

Cultural Production and the Digital Humour Economy

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, I present data from my research at the Just for Laughs Comedy Festival in Montréal, one of the most significant meetings of performers, producers, agents and networks involved in the comedy industry. In particular, I analyze data from the annual industry conference, Just Comedy, which takes place during the festival. Here, industry “insiders” discuss potential trends, anxieties, and frustrations related to the casualization of cultural labour and the growth of digital technologies. I consider this in relation to academic discourses about DIY-culture and the politics of humour production.

Keywords

Humour, stand-up comedy, internet, cultural production.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Just for Laughs Comedy Festival (JFL), now one of the largest showcases for stand-up comedy in the world, began in 1983 as a four-day francophone comedy event featuring 16 artists. Since this time, JFL has grown rapidly into an internationally recognized entertainment landmark and industry hub. Currently the festival attracts more than 2 million visitors annually, and includes over 350 artists from numerous countries (primarily French- and English-speaking). Indoor shows are recorded and broadcast on television networks and airlines the world over. Artists use their visit to JFL to network with industry, especially representatives from the US entertainment industry, and many careers are made and broken on the festival stages, in the industry sections of festival comedy clubs, and in the Hyatt Lobby, where media, industry, and performers schmooze until the early hours of the morning.

Attracting over 1000 industry executives, the festival has become an important meeting place for those individuals whose decisions and preferences dictate the direction of the comedy industry. However, with the growth of digital technologies, the hold of these gatekeepers, or “cultural intermediaries,” is being renegotiated. This paper draws upon observations made at JFL in 2008, 2009, and 2010, in particular my attendance at the annual industry conference Just Comedy. Here, industry “insiders” presented their views on new developments within the comedy industry, primarily in relation to the growth of digital technologies and the shift in production power from networks to individual artists. I find that their perspectives mirror academic discussions of trends in the creative economy where stand-up comedy is rarely considered. In particular, it is evident that stand-up performance is a form of cultural production that is well suited to the demands of internet dissemination and consumption, owing largely to its

amenability to low production standards, short-clips, and pursuit of both mass and specialty audiences.

2. The Creative Economy and Shifting Labour Practices

Recently, considerations of cultural production have turned to the concepts of the “creative industries” and the “new economy.” The study of the creative industries combines theories of the creative arts and the cultural industries (Hartley 2005, 6). According to John Hartley, the term creative industries “exploits the fuzziness of the boundaries between ‘creative arts’ and ‘cultural industries,’ freedom and comfort, public and private, state-owned and commercial, citizen and consumer, the political and the personal” (Hartley 2005, 18). Considering New Zealand in particular, Russell Prince attributes the rapid growth of governmental interest in the “creative industries” as an economic fix-all to the particular relation this “product” has to the labour force. He argues that,

The explanation for this rapid diffusion implicit in the policy and its surrounding governmental discourses is that regional and national economies are shifting from a manufacturing base to one of knowledge, innovation, and creativity—resources understood as residing in the heads and bodies of the working population and, therefore, less prone to the capital flight that occurs when natural resources dwindle or labor costs becomes too high. (Prince 2010, 120)

The *resource* being developed is the cultural competencies of the population. The idea of *culture as resource* is also a characteristic of neoliberalization. George Yúdice argues in *The Expediency of Culture* that, “the question of culture in our period, characterized as one of accelerated globalization” must be approached as a question of culture “as a *resource*.” Yúdice points to the “culturalization of the economy” as part of a shift toward endorsing cultural development as a component of economic growth (Yúdice 2005, 13, 17). The culture that *counts* in this context is literally that which can be *counted* in a way meaningful to dominant stakeholders; the creative industries exist as statistical mappings including “contribution to GDP, the number of people they employ, the export dollars they earn, and so on” (Prince 2010, 122). This mapping often erases the extent to which the creative industries are contested, contradictory, and, at times, highly exploitative. Instead, the narrative of the “creative class” offered by creative economy boosters such as Richard Florida offers a convenient and compelling narrative for policy-makers, arts organizations, and cities competing for scarce resources and attempting to make economic justifications for cultural work.

Within the framework of the creative industries, investment in culture is legitimized through instrumentalization; it must be linked to improvements in social conditions, multicultural tolerance, the promotions of cultural citizenship, economic growth, urban renewal, or some other utility (Yúdice 2005, 13, 17). Yúdice suggests that the current cultural turn is reliant upon the operationalization of “cultural capital.” In contrast to Bourdieu’s more figurative use of this concept, here, cultural capital is meant literally. In relation to festival and events management, Jane Ali-Knight and Martin Robertson take up Bourdieu’s concept in this entirely literal way, speaking enthusiastically of the French sociologist who “championed [...] the economic significance of the arts and cultural sector,” an area of great market potential that had long been overlooked (Ali-Knight and Robertson 2004, 6). Within the creative economy, the idea of culture for culture’s sake is irrelevant. The provision of, at the very least, an indirect form of return is required in order for culture to be seriously considered by policy-makers, investors, and even audiences.

In *Firing Back*, Pierre Bourdieu laments the impacts of neoliberalization on social, political, and cultural life. He argues that under neoliberalism:

the new mode of production maximizes profit by reducing payroll through layoffs and the compression of wages, the shareholder being concerned only with stock market value, on which his nominal income depends, and with price stability, necessary to keep his real income as close as possible to the nominal. Thus has come into being an economic regime that is inseparable from a political regime, a mode of production that entails a mode of domination based on the *institutions of insecurity*, domination through precariousness: a deregulated financial market fosters a deregulated labor market and thereby the casualization of labor that cows workers into submission. (Bourdieu 2003, 29)

This insecure and deregulated labour market is characteristic of the work that takes place in the creative economy that has emerged under neoliberal globalization. Notably, the alignment of creative work with the process of neoliberalization was not a great stretch. Creative work has long been unstable. The artist, with a work life characterized by financial uncertainty, is already accustomed to navigating the harsh realities of casual, temporary, and contractual work. This has only intensified as the creative industries have moved to the centre of neoliberal policy initiatives that celebrate culture and creativity as the driving forces of economic regeneration and urban renewal (Murdoch 2003, 15; Léger 2010, 559).

Jamie Peck, Nik Theodore, and Neil Brenner, writing post-2008 financial crisis, offer a succinct definition of the dominant political economic processes at work under the current financial regime. They suggest that,

neoliberalization should be conceived as an hegemonic *restructuring ethos*, as a dominant pattern of (incomplete and contradictory) regulatory transformation, and not as a fully coherent system or typological state form. As such, it *necessarily* operates among its others, environments of multiple, heterogeneous, and

contradictory governance. (Peck, Theodore, and Brenner 2009, 104)

For Peck et al, the recent financial crash and subsequent economic recession do not mark the beginning of a post-neoliberal era. This is because neoliberalism as a *thing* cannot really be said to have existed; instead, the world economic system has undergone a process of liberalization that has altered, but not erased, the role of the state in national economies. The *state* continues to be involved in “market making and market-guided regulatory restructuring;” the “solution” to the recession has largely been to support and defer to the expertise of the very institutions that led to the 2008 crisis (Peck, Theodore, and Brenner 2009, 109). Similarly, Kingfisher and Maskovsky argue that neoliberalism has not been characterized by a “retreat of the state,” but rather by “critical shifts in the ways that governments intervene in markets” (Kingfisher and Maskovsky 2008, 117). For these authors, “neoliberalism” is a useful descriptive model in as much as it provides a general conceptual link between the impact of globalization upon national economies and the ideological and political justifications that have been offered for these often dramatic changes (Kingfisher and Maskovsky 2008, 116). Neoliberalism is not, however, “a unitary, structural force.” It is contradictory, and exists in relation to many other social forces (Kingfisher and Maskovsky 2008, 119).

In his study of creative work, Léger points out that a defining fantasy of neoliberalism is the expectation that the cultural economy will “make up for” the economic declines of other sectors such as manufacturing and agriculture (see also Miller et al 2005, 116-117). He argues that,

For good and bad, cultural production, associated with creative thinking and innovation, has been conflated with new industries, mostly in the area of communications technology, and deemed a catalyst for economic growth. The name that neoliberal policy-makers have given to this new approach to cultural administration is the creative industries. (Léger 2010, 559)

Léger further points out that the great “irony of Florida’s research is that, by economic definition, most artists would not qualify for inclusion in his ‘creative class’ category” (Léger 2010, 567). Most artistic work is more characteristic of the instability of the service sector (and in many cases, artists unable to earn a living wage from their craft work in the service sector). If creative work is replacing other industries such as manufacturing, it is not being conferred the same level of stability and predictability that these other industries offered their workforces. The cultural worker is a creative entrepreneur, whose precarious movement within the industry is difficult to identify and track. Jan Marontate and Catherine Murray have argued that this characteristic of creative work makes policy formulation for the support of workers particularly challenging:

This is no small part due to the very nature of entrepreneurial ventures in these fields, marked by rapidly changing tastes, fluctuating seasonal demand, and career patterns that involve intermittent and concomitant part-time employment and the participation of substantial voluntary workforce... (Marontate and Murray 2010, 333)

Cultural workers have therefore found themselves in a curious position, with their field increasingly promoted as the key to a thriving economy, but their labour conditions very much as precarious as they have ever been (Léger 2010; Brault 2010; Hesmondalgh and Baker 2010). This is the primary incentive for stand-up comics to move out of live performance and into “cultural industries” such as film and television; however, this work is increasingly also contractual and unpredictable. In particular, DIY cultural production made possible through cheap video equipment and editing software, and free, rapid transmission via sites such as youtube.com are destabilizing not only how comedy is being made, but also how comics are being reimbursed for their labour. At Just Comedy 2008, 2009, and 2010, these issues were heavily discussed and debated by industry “insiders,” including network executives, producers, writers and performers. Below I present initial data findings collected over this three year period while conducting naturalistic observation at JFL.

3. The Conditions of Comedy Production

3.1 Research Methods

During July of 2008, 2009, and 2010, I spent two months in Montreal conducting naturalistic observation at JFL. This research is part of my doctoral dissertation. One of the most data rich spaces of this event proved to be Just Comedy, an annual industry conference held at the Hyatt Regency (the headquarters for JFL logistics during the festival). During the conference I attended presentations, keynotes, and several industry parties. The data upon which I draw for this paper consists of field notes taken during the conference, especially those panels that discuss changing labour conditions and the impact of the internet on comedy production. Notably, many panels that were not advertised to discuss these issues shifted towards them if not during the panel, then certainly during the Q & A period. It was evident, therefore, that conference attendees were preoccupied with these very issues.

3.2 Considering Industry Discourses at Just Comedy

This section will present data obtained from the conference pertaining to three primary issues: 1) changing labour conditions in the production of comedy; 2) the impact of digital technologies on content production and dissemination; and, 3) the shifting terrain of gatekeeping in the internet age.

3.2.1 Labour

Labour is a particularly contentious issue in cultural production as the US and Canadian television and film industries have a long history of unionization while the stand-up comedy industries do not. As such, performers, writers, and producers with different industry backgrounds might also be expected to have divergent views on cultural labour, especially in relation to unpaid creative work. In the Canadian stand-up comedy industry, for example, performers can be expected to participate in unpaid or low-paid work early in their careers in order to develop skills and a comedy profile (Stebbins, 1990). These precarious and exploitative early years are part of a larger, industry ideology which calls upon young performers to “pay their dues” prior to acceptance into a professional class of performers.

Within this system, the internet is seen as another means of profile development available to writers and performers. This was certainly the perspective put forward by multiple panelists at the 2008 conference. Lou Wallach, senior VP of Original Programming, Television & Digital Development for Comedy Central suggested that the internet offers a vital space of internet development, a good place to get work seen, and a way to “get your foot in the door” with television networks (*Webisode to Episode* panel, July 17, 2008). On another panel intended to discuss broadcasting, both Michelle Daly, Director of Content at Comedy Network and Anton Leo, Creative Head of TV Comedy at CBC/Radio Canada agreed that the internet offers an invaluable space for the development and discovery of new talent. However, they also agreed that it is unlikely that their networks would be able to make money off of online content (*Broadcaster Panel*, July 17, 2008). As such, internet content was expected to be a marginal form of content dissemination, with networks hoping that web audiences could be redirected towards their broadcast programming. Writers, performers, and producers hoping to break into the comedy industry can use the internet to disseminate their material, but it is expected that these cultural workers will need to integrate into the established film and television industries in order to make a living off of their cultural work. The following year, Renate Radord, VP of Comedy Programming for NBC Entertainment & Universal Media Studios admitted that broadcasters were still unclear how money might be made off of internet programming.

This perspective was also promoted at the 2010 conference. This included an entire panel from FunnyorDie.com (FOD), a wildly successful internet comedy website which produces original content, reproduces viral comedy videos, and offers members of their digital community the opportunity to disseminate their own comic work through the website. Videos produced by FOD staff often include unpaid cameo performances from celebrities (popular musicians, comedians, actors, etc.). During the panel, FOD writer/actor Seth Morris argued that once money can be made off of internet content, the “golden-age” of digital comedy production will come to an end. FOD benefits from unregulated and largely unpaid content production. When an audience member asked the panel about the ethics of using the unpaid labour of an otherwise unionized workforce, the panelists argued that any intrusion of unionization into the type of production that they were doing would render their creative work impossible. The panelists did not, however, see this as exploitative, but rather as a space of production that allows for pure comedy, free from the censoring impact of the cultural economy.

3.2.2 Digital Production

As a content and talent development space, there is evidence that the internet is succeeding. On the *Webisode to Episode* panel (2008), Peter Oldring discussed some of the advantages and disadvantages of this trajectory. His breakfast TV parody, “Good Morning World” was established as a webisode. As such it was cheaply produced, had little development time, and housed on a simple internet site. Once this program was picked up by a network, the comedian had to change some minor details (according to network production expectations), but overall Oldring feels that his original ideas and characters remained intact. John Gemberling and Curtis Gwinn also had their webisode picked up by a network. They produced their original program, “Fat Guy Stuck in the Internet” based entirely upon what they felt was funny. They were not seeking network support, but managed to land a network deal after their program was

discovered online by an interested network executive. Despite the improvement in production value that the network affiliation enabled, Gemberling and Gwinn were optimistic that TV would continue to move online. In both of these examples, undiscovered writers/performers were discovered via self-produced, self-financed online content. This reinforces the idea that, while not directly lucrative for the online comedy producer, the internet is an effective space for material and profile development.

3.2.3 Gatekeepers

Advances in global communications technologies are also having an impact upon the balance of forces between dominant gatekeepers in the field. Over the past two years at Just Comedy, for example, one topic has dominated conversation and worked its way onto every panel regardless of intended theme: the Internet. Of particular concern is the question, will the Internet will kill network television? If not, how can networks make money off of Internet content? Increasingly, it would seem, the standard sitcom model on network television is coming under scrutiny. Content producers have been able to circumvent the risky process of pitching pilot concepts to the major networks, opting instead to make low-production value videos that can be posted to the Internet. Once a video goes viral, creators can expect it to be picked up by a network, or more likely a specialty cable channel. It seems unreasonable to continue investing resources in the production of pilots when new comedic content is constantly being made available free of charge. Furthermore, entrepreneurial comics can surpass many established gatekeepers such as comedy clubs and festivals through online content, linking them directly with a mass audience. Currently, their chances of “making-it” as a successful internet content producer are not necessarily better than if they moved through the established system of gatekeepers. The internet is full of content that receives little or no attention. However, content that does make it into high circulation on sites such as FunnyOrDie or YouTube will access audience numbers that many networks—since the growth of cable-TV splintered the mass audience—no longer attain. This is not to exaggerate the impact that internet comedy has had on television consumption. Many of the traditional gatekeepers have grown to take advantage of this new form of content dissemination.

Internet content has low production value and limited narrative development. It is based upon unique characters in humorous situations. The most successful videos are those that are only a few minutes or even seconds long. This type of internet content has essentially become “waste time at work” content (Seth Morris, *FunnyorDie Panel*, July 16, 2010). The emphasis on high production value that is generally characteristic of network-TV simply does not apply for internet content where high-definition media files can be difficult to view depending upon internet speed. The internet generation has shown that quality comedy is important to them, but production value can be sacrificed in exchange for ease of access and circulation. The genres of stand-up and sketch comedy are particularly well suited to internet programming as they tend to be consumed in short “clips” and their enjoyment is not heavily dependent upon high production value or the quality of the image.

4. Conclusion

The growth of digital technologies has altered the way comic performers are discovered, as well as some of the ways that comic content is produced and disseminated. Comics are using the production of free internet content, often unpaid and self-funded in order to develop their profiles and gain entry into the tightly controlled cultural industries. This type of precarious and underpaid labour is characteristic of the creative economy generally. Notably, however, comics also benefit from this new type of production by circumventing some of the traditional gatekeepers in the field. This allows performers to take greater creative control over their work and their careers. The digitization of the comedy industry is altering the way the humour is produced, as well as the system for producing comic talent. These changes are rapidly-occurring and have, as yet unmeasured impacts upon the shape and direction of the comedy field.

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