following the release of the text, with no significant delay between the performance and the discussion. This limits the opportunity for self-reflection on the part of the practitioner. However, due to social media, and the opportunities created by the Internet more generally, practitioners now also have the ability, and responsibility, to be aware of the cultural significance and connotations of their work. To be able to engage in media, they must also be able to access and experience it, and therefore have an awareness of the implications of their work. This awareness of current events is often the basis of their comedy but can lead to a negative response from audiences when the practitioner appears under-researched or of improper agency to discuss the issue. If a reader of the text (e.g., an audience member) cannot see that the practitioner has direct experience of the issue they are discussing, the reader will be hesitant to engage with the discourse, and this can lead to audiences feeling uncomfortable, or offended, as will be outlined in this chapter. If the practitioner is considered to be more powerful than the subject of the joke, they lack the agency to make certain jokes as audiences are likely to object if they feel that the comedian is ‘punching down’ rather than ‘punching up’.

1 The concept of ‘punching down/up’, although idiomatic, is a comedic term regarding the perceived power dynamics between the individual making the joke.
Digital vigilantism (DV) “is a process where citizens are collectively offended by other citizen activity, and respond through coordinated retaliation on digital media” (Trottier, 2017, p. 55). This chapter discusses how comedy practitioners, in particular those who publish their work online, are viewed as citizens, and therefore can be subject to digital vigilantism towards their work. When considering comedy, “factors which can influence humour appreciation are such things as religious beliefs, political convictions, and sexual orientation” (Lockyer & Pickering, 2009, p. 128), and this raises issues of agency, ethics and morality, when writing and producing comedy.

In this chapter it is important to consider the cultural capital of comedy. “The tastes actually realized depend on the state of the system of goods offered” (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 228): the issue of taste, and reactions to it, are dependent on the state of capital of the good. Bourdieu argued that the bourgeois theatre is a respectable and enjoyable place to visit “because it only asks questions which ‘everyone asks himself’, from which ‘the only escape’ is ‘humour and incurable optimism’” (Bourdieu, 1984. p. 267). He then described how, although the theatre and its comedy is relatively accessible to those with the means, the next stratum — visiting the opera, galas, etc. — expressed an accordance with being part of high society (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 269). Visitors to a comedy show would generally be of lower capital “culturally or economically” (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 283), and this lowers the capital of entertainment such as the theatre, and, when applied to more modern entertainment, comedy. Comedy has never been considered to have a high cultural capital, and as such has, so far, been given leeway to discuss human experiences that may be considered inappropriate for other genres. It is worth noting that this chapter is written from an Anglo-American perspective, and that in different cultures and countries opinions of comedy and comedy laws can differ.

In fictional comedy, the audience is generally separated from potentially offensive jokes as they understand that the narrative is imagined. However, fictional comedy based on real-world events can be more problematic. Producer Amy Poehler faced backlash for the show and the subject matter of the joke. It is generally agreed by practitioners that it is appropriate to ‘punch up’ by making jokes about those in higher power, but not to ‘punch down’ on those who are in a lower position.
*Difficult People* (dir. Klausner, 2015–2017) when audiences considered a joke made by a character to be a step too far. A character within the show tweeted “I can’t wait for Blue Ivy to be 18-year-old so R Kelly can piss on her”, causing uproar on real-world Twitter. Here viewers expressed their disdain with tweets like: “A joke about R. Kelly assaulting Blue Ivy is not a joke targeting him. It’s making light of what he did and punching down at his victims” (Twitter, 2015). This tweet was written by a verified account and received a high number of likes and retweets, with comments that reinforced the opinion given. The character in *Difficult People* faced a similar backlash as the writers, and so the overarching purpose of the fictional storyline appears to have been misunderstood: the purpose of the joke was to cause controversy for the character, and therefore the character had to deal with the repercussions of their actions, ultimately deciding to remove the tweet. The real-world writers faced a similar response and found themselves in the same scenario they had written for their character. However, the events of the show could not be reversed as easily as deleting a tweet, and by persecuting the writers, the real-world digital vigilantes appear to have underscored the social commentary written into the episode by behaving in the same way as their fictional counterparts. The character who was persecuted wrote the tweet to ‘punch up’ at R Kelly and received a negative response from her followers. This in turn led to the creators of the show receiving the same negative response in real life. The creators of the show not only wrote the tweet but also the fictional backlash which followed, and thus were already aware of the implications of the tweet, having condemned it themselves.

Comedy has been widely researched, though perhaps not as widely as other genres that are considered of a higher cultural capital, such as drama or blockbuster films that are accessible to a wider audience, and as such are under more pressure to be enjoyable for everyone. That being said, due to the discourse around comedy it still remains a relevant subject for discussion. Its relevance stems from the fact that “comedy plays an absolutely pivotal role in the construction of a cultural identity” (Medhurst, 2007, p. 1) and therefore helps to shape society and the people within it. The reason that comedy has not been as widely studied as the other genres is that “comedy has also been perceived as ephemeral or lacking in intellectual weight” (Stott, 2005, p. 18), because
it is generally something that must be taken at face value. Here we should recall the perceived responsibility of texts of a higher cultural capital to tackle weightier issues. Based on Bourdieu’s analysis, comedy should hold a low intellectual weight. However, with the development of Web 2.0 and social media, comedy can be shared widely, changing both its delivery and reception, which provides audiences an opportunity to express both enjoyment and offence.

The examples featured in this chapter include cases where discourse has strayed from fan response to social commentary, and developed into, or displayed elements of, digital vigilantism. Many of the examples began with audiences engaging in discussion, who were then joined by individuals who had never experienced the source text first hand. These responses then led to tensions between practitioners and their employers, which resulted in the enforcement of the actions and opinions of the digital vigilantes, or of the individuals showcasing vigilante-like behaviour. Though this discourse may not have been intentional, it directly affected the practitioners and as such the scale and implications of the response online developed into acts of digital vigilantism.

The next section of this chapter discusses the methodological approach taken to research this topic, explaining why the cases studies were chosen and how they are relevant to the research. The section ‘Subscribe to Digital Vigilantism’ examines vigilant audiences of YouTube, with a specific focus on the channel of Felix Kjellberg, known as PewDiePie, which has received both support and condemnation from vigilant audiences. Kjellberg has been accused of being racist and anti-Semitic, and so he lost contracts with big businesses including Disney. Yet he has also received support from audiences when at risk of losing his title as the most subscribed channel on YouTube. This section also discusses the case of Mark Meechan, a YouTuber whose comedy video resulted in him being prosecuted for a hate crime, despite him maintaining that the content of the video was not intended to cause offence. Both cases cover the way in which content, later described as satire, has been condemned by audiences. One of the key issues of both cases was the lack of clarity surrounding the satirical intention of the uploads, and the retrospective definition assigned by their creators. Kjellberg and Meechan, in their roles as YouTube content creators, lacked the credibility that would have been conferred by their having established careers as comedians, and
the role of YouTube personality blurs the lines between reality star and fictional character.

The next section, ‘Dapper Laughed’ focuses on the work of Dapper Laughs, whose real name is Daniel O’Reilly. O’Reilly originally made short videos on the platform Vine, using shock tactics and offensive topics to attract viewers, but later moved from the platform to television. However, his offensive comedy, though originally what attracted his audience, eventually resulted in the cancellation of his series with ITV. The section also examines the comedian Frankie Boyle, who has been accused of producing racist and callous work both on television and on Twitter, but who successfully sued the newspaper, The Mirror, for defamation after they published such claims. Unlike Boyle, an established comedian, O’Reilly faced similar issues to Kjellberg and Meechan, in that his character Dapper Laughs was confused with his real self. However, O’Reilly played on this confusion following the response to his television work. The cases examined in this section discuss how vigilant audiences can follow targets from digital spaces into television and the wider community. Certain content appears to be deemed acceptable in digital spaces due to the space having a lower cultural value, but when moving onto television broadcast it is held to a higher level of scrutiny.

The third section is titled ‘Your Fey is Problematic’ and examines television comedy, and the issues faced when audiences conflate writer with character with actor. This section focuses on the works of Tina Fey and Ricky Gervais, who each have different approaches to dealing with vigilant audiences. It discusses issues of agency, and how individuals with different backgrounds or experiences can discuss and comment on topics that others may be unable to tackle. The concept of agency, or perceived agency (or lack thereof), affects the way in which audiences respond to and interpret a text, and thus whether the audiences may then become vigilant to certain content. The section also touches on how both Fey and Gervais have taken different approaches to responding to vigilant audiences and the affect this has had on their work, and how the cultural capital of their work, being primarily television-based rather than online, has affected reactions to it. Following Gray,

Debates about what is it permissible to mock tend to be predicated upon assumptions about the target; whether an individual or a group is
vulnerable or too powerful, whether a joke serves to change or aggravate a situation. Narrative comedy complicates the mix further: its targets are fictional and in theory, one cannot hurt a fiction; but we are aware that things are not quite so simple. All arguments, however, that explore laughter’s relationship to powerful emotions assume clear boundaries between joker, audience and target; the joker acts, the target suffers, the audience laughs (or not) (Gray, 2005, p. 146).

Methodology

The topic of comedy, audiences and digital vigilantism is ever changing, and as such this research was conducted with grounded theory, as its methods “consist of systematic, yet flexible guidelines for collecting and analysing qualitative data” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 2). As social trends and audience reactions develop, the subject of the research was continually developing, especially in the case of Kjellberg in the next section, and therefore the research approach had to be adaptable to new information and events.

This research also had an ethnographic approach, as I observed audiences engaging with texts — and each other — on Twitter and other digital spaces. Ethnography is appropriate as it “is the study of culture and ethnographic descriptions are creative endeavors that allow researchers a window to the world of a particular culture” (Schembri & Boyle, 2013, p. 1252), with digital vigilantes forming the particular culture in this instance. This research examined the way that audiences and businesses have responded to comedy practitioners and their content, as “typically ethnography begins in observation, proceeds analytically to deconstruct culture and social meaning, and then uses words to reconstruct reality as verbal description” (Margolis, 2002, p. 373). Data was collected by following popular events that appeared in the news, and searching for key terms on Twitter, such as #subscribetopewdiepie. I then examined the most popular tweets in terms of likes and retweets, which signified agreement from other users of the site. It was also important to follow the practitioners themselves, to witness the discourse they chose to engage with on the platform. Users of Twitter often engage in digital vigilantism based on the posts of other users, rather than responding to a specific original tweet. This meant that it was important to search for discussion that was validated by other users.
One of the major difficulties faced in this research is that comedy is inherently subjective. Every individual will experience comedy differently and, though this is integral to the efficacy of any joke or comedy piece, it can pose difficulties in terms of researcher bias. For this reason, I have refrained from presenting a judgement as to whether the cases cited are offensive, but rather provided a discussion on the reaction of audiences and digital vigilantes regarding each case. Another issue came from the ever-changing digital space. The discussion of Kjellberg could run on indefinitely due to his continued activity and discourse online.

Across the board, new examples of difficult comedy become apparent almost daily. For the purpose of this chapter, research was focussed primarily on Twitter, and avoided detailed discussions on personal blogs, Instagram and other social media. O’Reilly’s videos as Dapper Laughs were made on Vine, a now defunct social media platform, so these videos are accessed today through YouTube.

The majority of cases discussed in this chapter feature white males, based in the United Kingdom. The profile of these individuals puts them in a majority, holding a position of cultural power, and as such they are at much greater risk of punching down rather than the more socially acceptable act of punching up. This makes their work inherently more problematic as they lack the agency to make fun of those in a minority. The first example discussed is Felix Kjellberg’s YouTube channel. This was chosen because, at the beginning of this research, it was the most subscribed-to channel on the platform. Though online comedy may possess low cultural capital, Kjellberg’s reach is so wide that his work may be regarded as having higher capital than he may have intended or expected. This means that, as a practitioner, he may have a greater responsibility to his audience to make his intentions explicit. This research examines responses to his YouTube videos, and his since deleted Twitter account, as well as discourse on Twitter surrounding the Subscribe to PewDiePie campaign.

The case of Mark Meechan is an appropriate comparison as he works in the same sphere, but with a much lower subscriber count and arguably possesses lower capital and responsibility. Despite his smaller audience, Meechan’s joke led to prosecution, and therefore showcases the power of digital vigilantes. Dapper Laughs similarly, had lower responsibility
due to the lower cultural capital of Vine, but this responsibility increased when given a television show with higher cultural capital. These three examples were selected as they feature individuals whose work relies on the confusion between character and reality, and all experienced changes in their employment or contracts due to the impact of digital vigilantes.

The Internet is a rapidly changing sphere and YouTube is ever-growing, with more than 2 billion active users as of November 2019. This, combined with the fact that 79% of Internet users claim to have a YouTube account, implies that the cultural capital of digital media, and in this case comedy, is changing faster than content creators can keep up with (Mohsin, 2019). Furthermore, Twitter has 145 million users daily (Lin, 2019), which means that there is massive scope for users to see and be drawn into digital vigilantism targeting content they may not have experienced first-hand, leading to further misinterpretation of what the creators may have originally intended. The scope of digital platforms is incredibly wide-ranging, with the potential to encapsulate target audiences of content creators, which makes YouTube and Twitter personalities excellent examples to show the impact of digital vigilantism.

The other examples discussed in this chapter are all comedians, or comedy writers, with more established careers that are not based primarily on YouTube or social media. These individuals are included as they have generated discourse online, in particular on Twitter. Interestingly, of the four practitioners, Boyle, Fey, Gervais and Poehler, the two female Americans, Fey and Poehler, have refrained from engaging in discussions on Twitter directly, putting them slightly out of the remit of this chapter, though still being subject to elements of digital vigilantism regarding their work. Boyle and Gervais however, continually engage in feedback from audiences via social media, making them more of a target for digital vigilantes. Poehler and Fey are relevant to this chapter however, as they discuss the issues they have faced from vigilant audiences through situational comedies, rather than responding directly to individuals. Boyle and Gervais are relevant examples as they faced similar responses to their work as the aforementioned YouTube and Vine personalities, however, they both were established in their field
prior to the instances of vigilantism, leading to different experiences and outcomes.

There are many more individuals who could be examined, but these were chosen as they featured heavily in UK news at the height of their notoriety, and were discussed prominently online, particularly on Twitter where the discussions were trending. The main criteria for selection was cases where actions from vigilant audiences interfered with, or were perceived to interfere, with the career of the practitioner targeted.

Subscribe to Digital Vigilantism: How Have Vigilant Audiences Both Condemned and Supported Content Creators on YouTube?

In no other area of life than comedy would it be socially acceptable to “lie to friends and cause them inconvenience, even pain” (Morreall, 2009, p. 2) and yet in the context of comedy it is totally acceptable, as the pain results — theoretically — in laughter. In the realm of YouTube, viewers engage with content creators as though they were friends, with the ability to communicate directly by commenting on a video, or through other social media sites. This section examines the case of PewDiePie (real name Felix Kjellberg), who is well-known for being the most subscribed-to individual channel on YouTube. Over the past two years, Kjellberg has faced a severe backlash for his comedy videos, leading to real-world consequences for his work. Since then, however, he has regained support from his viewers because another channel, T-Series, came close to surpassing him in subscriber count. Lastly, this section looks at a case where an individual was taken to court due to the viewers’ reactions to a comedy video he uploaded online.

Kjellberg began his channel in 2010, originally focussing on game playthroughs. His comedic reactions while playing the games were a significant factor in his growing popularity on the platform. In 2017 Kjellberg shifted from his original style of YouTube content, making more comedy vlogs and fewer video-game playthroughs. As part of these comedy videos, Kjellberg made a since deleted video where he ordered a selection of services from the website Fiverr. These services included paying a pair of men to dance while holding up a sign
which read “Death to all Jews”. Following on from this, other videos included paying a man dressed as Jesus to say ‘Hitler did absolutely nothing wrong’ (Winkler, Nicas, & Fritz, 2017). As a reaction to this, “in 2017 YouTube removed some advertisers from his channel... and Disney-owned Maker Studios cancelled a contract because some of his content appeared to be anti-Semitic” (Meyers, 2017). Several videos were removed by Kjellberg following the controversy. In defence of his content, Kjellberg also published a blog post on 12 February 2017, stating that “[he] was trying to show how crazy the modern world is, specifically some of the services available online” (Kjellberg, 2017).

If “comedy is the imitation of the ridiculous or unworthy aspects of human nature” (Stott, 2005, p. 19), then viewing Kjellberg’s work as problematic is... problematic. The satirical nature of his content was not explicit, and as such Kjellberg failed to emphasise the ridiculousness of the work to audiences, which would have shown them that Kjellberg was not agreeing with the sentiment of the jokes, but rather condemning it. However, confusion has arisen around the difference between PewDiePie the character, and Kjellberg the content creator, much like the tweet in Difficult People. The complicated boundary between author and character will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter.

A major issue in this case is that much of the backlash developed following the publication of articles that condemned Kjellberg’s content, and vigilant audiences responded directly to the content of the articles, rather than referring back to the original video. In John Cleese’s live show John Cleese Live! — The Alimony Tour (Cleese, 2011), Cleese discusses the concept of feeling anxiety as a result of comedy. He explains that when the film A Fish Called Wanda (dir. Crichton, 1988) was being viewed during its test screenings, the three most offensive moments of the film were also widely agreed to be the funniest. He then goes on to explain the reasoning behind this, stating that “when you get into taboo areas [...] there’s always a little bit of anxiety” (Cleese, 2011). For some, the anxiety Cleese refers to leads to a viewer becoming so tense that they feel that they are offended, but for the majority this is what creates the comedy. Cleese describes this as: “You get the normal laugh, and then you get the extra energy that comes from that little bit of anxiety being liberated” (ibid.). To experience comedy is to willingly put yourself into a position of anxiety. Whether this is anxiety that you are personally
subject to, or an anxiety that stems from witnessing another person experience anxiety — thus gaining pleasure from witnessing them be subject to it — is not entirely relevant. Anxiety caused from a comedic set up must not be so overwhelming that it overpowers the comedic relief, but there will always be different levels of anxiety that viewers or readers can cope with.

When Kjellberg’s videos were cut and clips taken out of context, the set-up and punchline were separated, leaving the anxiety unliberated, and audiences offended. When discussing the situation in his blog post, Kjellberg stated that although not intentional, he understood that the jokes were “ultimately offensive” (Kjellberg, 2017). This response echoes Chaplin’s delayed response to *The Great Dictator* but whether this came from personal reflection or purely to appease digital vigilantes may never be known.

However, recently audiences have rallied around Kjellberg, as another channel came close to surpassing his number of subscribers. T-Series is a channel dedicated to videos advertising and showcasing Bollywood films and music, and is “India’s largest Music Label & Movie Studio” (T-Series, 2018). Fans and subscribers of Kjellberg’s channel engaged in Twitter campaigns, using a variety of hashtags including #pewdiepievstseries to encourage others to subscribe to the PewDiePie channel. An individual known on Twitter as TheHackerGiraffe also claimed to have hacked thousands of computers to send out a message asking recipients to unsubscribe from T-Series and subscribe to PewDiePie. However, they also claimed that the reasoning behind their actions was actually to raise awareness of the dangers of having poor security, “Spread the word with your friends about printers and printer security! This is actually a scary matter. Will tweet everything about this entire pewdiepie hack later to explain to everyone exactly what went down” (TheHackerGiraffe, 2018). The user also expressed an understanding of vigilant audiences who responded to their invasive actions by tweeting later “To all those who wanna dox me, you’ll never find out where I live!” (TheHackerGiraffe, 2018).

As the ‘Subscribe to PewDiePie’ meme spread however, it developed consequences outside the remit of the original light-hearted campaign. A self-proclaimed fan vandalised a World War Two memorial with the campaign slogan, causing Kjellberg to condemn the actions on
his YouTube channel, telling his viewers “don’t do anything illegal because obviously that would look bad on me” and that the vandalism is “obviously disgusting” and that he does not condone such actions (Kjellberg, 2019). A conflict developed between vigilantes acting for, and against, Kjellberg.

On 15 March 2019, there was an even greater shift in the campaign, as a terrorist who attacked a mosque in New Zealand used his online broadcast to record his final words: “Subscribe to PewDiePie”. Though this does not directly fit into the subject of digital vigilantism, it occurred as a response to popular media, and is it interesting to note Kjellberg’s response to the attack. Initially he only discussed the event on his Twitter account, stating that he was “absolutely sickened having my name uttered by this person” (Kjellberg, 2019), and continued to post videos pertaining to the meme/campaign. However, on 29 April 2019 Kjellberg uploaded a short video to YouTube declaring that he wanted to end the meme, explaining that though he appreciated the support, he “didn’t want hateful acts to overpower all these amazing things that people are doing” (Kjellberg, 2019), stating that he should have ended the ‘Subscribe to PewDiePie’ campaign following the Christchurch shooting. Kjellberg, as a practitioner, lost control of his work as audiences engaged with and changed its meaning. Though Kjellberg attempted to regain control and enjoyed the support of a large group of digital vigilantes engaging in playful behaviour to boost his subscriber count, ultimately his actions were ineffective as the discourse developed by digital vigilantes and news reporters was too great.

DV is “a form of mediated and coordinated action” (Trottier, 2017, p. 57), so although in this case the audience was not necessarily persecuting Kjellberg, they are showcasing similar actions and behaviours as digital vigilantes to maintain their perceived ideal social order. Though there was originally a highly tongue-in-cheek element to the campaign, its coordination and unremitting execution imitates the actions of digital vigilantes, though individuals engaged in actions that opposed Kjellberg’s original intention.

In 2016, a YouTuber, Count Dankula, whose real name is Mark Meechan, posted a video in which he had trained his girlfriend’s pug to respond to anti-Semitic language and perform the Nazi salute. The video was viewed over 3 million times before it was removed from YouTube
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(BBC, 2018). Meechan claimed that the video was made solely to annoy his girlfriend, but as it was uploaded to an open platform, the video was available to the public to view, and subsequently Meechan was taken to court under the Communications Act of 2003, which “makes it an offence to use a public communications network to send certain types of messages including those that are grossly offensive or threatening” (‘PF v Mark Meechan — Judgments & Sentences — Judiciary of Scotland’, 2018).

Other comedians took to defend Meechan, with Ricky Gervais tweeting “If you don’t believe in a person’s right to say things that you might find ‘grossly offensive’, then you don’t believe in Freedom of Speech” (Gervais, 2018). Returning to the discussion of cultural capital, different levels of comedy come with a different cultural capital. Digital comedy such as that on YouTube is relatively new, but is comparable to slapstick in that slapstick is often considered to be of the lowest cultural capital. Slapstick is said to be “popular, rather than literary, low physical comedy” (Dale, 2002, p. 1). In addition to this, in a paper originally written in 1987 discussing situational comedy, Paul Attallah states that “in the classic dichotomy between high art and low art, television definitely occupies the region of low art” (Attallah, 2010, p. 14). The paper was written before the advent of YouTube, and as such the platform is excluded from the analysis, but based on the placement of television as lower than film, books and plays, YouTube would arguably be classed as a lower artform than even television. From this we can infer that the more accessible, or popular, comedy is, the more it must be of interest to the lowest level of society, or at least carry the lowest cultural weight. YouTube is an entirely accessible source of entertainment, and therefore arguably on the lowest rung of the ladder of cultural capital. This then raises questions of whether comedy on this platform should be judged on the same level as other means of speech or comedy production, or whether the content creator should be more considerate of the potential reach of their work. Attallah also states that “There is a strong sense in which television and everything connected to it is seen as unworthy [...] of critical evaluation” (ibid., p. 90), and this statement could also be applied to content on YouTube.

Though vigilant audiences highlighted the video and were the reason why Meechan was taken to court, audiences also raised nearly
£200,000 to cover Meechan’s legal fees, via a GoFundMe account he set up. Meechan posted several update videos in the year following the upload of the original video, *M8 Yur dug’s a Naazi*. In the first video he stated that “the public response to the video was kinda overwhelmingly positive [sic]”, however, he described how one of Meechan’s neighbours approached him in their street and told him “you Nazi bastard, you’re a Nazi bastard [sic]”. The neighbour’s vigilante actions, which were physical rather than digital, went on to include emptying a bin from the dog park on Meechan’s front door. Meechan explains in the video that they reported the neighbour for these actions, expecting a charge for damage to property. However, the neighbour was later arrested for a hate crime — not for their physical actions, but for accusing Meechan of being a Nazi (Meechan, 2016).

Meechan goes on to defend his video by saying “I’ve had Jewish people messaging me saying that they don’t agree with what I did but they say I shouldn’t have been arrested for that [sic]”, and that “[he] didn’t expect it to be on the front page of Reddit [sic]”. He also implies that he lost his job due to the high level of media coverage of the video, though his employer refused to provide a reason for the termination of his contract. Meechan also states that, if you watch his videos, he makes it very clear that he does not agree with discrimination of any kind, but that it is clear he is a fan of offensive comedy, such as the work of Frankie Boyle who is discussed later in this chapter. Meechan reiterated that “[he doesn’t] think we should bring harm to anyone for any reason”, however, Meechan also believed that with the backing of the English or Scottish Defence League, he would have been able engage in similar behaviour without facing any charges, and if he were part of an organisation, Meechan felt that his actions would be “recognised as free speech”, even though his actions as an individual were taken to court.

In Meechan’s third video, he briefly explains some of the details around his court case. In the video he mentions witnesses speaking at the trial and asks his audience “Do not [...] contact them or harass them [sic]”, implying that digital vigilantes may have tried to defend Meechan by turning on those speaking against him in court. It is important to note that Meechan has a much lower subscriber count on YouTube than
Kjellberg and as such his video may have gone unnoticed by the courts had it not been for digital vigilantes sharing the video.

This section shows the ways in which audiences can both condemn and support content creators on YouTube and can carry those vigilante elements into real world spaces, through printer hacking, or court cases. The speed with which content can be uploaded and spread, often further than initially intended, allows audiences to engage with content quickly and form instant opinions and reactions to it. In the case of Felix Kjellberg, the Subscribe to PewDiePie campaign developed in ways apparently outside of his control. There are also plenty of incidents regarding Kjellberg, and other YouTube content creators, that could inform further research, such as a scandal in 2017 when Kjellberg used a racial slur during a live stream, and again in 2018, when Kjellberg promoted a channel that transpired to be pro-Nazi.

**Dapper Laughed: How Have Vigilant Audiences Followed Independent Comedians from Online Spaces to the Mainstream?**

This section examines how audiences have followed practitioners from online spaces as they moved to work in television and on stage. In particular, this section focuses on Dapper Laughs, also known as Daniel O’Reilly, who originally began creating content on Vine and was picked up by the channel ITV to develop a television series. The character of Dapper Laughs blurs the line between content creator and character, something that other comedy practitioners appear to try to differentiate between rather than actively confuse. O’Reilly’s offensive humour was considered relatively acceptable on the Vine platform, but in moving to television, a platform with higher levels of cultural capital, visibility and regulation, this humour was no longer acceptable. This is further discussed when looking at comedian Frankie Boyle, whose offensive humour, both on television and Twitter, led to claims that his comedy style caused him to step down from his role with the BBC.

Dapper Laughs garnered success on the mobile platform Vine for his short sketches discussing dating, sex, inconveniencing strangers and occasionally British politics. O’Reilly faced some backlash against his comedy, especially due to his inclusion of strangers who may not have
been aware of or willing to participate in his videos, as well as the sexist nature of some of his content. However, the fact that this backlash was only minor when his work was restricted to a social media platform is something that ties in with theories of cultural capital, as he represented himself as an individual; he did not represent a production company or channel. Due to the success of his Vine channel, Dapper Laughs was offered his own television programme with ITV2; *Dapper Laughs On The Pull*. ITV defended their choice of the controversial comedian, releasing a statement saying “We realise that all humour is subjective and accept that Dapper’s humour is more risqué but feel that his unique brand of banter and brash charm is neither sexist or degrading to women” (ITV, via huffingtonpost.co.uk, 2014). However, during a live show, O’Reilly discusses some of the press response to his television series, where it had been described as a “Rapist’s Almanac” (Kern, 2014). During the show, O’Reilly, performing as Dapper Laughs, made a comment directed at a female audience member saying that “she’s gagging for a rape” (O’Reilly, 2014). A change.org petition, a form of digital vigilantism, was created asking ITV to pull the show from the air and received 67,860 supporters. ITV later released a statement to say that the show would not be continuing for a second series, after they had “given careful thought to the recent criticism of the character Dapper Laughs, which has focused on his activities outside of the ITV2 programme” (ITV, 2014).

Due to the premise of his Vines and his subsequent show, Dapper Laughs was not seen to be an actor playing a character and so audiences felt that everything that was said was a genuine opinion and belief. In interviews following the incident, the man behind Dapper Laughs, Daniel O’Reilly, revealed that the character was nothing more than that; a character. He went on to explain that he has “never said [he condones] rape” (O’Reilly, via Independent.co.uk, 2015) but in the view of the audience this was not enough to undo the outcry at his comments, which was then reflected in the producers’ action.

In late 2014, O’Reilly appeared on BBC’s *Newsnight* (2014), and declared that Dapper Laughs was a character he had created and that the views of the character were absolutely not views of his own. He stated of the videos, “that’s not real, obviously I don’t think that”, and that in his work he was “taking the mic out of what [he] thought men think”.
Part of O’Reilly’s defence was that “[he] didn’t see it was [him] saying it, [he] was creating this character”, and that “[he] didn’t realise [he] was causing that much of a problem”. During the interview, O’Reilly declared that “[he did not] want to be seen to approve of it” and that “Dapper Laughs is gone”. O’Reilly also spoke of how he was going to work towards preventing the work being shared and that he would no longer be continuing with the character.

However, shortly after denouncing the Dapper Laughs character, O’Reilly released the Res-Erection show, which had a trailer featuring Dapper Laughs descending from heaven, and switching places with Daniel O’Reilly who was shown wearing the same outfit that he wore in the Newsnight interview. This raised concerns about whether the initial apology was genuine. Although O’Reilly never returned to ITV, he continued to profit from the Dapper Laughs character.

In early 2018, O’Reilly appeared on the UK version of Celebrity Big Brother (Channel 5, 2018) and in his introductory video he states “my name is Daniel O’Reilly, but unfortunately some of you may know me as Dapper Laughs” (Channel 5, 2018), making it apparent that he is still content to profit by his infamous character. This links back to the aforementioned issue faced by Dapper Laughs: his mistake was that he was not already rooted in people’s minds as a likeable person and as such they were only able to see him as the offensive character, meaning that the actor Daniel O’Reilly had no opportunity to truly justify himself, and therefore “he’s reinforcing the behaviour rather than knocking it” (Bennett, theindependent.co.uk, 2014). This left O’Reilly open to digital vigilantes who condemned his offensive actions.

A comedian who has seemingly had more success in walking the fine line between comedic, tongue-in-cheek offence, and harsher, more provocative offence, Frankie Boyle has written about the issues of taste, offence and censorship in comedy. One of Boyle’s most controversial tweets, which has since been removed, was “Jimmy Savile did an incredible amount of charity work towards the end of his life, just to be sure he could shag Madeleine McCann in heaven” (original Tweet removed from Google search under the Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU) right to be forgotten). Making light of missing child Madeleine McCann is considered distasteful as the girl has never been found, and her story was heavily covered by the media, in some ways
raising the cultural capital of the case. Boyle made the assumption that the girl is dead, and added a reference to the recent discovery that former children’s television presenter Jimmy Savile was a paedophile. This may bring so much distress to the reader, that the anxiety — as mentioned by Cleese earlier in this chapter — caused by discussing the topic cannot, for most people, be outweighed by the release. This attracted digital vigilantes who called attention to the poor taste of the joke. To explain his joke would be to remove the comedic elements to it, as most comedy comes from the relief or surprise generated by the punchline. In the case of this joke, the punchline may have been taken out of context, or audiences understood the context and still rejected it as content that offended them, suggesting that the anxiety generated by the joke was too much. This led to digital vigilantes condemning Boyle and his work.

Frankie Boyle has also written about his opinions and experiences of audiences taking offence at something, without ever experiencing the original text. Following the Charlie Hebdo attacks in France in early 2015, he took to his website to write a blog post about his experiences with offence and comedy, which has since been removed. Boyle explains that “we no longer need to hear the actual content of the thing we’re told to be offended by” (Boyle, 2015), and this is a very real problem in the interpretation of comedy. His post generally explains his frustrations with the media, stating that “comedians get attacked for making jokes” (ibid.) and as such audiences — or the media itself — seem to be struggling with the fact that offence, if present, is a part of the comedy, and not an insensitive or inadvertent side-effect of the humour. Frankie Boyle discusses the fact that comedy, in general, is a work of fiction, and that “even on a good day I only really half agree with myself” (ibid.) and thus even if he says something distasteful and offensive it does not equate to his actual beliefs. It is simply that if a joke is funny he will say it anyway, and he does not have any interest in the ensuing aftermath: “I don’t really give a fuck about [...] someone who might find a group of words in the wrong order too much to bear” (ibid.). Boyle also discusses the idea of moral superiority, in that we now seem to associate being offended with being morally superior, and therefore more intelligent, which again, could be an application of cultural capital; if you are morally superior, then you are culturally superior. As discussed
previously, in the past comedy has avoided such interrogation due to its low cultural capital, but by reading comedy and taking offence to it, the audience has raised its cultural capital. This reading, however, may not always follow the intention of the author, as Boyle defended his comedy by stating that “we have given taking offence a social status it doesn’t deserve: it’s not much more than a way of avoiding difficult conversations” (ibid.). In an article on satirical literacy and social responsibility, Jessie LaFrance Dunbar discusses “the audience’s responsibility as consumers of sociopolitical comedy” (2017, p. 79), and the importance of reading comedy appropriately. This, however, depends on the audience’s understanding of the nature of the comedy, which is reliant on the comedian, or practitioner, framing it correctly, as either satire, observation, etc.

Vigilant audiences are not restricted to commenting on issues that exist in online spaces. Though the work of Daniel O’Reilly began on an online forum, when he moved to television and physical spaces, his work began to reach wider audiences who were less familiar with his work, attracting vigilant audiences. In the case of Frankie Boyle, though primarily based on television, he also made use of Twitter, and his comments there opened him up to retort from digital vigilantes. However, in contrast to O’Reilly, Boyle has since continued to work online, using his blog to communicate with vigilant audiences and to continue the discourse surrounding the difficulties of working in comedy.

**Your Fey is Problematic: How Are Vigilant Audiences Conflating Character with Writer?**

This section focuses on the works of comedy writers and performers Tina Fey and Ricky Gervais, by examining the agency, or perceived agency, which they each have. They have both received responses from digital vigilantes based on their work, and have different approaches to responding to such comments. The issue of audiences conflating fictional character with writer has been present throughout this chapter, but with the previous examples, the individuals were working within a frame in which they were playing a version of themselves. Much of the vigilantism directed towards both Fey and Gervais discusses the actions
of the characters that they have written, rather than their personal comments or actions. Though some audiences may be taking issue with the content of the writing, others seem to misunderstand the difference between writer and character, especially when the writer and actor are one and the same. When it comes to digital vigilantism, audiences can spread information and opinions faster than the content created by the targets can be released, especially with regards to television broadcast, which takes longer to produce than online content such as Vines or YouTube videos. Television also holds greater cultural capital than online spaces, and this affects the esteem in which audiences hold the content that they view.

Comedians Amy Poehler and Tina Fey have generated discourse in their work as comedians, using their status to promote feminism on many occasions. Being women in an industry primarily dominated by men brings attention to their work, and they were praised for presenting the 2015 Golden Globes, where they used their comedy personalities to draw attention to much of the sexism that exists in Hollywood. One journalist said that the media coverage of the Golden Globes is “the exact spot where feminism all but dies in America” (Freeman, 2015), and she praised Poehler and Fey for their ability to overcome this in the humour as they presented the awards, describing the event as “a feminist awards show” (ibid.). As women, a category that could be considered a minority in Hollywood, they have the power to punch up, due to the repression they face. Freeman goes on to explain that their gender is not the only reason their performance was so successful: “while they are generally lauded as being the most likable people in show business, they aren’t always all that nice” (ibid.). Although what they say might be, to an extent, offensive, or distasteful, the fact that Poehler and Fey are so likeable means that they have the agency to say things that would otherwise be considered unlikeable.

Fey manages the issue of ‘punching down’ in The Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt (dir. Carlock & Fey, 2015–2019), which follows the tale of Kimmy Schmidt as she adjusts to life after having spent fifteen years kidnapped by a religious zealot and imprisoned in a bunker. The character wears bright colours and is always smiling, upbeat despite her past, and it is easy to forget the trauma that she and her fellow cult members went through. Nevertheless, the show manages to acknowledge the horrible
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situation while remaining funny and without punching down at the victims. This is primarily down to the optimistic protagonist Kimmy, and her resilience in the face of adversity. The shows punches in all directions, as it targets the poor unfortunate characters as well as the rich and successful ones. Even when Kimmy is the butt of the joke, she eventually succeeds, and each character in the show is the butt of a joke at some point or another. As such it provides its viewers with a level of equality: unfortunate things happen to each of the characters in turn, but with no individual character bearing the brunt of the misfortune. The series is successful in generating (potentially) offensive narratives for its characters without incurring a significant backlash, as it is indiscriminate in its assault but fundamentally on the side of its characters.

Fey has also used the series to discuss issues of agency and taste, most notably in the episode Kimmy Goes To A Play! (dir. Carlock & Fey, 2016, release date 15 April). A character named Titus performs a play based on his past life as a Geisha, and audiences within the show flock to watch his performance and shame him for cultural appropriation. The fictional audience is outraged at the idea of the play before seeing it, but change their opinion after watching the play and trusting Titus’ authenticity. This episode reads as a response to real-life cases when audiences have reacted negatively to a work before they have experienced it themselves, often discovering the work through digital vigilantes.

Fey has faced commentary from vigilant audiences, as an individual, as a writer and as a character. The website Your Fave is Problematic (yourfaveisproblematic.tumblr.com) is dedicated to pointing out and sharing problematic behaviour by a variety of popular individuals and celebrities, with the tagline “Problematic shit your favourite celebrities have done” (Tumblr, 2017). Though there is a definite vigilante element to the website, they do make a point of explaining that they are not trying to actively attack those that they deem problematic, instead asking visitors to the site to keep an eye on their favourite celebrities and “If they do something problematic, call them out on it” (ibid.). Rather than attacking celebrities, the site encourages visitors to educate and inform them. The website has generated discussion around Tina Fey and her work, as she was featured on the website, but other Tumblr users submitted rebuttals of the condemnation. One user points out that “Feminist Humour often employs stereotypes, not [as] a way of
reinforcing them but as a way of destabilising them [sic]” (Tumblr, 2016). The user goes on to defend the work by explaining that “when the character [...] does something terrible we are supposed to recognise it as terrible [...] If you jump straight to an offensive reaction, you miss out on this tripartite response” (ibid.). This links back to the concept of cultural capital: if audiences consider comedy to be of low capital then they may only want to accept what they are shown at face value, rather than learning to consume and read the text as discussed previously. However, audiences online are discussing a deeper meaning, which changes their response to the text. In her article on satirical literacy, Dunbar states that “students are ill-equipped to discern, let alone communicate, which aspects of the text are meant to be humorous and which are meant to invite thoughtful consideration” (2017, p. 84), and this is likely to be the case for audiences, who have had no training in reading comedy. This lack of understanding in how to read a text can lead to audiences confusing writers with the fictional characters they have created, or missing the text’s intended message.

One major difference between Tina Fey and Ricky Gervais is their online presence. Fey tends to steer away from direct online contact with audiences, while Gervais has a Twitter account with over 13 million followers, and as already mentioned, has spoken out about issues of offensive comedy, such as the case of Mark Meechan. Gervais has also presented the Golden Globes, in the years prior to Poehler and Fey, and has said that hosting the show again “would have been the end of [his] career” (Gervais, 2018, via The Hollywood Reporter), due to the controversial nature of a lot of Gervais’ work.

Gervais uses his Twitter account not only to engage with his fans, but also those who take issue with his work, using the platform to explain his stance on problematic comedy, as exemplified by this tweet:

Please stop saying ‘You can’t joke about anything anymore’. You can. You can joke about whatever the fuck you like. And some people won’t like it and they will tell you they don’t like it. And then it’s up to you whether you give a fuck or not. And so on. It’s a good system (Gervais, 2018).

By engaging directly with digital vigilantes, Gervais continues the discussion on his own terms.

Generally, once a piece of fiction has been written, the author can have no more say in it. This can apply to screenplays or television, but
also to social media, like Vine and Twitter. If a person says something as a fictitious character or personality then it cannot be rescinded as a joke after readers have been offended by it. A writer is, to most audiences, invisible, and therefore needs to be wary that what they put into their work cannot be misconstrued, and that is their responsibility. If a viewer is offended by something that writer has chosen to say then — if the comedy is good — they were probably meant to be offended. Yet if a viewer is offended by something the writer did not mean then that may be attributed to poor writing. “Once an author is removed, the claim to decipher a text becomes quite futile” (Barthes & Heath, 1977, p. 147) and so the writer is powerless. This ties back to ideas of high-culture and low-culture comedy. Audiences misunderstood the joke, so perhaps it was too high-brow, but to explain a joke is to remove the revelation of the punchline, and thus it ceases to be a joke, or piece of comedy. There are allegedly two ways to remove this issue of offence and censorship from comedy, the first being ‘to retain the claim that comedy expresses feelings of superiority’ but the second is to discard the first in favour of ‘one in which laughter and humour are based in something that is not anti-social’ (Morreall, 2009, p. 8).

Conclusion

Comedians in digital spaces such as YouTube or Twitter are seen more as peers than celebrities, actors or writers playing characters. This leaves them open to criticism from digital vigilantes who disagree with the content of their work, even if the work was originally intended as satire or parody. This is further complicated by the current issue of fake news, though that is an area of research outside the remit of this chapter. In online spaces, social hierarchy is removed, and audiences can respond to practitioners in the same way as they may respond to a friend or colleague. This means that they may also hold comedy practitioners to the same standard as they would their real-world associates. In digital spaces, a joke can also become removed from author or context and misunderstood, leading to vigilante-like responses that may in fact align with the point of view of the practitioner to whom they are objecting.

Although “traditions [...] have informed the ways in which comedy and entertainment programming have been shot, promoted and
understood” (Mills, 2007, p. 180), with development in media, and changes to the way television is viewed and received, these traditions need to move forward. Comedy needs to have an “unexpected turn or dénouement, the punch line” (Kuipers, 2006, p. 5). As we are exposed to more comedy, from different and sometimes unexpected sources, writers and comedians try harder to surprise their audiences. This can lead to viewers being subject to comedy that they find difficult or uncomfortable, and then sharing their feelings online. Sometimes, this can be justified, if the supposed joke causes genuine offense, such as on grounds of homophobia, racism, sexism, etc. But at other times, humour may raise these issues intentionally, to raise awareness, to parody difficult subjects, or to educate viewers on their own behaviour.

Both author and audience have a responsibility to understand whether a joke is a parody or offensive. As stated earlier, comedy, in general, must be taken at face value, and so for both parties to engage in the comedy there must be an agreement between author and audience. If the practitioner does not contextualise the joke, either by defining it as satire, or by offering an explanation, then the agreement has been broken, but likewise if the audience decontextualises the joke then they too have broken the agreement. Both the lack of clarity and decontextualisation can turn audiences or fans into digital vigilantes as they work to reinforce the worldview that they feel has been broken. It is also a way for audiences to distance themselves from a practitioner whom they no longer wish to be affiliated with. “Humour needs to be both understood and permitted in order to be a joke” (Lockyer & Pickering, 2005, p. 80, emphasis in original), and it is the responsibility of both the practitioner and audience to make clear, and understand, its intent. Despite the idea that comedy is of low cultural capital, its words are given weight, and if they are to be treated in this way then comedy in general should be considered of higher standing. However, if we begin to take comedy more seriously, we need to understand that this may change its very nature. Despite this consideration, “no single intellectual viewpoint can hope to account for the complexities of comedy” (Medhurst, 2007, p. 2), and as such the discussion may extend indefinitely.

Overall, this research has shown that there are three key circumstances in which audiences take offence to comedy. The first is when audiences
engage with comedic elements that are separated from context, which can occur intentionally to discredit a comic, or accidentally, if discussing a component piece of a wider comedy. When the offensive content is removed from its context, audiences miss the ‘release’ and are therefore left with the anxiety, and none of the humour. The second is when the audience fails to separate the actor or writer from the flawed character they are performing or writing. When this happens, audiences misdirect anger at an offensive comment or action towards the actor or writer, rather than experiencing the intended story of the flawed character engaging in offensive or problematic actions. The third circumstance occurs when the comedy is, or appears to be, incorrectly positioned in the joke/action, either due to the power dynamic of the practitioner in relation to the text, or the setting in which it is told. Audiences, whether actively aware or not, can differentiate between humour that punches up and that which punches down. This relates back to the release of humour, as audiences’ anxiety abates when they understand that the subject of the joke is in a position of power, but when they see the comedian laughing at an individual who cannot defend themselves, or who is in a low position socially and economically, they retain the anxiety and cannot find humour in the message. In online spaces, audiences can share their dissatisfaction with ease and find like-minded individuals. This coordination in online spaces can lead to their criticism developing into digital vigilantism, and subsequently creating issues for the comedy practitioners targeted.

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