

The Thin Black Line

**Black comedy and its descent from subversive comic provocation to
mainstream inglorious offence**

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines whether black comedy still lampoons influential institutions and probes social mores with sharp satire and strong language or simply aims to offend for its own sake. It questions whether the freedom of speech that comedians in the 1960s advocated to defend their social and political subversion is now assumed, as a right, by comedians for the less edifying practice of humiliating people and targeting the vulnerable.

Black comedy in the 1960s questioned our attitudes to politics, religious power, and sexuality. While black comedy In the 21st Century addresses complex issues of social importance it tends to do so through humiliation, deception and mockery.

Black comedy is inspired by politics, protest, provocation and the broad array of experiences that could be described as the human condition. *The Thin Black Line* explores the intersections between social acceptability and social outrage. This study concentrates on prolific exponents of black comedy and treats the terms dark and black comedy as interchangeable.

This thesis argues the political agitation that characterised much of dark comedy in the 1960s and 1970s has been largely replaced in the 21st Century by what might be termed superficial abuse, in that the comedy does not seek to right perceived injustices or expose prejudice, but aims to do little more than cause offence. The common element in the comedy being examined is that it created controversy by taking on taboo subjects, including child abuse and the sensitivity of minorities, such as people with a disability and various religions. The changing motivations behind the championing of free speech are illustrated by the comedians' work, the reaction to it and the period of time the comedy was created. The ability of later generations of comedians to push that 'black' line further owes much to dark comedy originators, Lenny Bruce's fight for free speech and resistance of police intimidation in the 1960s and George Carlin Supreme Court challenges in the 1970s. This thesis proposes that many 21st Century comedians are using freedom of speech to condone abuse and prejudice.

By comparing the lives, work and times of Bruce and Carlin to comedians in their wake, who also caused outrage, this thesis considers whether black comedy is still iconoclastic or has become little more than a bully's playground.

DECLARATION:

The thesis [examinable outcome] contains no material which has been accepted for the award from any other degree or diploma, except where due reference is made in the text of the thesis. To the best of my knowledge the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text; and where the work is based on joint research or publications, discloses the relative contributions of the respective workers or authors.

Signed

Chris Beck

METHODOLOGY:

This thesis uses a journalistic method. Journalism at its purist is committed to reporting the truth. Journalism has a pragmatic and realist view of situations and events to analyse. Journalists' main pursuit is to inform. Although recent history has the disgruntled such as Donald Trump describing news stories that sully his image as 'fake news', the research that informs this thesis has not been attacked for its truthfulness.

There is the issue of 'what is truth' but that is a problem in any form of method that is not mathematically or scientifically based and even then truth can be questioned. This thesis compares comedy practice that triggered social repercussions over a timeline of 50-60 years. Tolerance in society and its institutions such as the Church is appraised through the evolvment of dark comedy, and the response it generated. Comedians from the 1960s who created controversy are compared with controversial comedians that succeeded them.

Through a journalistic method I access a wide range of published primary and secondary source material in journals, biographies and articles, which was written contemporaneously about the protagonists and their work. This thesis recognises that journalists play an important early role in recording historical events, which over time can be interpreted in new ways and are inevitably seen through the prism of contemporary values and expectations. For example, in the 1960s Journalists wrote about Lenny Bruce's arrests. Those reports are invaluable as they recorded both the basic facts of what occurred and the commentary of the protagonists, including Bruce himself.

In assessing material written about the protagonists, I have sought to acknowledge and understand the biases of those who recorded and interpreted the events. In many cases the biases and sympathies are transparent. In others, less so. In a topic as rich as this, and which deals with contested and controversial ideas, understanding and navigating bias is important. The journalistic method is useful in this regard as this is precisely what journalism, at its best, seeks to do in order to get close to the truth. When done well, journalism is clear and concise in order to accurately describe and analyse. At its core good journalism is about engendering greater knowledge and understanding. In adopting a journalistic methodology the challenge for this thesis is to do likewise and to clearly set out the case with the mission to inform, not to obscure events or ideas in arcane theoretical concepts and literature.

All comedy has humour, but not all humour is comedy. Humour is the much broader category of anything that may make us laugh, often unintentional, such as a friend sneezing and expelling his false teeth across the room. Comedy is professional entertainment of jokes and sketches, mainly pre-conceived and intended to make people laugh (Mankoff, R. 2014). This thesis refers to the jokes and material under discussion as comedy, as opposed to humour (apart from direct quotes from references) because it is evaluating the work of comedians in their professional practice.

The Thin Black Line, the title of the thesis, is a common phrase to pronounce what is socially tolerable with commentary or actions. "The line was crossed" is an

everyday rebuke to something said or written that offends or humiliates a person, group or institution. The comedians I investigate have all 'crossed the line'. The focus is on professional comedians who have publicly offended, the means of offence and the groups or individuals who took offence and why. To investigate black comedy and its level of public influence, it is important to concentrate on comedy that created controversy and the 'who, why, when and how' it offended – the times, the comedians and their motivations. Although there are many journals that explore aspects of black comedy, there appears to be none that solely address this thesis hypothesis.

My approach includes character assessment derived from the comedians' influences, upbringing and the times of their formative years. For example Bill Hicks was raised in a small town in the 1970s by religious parents. He was a loner who largely rejected his parent's views as a teenager and locked himself in his room for large periods. He idolised the choleric political satirist Richard Pryor and social satirist Woody Allen who were both productive in the 1960s and 1970s. Hicks went on to perform bilious, anti-authoritarian routines about advertising, personal rights and politics.

Academic literature shaped the approach this thesis takes to content analysis. Through the study of journals and books that helped explain the comedians, and the areas they lampooned including religion and race, and their relationship with freedom of speech and political correctness, including: *The Haunted Smile The Story of Jewish Comedians in America*, Epstein, L. 2002, Public Affairs; which wrote about Bruce and Jews of his generation caught between an American and a Jewish identity, uncomfortable and confused about their role. This concern over identity included how he felt about his role as a comedian – freedom fighter, social commentator, iconoclast or comic?

This study uses academic literature as well as contemporaneous print, online and video media including *The New York Times*, *The Guardian* and *The Age* and *Sydney Morning Herald*, regarded as quality press. These media outlets have reputations for taking responsibility for the accuracy of their profiles, reviews and comments. Biographical and autobiographical works from comedians Lenny Bruce, George

Carlin, Chris Morris and Bill Hicks and the comic material created by the protagonists emphasise the divide between the catalysts of dark comedy and current comedians. The work of high-profile comedians who caused controversy and offence is explored in context with the world they live in to understand changes in the intent of dark comedy.

The Trials of Lenny Bruce (2003) details Lenny Bruce's arrests and conviction in the 1960s relating to his derisive satire about officialdom and religious figures such as the Pope. The text positions him as an inspiration to comedians and progressives in a decade of conservative politics and social change. Literature about Bruce contextualised his radical philosophy, religious satire and struggle for freedom of speech. In 2010, in a time of heightened world terrorism and a lighter approach to online and print media, creators of the animated series *South Park*, Matt Stone and Trey Parker, received death threats over their crude comedic depiction of Islam. The popularity of *South Park*, described as conservative in the text, *South Park Conservatives, The Revolt against Liberal Media Bias* (2015), is an important aspect of this study. The *South Park* series, employed tragedy and humiliation to comic effect in controversial episodes lampooning religious institutions and individuals, while claiming a vulgar populist television show, *Springer*, that arbitrarily humiliated vulnerable people, as a major influence on them as College students.

The chapters compare and juxtapose comedians with a link, for example Lenny Bruce and *South Park* controversially lampooned religion but their motives and political intent were contrasted through journals such as, '*South Park Conservatives: the revolt against liberal media bias*' and '*Comedy and Liberty: The Life and Legacy of Lenny Bruce*'. The angry political comedy of Bill Hicks in the 1980s connects and contrasts with the more cynical humiliation of public and private figures in the early 2000s by Chris Morris and The Chaser through analysis of long form articles in the New Yorker, New York Times and Sydney Morning Herald, The Age and The Guardian.

The evolution of black comedy into the new century is outlined through journals and biographies including, *Near the knuckle? It nearly took my arm off! British comedy and the 'new offensiveness'* Hunt, L. 2010; *That's not funny: Instrument*

validation of the concern for political correctness scale, Strauts, E. Blanton, H. 2015; *The Comedy Store*, W. Cook, 2001; *'Seven Dirty Words, The Life and Crimes of George Carlin'*, J. Sullivan; *'Disgusting Bliss, 2010: The Brass Eye of Chris Morris'*, L. Randall, 2010.

Although not every comedian in this study has been influenced directly by Lenny Bruce and George Carlin, they are connected through Bruce and Carlin's influential actions and this thesis confirms their influence. Comics who developed, often in difficult and isolated circumstances, in times of change, protest and revolution in the 1960s and 1970s and the comics who followed during the emergence of political correctness in the 1980s and 1990s, are compared to the often middle-class, university educated comedians in the technological age of the 21st Century, to determine the outcome of Lenny Bruce's debilitating fight, in the 1960s for the freedom of all comedians to speak their minds.

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PRELUDE

The prelude takes a brief look at the 1950s, a time of tension with the Cold War. Sophisticated novelists, filmmakers and musicians emerge but a sense of innocence and naivety remains in popular comedy. The 1950s preceded a decade of rebellion, race riots, protest, sexual revolution and political upheaval when Lenny Bruce rose to fame and battled conservative institutions that took offence at his language and satire about the church and taboo subjects.

The prelude to the 1960s was a sign of decades to come. On January 2, 1959, the Soviet Lunik 1 capsule became the first man-made object released in space to orbit the sun (Kaplin. F, p. 1). The flight of the Lunik set off a year when conventions of all sorts were broken – in society and culture. Novelists and journalists, most famously, Truman Capote and Tom Wolfe blurred the boundaries between author and subject, reportage and literature. Rebellious filmmakers such as John Cassavetes made improvised movies outside the confines of Hollywood studios. Jazz musicians, including Miles Davis and Charles Mingus contrived a new kind of music that broke through the structures of chords and pre-set rhythms. Comedians satirised the once forbidden topics of race, religion and politics.

The popular comedy shows on television in the 1950s were led by wholesome family situation comedies: *I Love Lucy*, starring a daffy Lucille Ball, *Leave it to Beaver*, portraying the iconic post-war family, *Dennis The Menace*, and *The Ozzie and Harriet Show* and *Father Knows Best*, set in the typical Midwest community of Springfield [the unruly animated comedy *The Simpsons* was set in Springfield 40 years later]. Box office comedy hits included the ‘delightful comedy-romance’ *Sabrina* (Crowther, B, 1954), the teen romantic-comedy *Gidget*, and the classic good-hearted ‘message’ film, *Harvey*, where the friendship between a gentle man and a six foot imaginary rabbit helped people discover what it means to be human.

Television comedy in America portrayed a largely innocent and optimistic view of the world in the 1950s. It was a place where problems were solved in time for a happy ending. In Britain, despite *I Love Lucy* being a hit, there were some less cheerful comedies on air, such as *Hancock's Half Hour*. Tony Hancock played an exaggerated version of himself, a down-at-heel comedian waiting for the big time to hit while he struggled to make ends meet (BBC, 2014). His character was mostly miserable and largely failing in life (BBC, 2014). *The Goon Show*, a British radio comedy program created, written by, and co-starring Spike Milligan debuted in 1951 and lasted almost a decade. Arguably the most popular and influential comedy in Britain, its appeal wasn't about 'family', 'wholesomeness' or 'optimism'. The scripts mixed absurd plots with surreal comedy, puns, catchphrases and an array of bizarre sound effects. The show satirised life, parodying facets of show business, commerce, industry, art, politics, authority, education, class structure, literature and film. *The Goon Show*, and the work of Spike Milligan in particular, was an inspiration for comics including Peter Cook and the Monty Python team that developed their own version of satire and absurdity in the 1960s (Dangerous Minds, online). In 1950s Australia, comedy on television was mostly made up of American imports including the ubiquitous, *I Love Lucy*.

As the so-called innocent time of the 1950s and submission to Cold War paranoia gave way to a new decade of street protests, race riots, feminism and sexual curiosity, Lenny Bruce, arguably the first comedian identified with the term black humour, offended and challenged conventional society and provoked conservative authority into taking steps to outlaw his darkly comedic observations and opinion.

INTRODUCTION: WHAT IS BLACK COMEDY?

In 1940 the French Surrealist André Breton published the frequently reprinted *Anthologie de l'humour noir* (*Anthology of Black Humor*), and first coined the term black comedy (Jahsonic, 2018).

Black comedy is about scorn and scepticism – making light of serious subjects such as cancer and death, to produce a little nervousness and meaningful thought, as well as laughter in the audience. **Prolific director and comedy writer Mel Brooks famously said, “Tragedy is when I cut my finger. Comedy is when you fall into an open sewer and die” (G.Q. 2013). That comic line has an honesty designed to draw nervous laughter about a perceived uncomfortable truth – we care most about ourselves.** Black comedy often uses farce and to make clear that individuals are helpless victims of fate and character. In his study of dark comedy [also referred to as Lenny Bruce made political points about the Church Lenny Bruce made political points about the Church comedy in this thesis] in *The Comedy of Entropy*, Patrick O'Neill argued that dark comedy allowed us to envisage the facelessness of the void and yet be able to laugh rather than despair (2010).

Wes Gehring wrote in *American Dark Comedy – Beyond Satire*, that, “at its most fundamental, black humour is a genre of comic irreverence that flippantly attacks what are normally society’s most sacred serious subjects” (1996, p.1). Jonathan Swift, 18th Century author of *Gulliver’s Travels*, has been cited as the first writer to use black comedy in *Anthology of Black Humor* (1979). In that book, Breton credited Swift most famously with his article ‘A Modest Proposal’ in which he suggested that the solution to poverty and overpopulation in Ireland was eating children. Swift admitted that he, “hated all nations, professions and communities”; that all his love was for individuals and he “detested that animal known as man”. But, while he complained about Ireland from his home in Dublin, he also had a strong sense of justice and went about helping his country.

Finding humor in the face of death was named 'gallows humor' by psychiatrist, Sigmund Freud. His example was of a man about to be shot by a firing squad asked if he wanted a last cigarette (McGhee, P. 1999). "No thanks," he said, "I'm trying to quit". The joke helped the doomed man take emotional control of the situation. Freud proposed that all humour is a defence mechanism against the deficiencies of life, a self-protective rechanneling by the superego of feelings and guilt, anxiety, fear, or terror into pleasure-producing form (McGhee, P. 1999).

Dark comedy has been a tool for survival, defiance and facing sensitivities for centuries but the emergence of great social change in the 1960s, juxtaposed with a largely conservative political authority, was a defining period for black comedy. The offence comedy could cause was underlined, during this time and beyond, by court cases and jail terms, organised protest, censorship and societal backlash. The Jewish-American comic, Lenny Bruce, was one of the first to 'cross the line'.

We can judge 'crossing the line' by the level of offence caused and the effect the comedy creates – for example, censorship, police charges and public condemnation. Comedy is an art not a science. There are no rules to create a laugh, although regulations have been imposed on comedy, lines drawn and lines crossed. In the 1960s, Lenny Bruce was arrested and charged with obscenity for using profanities. George Carlin was arrested and charged with public indecency for violating obscenity laws (Bella, T. 2012).

In the early 1970s, John Waters' black comedy, *Pink Flamingos* mocked conventional taste, with a storyline about "the filthiest woman alive". The film included rape, bestiality and torture. The star, Divine, a 200-kilogram transvestite, ate dog excrement in the final scene. The film was banned in Australia on initial release but is now regarded as a cult classic, shown in cinemas and festivals and released on home video and DVD. Barry Humphries, who became a cultural icon, created extreme Australian characters such as Barry McKenzie and Les Patterson who "vomited in public", used sexist, homophobic – "no poofters allowed" –, abusive and racist language, while claiming to represent Australia. *Brass Eye*, a 2001 British television comedy satirised the moral panic about paedophilia, which provoked 3000 complaints in Britain, condemnation from public figures, a call for

censorship and media outrage (Day, E. 2010). In 2009 ABC-TV's *The Chaser* upset families with terminally ill children, politicians, the media and the general public with a segment mocking a charity group that offered special events for children suffering life-threatening illness (Cooper, M. 2009). The clumsy satire whether intentionally or not, made the humiliation of dying children the focus of the comedy not the charity organisation.

In the 1960s, change came from all quarters: the emergence of 'the generation gap', the rise of questioning authority, the politics of sexuality, feminism, black power, and mass protest against the Vietnam War that contrasted and challenged a conservative authority. Most black comedy from the 1960s and 1970s was uncompromised and meaningful, making statements and highlighting society's misgivings and hypocrisies. Comics such as Richard Pryor, who had been writing and performing comedy for a broad audience, were making moves across the border of social acceptability, to find comedy in the contentious topics of racism, religion, and ignorance (Watkins, M. 2005).

Carol Burnett, one of the few high profile female comics of the 1960s and 1970s, has been credited with the line – "comedy is tragedy plus time" (Sarkis, S. 2012). Mel Brooks, a former comedy writer for popular television variety programs such as *Your Show of Shows*, in the 1950s, risked the making of his directional debut, the 1968 film, *The Producers*, because he wouldn't compromise the darkest element. The black comedy in *The Producers* stemmed from his preoccupation that as a Jewish comic he was obliged to paint the image of Adolf Hitler as absurd and idiotic (Wallace, M. 2001). His script, including a goosestepping dance number, *Springtime for Hitler*, was viewed as in appalling taste and too soon to be making light of a man who slaughtered millions of defenceless people (Kashner, S. 2004). *The Producers* was written more than 20 years after World War II ended and the consequences of the Holocaust were revealed. Hollywood executives, shocked that Brooks could depict Adolph Hitler in such a comic manner, rejected the script. A producer from Universal Pictures, Lew Wasserman, suggested Brooks change the character of Hitler to the more palatable Italian dictator Mussolini (Parish, J. p.173). Brooks wouldn't compromise.

In the 21st Century the time factor between tragedy and resulting comedy has shortened. Charlie Chaplin was credited with the observation that, “life is a tragedy when seen in close up, but a comedy in long shot” (Carr, J. Greeves, L. p185. 2006). In Jimmy Carr and Lucy Greeves’ book, *The Naked Jape*, they propose that some tragedies – the 2001 attack on the World Trade Centre in New York – are so cataclysmic that in the immediate aftermath it seemed wrong to laugh at anything, let alone jokes about the tragic event (Carr, J. Greeves, L., 2006).

Brooks’ film, *The Producers* was eventually made with the Hitler references intact, flopped at the box office, but became a cult movie for decades to come. Ironically, despite the many rejections of his script, *The Producers* won the coveted Academy Award for best original screenplay in 1968 over the cerebral 2001 Space Odyssey by auteur Stanley Kubrick and Arthur C. Clark and other screenplays by the acclaimed filmmaker John Cassavetes and Hollywood favourite Peter Ustinov (Parish, J. p 173. 2007). In 2001, months before the September 11 terrorist attacks and the emergence of a new world villain in Osama Bin Ladin, the Broadway musical based on the film opened to critical acclaim, ecstatic audiences, toured the world, and won a record 12 Tony Awards.

Much of today’s black comedy seems to be less about what someone like Lenny Bruce thought he should say and more about what someone like popular comic Ricky Gervais thought he shouldn’t say but did.

“Yeah, well, at least the little handicapped fella is able-minded. Unless he's not; it's difficult to tell with the wheelchair ones.” – Ricky Gervais’ character David Brent in *The Office* (Gervais, R. 2001)

“My girlfriend’s reading a book called ‘Women who love too much’ which I think should have the title shortened, to ‘Sluts’.” – Jimmy Carr (2013)

“I thought it was sad that they had that concert for Princess Diana. I mean she didn’t have much to do with pop music, they should have done something that celebrated what was really great about her life ... by staging a gang bang in a minefield.” – Frankie Boyle (Metro, 2013)

Ricky Gervais achieved mainstream success that was out of reach in the path-

finding black comedy of the 1960s. "Ricky Gervais does something that's terrible, which is to take brutal subject matter and make it cosy for a large audience" – Jerry Sadowitz (Kettle, J. 2011, online). Many comedians that followed Bruce and Carlin, dumped political and social comment and simply told jokes about sexuality, the disabled, women and minorities. Even so, black comedy continues to create uproar with material far more offensive than Carlin's *Seven Dirty Words* or Bruce's interpretation of religious and political hypocrisy.

But does it mean anything?

CHAPTER 1: THE DAWN OF THE DARK BECOMES A RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

Obscenity, offence and iconoclasm

Lenny Bruce, *South Park*

Chapter one introduces Lenny Bruce and his comedy that lampooned the Catholic Church and the secrecy and shame conservative forces encouraged about sexuality. His comedy that highlighted racism and hypocrisy targeted liberals and conservatives alike. His satire on religion humiliated the Church and police harassed him leading to his incarceration and several court cases. The constant attention from authorities affected his mental health and he spiraled into depression, finally dying of a heroin overdose. He and his circumstances are compared to Trey Parker and Matt Stone, the creators of the animated television series *South Park* more than 30 years after Bruce's death, which also provoked religious institutions that resulted in death threats and threatening lawsuits. Although both Bruce and *South Park* ridiculed aspects of religion, the inspiration, method, motives and outcomes from Bruce and Parker and Stone were very different.

Lenny Bruce Performance Film, a documentary recorded in 1965 of Lenny Bruce's second last performance, portrayed a frustrated comic railing against what he saw as injustice. In one section of the film, Bruce delivered to the audience a policeman's evidence at one of his six trials for obscenity:

"... I don't remember the whole act, your honour but I made these notes... Ah, let's see now: Catholic, asshole, shit in the park, tits, and shit and Catholics, Jews and shit. That's all I remember. That's about the general tenor of the act (Magnuson, J. 2006)."

The prosecution of Lenny Bruce (Collins, Skover, 2002) for misdemeanour obscenity involved at least eight trials that took four years and 3,500 pages of trial

transcripts, consumed uncountable man-hours and amounts of public money, involved appeals and/or petitions to state High Courts, and the US Supreme Court, and bankrupted Bruce, who once made nearly \$200,000 a year (Collins, Skover, 2002, p. 403).

He died a convicted criminal. The words he used on stage in LA nightclubs, such as cocksucker and motherfucker got him arrested, charged and brought before a judge. But he was more than profane. Bruce blended what he had learnt from popular satirist and fellow Jew, Mort Sahl, with the dirty language he had used for years in strip clubs, his attitude to religion, drugs, sexuality and a sense for hypocrisy, to create an act that polarised much of America. (Epstein, L. 2002, p 169)

Ronald Collins in his journal, *Comedy and Liberty: The Life and Legacy of Lenny Bruce* (2012), agreed that, "Lenny Bruce intended to rip the covers off and expose the naked truth about religious hypocrisy, political corruption, race relations, sex, drug use, and homosexuality—all topics that other comedians of his day never dared to touch or address as openly, brazenly, and authentically." (Collins, R. 2012, p 65)

Although Bruce used profanity and obscenity with dark comedy about sex and race, it was his mocking of organised religion that caused both praise and disquiet.

"If Jesus had been killed twenty years ago, Catholic school children would be wearing little electric chairs [around their necks]." (Markham, I. S. 2010 p. 123)

His routine, *Religions Inc.*, described a meeting of America's new religious leaders, including Oral Roberts, Billy Graham, Danny Thomas and Jane Russell, held at the headquarters of 'Religions Incorporated' (Collins, Skover, 2002). They discussed religious 'stocks' and merchandising (Collins, Skover, 2002, p. 35). Oral Roberts took a phone call from the Pope about racial integration.

"They're buggin' us again with that dumb integration. Nah, I don't know why the hell they want to go to school, either... When ya comin' to the coast?... I can get ya on the Ed Sullivan show the nineteenth... Wear the big ring. OK sweetie... No, Nobody knows you're Jewish."

Suggesting that religious leaders are racist, manipulative, and ostentatious, and that the Pope is secretly Jewish was provocative. He used comedy to paint a sinister

and dark view of organised religion. He damned the Church as bigots – “dumb integration”, and elitists – “wear the big ring”. Bruce said in an interview for the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, “I’m not a moralist. I don’t object to the sins of today. I just object to people who don’t admit their sins.”(Collins, Skover, 2002)

After repeated retribution from authorities to his act over several years and related support from intellectuals and artists, he became more of a commentator on his personal situation than a comic interpreter of society. The *Lenny Bruce Performance Film*, 65 unedited minutes of his stage act, showed him, unshaven, overweight and baggy-eyed, reading out court papers in desperation about his trials (Collins, Skover, 2002, p. 358).

Bruce’s legacy remained strong long after his death from a drug overdose on 3 August 1966. He would become a martyr and a hero to people too young to see his act, through records and books and ‘Dirty Lenny’ became ‘Saint Lenny’. Collins and Skover wrote that where the law once prosecuted him, the culture now hailed him (2002, p. 5). On Broadway, on film, on The Beatles’ *Sergeant Pepper* album cover, in books and documentaries, on reissued recordings, posters, in comedy clubs, college classes, archives, on the internet, America continued to honour its brazen hero of free speech. He wasn’t a member of the baby boomer generation but he spoke a rebellious language baby boomers could relate to.

Bruce targeted almost anything in society that had a set of rules and expectations of behaviour. He was indulgent, a heavy drug user, a philanderer and he appeared to do as he pleased, regardless of the consequences for others or him. He eventually died, exhausted and beaten, fighting to do as he pleased and, say what he wanted.

Ronald Collins wrote in a 2003 petition to pardon Bruce:

Admittedly, Lenny Bruce used blue words in his nightclub routines. But if truth be known, it was what Bruce said more than the profane way he put it that brought the force of the law down on him. And that is precisely the problem. If any law can be tapped to persecute people for what they think, then our entire system of freedom of expression can be sabotaged. As Justice

Louis Brandeis aptly put it in 1927: the freedom to think as you will and to speak as you think are means indispensable to the discovery and spread of political truth (Skover, D. 2003).

One of the routines that caused concern amongst authorities was known as 'Christ and Moses'. Here, the two biblical figures appear at the back of New York's St. Patrick's Cathedral (Bruce, L. 2004):

Cardinal Francis Spellman is deep into his sermon when he is alerted to the heavenly visitors... Spellman panics, "Did Christ bring the family? What's his mother's name?... Mary Hale? Hail Mary? Hairy Mary?... Oh, Christ, look at the front door. The lepers are coming" Flesh is falling on the polished floors. Spellman is frantic. He calls Rome, "Hullo, John? Fran in New York. Listen, a couple of the kids dropped in ... I'm up to my arse in crutches and wheelchairs here! This place is getting ridiculous here. They're in the back, way in the back ... Of course, they're white!" Click [Excerpt] (Bruce, L. 2004).

A vision of cripples and lepers being a nuisance and discussed in flippant terms was a variation on the theme of death and absurdity associated with dark comedy. In Lenny Bruce's routine, the ridiculous met social comment when he 'replied', "of course they are white" about the skin colour of Jesus and Moses. The vernacular became accusatory. The Jewish comedian hinted that Spellman was paedophilic, "He brought a very attractive Jewish boy with him", and "I have a lot of kids staying here"(Collins, 2012, Skover. p. 20). Christian groups were offended by what they heard of Bruce's act. Theologian Stephen H. Webb wrote that Lenny Bruce was a provocateur, not an entertainer (2004) and that his most common target was the Christian Church. "[Theologian] Karl Barth argued that the Church must be understood as 'the listening community'," Webb wrote, "Perhaps that is why Christians can be so sensitive to public obscenity" (Webb, S. 2004).

Lenny Bruce was born Leonard Alfred Schneider, on 13 October 1925, in Mineola New York, more than 20 years before the end of World War II (Boskin, J. 2000).

Bruce, the angry outsider, had an unusual upbringing and confused sense of identity. He grew up in Long Island, a working-class Jewish boy from a divorced family who lived with his father, Mickey. He moved between relatives so his father could ensure his wellbeing during the Depression of the 1930s (Prussing-Howell, 2007). Eventually, young Lenny gained a reputation among relatives as a troublemaker, a cheat, a liar, and a “two-faced flatterer”. He quickly became an unpopular houseguest, which resulted in the constant shuffling between families (Prussing-Howell, 2007).

“He was always a loner,” his mother Sally Marr said (Weaver, J. 2012).

Lenny Bruce’s mother was a burlesque-comedian whose energies and aspirations influenced Lenny’s comedic sensibilities (Prussing-Howell, 2007, p. 15). Young Lenny’s relationship with his mother was an uncommon one, bearing almost none of the characteristics of the traditional mother-child relationship. Instead, Sally was the straight-talking buddy who could introduce him to girls, listen to his troubles like a mate and share lots of laughs (Prussing-Howell, 2007, p. 15). The rest was left to his father.

Apart from complaining about his father’s temper and discipline, Bruce didn’t talk much about him. Mickey showered what Albert Goldman in his book, *Ladies and Gentlemen Lenny Bruce*, described as Jewish Love [affectionate emotions crossed with negative feelings] on the child and established a fatherly discipline (1971). Despite Mickey’s modest wage, Bruce was given many presents as a child, including a jukebox, typewriter and radio. Eighteen months before he died in August 1966 Bruce, wrote:

Dear Father,

This is a story of a boy and his father who spoiled him. He would want a bike, and his father would bring one home: and if it wasn’t to the boy’s liking, he would throw it down on the ground and say, “I don’t want this cheap old bike.” And he would kick its spokes and jump on it: and the poor father would say, “Alright son I’ll work 24 hours a day and get you a nicer one.” The more

the son got, the more vicious he got... [The son] started robbing banks to get what he wanted and finally killed someone. On the way to the electric chair, the poor father was crying, "Oh my son! Where have I failed you?" And the son said, "Come here father, I want to whisper something to you." The old man leaned to the son and the son bit his ear off.

I'm going to jail tomorrow because you spoiled me.

I love you,

Lenny

(Goldman, A. 1971)

In contrast to Mickey's devotion to his son – despite his odd bursts of anger and discipline – Sally was a young divorcee who led her own life. She loved her child but, according to Goldman, loved herself better. She was not willing to sacrifice for him; she would care for young Lenny but on her terms (Goldman, A. 1971, p.86). Bruce forgave her, perhaps because they had similar traits – superior and selfish comedians with an indifference to other comedians. He forgave many people who hurt him. The only person he never forgave was his father. Passed, as a child, endlessly from aunts to uncles and grandparents, Bruce later told an audience, "If you ever get divorced, let your wife keep the kid. Your kid is better off with a wife that sleeps with a different guy every week than with grandparents. Cause no kid six-years-old is happy in a house that gets dark at seven-thirty" (Deikel, S. 1974).

Young Lenny attended 26 different schools and dropped out in sixth grade. He eventually joined the Navy to fight in World War II. He disliked Navy discipline and was discharged when, after reading a psychology book he discovered transvestism as a way out of the navy (Bruce, L. 2002, pp. 22-24). He held no fear of persecution or embarrassment for dressing in women's clothing. His sense of superiority to his fellow sailors and apathy to his role in the Navy negated any sense of shame.

The mixed messages of being spoilt and disciplined by his father, having his comic mother act like a friend, not a parent, and his extended family disliking him, conjured up many emotions and ideas that coloured his view of the world. Add to

this his intelligent sense of humour and he had all the ingredients for cynical satire that didn't take orders from anyone. He had strong opinions from a very young age. The Lone Ranger was young Lenny's favourite comic-strip character. When you listen to Bruce's later routine, knowing of his childhood love for the fictional hero you can sense the lonely and needy child. The 'Masked Man' routine relied on the storyline that the Lone Ranger saved people from dangerous situation and then turned and left before he could be thanked. His swift departure is meant to convey selflessness and a sense of duty that doesn't require reward. To young Lenny it was a message of coldness, narcissism and arrogance – three things he could have been accused of in later life. In his book, *How to Talk Dirty and Influence People* (1992), Bruce complained that his father's self-sacrifice – similar to the Lone Ranger avoiding any appreciation for his deeds – made him feel guilty. In his 'Masked Man' routine, the townspeople chased the Lone Ranger to find out why he always ran away before he could be thanked. He explained that he didn't want to get too attached to gratitude. Bruce then extended this idea by having the townspeople insist on giving him a token of their thanks. He wanted "the Indian".

Redneck: What the hell you want Tonto for?

Lone Ranger: To perform an unnatural act.

Redneck: What?

Lone Ranger: To perform an unnatural act.

Redneck: Oh...Mask Man is a fag. Ah...ah...fag man. A dirty fag, you dang queer you...

Lone Ranger: I'm not a fag, but I read a lot about it and read 'expose' and I want to try it now to see how bad it is, just once. I like what they do with fags anyway. Their punishment is quite correct. They throw them in jail with a lot of men. Very clever hum...hum...

Redneck: Wash him up and get him ready.

Lone Ranger: Tell you what - give me the horse too.

Redneck: Whaaaafaar?

Lone Ranger: For the act.

(Linder, D. 2003)

It could be concluded that the routine had roots in his father's 'Jewish love' and Bruce's distrust of his father's motives. Bruce's ribald observation about the human condition of giving – told via his childhood hero – implied that no-one did anything for nothing. Even the great American symbol of courage and selflessness, or your father, had a self-serving side. Trust no-one.

Lenny Bruce began as a 'clean-cut' comic who largely mimicked his mother's act, with impressions of famous actors such as Humphrey Bogart in a German accent (Collins, K. Skover, D. 2002, p.14). Bruce's rise to the status of cultural icon began in the mid-1950s in the strip clubs of southern California, where he began to develop an iconoclastic edginess according to writer Denis Linder (2003).

Bruce's career coincided with the counterculture and social upheaval of the 1950s and 1960s, and he was as contentious as the movements he reflected. But he stood alone as he attacked convention. He wasn't part of a group of like-minded protesters, banding together in a united stand like the civil rights activists, feminists and the anti-Vietnam war protesters. One of Bruce's favorite devices was to give public voice to offensive words (Collins, K. Skover, D. 2002, p. 19). Bruce had a mission to liberate words from social taboos. He decided that hiding, or excluding a word from the lexicon would give its perceived meaning a significance it didn't deserve. He believed that repeating them again and again, would defuse their power to shock and wound (Collins, K. Skover, D. 2002, p. 19).

"If President Kennedy got on television and said, "Tonight I'd like to introduce the niggers in my cabinet," and he yelled "niggerniggerniggerniggerniggerniggernigger" at every nigger he saw,

"boogeyboogeyboogeyboogeyboogey,nig-gerniggerniggernigger" till nigger didn't mean anything any more, till nigger lost its meaning-- you'd never make any four-year-old "nigger" cry when he came home from school.

Screw "Negro!" Oh, it's so good to say, "Nigger!" Boy!

"Hello, Mr. Nigger, how're you?" – edited transcript Lenny Bruce routine (Sleeveless, B. 2013)

Bruce examined the comic in words and decided that the use of familiar words in an unfamiliar context, or vice versa, can create a comical effect. The combination of two familiar words – *to* and *come* – in an unfamiliar context created a comical effect in one of Bruce's famous performances. Two perfectly harmless and extremely frequent words become a threat to 'good taste' when combined (Prussing-Hollowell, A. 2007 p. 52-3).

[Bell rings] *"Toooooooo* is a preposition. [Bell rings] *To* is a preposition [drum beat]. *Come* is a verb. [Chanting with bell and drum beats] *To* is a preposition, *come* is a verb – the verb intransitive. *To come, to come... to come, to come.* It's been like a big drum solo. Did ya *come* [drum beat]? Did ya *come*? Good. Did ya *come* good? [Speeds up to bebop tempo] Did ya *come* good; did ya *come* good; did ya *come* good..." (Prussing-Hollowell, A. 2007 p. 52-3)

It is not surprising that Bruce used words with a twisted ambiguity. He was an avid reader and listener of stories on the radio growing up, examining the meaning of narratives and situations such as The Lone Ranger's motives. Bruce argued that sexual words should not be considered indecent because they described an action most Americans performed, but most Americans preferred submerging the topic in non-sexual language in order to avoid appearing crass in polite conversation. (Prussing-Hollowell, A. 2007 p. 52-3). Instead of discussing sex like any other topic, Bruce said, Americans reverted to child-like language, labeling body parts with nonsense words, like 'boobies' (Prussing-Hollowell, A. 2007 p. 52-3).

More than 30 years after the death of Lenny Bruce, two young men just out of

college created a cartoon world featuring obnoxious, bullying and angry children using irreverent, blunt language, supported by a cast of malcontents and extreme characters.

The crudely animated series, *South Park*, debuted on U.S. Cable network, Comedy Central [broadcast on SBS in Australia] in 1997. It pushed the boundaries of free expression, attracted censorship, criticised government policies, and mocked key social figures (Sculzke, M. 2012). *South Park* targeted moral issues including religious views, abortion, gay marriage, and global warming. Written, and performed largely by its creators, Matt Stone and Trey Parker, the series, still running after 20 years, followed the ‘foul-mouth’ lives of four eight-year-old boys from South Park, Colorado. The show challenged American hypocrisy, typified by greed and sanctimony through its characters’ greed and hypocrisy (Scott, D. 2011). The *South Park* boys included the self-centred, egotistical Cartman – grounded by his parents for two weeks in one episode for trying to exterminate the Jews–, the Jewish Kyle Brodowski, and the impoverished Kenny McCormick. The children are presented as wide-eyed sadists that expose childhood as a dangerous and obscene place. “There’s this whole thing out there about how kids are so innocent and pure,” Parker said in *Rolling Stone* magazine in 1998, “That’s bullshit man, kids are malicious little fuckers. They totally jump on the bandwagon and rip on the weak guy... They are total fucking bastards, but for some reason everyone has kids and forgets about what they were like when they were kids” (1998). Added Stone, “[*South Park* is] a total projection of what I remember [of bully as a child]. I remember thinking what is the meanest thing I could possibly do here? (1998)”

Parker and Stone cite the exploitative and voyeuristic talk show, *Springer*, as a source of inspiration. When they met host Jerry Springer, they excitedly told him they held a party to screen his video, *Jerry Springer: Too Hot for TV!* (Wild, D. 1998) Springer hosted an enduring daytime talk show, widely regarded as ‘trash TV’. It relied on participants, usually family members or life partners, in conflict with each other as they, bullied, yelled, fought, spat and even stripped and wrestled in front of a raucous, inciting audience. In an online survey of 240 people conducted by Jason Mittell for his paper, *Audiences Talking Genre: Television Talk Shows and Cultural*

Hierarchies respondents described the people who appear on daytime talk shows – most notably *Springer* – as low brow, ‘white trash’, under-educated and ‘trailer trash’ (2010). Fans noted that they enjoyed watching the fights and the ridiculousness of the situations with no presumed educational or social value (Mittell, J. 2010). While in the 1960s black comedy drew on counter-culture for its inspiration and audience, *Springer*, I contend, was less counterculture and more no-culture.

Lenny Bruce straddled the counter-culture [the underground] and the mainstream just as cultural icons such as Elvis Presley and James Dean had a decade before. Bruce’s rising popularity with mainstream Americans was related to their interest in non-conformity (Prussing-Hollowell, A. 2007, P. 38). Although straight America participated in the ‘American Dream’, they were aware of the artificiality and conformity the underground denounced (Prussing-Hollowell, A. 2007, P. 38).

The descriptions of Bruce’s early life connect with his reaction to his fans and detractors. His audience gave him his father’s once-removed love and both religious and civic authorities viewed him like the unwanted childhood guest of his extended family. From reading his biographies and journals it is clear he never embraced his audience members. He dismissed those who threatened him and challenged his words. He quickly became an enigmatic outcast. According to Victoria Meyer in her journal, *Limits and Laughter. The Comedy of Lenny Bruce and Andy Kaufman* (2007), admirers were essentially demanding to be offended, to be shocked and insulted. His comedy prompted self-conscious laughter and his act was a thrilling ride of anxiety and fear with takes on taboo subjects that his audience would never think of, let alone say (Meyer, V. 2007).

“Now, the reason, perhaps, for my irreverence is that I have no knowledge of the god, because the Jews lost their god,” Bruce said, “Because to have a god you have to know something about him, and as a child I didn’t speak the same language as the Jewish god. To have a god you have to love him and know about him as kids – early instruction – and I didn’t know what he looked like. Our god has no mother, no father, no manger... He has no true identity. Is he a

strong god? Are there little stories? Are there Bible tales about god, that one god, our faceless god?" (Davies, I. 1988)

Jewish comedians often stood out in the community. Bruce used being a Jew when it suited him. He used Yiddish shtick as a tool to identify himself, and his delivery made it cool. He was a hip comedian and one of the earliest rappers – using rhythm and repetition. He was harsh in his evaluation of life and the Jewish community. He also compared Christian and Jewish ideas about God: "The Christian God is all over... he's been in three films... Where is the Jewish God? He's on a little box nailed to the doorjamb..." (Epstein, 2002, xxi)

I contend that Bruce derived his view on the Catholic Church from his developing childhood mind that questioned the meaning of words and our use of them – love and bigotry, sex and corruption, truth and hypocrisy.

South Park's Matt Stone said in an interview for the *Reason* journal in 2006, "We've done stuff that's really anti-religion in some ways. But it's such an easy joke to go, 'Look how stupid that is', and then stop right there (Gillespie, N. Walker, J. 2006). Religion's just much more fascinating than that to us. So from the very beginning, we always thought it was funny just to flip it on its ear and show how screwed up it is, but also how great it is. People couldn't tell if we were kidding."

In general, Stone and Parker mock religion on a surface level – Jesus and Santa Claus in physical combat – yet provoke a deep anger with their satire. They admit that the Jerry Springer show was a great influence on their work, with its expose, humiliate and bully formula. *Springer* took psychologically sensitive issues and exploited them by, for example, surprising a young woman in front of a crowd that her cheating boyfriend had regular sex with her mother. Stone and Parker took that 'surface level' approach and applied it to the world they saw growing up – the rise of celebrity gossip, the loss of respect for religion and politics. In Lenny Bruce's time, challenging political, social and religious values was much harder than in the late 1990s when there was a competitive media scramble for scandalous stories.

Despite the simple approach to make fun of everyone, *South Park* was not simply a vehicle for negativity and criticism. In the episode, *Red-Hot Catholic Love*, the abuse of young boys by Catholic priests and the Church's role in covering up their crimes ended with the destruction of the Vatican by a priest in a bid to return to shared values of love (Gournelos, T. 2008). Despite being offensive to leaders of the Church the episode had an underlying positive message and Stone is proud of other episodes that exhibited what he described as amazing heart (Wild, D. 2015).

On the other end of the scale, there were many more scenes that would be viewed as juvenile and offensive to most people, let alone to religious devotees. The depiction of a marble statue of the Virgin Mary 'bleeding from her arse' over the Pope in an episode that compared unquestioning reliance on religious mythology to substance abuse is a good example. Organised action against *South Park* began to emerge. Intense lobbying from Catholic groups influenced the Comedy Central management to not rerun the 'Virgin Mary' episode as planned. Australian Catholic groups prevented it from airing across the country (Gournelos, T. 2008). An intimidating response to a *South Park* episode from members of radical Islam proved more powerful than censorship. On April 14, 2010, Parker and Stone populated the 200th episode with celebrities such as Paris Hilton, Kanye West and Barbra Streisand, as well as major religious figures, Moses, Jesus and Buddha, with a storyline focused on Muhammad. The next day, the group Revolution Muslim warned Stone and Parker they would probably be killed in retribution because Islam forbade the depiction of its holiest prophet (Itzkoff, D. 2010). In a follow up to the 200th episode later that year [titled 201] Comedy Central concealed [censored] the character Prophet Muhammad, and references to the Prophet were removed.

In a statement, Parker and Stone remained steadfast in their disobedience, "In the 14 years we've been doing *South Park* we have never done a show that we couldn't stand behind" (Itzkoff, D. 2010). Their statement didn't address the point of their satire that led to its censorship, only their defiance. Despite the fact that the network censored them under the weight of commercial damage and death threats,

the *South Park* creators continued on their cynical and mocking way. Contemptuous jibes at religion and disdainful storylines persisted in *South Park*.

In the 1960s, television in Britain was embracing edgy topical satire including the work of Peter Cook and Dudley Moore and David Frost's *That Was The Week That Was*. Another British comedy with satirical elements pushed the boundaries of taste with nudity, blasphemy and disgust. *Monty Python's Flying Circus* made fun of class, authority, religion and the media with a sense of the surreal. John Cleese, Michael Palin, Graham Chapman, Eric Idle and Terry Jones met at Oxford and Cambridge Universities, famous for student comedy revues. The BBC censored the British satire several times, including the 'crackpot religion' sketch, when the head of a [animated] priest screwed open to reveal the devil. In 1979 the Monty Python film, *Life Of Brian*, about an ordinary man mistaken for the Son of God in Biblical times, opened to widespread protests. The film included satirical takes on the crucifixion, Biblical stories such as the burning bush, religious worship and the enduring line, "he's not the Messiah, he's a very naughty boy". Thirty-nine local authorities in England refused to allow any screenings on the grounds it could break censorship laws on blasphemy. Religious groups picketed the film around the world, panel shows debated the apparent blasphemy of the film and 'The Pythons' received death threats (Daily Mail, 2011). Forty years on the film and the protests seem tame.

In 2004 Dutch filmmaker Theo Van Gogh was killed by a fanatic who objected to the portrayal of Muslim women in one of his movies (Simons, M. 2004). In 2015 gunmen shot dead 12 people at the Paris office of French satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo* in a militant Islamist attack. Four of the magazine's cartoonists, including its editor, were among those killed (BBC, 2015). Witnesses said they heard the gunmen shouting, "We have avenged the Prophet Muhammad" and "God is Great" in Arabic – "Allahu Akbar". The weekly satirical magazine courted controversy with an irreverent take on news and current affairs. It had previously been firebombed in November 2011, a day after it carried a caricature of the Prophet Muhammad (BBC, 2015).

Although black comedy challenges us with offensive opinions, descriptions and

images, increasingly the targets become more selective when retribution is threatened or carried out by offended people such as Muslim extremists. The director of *Life of Brian*, Terry Jones said in 2011 the film could not be made today because of a “toxic mixture of political correctness and religious extremism” (Daily Mail, 2011). Despite dismissing death threats in 1979 inspired by claims of blasphemy about the film, Jones said he would genuinely fear for his life if he directed a similar one nowadays. Jones’ long-time collaborator John Cleese said that it is difficult to make jokes about Muslims because, “they will kill you”, which demonstrated both fear and the modern stereotyping of combining the Muslim faith with murder (Daily Mail 2014).

Trey Parker and Matt Stone recalled in a *Rolling Stone* article being asked where they find inspiration for their ideas by University students (Wild, D. 1998).

“Acid, yeah, Acid,” they replied glibly (Wild, D. 1998).

Parker and Stone grew up during a time of cynical and trivial media that exploited and humiliated, akin to the histrionic television talk shows, *Springer* and *Renaldo*. Magazines exposed celebrities’ private lives with intrusive photographs, speculated on relationship breakdowns and personal instability, and used dubious sources – ‘a family friend’ –, to hold them up to ridicule. *South Park*’s intimidating approach echoes its creators’ formative years in the 1980s and 1990s, school bullying and superiority – white college educated kids watching a rich white man, Jerry Springer, exploit the unstable, the poor and needy for amusement. *South Park* is steeped in childishness, voyeurism and, an enjoyment of typical teenage boy culture such as embarrassing bodily functions and humiliation. They blend those influences with sharp observation and lateral thinking.

After becoming wealthy, powerful entertainment figures the *South Park* creators formed a vanity rock band called DVDA. The title drew on pornography pay rate for double vagina and double anal penetration that topped the pay scale (Wild, D. 1998). Their chosen band name is an example of their roots in smug adolescent

humour and bullying behaviour – naming a band after the most brutal and damaging pornographic act on women. In an interview in the *Reason* journal, Parker explained the key to their self-image growing up in the 1980s.

“When you were a teenager in Colorado, the way to be a punk rocker was to rip on Reagan and Bush. Then we went to the University of Colorado at Boulder, and everyone there agreed with us. And we were like, “Well, that’s not cool, everyone agrees with us”. And then you get to Los Angeles. The only way you can be a punk in Los Angeles is go to a big party and go, “You can say what you want about George Bush, but you’ve got to admit, he’s pretty smart.” People are like, “What the fuck did he just say? Get him out of here!” (Gillespie, N. Walker, J. 2006)

In the 1980s, post the aggressive and non-conformist punk movement, to be outside the accepted social norm was ‘cool’ to Parker and Stone. They were aware of the ‘right’ image at a young age – non-conformity and saying the opposite of popular opinion, even if you didn’t mean it. Youthful ambitions to be punks were artificially achieved with their offensively named punk band when they became wealthy, famous and popular. Stone and Parker weren’t natural outsiders. When asked to explain statements about hating conservatives but really hating liberals, they were at a loss. “Wow, that’s a good question.” “I’ve never thought about that” (Gillespie, N. Walker, J. 2006).

Parker said, “to some degree”, *South Park* has a simple formula that came from the very first episode – *The Spirit of Christmas* – which featured Jesus and Santa fighting over who owned the holiday (Stratynner, L. Keller J. 2009). “There was Jesus on this side and there was Santa on this side, there’s Christianity here and there’s Christmas commercialism here, and they’re duking it out. And there are these four boys in the middle going, “Dude, chill out”.

“The show is saying that there is a middle ground, that most of us actually live in this middle ground, and that all extremists are the ones who have the microphones

because they're the most interesting to listen to, but actually this group isn't evil, that group isn't evil, and there's something to be worked out here.” (Gillespie, N. Walker, J. 2006)

That could be interpreted as a statement from two middle class white men with unremarkable upbringings, who haven't had to deal with complexity and adverse childhoods like Lenny Bruce. Lenny Bruce never felt a part of the Jewish culture or his Jewish family, nor the American culture. He was alone with no 'club' to join. His sense of superiority was more of a defence than a belief. In the book, *The Haunted Smile: The Story of Jewish Comedians in America*, Lawrence J. Epstein wrote that Bruce and many other Jews of his generation felt caught between an American and Jewish identity, uncomfortable in either one (2002). Lenny Bruce played out in public the anguish of American Jews, many of whom were unable to express it publicly.

Bruce was confused about his role as a comedian. Was he a freedom fighter, social commentator, iconoclast or comic? This disorientation could explain the assaults on his audience followed by affection. As one reviewer noted:

... Every time he used an obscene word or expression the audience would shiver, and yet he continued ... he was saying 'take that you bourgeois scum'. The nearly instantaneous change from demonstrated revulsion of his audience to warm interaction represents the intense ambivalence that characterised Bruce's performance (Deikel, S. M, 1974).

After spending many television hours creating shocking and offensive depictions of religious icons and dogma, Parker and Stone showed a more sophisticated and empathetic approach with their hit Broadway musical, *The Book of Mormon*. Critics and audiences hailed *The Book of Mormon* and in 2011 it received nine Tony Awards, American Theatre's prestigious honour. In his review that year, *The Guardian's* Euan Ferguson wrote:

Shortly after the death of Diana, the writer Ian Jack coined the phrase

‘recreational grief’, and you could easily argue that in the past few years we've seen the rise of ‘recreational offence’ (2011). In short, if you're the kind of dick who spends valuable time looking to be offended, [*The Book of Mormon*] is offensive. In such a good, clever [and] kind way. For instance, the tenets of the Mormon Church are presented not with finger-poking sarcasm but with old-world reverence (Ferguson, E. 2011).

With a sense of fondness, Parker and Stone called the show, “an atheist love letter to religion” (Swanson, C. 2011). As they matured and met people of religion rather than viewing them through a media filter, Stone and Parker created the more empathetic, *Book of Mormon* at a time when religion was linked with terrorism, child abuse and a lack of empathy. In a way it harked back to their college days when they supported the opposite of popular wisdom to be cool.

“We obviously all have fun at the expense of religion and [with] the *Book of Mormon*, it's silly and there's a lot of good comedy there,” Stone said, “But we were looking at this thing and realised we all kind of like Mormons as people, painting with a broad brush. Every Mormon we've met is a nice person. And even when they know who Trey and I are from our work – work that some Mormons don't like – they're totally nice to us. So we'd sit there and go, “How do we do a show where we both have fun at the expense of religion, and at the end of the day ask, 'Is there truth to these stories?' Can we come up with a pro-faith show, that's pro-faith broadly, and in the details have fun with all the silliness of all these particular arguments about who dug up the golden plates?” (Swanson, C. 2011)

When they engaged in the real world – “every Mormon we've met is a nice person” – they put more compassion and less cynicism into their work. By immersing themselves in *South Park*, as writers, performers and producers throughout their young adulthood, Parker and Stone didn't have much time for anything that didn't inspire a cynical storyline – mostly celebrity and religion. When they looked at the people and not what they represented or how the media represented them, it seemed revelatory for Stone and Parker. Their early ideas were affected by who

they were and what they wanted to be – cool, punks – cast through a prism of college student vulgarity. *The Book of Mormon* was a kind of coming out – a celebration of people, with a sense of mischievous fun, inspired by an optimistic belief in humanity cast through a prism of college student vulgarity.

Joseph Boskin wrote in *American National Biography* (2000) that although Lenny Bruce seemed antagonistic toward his audience, he possessed a defined sense of morality supported by introspection. He was acutely aware that he was not innocent of encouraging social irrationality. “Sometimes I look at life [through] the fun mirror at a carnival,” Bruce said, “I see myself as a profound, incisive wit, concerned with man's humanity to man. Then I stroll to the next mirror and I see a pompous, subjective arse whose humour is hardly spiritual. All my humour is based on destruction and despair.” Boskin wrote that Bruce assaulted the barriers of conventional public comedy, expanding its language to include the scatological, and widening its subject matter (Boskin, J. 2000).

Lenny Bruce was the most controversial comedian of his generation. Prosecutors in San Francisco, Los Angeles, Chicago, and New York – four of the most culturally sophisticated cities in America in the early 1960s – charged Bruce with word crimes. Harry Kalven, one of the great free speech scholars of the 20th Century (Collins, K.L. Skover, D.M. 2002, p. 4) defended him in his obscenity trials (one of 29 free speech lawyers who represented him between 1961 and 1966), while conservative commentators testified against him.

Society, the law and religion in the US were entangled. Although Christian values appeared to be attacked by Bruce, he wasn't charged with blasphemy. In the United States of America, prosecution for blasphemy would violate the Constitution according to the decision in *Joseph Burstyn, Inc. v. Wilson* (1952) (Aswad, E.M. 2006). As well as lampooning organised religion, Bruce made serious critical statements about the relevance of the Church: “The thing with Catholicism, the same as all religions, is that it teaches what should be, which seems rather incorrect,” Bruce said, “Now, if you're taught to live up to a ‘what should be’ that never existed – only an occult superstition – then you can sit on a jury and indict

easily, you can cast the first stone, you can burn Adolf Eichmann [hanged for war crimes after a trial in Jerusalem], like that!" (Quoteland, 2014)

Bruce wasn't the only comic working blue at the time; Buddy Hackett and Redd Foxx were also using foul language in their acts. In his liner notes for the Lenny Bruce recording, *Let The Buyer Beware* (2004) Paul Krassner argued that Bruce's problems had less to do with his swearing and sexual content than with his discussion of religion in routines like *Religions, Inc.* or *Christ and Moses* – "Catholic cops began looking for any excuse to run him out of town" (Schwartz, B. 2004). There were many times when police officers stood in the back of the club, scribbling notes at a Lenny Bruce show.

Bruce differentiated himself from traditional comedians by portraying himself as superior to his mainstream audiences. Comedians generally depicted themselves as inferior or equal to their audiences – the most successful 'failure' was Bob Hope – but Bruce argued against his mainstream audiences' beliefs – religious, ethical principles – that would create resentment among many Americans. In December 1962, at the Gate of Horn nightclub in Chicago, Bruce showed a photo of a naked woman and asked how it could be indecent, "You see, you defeat your purpose. It's God, your filthy Jesus Christ made these tits" (Collins, K.L. Skover, D.M. 2002, p. 145). Bruce also talked about the hatred of Americans and America's cruelty as World War II victors to Japanese war victims, "because we fucked all their mothers for chocolate bars" (Bruce, L. 2004). Six months after war criminal Adolph Eichmann was hanged in Jerusalem, Bruce told the audience in a German accent playing Eichmann, "Do you think you are better because you burned your enemies from at long distance [Hiroshima] without seeing what you had done to them?" (Bruce, L, 2004) This was not the popular view. Bruce was arrested at the club. Patrolmen Arthur Tyrrell and Michael Noro who made the arrest were "disgusted" by the evening's performance and saw it as an illegal affront to public morals (Collins, K.L. Skover, D.M. 2002, pp.146, 147). Bruce was released on bail and continued his act at the Gate of Horn with the support of the club owner (Collins, K.L. Skover, D.M. 2002). One week after his arrest, the head of Chicago's vice squad warned the club owner that if Bruce spoke against religion, "I'm going to pinch you

and everyone in here. Do you understand?... [He] mocks the Pope – and I’m speaking as a Catholic – I’m here to tell you your license is in danger” (Collins, K.L. Skover, D.M. 2002, pp 148, 149, 150).

In the next few years Bruce was regularly in trouble. He was arrested at a club in Los Angeles; the trial resulted in a deadlocked jury. In Illinois, he was convicted and sentenced to a year in jail (Linder, D. 2003). He was deported from London before he could exit Heathrow airport. In 1963 the courts ordered him to be confined in a rehabilitation centre for drug addiction treatment. He was arrested again in California for obscenity in 1964 (Linder, D. 2003). By 1965 Bruce had been arrested nine times for either obscenity or possession of dangerous drugs (Linder, D. 2003). He was unable to continue the frenetic pace of court trials and performances and sought refuge in narcotics to relieve his depression and lethargy. The pointed satire of his early routines had turned to obsession over his drug busts and obscenity arrests. Ironically he was reviewed as performing secular sermons, not comedy (Deikel, S. M. 1974). More often than ever, his critics contended, he resorted to perverse shock, including declaring that men are oversexed creatures willing to have a one night stand with just about anything that moves, including chickens (Linder, D. 2003).

Bruce was soon indicted for violation of Penal Code 1140-A, which prohibited ‘obscene, indecent, immoral, and impure drama play, exhibition, and entertainment...’ For each of the three charges against him Bruce faced a maximum penalty of three years in prison (Linder, D. 2003). Although Bruce’s material was becoming less relevant and more about hollow sensationalism, poet Allen Ginsberg formed an ‘Emergency Committee against the Harassment of Lenny Bruce’ (Collins, K.L. Skover, D.M. 2002, pp 222, 223). More than eighty prominent people, mostly entertainers and authors, signed a petition protesting the prosecution of Bruce:

Whether we regard Bruce as a moral spokesman or simply as an entertainer, we believe he should be allowed to perform free from censorship or harassment.

Signers of the petition included Paul Newman, Bob Dylan, Richard Burton, Norman Mailer, Susan Sontag, John Updike, James Baldwin, George Plimpton, Henry Miller, Gore Vidal, and Woody Allen (Collins, K.L. Skover, D.M. 2002). These signatures were about principle, not friendship. He was frustratingly lonely as he became more and more aggravated that his performance and his mental health were being questioned in court. After a 99-day trial the judge sentenced Bruce to four months in the workhouse. Bruce remained free on bond during the appeal of his conviction (Linder, D. 2003). As he obsessed over his legal problems and devoted most of his time to filing civil suits against his tormentors, prosecutors and judges, Bruce got sicker. Disheveled and overweight on August 3, 1966, he died of a morphine overdose in his home in Hollywood Hills, California. He had been depicted as having a huge appetite for life but died of a self-administered overdose, which was described as, “a final act of a troubled and perverted life” (Deikel, S. M. 1974).

After Bruce's death, one of his New York prosecutors, Assistant District Attorney Vincent Cuccia, expressed regret over his role, “I feel terrible about Bruce. We drove him into poverty and bankruptcy and then murdered him. I watched him gradually fall apart... We all knew what we were doing. We used the law to kill him” (Linder, D, 2003).

The ‘martyr’ Lenny Bruce had not died in vain. Ultimately Bruce was vindicated in principle but not always in practice, according to Ronald K. L Collins and David M. Skover in their book, *The Trials of Lenny Bruce* (2002). However coarse his performances, they wrote, however brazen his actions in court, and however bizarre his life, the fact remained that his speech was allowable as a matter of law. First in San Francisco a jury acquitted him. Second in Los Angeles no jury was able to convict him – charges were dropped or dismissed. Third, in Illinois the State Supreme Court reversed his conviction. And fourth in New York the state appellate courts sustained the principle of free speech claim, though after his death (Collins, K.L. Skover, D.M. 2002). He died a convicted man. Bruce struggled to say what he wanted. He was arrested regularly, and denied that right to speak freely.

He made his misgivings public in his act, initially creating clever wordplays and

routines and, towards the end, simply reading, with frustration, court transcripts from his trials. The trials, the drugs, the defence of the First Amendment, the cynical and provocative observations, seemed to be all about Lenny Bruce. His stance, as self-serving as it was, became a symbol of free speech for many.

It takes a deal of arrogance to create change. Leaders aren't 'shrinking violets' and the common thread of political leaders and trailblazers is a strong ego. Bruce also dealt with insecurity that clashed with his conceit and encouraged stress, ambivalence and drug dependence. But he was a pathfinder for people who wanted to make up their own mind about their place in the world and its rules. In this time of sound bites, simplistic hate speech and Twitter trolls, Lenny Bruce's material may seem verbose and dated, but he remains an icon of liberty and a comedy hero.

In his paper, *Comedy and Liberty: The Life and Legacy of Lenny Bruce*, Ronald Collins, wrote that because of the Lenny Bruce 'saga', comedians who wanted to express themselves freely such as Richard Pryor, George Carlin [both influenced by Bruce], Chris Rock, and Bill Maher were able to speak without fear of arrest (2012, p.78).

In May 2003, a group concerned that Bruce's 1964 conviction from the Cafe Au Go Go trial remained, launched a campaign to convince New York Governor George Pataki to issue Bruce a posthumous pardon (Linder, D. 2003). The group included scholars, lawyers, and comedians such as Robin Williams, Dick Smothers, and Margaret Cho. In a letter to Pataki, the group argued that a pardon for Bruce would show the state's "commitment to free speech, free press, and free thinking". In December 2003, Pataki posthumously pardoned Lenny Bruce, 37 years after his conviction for obscenity (Kifner, J. 2003). The Governor said the posthumous pardon – the first in the state's history – was a declaration of New York's commitment to upholding the First Amendment.

In his review of *The Trials of Lenny Bruce*, Nick Gillespie wrote that Bruce's influence extended beyond comedy clubs:

You can hear it on talk radio and in recorded music, and it's on display all over cable and network TV (2003).

What is obscene under U.S. law has plagued courts for many years. Many people don't realise that in society, which trumpets free speech, there are many restrictions on speech, including restrictions on adult or sexual images and words - or 'obscene' materials (Gillespie, N. 2003). In 1964, Justice Potter Stewart tried to explain hard-core pornography, or what is obscene, by saying, "I shall not today attempt further to define the kinds of material I understand to be embraced... but I know it when I see it..." (Gillespie, N. 2003) This quote, and the intent behind it, is well known as summarising the irony and difficulty in trying to define obscenity. For at least fifty years, the Supreme Court has struggled to define which speech is 'obscene'. 'Obscene' speech is 'unprotected' speech as ruled by the Supreme Court. The term 'unprotected speech' means speech that does not enjoy First Amendment protection and could be criminal to express. This ruling was used against Bruce despite the lack of definition (Findlaw, 2016).

Before Bruce there were entertainers who drew on politics, society, sex and obscenity for inspiration but they remained largely conventional. In 1927 Mae West spent 10 days in prison for obscenity in her play *Sex*, and the district attorney shut down subsequent Mae West theatre productions (Cullen, F. Hackman, F. McNeilly, D. 2004). His contemporaries, Bob Newhart, Bill Cosby and Shelley Berman were more about social observation than biting satire. Mort Sahl, a popular satirist on television, was an inspiration for Bruce. Sahl's dialogues, straight-to-camera that reflected on politics, corporations, psychiatry, women and more stirred debate but little controversy. Lenny Bruce was a catalyst for comedy to delve deeply into social issues, language and humanity in a period when there was a groundswell for social change. Following his death, Dustin Hoffman portrayed him in the sympathetic film, *Lenny*, books about him and his 'fight for justice' were published, including *The Trials of Lenny Bruce*. Matt Chester, a Lenny Bruce fan, wrote in his blog:

... His work might not have longevity, but what he represented certainly does. Maybe that's why so many people sing songs about him – he's more folk hero than comic (Chester, M. 2012). After his death Bruce became not just a comic

icon but also a social justice icon, even to those who didn't consider him funny.

Nick Gillespie wrote in 2003:

Lenny Bruce just isn't that funny anymore. Part of the reason is that Bruce's targets – organised religion, politicians, sexual hypocrisy and racism – long ago lost whatever widespread, uncritical support they once might have enjoyed. To be sure, Lenny Bruce himself contributed to this... As a pioneer of the free expression that Americans can now take for granted, Bruce went boldly where no man had gone before – or has had to since.

CHAPTER 2: Say it Loud, Say it Fucking Proud

Politics and the human condition

Bill Hicks

With Richard Pryor, Woody Allen

Louis C.K., Chris Morris, *The Chaser*.

In this chapter the late 1980s and 1990s angry political comedy of Bill Hicks is linked to Bruce, Richard Pryor and his angry routines concerning race in America and the eccentric social dissection of Woody Allen's standup in the 1960s. The political and deliberately provocative comedy in the late 1990s and 21st Century of Louis CK, Chris Morris and The Chaser in Australia, delivers a more personal attack. All these comedians shocked but Morris and The Chaser and CK (who used female degradation as part of his comedy) deliberately humiliated people in the public eye and, sometimes, ordinary people.

That this house notes with sadness the 10th anniversary of the death of Bill Hicks, on February 26th 1994, at the age of 32; recalls his assertion that his words would be a bullet in the heart of consumerism, capitalism and the American Dream; and mourns the passing of one of the few people who may have been mentioned as being worthy of inclusion with Lenny Bruce in any list of unflinching and painfully honest political philosophers." – Stephen Pound MP, Early Day Motion, House of Commons, London, February 2004 (Hicks, B. 2004)

Bill Hicks called himself the dark poet – a rock 'n' roll comic out to shatter America's fundamental beliefs about entertainment, religion, sex, business and politics (Schatzberg, A. 2003). Hicks and Lenny Bruce are regarded as 'comrades-in-arms' who ardently protested society's hypocrisies and failings.

Comedian Doug Stanhope wrote on his website in 2006:

Bill Hicks and Lenny Bruce are just as relevant today. You say that as though it's a good thing. When comics are known for commenting on the obvious

flaws and letdowns of current society, you'd hope that the sooner they are out-dated, the better. But they are not. Ten years, thirty years. Shit gets worse and less care. I'd rather have those comics seen as antiquated as rotary dial or vaginal intercourse than still live in a world where so little has changed"(2006).

Like Lenny Bruce, Bill Hicks' comedy relied on intimate storytelling and confrontation.

"You know if you play New Kids On The Block records backwards, they sound better. Oh come on Bill don't pick on them, they are so clean cut; they are such a good image for the children. *Fuck that*, when did mediocrity and banality become a good image for your children? I want my children to listen to someone who fucking rocks. I don't care if they died in puddles of their own vomit – I want someone who plays from his *fucking heart....* We are so clean cut – Seig Heil, Seig Heil – a good clean country – *Heil, Heil, Heil...* I want them to play with one hand and a gun in the other [points at his head] and, 'I hope you enjoy the show' – BOOM. PLAY FROM YOUR FUCKING HEART" (Schatzberg, A. 2003).

Hicks was born in Georgia in 1961 and, similar to Lenny Bruce, his childhood was one of constant change as he moved from state to state before his family settled in Houston, Texas. He lived west of the city in a strict Southern Baptist zone. Bored by the area he was bemused by the appeal to live the so-called 'American Dream' (Outhwaite. P, 2014).

James Truslow Adams, in his book *The Epic of America* (1931), wrote:

The 'American Dream' is, that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement. Another interpretation is that the 'American Dream' was the pursuit of material prosperity – that people worked more hours to get bigger cars, fancier homes but had less time to enjoy their success. Others said that the 'American Dream' was beyond the grasp of the working poor who worked two jobs to ensure their family's survival. Yet others looked

toward a new 'American Dream', with less focus on financial gain and more emphasis on living a simple, fulfilling life (Library of Congress, 2015).

It is likely Hicks understood the 'American Dream' to be more about a homogenous and boring society. "One time a friend of mine – we were nine – runs over and goes 'Bill, I just saw some hippies down at the store.' I go 'no way' and he goes 'I swear' and my dad goes 'Get off this property! We don't swear on this property!'" His parents, Jim and Mary were devout Southern Baptists. Despite young Bill's protests they insisted he went to church but he skipped Sunday school and napped in the church library (Outhwaite, P. 2014). Bill's father worked at General Motors and proudly wore a big GM ring. Hicks lived with his parents and brother and sister in an immaculately kept house with a pristine lawn – Hicks joked that Jim would measure the length of the grass with a ruler. Looking for distraction from the tedium of suburbia, the teenage Hicks became fascinated by the socio-political rants of Richard Pryor and Woody Allen's lateral takes on human foibles. Energised by these two idiosyncratic comedians, he wrote scripts with close friend Dwight Slade (Rougvie, J. 2004). In his short biography of Hicks, Paul Outhwaite (2014) wrote that Hicks wanted to *be* Woody Allen. At his first stand up performance at a church camp talent show he told Allen's joke about being breastfed from falsies.

"People laughed and then looked at me like I was the antichrist," Hicks said. It was an early indication that Hicks had no time for didactic morality (Outhwaite, P. 2014). Unlike Bruce he had little in common with his mother or father. His childhood was less significant than Bruce's but he locked himself in his room for long lengths of time. His friend and biographer, Kevin Booth, wrote:

It was a sanctuary where he could isolate himself from the foreign world of his parents ... camped in his permanent mess of a bed he listened to everything from [blues legend] Leadbelly to Led Zeppelin while he typed out one-liners (Booth, K. Bertin, M. 2006).

His parents considered his behaviour odd and took him to a psychiatrist who found nothing wrong with him, remarking in jest that he was more concerned about

Hicks' parents. Unlike the *South Park* creators who sought the outside Hicks was a natural outsider. Kevin Booth wrote:

On the outside. That's where he belonged. Bill was a misfit, both with his family and with a few exceptions, among his peers (Booth, K. Bertin, M. 2006).

Hicks' other comic hero, Richard Pryor had a rare and disruptive upbringing. He described his grandmother as big, strong, bright and appealing but also as a mean, tough, "controlling bitch" (Pryor, R. 2006). His father, Buck and mother, Gertrude ran brothels in Peoria, Illinois. They physically fought with clients and then sat down and drank with them. When a perplexed and frightened young Richard questioned what was going on one night, his father smacked him and told him to shut up. Young Richard witnessed stabbings and other violent, bloody acts in the brothel that were never explained to him. Pryor, born in 1940, was an unwanted child. He claimed he was lucky not to "be flushed down the toilet by his mother, like others", and that, he "found a dead baby in a shoe box as a child" (Pryor, R. 2006, p.21). His mother was an alcoholic who would regularly leave the house and not return for several months. "It was nice to see her when she was home. I didn't want to upset her by asking questions. You know? She was my mom" (Pryor, R. 2006). Pryor had a history of keeping quiet as a means of survival but it left him with many unanswered, painful questions as an adult.

The confronting Pryor routines and self-deprecating, passive-aggressive comedy of Allen inspired by uncommon and alienated childhoods were stepping-stones for the secluded Hicks. In the late 1960s, Allen gave up stand-up to write and direct movies. Many of his films – *Annie Hall*, 1977, *Manhattan*, 1979, *Stardust Memories*, 1980, *Radio Days*, 1987 – are largely based on himself, his attitude to life and his take on morality. One of the most absorbing scenes from his movies is from *Crimes and Misdemeanors* (1989) in which the main character, Judah, tells his story of getting away with murdering his lover, disguising it as a movie he's pitching:

JUDAH: People carry awful deeds around with them. What do you expect him to do, turn himself in? This is reality. In reality, we rationalise. We deny or we couldn't go on living. (Marche, S. 2014)

CLIFF [Allen]: Here's what I would do. I would have him turn himself in. 'Cause then, you see, your story assumes tragic proportions. In the absence of a God or something, he is forced to assume that responsibility himself. Then you have tragedy.

JUDAH: But that's fiction. That's movies. I mean you've seen too many movies. I'm talking about reality. If you want a happy ending you should go see a Hollywood movie (Marche, S. 2014).

Allen and Bill Hicks were both loner comics with a personal self-righteous take on morality. They were isolated from the mainstream while managing to 'cut through' with their comedy.

Richard Pryor started his career, like Bruce, as an inoffensive popular comedian on stage and television. Despite his growing popularity, he was frustrated. "I was hiding my personality... I was being a robot comic, repeating the same lines, getting the same laughs for the same jokes. The repetition was killing me." In 1967, Pryor stormed off the stage of the Aladdin Hotel in Las Vegas, shouting, "What am I doing here? I'm not going to do this anymore!" (Watkins, M. 2005)

In his autobiography, *Pryor Convictions* (1997), he recalled meeting Woody Allen at a club in New York. Allen told Pryor to, "stick around, watch me and you'll learn something". Pryor wrote that, 'oddly' he learned more from a hooker in Baltimore. She played him a green coloured record and he heard Lenny Bruce for the first time (2006). The material and performance encouraged Pryor, who had been a devotee of the more moderate comedy of Bill Cosby, to comment on society in a personal way. He played Lenny Bruce's records over and over.

It was him who said comedy wasn't about telling jokes – it was about telling the truth" (Pryor, R. 1997).

Pryor decided to tell his truth – the demons, drug abuse, jail, growing up in a brothel, philandering and the trials of living as a black man in America. His record album, the X-rated, Grammy award winning, *That Nigger's Crazy* (1974), sold more than half a million copies and surprised industry insiders with its appeal to young whites as well as blacks. It was followed in 1975 by another X-rated, Grammy award winning album, . . . *Is It Something I Said?* (Watkins, M. 2005)

Just as Woody Allen explored his Jewishness and its clichés to create an identity, Pryor examined the eccentricities of his race to underpin his act. Both Jews and blacks have been ostracised in society for centuries but Pryor's identity was far more controversial. Pryor learned to tone down Bruce's long-winded, confrontational rhetorical style (Webb, S. 2004). Echoing Bruce's 'President Kennedy nigger' routine, Pryor made a conscious decision to use the word constantly in his act. "Nigger. And so this one night I decided to make it my own. Nigger. I decided to take the sting out of it. Nigger. As if saying it over and over again would numb me and everybody else to its wretchedness. Nigger. Said it over and over like a preacher singing hallelujah" (Jackson, D. 2005).

The 'intensely black' Pryor and Jewish Allen inspired a white, athletic, Southern Baptist boy from a sedate small town in Texas to find his identity. Hicks locked himself in his room and, like other black and white Americans, listened to Pryor's take on black culture and its contrast to white society, peppering his act with words including fuck, bitch, motherfucker and nigger. In his article on Pryor, *The Real Slim Shady*, Rob Sheffield wrote:

The character Richard Pryor did best was the preacher, who almost heroically refuses to give any moral dignity to all this bullshit. Instead he insults the cripples, tells the deaf to kiss his arse, and warns the dead, 'If you think we gonna bury you with them diamonds, and shit, you got another thing coming' (McCluskey, A. T. 2008, p. 198).

Director and comedian Keenan Ivory Wayans said, "Richard Pryor made the blueprint for the progressive thinking of black comedians, unlocking that irreverent style" (Watkins, M. 2005). *The New York Times* described him as volatile

yet vulnerable, crass but sensitive, streetwise and cocky but somehow still diffident and anxious (2005). Watkins wrote that his monologues evoked the passions and foibles of all segments of black society, including working-class, church-going people and prostitutes, pimps and hustlers (Watkins, M. 2005).

Pryor's adulthood began to mirror his parents' behavior that he endured as a child. In the 1970s he went on drug binges that culminated in setting himself on fire, treated women as disposable sexual objects, and threatened a succession of wives at gunpoint. In 1979, he flew to Kenya with his then wife after she hauled him out of a house full of prostitutes and drugs. "The only people you saw were black [in Kenya]," Pryor said. "At the hotel, on television, in stores, on the street, in the newspapers, at restaurants, running the government, on advertisements. Everywhere." He turned to his wife, Jennifer and said, "You know what? There are no niggers here. ... The people here, they still have their self-respect, their pride" (Jackson, D. 2005).

In *Pryor Convictions* Pryor 'that he left Africa, 'regretting ever having uttered the word nigger on a stage or off it.

To this day I wish I'd never said the word. I felt its lameness. It was misunderstood by people. They didn't get what I was talking about. Neither did I ... So I vowed never to say it again. (1997)

At the age of just 17, Hicks was a star at the Comedy Workshop in his hometown when he was still a student. In the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s he worked his way around the US comedy circuit. In the mid-1980s, Hicks became a regular face on television. In 1987 he moved to New York and a year later he quit drugs and alcohol, which were affecting his ability to perform. Although he attended Alcoholics Anonymous meetings, Hicks didn't renounce his drug use, saying in performances that he had some great times on drugs. In a 12-month period he performed 300 times in New York. In 1990 Hicks released his first album, *Dangerous*, made an HBO special, *One Night Stand*, and appeared at the *Just For Laughs* festival in Montreal (Outhwaite, P. 2014). He performed in London and

found a wide audience where he “delivered acid home truths about the USA, which, to Hicks, stood for ‘United States of Advertising’” (Lahr, J. 1993). “Anyone here in advertising? Kill yourself” (Cavendish, D. 2014).

British comedian, Eddie Izzard said that Hicks shocked people because they were surprised that he would say things like “that”. Hicks’ friend and fellow comedian, Brett Butler believed that Hicks’ strong views about culture and society were an indication of the comedian’s goal in life. “It was Jesus, Bill wanted to be... He wanted to be Christ at his angriest” (Cromelin, R. 2005). Bill Hicks’ friend, Richard Jeni, said that comedians could tell the truth because they were responsible only for themselves but that – unlike Hicks – most don’t for fear of reprisal (Edwards, R. 1994). Another American comedian, Richard Belzer said that the nature of Hicks’ material was not universally applauded and accepted because it challenged the status quo and could upset certain political sensibilities in the audience and corporate structures (Edwards, R. 1994). “America is a place that you love and hate at the same time,” Belzer said, “Everything is here, every possible evil and good. It’s very frustrating for someone like Bill who lays himself open with his heart and mind, to see the hypocrisy and contradictions of what we could really be and what we are” (Edwards, R. 1994).

Hicks’ friend Kevin Booth told the *New Yorker* magazine that Hicks was the first person he had met whose goal was to be enlightened (Lahr, J. 2003). At various times in his life, Hicks had meditated, studied Hindu texts, taken hallucinogens and searched for UFOs to make some larger spiritual and intellectual connection (Hicks, B. 2004). “To me, the comic is the guy who says ‘Wait a minute’, as the consensus forms,” Hicks said, “He’s the antithesis of the mob mentality. The comic is a flame – like Shiva the Destroyer, toppling idols no matter what they are. He keeps cutting everything back to the moment” (Lahr, J. 1993).

The questioning of authority, a foundation of black comedy, came naturally to Hicks since the days alone in his room listening intently to a black man’s point of view. Matt Stone and Trey Parker who arrived after Hicks’ death in 1994, however, saw

dissent as more of a comic tool than a form of expression. Hicks took on the difficult task of mixing comedy with profundity to express his dissent.

The world is like a ride at an amusement park, and when you choose to go on it, you think it's real, because that's how powerful our minds are. And the ride goes up and down and round and round and it has thrills and chills and it's very brightly coloured and it's very loud. And it's fun, for a while. Some people have been on the ride for a long time, and they begin to question, 'Is this real? Or is this just a ride?' And other people have remembered, and they come back to us and they say 'Hey! Don't worry, don't be afraid – ever – because... this is just a ride. And we kill those people. 'Shut him up we have a lot invested in this ride! Shut him up! Look at my furrows of worry; look at my big bank account, and my family. This has to be real' (Hicks, B. 2004).

A comic who shared Hicks' insightful anger, Louis C.K., came to prominence about a decade after Bill Hicks died in 1994. C.K. presented himself as a 'regular guy with regular life, a regular wife and two children, who thinks funny and finds himself in extraordinary circumstances. His reaction to being abandoned by his father as a child can also be seen as extraordinary. His mother raised C.K. and his three sisters after their father, Luis Szekely, a Hungarian-Mexican economist, left the family home when C.K. was 10 years-old. When asked in an interview in *Rolling Stone* in 2011 if his dad was now part of his life he replied, not so much, and changed the subject (Weiner, J. 2011). In an episode of his television show *Louie* his character – based on him – started to vomit for no reason. A doctor decided it was because in a few days he was due to visit his "estranged father". The episode followed his relentless anxiety and ultimate failure to knock as he made it to his father's door. He fled on a motorbike and speedboat in a comical takeoff of a chase scene from a movie (Lyttelton, O. 2012).

Balding, ordinary looking, Louis C.K., presented himself as an 'average Joe' in part by mass-emailing his fans with intentional typographical errors to make them appear more personal while incidentally making outrageous comments. In an

article in *The Atlantic* online, Adrienne Lafrance (2014) wrote that Louis C.K.'s regular-guy shtick permeated everything – the plain black T-shirts, the self-deprecating humour, his Twitter bio – “I am a comedian and a person and a guy who is sitting here” (2014).

In contrast to his contrived image, in 2010, he tweeted irregular comments about controversial republican politician, Sarah Palin, including:

Louis C.K. on 01/09/2010:

“@SarahPalinUSA kudos to your dirty hole, you fucking jackoff cunt-face jazzy wondergirl”

“I just want to say that Sarah Palin has NEVER eaten ANY babies. I know that for a fact. But she’s still a cunt. But I really respect her.”

Sources: Twitter | Web Archive

Louis C.K. on 21/05//2010:

“I have a great idea how to plug the oil leak in the gulf of mexico. kick sarah pallin right in her stupid vagina. Then plug the leak.”

Sources: Twitter | Web Archive

These comments created some debate among political and social media commentators but little public reaction. Five years after the tweets, C.K. apologised to Palin when he met her at the *Saturday Night Live* 40th anniversary party (Grossman, S. 2015).

New York writer, Sarah Seltzer, online that C.K. is, ‘beloved by some progressives as one of the smartest, most self-aware people working in comedy today, yet he hardly has clean hands.’ Secondly, she wrote, it seemed like C.K. had at least partially absorbed the message that you can hate a female politician as much as you want, but crude sexism won’t actually strike a blow for your ideals. In fact, it only

continues to advance sexism as a legitimate tool to silence and shame powerful women (Seltzer, S. 2015).

Louis C.K. spent his early years in his father's native Mexico and grew up in Newton, an affluent suburb of Boston. He was an average student, brought up by a single mother along with three sisters. "Eighth and ninth grade were two solid years of dropping acid, snorting coke when somebody had it, Quaaludes, an alarming amount of pot, mescaline, drinking. By the time I got to high school, I was a recovered drug addict," he said (Weiner, J. 2011).

After completing high school, he was about to study film at New York University but baulked at the last minute. Instead he took a series of jobs—as an auto mechanic, a cook at a KFC, and, eventually a stand-up comic. James Parker wrote in *The Atlantic* (2012) that C.K.'s life choices left him with a chip on his shoulder. On cable television, C.K. said, "A fifty-five-year-old garbage man is a million times smarter than a twenty-eight-year-old with three PhD's. Especially smarter than him, because this idiot has been thinking about three things for, like, fifteen years." Parker decided that this was C.K.'s rebuke of his absent father – a Harvard educated economist – with whom he had a troubled relationship. It is also self-justification, "I may not have studied Hegel and Uta Hagen", C.K. is saying, "but I have slept in musty motels in fifty states, and I crashed a motorcycle, and I once found a computer on the street and reassembled it by hand, and that makes me a more interesting artist" (Marantz, A 2014).

In 2010, C.K. publicly honoured George Carlin at a tribute at the New York Public Library. "He gave me the courage to try," C.K. said. "And I thought, well OK, when you're done telling jokes about airplanes and dogs and you throw those away, what do you have left? You can only dig deeper, start talking about your feelings and who you are... I'm doing exactly what he taught me to do." (McGlynn, K. 2011)

In a *Rolling Stone* article by Jonah Weiner, *The Man Who Loves To Hate Himself*, C.K. said something that also rang true for Carlin, Hicks and Bruce. "I have a little bit of a

problem with authority," he says later. "I don't like being told what to do or say. It bothers me down in my guts" (2011).

Like fellow comedians Larry David and friend Sarah Silverman, Louis C.K. created a popular television comedy series built around a fictional version of himself. He accepted a deal from FX [a digital specialty channel] with a tiny budget in exchange for total artistic control, including a veto on the usual notes with suggestions from network executives (Reilly, I. 2015). Martyred single parents raised Lenny Bruce, Carlin and C.K.; Hicks fundamentally disowned both his parents. They are all defiant and suspicious of authority and developed angry and often abusive routines.

Jonah Weiner wrote in *Rolling Stone* (2011) that C.K. explored what it meant to be a decent person and an absurdist social critic in the Bill Hicks tradition. In a 2008 bit, he talked about how fantastic it was to be white, "I can get in a time machine and go to any time and it will be awesome when I get there. That is exclusively a white privilege. Black people can't fuck with time machines! A black guy in a time machine's like, 'Hey, anything before 1980, no, thank you.'" Correcting himself, he added, "I don't wanna go into the future and find out what happens to white people. We're gonna pay hard for this shit." African-American comedian Chris Rock described C.K. as "the blackest white guy I know. I called him a nigger a couple of days ago" (2011).

The father of two has also said if child abuse was legal then paedophiles wouldn't kill children, which, he 'alleged' would oddly be a good thing (Weiner, 2011). He also spoke of the insatiable drive of paedophiles to molest, considering the risk of jail, retribution and shame involved in such behavior. On the American comedy show, *Saturday Night Live* in May 2015, he told the audience:

"Child molesters are very tenacious people. It's so crazy because when you consider the risk in being a child molester, speaking not of even the damage you're doing, but the risk, there's no worse life available to a human than being a caught child molester. Yet they still do it, which you can only really surmise that it must be

really good, from their point of view. It must be amazing for them to risk so much. I love Mounds bars, it's my favorite thing, but there's a limit. They are delicious, and yet if someone said to me, 'You eat another Mounds bar and you'll go to jail and everybody will hate you', I would stop eating them. Because they do taste delicious but they don't taste as good as a young boy does to a child molester" (Brown, 2015).

The culture website, *Vulture* responded that C.K. brought his "edgy A-game."

... His amazing closing joke about child molestation surely got the job done. This is audacious stuff for live television, and while people are entitled to be offended, I LOL'd (Berkowitz, J. 2015).

However, the tabloid, *New York Post's Decider* website called his observations bizarre, adding pointedly, "We have little doubt that his ardent followers will be praising his 'bravery' and 'boldness' as this controversy unfolds" (Brown, 2015).

The public was aware of paedophilia in the community before the late 1980s but it was seen as an aberration. In the early 1980s comedy about child abuse was accepted in the right forum. The Australian comedy cabaret group, The Pete Best Beatles (PBB), performed a parody of a song about a child who asks her father about Father Christmas, to adoring crowds in clubs and pubs. In the PBB's version of the hit song, *My Little Angel*, the father was naked and sweaty. He tricked his daughter into performing fellatio by introducing his penis as a doll in the form of a notoriously short, bald rock star, to loud cheers and laughter and no apparent objections.

"How about giving Angry Anderson dolly a kiss."

"OK... Ooh daddy, Angry Anderson dolly is being sick."

"Here's two bob, don't tell your mother." – Peter Best Beatles, *Stench of Wealth* LP - 1985

By 1984 a huge increase of adults, in the U.S, in particular, reported being assaulted when they were children and a moral panic developed. People were going under hypnosis for anxiety or eating disorders and coming out of it accusing family members of child abuse based on 'recovered memories' (French, C. 2009). The panic was fueled by lurid personal accounts in the media and questionable stories about rape and incest, organised paedophile rings, satanic rituals and serial murders of children.

The McMartin Preschool case was one of the earliest and largest child sexual abuse cases in the U.S. In 1984, police arrested Ray McMartin, his sister Peggy Ann, mother, Peggy, and grandmother Virginia, as well as three other teachers on charges of child abuse and later satanic ritual. The saga inspired a film based on their story. The 28-month trial was the longest and costliest criminal prosecution in U.S. history (Schindehette, S. 1990). This case is often cited as triggering a wave of pre-school sexual abuse cases during the mid-1980s and unreliable evidence from children accusing teachers and childcare workers. The McMartin case drew attention from international media, and is still named as a symbol of the dangers and difficulty of using children's testimony (Schindehette, S. 1990).

Paedophilia, a topic that went largely unremarked before the 1980s, suddenly became major news as teachers, parents, priests and teenagers were accused and convicted of child abuse. Some were proved true although the British False Memory Society and the False Memory Syndrome Foundation in the U.S. disproved most accusations derived from recovered memories. In Britain rumours and accusations of sinister involvement by politicians in organised child abuse made headlines and were revisited in 1995 and in 2012 after the indecent assault charges against famous entertainers Jimmy Savile [posthumously] and Rolf Harris (BBC News. 2015).

The sexual abuse of children in the Church was rarely discussed in public before the 1970s, and it was not until the 1980s that the first proven cases of molestation by priests came to light, in the U.S. and Canada (BBC. 2014). In the 1990s, revelations began of widespread abuse. Additional cases of abuse were revealed in

more than a dozen countries and inquiries were held (BBC. 2014). Paedophilia was an emotional topic in the media; salacious news items, opinion pieces, rumour and case studies bombarded the community. It wasn't surprising that child abuse became a theme for comedians intending to tread the fine line between laughter and anger as it became harder to offend with obscenity, blasphemy and abuse.

It was during the tail end of moral panic about paedophilia, which had peaked and troughed since the 1980s, that a British comedy on public television station Channel 4, took a contentious stand. *Brass Eye*, a corrosive satire of TV news and current affairs, mocked the media for promoting social anxiety with extreme and unreliable reports and opinion. The original 1997 series ran broadcast six half-hour episodes, and returned for a special about paedophilia – *Paedogeddon!* – in 2001.

The conservative [British] *Daily Mail* described the creator of *Brass Eye*, Chris Morris, as the most hated man in Britain (Lonroth, L. 2013). In his biography of Morris, *Disgusting Bliss: The Brass Eye of Chris Morris* (2010), Lucian Randall described *Brass Eye*'s predecessor, *The Day Today*, as an awkward blend of the savage and the absurd (2010).

The satire is cruel – but then a lot of comedy is cruel. You really squirm. But then the really great comics are not necessarily the people you always laugh at, but the people who make you think, ooh, should I really be laughing at that? (2010)

The most experimental show of Morris', *Jam* (Channel 4, 2000), unsettled its audience through the mixing of conventions and absurd use of comedy in situations where a high level of seriousness was otherwise required; for example in its comedic approach to rape and infant mortality (Randall, L. 2010). Morris' later work and debut film *Four Lions* (2010) was a topical black comedy following a group of British Islamist terrorists and aspiring Jihads as they planned a suicide bombing in London.

With *Brass Eye* Morris caused public outrage and offence as he pushed his comedy further in its sustained attacks on certain sensitive subjects (Randall, 2010). The episode *Drugs* broadcast the duped comedian Bernard Manning sincerely warning against the dangers of 'Cake', a fictional drug, "if you're sick on this stuff, you can puke your fucking self to death. One girl threw up her own pelvis bone before she snuffed the lid. It's a fucking disgrace" (Randall, L. 2010). All the hoodwinked celebrities simply recited the absurd lines from cue cards written by Morris despite obvious clues to the deception.

"[Cake] stimulates the part of the brain called Shatner's Bassoon that deals with time perception so a second feels like a month. Almost sounds like fun, unless you are the Prague schoolboy who walked into the street straight in front of a tram. He thought he had a month to cross the street." – celebrity Noel Edmonds (*Brass Eye*, 2001)

A lot of the Morris comedy has been derived from anger. Where the anger came from is impossible to gauge, even for friends, wrote supporter Euan Ferguson in *The Guardian* in 2001. After a pleasant, some say idyllic, childhood he took a degree in zoology before spells in local radio where he was equally excited by the possibilities of the media and bored to distraction by its conventions (2001).

Chris Morris was born in 1962 in the village of Buckden, Cambridgeshire. It was a secure and stable middle class upbringing by loving, doctor parents. At the age of 10, he and his brothers, Tom and Ben, attended boarding school. Morris had a distinctive birthmark on his face and bad acne as a teenager but it didn't seem to be an issue with him or other boys (Randall, L. 2010). He didn't stand out at Stonyhurst College's St Mary's Hall because many boys there asserted themselves. Unremarkably for a boy growing up in the 1970s, he had a passion for cricket and the Rolling Stones.

"For a self-appointed scourge of the establishment, The London *Daily Mail* reported, "Chris Morris had the most conventional of backgrounds" L. Randall, L. 2010).

As a teenager Morris first heard the improvised comedy and ridiculous voices of dissident comic Kenny Everett on Capitol Radio. Everett later hosted an equally absurd comedy on television, which notably impersonated Barbara Streisand as her nose 'grew' to the size of a house and demolished the studio. Everett was a revelation for the young Morris. The inventive comic pranks of Humphrey Berkeley also touched a chord with him and his brother Tom. As an undergraduate in 1948, Berkeley sent hoax letters to headmasters of elite schools poking fun at the pomposity of the establishment. He later became an MP and published a book of the hoax letters in 1974, which came to the attention of Morris. Other influences included eccentric Spike Milligan's *Goon Show* on radio and the mischievous sketch satire of Peter Cook and Dudley Moore on television. He particularly enjoyed their anarchic and ruthless *Derek and Clive* comedy records issued during the rise of the punk movement in 1970s (Randall, L. 2010). After receiving his degree in zoology Morris joined several bands, including the Exploding Hamsters, and played bass for the popular Cambridge Footlights revue that had previously included Stephen Fry and Hugh Laurie. Soon he was hosting a radio show at Radio Cambridgeshire and his career took a more comic path, eventually to television.

After broadcasting six episodes in 1997, *Brass Eye* returned for a one-off special in 2001 concentrating on the new controversial subject in Britain – paedophilia. Euan Ferguson wrote in *The Guardian* (2001) that, *Paedogeddon: The Paedophile Special* had two main intentions. Firstly, to make people laugh. The truly telling laugh, Morris has said, is the laugh that escapes us despite our better judgment. Secondly, to make people think not just about the media, but their own confused attitude to children. Morris, a father of two, was worried by his own heightened senses of love and worry and genuine fear that every parent feels. Morris was angered, Ferguson continued, at the “deliberate stoking by the media of a culture of fear”, as if a parent didn't have enough to worry about without being told at every turn, to the strains of mawkish melodrama – “This could be your child - your child could be next” (Ferguson, E. 2001).

After an eight-year old girl, Sarah Payne, was abducted and murdered in 2000, the tabloid *News of the World* began an anti-paedophile campaign and printed hundreds of stories about the most abusive British child abusers, promising to name all 110,000 on the sex offenders register – “virtually one for every square mile of the country” (Randall, L. 2010). Nightly paedophile hunts were organised by mobs as soon as names were published, causing many offenders to leave their homes in panic. Cars were burnt down, innocent families attacked and one offender in Manchester killed himself when his home was surrounded. Making a comedy show about paedophilia at this time was a perilous project to take on (Randall, L. 2010).

In his sympathetic opinion piece about Chris Morris Ferguson wrote:

Moral outrage, as we are used to it today, is nothing more than acute self-indulgence. Sending flowers to the roadside for Sarah Payne is self-indulgent, if done by those who didn't know her; it's a meaningless convulsion, emotional onanism. (2001):

Like all of Morris's satires, the 'paedophile special' mixed absurd fictional skits – a child molester disguised as a school and getting away with it for 12 years –with the reality of conning unaware participants into making ridiculous statements. The chairman of the 'Family and Child Protection Group' held up a [bogus] postcard of a man naked apart from white underpants with the slogan 'Kids! I can help you with your homework – telephone 077 999 888'. “What sort of sick person puts this up in a telephone box?” he asked.

The show included a long list of fooled celebrities. Gary Lineker, sports commentator and former international footballer, warned against a secret code used by paedophiles when sending text messages to each other's mobile phones. "Baltimora. This means I'm running at them now with my trousers down" (O'Neill, S. 2001). Morris, posing as a reporter was filmed, at a distance, perhaps to heighten the voyeurism, as he humiliated an actual convicted paedophile in a park– “you are

a perv, a slot badger, bush dodger, you're a small bean-regarder, a nut administrator, a una-bummer, you're a *Free Willy*" Brass Eye, 2001). "Yes well you just mentioned some of the names we have to put up with every day," the child abuser said, as he shook his head dismayed, "and it's just another form of racism" (Brass Eye, 2001).

By exposing the ignorance of public figures about the reality of paedophile crime, Morris sought to satirise the kind of hysteria drummed up by media that blighted discussion about child sex offenders. More than 900 complaints were made to the Independent Television Commission, almost 250 complaints to the Broadcasting Standards Commission, and 2,000 complaints to Channel 4, making *Paedogeddon* the most complained-about television program in British television history at that time (Lockyer, S. Attwood, F. 2009). The National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children said much of the satire trivialised child abuse. The program was accused of ignoring the true nature of paedophilia. It gave no indication of the suffering of the victims or the difficulties faced by the police and other agencies in detecting persistent offenders. The producers argued that that was not their aim (O'Neill, S. 2001).

In the 21st Century the proportions of the abuse of children by members of the Catholic Church such as priests and nuns escalated and became so endemic that Royal and government commissions, investigations and public hearings have been conducted worldwide. Thousands of adults abused as children, and parents who lost their children to suicide, mental torment or drug related deaths demanded to be heard. British celebrities such as Rolf Harris and celebrity manager Max Clifford were jailed for child abuse. The posthumous revelation that the celebrity Jimmy Savile was a serial child abuser, instigated investigations of more than 1,400 men – including 261 high-profile individuals – over allegations of past child abuse. *The Guardian* reported Chief Constable Simon Bailey, who ran Operation Hydrant, the national coordinating team that oversaw the various inquiries, as saying the scale of alleged child abuse across society – both recent and non-recent – was stark (Laville, S. 2015). Victims of non-recent abuse identified hundreds of institutions as places where exploitation took place (Laville, S. 2015). These included 154 schools,

75 children's homes, 40 religious institutions, 14 medical establishments, 11 community groups, nine prisons or young offender institutions, nine sports venues and 28 other places including military establishments. Bailey warned that the number of victims could run into the hundreds of thousands, and called for much more support for survivors of child abuse (Laville, S. 2015).

The massive global reports of child abuse by people from almost all walks of life – teachers, celebrities, the military, politicians, humanitarians, religious devotees and shopkeepers – could be seen as negating Morris's contention that child abuse is not endemic. Although it could also be argued in a few years time that Operation Hydrant was another media driven witch-hunt and could even inspire Chris Morris to broadcast another controversial special. Morris never commented on the criticism, let alone apologised for his satire. He deliberately made no response to any critical stories in the media about him and his work. His rationale for silence was that he wanted viewers to judge the program on its own merit (Randall, L. 2010).

Louis C.K. became famous for heaving brutally honest truths at his audience, wrapped in comical observations. On an episode of *Louie* [season 1, Ep. 6], a fictionalised version of his life, the scripted story depicted a female member of the audience interrupting his act, and her subsequent humiliation (Yahr, E. 2014). He joked, among other things, that she would have never been born had her mother not raped a homeless Chinese man; he asked her to die of Aids; he said that she was the worst thing that ever happened to America – above slavery, Pearl Harbor, and 9/11 combined; he called her dead mother a whore and a cunt and he finishes his diatribe by repeatedly calling her a cunt. In the episode his 'fellow comics' – all male – lent him their support by endorsing his course of action. His character [Louie] later justified his actions because, he said, she was not a nice person because a nice person would not interrupt him (Yahr, E. 2014).

One lingering critique of Sigmund Freud's writings on humour was that he normalised the passive role of the woman and presented the aggressive behaviour of the man as natural – conduct that today would be referred to as sexual

harassment (Reilly, I. 2015). Here C.K. fits this profile – the string of derogatory jokes presented in this scene needlessly dehumanised and objectified the woman, leaving her with no opportunities to meaningfully respond to her oppressor (Reilly, I. 2015).

Unlike Bruce, Carlin and Hicks, C.K. has an inconsistent and unclear comedy ethic. He was a sharp commentator on our social and cultural landscape, and promoted by some critics and fans as a feminist and sensitive comedian who also admitted in 2017 to accusations of masturbating in front of vulnerable women [his upcoming film was cancelled in the backlash] (Jones, N. 2017). In 2014 he wrote a moving episode for his television series [season 4, episode 3] about the issues fat people faced that resonated with people of all shapes and sizes (Yahr, E. 2014).

He may have shown sensitivity to overweight people but women, it seemed, didn't warrant the same treatment. "You should never rape anyone," C.K. said on stage, "Unless you have a reason. Like you want to fuck someone, and they won't let you. In which case what other option do you have. How else are you supposed to have an orgasm in their body if you don't rape them? Like what the fuck? Ah, OK. That's fucked up" (Berman, J. 2012).

In an episode of *Louie*, his character sexually assaulted a woman he had lusted after for a long time. C.K., in this instance did what black comedians do best – tackled a difficult subject, inspired opinions and got people talking. Feminist writer Ruby Hamad wrote, in relation to this episode, on the Australian current affairs site, *Eureka Street*, that Bill Hicks used comedy as a medium for exposing society's worst ills. Hicks, she wrote, aimed to enlighten as well as entertain as he told what he perceived as the truth (Hamad, R. 2012).

But what is the 'truth' about rape, and can we ever laugh at it?" Hamad asked, "A friend of mine, Zach Rhinier, works as a stand-up comedian in New York City. When I asked him if it is ever okay to joke about rape, his response echoed that of many feminists – 'only if it mocks the rapist, but not a victim' (2012).

Former Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission Kate Jenkins said at a conference in 2015 that violence against women is globally recognised as one of the most systemic, widespread and pervasive human rights violations. In a time when there is more government and social focus on the issues of violence against women, rape jokes are the new 'anti-establishment' joke. 'Political correctness gone mad' is as an instant defence against criticism of a joke demeaning women – why are women off limits? You can joke about blokes". But most comedians don't joke about men as an entity to abuse. As much as male comedians want to be seen as offensive and crossing the line, men empathise with men, and that can encourage a superior and defensive attitude to women, especially after feminism changed the social landscape in the 1960s and 1970s.

The rape joke has become a cause celeb for comedians like Louis C.K. who says there is a fight between comedians and feminists because "feminists can't take a joke". C.K. also said that he learnt something from criticism about his comedy involving rape, which admittedly had more satirical value than Carr's one-liners. "This woman said that rape is something that polices their lives – they have a narrow corridor – they can't go out late, they can't go to certain neighbourhoods, they have to dress a certain way – that's part of me now that it wasn't before. And I can still enjoy a good rape joke" (Stewart, J 2016). That comment about the limits on women to live a full life has been a common truism that the observational C.K. should have been aware of growing up, so quoting it as a revelation in his late 30s is more of a reflection on him. He goes on to say women should listen to men and men should listen to women and then women should "shut the fuck up". Irony? (Stewart, J. 2016)

Bill Hicks' use of freedom of speech was more about spouting his opinions on freedom and choice, and exposing what he saw as manipulative propaganda. He was aggressive and angry but mostly with faceless people representing his 'social enemy'. "I smoke. If this bothers anyone, I suggest you look around at the world in which we live and shut your fuckin' mouth" (Decadent Lifestyle, 2013). "About

drugs, about alcohol, about pornography and smoking and everything else. What business is it of yours what I do, read, buy, see, say, think, who I fuck, what I take into my body – as long as I do not harm another human being on this planet? And for those who are having a little moral dilemma in your head about how to answer that question, I'll answer it for you. NONE of your fucking business. Take that to the bank, cash it, and go fucking on a vacation out of my life".

Hicks said that saying the unsayable was his job. People, he believed, watch television not to think. He said he would like to "stir things up to see what happens" on television but was uncertain whether he wanted to be part of the television industry. "Show business or art – these are the choices". In 1993 Hicks lamented the inability to express opinions on television to John Lahr who recounted them in an article in *The New Yorker*.

Comedy in the States has been totally gutted he told [Lahr]. "It's commercialised. They don't have people on TV who have points of view, because that defies the status quo, and we can't have that in the totalitarian mind-control government that runs the fuckin' airwaves" (Lahr, J. 1993).

In 1984 he made his first appearance on the popular talk show, *Late Show With David Letterman*. Hicks appeared ten more times on the show (Lahr, J. 2011). On October 1 1993, a performance by Hicks for *Late Night with David Letterman* was removed from the recorded broadcast that aired later that evening after Letterman producers told Hicks that his routine was too offensive for their audience. In 2009 David Letterman publicly took responsibility for the censorship without explaining his reasons (Lahr, J. 1993). Hicks' deleted routine included discussions about Jesus and the cross, the incongruity of the Easter Bunny and a diatribe based on the contentious subject of abortion in America (Lahr, J.1993).

You know who's really bugging me these days? These pro-lifers . . . [smattering of applause]. You ever look at their faces? ... "I'm pro-life!" [Here Hicks makes a pinched face of hate and fear; his lips are pursed]. "I'm pro-life!" Boy, they look it, don't they? They just exude joie de vivre. You just want

to hang with them and play Trivial Pursuit all night long. [Audience chuckles]. “You know what bugs me about them? If you’re so pro-life, do me a favour—don’t lock arms and block medical clinics. If you’re so pro-life, lock arms and block cemeteries [audience laughs] ... I want to see pro-lifers at funerals opening caskets –‘Get out!’ Then I’d really be impressed by their mission [audience laughs and applauds]” (deleted routine on *Letterman*).

In his essay, *The Goat Boy Rises*, John Lahr (1993) wrote that a friend of Hicks called the comedian to tell him about a pro-life commercial she had seen on the Letterman show, and suggested a direct link to the censorship.

“The networks are delivering an audience to the advertisers,” Hicks said later. “They showed their hand. They’ll continue to pretend they’re a hip talk show. And I’ll continue to be me...” (Hicks, B. 2004)

Hicks sent Lahr a 39-page letter after the Letterman incident, drawing comparisons to an event forty years previously when in the same [Ed Sullivan] theatre Elvis Presley was censored from the waist down – “now Hicks had been banned from the head up”. Hicks also quoted another influential rock icon, “As Bob Dylan said, the only way to live outside the law is to be totally honest. So I will remain lawless” (Hicks, B. 2004).

Yet again, honesty was ‘owned’ by a comedian who challenged and provoked. Was it a self-defensive action from an insecure and self-interested artist with a pretention to greatness? Bruce stood on stage and read pages and pages of court transcript, painting his enemies as liars and bullies and him as a victim. Richard Pryor quoted Bruce’s honesty as his greatest influence. He then had numerous affairs behind several wives backs, set himself on fire freebasing cocaine and, drug affected on stage at an AIDS benefit, told the audience, “you Hollywood faggots can kiss my rich, happy black arse”. John Lahr described Hicks, sympathetically, as “outraged, obsessed and bewildered” about his treatment by Letterman and his producers (Lahr, J. 2011).

The tone and length of the comedian's letter revealed a man who saw himself as a martyr. Hicks' friend, Brett Butler had spoken of his desire to be a Christ-like figure. His network television censorship wasn't that outrageous an action in politically conservative America. George Carlin did most of his controversial work on HBO, a cable television enterprise that had fewer restrictions and a strong liberal audience. Hicks knew he was entering controversial territory with jokes about the right-to-life movement – or “only jokes” as he described them, suggesting they had no controversial content (Hick, B. 2004).

In the 1980s and 1990s – a time when controversial black comedy was largely in hiatus – the religious right [right-wing Christian political factions] developed a platform labelled 'Family Values'. Religious broadcaster Pat Robertson's failed bid for the Presidency in 1988 led to the creation of a powerful political group, the 'Christian Coalition'. The group embraced a collection of key moral issues, including returning prayer to public schools, condemning homosexuality and ending abortion. (Brewer, E. Taylor, K. 2011) In the late 1980s, The American Family Association [AFA] run by Donald Wildmon, an ordained minister in the United Methodist Church, campaigned to clean up “decadent and offensive television programming” by boycotting sponsors. The AFA launched boycotts or protests over shows including *NYPD Blue*, *60 Minutes*, *Oprah*, *Saturday Night Live*, *The Wonder Years*, *Will & Grace* and *Ellen* (Brewer, E. Taylor, K 2011).

At the time of Bill Hicks' censorship [October 1 1993], David Letterman's show on CBS had been on air for only a month. It was more commercially orientated than his previous NBC show and broadcast in an earlier timeslot. Letterman had previously fought a losing battle with Jay Leno to replace the retiring NBC *Tonight Show* incumbent, Johnny Carson. The bitter and protracted circumstances of the fight for the 'late night prize' were considered so intriguing that it inspired the book, *The Late Shift: Letterman, Leno and the Network Battle for the Night* by journalist Bill Carter, and the film, *The Late Shift* (1994). Carter wrote in his *New York Times* article that when NBC eventually chose Leno, Letterman was devastated (1993).

Despite insecurities about his career, Letterman and crew moved to CBS and the *Late Show with David Letterman* began on August 30, 1993. There was pride and money at stake. CBS offered a reputed \$42 million over three years to Letterman (Carter, B. 1993). He wasn't following the main act, Johnny Carson, after midnight any more – and the potential liberty that presented – he *was* the main act. It was likely, in the beginning at least, he felt pressure to succeed, impress his new employers and not cause any grief.

Only a month after Letterman's debut on CBS, on October 1, Bill Hicks walked on to the *Late Show* set. The American Family Association was still a powerful organisation and reflected the conservative influence in America. Abortion was high on the conservative political agenda. In 1993 there were several anti-abortion campaigning organisations including *Right-to-Life*, *Concerned Women For America*, *Operation Rescue* and *Priests for Life* that lobbied politicians and the media, advertised and organised protests. In the same year Bill Hicks was making jokes about powerful anti-abortion organisations on national television, a number of abortionists were being killed and clinics firebombed (Department of Justice, 1998).

After cutting him from the show the *Late Show* producers told Hicks that their CBS audience was more conservative than the audience on NBC. Hicks, in his 39-page letter to Lahr, looked deeper.

"The fact of the matter is, this vast empire of network television called CBS are a bunch of shameless cowards who kowtow to very organised, although minority, special interest groups in America. They fear losing corporate sponsorship, and that is the threat these special interest groups promise" (Hicks, B. 2009).

Hicks was communicating his anger through a private letter to a journalist, and taking this conflict of commercial interests personally. Like Bruce, who obsessed about his obscenity trials, he was obsessing about being cut from the Letterman show. Hicks had developed from a boy who locked himself in his room to idolise outsiders that infiltrated the inside (Allen and Pryor), to the outsider the 'inside' rejected. In his letter to Lahr he quoted Thomas Jefferson and the intellectual Noam Chomsky in reference to himself – "the responsibility of the intellectual is to

tell the TRUTH and expose the lies” – and referred to Letterman’s producers as foetus and pro-lifers as a pack of dogs. The political rhetoric in his letter straddled a similar fine line that Bruce and Carlin walked – self-interest entwined with genuine political statement about free speech and social change.

In June 1993 Hicks was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer and given only several months to live (Outhwaite, P. 2014). In severe pain he was not far from death but kept his condition a secret, including during the censored performance on *Late Night With David Letterman*. He played his final show in New York on January 6, 1994 and moved back to his parents’ house in Little Rock soon after. Hicks died on the 26 February at the age of 32 (Outhwaite, P. 2014).

At the memorial service, Hicks’s brother Steve read a piece Hicks had written and requested be read, “I left in laughter, and in truth, and wherever truth, love and laughter abide, I am there in spirit” (Encyclopaedia of Arkansas History and Culture, 2014). Almost 16 years after the Bill Hicks performance was hastily removed from the Letterman show, on January 30, 2009, David Letterman invited Hicks’ mother Mary on the show to talk about her son’s life and work. In his opening introduction he took responsibility for censoring Hicks’ act. “Afterwards in considering what I had seen, and it was an error of judgement on my part, just a mistake, I made a decision born from insecurity. I said, I don’t think we want to have that on the show, looking back, I don’t know why, and I’m sorry that I did” (YouTube, 2013).

John Lahr wrote in his introduction to *Love All The People*, a collection of Hicks’ work (Hicks, B. 2009), that since his death, history has caught up with the comedy of Bill Hicks:

In the early nineties he was already talking about Iraq and the first President Bush. “If Bush had died there,” he said in a bit about why we should kill Bush ourselves instead of launching 22 cruise missiles at Baghdad, in response to his alleged attempted assassination, “there would have been no loss of innocent life.” In a culture made increasingly woozy by spin-doctors, Hicks’

straight talking about political chicanery was a few years ahead of his time. If Hicks didn't pave the way for comic civic disobedience in such popular TV shows as *Politically Incorrect with Bill Maher* and *The Daily Show*, [then] he was an immanence of subterranean rumblings. Hicks mocked society's enchanters – advertisers, TV Networks, rock-n-roll icons, religious fanatics and politicians – with the sure knowledge that, as in all fairytales, only the disenchanted are free. He was what only a great comedian can be for any age: an enemy of boundaries, a disturber of the peace, a bringer of insight and of joy, a comic distillation of his own rampaging spirit (Hicks, B. 2009).

The question then is why he was aggrieved and surprised to an obsessive degree, by his comments relating to a highly contentious subject on commercial television being censored? In many provocative comics' eyes it would have been a 'badge of honour'. He made points about, war, commercialism, freedom, and integrity in his comedy. Hicks could have made less of his censorship over one contentious subject and more of his sharp observations and opinions about America and its values in other forums. Like his comic heroes, Woody Allen and Richard Pryor – he ultimately looked inward. Despite being an outsider, Hicks wanted the mainstream success of the comedians he identified with as an adolescent. Despite his concern about conservative bullying, he was writing to a sympathetic compatriot – John Lahr – who wrote the foreword to Hicks' book) that it was he who was unjustly treated, not freedom of speech. The 39-page handwritten letter was less a cry for help or a call to arms as a therapeutic exercise to remove the pressure of injustice that he felt as a "speaker of the truth".

In 2001, the same year *Brass Eye* created a huge outrage in Britain, the same decade Louis C.K. pushed himself into dangerous comic territory and eight years after Bill Hick's death as a comic martyr, the satire *The Chaser* debuted on Australian television. For years *The Chaser* group, in its various guises on television, in print and on stage, proudly pushed the envelope with political pranks and sharp satire, including a controversial skit mocking what they saw as the hypocrisy of not speaking ill of the dead.

*Princess Di was just a slut for sex, when they looked in the car wreck,
her dress was wet with Arab semen stain....
Kerry Packer was a brothel chief, a tax cheat and a kidney thief
and procreating Jamie was the worst mistake he made.
But all that was forgotten, once he took his final breath,
yes even cunts turn into top blokes after death.
(Give me the remote, 2007)*

The Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd was moved to comment, "I have said before that I have enjoyed the *Chaser's* work but I would say to those guys at *The Chaser* this is absolutely disgusting. Guys, you really need to lift your game, guys this is just wrong" (Shubert, M. 2007).

The Chaser satirical team started a larger storm of anger in 2009. They broadcast a skit on their ABC-TV show, *The Chaser's War on Everything*, apparently lampooning the *Make-A-Wish Foundation*, which arranged activities for children with serious illnesses.

The segment portrayed dying children – played by child actors – being offered miserly gifts like pencils, instead of trips to Disneyland or meeting heroes and celebrities because, "they are going to die anyway". *Make-A-Wish Foundation's* spokesperson, Janita Friend, said she feared portraying the foundation 'granting dying wishes' would traumatise some children (Cooper, M. 2009).

If you put yourself in the position of a family or a child who is having a wish granted, a lot of our children do not pass away, and the child might be at home watching saying 'Oh my God, I'm having a wish, I'm going to die'," she said. "It's pretty horrific" (Cooper, M. 2009).

ABC viewers vented their anger on the broadcaster's website. One father of a terminally ill seven-year-old boy wrote that his wife was consoling their son about

his pending fate and agonising death, and the show did nothing but exacerbate the issue (Cooper, M. 2009). Reactions posted on the ABC website included:

My God. It's utterly unfathomable that these arseholes could be that callous and unfeeling in the search for a cheap laugh.

Chaser supporters I spoke to said the satire was about highlighting the trivialising of a serious disease when money should be spent on research not Disneyland trips. It was still a soft target that was not in the zeitgeist and not in the league of the usual satirical targets – racism, iconoclasm, sexuality and bigotry. *The Chaser* group never made clear the intention of the skit. *Chaser* member, Craig Reucassel said it was obvious the sketch was a "bit of black comedy", but he did not think it would offend as many people as it had. "We apologise to anyone obviously who's been offended by it but this is the nature of comedy – sometimes you offend people," Reucassel said in a statement (Howell, G. 2009). He made another defensive statement as the attacks got louder, "We certainly weren't meaning to offend *Make-a-Wish Foundation*". [*The Chaser*] wasn't really seeking to provoke a response to be honest." This came after several bold remarks before the incident about their aim to offend, like this from Julian Morrow – "There's a fine line in comedy. We generally find it by stepping over it" (Turnbull, S. 2007). The ABC suspended the show for two weeks and the team was forced to broadcast a public, uncomfortable and defensive apology (Dari, J. 2009).

On May 26, 2010 – less than 12 months after the controversial skit – in a description of *The Chaser* app on *The Chaser* webpage, they wrote:

We've focused our efforts where they were most likely to reach the largest possible audience of people who can be offended (Chaser, 2010).

This presumably included sick children and parents of terminally ill children. *The Chaser* team has sent mixed messages about their intentions as satirists, mainly through co-founder, Julian Morrow. Delivering the annual Andrew Olle Media lecture in 2009, he said they regretted that despite the ABC withdrawing the sketch

it was posted on YouTube to an even larger secondary audience. "I wish our geek fans had done us a favour and not helped that sketch find a larger audience" (Morrow, J. 2009). Yet, in the DVD of the third season of *The Chaser's War on Everything*, a graphic appeared stating that the *Make-a-Wish* skit had been deleted by the ABC and couldn't be included in the DVD. Then another line appears – "try youtube" [you can find it on YouTube]. When you are forced to make a humiliating public "sincere" group apology, perhaps you want to claw back some comic credibility. It could be likened it to a schoolboy apologising for bullying a weaker boy and when the time was right, gloating about his disingenuousness.

In the past *The Chaser* team has described the show as comedy rather than satire. In 2001, Julian Morrow suggested that much of *The Election Chaser* was simply a 'piss take'. "If it's just funny, we'll do it, regardless of the fact that it's superficial or shallow, because that's the kind of people we are (Turnbull, S. 2007)." This statement would imply that the skit ending with the statement, "[sick kids] are going to die anyway", so don't spend money on them, was all for laughs. Yet, under pressure to respond to mounting anger about the sick children skit, Morrow and the ABC's director of television, Kim Dalton, said in a joint statement, *The Chaser* was "a satirical program aimed at provoking debate and providing social commentary on topical issues". They did not explain the purpose of the offending sketch in that context (Jensen, E. 2009).

It became plain as this issue continued that Chris Morris's non-response to public outrage is the clearest statement to make. By trying to explain the intent and grudgingly apologising, the credibility of the satire is compromised. It got worse. *The Sydney Morning Herald* quoted cast member Craig Reucassel as apologising and encouraging people who were offended – not the offenders [them] – to donate to the *Make-a-Wish Foundation* (Jensen, E. 2009). *The Chaser* team continued to appear emotionally removed from the subjects they lampooned.

It could be argued they were required to apologise by their employers, the ABC. Lenny Bruce, Bill Hicks, George Carlin didn't have employers – they answered to themselves. But Bruce refused to back down on issues of offence and was jailed,

Carlin was arrested and faced the Supreme Court and Hicks refused to accept censorship despite the likelihood of being banned from television, which would badly affect his rising career. When threatened with death from terrorists or lawsuits from powerful and wealthy celebrities like Tom Cruise – who they depicted as a closet gay in an episode deriding Scientology – the *South Park* creators didn't look for excuses or issue apologies for the sake of their broadcaster. They maintained their ruthless level of satire. So where does *The Chaser's* apology fit?

The Chaser built an identity as a group of sharp, well-educated mates with the independence to speak their comical minds. They had the confidence a private education often affords, but with no guiding light or member that was not a like-minded school friend. Although respected television identity Andrew Denton produced several series until 2004, before questions about the validity of their satire surfaced. The members of the group didn't have the insular, streetwise or brutal upbringing of predecessors. The strength of Lenny Bruce, Carlin and Pryor, who collectively laid the foundation of modern black comedy, was their understanding of the subject, confidence in their opinions and defiance when faced with retribution.

The satirical magazine, *The Chaser* was launched in 1999. Co-creators Charles Firth, Chas Licciardello and Dominic Knight edited a school newspaper as students at the elite Sydney Grammar School. They met Craig Reucassel, Julian Morrow and Andrew Hansen at prestigious Sydney University and they launched *The Chaser* soon after graduating (Turnbull, S. 2007). Chris Taylor joined later and spoke of his gratitude to the others for letting him into their clique (Cormack, L. 2010). The group – apart from Reucassel – were educated at private schools and Andrew Hansen was captain of The Hills Grammar School in Kenthurst. Sue Turnbull wrote in *Metro*, that *The Chaser* team's mix of silly comedy, political satire and line-crossing stunts earned them a loyal audience, which embraced both their satire and their 'private schoolboy' larrikinism (2009). Like another comedy team, *Monty Python*, they were male, white, university educated, likeminded and friends. The set of *The Chaser's War on Everything*, had a shabby couch, a T-Shirt emblazoned with the

word 'dongers' hanging from a cupboard, a giant dartboard, 'free drinks' poster, underwear hanging from a bookcase and traffic signs on the walls. The set was a giant metaphor for a [school] boy's club or prefect's study (2010).

The Chaser's War on Everything and *The Chaser's Election* specials – 2001, 2004, 2007, and 2010 – consisted of pranks and skits targeting hypocrisy, stupidity and injustice. But like the fictional world of *South Park* there was a large degree of juvenile behavior, - including Chas walking around a hardware store with a toilet seat stuck to his backside. Their reaction to the September 11 attack on the World Trade Centre in their satirical newspaper days, showed an unsophisticated lack of empathy and purpose. The story was headlined, *WORLD TRADE CENTRE JANITOR DECLARES: "Best sickie ever"*, and detailed his gloat about not being one of the hundreds of victims who leapt to their deaths or were incinerated (2001). In hindsight, *The Chaser's* Craig Reucassel said they didn't "get it right". "I think we're fine with being seen as crossing the line as long as the message is right, and there are times when we haven't got that right and we'd probably have to admit that September 11 was one of them," Reucassel said. "Not because we shouldn't have gone as early as we did, but because we didn't actually get it right, because we didn't have the benefit of time. Time often reinforces or highlights the satire" (Idato, M, 2004).

Rather than admitting the supercilious nature of the story inspired by gross human tragedy, he went into the machinations of comedy and how it could have been improved. That can be related to a sense of privilege and disconnect. There is a common thread with *South Park* and *The Chaser's* approach to satire – tragedy as simply a tool for their comedy. Lenny Bruce forecast the franchising of religion with his skit, *Religious Inc.* and he was intuitive about the abuse of children in the Catholic Church. Veteran filmmaker and comic, Mel Brooks' preoccupation with Hitler came from his instinctive sense of duty that as a Jewish comic that he was obliged to represent the German despot as absurd and idiotic (Wallace, M. 2001). *The Chaser* team's experience of offending religions included a sketch imagining the Nazi propaganda films of Leni Riefenstahl as comedies, which offended sections of the Jewish community, and the alleged harassment of the former mufti Taj Din al-

Hilali, which upset Islamic groups (Bodey, M. 2009). The philosophy seemed akin to *South Park* – an opportunity to offend in the name of comedy, not an opportunity to question authority and test the comfortable status quo as Bill Hicks did, or boldly ridicule people who exemplify the reprehensible, like Mel Brooks.

Black comedy was in the hands of a new generation that hadn't seen a brutal worldwide economic depression, hadn't grown up during a world war or hadn't fought against racial discrimination or protested sending troops to Vietnam. They grew up during a Cold War with its associated nuclear threats and protests but the 1980s is often recorded, as was a time associated with first world wealth, excess and hedonism. A disconnected elite became a media fascination. Voyeuristic celebrity magazines were sold in the millions and consumed by people, either aspirational or finding comfort and a deal of detached revenge in the scandal, intrusions and exposes – *Stars Without Makeup!* – of wealthy, beautiful, unattainable celebrities.

By the time *The Chaser* members – who grew up in the 1980s – emerged in the 21st Century, the focus of dark satire was less about issues and more about a form of detached attempts at outrage and offence. On *The Chaser Decides* [election special], footage of street vox pops featured images of people making uneducated statements stamped with the graphic, “this person votes” in mocking fashion. *The Chaser* members were mostly political junkies according to Reucassel in a 2014 article in *The Age*, and they confidently confronted prominent politicians in public (Idato, M. 2014). But Chaser stunts were often lame attempts at annoying people into a reaction. In 2006 Licciardello, was arrested and fronted court on offensive behaviour charges after ‘trying to sell’ Canterbury Bulldogs ‘supporter kits’ outside the rugby team’s ground – fake knuckledusters, plastic knives and packages labelled rohypnol, a drug used in date rapes (O’Dwyer, E. Dasey, D. 2006). The stunt, inspired by reports of violent incidents at Bulldogs games raised the ire of the public, including the premier of NSW at the time, Morris Iemma (O’Dwyer, E. Dasey, D. 2006). Licciardello showed little understanding of the issues of violence in the working class community. Acting Police NSW Deputy Commissioner Denis Clifford and NRL chief David Gallop said the stunt could have sparked serious

hostile attacks. After his arrest, Licciardello said he regretted the incident – with qualification, “Most of the people took it pretty light-heartedly but a couple of the supporters got a bit angry and then the police stepped in,” he said (O’Dwyer, E. Dasey, D. 2006).

The Chaser team ill-judged a ‘door stop’ of the then opposition leader Tony Abbott in 2012 as he accompanied a Bali bombing survivor and nurse, Clair Marsh, from a memorial. After the event Megan Levy wrote in *The Age*:

Ms Marsh still had a tear in her eye as she was being led away from a press conference when Reucassel interrupted them and began firing questions at Mr Abbott about freedom of speech... Craig Reucassel has apologised this morning, "for any offence or distress caused" and insisted he had never intended to offend Clair Marsh, a nurse who helped treat those injured in Bali, or any other bombing victims (Levy, M. 2012).

A statement released on Craig Reucassel’s Twitter account the next morning went into a long account of why he didn’t do anything wrong, including:

- He had spoken to Mr Abbott's media adviser before the press conference and said he would not interrupt the event "on account of the gravity of its subject"
- In the second half of the press conference, the Opposition Leader took questions about a range of issues such as the carbon tax and gay marriage. As agreed, Craig did not ask any questions
- Since Mr Abbott had readily taken questions on other issues, Craig asked the [then] Opposition Leader a serious question about his recent statements on free speech. He did not make any jokes or perform any 'stunts'. He did not mention Bali
- As soon as Clair Marsh expressed discomfort, Craig walked away (Levy, M.2012).

There is a pattern of making qualified apologies by *The Chaser*, never meant to offend *Make A Wish...* never intended to offend *Clair Marsh...* most people took it pretty light-hearted.

The limited apologies by members of *The Chaser* team left room for maintaining their sense of righteousness. The “unfortunate” offences they alluded to are the type a bully at school would make when he is caught beating on a weaker boy – “I am sorry if I broke his nose, I had no idea he was standing in front of me and he said some pretty stupid things in class”.

The Chaser has produced some sharp, very funny satire since the first *Chaser* magazine was released in 1999 but when they targeted ordinary people such as those who weren’t interested in politics or working class football supporters their sense of superiority and lack of empathy began to show. The late columnist and opinion maker Sam de Brito, wrote in the *Sydney Morning Herald* that *The Chaser* reminded him of, the annoying bloke at the pub who picks fights, safe in the knowledge he has a big, street-fighting mate standing in the corner to bail him out of trouble (De Brito, S. 2007).

In *The Chaser's* case, that ‘mate’ is the security guards they employ to protect them from their ‘victims’, the camera crews that film every interaction, ABC lawyers and, most recently, the halo of celebrity that stops embarrassed and humiliated targets meting out natural justice” (De Brito, S. 2007).

De Brito wrote that being intimidated and feeling fear at some stages of your life is a lesson in the human condition and respect for people who live outside your world.

When you've been on the end of a few beatings you recognise the signs and triggers in the people that have delivered them; you don't needlessly disrespect people, you don't insult their family or their girlfriends, you don't

humiliate them, you give blokes a way of saving face or they'll more than likely punch you in yours. That will probably never happen to *The Chaser* team because, as I said before, they're insulated nowadays by minders, producers, lawyers and notoriety" (De Brito, S. 2007).

Julian Morrow's reply when questioned by Lucy Cormack on the pop culture internet site *Pedestrian* deflected de Brito's point about them being protected bullies and created a portrait of a humble group of larrikins with honourable intentions, "I don't think we've ever tried to add to the discourse. I've always just seen *The Chaser* as a piss-taking undertaking. We're just there making fun of people. Sam is absolutely right; we do just get paid to make fun of people who are more important and intelligent than us. And there's a long tradition of that, from the court jesters of medieval England up until now and I would hope that in a liberal democracy there would be room for that, for people to stand on the sidelines and throw pebbles at those in charge... we are just a bunch of hacks taking the piss" (2010).

Morrow begins by agreeing with the De Brito, and then declares that *The Chaser's* comedy targets those with the power, implying something noble, then deflecting the criticism with self-deprecation, by saying he and his colleagues are "just a bunch of hack. But they don't just throw pebbles at those in charge or those more intelligent and important. In fact they often throw stones at people with no power. *The Chaser* team has described the program as "a satirical program provoking debate and providing social commentary on topical issues", then "blokes taking the piss", and themselves as comedians not satirists. Their statements depend on the context they find themselves in – but they always seem to see themselves as in the right.

Little public information is available about members of *The Chaser*. There a couple of lines about their school background on the internet and mentions of their parents if they are of any note. A profile of Andrew Hansen by a university student is available online and various mentions in the social pages (Getty Images), 'puff pieces' and approved biographies on speaker circuit sites (ICMI). But how they

developed as teenagers and students, their attitude to privilege and any sacrifices for their beliefs are not recorded. If you make political and social satire that lampoons ideologies, corporations and people, it would be appropriate to also reveal who you are.

The Chaser team has heeded some criticism and dropped a lot of the contrived stunts in their shows but, "If we see fish in a barrel, we're going to have a shot at them" (Kalina, P. 2012).

It became clear that the satire *The Chaser* developed was more about targeting something or someone, than, like Chris Morris [society] and Bill Hicks [civil rights], making statements. The way they victimised vulnerable people was more bullying than the Chris Morris's public duping of politicians and celebrities. The political and societal insights of Lenny Bruce and Bill Hicks inspired a strong sense of self-righteousness in the angry comics. They ended their lives as self-styled martyrs spouting powerful, political and provocative words that they defended to their deaths because they believed in what they said.

CHAPTER 3: Up Cripple Creek

Disabling politically correctness

George Carlin,

With Peter Cook, Alexei Sayle and alternative comedy

British cringe with Ricky Gervais, Frankie Boyle, Roy Chubby Brown, Jimmy Carr, Sacha Baron Cohen.

This chapter examines the evolution of our understanding of political correctness and comedians that ‘crossed the line’ that they believed was drawn by the politically correct.

Political correctness also emerged as an inspiration for comedy.

George Carlin was the first to apply his comic reasoning to assault the use of political correctness in language to reduce the offence of minorities, including the disabled and women. He was the only comedian to have a coherent and comical argument about his dislike for political correctness.

The other comedians in this chapter used political correctness as a yardstick to offend and some cast political correctness as a wowser villain that attacked their rights to freedom of speech.

Peter Cook and Dudley Moore recorded sketches that were aimed at being as offensive as possible, with references to violence against women, misanthropy and bizarre sexual fantasy. British comics Ricky Gervais, Frankie Boyle, Jimmy Carr and Roy Chubby Brown all performed routines derogatory to minorities, the disabled and women, including the use of the words mongs and sluts.

Like Lenny Bruce, George Carlin worked with words. Carlin often said there were three main elements to his comedy (Sullivan, J. 2010): the little world of everyday experience – kids, pets, driving, TV; the big unanswerable questions – race, war,

government, big business, religion; and the English language – lingo and faddish buzzwords, catchphrases. James Sullivan wrote in his biography of Carlin, *Seven Dirty Words*, that like a master craftsman, Carlin held [words] up to the light:

He inspected them, rubbed them and whittled them. He worshipped them... “ (2010)

When Lenny Bruce was arrested at the Gate of Horn nightclub in Chicago (Bella, T. 2012) in December 1962, he shared the back seat of a police car with audience member, Carlin, who had refused to show identification to the police. Carlin, an observational comedian who idolised Bruce, viewed stand-up comedy as social commentary, rebellion and speaking the truth [Zoglin, R. 2008]. Carlin had been working in radio in 1958 when a friend introduced him to the comedy of Lenny Bruce. “*The Sick Humor of Lenny Bruce* [LP] let me know that there was a place to go, to reach for, in terms of honesty in self-expression” (Carlin, G. 2009).

Despite the rapture about his confrontational comic hero, Carlin’s early 1960s comedy career was uncontroversial. Carlin got his start as a stand-up comic by performing on the Las Vegas circuit and entertaining TV audiences (Bio. 2014). His observational comedy on American culture and society built a solid following. Fuzzy language and fuzzy thinking were always among Carlin’s favourite topics. He marvelled at what he saw as oxymoronic, like ‘jumbo shrimp’ and ‘military intelligence’, and pointed out the social uses of euphemism, ‘When did toilet paper become ‘bathroom tissue’? When did house trailers become ‘mobile homes’?’ This way of thinking would lead to his later routines decrying what he saw as political correctness (Zoglin, R. 2008).

George Carlin was an unplanned child. His parents were separated but Carlin’s father Patrick, 48, persuaded his mother to meet him for sex, which resulted in Carlin’s birth. Mary, 40, almost had an abortion but saw a vision of her dead mother as she sat in an abortion clinic, took it as maternal disapproval, “from beyond the grave”, left, and told Patrick she was having the baby (Carlin, G. 2009 pp. 4, 5). They separated largely because Patrick was an alcoholic and abusive but they loved each

other very much according to Carlin. They often reconciled because Patrick was persuasive with his words. The marriage didn't last as Patrick continued to drink, hit Carlin's older brother Patrick junior, and finally, in a rage, as baby George looked on, threw a silver tea service from a sixth floor window (Carlin, G. 2009, p. 4).

Carlin wrote in his memoir:

Mary who was capable of making life-changing decisions on a dime, made one now, she was leaving for good

In later life Carlin would challenge authority and stray into illegal drug use but he was greatly impressed by his maternal grandfather, a dedicated policeman. Carlin proudly included an anecdote in his memoir (2009):

He had passed the test for first lieutenant and was told immediately that a payoff of a thousand bucks was expected if he wanted the promotion. He refused to pay the bribe and told his family – “Principle – [even] if it comes out of a dog's arse!” Carlin concluded, “I sure wish I could have known you” (Carlin, G. 2009).

His absent father, Patrick, was in Carlin's words, a “great bullshitter” but his maternal grandfather was a principled man. As a comic, Carlin sought to employ what he saw as ethical reason to “expose the bullshit”. His most famous routine, ‘Seven Words You Can't Say on Television’, marked him as a foul-mouthed comic. Yet the routine was an example of something he believed in – reason. Carlin believed he had the right to use all of the words of the English language including the seven words: shit piss, fuck, cunt, cocksucker, motherfucker and tits. He recited them as part of his act and was eventually arrested. The debate that followed ended up in the Supreme Court (Sullivan, J. 2010). Carlin must have enjoyed articulating his case to the highest court in the land, using the word skills he inherited from his family.

His mother, Mary, was a frail child but managed to grow up physically and mentally strong. She was popular, vivacious and sure of herself. Mary read widely and passed on her love of language and respect for the power of words to her youngest son George. Patrick flourished as an advertising manager. In 1935 he won first prize, over 632 contestants, in the National Public Speaking Contest held by the Dale Carnegie Institute, with a speech outlining 'The Power of Mental Demand'. Throughout his life, Carlin kept the wooden gavel his father had been awarded (Sullivan, J. 2010, p. 9). The influence of Patrick, as a dynamic speaker and Mary as a lover of language became more evident as Carlin grew into comedy. Their marriage was an energetic one. Patrick called her 'Pepper' and she called him 'Ever-Ready' after his sexual drive and availability. They blended their vitality with a sense of humour (Carlin, G. 2009).

"According to Ma, she'd sometimes hear him call from another room, "Mary is this yours?", go in and find him standing in the nude, holding his penis with ice tongs" (Carlin, G. 2009).

Mary and the children were staying at George's grandfather's home when Mary's estranged husband broke the door down and forced his way in. The next day the 74-year-old grandfather was dead of a stroke, which Carlin ascribes to Patrick's sudden and violent actions (Carlin, G. 2009). Carlin was only three months old when his father was out of his life forever after the final separation. He died in 1945 of a heart attack when Carlin was eight-years old. In 1990 Carlin read a letter Patrick had written to his daughter from a previous marriage. After being a high profile and high earning advertising executive, Patrick was by then working in a kitchen at a monastery. Perhaps his alcoholism had affected his work but the letter was optimistic and cheerful about his situation.

"He seemed to be a person who defined himself and his self-worth to the universe at large, not the material world and its narrow standards. It made me proud and gave me a reason to believe that my similar sense of what's important had come directly from him. It's a connection, a profound one. I don't have many" (Carlin, G. 2009).

There are other links Carlin had with his exuberant, addicted, excitable, angry, persuasive and argumentative father described in his memoir. Carlin managed to see another letter Patrick wrote to his daughter during World War II. He signed off with:

I pledge allegiance to the people of the United States of America and all the political crap for which they stand. Big dough shall be divisible with union dues for all.

Carlin regarded that final sentence as his father rejecting the, “bullshit that is the glue of America. That makes me proud. If he transmitted it to me genetically, it was the greatest gift he could have given” (Carlin, G. 2009).

Carlin, who smoked marijuana habitually from the age of 13, was an excitable, persuasive, angry and addicted performer. His love of words, drug-taking and questioning authority was more about who he was and where he came from than a performance. “When people asked me, ‘do I get high on stage?’ I couldn’t understand the question, I mean I’d been high since eight that morning” (Sullivan, J. 2010 p. 107).

Carlin performed ‘family friendly’ satire until the early 1970s, when he absorbed the new spirit of counterculture and re-invented his image. “Dropping acid was a turning point for me, a seminal experience,” he wrote in his memoir, *Last Words*. “Suddenly all the conflict that had been tormenting me between the alternative values and straight values began to resolve” (Carlin, G. 2009). “They helped open me up” (Sullivan, J. p. 106).

His scripted monologues began to represent disillusionment, as he explored the sensitive issues of Vietnam, politics, religion, drugs, the demise of humanity and the right to free speech (Carlin, G. 2009). He soon grew comfortably into his new anti-establishment persona, but his fans didn’t come with him. His routines about censorship, poverty, materialism in American society and the Vietnam War

incensed the Playboy Club crowd in Lake Geneva. The management said they feared for his life. Carlin wrote that the booking at Lake Geneva was scary.

People were yelling things like, "Where's the old George Carlin?" (2009)

As a vocal atheist and avid illicit drug user, his critics deemed him anti-religious and disrespectful of society. However, the comedian's new material brought him success from the younger counterculture. Carlin embraced counterculture with long hair, a thick beard and earrings (Carlin, G. 2009). His new material and image as a performer created a type of rock 'n' roll comic performance for a like-minded younger generation. At the same time he was being rejected by his own generation.

An unlikely support act for the rock group Spirit, at Santa Monica College, Carlin received a standing ovation from 400 students. He got involved in a non-profit group, called Committee to Bridge the Gap, a network of college students that believed people and the planet were in danger and tried to achieve consensus with political activists and moderates. In the 1990s he would amend that belief to, "The planet is fine but the people are fucked". Carlin also began to put his cynical observations on religion to his audience, which struck a chord with Bill Maher, a comedian who presented the television discussion show, *Politically Incorrect* (1993 - 2002]. Maher wrote after Carlin's death in 2008:

George Carlin was the only person I ever heard who talked about religion in the way that I thought about religion. Comedians have always made jokes about religion, but they weren't subversive. But he said that religion was stupid and dangerous. And that was very powerful to me, that someone could say that publicly (Maher, B. 2008).

Lenny Bruce's controversial views about the hypocrisy of religion were echoed by Carlin. However whereas, for example, Bruce alluded to paedophilia in the Church, Carlin fashioned his commentary in a more direct way – although by the 1990s

allegations of child abuse in the Church were prevalent, especially in the Catholic Church.

“Idle thought: Do you suppose a perverted priest has ever tried to stick a crucifix up a kid’s arse? Just wondering” (Carlin, G. 2004).

Just as Bruce and Carlin could throw out a quick muse, they could immerse themselves in diatribes. Although Carlin was, less rambling, more direct and less oblique than Bruce:

And the invisible man has a special list of ten things he does not want you to do”, Carlin. And if you do any of these ten things, he has a special place, full of fire and smoke and burning and torture and anguish, where he will send you to live and suffer and burn and choke and scream and cry forever and ever 'til the end of time! But ... He loves you, and He needs money! He always needs money! He's all-powerful, all-perfect, all-knowing, and all-wise, somehow just can't handle money! Religion takes in billions of dollars, they pay no taxes, and they always need a little more. Now, you talk about a good bullshit story. Holy Shit! (Carlin, G. 2012)

Carlin fitted into the 1970s period, when activists, artists, filmmakers and comedians popularised the 1960s’ youthful concepts about sexuality, politics, religion and equality. Television shows such as the British *Till Death Us Do Part* and its US imitator, *All In The Family* confronted racism and bigotry. Films such as, *Harold and Maude* and *Taxi Driver* depicted a more relaxed societal attitude to sexuality and religious piety. Hosting the first *Saturday Night Live* on television in 1975, Carlin performed a routine about our relationship with religion.

“We are so egotistical about God, that we face our dashboard Jesus toward us, rather than on the road ahead watching out for traffic as [he] should be.”

James Sullivan, in his biography of Carlin, wrote that the routine was ‘incisively Lenny-esque’ (2010, p. 173). Viewers ‘lit up’ the switchboard with complaints,

including Dave Tebet, the network head of talent, who described the monologue as 'anti-religion soapboxing'.

As a child Carlin's mother worked long hours while his older brother, Patrick junior, wandered the streets with friends. Carlin was often alone. In another similarity with Lenny Bruce, he immersed himself in radio shows, including *The Lone Ranger*, and comics such as the sardonic *Mad Magazine*. He enjoyed time alone to develop his imagination with no interruptions from anyone (Sullivan, J. 2010).

Carlin was an outsider in the sense that he felt trapped by expectations and he had a capricious, hedonistic and spontaneous personality. He, like Bruce, viewed authority with scepticism, something that can be attributed to his violent father who beat his older brother and abused his mother. Carlin was full of contradictions and frustrations fuelled by his drug and alcohol use. He took risks and was attracted to rebelliousness. In his 20s, Carlin had been a popular radio announcer but got the sack for using a company vehicle to buy marijuana. In the mid-1990s, when he finally won the lead in a situation comedy, a constant ambition, he hated it (Sullivan, 2010, pp. 9,10).

Despite his drug and alcohol dependence and frustrations, Carlin was coherent enough to observe life's absurdity through his analysis of words and phrases.

"I keep hearing that America has lost its 'innocence' on 9/11. I thought that happened when JFK was shot. Or Vietnam, Pearl Harbour. How many times can America lose its innocence? ... If you look at the record America has had very little innocence from the beginning" (Carlin, G. 2005).

George Carlin, like his mentor, Lenny Bruce, was arrested for his choice of words, not his religious satire. "There are no bad words," said Carlin, "Bad thoughts. Bad intentions. And woooords" (Zoglin, R. 2008). On July 21, 1972, after Carlin performed 'Seven Words You Can Never Say on Television' at Milwaukee, Wisconsin's *Summerfest*, he was detained and charged with violating that state's obscenity laws (Carlin, G. 2009).

“There are 400,000 words in the English language,” Carlin told the audience, “and there are seven you can’t say on television. What a ratio that is! 399,993 to seven. They must really be bad. They must be outrageous to be separated from a group that large. ‘All of you words over here, you seven.... bad words.’ That’s what they told us, right? ...You know the seven, don’t ya? That you can’t say on TV? Shit, piss, fuck, cunt, cocksucker, motherfucker and tits” (Carlin, G. 2009).

A decade earlier, Lenny Bruce had been blacklisted from performing in U.S. clubs because of his profanity-laced routines (Bella, T. 2012). Inspired by this, Carlin shaped the seven words to be morally testing but affable in the performance. The message was directed at what he saw as corporate control of the entertainment industry and an unproductive society that refused to readdress its values toward language.

“[Seven Words...] was rebellious on a sort of profound level and it also had a kind of jubilation to it,” said comedy writer and Carlin’s close friend, Tony Hendra (Bella, T. 2012). This observation echoed his mother’s love for words and their meaning. “I think for others in the larger community of comedians who were trying to be themselves and trying to be more relevant, it was definitely a kind of brilliantly funny, brilliantly daring piece in its time,” Hendra said, “It was pretty clear he was the first person to say these things on a public stage since Lenny” (Bella, T. 2012).

Carlin’s 1972 obscenity case had him front the Supreme Court, resulting in the creation of the ‘family hour’ policy on network television [that was struck down in 1976 by the United States District Court in California] (Wyatt 2009). It also became a cause célèbre for free speech. Carlin began referring to the taboo words as *The Milwaukee Seven*. In December 1972, the court case was eventually decided and dismissed. The Judge ruled that, while Carlin’s language was definitely indecent, Carlin had the freedom to say it, as long as he caused no disturbance. The ruling allowed other comedians, such as Lewis Black, to expand their routines into once forbidden territory (Walston, M. 2012).

"He kind of took the door that Bruce opened and basically put a door-jam in it," said Lewis Black, who cited Carlin as one of his prime influences. "[Profanity] allows comedy to go further. For me, he provided a comfort zone" (Bella, T. 2012).

In the late 1980s the concept of political correctness emerged that would bolster dark comedy and give comedians inspiration to again offend with confidence. Carlin was among the first to attack political correctness, which was an attempt to curb the effect of offensive words in the context of the vulnerable.

In their paper, *That's not funny: Instrument validation of the concern for political correctness scale*, Erin Strauts and Hart Blanton quoted 20th Century philosopher of science, Karl Popper. "If we extend unlimited tolerance even to those who are intolerant, if we are not prepared to defend a tolerant society against the onslaught of the intolerant, then the tolerant will be destroyed, and tolerance with them" (2015).

The contradiction that Popper was grappling with, they wrote – now commonly termed the 'paradox of tolerance' – was critical to an argument central to the culture wars of first world politics. The use of the term 'politically correct' or 'PC' was linked to political conservatives seeking to label some political liberals as promoting tolerance of minorities and disadvantaged people to the point of intolerance. Conservatives who coined the phrase 'politically correct' argued that limiting freedom of expression and stifling debate on important social problems, might promote further stereotyping of disadvantaged individuals as victims (Strauts, E. Blanton, H. 2015).

In the late 1970s and early 1980s there weren't a lot of new topics for dark comedy to fuel the kind of edgy, dangerous routines Bruce and Carlin had developed. The Vietnam War ended in 1975, racial and feminist protest calmed; the peace movement and student politics began to subside. The Cold War and entwined nuclear development dissent were the main political issues. It was basically a single-issue protest that struggled to compete in the media with the hedonistic prosperity experienced by some in the first world. Media images of excess were

projected as aspirational and amusing: private jets, pink helicopters, huge parties and cocaine dominated the 'worthy' and combative images of anti-nuclear protests. Recent superficial television specials about the decade are mostly full of salacious images and stories of greed in the spirit of the movie *Wall Street*. The hit film became the archetypal portrayal of 1980s excess with the catchphrase, 'greed is good' (IMDB, 2015).

In the 1980s controversial black comedy largely took a back seat in America to more conventional stand-up until Bill Hicks emerged at the end of the decade. In Britain, alternative comedy led by Ben Elton and Alexei Sayle from the *Comic Strip* group – which included future stars Dawn French, Jennifer Saunders and Rik Mayall – rejected the sexist, homophobic comedy of old stagers, Benny Hill and Les Dawson. The 1970s' British comedies *Love Thy Neighbour* about a racist living next door to a black couple he labelled nig-nogs – and the sexist comedy, *On The Buses* with its portrayal of 'sexy' female conductors, lewd bus drivers and 'ugly wife' jokes were also condemned by the new breed of comics.

By the 1980s it was more difficult to cross the line that separated acceptance and outrage. Roger Wilmut, in his book, *Didn't You Kill My Mother-In-Law?* (1989), observed that in Britain the main focus of the 'new comic' was life as it was experienced by their audiences – many of them young, working class and unemployed (1989). Politically aware comedians, such as Ben Elton and Alexei Sayle, experimented with a surreal, cerebral approach to comedy.

"If I'm about anything, at the core I'm about vaunting working class culture. The reason I adopted the guise of a skinhead is because it's one working class tribal form that posh people will never rip off, because it's too ugly." – Alexei Sayle (Wilmut, R. 1989)

"Attitude like Sayle's hadn't existed in British stand-up for a long time," said comedian Arthur Smith. "He didn't care if he alienated people. [He] had a view of the world and he was going to tell you. And if you didn't want it then fuck you" (Cook, 2001). The controlled and scripted Sayle and the anarchic Keith Allen

showed their disdain for the “over-educated elite” at The Comedy Store venue in London. Allen was unpredictable, fearless and abusive – especially to any middle class, ‘safe’ comedy writers or journalists in the room. He walked on stage one night naked carrying a dressed ventriloquist dummy. Every now and then he would adjust his penis, “to distract from my lips moving” (Cook, W.2001). Others like Rik Mayall, Ben Elton and Lise Mayer, writers of the anarchic television series *The Young Ones*, reacted against the structure and traditional topics of comedy with existential creativity, linking fantasy with a gloomy reality. Inspired by late 1970s’ punk and early 1980s’ new wave movements, *The Young Ones* combined animation and puppetry, dream sequences and cartoon-like violence to make a youth-oriented, politically savvy satire.

The new comedy was often aggressive and confronting: Tony Allen (no relation to Keith) didn’t aim for laughs and was one of the few to tackle the soon to be popular topic of rape and the new frightening and baffling disease AIDs on television. William Cook wrote in his book about the Comedy Store that the best of it hits hard and it hurts, but it’s philanthropic not misanthropic (2001). Ben Elton was quoted in the book as saying, “Irishmen are not stupid and it’s not funny to say they are. Women’s tits are not funny and it’s not funny to say they are. So where did we look, we looked around us, inside ourselves and in what we were doing – that’s where the comedy was” (Cook, W. 2001).

The usual standpoint of alternative comedy is held to be non-racist and non-sexist. Alexei Sayle took a slightly different view:

“The important thing about racism is oppression – I won’t do stuff about the Irish or women or blacks or Pakistanis because they are oppressed, I don’t want to make oppression any greater, I think that in many ways we are oppressed by the Japanese, and therefore I would be happy to do stuff about the Japanese. People don’t really think it through; they just babble this thing about non-sexist, non-racist (Wilmot, R. 1989).

Alternative comedy challenged the sexist and racist comedy establishment of the 1970s. But by the mid-1990s there was a backlash against the often-hostile, self-righteousness of leading alternative comedians. Roger Lewis wrote in GQ magazine that Ben Elton would go down in history as the man who killed Benny Hill.

"We know in Britain," ranted Elton, "women can't even walk safe in a park anymore.

Lewis wrote:

That, for me, is worrying. Pompous and portentous as this is, blaming Hill for rape statistics is like accusing Ronald Searle [creator of The St Trinians' series of books] for bullying in girls' boarding schools, or pointing a finger at concert pianists for causing elephant poaching (2014).

A new face of comedy in the 1990s displaced the alternative comedy of Elton and others as a comic wave of pressure on political correctness, from developing comics such as Sacha Baron Cohen and Ricky Gervais gained momentum.

Historically, what critics now call political correctness began with policies such as affirmative action and changes to university curricula in the USA in the 1960s, which, according to conservatives, were being pursued by radical left-wing academics (Rainbird, M. 2004). The term, and the political right's version of political correctness, has been largely adopted by the media and is often used to undermine the promotion of 'minority' interests (Rainbird, M. 2004). 'Political correctness gone mad' is the emotional catch-cry when a perceived racist, sexist or homophobic comment is challenged.

In his paper, *A Critique of Politically Correct Language*, Ben O'Neill, wrote that defenders of politically correct language claim it is a civilizing influence on society. They believe, he wrote, that political correctness discourages the use of words that have negative or offensive connotations, which grants respect to people who are the victims of unfair stereotypes. For example, people are discouraged from referring to someone with a mental disability as mentally retarded and instead

encouraged to refer to him as being 'differently abled' or as having 'special needs' (2011 p. 279).

Although opposed to the term political correctness, journalist Polly Toynbee explained the drive for this kind of language in the Guardian newspaper in 2009.

The phrase political correctness was born as a coded cover for all who still want to say Paki, spastic or queer, all those who still want to pick on anyone different to them, playground bullies who never grew up. The politically correct society is the civilised society, however much some may squirm at the more inelegant official circumlocutions designed to avoid offence. Inelegance is better than bile. (2009)

Journalist Will Hutton offered a similar defence.

It matters profoundly what we say. It is an advance that it is no longer possible to call blacks niggers and that sexist banter in the workplace is understood to be oppressive and abusive. It is right that the groups in society that used to be written off as mentally retarded are recognised as having special needs (2001).

Along with reasonable terms such as 'special needs', silly ideas such as referring to garbage collectors as environmental service workers created a backlash and the term politically correct gained traction as a criticism not a virtue (O'Neill, B, 2011).

In his paper, *Humour, Multiculturalism and 'Political Correctness'*, Mark Rainbird wrote that in the mid-1990s, the issue of 'political correctness' became a high profile political issue. In the post-1996 election period conservative Australian Prime Minister John Howard considered one of his major achievements to be the repudiation of the political correctness he believed the country had suffered from under the later years of the Keating Labor Government (Rainbird, M. 2004, p.10). Howard saw political correctness as stifling freedom of speech and open debate on issues such as immigration or Aboriginal relations. In fact Howard was so incensed

with political correctness that he made an indirect reference to it as an ideological passing fashion in his and poet Les Murray's proposal for a preamble to the Constitution. Howard believed that in the preamble he was expressing commonly held feelings of ordinary Australians and it is these views that presumably exclude those of the so-called politically correct – homosexuals, radical feminists and Aboriginal people (2004).

The perceptions and actions of John Howard concerning political correctness were important in the context of national identity. By the turn of the century, the use of the term political correct in the pejorative became a justification of not just the use of words, but intolerance, bigotry and making fun of the disabled and vulnerable.

Maira Weigel wrote a piece about political correctness in *The Guardian* after Donald Trump's election as President of the United States that included his successful use of the term politically correct as the answer to every criticism (2016). The following is a short extract:

Throughout an erratic campaign, Trump consistently blasted political correctness, blaming it for an extraordinary range of ills and using the phrase to deflect any and every criticism. During the first debate of the Republican primaries, Fox News host Megyn Kelly asked Trump how he would answer the charge that he was "part of the war on women" (2016).

"You've called women you don't like 'fat pigs,' 'dogs,' 'slobs,' and 'disgusting animals,'" Kelly pointed out, "You once told a contestant on *Celebrity Apprentice* it would be a pretty picture to see her on her knees ..."

"I think the big problem this country has is being politically correct," Trump answered, to audience applause. "I've been challenged by so many people, I don't frankly have time for total political correctness. And to be honest with you, this country doesn't have time either (2016)."

Trump used the same defence when critics raised questions about his statements on immigration. In June 2015, after Trump referred to Mexicans as rapists, NBC, the network that aired his reality show *The Apprentice*, announced that it was ending its relationship with him. Trump's team retorted that, "NBC is weak, and like everybody else is trying to be politically correct" (Weigel, M. 2016).

In August 2016, after saying that the US district judge Gonzalo Curiel of San Diego was unfit to preside over the lawsuit against Trump University because he was Mexican American and therefore likely to be biased against him, Trump told CBS News that this was common sense. He continued, "We have to stop being so politically correct in this country." During the second presidential debate, Trump answered a question about his proposed "ban on Muslims" by stating, "We could be very politically correct, but whether we like it or not, there is a problem" (Weigel, M 2016).

Every time Trump said something viewed as outrageous commentators decided he had finally crossed a line and that his campaign was doomed. But time and again, Trump supporters made it clear that they liked him because he wasn't afraid to say what he thought. Fans praised the way Trump spoke, much more than his policy proposals. He tells it like it is, they said. "He speaks his mind". "He is not politically correct" (Weigel, M. 2016).

Moira Weigel claimed in *The Guardian* that Trump and his followers never defined political correctness, or specified who was enforcing it. "They did not have to. The phrase conjured powerful forces determined to suppress inconvenient truths by policing language" (2016).

To be politically correct was to be a wowser, with no humour, meddling in other people's business – it was easily transferable to any provocative situation to either justify bullying behaviour, offend sections of the community or judge people. 'Blokey' sport shows such as Melbourne's *The Footy Show*, led by John 'Sam' Newman, demeaned women consistently as sex objects. Newman groped a lingerie-clad mannequin with a picture of *The Age's* chief football writer, Caroline Wilson,

stapled to it. As the answer to objections, Newman regularly complained of the politically correct or “political correctness gone mad”.

In an online story in 2015, former Monty Python member John Cleese dismissed political correctness as condescending, saying, “It starts as a half way decent idea and then it goes completely wrong and is taken ad absurdum”. Cleese explained how he stopped making race-related jokes after audiences were angered by jokes about Mexicans in his routine. As he put it, “we make jokes about Swedes and Germans and French and English and Canadians and Americans, why can’t we make jokes about Mexicans? Is it because they are so feeble that they can’t look after themselves? It’s very, very condescending there” (Silman, A. 2015).

In 2003, Australian satirist, Barry Humphries lost his *Vanity Fair* ‘agony aunt’ column for a remark made in the February issue. He blamed it on political correctness (Sydney Morning Herald, 2016). As his comic alter ego, Dame Edna, he responded to a question asking if learning Spanish was a good idea with, “Why Spanish, who would you talk to – your maid?” Many took offence, including Mexican actress Salma Hayek who penned a critical letter in response, which seemed quite sensitive considering the character of Edna Everidge has been built on a clear form of ironic bigotry (Sydney Morning Herald, 2016).

In his book, *When Will Jesus Bring the Pork Chops?* George Carlin attacked the principle of political correctness.

Political correctness is America's newest form of intolerance, and it is especially pernicious because it comes disguised as tolerance. It presents itself as fairness, yet attempts to restrict and control people's language with strict codes and rigid rules. I'm not sure that's the way to fight discrimination. I'm not sure silencing people or forcing them to alter their speech is the best method for solving problems that go much deeper than speech (2005).

Carlin mocked the idea of changing the lexicon to “soften the language” in his comic routines and books.

I should be careful in stores not to call a cripple cart a cripple cart in front of other cripples but I'm thinking to myself they know they're cripples. What else would you call it? Honestly, I can't imagine. The word was recorded as early as 950 AD. I'm not going to say to the clerk at the grocery store "Can you tell me where the motorised vehicles are for the challenged or differently abled?" I'm going to say, "Where's the fuckin' cripple cart?" That's 14 words versus 5, and 4 if I leave out "fuckin'". Saves everybody time (Carlin, G. 2005).

Also, crippled people are crippled, they're not differently-abled... Crippled people are simply crippled. It's a perfectly honorable word. There is no shame in it. It's in the Bible: "Jesus healed the cripples." He didn't engage in rehabilitative strategies for the physically disadvantaged (Harvest, J. 2008).

Carlin was making points and casting his comically considered opinion, right or wrong. He wasn't complaining that his act would be ruined by political correctness – he used it in his comedy, and in context. His arguments were about language and the idea of forcing language on people.

First I want to be really clear about one thing: as far as other people's feeling are concerned, especially these "victim groups". If I meet a woman who wishes to be referred to as a motion-impaired, same gender-oriented Italian-American who is difficult to deal with, fine. On the other hand, I am perfectly willing to call her a crippled, Guinea dyke cunt if she prefers. But! But! When I am speaking generally, and impersonally about a large group of people, I will call them what I think is honest and fair (Carlin, G. 1997).

Carlin made some strong points as he entertained his audience. Interestingly he pointed out the difference he saw in addressing a group of people and an individual. But the growing backlash against political correctness in the 1990s led to a more flexible use of the phrase to justify aggression and bullying about minorities and the disabled, as groups or as individuals, especially in the U.K.

In the 1960s and 1970s, the dominant social and political topics as reported in newspapers, television, radio, and ‘over the back fence’ were inspiration for comedians like Carlin and later Bill Hicks. Since the 1990s social devices have dominated the media. The internet and its spawn – Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat and apps, including the ‘instant’ dating apps Grindr and Tinder, are realities of a global community in the new century. The concept of a global village was first proposed in the 1960s by Canadian philosopher of communication theory, Marshall McLuhan, who imagined the world interconnected through electronic communications. McLuhan died in 1980 so he didn’t see the increased power and broadening of the media or the public’s involvement in the internet’s ‘global village’ since the beginning of the 21st Century. When McLuhan died, print media was still the dominant information provider, using wire services and compiling the news and analysis hours before it was delivered. Radio and television relied on the more resourced print media to spark comment and debate on the airwaves. Newspapers also fostered dedicated investigative departments to expose corruption and political expediency. Now electronic media providers rely on being immediate in both news and analysis. Soundbites – a quick summation or comment – became the dominant way of broadcast reporting. Soundbites also became the chosen way for public figures to get their message out in an increasingly distracted world. Today, traditional media partly sources news generated by the internet through Twitter, which puts a limit on the number of characters in a message, Facebook, Instagram and other forms of communication. Gossip and salacious reporting is popular on internet sites. Celebrity headlines are positioned high on internet and broadcast news bulletins, often given more importance than natural disasters or political upheaval.

In the 1960s images of the Vietnam War were confronting and largely responsible for the increased public sentiment against involvement in the war. During this time, a meeting at *The Age* newspaper in Melbourne considered the publication of a distressing photograph of a soldier in Vietnam holding a dead baby casually by the foot. One journalist protested that the image didn’t pass the ‘Weeties test’ – an image unsuitable for viewing at the breakfast table. Celebrated *Age* editor Graham Perkin reacted “Let them spew over their Weeties”. It was a time when newspapers

led the conversation, informing, analysing and making pronouncements editors felt were important to the community. And so the picture was the front-page lead the next day.

In February 2016, the lead story for several days on *The Age*, *Herald Sun* and other news sites online was about two celebrities, good friends and work colleagues who were involved in a sensitive and personal dispute. When the 'scandal' first broke, *The Age* editor sent a memo to staff about the affair that illustrated the change that technology has made to the media and its attitude to news:

Every time one of these stories comes up, we find ourselves in all sorts of contorted machinations. Let's look at how the different platforms ran the story. The iPad ran it as one of the last items of its news section today, the homepage and mobile ran it prominently all day yesterday, and the paper ran it as a brief in the sports section.

The reason the homepage and mobile sites ran it so strongly was due to reader demand. It was probably one of the most-read stories we have had on a Sunday for some time. There is no question that these two platforms are the most sensitive to what readers want. While the editors have a say... I am more inclined to let the readers determine our coverage (protected source, 2016).

The media can now quickly gauge the top items of public interest, with the ability to access the number of 'hits' a page generates. The media is now more likely to be led by what the public wants to know more than what they need to know. In recent years, the phrase 'trending on Twitter' has become shorthand for any issue that's capturing public interest on a massive scale (Woolacott, E. 2014). Journalists and politicians cite related popular hashtags as evidence of grassroots support. Along with the rise in Twitter use [more than 255 million users] there has been a boom in Twitter bots – automated accounts of tweets generated entirely by computer. They exist only to entice other users to click on promotional links, generating revenue for their controllers (Woolacott, E. 2014).

The tactical use of celebrity has become a cheaper form of advertising. At events such as entertainment and sports awards, celebrities are expected to clearly mention the designer of their [free] fashion outfits at their red carpet interviews. The famous are paraded at shopping centres for product launches and dressed in sponsors' clothes from top to bottom. Popular celebrities are promoted as 'ambassadors' of a product to give their promotion credibility, when a more accurate term would be salesperson. Instagram is full of pictures of celebrities touting products in the guise of contact with fans.

In 2015 *The Age* sent a memo to staff when young celebrities Kylie and Kendall Jenner arrived from the US for shopping centre appearances in Melbourne as 'ambassadors' for a new range of clothes:

"So what?" you may ask. Are they not just a couple of young facile wannabe celebrities that should be duly ignored by any quality media organisation...?

- *Time Magazine* recently included Kylie in its top 30 most influential teenagers
- She has a social media following of about 60 million across Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and her own app.
- *New York Times* and *Washington Post* published stories on Kylie and Kendall
- Kendall has been the face of Estee Lauder and on cover of fashion magazines.

(protected source)

Kylie's Twitter feed tweets about deals with shoes manufacturers and promotions for nail polish, an app game based on Kylie and Kendall, photos of Kylie's various hairstyles and promotions for hair products.



Verified account@KylieJenner 20 hours ago

20 hours ago



Hope everyone had a bomb Valentine's Day

I miss home and my puppies

2,278 retweets11,045 likes



Verified account@KylieJenner 20 hours ago

And posting and on [@kyliecosmetics](#) Instagram and Twitter! So make sure u follow if u are interested in getting a kit!

943 retweets4,735 likes

In the 1950s the media was absorbed in the effect Elvis Presley had on teenagers. He was a controversial, original and creative performer whose influence on the culture and specifically teenagers was scrutinised by the media. The Beatles, Marlon Brando, James Dean, Bob Dylan were musicians and actors first, celebrities second. Celebrity was an, often, unwanted by-product of their talents. The Jenners, their sister Kim Kardashian and Paris Hilton are an example of the new celebrity that is first and foremost about celebrity and the media.

As the media elevated celebrity gossip to the status of news, comedians added it to the list of satirical targets, although jokes about famous people were more about personal humiliation than exposing hypocrisy.

Ricky Gervais, award-winning writer and creator of the satirical British series, *The Office*, joked about celebrities directly in his role as host of the *Golden Globes* in 2010. The material included some provocative jabs at Mel Gibson, describing him as obsessive about Jews and highlighting his drunken episodes. There were gasps, and vision of sullen faces, as well as laughter, throughout the evening but the jokes had a sense of vaudeville.

"On a serious note, he said, "just looking at some of the faces it reminds me of some of the great work done this year... by cosmetic surgeons."

After Gervais suggested Downey Jr was best known for his time in prison and rehabilitation centres, the actor said, "Aside from the fact that it's been hugely mean-spirited with mildly sinister undertones, I'd say the vibe of the show is pretty good so far" (Independent, 2012). Despite the media reporting he had offended Hollywood, The *Golden Globe* award organisers asked him to return as host in 2011 and 2012 and again in 2016 – despite him declaring he would never host it again. Gervais was chosen to create controversy and achieve television ratings but by his third appearance in 2012 his comic insults were predictable and held no real interest to the media.

Gervais' response to criticism could be just as prosaic as his Golden Globe jokes. When the editor of the satirical magazine, *Private Eye*, Ian Hislop attacked Gervais' stand-up show, *Animals*, on television in 2003, Gervais, thereafter closed each gig by calling Hislop an "ugly little pug-faced cunt" (Moss, S. 2009). He has also attacked other journalists who have said he was on the slide (Moss, S. 2009). In an interview with the *The Guardian*, Gervais said his blog got 300,000 hits a day, "which is more than most daily newspapers". His blog, website and podcasts give him direct access to his audience and a forum to take on his critics. I don't do it for people who have slagged me off or don't like my work," he says. "I don't care

whether people say, *'The Office* is rubbish, *Extras* [the follow up] is worse, he's not funny, he never has been, I hate him. [but] If they misquote me, I think I'm totally justified in saying, I didn't say that. Your reputation is still the most important thing that you've got" (Moss, S. 2009). At the *Golden Globes*, he trashed a lot of celebrities' reputations. There is an underlying self-righteous theme with black comedians. To confidently write and perform dark comedy, self-righteousness anger could be seen as an asset, even essential. In his *Guardian* story on Ricky Gervais, Stephen Moss asked, "Where does the anger come from? It is tempting to trace it back to his childhood, growing up on a Reading council estate in the dispossessed 1970s, the accidental [so he has said] youngest child of four, born long after his three siblings to ageing parents. But the solution may be too pat. The household was warm and loving, and he tells me a touching story about his mother. "When I was 18, I told her I was going to Paris," he recalls. "'Why do you want to go there?' she said. 'There are parts of Reading you haven't seen yet'" (2009).

Moss believed it might be pertinent that the two issues Gervais felt most passionate about – animal rights and the troublesome 'myth of God' – are not principally about people. Others, including his collaborator Karl Pilkington, have noted that there is an element of misanthropy in Gervais; he attacks fat people in his comedy because he really believes fat people have a problem – and he was slightly overweight. He studied biology at university – but changed to philosophy after a fortnight because the science was too hard – and there remains in him something of the philosophical anatomist, dissecting the way we behave, the signals we send out – judging fat people, observing the disabled (Moss, S. 2009).

In 2010, Gervais, was riding a huge wave of popularity after television success with *The Office* and *Extras*. *The Office*, in particular, was a brutal take on the human condition. Self-obsessed, embarrassing and flawed characters, led by Gervais' David Brent, engaged in conflict and subterfuge in the bland setting of a paper supply office. His ensuing popularity led to uncompromising stand-up concerts, filmed for DVD sale, glibly titled *Animals*, *Politics* and *Science*. The gleefully told stories included references to anal insertions, various takes on fat people, rape,

masturbating to the Holocaust movie *Schindler's List* – “a two hanky job” – and autism.

The social media tool Twitter soon shone a spotlight on the distress his comedy could cause. Alice Jones reported in *The Independent* that a controversy began in 2011 after four days of tweets from Gervais that included variations on the word mong – “Good monging everyone”, “Night night monglets” and “Two mongs don't make a right” – as well as ‘selfies’ posted of contorted, ‘monged-up’ expressions. A number of his followers took offence at the frequent use of the word mong, a shortening of mongoloid, an offensive term for people with Down syndrome (Jones, A. 2011). Gervais responded immediately on Twitter – “Just to clarify for uptight people stuck in the past. The word mong means Down syndrome about as much as the word Gay means happy” – and continued in the same manner. As the criticism grew louder, he remained bullish, tweeting, “Dear fans. Don't give the haters any attention. Those people aren't really offended by the things I say – they are offended by my success.”

Mark Gale, of disability charity *Mencap* and Frank Buckley from *Down Syndrome Education International* criticised him in the media as “disappointing”, stating that such language can perpetuate discriminatory attitudes (Jones, A. 2011). Gervais defended his use of the word. “I have never used the word ‘mongol’”, he said, “I have used the word mong. But I have never used that word to mean Down's syndrome and never would” (Jones, A. 2011). Hours later, he posted another gurning self-portrait to Twitter with the caption, “The police just came round and confiscated all my awards. Gutted” (Jones, A. 2011). Richard Herring, stand-up comedian and vocal critic of the Gervais tweets, said, “Though there are no rules, with comedy, I feel, we should be siding with the weak... punching downwards is just bullying” (Jones, A. 2011).

“I can understand [his] impulse to dig his heels in and say the words even more, like he's standing up to some kind of 'politically correct' backlash,” Herring said, “But if the words are upsetting some people and perpetuating a stereotype, isn't it

more noble and thoughtful to just admit you might have made a mistake and stop?" (Jones, A. 2011)

Dismissing the opinions of people working in disability, Gervais insisted that, people confuse the subject of a joke with the target of a joke. He rethought his position only after a disability worker and mother of bullied disabled children pointed out that the original hurtful meaning of the word mong was very much in the social consciousness. Nicola Clark wrote a column in *The Guardian* with the headline, *Ricky Gervais, please stop using the word mong*.

Anyone who is disabled or who loves someone with a disability knows what that word means because they will have heard it used about them abusively at some stage. Along with "retard" and "spaz", it's a prominent verbal feature of the bully's toolkit. I'm 45 and I know that. Ricky Gervais is 50, so he will definitely know that – besides, he tackles the issue in an episode of *Extras* in which a boy with Down syndrome is referred to as a mongoloid. Gervais' younger fans may justifiably claim ignorance about the word, but my 17-year-old daughter knows what it means because it was used about her sister, and she herself was called retarded (Clark, N. 2011).

Gervais backed down after an internet chat with Clark, in which he transferred the blame, "Never dreamed that idiots still use that word aimed at people with Down's syndrome. Still find it hard to believe" (@rickygervais October 2011). [It can be referred to as Down or Down's syndrome]. When asked how the public outcry towards his use of the word mong had made him feel, he later tweeted, "a mixture of confusion, anger, terror and disappointment. But mostly naïve. Never meant the word like that and never would" (McCabe, J. 2011). His apology never mentioned culpability – just ignorance of the facts that had been repeatedly presented to him. To be on Twitter and not realise there were people out there using the derogatory word in full knowledge of its origin is indeed naïve for such a socially aware writer of the human condition. Gervais regularly used disability to comic effect – a wheelchair bound co-worker in *The Office* who was often in the way, joking about a woman with cerebral palsy in *Extras*, dwarf jokes such as falling out of a car in his

series, *Life's Too Short*, and promoting Karl Pilkington as a moron in *An Idiot Abroad*. He should be across what it means to be disabled if not empathetic.

The year after the mong controversy, in April 2012, a new Ricky Gervais comedy, *Derek*, about an intellectually slow man who helps out at an old people's home was broadcast. Sentimentality and affection mixed with his usual dark comedy – Derek loves Jesus “because he's nice” and the elderly people are amusingly sweet. *Derek* seemed like a defensive response from Gervais to the attacks over his provocative tweets. Unlike the inventive series *The Office*, *Derek* even employed old-fashioned storylines such as the fight to stop the old people's home being closed down by the heartless local council. *Extras* employed a sense of morality but in a less mawkish manner. Gervais responded to criticism of his motives behind *Derek* in an article in *The Independent* in 2012. “I do like getting close to real emotions, I've never been scared of that. But people assume my work is outrageous and cynical, and it's never been. I mean *The Office* was never cynical – there was always happy endings in *The Office* and *Extras* – and this is all about kindness and forgotten people on the peripheral of society. It's not a class thing it's not an education thing... I live in [the wealthy suburb of] Hampstead and there are people there who never wear socks” (2012).

The Office “happy endings” have included a cruel, sexist, offensive bully having sex with an office worker in the car park as she crouches in pain on all fours.

“My knees hurt.”

“Almost done.”

The closing scene of the final episode of the series showed a devastated David Brent, begging for his job back to bemused superiors. It was a brilliantly unsettling moment but hardly a happy ending to conclude *The Office* series. Gervais revealed an acute understanding of the foibles of humanity in *The Office* and *Extras*, while *Derek* seemed, to put it cynically, like a cry for being liked. Most of his comedy relied on awkward moments, including Gervais character dressed in Nazi uniform, describing a woman with cerebral palsy as a “pissed-up nutter” to her sister unaware they were related.

Gervais endured a real-life awkward experience in 2006 when he interviewed American comedian Garry Shandling for an internet series of interviews with his comic heroes. Shandling, who played the title character of the 1990s cult comedy *The Larry Sanders Show*, was openly hostile. He told Gervais not to touch him, asked him why he makes fun of people with cerebral palsy, and when a buzzer sounded he said it was his “arse detector and it’s going off because you are here”. While as a comic writer Gervais could conjure up brilliant awkward moments for comedy, participating in an uncomfortable situation left him, as a person, wounded. He had enough humility to allow its internet broadcast [he would have known it would have appeared online at some stage], but devastated he gave up work on the series. Gervais has conflicting personas in the real world – the self-proclaimed, cocky ‘smartest kid in the room at school’ (Moss, S. 2009) and the shattered naughty schoolboy attacked by his mentor.

After the mong incident, Gervais, an animal lover, tweeted a picture of his Siamese cat in repose every night with the words “have a peaceful evening”. His protestations of naivety and his public hints of a softer side combined to put more meaning into this stated transparency, “As a comedian, not only should you be painfully aware of your inadequacies, but you want people to know them as well” (Elle, 2016).

In 2010 the controversial Scottish comedian Frankie Boyle devoted five minutes of a stand-up show to a tirade about people with Down syndrome. He picked on their hair, clothing and mimicked their voices. He then turned on the audience, baiting a couple in the front row, accusing them of talking (BBC, 2010). The woman, Sharon Smith, told Boyle that her daughter had Down syndrome and she was simply upset. Smith later said, “the type of jokes he was making about people with Down syndrome, I don’t see there was any point being made” (BBC, 2010). Boyle was unrepentant. He made fun of the couple before saying, “this is my last tour. I don’t give a fuck what people think” (Loveys, K. 2010). After challenging Smith about the veracity of his claims about Down syndrome Boyle described his background to the audience as an explanation of why he was “so nasty” (BBC, 2010).

Frankie Boyle was born in Glasgow in 1972. Raised a Catholic, religion featured prominently during his early years and formative education, but he lapsed at the age of 14. "I'm beyond atheism now, I'm in some different fucking place." Boyle had a porn habit and did group therapy to combat depression as a teenager (Herald, 2009). After uneventful school years Boyle studied urban planning at Aston University in Birmingham, before switching to a degree in English Literature at Sussex University (Greenstreet, R. 2012). Early employment included working in a mental health hospital, until, at the age of 23, he began performing stand-up (Greenstreet, R. 2012). Edinburgh's infamous comedy club, The Stand, was a regular haunt for Boyle to hone his ever-edgier shtick. In 1996, he won an 'open mic' event at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe, which led to writing jobs for television and, eventually, a central role in the satirical news series, *Mock The Week*. His cutting style proved popular with audiences, and caused controversy with the censors and Britain's tabloid media. He left *Mock The Week* after several years because, he said, he was "bored" (Herald, 2009).

In a 2009 interview in the *Scotland Herald* Boyle denied hurting people with disabilities, with qualifications, "I don't make jokes about disabled people that are offensive to disabled people. Most jokes have victims but I don't think any of my stuff is done with any real malice, apart from the stuff that is towards people I feel malevolent about, like fucking politicians, bankers, racists and the world's cunts" (Scotland Herald, 2009).

Boyle mixed political satire with personal insults and jibes about sexuality and disability – "Not only will America go to your country and kill all your people but they will come back 20 years later and make a movie about how killing your people made their soldiers feel sad. (Wardle, 2015)" A comment piece in *The Observer* questioned whether Frankie Boyle was offensive, unfunny or even pushing the boundaries in a politically correct world. In a 2010 comment piece, Guardian editor and critic, Boyd Hilton wrote:

The problem with Frankie Boyle isn't so much that he's offensive; it's that his relentless attempts to offend have worn me down and left me feeling a bit melancholy (Hilton, B. 2010). He is, for me, merely the ultimate example of what brilliant stand-up Stewart Lee calls, "professionally offensive comedians". How meaningful or funny can a sharp swipe at Israel seem if it's followed minutes later by the devastating observation that a famous sportswoman might be a lesbian? I get the feeling Boyle and his fans like to think of him as being at the vanguard of a new, dark comedy. But the pioneers of scathingly misanthropic material, such as Lenny Bruce and Bill Hicks, were genuinely angry about stuff, and turned that anger into inventive routines aimed mostly at the powerful elite (Hilton, B. 2010).

Tim Arthur, editor of *Time Out*, countered that Boyle's success spoke for itself. He that Boyle's lineage came from other 'great unflinching offenders' such as Bill Hicks, Jerry Sadowitz and Lenny Bruce (Arthur, T. 2010).

He may be too brutal, vulgar, uncompromising or challenging for your delicate sensibilities. Well, remember the thing that starves comedy of its oxygen is a lack of laughter. If you're that offended by Boyle, don't go to see him. Don't watch his programs or buy his DVDs. But don't continue to erode the principle of freedom of speech by blowing one or two jokes out of proportion (Arthur, T. 2010).

In December 2008, on the Radio 4 panel show, *Political Animal*, Boyle likened the situation in Palestine to "a cake being punched to pieces by a very angry Jew". Boyle also said he had "been studying Israeli Army martial arts. I now know 16 ways to kick a Palestinian woman in the back". (BBC, 2010) The BBC's complaints unit responded to angry protests, agreed that the comment was inappropriate and offensive and apologised (BBC, 2010). Unlike other Boyle comedy, the jokes were not aimed at an individual but at a country involved in conflict. Much of his comedy is set around the popular subject of celebrity. His jokes about the profoundly disabled child of British celebrities also known as Katie Price and Peter Andre

caused Price to seek apologies and political action. Boyle said during his late night television show *Tramadol Nights*, "Jordan and Peter Andre are still fighting each other over custody of Harvey – eventually one of them will lose and have to keep him." He added, "I have a theory about the reason Jordan married a cage fighter - she needed a man strong enough to stop (the unusually strong) Harvey from fucking her..." (Norman, M. 2011)

Ofcom, the British media regulator, ruled that the joke had breached the broadcasting code and appeared to directly target and mock the mental and physical disabilities of a known eight-year-old child. The broadcast, Ofcom stated, had been, "an erroneous decision on a matter of editorial judgment" (Sweeney, 2011). Following the Ofcom ruling Price wrote to Channel 4 chief executive David Abraham telling him he must accept responsibility for the breach and for the offence caused by Boyle (Broadcast Now, 2011). Abraham replied, "I appreciate the very personal perspective to your letter and I would like to reassure you that we never set out to offend or cause distress to your son." He added, "As we made clear in our submission to Ofcom, our detailed internal commissioning process meant that we were satisfied that you and not your son, were the object of the satire" (Broadcast Now, 2011).

The BBC decided that the country of Israel – the BBC doesn't broadcast to Israel – deserved an apology but a ridiculed mother of a ridiculed disabled child didn't. Boyle's response was to ignore Katie Price's offer to meet her disabled child and instead continued the jokes. He denied blame for Harvey being bullied after he joked about him on Channel 4. He told an audience at The Stand comedy club, "I'm getting blamed for people bullying Harvey. But I don't believe kids at his school [who] wanted to bully him were struggling for an angle." (Archibald, B. 2013)

Gail Walker in the *Belfast Telegraph* wrote:

Yes, [Price] can come across as crass and vulgar. And, yes, she is a publicity addict. But none of that means she isn't entitled to be treated as a human being (2013).

Boyle has also joked about breast cancer, suggesting those with the disease lie in bed and “play with their tits before they fall off”. On television in 2010, he said that celebrity Jade Goody’s widower Jack Tweed was “the luckiest guy in the world. In the three weeks they were married [before she died of cervical cancer] she got thinner, better looking and her pussy got tighter”. Goody left behind two young sons. AIDS sufferers, he suggested, contracted the disease from having sex with monkeys. At one point in his television show Boyle said, “I’m genuinely surprised I’m getting away with this” (*Daily Mail*, 2010). Boyle’s act is littered with insults and meanness – the original title of his comedy show on Britain’s Channel 4 was, *Deal with this, Retards*. In 2012 he tweeted that disgraced dead pedophile Jimmy Savile did an incredible amount of charity work in his life, just to be sure he could shag [missing child] Madeline McCann in heaven (Anorak, 2012). It resulted in outrage, the joke was current but it didn’t have any point. The joke didn’t question privacy standards, community principles or the responsibility of authorities. The Gervais/mong controversy at least put a spotlight on bullying behavior, even though that wasn’t the intention of the comedian. In February 2015 Boyle was to make a comeback to broadcasting in a BBC radio comedy, *Blocked*, but a joke in the script about the assassination of Lord Mountbatten, the Queen’s cousin, by the IRA in 1979, led to its axing. According to the *Daily Mail* the BBC considered the show “too risky and controversial” (Newton, J. 2015). It was surprising that a joke about a 36 year-old incident was considered a risk and too controversial but a line of jokes that made life harder for a severely disabled child and his celebrity mother was defended.

While Frankie Boyle did small amounts of acting in skits for his shows and Ricky Gervais began his comic career acting and writing for a comedy series, they are also high profile comedians in their own name. Their jokes are attached to them not a character, and they are quoted and profiled in the media and correspond on Twitter with their fans and detractors. British comic actor and writer, Sacha Baron Cohen found fame by playing obnoxious, clueless characters, mostly in real-life encounters with unwitting ordinary people. Cohen initially portrayed Ali G, a white man behaving like black rapper. He interviewed police officers, feminists and religious leaders, all perplexed but none the wiser about the ruse. Cohen also

played Borat, a Kazakhstan television reporter, and Bruno, a gay Austrian fashion designer in *Da Ali G Show* on British Channel 4. Cohen, disguised as Borat, journeyed across America in the 2006-film *Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan*. In character he prompted unguarded reactions from unsuspecting victims with his concocted 'naively offensive' behavior. The film was acclaimed by critics and nominated for an Academy Award for Best Adapted screenplay (Cenite, M. 2009).

The plot was ostensibly a 'mission to document American culture for Kazakh viewers'. 'Borat Sagdiyev' and his producer 'Azamat Bagatov' filmed interviews with a wide range of people – from retailers to politicians– asking them about American customs, products, and beliefs. In broken and heavily accented English, Borat asked a gun salesman, "What is the best gun to defend from a Jew?" A nine millimetre or a 45 was the reply (Blouke, C. 2015). He asked a car salesman what vehicles would "attract a woman with shave down below". According to the salesman, a Corvette would do the trick. He also introduced traditional Kazakh customs to some of his interviewees, such as sharing cheese with former Georgia Congressman Bob Barr. Borat explained to Barr after Barr had tasted the cheese, "My wife, she make this cheese. She make it from milk from her teat" (Blouke, C. 2015).

Baron Cohen rarely stepped out of character in his public appearances extending the 'joke' beyond the film. It was Borat who appeared in interviews with news agencies such as CNN and Fox News, who made an appearance on *The Tonight Show with David Letterman*, and it was Borat who was awarded *GQ Magazine's* Man of the Year Editor's Special Award for 2006 (Bilmes, A. 2006).

As a child, Baron Cohen liked Monty Python and Peter Cook, but his greatest comic influence was Peter Sellers. "He was this incredibly realistic actor," said Baron Cohen, "who was also hilarious and who managed to bridge the gap between comedy and satire." Sellers, who played a multitude of characters for movies and for the influential *The Goons* radio show, was confused and troubled about his true self (Anthony, A. 2009). The true nature of Baron Cohen's personality has been a

well-guarded secret, partly to protect his characters from celebrity contamination but more likely to protect himself. "I'm a private person," he said, "and to reconcile that with being famous is a hard thing" (Anthony, A. 2009).

He protected himself from media scrutiny by only making appearances in character and refusing requests for profile interviews. The fact that he guarded himself from the fate of most celebrities seems unfair considering his deceptions that publically humiliate celebrities and ordinary people. To put it simply – he can give it but he can't take it. His black comedy doesn't look inward or ponder social issues and politics; it is more interested in entrapment as a means to a comic end. "Borat essentially works as a tool," Baron Cohen, a cultural Jew, said. "By being anti-Semitic, he lets people lower their guard and expose their own prejudice, whether it's anti-Semitism or an acceptance of anti-Semitism" (Anthony, A. 2009). Baron Cohen said he is not a religious Jew but an observant of the customs and traditions and is culturally and historically proud of his Jewish identity. In her unauthorised biography of Cohen Kathleen Tracy wrote that as a student at Cambridge's Christ's College his academic instructors viewed him as a serious, socially proactive intellectual, interested in studying the roots of ethnic and cultural prejudices (2008).

In *Borat*, Jews are placed as the victims of ignorance and hate or, depending on your viewpoint, malevolent characters. An early scene depicted 'the running of the Jews', where, similar to the running of the bulls in Spain, Borat's 'countrymen' ran in packs from huge evil looking Jewish effigies. When one laid a giant egg small boys were encouraged to stamp on it before it "grew into a Jew". When Borat stayed at a bed and breakfast, two elderly Jews were seen as kindly, offering late night sandwiches and being hospitable while Borat feared them as evil; his paranoia extreme when, in his mind, they morphed into two cockroaches on the floor as he ran screaming from the house. When pretending to fire a gun at a gun shop, Borat said, "Make my day Jew" (Borat, 2006).

Sacha Noam Baron Cohen was born in 1971. His father was a wealthy clothier and Baron Cohen and his brothers had a typically upper-middle class upbringing with parental expectations of success for their children who attended Haberdashers' Aske's Boys' [private] School in Hertfordshire in England. As a boy, Cohen was involved in Habonim, a Jewish youth group with chapters in more than 20 countries. It was there that he made his acting debut and developed a desire to be a comic. At Cambridge University, boasting old boys such as Peter Cook, Hugh Laurie and Stephen Fry, he studied history, joined the dramatic club and performed in the annual Footlights review (Tracy, K. 2008). Like Gervais, Parker and Stone, *The Chaser* team, Chris Morris and to a lesser extent Boyle, Baron Cohen had an unremarkable, comfortable middle class upbringing.

Kathleen Tracy wrote that Baron Cohen would blend his social awareness with his zeal for performing and create controversy both to comic effect and to, 'expose subconscious bias carefully buried under political correctness or apathy' (2008). He justified lying to unsuspecting people to gain their trust and hope they dropped their "guard" and revealed themselves as intolerant. Along the way he also aimed to elicit laughter from the audience. His method of entrapment led his victims into situations he controlled. For example, at a dinner party in *Borat*, he 'mistook' an elderly *retired* man as being *retarded*, brought in a surprise uninvited guest – a black, disheveled prostitute, waved a bag of his 'own excrement' around at the dinner table and intimated that one of the female guests was ugly. That kind of provocation would likely anger anyone. Yet Borat's dining companions weren't upset when they saw the film. "All things considered, we got out of this pretty clean," said Mike Jared ['mistaken' for a retarded person]. Jared, a religious minister, abruptly left the party when the alleged prostitute arrived. His attitude was "hey, he fooled us; it's funny. Watching this, I'm sure it's funny to some people. It was just not funny that night." He added that his two college-age sons found his appearance "hysterical" (Marchese, D. Paskin, W. 2006).

Three feminists, Linda Stein, Grace Welch and Carole De Saram, who formed a panel in the movie acknowledged the comedy in the film despite feeling anger at

the time of filming. Borat's remarks included a request to take their tops off, suggesting women have smaller brains and saying, "listen, pussycat, smile a bit." However Linda Stein said that, the joke appeals more to men than women (Marchese, D. Paskin, W. 2006).

In an article in *The Guardian*, Andrew Anthony wrote that the basic joke was to have one of Baron Cohen's characters say something inappropriate and see how celebrities or civilians responded (2009). But it is seldom that simple.

For example, Ali G's reference to "hanging with me bitches" may have been transparently sexist for demeaning women. But was it racist for ridiculing a certain strain of macho black culture? Or was it about racism? Was Ali G, as critic Jeanette Winterson suggested, little more than a postmodern version of *The Black and White Minstrel Show*? Does Baron Cohen play with stereotypes or reinforce them? This debate followed each of Baron Cohen's creations. In the case of *Borat*, for which he won a *Golden Globe*, Borat 'from Kazakhstan' regularly demonstrated hatred for Jews in the film. Media appearances were made palatable to liberal critics by the knowledge that Baron Cohen was Jewish. That didn't do a lot to placate the Kazakh authorities (Andrews, A. 2009).

As well as acclaim, *Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan* received accusations of racism, misogyny, and sheer vulgarity (Blouke, C. 2015). Baron Cohen never explained or apologised to those offended and distressed by his work. He never engaged as himself with victims of his comedy and rarely commented.

The 'working class honesty' of alternative comedy – Keith Allen's abuse, Ben Elton owning his attacks on Benny Hill – was another element that was discarded by the new breed of comedy, especially Baron Cohen. Two men who were filmed drunk, spouting sexist and racist remarks sued for fraud, claiming that the *Borat* producers' misrepresentations, including that the film would not be shown in America or name them, voided their appearance releases (Cenite, M. 2009). The

lawsuit was dismissed on grounds of public interest. If there were full disclosure, the apparent aim of the film – exposing American society’s level of bigotry – would be diluted or impossible to represent. The filmmakers relied on the concept of public interest against individual harm, which is classically and broadly defined as the common good. Mark Cenite, in his journal, *Ethical Learnings from Borat on Informed Consent for Make Benefit Film and Television Producers* wrote that public interest was not public curiosity, but involved matters in the interest of the public, for example, matters of ethical controversy or wrongdoing:

In the context of producing video, serving the public interest should include exploring matters of public controversy and would allow latitude in its interpretation (2009).

Another case concerned the film’s opening scene, in which Borat is shown leaving his “Kazakh” hometown for America. It was actually filmed in a poor rural village in Romania. Residents who spoke limited English claimed they were told it was a documentary about their plight and that they did not sign releases. A man whom Borat referred to as the town mechanic and abortionist was featured, and he kissed and identified a woman as, “my sister, number four prostitute in all of Kazakhstan”. The villagers filed a \$30 million lawsuit, but their legal action foundered when they were required to amend their complaint for failure to state a cause (Cenite, M. 2009). It was hard to make a case for damages against the producers of *Borat* despite the hurt it caused. The lies, it can be assumed, were told to exact a ‘truth’ about people.

Patrick Barham wrote in *The Guardian* (2006) how the ‘sting’ would work for most of Baron Cohen’s US targets. The subject would be cold-called by representatives of a front company, usually called One America Productions:

Linda Stein, for example, an artist and feminist baited by Borat in the film, had a pre-interview with a woman with the false name of Chelsea Barnard working with a Belarus TV station. Stein searched for One America on the internet and found nothing. Fearing it could be a cover for an extreme right

group, she interrogated Barnard, who told her funding for the documentary came from Belarus Television. Baron Cohen was shielded from Stein, and others, until the last minute, presumably to give people less time to see through his act. And, just as the crew was setting up the shoot, the victims were handed consent or release forms, in complex legalese. Media lawyers who examined the forms said they were unusually long, with some unique clauses. But the victims invariably signed them without checking them properly. Stein admitted she barely read the form but she questioned its validity given that accompanying signature – Chelsea Barnard – was a made-up name. And, as she wrote in Manhattan's *Downtown Express*, 'While I'm no legal expert, I can't believe that you can agree to be defrauded' (Barham, P. 2006).

Despite the legal failures of the victims, the ethics of Baron Cohen and the filmmakers of *Ali G*, *Borat* and *Bruno*, seem questionable, especially when reading the approach of other comedians in Mark Cenite's journal. In an interview with National Public Radio, comic actor, Steve Carell spoke of what he found acceptable or objectionable when he worked for the satirical series, *The Daily Show*, in 1999. For his audition field piece, he was asked to interview a man who, Carell came to believe, was mentally ill. "We weren't making any sort of point. We were just mocking the fact that he believed what he believed," Carell said. "It's like shooting fish in a barrel. These people just can't fight back." He contrasted that with interviews with "people who deserve it" such as "people of intolerance," including neo-Nazis (Gross, T. 2008). Similarly, American satirical columnist Molly Ivins wrote:

Satire has historically been the weapon of powerless people aimed at the powerful. When you use satire against powerless people it is like kicking a cripple" (Krugman, P. 2007). American satirist, Stephen Colbert regularly contributed a religious news segment to *The Daily Show* titled 'This Week in God'. When deciding what to include in the segment he would consider, "Does [the material] disrespect the concept of their belief?" (Gross & Miller, 2005) Another of his tests was to not make a joke "more important than being humane". This meant, for example, not talking about

tragedy or not questioning someone's closely held religious beliefs. But if they are using religion as a tool in ways that are hypocritical or destructive, he said, then it's fair game. Colbert considered [his view of] public interest versus culpability and respect for the participant (Cenite, M. 2009).

In 2008, on a pre-recorded episode of British Radio 2's *Russell Brand*, comedian Brand and Jonathan Ross left a series of answer phone messages for actor Andrew Sachs. They were explicit false claims that Brand had sex with Sachs' granddaughter. Ross yelled, "He fucked your granddaughter!" Ofcom received 1039 complaints and the BBC received 42,851. Brand resigned, Ross was suspended without pay for three months and Radio 2 controller Lesley Douglas resigned, as did Radio 2's Head of Compliance (Hunt, L. 2010). An editorial in *The Telegraph* claimed, "This could spell the end for the comedy of cruelty" (2008). The BBC, it wrote, was dangerously divided from the majority of people in this country, deploying as evidence a quote from BBC journalist, Andrew Marr, to the effect that it was a publicly funded, urban organisation with an abnormally large number of young people, ethnic minorities and gay people (Telegraph, 2008). Cruelty became the binding theme for the policing of comedy. It would inform the BBC's proposed revisions to editorial guidelines, in particular Section 5 [Harm and Offence] in the sub-section on Intimidation and Humiliation.

Some comedy can be cruel, but unduly humiliating, intrusive, aggressive or derogatory remarks must not be celebrated for the purposes of entertainment. Care should be taken that such comments and the tone in which they are delivered are proportionate to their target (Draft BBC Editorial Guidelines for Public Consultation 2009: 41).

The gratuitous and opportunistic comedy of the new century was becoming problematic to broadcasters. Gervais and Boyle were the most noticeable perpetrators and to a lesser extent Jimmy Carr – "I don't know where the mark is until I overstep it" – who mostly told short offensive and often sexist jokes:

If men are meant to fall asleep right after sex, why is it so difficult to catch a rapist? (Pelser, H. 2013)

What do nine out of 10 people enjoy? Gang rape.

What is rape anyway but surprise sex? (Gold, T. 2012)

Carr, who has appeared on many British television shows and also hosted a word-game show, performed a routine on stage that gauged offence from his audience. Starting slowly he, 'takes it up a gear' – disabled kids then abortion – “it doesn't cost anything to fall down the stairs, some of these girls think I'm made of coat hangers”. Then paedophilia. His jokes were not just about the joke but also about prodding the moral lines and civility of the audience. He silenced a roomful of rock stars and celebrities at an award show with a line about Reeva Steenkamp, a week after Oscar Pistorius was convicted of her murder. Joking about the queue for the toilets at the show, Carr said, "It's so frustrating. All I'm saying is, I can see it from Oscar Pistorius' point of view". He then told the gasping crowd, "that's not the controversial bit, here it comes ... I blame her. If she hadn't been in that disabled toilet none of this would have happened" (Northover, K. 2015). Most of his jokes are simply about testing the line of offence to the point of turning into a game with the audience. Sexist jokes come easily to the popular comedian, despite or because he knows his audience has a strong contingent of women. “I've got a friend whose nickname is Shagger. You might think that's pretty cool. She doesn't like it” (Carr, J. 2015). On a filmed stand up routine he called a woman in the audience a dirty little hussy while congratulating her apparent “fuck buddy” male sitting next to her. Carr's line, “It's not everyday I get to talk to a slag” was followed by rousing applause (Sebwester. 2010).

Like Gervais and Boyle, Carr was attracted to disability as a target for his jokes – as well as redheads, the elderly and women. Carr courted controversy by including a joke about children with Down syndrome – the popular choice for British disability jokes – in his stand-up set. Referring to the minibus network used by the disabled he said, “Why are they called Sunshine Variety Coaches when all the kids on them look the same?” Carr later obliquely defended the joke, arguing that it was the 238th performance of his tour, and this was the first occasion on which the joke had caused offence – which was more of a non-sequitur defence. In 2009, Carr joked that as a result of the large number of servicemen amputees from the Iraq

and Afghanistan wars “we are going to have a fucking good Paralympic team in 2012”. Colonel Richard Kemp, former commander of the British Forces, said that Carr’s joke was “completely disgraceful”. Carr later pledged to fundraise for the Help for Heroes charity (Hodari, D. 2012).

Carr commented on the wider backlash – a joke said on stage to a small crowd, relayed to a wider audience via media) – ‘There is a tendency, when someone is upset, to say, ‘Well, I was highlighting the tragedy’. I wasn’t. I was trying to make people laugh” (Hunt, L. 2010). Carr and Lucy Greeves in their book, *The Naked Jape* (2007, p 190), caution against ironic ‘meta-bigotry’, the parody of discussions about, for example, race, rape, abortion and sexuality. They propose that most offensive jokes are not taboo busting at all and it isn’t the function or purpose of jokes to enlighten but to amuse (Carr, J. L, Greeves. 2007: p 192).

If a comic made a joke about breast cancer would it have to have some resonance and some relevance – perhaps to remind people to get check ups – and humourous relief to the cancer patient? Much of comedy is about recognition – ‘it’s funny because it’s true’. That should be particularly true of comedy that relied on society, humanity, media and the zeitgeist for material. Should comics be mindful of upsetting parents of Down syndrome children who may be in their audience? Should a broadcaster censor a comedian who is believed to have overstepped the mark? In 2012, Frankie Boyle branded Saudi Arabian Paralympians as “mainly thieves” on Twitter, a Paralympics high jumper’s performance as “Taliban assisted” and reported that, “the blind high jump was cancelled after two Labradors were hanged during training” (Szalai, G. 2012). Boyle defended his jokes on Twitter, calling them “celebratory, non-discriminatory, pretty funny”. And he added, “Nobody thinks it’s a good thing to laugh at the disabled. But it is a genuine problem that we’re not allowed to laugh with the disabled” (Szalai, G. 2012). Although he didn’t offer any feedback from any disabled people that he was laughing with. In fact it’s more likely there were few, but because, obviously, disabled people would have a sense of humour, he simply deduced that they would laugh with his jokes (Halliday, J. 2012). The Channel 4 management cut ties with

Boyle because it was the host broadcaster for The Paralympics. Does that kind of context have to be applied before someone is deemed too offensive to work with? There was evidence of many people offended by his disability jokes on Channel 4 before it became the Paralympic broadcaster. Does a broadcaster suddenly become sensitive to an issue only when they are commercially connected to it? Boyle was at least consistently offensive and defiant, if unconvincing.

British comedians Jerry Sadowitz and Roy Brown had a bold, brave and even foolhardy focus on offending anyone. They didn't covet major fame and their acts were deemed too extreme for television. In 2016, *Spiked* published a review of a Sadowitz London gig online:

... His frenetic pace and lucid swearing came spitting forth from his foaming mouth, sparking rapturous laughter in the room. In his 'ultra-fascist', misanthropic shtick he viciously mocked every conceivable minority group while also giving (paedophile) Jimmy Savile, politicians, capitalists, young people, the ruling classes and his fellow comics a violent kicking. Sadowitz sported a variety of hats throughout the show, including a Nazi cap with the word 'Gestapo' printed on the front, and a Chinese conical hat; Sadowitz says he tells his most offensive jokes wearing different hats so that his critics can excuse his vicious tirades as 'character performance' (Harries, R. 2016).

Brian Logan wrote in *The Guardian*:

A legend in stand-up, Sadowitz is its original nothing-is-sacred, troubled genius, an unclubbable talent shunned by telly while his imitators – Frankie Boyle, Jimmy Carr, Ricky Gervais – made their millions (2014).

At a stand-up show in the UK in 2014, Roy Chubby Brown yelled , Nigger, nigger, nigger, nigger, nigger! Paki, paki, paki, paki, paki!" and followed that with the

rhetical question. "Who said I'm not allowed to say those words?" (Koshy, Y. 2014)

Decades earlier, in his act, Lenny Bruce said, however naively, that by repeating the word nigger, over and over it would lose its meaning and ability to hurt. Now Brown was saying he could use it despite its meaning and hurt. Lenny Bruce wasn't averse to shocking an audience but not shock for shock's sake or to stir up racist attitudes. In the routine, 'How to relax your colored friends at a party' a white man had an awkward and patronising conversation with a black man thinking he is being tolerant – "I guess a lot of you people are in show business? Do you know the guy on the "Cream of Wheat box?" – is a clever dissertation on what he saw as a self-satisfied liberal white attitude to black people. As they talked, the white man got progressively drunker and less inhibited – "Let's sing a song about the fried chicken and the watermelon in the world... come over to my house, it'll be dark soon, as long as you promise not to do it with my sister, I don't want no coon doing it to my sister"(Bruce, L. 2004).

Brown continued in his act with a routine about Ebola. "We've got Aids from West Africa; we've got malaria from West Africa; we've got pneumonia from West Africa and now we've got **Ebola**. Apparently the Africans got it because they were eating bats. No wonder them niggers have got big lips!" (Koshy, Y. 2014)

Cultural critic Yohann Koshy wrote in the arts website, *Vice*, that Brown has played to more than 150,000 people a year for three decades but that he would never appear on the BBC; in this sense, and in that sense he is genuinely subversive (2014). Koshy described what he viewed as one of the lowest moments from a gig:

Did you read in the papers about those Muslims burning poppies on Remembrance Day? Sick cunts. The guy who does my gardening's a Muslim, and he observed the two-minute silence. After I whacked him with a fucking shovel!" It's not even a joke, just an image: a scene of slave-plantation-style brutality. It's basically an incitement to racial violence. And it got a round of

applause. It's said he articulates his audience's political disenchantment, pointing out that his loyal fans are "rough people from rough houses on rough estates" who know that "[he] was just like them, except he struck lucky and found a way out (Koshy, Y. 2014).

Brown – real name Royston Vasey – grew up on a council estate in the bleak industrial town of Grangetown, Yorkshire. He wrote in his biography, *Common As Muck*, that more than 12,000 people lived within an enclosed few miles, boxed in by a massive chemical works, the North Sea, steelworks and hills.

All working class, all living hand to mouth, and all white. I didn't see a black or Asian person until I was in my mid-twenties. And neither did anyone I knew (2006).

His father frequently beat his mother. Brown suspected her severe epilepsy was a result of the beatings. The nine-year-old became a persistent small time thief after his mother left him to be raised by his father:

I was a complete pain in the arse who thought if I wanted something all I had to do was steal it," he wrote, "To [me and my mates] thieving seemed glamorous and exciting. (Brown, R. 2006).

Brown had no childhood memories of his mother:

Even today, more than fifty years later, I feel robbed. I used to see other kids coming home from school to their mothers cuddling them, giving them cakes and playing with them out in the garden. And I wanted that (Brown, R. 2006)

He left home at the age of 15 after his stepmother and her children moved in. At 16 he joined the merchant navy and like Lenny Bruce found life at sea challenging.

In spite of the camaraderie with the other crew members I found life at sea lonely. I spent hours on deck gazing at the ocean" (Brown, R. 2006).

After drunken fights and disobedience Brown quit the navy and was soon serving two years jail for burglary. He was offered early release after more than a year on the condition he had a family home to go to. Both his parents refused to take him and he served the full term (Brown, R. 2006).

Brown, who, like Bruce, Carlin, Hicks and Pryor began his career as a 'clean' stand-up, mined taboo subjects such as paedophilia, makes fun of disabilities and regarded famines in Africa and earthquakes in India as source material. He preached to the converted while his technicolour jacket and trousers, flying cap with raised goggles, bright white socks and brown loafers contributed to the vaudeville mood. When he appeared on stage the audience yell out you fat bastard, you fat bastard over and over (Brown, R. 2006).

Brown's racist and homophobic jokes had no sense of irony. The 2007 documentary *Britain's Rudest Comedian* established that he used themes most other comedians discarded decades ago. "You crack gags about homosexuals and they say you are homophobic, fuck off, that you are frightened of something. I am, I'm frightened of a cock up the arse" (Yapp, W. 2007).

Occasionally he miscalculated his audience When he performed in a town at the centre of a child abuse investigation, his opening line was, "I'm surprised there are so many of you here, I thought you'd all be at home fucking the kids". He was booed off stage (Hunt, L. 2010). But at a gig in Blackpool Brown said to loud laughter and applause, "I drove in this morning and I stopped at a little Paki shop. They sell milk and papers when they're not making fucking bombs". The mood in the room changed from laughter to loud laughter and loud cheers (2015). Meeting his fans for autographs after the show, one devotee said, "It's for my sister can you sign it, 'to Susan, you fat cunt'."

Leon Hunt posed the question, in his paper, *Near the knuckle? It nearly took my arm off! British comedy and the 'new offensiveness'*, "why is Jerry Sadowitz regarded as one of comedy's transgressive, misunderstood geniuses, a risk-taker, while Brown

is regarded as peddling ignorance to the ignorant?" (2010) While Sadowitz also told dark jokes about paedophilia, disabilities and race, he was not interested in preaching to the converted. Sadowitz once 'paid the price' in Montreal, punched unconscious after greeting his audience with, "Good evening, Moose-fuckers! You know what I hate about this country? Half of you speak French and the other half let them" (Hunt, L. 2010). John Fleming wrote in the Huffington Post of an onstage Sadowitz 'tirade':

If any other comic had told some of the jokes Jerry told last night, I think there is a high possibility he would risk being arrested. And not without reason. Some of the Muslim jokes were so close to stirring racial hatred that there could be a nice philosophical discussion on where the line lies. Though, interestingly, some of the jokes were so unsettling because they said out loud some normally unsayable truths (2011).

Hunt believed the real differences came down to audience and context. First, Brown and Sadowitz were located within traditions that possess different levels of cultural capital. Sadowitz could be seen as the uncompromising alternative outsider and Brown the panderer to common taste. Alternative comedy possessed a strong middle class appeal (Hunt, L. 2010). Justification of Sadowitz by supporters usually contends that he tweaks his audience's political sensibilities – 'assaulting their values'. To the middle class observer, Brown's audience is a 'rough' crowd. Sadowitz's audience is a less intimidating prospect – Montreal notwithstanding – almost as white as Brown's, but considerably more affluent. Lenny Bruce's audience was largely socially and politically liberal. British satirist, Stewart Lee said in an interview, "The thing about most of those professionally offensive comedians, though, is that no-one is ever actually offended. Everyone understands the parameters and operates within them – the audience and the performer. Whereas, with someone like Jerry Sadowitz, there's a part in every show of his where a little piece of me dies and I think, I wish I'd never heard that. Now, that's the most truly offensive comedian you'll ever see" (O'Hagen, S. 2009).

Jimmy Carr identified his favourite sound in comedy as “the laugh followed by the sharp intake of breath”. In his book on jokes, co-written with Lucy Greeves, he claimed, ‘the laugh is always first. The joke has made them lose control of their social self-edit function, just for a moment’ (Carr, J.Greeves, L. 2007: p. 181). The Freudian ‘release theory’ – the joke will evade restrictions and open sources of pleasure that have become inaccessible – attests to that (Hunt, L. 2010). Andrew Medhurst, author of *A National Joke: Popular Comedy and English Cultural Identities*, proposed that, ‘it is perfectly possible to be amused by a joke that advanced political positions you would otherwise find unacceptable’ (2007, p. 21). But our reaction to such jokes reveals that we may not find these positions as unacceptable as we might like to think. According to Sigmund Freud, “you are most effective as an artist when you express the subconscious of the audience’ (Hitchens, C. 1995).

Sadowitz, also an accomplished magician, is a blunter version of Bruce and Carlin. He pushed the boundaries of social acceptability like them but while Bruce and Carlin painted a picture, his offence got straight to the point. He has spoken about raping minor television celebrity Vanessa Feltz as he held a meat-cleaver to her throat, how soldiers are idiots and also how the abducted child Madeline McCann’s mother would be attractive and worth raping if only she smiled more often. He also told conventionally styled jokes:

What’s blue and won’t fit? A dead epileptic (Cook, A. 2011).

I’m actually a bisexual necrophiliac, I’ll shag anything that doesn’t move.

I only hate two things – living things and objects” (izquotes.com. 2016).

The Sadowitz technique to offend, his indifference to personal fame, honest yet mysterious persona, and his adaption of adroit magic skills inspired a rapturous critical response. But his act was as crude as the vilified Brown who is maligned as a ‘crowd pleasing’ bigot. Sadowitz was also a relentless pessimist and depressive, which in comedy can be seen as compelling and deep, especially compared to the cheerful Brown and his idiotic costume. Sadowitz, with his hooked nose, dark eyes, black top hat and dark lank hair presents as a menacing, gloomy and analytical character. Even their names separate them – from the moody insular ‘Sadowitz’ to

the ebullient 'Chubby Brown'. Sadowitz is hard to profile because he hasn't toured a lot, has no DVDs or CDs to promote, and he personally removed posts about him on the internet (Cook, A. 2011). There is little about his upbringing apart from some short internet biographies and a few newspaper articles.

Sadowitz was born in New Jersey U.S.A.. His American father was Jewish. His mother, Rosalyn, was Scottish. Raised in Glasgow, from the age of nine, Sadowitz took an interest in magic and he decided at the age of 11 to become a magician (Revolvy. 2017). He opened up about his family in an article in the *Scotsman on Sunday* in 2004. When his mother and father separated he thought he was going to spend time at his father's house and was looking forward to it. But when he got home, his plans disappeared. "I got into the flat," recalled Sadowitz, "and there were just these suitcases being packed and I didn't know what was going on. I remember going through a long tunnel and being on a plane and being sick and then landing in Glasgow. It was fucking freezing compared to New Jersey" (Scotsman, 2004). A few months later he began bleeding from the bowels. "Ulcerative colitis kicked in." He uses this condition that has plagued him all his life in his act, replete with graphic descriptions of suppressing erections at the age of 12 when pretty nurses showed him how to administer enemas. This was his only childhood memory he said (Scotsman, 2004). Everything he talked about to *The Scotsman* came back to his family and his illness, to loss, absence or disappointment. "Every dream I've ever had has been thwarted," he said. His Scottish mother took him and his sister home, and he never saw his American father again until adulthood in 2001. "My dad is very quiet. He has no life. I'd like to go back but it's insufferably boring. He doesn't want to do anything" (Scotsman, 2004).

"[My mother] is a maniac. If I had to be interrogated by the Nazis or spend half an hour with my mother, I'd choose the Nazis." In the interview he was vague about why he labeled her a maniac. "Oh, she's just unstable. Terrified of life" (Scotsman, 2004).

It would be easy to dismiss Sadowitz as a vitriolic misanthrope and self-loather but he is more complicated than that. "The odd thing is, I still love [my mother], despite the fact that she makes it impossible for you to love her. You put your hand in the fire and it gets burned every time. But I look at her and I think that somewhere in there is a really vulnerable, sweet girl. I'd really love to make her happy. But I can't" (Scotsman, 2004).

"My stuff comes from the fact that my life has been miserable," he said, "I now don't believe I have the capacity to be happy. I would settle for peace of mind. I'd give anything for that. But it's been a completely wasted life. Completely and utterly wasted" (Kettle, J. 2011).

Sadowitz said in a *Time Out* interview that he has never made a flippant gag in his life.

"It's something that I've thought really hard about, and come up with something to say. It may be the absolute wrong thing to say, which is a legitimate part of comedy. I don't always do the right thing. But however offensive it might sound, at least there's a genuine thought. The subjects that I've talked about, I searched very deep to find those topics, and then had to find humour in them, simply because everything else had been done. Paedophilia had not been done (when he started), jokes about pensions had not been done, or necrophilia, or any of these subjects – they're not nice subjects, but I wanted to find something original, rather than just go over well-trodden territory. But those subjects have been hijacked. Politically incorrect comedy is no genre: it's me, and it's been ripped off by loads and loads of comics" (Williams, B. 2013).

George Carlin found an uncensored outlet for his material on HBO, with the advent of American cable television, which, as a private subscription channel, was not beholden to the same content restrictions of public-airwaves broadcast stations (Walston, M. 2002). Carlin made an HBO special every two years from 1982. In the 1990s he focused on political correctness. Echoing Lenny Bruce, Carlin said on one show, "They're only words... It's the context. No-one flinched when Richard Pryor

or Eddie Murphy said nigger because we know they are not racists. Why? They're niggers" (Sullivan, J. 2010. p. 210). Carlin's material grew increasingly darker in later years, to the point where he was encouraging mass suicide and ecological disaster (Zoglin, R. 2008). "I sort of gave up on this whole human adventure a long time ago," he said in 2006. "Divorced myself from it emotionally. I think the human race has squandered its gift, and I think this country has squandered its promise. I think people in America sold out very cheaply, for sneakers and cheeseburgers. And I don't think it's fixable" (Zoglin, R. 2008).

His cynicism was transparent and becoming oppressive. "If everybody in the world sat quietly at the same time, closed their eyes and concentrated as hard as they could on peace and goodwill, all the killing and cruelty in the world would continue. And probably increase" (Carlin, G. 2004). Carlin was pointing out the negative without any suggestion of a positive. He became more of an outsider but not the happy loner of his childhood. He was the lone angry man in the spotlight with no answers. As he grew older and less in the zeitgeist, he became less relevant. He remained famous but never became an icon like his mentor Lenny Bruce. Carlin was well known for pushing the boundaries of acceptable language, but his last HBO performances went further, as he raved about eating disorders, plane crashes, war and rape.

Jessica Valenti's article, *Anatomy of a Successful Rape Joke*, detailed the controversy ignited by comedian Daniel Tosh in 2012, when he responded to a female heckler annoyed by his endorsement of rape jokes by saying, "Wouldn't it be funny if that girl got raped by like, five guys right now? Like right now? What if a bunch of guys just raped her...?" (Valenti, 2012) The online post about the incident went viral, prompting Tosh to write a defensive apology on his Twitter account: "all the out of context misquotes aside, i'd like to sincerely apologise — *daniel tosh (@danieltosh) July 10, 2012*". He became another comic who apologised for his dark comedy with qualification. He also tweeted, "the point i was making before i was heckled [with "no rape joke is funny"] is there are awful things in the world but you can still make jokes about them."

Elissa Bassist wrote in the *Daily Beast*, that Tosh's joke was to the heckler who called him out in front of an audience, "used humor to cut her down, to remind her of own vulnerability, to emphasise who was in control" (2012). Valenti quoted a 2007 George Carlin routine on how a joke about rape can be funny (and useful) by putting it into a comic scenario removed from any reality and then bringing it back to serious comment:

Picture Porky Pig raping Elmer Fudd. See, hey why do you think they call him Porky, eh? I know what you're going to say. Elmer was asking for it. Elmer was coming on to Porky. Porky couldn't help himself, he got a hard-on, he got horny, he lost control, he went out of his mind. A lot of men talk like that. A lot of men think that way. They think it's the woman's fault. They like to blame the rape on the woman. Say, "she had it coming, she was wearing a short skirt". These guys think women ought to go to prison for being cock teasers. Don't seem fair to me (2012).

Valenti wrote:

These jokes point out absurdity. They shed light on what's wrong with rape – what they don't do is threaten. And that's what Tosh did. Just because it was uttered by a comedian doesn't make it any less of a verbal assault" (2012).

Carlin's rape jokes exposition went on:

Don't seem right, but you can joke about it. I believe you can joke about anything. It all depends on how you construct the joke. What the exaggeration is. What the exaggeration is. Because every joke needs one exaggeration. Every joke needs one thing to be way out of proportion. Give you an example. Did you ever see a news story like this in the paper? Every now and then you run into a story says some guy broke into a house, stole a lot of things, and while he was in there, he raped an 81 year old woman. And I'm thinking to myself, "WHY??? What the fuck kind of a social life does this guy have?" I want to say, "Why did you do that?" "Well she was coming on to me. We were

dancing and I got horny. Hey, she was asking for it, she had a tight bathrobe on." I'll say, "Jesus Christ, be a little fucking selective next time will you?" ... I wonder, does a rapist have a hard-on when he leaves the house in the morning, or does he develop it during the day while he's walking around looking for somebody. These are the kind of thoughts that kept me out of the really good schools (Carlin, G. 2015).

Whether Valenti thought the rape jokes that came straight after the Porky Pig story were funny or not or demeaning to women is not clear because she didn't quote the full text. The Porky Pig story illustrated her point. But whatever the context of his jokes about elderly women being raped – Carlin still made his point the way he wanted to. Rightly or wrongly, he did not feel any pressure to back down or make excuses, nor can I find any public apology from him for his words.

In 1973, a year after Carlin's 'seven dirty words' created a minor moral panic in the U.S., Peter Cook, a comic institution in Britain, recorded all seven and more with comic partner Dudley Moore as they riffed on obscenity and vicious abuse. The *Derek and Clive* recordings were a departure from the wit and sharp satire that made Cook an idol among comedians and the public alike. Cook was the first and possibly the greatest of a long line of Oxford or Cambridge educated comics that include John Cleese, Rowan Atkinson and Stephen Fry (McSmith, A. 2009). In the early 1960s he predated the Monty Python team at University [Cambridge] with his popular *Beyond The Fringe* satirical shows with Dudley Moore, Jonathan Miller and Alan Bennett. ;

Christopher Hitchens wrote in *Vanity Fair* in a tribute to Cook (1995):

It was on the cusp of the '60s that the four young men – Moore and Bennett from Oxford and Cook and Miller from Cambridge – were brought together to take a revue to the Edinburgh Festival... When the curtain came down, a lot of things came down with it. The tradition of not lampooning the Royal Family, for example. The sacredness of British sentimentality about the 1940 Battle of Britain. The Church of England. The prime minister – a famous old ham in his own right named Harold Macmillan. Other sketches dealt witheringly and

ironically with matters of what we would now tiringly call 'race and class and deviance'.

While the *Monty Python* team was absurdist, Cook combined absurdity with contemporary satire. His work, especially in the popular 1960s BBC television series, *Not Only... But Also* was a mixture of satire, absurdity and dark comedy, including the 'One Leg Too Few' sketch and the 'Good vs. Evil cricket match' [*Monty Python* later came up with the philosophers' football skit]. Cook's unusual cricket match featured the Evil team's Le Marquis de Sade, Stalin and Salome and 12th man, Jack The Ripper, while Florence Nightingale opened the bowling for Good. In the One Leg Too Few sketch from *Beyond The Fringe*, Moore hopped on one leg as he auditioned for the role of Tarzan, while Cook tried to let him down gently. "Now Mr Spiggot you, a one legged man are applying for the part of Tarzan, a role that is traditionally associated with a two legged man. Yet you, a unidexter is applying for the role, a role where two legs would seem to be the minimum requirement..." (Albotello, S. 2011)

Peter Cook was born in 1937 in Torquay, England. His father, Alec, was often absent for most of his upbringing, working as a diplomat living in Nigeria. A lonely Cook was brought up by a series of nannies and family members, until his mother Margaret returned from Nigeria pregnant with a second child in 1944. His younger sisters [a third child was born later], mother and father – when home on leave – loved to play with words, creating spoonerisms and taking a subject to wide-ranging lateral themes. In Harry Thompson's biography of Cook, he looked back on his career, "Only in my mid-40s have I realised that a lot of my sense of humour comes from my parents, that's quite humbling in a way" (1997). The family humour was dry, witty and very English, Thompson wrote, and they stopped short of being crude. Cook loved the Goons, and, unlike the rest of the family, American comedians, the Marx Brothers, Abbott and Costello and Martin and Lewis. Cook was an avid reader as a child, especially of books by P.G. Wodehouse, "the savagely accurate" Geoffrey Williams and Ronald Searle creation, Nigel Molesworth. Cook adored *Ruthless Rhymes and More Ruthless Rhymes* by Harry Grahame, short verses of macabre moments (Thompson, H. 1997).

His favourite:

When Mrs Gorm [Aunt Heloise]
 Was stung to death by savage bees,
 Her husband [Prebendary Gorm]
 Put on his veil and took the swarm
 He's publishing a book next May,
 On 'How to Make Bee Keeping Pay'.

The illustration showed Mrs Gorm's head entirely covered in bees, a few stinging the dog, while Mr Gorm stood there grinning in bee-proof gear (Thompson, H. 1997).

Cook loved his parents – “mummy and daddy” – but saw less of them as he grew from childhood to adolescence. He was unhappy and bullied at Radley's boarding school and, like many comedians, found his comic voice as a defence early on. He was a ‘pretty’ boy and politely rejected homosexual advances from older boys. His impersonations of schoolmasters were a hit with the other boys including that of Mr Boylett, who told very boring stories (Thompson, H. 1997). Cook eventually took his characterisation to Cambridge University and later television, where Mr Boylett morphed into the absurd and soporific character, E.L. Wisty.

Cook often claimed his ambition ran out when he turned 24. Nicholas Lezard wrote in a review of William Cook's biography of the British comedian that he changed the course of a nation's comedy before he was out of his mid-20s (2014). By the time *Derek and Clive [Live]* with Dudley Moore, was released in 1976 he was 39 and close to dormant. Derek and Clive could be described as ‘the evil twins’ of the much loved naïve characters, Pete and Dud, from Cook and Moore's popular BBC television series *Not Only... But Also*. Pete and Dud sat in the pub, cloth capped, pint in hand and discussed life in an endearingly absurdist way. A famous sketch had them competing over ‘beautiful women they had rejected’ concluding with Pete complaining. “Bloody Greta Garbo! Bloody Greta Garbo - stark naked save for a shortie nightie. She was hanging on to the window sill, and I could see her knuckles

all white ... saying 'Pieter, Pieter ...' you know how these bloody Swedes go on – I said 'Get out of it!' (Epicure. Demon, 2015)

In the *Derek and Clive* recordings the situation shifted from acting legend Garbo outside a window to inside the 'cunt' of acting legend Joan Crawford. The first of three comedy records, *Derek and Clive (Live)* was released about 16 years after Cook emerged from University, triumphant in the famous 1960s *Beyond The Fringe* satirical shows. "When we were first writing *Beyond The Fringe*," co-creator Jonathan Miller said, "Peter resisted anything that might offend the audience" (Cook, W. 2003).

Sixteen years later Cook [Clive] was nearing 40, and tiring, as he spat out obscene streams of consciousness into a studio microphone and encouraged Moore [Derek] to match the extreme nature of the conversations. The recordings were racist, misogynist, violent, homophobic and misanthropic. The informal tapes were recorded for fun after a session in New York by pianist Moore's other interest, The Dudley Moore Trio (Hamilton, P. 2006). An engineer dubbed off copies that found their way to rock bands such as the Rolling Stones, the Faces and Traffic. Island records heard about them and a deal was struck with Cook and Moore to re-record the same material.

CLIVE:

.... and I spread her legs apart and I put my huge great nailed shoes on and I kicked her! And I kicked her in the cunt for half a fucking hour 'til I was exhausted! And then I said, "Dolly! Will you get a polaroid of that?!" And the cunt wouldn't even get up!

DEREK:

What a CUNT!

In the sketch *The Worst Job I Ever Had*, Clive [Cook] claimed he nursed Jayne Mansfield through an affliction he referred to as "lobstericimus bumbequissimus" – removing lobsters from her rectum. The extreme and uninhibited chatter started out as a private joke between the two comics but within a few years they were in

trouble with the law. The infantile 'adults only' records released by Island provoked complaints from across England and soon the police force was demanding the two comics be prosecuted for obscenity. The first complaint was lodged after the complainant read about the impending album release in his 14-year-old daughter's copy of *New Musical Express*. He was upset that "such rubbish should be made public" (Travis, A. 2009). The Department of Public Prosecutions' case officer, Graham Grant-Whyte said, "It is crude – fourth form lavatory humour - excretory topics abound as does foul language". Cook and Moore escaped prosecution but the BBC banned *Derek and Clive* anyway. Despite lack of airplay, the album went on to sell more than 100,000 copies in Britain and America and revitalised the comics' reputation for youthful rebelliousness (Travis, 2009). Unlike the *Seven Dirty Words* routine that defined Carlin as a comic, *Derek and Clive* was a spontaneous deviation – lasting three albums – that was a hit with a titillated younger generation that played 'the lavatory humour' out of earshot of their parents.

In a book of interviews about Cook, *How Very Interesting, Peter Cook's universe and all that surrounds it* (2006), Jerry Sadowitz said that he adored Monty Python, and that *Python* and card tricks got him through school and hospital stays. At 17, in a very unhappy time of his life, sharing a bedsit with his mother and father, "I chanced upon a Derek and Clive album. And not only did I find it funnier than Python but they became my companions at a time when I had no friends. They knew how to use swear words. Shit, wanker, fuck-off – they are all great words, with wonderful consonants. Cunt and fuck combined is poetry, pure attack" (2006, pp 197,198).

In 2005, ten years after his death, Cook was voted as the English-speaking world's most talented comedian in a poll of more than 300 comics, comedy writers, producers and directors on both sides of the Atlantic (The Age, 2005). Nigel Planer a member of the Comic Strip group of 1980s British alternative comics and the anarchic TV series, *The Young Ones*, regarded Cook as having, "... a certain cynical cruelty matched with an original mind that influenced everybody else and actually changed things".

“He is more influential than his actual body of work, the very existence of him is so outrageous. [He was] a genuinely anarchic and witty force with a healthy disregard for established pomposity” (Hamilton, P. 2006, pp. 296, 298, 299).

In January 1995, Cook, by then a disheveled alcoholic, died. Obituaries noted his influence but also “lost opportunities” and a “flawed private life”. A fleeting 20-second tribute at the British Comedy Awards offended Nigel Planer and probably thousands of others (Hamilton, P. 2006). Two days after his death a dismayed Stephen Fry, comic, writer and television host, broadcast an emotional honour and rebuke to the negative media coverage of the “extraordinary genius” of Peter Cook, saying he “is part of the DNA of all British comedy that came after him” (frog and peach, 2008).

Beyond the Fringe and *Not Only... But Also* were vanguards of the satire boom in Britain – *That Was The Week That Was*, *The Frost Report*, *Monty Python*, *Not The Nine O’ Clock News*, *Spitting Image*, and *Private Eye* magazine, which Cook funded. *Derek and Clive’s* anarchy influenced the next generation of alternative comics in the 1980s with its mayhem and vulgarity. Although alternative comic writers like Ben Elton would have balked at the racism and sexism. Cook’s cynical approach, absurd take on humanity and clever use of language can still be seen in the often cringe-making comedy of Ricky Gervais’ *The Office*, Baron Cohen’s bold *Borat*, *Ali G* and *Bruno* and Sadowitz’s foulmouthed anger. Despite a commanding sense of language and wit and being lauded as a satirical genius by his peers, Cook delighted in loud, bold and often obvious vulgarity.

There is a story told by a famous Australian comedy writer and performer – who was there at the time and repeated it with relish – that when Cook was a special guest of the first Melbourne International Comedy Festival in 1987, the wealthy owner of the hotel Cook was staying at rushed up to him and his friend in the foyer, interrupted his conversation, fawned over him and asked if there was “anything at all” he could do for the great man. In a loud voice that boomed over the reception area into the lounge and bar, a typically unrestrained Cook, replied, “well yes, you could... *SUCK MY COCK*” (Permezel, B. 2015).

In recent years, the increased use of profanity in primetime network programming has been noticeable, signaling a greater tolerance of such language from the audience (Bella, T. 2012). George Carlin's Supreme Court fight for the right to use any word of the English language in proper context publicly was seminal in this outcome. In a message written after the death of his wife, George Carlin bemoaned the paradox of life.

We have taller buildings but shorter tempers, wider freeways, but narrower viewpoints. We spend more, but have less; we buy more, but enjoy less. We have bigger houses and smaller families, more conveniences, but less time.

It goes on in typical Carlin manner for some 400 words and then in a change of pace for a dark, cynical, complaining satirist, he wrote:

Remember; spend some time with your loved ones, because they are not going to be around forever.

Remember, say a kind word to someone who looks up to you in awe, because that little person soon will grow up and leave your side.

Remember, to give a warm hug to the one next to you, because that is the only treasure you can give with your heart and it doesn't cost a cent.

Remember, to say, I love you to your partner and your loved ones, but most of all mean it. A kiss and an embrace will mend hurt when it comes from deep inside of you.

Remember to hold hands and cherish the moment for someday that person will not be there again.

Give time to love, give time to speak! And give time to share the precious thoughts in your mind.

AND ALWAYS REMEMBER:

Life is not measured by the number of breaths we take but by the moments that take our breath away.

If you don't send this to at least 8 people.... who cares?

-George Carlin (Hollender, J. 2007)

In 2004, George Carlin was voted second behind Richard Pryor on Comedy Central's list of "Top 100 Comics of All Time." On June 17, 2008, just five days before his death, it was announced that he was being awarded the 11th annual Mark Twain Prize for American Humour (Biography, 2017). "If (Carlin's) *Seven Dirty Words* has a legacy, it's that language and freedom of speech win," said Jerry Hamza, Carlin's friend and long-time manager, "I don't think people are going back to saying, 'You can't say this, you can't say that', I think those barriers are gone. I think the *Seven Dirty Words* have helped bust down the uptightness about language and I don't think we can ever go back. I can't see it" (Bella, T. 2012).

CHAPTER 4

Touching up their feminine side

The other side of Rape, cross dressing and other stories

Sarah Silverman

With Joan Rivers, Phyllis Diller, Catherine Deveny

Barry Humphries and Larry David.

This chapter focuses on women in black comedy with Sarah Silverman the centrepiece. Her naïvely positioned narcissistic and offensive persona didn't employ a pseudonym or character like Sacha Baron Cohen or Barry Humphries. The character was called Sarah Silverman just as Larry David, who is linked to Silverman in this chapter, played the narcissistic offensive Larry David, in *Curb Your Enthusiasm*. Both Silverman and David brought racism, bigotry and bullying to their situation comedies and, in Silverman's case, stand up. Barry Humphries as his alter ego, Dame Edna Everidge, is also connected to this chapter's focus through playing a female with a superior attitude. The place women comedians, including the confronting Joan Rivers, have in dark comedy is studied, with their use of self-deprecation, responses to complaints about their comedy, and their female angle to subjects such as abortion and rape.

If you call yourself a diva you better sing this solo
 And not be someone treating me unkind
 If you call yourself a diva it better be for reals
 And some dumb, pathetic kind of front
 If you're selfish and you're thoughtless
 And you're broken and you're heartless
 You're probably not a diva
 You're a cunt
 Cunt, cunt, cunt, cunt, cunt, cunt, cunt, cunt,
 Cunt. Cunt. Cunt. Cunt. Cunt.

Cunt... cunt... cunt... cunt ...

Repeat.

– Sarah Silverman

(FingerBuffet TV, 2011)

Sarah Silverman, writer-comic-actress, told a joke on the late-night television talk show on NBC hosted by Conan O'Brien in 2001: "I got a jury duty form in the mail, and I don't want to do jury duty. So my friend said, 'Write something racist on the form and they won't pick you like, 'I hate chinks'. I was like, jeez, I don't want people to think I'm racist; I just want to get out of jury duty. So I filled out the form and I wrote, 'I love chinks'" (Silverman, S. 2010).

Silverman was originally going to say 'niggers' but after a protracted conversation with a producer – who suggested using the 'N word' or 'dirty Jew' [Silverman is Jewish] – the compromised 'chink' was used. "I'm going to use chink – it's a funnier sounding word." The next day Guy Aoki, a representative from the Asian Network for Asian Americans publicly demanded an apology from her. NBC apologised and banned her from appearing on the network. Silverman – who had already sent a long rambling defensive apology to Aoki – and Aoki later debated on the television show, *Politically Incorrect* with Bill Marr (Silverman, S. 2010). Silverman argued that Aoki should look at the way Asian people are represented on television – for example there are no Asian actors on the drama, *Chicago Hope*, despite the high percentage of Asian doctors in the real Chicago hospital – rather than attack a comedian who made a joke about racism on late-night television.

Silverman wrote in her memoir, *The Bedwetter*:

Right-wing Americans who appear in mainstream media are not out here calling black people niggers," "instead they question the legitimacy of Obama's presidency because he was "born in Africa", or they call him a communist. I suspect the racist messages about Asians that permeate the media are even subtler, and therefore more difficult to combat (2010).

Silverman decided early on in her stand-up career that it would be more effective and funnier to embrace the ugly, frightening things in the world – the Holocaust racism, rape. But that meant she would have to have “a certain amount of emotional distance... akin to a shrink or a social worker. It takes someone really strong to work in a pool of heartbreak and not want to fucking kill yourself” (2010).

For me it was a funny way to be sincere. The hope is that the genuine sentiment – maybe even a goodness underneath the joke [however brutal] transcends. The problem with this formula is that once the irony becomes the audience’s expectation, the surprise is gone (Silverman, S. 2010).

Silverman adopted a persona that was ignorant and arrogant to allow her to say what she didn’t believe in. But while other comedians either didn’t apologise for their comedy or made what appeared to be self-serving apologies, Silverman seemed genuinely concerned when she upset people. Although on closer inspection that genuine concern could be more about pragmatism than compassion. After the ‘chink’ controversy and the long, defensive, letter to Aoki, and debate, she surprisingly created a social media storm over jokes about the oft-joked-about high-profile socialite Paris Hilton. More surprising was her belated sympathy for someone widely understood to be an attention-seeking elitist. In 2004 Hilton’s fame rose dramatically after a porn site managed to sell 600,000 copies of a private sex tape featuring Hilton and her then boyfriend. She tried to stop distribution of the tape, *One Night in Paris*, although its notoriety unexpectedly established her as a postmodern celebrity, leading to perfume deals, a memoir and the covers of *Vanity Fair* and *W*. magazines (Ogunnaike, L. 2006). Her friend Kim Kardashian won fame and a reality television show after her ‘unauthorised sex-tape’ circulated in 2007. Both women, or their spin doctors, capitalised on disrepute translating as celebrity in the media age. Pamela Anderson’s fame rose as a tabloid favourite when a tape of her fellating her husband, rock star Tommy Lee, appeared on the internet in 1997. Celebrity sex tapes surfaced with such regularity that cynics questioned whether the stars themselves were complicit, because of the publicity they attracted (Ogunnaike, L. 2006). Although the singer Kid Rock sued to stop a

sex tape going public, he told the Associated Press, "what perfect timing. I got a record coming up" (Ogunnaike, L. 2006).

In 1963, homosexuality was illegal in most parts of the world and pornography mainly existed as picture magazines of topless women, with anything harder sold from 'under the counter'. That year a British showgirl, Christine Keeler, was embroiled in a political sex scandal for having concurrent sexual relationships with a Soviet naval attaché and John Profumo, a conservative cabinet minister (Brown, D. 2001). The embarrassing affair became a national outrage, most likely because it was seen as a national security risk during the Cold War. Keeler and her friend, Mandy Rice-Davies received some glamorous notoriety – stylish photo shoots, biographies, Rice-Davies' record release, and the 1989 film *Scandal* – through the escalating drama of Profumo's denials and eventual resignation, courtroom dramas and government instability. The homosexuality and subsequent suicide of Stephen Ward, implicated as a pimp, provided more salacious detail and front-page headlines in the tabloids and broadsheets. The point of these episodes of human frailty for a satirist like Lenny Bruce was about the society, values and politics of the time that fuelled the scandal.

The Profumo Affair was a story of magnitude. Hilton and Kardashian were little known when they were exposed in sex videos and there was no unfolding story, merely naked and unfamiliar – at the time – socialites filmed performing fellatio. But the 21st Century media – especially tabloid – created news, links, comment pieces, feature articles and gossip items about boyfriends, parties they attended, places they went and eventually perfumes they put their names to. The Profumo Affair opened up dialogue about permissiveness, politics, privacy and bigotry. In 1963 the beautiful, articulate prostitute was a central figure of a society in transition. She soon faded from view as new topics emerged. In 2004 Hilton and later Kardashian became famous via porn tapes that have long been forgotten. The media and the new pervasive social media have extended and broadened their fame without acknowledging any tangible reason for it. In the 50 years since Lenny Bruce uttered his first expletive on stage one thing hasn't changed – comedy feeds off talking points. This kind of 'accidental' celebrity and social intrigue that had no

relationship with talent or courage or political intrigue was an easy target for comedy.

In 2007 Silverman hosted the MTV Movie Awards. As part of the job, jokes about celebrities and current events in pop culture would be required. Paris Hilton was embroiled in public humiliation for drink driving, violating her parole and an impending jail sentence. Silverman's comic response as Hilton sat unaware in the audience was, "In a couple of days Paris Hilton is going to jail – the audience cheered loudly, cameras trained on a stunned Hilton – ... I hear that in order to make her comfortable in prison the guards are gonna paint the bars to look like penises. I just worry that she's gonna break her teeth on those things" (Silverman, S, 2010).

The morning after Silverman's performance the internet was full of angry posts about her jokes targeting the wealthy heiress terrified of doing jail time. The *L.A. Times* described her observations as a cruel beat-down on Hilton and social media posts included the words cruel, vicious, mean and nasty. Blogs questioned whether Silverman was a bitch – Hilton posted to the affirmative. Although the news presents ordinary people facing poverty, death and jail in struggling circumstances all the time, we mostly remain silent. Yet there was loud outrage when a privileged, wealthy attention seeker and repeat offender who entered our consciences by stealth was upset by jokes about a situation she created. In the 1960s the routine would not have been about Hilton, it would be about our reaction to Hilton. The comedy would likely centre around a theme of consumerism and manipulation, not a personal attack although it may be a by-product. Bruce and Carlin and later Hicks would not accept blame for any harsh observations. Silverman did. People expressed remorse most often, it seems, when they have been caught. "I felt horribly guilty... I was so disturbed I couldn't work," Silverman said.

If only Hilton had been offended would Silverman have cared? Silverman knew Hilton was upset as she spoke, but decided to keep joking anyway, buckled under the weight of public condemnation. Silverman buckled under the weight of public condemnation and wrote an apology to Hilton who was by then in jail. The

comedian vowed to be more careful in the future (Silverman, S. 2010). Several months later Silverman hosted the MTV Music Awards when Britney Spears pop idol, former child star and paparazzi target launched a comeback on the show after a very public mental breakdown. Spears had succumbed in large part to the intense media scrutiny of her everyday life. For several years the media focused on, and perhaps contributed to, her erratic behaviour. She was constantly followed by paparazzi on drug rehabilitation visits, driving dangerously and intoxicated with her children in the car. Her surprise marriage to a childhood friend in Las Vegas and annulment three days later was worldwide news. Camped outside her house, a huge media pack, filmed, dissected and analysed, as a mollified Britney emerged shaven-headed to be escorted to a waiting car (Fleeman, M. 2004).

Spears' performance on the MTV Awards was sluggish, nervous and, while sex is commonplace in music videos, her undersized sequined bikini added to the debacle as she wandered the stage listlessly, oblivious to the provocative dancers surrounding her (Haberman, L. 2007). Silverman, who followed the performance, said she was oblivious to the 'trainwreck' of a performance and, expecting a triumph, had already prepared jokes about Spears. "Wow. She's amazing... It's weird to think that just a few years ago on this very show she was this, like, sweet innocent little girl in slutty clothes writhing around with a python... But have you seen Britney's kids? Oh my god, they are the most adorable mistakes you will ever see. They are as cute as the hairless vagina they came from" (Haberman, L. 2007).

Again Silverman was attacked for 'kicking someone when they were down' and making jokes about Spears' children, although Silverman said that the 'kids jokes' were aimed at Spears. Bloggers attacked Silverman's looks, lack of talent and heartlessness. Silverman wrote in her memoir that the only thing they were more brutal toward was 'Britney's extra eight pounds' (2010).

But like the 'chink' and Hilton upsets, she penned a 'sincere' apology to Spears. "I had no interest in drama or feuds with girls two-thirds my age." Silverman observed in her memoir, "I can't help noticing that the public outrage was far

greater in both instances – Spears and Hilton – than it was over my alleged offence against the Asian-American community” (2010). Silverman concluded by asserting that “sensitive Sallys” can take heart that in the near future people will have a “monolithic caramel colour and common facial features. There won’t be any blondes or hairy Jews. Words like ‘chink’ will have no meaning.”

Just as her cunt song lent – consciously or unconsciously – from Lenny Bruce’s claim, 25 years earlier, that the repetition of the word nigger would leave it redundant, Silverman channelled her defiant predecessor. Although Bruce’s monologues were about equality, Silverman was saying ‘we will all be the same’. There is a difference. And there is a difference to how we view the male and female comic.

In their journal, *Sarah is magic: the [post-gendered?] comedy of Sarah Silverman*, Eric Shouse and Patrice Oppliger argued that a formidable double standard existed when it came to the evaluation of women in U.S. popular culture (2012). When male stand-up comics use profanities and/or touch upon taboo subjects, Oppliger and Shouse wrote, they tend to be revered as brave and edgy. Meanwhile, Sarah Silverman has regularly been called nasty and cruel (2012).

Silverman’s stage persona was narcissistic (Shouse, E. Oppliger, P. 2012). She demanded attention both in her stand-up act and in her sitcom, *The Sarah Silverman Show*. Silverman rejected traditional standards of femininity and went for the laugh, regardless of offensive or taste – although when her comedy was rebuked she lost confidence and conceded (Shouse, E. Oppliger, P. 2012). This style helped to set Silverman apart from other women in comedy, but it also made her a target for criticism, prompting one writer to ask, “What is it with Sarah Silverman? It’s not as if she seems to want you to like her. In fact, she seems hell-bent on flipping you the bird” (Shouse, E. Oppliger, P. 2012). This criticism is indicative of the degree to which Silverman’s comedy is reliant upon presentation; audiences and critics who do not understand or accept her persona often find her both annoying and offensive. Her persona or character has the same name as its creator, which led to confusion between the two. This is in contrast to the wide-acceptance

of Australian satirist Barry Humphries and his comic 'alter-ego' – Dame Edna Everage – critical, rude, racist – “I’m not being nippist, don’t accuse me of nippism” – and dismissive of people.

Every night, women come on to the stage and embrace Edna,” her creator said in an interview with me in 1995, “They write to Edna, they kiss Edna, they thank Edna. They feel, in a sense, although she is now absurdly grand, that she still represents women. She represents women far more warmly than people like Betty Friedan or Kate Millet, you know, the great feminist leaders. [Edna] is more feminine (Beck, C. 1996).

In his book, *Dame Edna Everage and the rise of western civilization* (1991), John Lahr wrote that the character Edna exhibits a mixture of condescension and intolerance, through which Humphries teased both parochial bigotry and puritan liberalism.

Today the Puritan has never been more numerous or influential, Humphries wrote in 1984 – and has repeated something similar at various times since then – recollecting his original mission to shock and goad the humourless. (1991).

His 2015 public comments reinforced eccentric friend and feminist, Germaine Greer’s quote about transsexuals – “Just because you lop off your dick and then wear a dress doesn't make you a fucking woman” (Saul, H. 2015). *The Telegraph* reported that Humphries said, "I agree with Germaine. You're a mutilated man, that's all. Self-mutilation, what's all this carry-on? Caitlyn Jenner [a popular reality show participant who made the transition from man to woman publicly], what a publicity-seeking ratbag. It's all given the stamp – not of respectability – but authenticity or something. If you criticise anything you're racist or sexist or homophobic" (Jones, L. 2016).

A controversy over free speech ensued. This time it wasn’t about obscenity; it was about sensitivity. And it wasn’t a legal argument it was a social one. Social media forums full of conflicting arguments boomed, the media published comment pieces

and stories fuelled by two elderly but enduring icons. Fame, notoriety and provocation were a recipe for attention in this century. As a famous professional cross-dressing entertainer remarking savagely on a celebrity transsexual, the connection, while irrelevant, made headlines. The important issues involved and the people who are affected don't have the same news currency.

In his book on Humphries, John Lahr quoted one of his staff, Harriet, as saying that although Humphries liked to laugh at "everybody else, he can't stand anyone laughing at him. If he is unintentionally funny, "you have to leave the room and laugh. He gets so hurt if you laugh at him" (1991).

When Humphries first moved to the UK in the mid-1960s he went to parties in Earls Court, a favourite hangout of Australians and would meet up with Melbourne Grammar old boys who still regarded him as a longhaired, non-sports-playing poofter. They would have a few beers and abuse him. He would go home and scribble down their colloquialisms to use later for his satire (Lahr, J. 1991).

A friend who accompanied Humphries to these parties, Ian Donaldson, said that they were very interesting encounters to observe. "Barry would approach them with a mixture of amiability, which drew them out, and contempt. Edna has that," Donaldson said, "She's so amiable and so welcoming and so nice; and then the dagger goes in" (Lahr, J. 1991).

While comedians often create comedy around their own personality, Humphries, with his fondness for antique books, eccentricity, and clever wit is the antithesis of Edna Everage. Or is he? In 2012, after his wife Lizzie Spender was granted Australian citizenship, Humphries said, "At least my wife came to our country voluntarily and not against her wishes. She has the right-shaped eyes. A lot of new Australians are Chinese," (Sydney Morning Herald, 2012). His spokesperson later apologised to, "anyone who took offence". "He would never want to offend anybody; a lot of what Barry says to the press is in jest," the spokesperson said without actually quoting Humphries (Sydney Morning Herald, 2012). This statement describing the comedian as a naïve offender would probably be

strenuously denied by Humphries who delighted in creating mischief from a young age. "I was born in Melbourne with a precious gift. Dame Nature stooped over my cot and gave me this gift. It was the ability to laugh at the misfortunes of others" (Chilton, M. 2011). He has often spoken out against political correctness and it is "quite important" to him to be occasionally offensive (Kitchener, S. 2016). "I learned to smile when I say something vicious," he told the *Times* in 1973, "That way you can get away with anything" (Lahr, J. 1991).

In October 21, 2014, *The Australian* published a letter from Humphries stating, "There are a lot of Australians these days who are totally bereft of a sense of humour". He also said, "the new puritanism is alive, well and powerful". It was in regard to emails written by Professor Barry Spurr of the University of Sydney, published by *New Matilda*, an Australian left-wing news and satire site. Humphries made an argument that Spurr's emails were harmlessly politically incorrect, while *New Matilda* carried the headline, *The Partial Works Of Professor Barry Spurr. Poet, Racist, Misogynist* (2014). The professor's emails frequently lamented Aboriginal recognition and described Nelson Mandela as a darky. Humphries said that the terminology bandied about in Spurr's emails "would be offensive if they were not so clearly jocular" (Jobje, B. 2014). In one email Spurr referred to an Aboriginal family as a human rubbish tip, and in others referred to the Chancellor of Sydney University as an "appalling minx" [boldly flirtatious] as well as mentions of chinky-poos [Chinese], mussies [Muslims] and abos [Aborigine] (New Matilda, 2014).

Comic and *The Age* columnist, Ben Jobje wrote of the emails:

Satire may exist to illuminate truth, but surely there's got to be more to it than simply acting exactly like a real-life racist "(2014).

Humphries' view was that one should 'call something as it is' when discussing race. He put that opinion into practice when he complained that Australian teachers were instilling political correctness in students. Humphries described them as: "These sort of bullies who teach, forbid them to call a spade a spade" (Markson, S.

2015). “If you look at any school magazine today, very often they are Chinese or they come from families outside Australia,” he said (Markson, S. 2015).

Much of Humphries comedy had racist overtones through his characters Les Patterson, Australia’s cultural attaché to the Court of St James, and Dame Edna [“me talkum you”] and he was rarely drawn on race issues interviewed out of character. One of the four famous antipodean intellectuals – Clive James, Robert Hughes, Germaine Greer making up the four – to make a mark in Great Britain, the elder comedian was treated with a good deal of reverence by the popular media. His comedy was based on the Australia of the 1950s and 1960s that he left behind to conquer Great Britain. It was grounded in a white Australia before significant numbers of refugees arrived. In 1968 my suburban school photo showed 30 all-white Anglo schoolchildren and one Greek boy. In the 2011 Census, Australians reported about 300 different ancestries; 53.7 per cent of people had both parents born in Australia and 34 per cent had both parents born overseas, many with Asian heritage (ABS, 2011). Humphries’ attitude seemed derived from an Australia that didn’t exist anymore – the white middle class suburbs of more than 50 years ago that he lampooned so successfully.

Unlike Roy Chubby Brown the younger Humphries didn’t relate to his audience with his racism and bigotry jokes. When he was a child he was shocked by his mother’s laid-back anti-Semitism and railed against it with ironic racist slang, four-be-twos and Ikey-mo in his act. The racist jibes Edna and his other popular character Sir Les Patterson, voiced on stage were not about criticising the Japanese, Jews and Chinese. They were about provoking nervous laughter from his largely liberal audience, similar to Lenny Bruce challenging his liberal audience. But Humphries’ recent public remarks about the Chinese taking over Australian culture were critical of another race.

In his 80s, Humphries, a lauded semi-retired master of satire, bereft of disguises, and, long-accepted by the masses – although still at arms length from them – is in danger of being dismissed as an out-of-touch anachronism similar to his age-old

characters. . As people who are inside me, if you like, the characters have certainly helped me,” Humphries has said in the past. “In the guise of these characters, I can syphon off all kinds of aggressions, and I can also discuss certain topics, which I would find difficult to tackle in my own persona” (Lahr, J. 1991).

Sarah Silverman had only one persona – how different that was to her natural self is not clear. Silverman grew up in the 1980s with three sisters as part of a Jewish family [her brother Jeffrey died at the age of 3 months] in New Hampshire. At the age of five she was making mainly non-sequiter jokes that her family encouraged with laughter. Silverman described her mother as having a great passion for proper grammar and pronunciation – similar to George Carlin’s mother. “Books... are read with a pen in hand to correct typos and grammar mishaps... She didn’t care if we said fuck or shit as long as it was with crisp diction and perfect pronunciation” (Silverman, S. 2010). Silverman was a chronic bedwetter as a child and teenager, which made her anxious and uncomfortable. The prospect of a sleepover, a childhood rite of passage, created panicked excuses. “I realised I was going to be a bedwetter for the rest of my life. I supposed maybe someday this nightmare would end, but even so, you’re always an alcoholic, right? Even if you’re living dry? To still be a bedwetter in high school, to have a condition this deeply entrenched, is a pretty serious problem for a child” (Silverman, S. 2010).

She suffered depression for three years growing up in New Hampshire. By the time she was 14, she was prescribed four Xanax antidepressants four times a day [16 a day]. “I was kind of numb, I guess,” she said. “It didn’t fix me in any way” (Silverman, S. 2010).

“My friends didn’t understand. How could they? I didn’t. My parents didn’t. My friend even threw a surprise party for me for no reason, thinking it would make me happy again, but all it did was consume me with the guilt of knowing that no party in the world could change the fact that we are all alone” (Silverman, S. 2010).

Her first psychiatrist hanged himself; the hypnotist her parents hired to stop her bed-wetting told her of his death. “I don’t have easy access to my emotions,” she

admitted. "They're very tightly packed and compartmentalised." The symbiotic relationship she had with her persona, Sarah Silverman, and herself, Sarah Silverman, played out on stage. "I tend to be more arrogant on stage. Far more arrogant. I sometimes say what I think and the lines get blurred, but I can only hope that some kind of absolute power transcends" (Arthur, T. 2008). On her television show she often displayed a much sunnier, deceitfully naïve side – discussing her musical about the Holocaust and AIDS or joining a club to kill people who kill babies [abortionists] – while oblivious to the concerns of those around her. "Life at that time was all about who could be the most uncivilized just for a laugh" (2010).

In her memoir she recounted the story of a comic who thought up an in-joke just for comedians, not for the stage: If you are laughing at something a comic said then – as a reward – you suddenly pretend to give him a blowjob. It doesn't consider female comics making someone laugh (2010).

In terms of pushing the boundaries, Silverman's appearance in the movie *The Aristocrats* was a radical performance. *The Aristocrats* was a documentary that featured more than 100 comedians telling different versions of the same joke. Typically, the joke began, 'A family walked into a talent agent's office and say they have an act'. The punchline of the joke was that the family called themselves 'The Aristocrats'. Between the set-up and the punchline, the goal was to describe the most shocking acts of depravity imaginable – the joke featured vivid descriptions of incest, bestiality and defecation. Given the under-representation of women in stand-up comedy and the grotesque nature of the joke, only thirteen of the 100 comics featured in the documentary were female. However according to Sam Anderson in *Slate* online (2005), Silverman was the lone comic in the film who achieved the desired result.

She implied, via an emotionally supercharged soliloquy full of loaded pauses that the 79-year-old show-business institution, Joe Franklin sexually abused her. At the end, she looked straight into the camera and said, dead seriously, "Joe Franklin raped me"— an anti-punch line that completely paralysed the theatre I was at. Instead of laughing, we were all stuck trying to decide

whether this was some new species of joke or just plain old slander. When Franklin threatened to sue soon after the movie was released – "I didn't like the nature of that wisecrack" – it made the joke strangely better. Silverman was the only comic in the film who met the challenge of the joke: she pushed it too far (Anderson, S. 2005).

Anderson was writing about Sarah Silverman the comic, not Sarah Silverman the persona. Her selfish, narcissistic character in *The Sarah Silverman Show* was clearly a persona; but was the person who offended members of the Asian community, Paris Hilton, Britney Spears and their fans really a persona? And what does that mean? It had become a truism and a cliché that you could say whatever you want in character because it wasn't you – you were not responsible. Comedians legitimately exaggerated and used irony and falsehoods to gain a laugh; but would using a persona writ in their name disengage them from the hurt they cause? Humphries blurred the connection by playing characters that were adoringly treated by media as real people.

The producer of *The Aristocrats*, Paul Provenza, defended Silverman, saying that the statement was ironic because Franklin, an archetypal 'kindly old man', was the least likely person to be considered sexual (Shouse, E. Oppliger, P. 2012). Others were offended because Franklin was such an honoured member of the comedy community. When word came out that Franklin threatened to sue Silverman, her response was, "He doesn't have the balls to sue" (Shouse, E. Oppliger, P. 2012).

Rape is an obvious inspiration for black comedy performed by men. Provocative and internationally popular Australian Comedian, Jim Jefferies, widely criticised as a misogynist, would vent his opinions about women to an appreciative, mainly male audience. Sexual health researcher Sandi Scaunich described some of Jefferies' act that she attended in Melbourne, unaware of his content about women:

In his opening sequence he claimed that when a man put his fingers inside the vagina of an unconscious woman it was not really rape. He said women should be flattered to have their drinks spiked and be sexually violated. He

criticised the women who challenge his misogyny, calling them "uptight cunts that can't take a joke". Jefferies then joked about fat women, lying women, ugly women, beautiful but boring women, dumb women, and made plenty of references to the different types of women he had had sex with. He also admitted that he'd like to have sex with a 16-year-old. During his misogynistic sermon, he asked the audience if anyone knew the opposite of misogyny, and took delight that only one person responded. This lone voice supported his argument that misandry is generally unknown because men have no qualms with being sexually objectified by women (2015).

Compare the flippant aggression of Jefferies to Sarah Silverman's more reflective wisecracks:

"I was raped by a doctor, which is so bittersweet for a Jewish girl" (Silverman, S. 2005).

"Who is going to complain about rape jokes? Rape victims? They barely even report rape" (Gold, T. 2012).

But is this Sarah Silverman the character talking or Sarah Silverman the person?

Silverman has a Twitter account, which doesn't have a disclaimer about who is tweeting so it is safe to assume that she would accept responsibility for her tweets. In March 2015 Silverman re-tweeted a list of "Ten Rape Prevention Tips" that offered a simple message – Don't rape people.

The rape prevention list includes:

- Don't put drugs in women's drinks
- If you are in an elevator and a woman gets in, don't rape her
- When you encounter a woman who is asleep, the safest course of action is not to rape her
- Carry a rape whistle. If you find you are about to rape someone, blow the whistle until someone comes to stop you.

While many applauded the list as funny social commentary, others, almost all men, took to Twitter to express their outrage at what they labelled as Silverman's

sexism. Silverman did not write the 'tips' but simply tweeted an image of them suggesting people re-tweet to men in their lives; the image is watermarked as belonging to humor website 9gag.com. The tips were first shared in 2011, on a blog for the Washington State Coalition Against Domestic Violence (Rutherford-Morrison, L. 2015). It was a satirical play on the 'how to avoid rape' tips where the onus is placed upon the potential victim, not the prospective offender. An example of this was the advice from a police spokesperson that women should not walk in any park alone, in the wake of the murder of a Melbourne teenager in 2015 (Calligeros, M. 2015). Social commentator, Clem Bastow wrote in *The Age*:

... With depressing predictability, the #NotAllMen brigade were soon out in force, accusing Silverman of gross misandry and of tarring all Good Men with the same 'potential rapist' brush. (2015)

Paul Jukes @StumpsMonkey

@SarahKSilverman @texpatiate @lizzwinstead rather harsh on those of us who, you know, wouldn't dream of hurting anyone....

5:52 PM - 21 Mar 2015

2 2 Retweets 21 21 favorites

Mac @Berkshire_Bok

@SarahKSilverman @texpatiate @lizzwinstead This is so offensive to men. What an awful subtext you're propagating.

5:56 PM - 21 Mar 2015

8 8 Retweets 37 37 favorites

Oscar Uniform Tango @SimonT_Space

@REnlightenment .@SarahKSilverman @texpatiate @lizzwinstead

Stupid cunt

7:14 AM - 22 Mar 2015

1 1 Retweet 1 1 favorite

Femibuster @Femibuster

@tbozarth65 @Zaclee_nyc "We" don't want anything except for men to stop being demonized by ignorant hags like @SarahKSilverman

7:44 AM - 22 Mar 2015

1 1 Retweet 2 2 favorites

It seemed unreasonable for men to be offended by Silverman's re-tweet – she didn't even write the list. The aggressive response – stupid cunt, ignorant hag – didn't promote their case. The offended declarations that not all men are rapists were akin to saying not all lawyers are snakes or not all real estate agents are crooks. But there is no movement to halt lawyer or real estate agent jokes. It is not about 'all men' it is about the heinous crime of rape. Like the lawyer joke, there shouldn't be a disclaimer that the joke or point is not directed at all men because "not all men are rapists". Silverman was merely endorsing the notion that the focus for change should be on the offender not the victim. She saw the funny side of the list as well.

The comic also raised the ire of women on Twitter in 2014 with her response to the multiple rape allegations against popular celebrity Bill Cosby.

@SarahKSilverman

Bill Cosby gave me one of those 'don't be dirty' lectures but I was unconscious & he was talking about my a-hole.

She was quickly criticised by social media users, mainly women.

maddy @maddydell

@SarahKSilverman sorry how do you think this is an ok thing to say?

2:37 PM - 20 Nov 2014

betc4030 @betc4030

@SarahKSilverman ugh. You're funnier than this low level of rape humor.

2:28 PM - 20 Nov 2014

Samantha @LadyMazelin

@SarahKSilverman This is completely and totally inappropriate.

4:14 PM - 20 Nov 2014

In a more favourable comment, a fan wrote, obviously her joke is about the hypocrisy of Cosby being a rapist while always giving comedians shit about 'working clean'. (Weiss, S, 2014)

Silverman, again showing her sensitivity to criticism, backed down [after a fashion] and shared an edited version of the tweet:

Sarah Silverman (@SarahKSilverman) November 20, 2014

If I could rewrite my last tweet I'd edit it thus:

Bill Cosby gave me one of those "don't be dirty" lectures but I was rendered unconscious (Alexander, E. 2014).

For such a smart, funny and successful woman, Silverman showed some naïve lapses in judgement and extended remorse 'after the horse had bolted'. She has never really accepted total blame for anything she has said nor has she robustly defended or pointedly ignored criticism as Lenny Bruce, George Carlin, Bill Hicks and Chris Morris have done.

In 2010 *Age* columnist Catherine Deveny caused controversy when she posted offensive tweets during the Australian television award show, *The Logies*. "Rove and Tasma look so cute! I hope she doesn't die too," she tweeted about talk star Rove McManus, referring to his late wife Belinda Emmett [who died of cancer in 2006]. "I so do hope [11-year-old] Bindi Irwin gets laid," she also tweeted (Hunter, T, 2010).

Days later *The Age* dropped Deveny as a columnist, citing 200 unfavourable blog comments on the newspaper's website as the reason for the termination of the column. In the media Deveny stood by her comment about the 11-year-old, saying she was using satire "to expose celebrity raunch culture and the sexual objectification of women, which is rife on the red carpet" (Hunter, T. 2010). Deveny later confused her reasoning by saying the comment had no meaning. "This [the

Bindi Irwin comment] was a ludicrous remark that was as ridiculous as me saying I hope the dog that Molly Meldrum brought with him got drunk" (Hunter, T. 2010).

Deveny followed that up with a variation of Chris Rock's complaint that comments made in a nightclub are being broadcast out of context to the world through social media. "It was just passing notes in class, but suddenly these notes are being projected into the sky and taken out of context," she said (Hunter, T. 2010).

The difference was that an audience member appropriated Rock's material while Deveny was the initial tweeter.

Twitter's privacy policy states:

Our services are primarily designed to help you share information with the world. Most of the information you provide to us is information you are asking us to make public.

To have an expectation of privacy and claim to be taken out of context when you use Twitter directly as a professional writer and performer doesn't make complete sense. Social media conversations are public conversations. Everything you write can be seen by anyone who wants to look. It can then be shared by people who are friends, friends of friends and on a list of friends, with a possible audience of millions around the globe.

Sarah Silverman had a similar problem with internet naivety. In an article in the *Hollywood Reporter*, she replied to a question about political correctness:

I've said stuff in another climate that I wouldn't say today. There's an episode of *The Sarah Silverman Program* from 2008 called *Face Wars* where this black actor, Alex Desert, and I get into an argument about whose life is harder, blacks or Jews. So we decide to switch for a day. I have the most offensive blackface on, and Alex is wearing a big fake Jewish nose and a T-shirt that says, "I heart money." Early on, I tweeted a photo of myself in black-face and wrote, "I have minstrel cramps". I thought I was talking to fans of my show

who had seen the episode, but every once in a while I get someone so hurt and disgusted by that photo, and there is nothing I can do except direct message them and explain the context. I was the idiot who tweeted a photo out of context and now it's on the internet forever. All I can do is accept it and change with the times (Sandell, L. 2016).

That was in 2008 – has she changed and should she change? For a comedian who so freely manages to offend Silverman is surprisingly concerned about what people think of her. Silverman wouldn't receive much empathy from one of the pathfinders for female comics, the late Joan Rivers, who operated in the male dominated area of stand-up comedy for decades. "I don't like funny women. I come out of that generation where a woman should be beautiful and sexy and a wonderful flower attached to a man, even though my whole life has been the antithesis of this. To this day, you don't expect a woman to be funny," Rivers has said (Lockyer, S. 2011).

The American TV host Johnny Carson – who promoted many male comedians and also had Joan Rivers on his show as a regular guest – said that stand-up comedy is "much tougher for women ... you don't see many of them around. And the ones that try, sometimes, are a little aggressive for my taste. I'll take it from a guy, but from a woman, sometimes, it just doesn't fit too well" (Lockyer, S. 2011).

Academic and former stand-up comic, Joanne Gilbert, wrote in her journal, *Performing Marginality: Comedy, Identity and Cultural Critique* (1997) that women comics represented a group marginalised by the dominant male culture. That would be particularly true of Silverman and Rivers who leaned toward the dark side of comedy. Gilbert wrote that because of the 'us against them' nature of marginalised humour – African-American, gay/lesbian, Jewish comics – marginal comics often construct themselves as the victim (1997).

In the early 1980s, Roseanne Barr, a working class housewife, vented her anger on stage with vitriolic monologues. She went on to star in the popular situation comedy, *Rosanne* for nine years, make movies and publish best-selling books. Barr's jokes were from a women's point of view and men were the butt of her jokes. "I

joked about what women thought instead of how we looked... as for packaging I used the cover of being everyone's fat mother, fat neighbour, I used a funny voice" (Gilbert, J. 1997, p. 142). Her husband, comedian and actor, Tom Arnold noted, "If an insecure man looks at Roseanne; instead of having to deal with who she is, he says, 'she's crazy and she's fat'. That way he doesn't have to deal with the fact that she's powerful, intelligent and brilliant" (Gilbert, J. 1997, p.142).

In the book, *Queens of Comedy: Lucille Ball, Phyllis Diller, Carol Burnett, Joan Rivers, and the New Generation of Funny Women* (1997), Susan Horowitz wrote that much of Joan Rivers' stand-up performance was aggressive in tone and content. This aggression, Horowitz wrote, was directed towards either herself, through the use of self-deprecating comedy, celebrities and/or image-obsessed Western culture.

Across her comedy career Rivers joked about her non-existent love life. Whether single, married or widowed, the main thrust of Rivers' comedy persona remained the same – Joan is the sexual loser, the ugly girl whom no man wants. For example, in a performance in London, Rivers' topics of conversation suggested she had few, if any, sexual relationships. "Peeping Toms look at my window and pull down the shade. You have no idea. My gynaecologist examines me by telephone" (Horowitz, S. 1997).

Rivers also discussed her childhood experiences and her difficult relationship with her parents (Horowitz, S. 1997). "My parents hated me OK, we're all gonna hear the story 'my parents hated me too'. All I ever heard growing up was 'Why can't you be like your cousin Sheila, why can't you be like your cousin Shelia?' Sheila died at birth. They just hated me" (Horowitz, S. 1997).

River's entry in Jewish Women's Archive (Goldman, S. 2016) stated that she was born Joan Alexandra Molinsky in Brooklyn, New York, on June 8, 1933, Rivers was the youngest daughter of Beatrice (Grushman) and Meyer Molinsky, a doctor. Molinsky's family had been poverty-stricken in Russia, and they remained poor in their early years in America. Meyer's medical profession propelled the family into the emergent Jewish middle class of Brooklyn. Beatrice's family had been wealthy

merchants in Russia but left everything behind to migrate to America. That loss of status haunted Beatrice, and she continually pushed her husband – a struggling general practitioner in the heavily Jewish Brownsville section of Brooklyn – to earn more money (Goldman, S. 2016). The conflict between her parents – “my mother wanted M.D. to stand for Make Dollars” – was the inspiration for many of Rivers’ early routines. The constant arguments in the family about money left her with a permanent sense of insecurity that she mined for its comedic value. The epilogue to the 1986 biography *Enter Talking* concluded, “She lives the life her mother longed to have – but still believes that next week everything will disappear” (Goldman, S. 2016).

Educated in Brooklyn’s Ethical Culture School and Adelphi Academy, Rivers was an enthusiastic participant in school drama and writing programs. At Adelphi, she founded the school newspaper (Goldman, S. 2016). At Connecticut College and later at Barnard, she read widely in the classics and took courses in the history of the theatre. Shalom Goldman, in the *Jewish Women’s Archive* (2016), wrote that though she was later to project a scatterbrain image, the key to her craft lay in her classical education and her ability to turn out witty monologues and dialogues. In 1960, she developed comedy routines and in 1961 she joined the *Second City* comedy troupe in Chicago. Within a few years she was a regular at New York City comedy clubs where she joked about sex in a way that was both shocking and endearing. “I knew nothing about sex. All my mother told me was that the man gets on top and the woman gets on the bottom. I bought bunk beds” (Goldman, S. 2016).

In his book about Jewish comedy in America, *The Haunted Smile*, Lawrence Epstein wrote that the real turning point for Rivers was watching Lenny Bruce perform in 1962 (Feuer, M. 2016). She saw in Bruce the type of comedy she wanted to perform; a comedy that came from personal, intimate experiences, a direct and honest approach – something Carlin and Pryor also saw profoundly in Bruce. Rivers was not interested in the political and religious confrontations that came to dominate Bruce’s material, but she was deeply impressed by his delivery style. She transformed his blunt obscenity into softer words such as tramp or slut. Epstein characterised her transition as a ‘change from self-mockery to self-assertion’

(Feuer, M. 2016). She talked about subjects women were not expected to talk about. Sharon Lockyer wrote in her journal (1997) that honesty was evident in her routines about ageing. There was a caring side as she passed on 'valuable knowledge' that, if pre-warned when she was a younger woman, would have made the ageing process a more pleasant experience. "Let me tell you something. And this is why I'm glad I have the chance to discuss this because our mothers don't tell us. If our mothers told us, you would feel better; do you know what I'm saying? If my mother had said to me, 'Joan, when you get old, your vagina's gonna drop, but it's a good thing because you can have sex in the bedroom and still be watching TV in the living room'. Because if you don't know it's trouble" (1997).

Through her observations and discussions of the older woman's physiology, Rivers widened the stand-up comedy agenda (Lockyer, 1997). "Thirty-six hour erections on 90-year-old men, oh my god, and these poor women. Even if it's ten minutes a session, that's two hundred and twelve times you have to fake an orgasm. How often can you say 'you're the best, you're the best, you're the best?' A nightmare, a nightmare. And do you know who I feel sorry for, not the men, it's these poor wives, these poor dry old wives, and these guys on top of them, in and out, in and out, in and out, they're gonna set them on fire" (Lockyer, 1997).

Rivers gained a following at New York clubs and by the 1970s she was a regular on national television, particularly on the fashionable, *Tonight Show with Johnny Carson*. In the 1960s, self-deprecating jokes were used by the few female comics of the time – Rivers, wisecracking Phyllis Diller, another popular female comic, Totie Fields and Carol Burnett who played mostly frumpy, sexually needy characters in her popular television variety show. They joked about their appearance and body shape and size in a derogatory manner. This comedy was based on negative female stereotypes, exaggerated for effect (Horowitz, 1997). Some stand-up comedians use self-deprecating comedy as a form of resigned strategy. When explaining her own use of self-deprecating comedy, British comic Jo Brand said, "I've always felt that the putting-yourself-down stuff did give you a bit of a ticket to go on and lay into someone else. Also, it gets it out of the way. Because as a woman you know when you come on stage the first thing you're judged on is your appearance"

(Wagg, S. 1998). Susan Horowitz argued, “self-deprecating comedy eased the resistance to the idea of a woman comic – the logic being that if you’re doing something women aren’t supposed to do, you might be accepted if you show that you don’t think much of yourself as a woman” (1997). Horowitz suggested that, “in her comedy act, Rivers becomes both the ugly, teased scapegoat and the catty schoolmates who inflict the teasing” (1997). Rivers interspersed the jokes made at the expense of others with self-deprecating jokes. “I actually belong to over-eaters anonymous. Does anyone here belong? Except you’re anonymous don’t answer. The lousy thing is that they don’t serve hors d’oeuvres, but the meetings are very interesting because these big fat ladies sit and cry and they go like nobody loves me, which is not true, because the butcher loves them, the baker loves them. One woman stood up and said, ‘They made me buy two seats in the aeroplane’. And I said, yes, but you got two meals and she perked right up” (Horowitz, S. 1997).

Sarah Silverman hasn’t continued the tradition of self-deprecation employed by her forebears (despite her defensive insecurity). For her eponymous cable television show she developed a character, Sarah Silverman, based on herself, as single, unemployed, irresponsible, narcissistic and naively offensive. On *The Sarah Silverman Show*, Silverman was the main focus despite other characters sharing the comedy, and boyfriends weren’t a feature of the show; she trod a fine line of vanity, racism and religious vilification with the associated backlash.

The Sarah Silverman Program.: Officer Jay [#1.1] [2007]

Sarah Silverman: [Talking to her dog] I learned so much today Doug.... I learned, whether your gay, bisexual, it doesn't matter, ya' know? Because, at the end of the day, they're both gross. But mostly I learned, that elderly black women are wise beyond their years. But that younger black women are prostitutes.

The Sarah Silverman Program: Positively Negative [#1.3][2007]

Sarah Silverman: If we can put a man on the moon, we can put a man with AIDS on the moon. And pretty soon, we'll be able to put everyone with AIDS on the moon!

The Sarah Silverman Program: Not Without My Daughter [#1.4] [2007]

Sarah Silverman: About ten years ago I got pregnant and everyone around me wanted me to give up and have the baby. And for about eight and a half months I listened to them. Until finally I worked up the courage to walk into that hospital and say, "Get this thing out of me". I had to physically push the fetus out of me. And when it came out it was crying and covered in this like gooky stuff. Heather, you have a choice. You can walk away and give birth to a failure that will haunt you the rest of your life or you can go out there and have the abortion of your dreams. So what's it gonna be? (Silverman, S. 2007)

There is no self-deprecation in these quotes – just a form of ironic ignorance. In his article in the online current affairs, politics and culture magazine, *Slate* (2005), Sam Anderson wrote that through her stand-up, Silverman became an important member of 'a guerrilla vanguard in the culture wars that we might call the meta-bigots' (2005). Other members include the *South Park* kids and Sacha Baron Cohen's Ali G. Instead of discussing race, rape, abortion, incest, or mass starvation, they parody our discussions of them. They manipulate stereotypes about stereotypes. Anderson argued that it was "a dangerous game... If you're humourless, distracted, or even just inordinately history-conscious, meta-bigotry can look suspiciously like actual bigotry" (2005).

Silverman was particularly vulnerable to such confusion because, unlike other 'meta-bigots', she doesn't insulate herself with fictional characters. On Her persona – an incestuous, genital-obsessed, racist narcissist – looks and sounds exactly like Silverman herself. She delivers even the most taboo punch lines with almost pathological sincerity (2005).

Still, she is one of the first women in comedy to take on the risk of confusion. She hasn't guarded against a backlash by creating a likeable persona or characters in costume – Barry Humphries and Sacha Baron Cohen – in her stand-up and television shows.

Larry David, co-creator of *Seinfeld*, whose identity was the blueprint for the insufferable character of George, based the character 'Larry David' closely on him for his award winning series *Curb Your Enthusiasm*. 'Larry David' is the co-creator of *Seinfeld* – lazy, self-centred, opinionated, blunt, offended and offensive. Larry possessed all the traits of George in *Seinfeld* but *Curb Your Enthusiasm* had far less restriction on the HBO cable network – Larry marvelled at a child's large penis, an obituary mistakenly referred to a relative as a cunt instead of an aunt, and his manager talked openly to Larry about masturbating over fantasies about Larry's wife.

Despite having an empathy with the offensive side of the human condition, David hasn't raised any major stirs. But he has influenced several who have, such as Louis C.K., Ricky Gervais and Sacha Baron Cohen, as well as others who 'trod the thin black line'. David is a Jewish male counterpart to the Jewish Sarah Silverman except that he found almost total acceptance with audiences, awards, admiration, and fascination, while Silverman found love and hate. Silverman's show was cancelled after three series; *Curb Your Enthusiasm* has completed nine seasons.

Unlike Silverman whose character was created to react to an ugly world with ironic ugliness, David's character was simply an extension of himself. Like his work on *Seinfeld*, David took real-life situations and elevated them to an uncomfortable, even humiliating level. On *Curb Your Enthusiasm*:

- He was caught enjoying porn by his friend's elderly parents
- He missed his mother's death because he was busy and also used her death as an excuse to get out of situations
- A Rabbi brings Colby Donaldson from the TV reality series *Survivor* to a social occasion and Larry's father brings a Holocaust survivor, leading to an argument between the two over who was the true survivor.

But like Silverman, Lenny Bruce, Carlin, Hicks and Chris Morris, ethics are weaved into David's outrageous situations that built on the plotted but improvised scenes. Racist dogs, ladies in burkas, Korean chefs, and Japanese kamikaze pilots are plotlines that feed David's prurience about ethnic diversity. America's treatment of race is one of David's themes. Natalie Stendall noted in *Writer Loves Movies* (2014)

online some of *Curb Your Enthusiasm's* most controversial moments. "Is it wrong to assume that a Black man wearing a bow-tie is a Muslim?" David asks, and "Have you noticed if she [adopted Chinese daughter] has a proclivity for chopsticks?" Yet, Stendall wrote, the outspoken Larry was afraid to sack an African-American employee, fearing that this action says more about him than it does about his employee's workmanship (Stendall, N. 2014).

David revealed a more optimistic and purposeful comic approach to disability than Jimmy Carr, Boyle or Gervais.

Larry: We don't like to be referred to as 'normal' ok, we're able bodied – able bodied not 'normal' – that's like from the 80s, who doesn't know that?" (Stendall, N. 2014)

Another controversial moment according to Stendall was when Larry yelled at a man in wheelchair for failing to control his vehicle properly (2014). The comedy came from Larry's unsophisticated attempts to treat everyone equally – when it suited him. This theme emerged again in a later episode when Larry used the disabled toilet because the other stall was in use. He had a heated debate with a disabled person who was waiting (2014). Later, when the same disabled man used 'an abled' stall, Larry felt he had the moral high ground. When Larry inadvertently found himself on a date with a wheelchair user, Denise, he enjoyed the respect this brought him. So Larry called on another wheelchair user for a date when he lost Denise's number. Larry was later forced to reveal to both of them that he used their disabilities as descriptors in his phone. The joke was not about the disabled, it was about abled people's response to disability. This was similar to Bruce's sketch about a liberal patronising a black man at a party.

Larry's place in the world of *Curb Your Enthusiasm* is one of awkward human frailty, of a man wanting to be respected and win in life. A man whose understanding of morality was mostly related to the offence he felt not the offence he inflicted. The abundance of self-conscious and uncomfortable situations came

freely to the star, writer and creator of *Curb Your Enthusiasm*. In his paper, *Curb Your Enthusiasm and the schlemiel tradition* (2010), David Gillota wrote that Larry found himself in sharp opposition to his social milieu. At times, Gillota wrote, this conflict was because of his failure, or refusal, to follow unwritten social guidelines – loudly expressing admiration for the size of a child’s penis at a barbecue. At other times it was because someone else has not adhered to Larry’s comprehension of propriety (2010). A major issue would result in what began as a minor indiscretion, for example, Larry playfully calling a rival card player a cunt for winning several hands in a row escalated from embarrassed silence to social damnation and exclusion. The character of Larry being accused of anti-social behaviour such as racism, homophobia, paedophilia and bestiality was a theme of the show (Gillota, D. 2010). Larry, like his creator Larry David, was continually proven a social outsider. David, Silverman and Bruce demonstrated the outsider outrage, sense of entitlement and neurosis associated with being Jewish [Rivers was more of a self-deprecating/critical Jew]. David and Silverman put these traits into their characters and Lenny Bruce became more and more outraged, self-important and neurotic as his sense of persecution escalated.

In *Curb Your Enthusiasm* David hit on the ideal way to use offence and be lauded, not attacked for it. The outrage came from the mouth of a hopeless anti-hero who was so feckless and awkward that the joke was not only from him but also *on him*. While Boyle and Gervais spoke from a level of superiority and Baron Cohen used entrapment, David appealed to the underdog and self-indulgence that lurked inside most of us. Some of his comic ideas are the darkest most offensive concepts built around ignorance, abuse, perversion and neglect. Unlike Silverman who clearly cared about what people thought of her, which kept her apologising, David made his character so intriguingly vexed and ignoble that he built a loyal audience who responded in the classic ‘should I be laughing at this?’

It is likely that people accept impertinence and self-interest more easily from a man, which has shielded David from condemnation. His ability to exploit mental health, race and disability issues in his comedy with no apparent objections is something his ‘alter ego’ Sarah Silverman couldn’t manage. Her clever approach to

the abuse of women also copped scorn from both men and women. The characters David and Silverman portrayed, both Jews, both narcissistic, both offensive, both offended, were equally provocative. It came down to the age-old disparity of gender but also Silverman was exposed on social media platforms while David remained a guilty pleasure on Cable television.

CHAPTER 5: FEAR AND LOATHING - THE GLOBAL BULLY

War and terrorism, intolerance and social media

Smothers Brothers, Gilbert Gottfried

Trolls and hate jokers

The Vietnam War and the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks were influential periods of history. Dark humour emerged from both in different ways. The Smothers Brothers television satire about the Vietnam War was part of the push to end it and drew the ire of President Johnson. The shock of the September 11 terrorist attacks on New York and Washington suppressed comedy afterwards and television comedy talk shows shut down for a week with producers unsure what to do.

In the new Century do it yourself comedy, mainly in the form of abuse, emerged with the Internet and social media.

Two pivotal points in history – the decades long Vietnam War and the sudden terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001 – shaped different comedic tensions.

When the Smothers Brothers in their 1960s' *Comedy Hour* poked fun at President Johnson and criticised his Vietnam War policies, Johnson exerted pressure on CBS to control the comic activists. The Brothers resisted censorship and the show remained popular but after Johnson retired and another Vietnam War supporter, Richard Nixon was elected in 1968. The pressure became too great and they were sacked. – David Bianculli (2009).

Thirty-three years later:

In New York, following the (2001) attacks on the twin towers, the comedy clubs were strange furtive places for months afterwards. People wanted to laugh but they needed to be given permission. The atmosphere in the media was one of near hysterical solemnity, and any discussion of 'the events of '9/11' that deviated from this tone was swiftly silenced. – Lucy Greeves (2006).

Six months after the terrorist attack of September 11 2001, at the US Comedy Arts Festival in Aspen, Colorado, several outspoken performers were recognised for defiantly upholding freedom of speech (Bianculli, D. 2009). One was Bill Maher, whose ABC late-night talk show *Politically Incorrect* was suspended and later cancelled after he remarked of the Al-Qaeda terrorist hijackers who steered passenger airliners into the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon, "We have been the cowards lobbing cruise missiles from 2,000 miles away. That's cowardly. Staying in the airplane when it hits the building – say what you want about it, it's not cowardly". He later clarified and apologised (Bianculli, D. 2009). His line was reminiscent of Lenny Bruce's unapologetic quote about America's involvement in World War II, "Do you think you are better because you burned your enemies from long distances [Hiroshima] without seeing what you had done to them?" Another was stand-up comic and civil rights advocate Dick Gregory, who challenged segregation as the first black comic to headline in all-white nightclubs. He also demonstrated alongside Martin Luther King Jr. and Medgar Evers in history-making confrontations in Montgomery and Selma. George Carlin was acknowledged for his notorious *Seven Words You Can Never Say on Television* and *Filthy Words* (Bianculli, D. 2009). Satirists Tom and Dick Smothers, famous for their controversial 1960s comedy show, *The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour*, and for its untimely demise, were recognised that night as defiantly linked to the growing protests over the Vietnam War.

From 1967 to 1969, Tommy and Dick Smothers challenged the censors at the CBS network and the political establishment who opposed their popular and politically left-leaning show. In his book about the brothers, *Dangerously Funny* (2009), David Bianculli wrote that by becoming unexpected martyrs to the cause of free speech, the Smothers Brothers lost their most influential national TV platform just when that freedom mattered the most. "In terms of introducing and encouraging new talent, pushing the boundaries of network television, and reflecting the youth movement and embracing its anti-war stance and anti-administration politics, the show was, quite literally, their finest hour" (2009). The show ran its own 'candidate' for president, comedian, Pat Paulsen, who delivered fake editorials on the show, such as the one in support of network censorship and travelled the

campaign trail. Legitimate candidates such as Robert F. Kennedy played along with the joke, and the show hired a former campaign manager to offer behind-the-scenes advice.

Politics, and politicians, including the contentious Vietnam War policies, played a big part in *The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour* (Bianculli, D. 2009) painted a colourful picture, describing The Smothers Brothers as crucial to political satire in America:

When Michael Moore takes his time in the spotlight during a live Oscar telecast to scold President George W. Bush for sending America to war without due cause, the Smothers Brothers, in spirit, are there... when Jon Stewart skewers politicians and the media on Comedy Central's *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, the Smothers Brothers are there. When Stephen Colbert attempts a comedic run for the presidency, the Smothers Brothers are there (2009). It's worth pointing out, though, that contemporary outspoken comedians and programs reside today on cable. When CBS fired Tom and Dick Smothers, there were no cable networks. They had not been invented. And nearly forty years after the network pulled *The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour* from prime time, there's still no true modern-day equivalent on broadcast network television – no series that speaks truth to power, pushes boundaries, and champions new art and artists in quite the way Tom and Dick Smothers did (2009).

"Comedy is tragedy plus time" – Carol Burnett (Sarkis, S. 2012)

Paul Achter in his journal, *Comedy in Unfunny Times: News Parody and Carnival After 9/11* (2008) wrote that for almost three weeks after the terrorist attacks in 2001, highly visible comedians, including Jay Leno, David Letterman, and Conan O'Brien moved uncomfortably into serious reflection on the meaning of the events only after taking week-long breaks from filming shows. Comedy Central's popular satirical news program, *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, aired reruns for two weeks. Letterman articulated his anxiety about performing:

"I wasn't sure that I should be doing a television show, because for 20 years we've been in the city making fun of everything... So to come to this circumstance that is so desperately sad and I don't trust my judgment (Achter, P. 2008)."

The Emmy Awards were postponed and all jokes removed when it was finally aired. The few comics doing routines about terrorism before September 11 at New York's comedy clubs stopped. Other performers expressed personal feelings about the tragedy to the audience on stage (David, A. 2001).

Reactions to jokes about the World Trade Centre attack in clubs were palpable, as crowds groaned and complained. A Scottish comedian was ushered off stage after making a September 11 joke. Gilbert Gottfried, received a cool reception on September 18 when during his act he remarked, "I have to leave for L.A. tonight. I couldn't get a direct flight. They have to make a stop at the Empire State Building" (Achter, P. 2008). Gottfried recalled that after he uttered those words, "There was just a gasp in the entire room. And one guy yelled out "too soon!" I thought he meant I didn't take a long enough pause". Gottfried decided the best move was to leave aside the terrorist act and do, "the most dirty, disgusting material I could think of" (Achter, P. 2008).

In 2011 Gottfried was attacked via the internet for tweeting a series of jokes the day after a devastating earthquake and tsunami hit Japan. The confirmed death toll reached nearly 16,000 according to Japan's national police agency, with 230,000 people losing their homes (Oskin, B. 2015).

"Japan is really advanced. They don't go to the beach. The beach comes to them."

"I asked a girl in Japan to have sex with me. She said OK but you'll have to sleep in the wet spot."

"I just split up with my girlfriend but like the Japanese say, "They'll be another one floating by any minute now" (Stopera, M. 2011).

Comedian and voice artist for film and advertising, Gottfried was sacked two days later by one of his major clients, Aflac Insurance, via a public statement, “Gilbert’s recent comments about the crisis in Japan were lacking in humor and certainly do not represent the thoughts and feelings of anyone at Aflac.” The company, which does 75 per cent of its business in Japan, stated. “There is no place for anything but compassion and concern during these difficult times” (Claypoole, T, Payton, T. 2012). Interestingly it was a client with strong business ties to Japan that exhibited outrage and compassion for the devastated people of Japan. A day after he was fired as the voice of Aflac Insurance Inc.’s iconic duck, Gottfried, perhaps sensing employment issues, released a statement.

I sincerely apologise to anyone who was offended by my attempt at humor regarding the tragedy in Japan. I meant no disrespect, and my thoughts are with the victims and their families – Gilbert Gottfried (Shira, D. 2011)

Like some before him including *The Chaser* group [children with leukaemia], Bill Maher [September 11 attacks], the apologies seemed related to self-interest. The mea culpa appeared to last as long as the public’s memory. In a comment piece for the culture site, *Vulture*, in 2016, five years after his apology, Gottfried wrote:

You can do jokes about the Lincoln assassination and the Titanic, and no one says anything because everyone involved is dead, and their grandchildren are dead. I actually think that's in worse taste. You're saying, “screw all those people who died, I waited for it to become unimportant to us.” When I do a joke about September 11, or the Japanese tsunami, what's funny is that it shocks the audience. They are responding to the fact that it's tragic, and you're acknowledging it (2016).

With the [space shuttle] Challenger explosion [in 1986] or any other tragic event pre-internet, there were always a bunch of jokes that would come out immediately. Everyone was in a rush to tell their friends, everyone was laughing about it, and it was okay. Now, with the internet, it makes me feel

sentimental about old-time angry mobs. In a mob you actually had to throw on your jacket, go outside, use your hands. Now you can join a mob sitting on your couch in your underwear. I feel like people who get outraged like that are patting themselves on the back. "You see; I was offended" (2016).

But I'm as hypocritical as anybody else. I remember when all those stories came out about Mel Gibson: A woman cop had stopped him, he called her "sugar tits," asked her "are you a Jew?" and said the Jews were responsible for all the wars in the world. Then news came out about his girlfriend: He smacked her when she was holding her baby, told her "you look like a bitch in heat. If you get raped by a pack of niggers, it will be your fault." "I'll put you in a fucking rose garden, you cunt." And after all that, I was like, wait, he said what about the Jews?" (2016)"

Gottfried made some good points but he never mentioned his self-serving apology, merely referenced his Tsunami and September 11 attack jokes. Like *The Chaser* who made excuses, self-serving apologies, blamed others and then promoted themselves as iconoclasts, Gottfried is selective about his actions. Six months after the September 11 attack Bill Maher accepted an award for defiantly upholding freedom of speech for his comments about "cowardly America" yet apologised soon after a public backlash and the withdrawal of support from advertisers.

While the Smothers Brothers knowingly broadcast their pointed satire about the White House and its support of the Vietnam War, American soldiers were being killed every day. Anti-war activists such as Pete Seeger and Joan Baez were subjected to censorship on the show and Dr Benjamin Spock, baby doctor and anti-war activist, was prevented from appearing (museum tv, 2016). The brothers were constantly battling the network that broadcast them.

The Vietnam War was the first television war with live reports of atrocities beamed daily into lounge rooms – the public started to question what patriotism meant and people from all walks of life joined the protests. Television satire, mainly in the

form of the *Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour*, played its part in the end of the war (Trueman, C.N. 2016).

In the aftermath of the September 11 attacks in New York and Washington when 3000 people were killed, satire wasn't deemed appropriate (Heinrich, J. 2004). In the Vietnam War, America was eventually viewed as the aggressor; America was the victim in the terrorist attacks in September. Satire is largely about pointing out absurdities and wrongs about people and organisations in authority, banks, and politicians, mostly in our own country. Comedians didn't even know who the terrorists were, or their agenda, apart from killing people and themselves in some form of gesture against their enemy. They were unaligned to any country but attached to an ideology. How to make fun of them – as Muslims, as Arabs, as ideologues?

The strange, quiet reverence that befell comedians for weeks after the 2001 terrorist attacks was partly respect and partly confusion as to how to respond. The issues around the Vietnam War were clear by the late 1960s. America was seen as sacrificing lives for an oblique, paranoid cause – stopping the spread of communism. The 'real' enemy slowly came into focus – politicians and the censor. After September 11 2001, the cause terrorism fought wasn't clear and didn't involve well-defined politics – democracy, capitalism or socialism. It was all too abstract. The disaster was even given an abstract emblematic millennium style moniker, 9/11 – something unintelligible to anyone unaware of the terrorist act – for a generation raised with succinct slogans. [The Vietnam War, World War I and II were clear descriptions].

But just as Lenny Bruce and George Carlin found a way to turn accepted standards on their head by making jokes about uncomfortable subjects to inspire uncomfortable laughter, why couldn't the comedians of the time find a way to express dark and biting comedy? Freud described gallows [dark] humour as unconsciously meeting a psychic need by helping to deal with morbid or tragic situations (Pasquali, E. 2003). Laughing at death and tragedy, he believed, helped people cope with the psychological pain associated with the tragedy. Gallows

humour following a disaster was often referred to as survivor humour because it laughed with, not at, survivors, and aided social bonding and unity under pressure (Pasquali, E. 2003).

Amanda Hess wrote in *Slate* online (2015) that the September 11 terrorist attack was a social media tragedy. Suddenly, horrific news footage didn't just traumatise everyone in the moment – it lived online indefinitely. The public could now connect, share stories and argue online and also send jokes about the disaster to all corners of the world. The audience was now the performer. The reaction was one step removed – rather than receiving a hostile reception in a club or venue, these internet joke-tellers might receive a vitriolic message or a lecture but their safety and anonymity remained intact. Hess cited American studies scholar Bill Ellis who spent the months after the attack charting the terror jokes that swirled across the Web (2015). He found that while most Americans refrained from gallows humour for a week following the attacks, 9/11 jokes soon turned patriotic and played to huge online audiences.

Vulgar photoshops circulated of the Manhattan skyline rebuilt into a raised middle finger and the Empire State Building buggering a bent-over Osama Bin Laden. Anti-Arab slurs leftover from Desert Storm were preserved in bizarre jingoistic email forwards, like one that recast Bin Laden as a Muslim Grinch who hated America because, well, “It could be his turban was screwed on too tight/ Or the sun from the desert had beaten too bright” (Hess, 2015).

The internet platform had no restrictions on levels of taste or burden of proof. Similar to punk rock, that angrily challenged the elitism and propriety of pop music in the 1970s, internet chat was avoiding any kind of restraint with conspiracy theories – mostly claiming no Jews dying inside the twin towers– and, often lame, jokes:

It's a bird! It's a plane!... It's.... Oh shit, it IS a plane!

Did you hear the one about American Airlines new deal? They fly you straight from the airport to the office.

But they mostly were written anonymously from behind a computer firewall.

In the late 1980s, before terrorism became a major tool for world disruption, internet users adopted the word 'troll' to denote someone who intentionally disrupted online communities. Early trolling was relatively innocuous, taking place inside small, single-topic Usenet groups (Schwartz, M. 2008). The trolls employed what the M.I.T. professor Judith Donath called a pseudo-naïve tactic, asking stupid questions and seeing who would rise to the bait (Schwartz, M. 2008). The game was to find out who would see through this stereotypical newbie behaviour, and who would fall for it. As one guide to trolldom put it, "If you don't fall for the joke, you get to be in on it."

It quickly descended into particularly dark and aggressive online bullying. Trolls used cyberspace and digital devices to provoke, judge and defame others, usually without any political or social reason. By hiding behind screen names and avatars – an image of somebody in virtual reality – trolling can be done anonymously when they stir up trouble from the comfort of their home. When they are finished, they can carry on with their lives without facing any consequences. Although in her study, *This is why we can't have nice things: mapping the relationship between online trolling and mainstream culture* (2015), Whitney Phillips, in a convoluted argument, asserted there was some social value in trolling.

... Trolls have a great deal to teach. Not because trolls or their behaviors are themselves instructive, but because the messes they leave behind are. Specifically, they unearth the biases, hypocrisies, and deep inconsistencies that compose mainstream culture – and in the process, handily blur the boundary between where the troll mess ends and the mainstream mess begins (Phillips, W. 2015).

To put a view more simply, trolling is the working version of the classic question – if you could get away with it, would you do it?

The reality of trolling doesn't have the resonance of the closing scene of Woody Allen's film, *Crimes and Misdemeanours* [mentioned earlier in Chapter 2], when the murderer becomes comfortable with his actions once it became clear he wouldn't be found out. Trolling is largely about pranks – mischief making for a reaction, not making statements or provoking discussion.

In 2010 a killer whale killed a SeaWorld trainer. Within minutes the trainer, Dawn Brancheau was transformed into a meme – an often-humorous image or short repeating video – dehumanised, sexualised and spread across the internet (Phillips, W. 2015). Memes often incorporated additional memes. A troll favourite of a man pronouncing ambulance as 'amber lamps' after enduring a beating, was added to the killer whale meme with the statement, 'Should have Called the Amber Lamps'. Once a troll posts a provocative comment, insult or absurdity aimed at a vulnerable person or situation, more trolls converge, share and add to the assault. In July 2016, actor Leslie Jones was inundated with racist and hateful messages on her Twitter account. The tweets were sparked by her leading role in a remake of the classic *Ghostbusters* film, with an all female lead cast. The film endured a backlash for casting women in the lead roles – mainly among men – made famous in the original by male comics including Bill Murray (Brown, K. 2016).

Milo Yiannopoulos, [then] editor of syndicated far right news opinion website *Breitbart* and infamous internet troll, 'that the black actor was "spectacularly unappealing' and her character was 'flat-as-a-pancake black stylings' (Brown, K. 2016). He also tweeted:



Jones replied.

[Leslie Jones](#)

✓@Lesdoggg

Some people on here are fucking disgusting. I'm blocking your filthy ass if retweet that perverted shit. Just know that now bitches!!

[2:12 AM - 19 Jul 2016](#) · [Manhattan, NY, United States](#)

In retaliation, trolls tweeted hundreds of racist, misogynistic insults at Jones, including referencing her as the gorilla shot when a young boy fell into its zoo enclosure. Jones continued to try and expose the abuse but only provoked more hatred and Yiannopoulos incited his troll followers to continue to target her.



The trolls even impersonated her on Twitter, using misspelling to make her look even worse.



[Follow](#)




[Leslie Jones](#)

✓@Lesdoggg

THIS WAS NOT ME!! OK TWITTER IM DONE!! IF YALL CAN LET THIS SHIT HAPPEN
I DONT WANT TO BE HERE. I DID NOT POST THIS

[1:42 PM - 19 Jul 2016](#) · [Manhattan, NY, United States](#)



Milo Yiannopoulos 
@Nero



 Follow

Don't tell me some mischievous internet rascal
made them up!

Jaffa @jaffaesque

@Nero Haha, nice fake tweets. You forgot to edit out the 'delete' button though.

RETWEETS
43

LIKES
308



11:31 PM - 18 Jul 2016



43



308



Rattled, Jones signed off from Twitter after receiving a tirade of abuse in just 24 hours. “I leave Twitter tonight with tears and a very sad heart,” she tweeted. “All this cause I did a movie. You can hate the movie but the shit I got today...wrong.”

Twitter subsequently suspended Yiannopoulos’ account. Leslie Jones reactivated her account. In a post on news and culture site, *Fusion*, (2016) Kristen Brown wrote:

Twitter, which once referred to itself as ‘the free speech wing of the free speech party’, has changed a lot from its early days as a platform that protects and promotes unfettered free speech. Twitter has made many steps to show that it takes harassment seriously, such as banning revenge porn and issuing new anti-harassment rules. Yiannopoulos’ antics in particular have become a litmus test for how far Twitter is willing to go to stamp out harassment on the platform (2016).

The limits to free speech are being tested on sites such as Twitter and Facebook. The swarm of humiliating sheep-like-insulters inspired by one man to simply attack Leslie Jones – not enlighten, not provoke opinion, not expose – in a short space of time is perhaps an example of ‘less like free speech and more like free abuse’. Speech is defined in the Chambers Dictionary as a form of communication in spoken language, made by a speaker before an audience for a given purpose.

In a media interview soon after the Leslie Jones incident, former Twitter executive Kirstine Stewart said Twitter can't completely eliminate abuse and trolls without limiting free speech but, she said, the company is revisiting its policies to prevent harassment (Khadem, N. 2016).

“It's a microphone for the world,” Stewart said, “It's difficult to have a blanket solution to manage situations when conversations don't go well” (Khadem, N. 2016).

Twitter had been under constant criticism for failing to protect individual users from abuse and harassment. Twitter chief executive Jack Dorsey replied to criticism with an endorsement of Twitter's principles. “Twitter is based on ideals of free speech – it's about allowing people to have a voice in a way they have never had before” (Khadem, N. 2016).

Charlie Warzel, a technology reporter for *BuzzFeed* said in an interview published in the journal *Fresh Air* that, “the fundamental problem with protecting people is that the free speech element really, really hampers Twitter” (Gross, T. 2016). “It's very important to them that no voices be silenced,” Warzel said, “And yet the task of moderating is to silence certain voices to some extent. Instagram and Facebook have adopted a real identity-centric approach. You can't choose a pseudonym [like you can on Twitter]. You have to project some version of the person who you really are. And that is a very powerful thing. And as a result, Facebook has its own problems with abuse and harassment, but not nearly to the same degree because there's no way for people to sort of hide behind an anonymous account name or an anonymous avatar” (Gross, T. 2016).

Trolling covered the long-standing targets of dark comedy – racism, sexuality, religion and political correctness. But the most potent dark comedy combined those issues with iconoclasm and comment. Trolling is more about gaining – often-anonymous –power over the unprotected or the troubled. Trolls were like the angry and unhappy person who buys a cat so he can kick it when he gets home.

The internet brought trolling into the spotlight and was also a worldwide avenue to showcase home made movies and by extension prank videos. In 2016 a YouTube video of young Muslims of Kurdish descent impersonating terrorists went viral. In clichéd Arab dress they cruised the streets in a 4WD. One lifted an AK-47 rifle and took aim at a man and his young daughter at a payphone. The sound of gunshots could be heard. The man ran, leaving his terrified daughter scampering behind. In other clips by Max and Arman Jalal, viewed 10 million times on YouTube, a man in Arab dress and fake beard tossed a suspicious bag into donut shops, car windows and the open doors of a lift. He threw it into an occupied toilet cubicle. He flung it at tradesmen on a lunch break and at a man descending an escalator (fusion soccer, 2016). Following the posting of the drive-by shooting prank, the practical jokers were arrested by counter-terrorist police and appeared in court. They then admitted the drive-by shooting was staged and the little girl was their niece, in all likelihood to avoid charges (AAP, 2016). They also hinted that the other videos were also staged. Max and Arman Jalal did create controversy however. Their videos polarised the community – generally the young found them funny and older people were outraged – and gained them mainstream media attention. But when faced with court appearances and the possibility of jail, they confessed to the lie, which diluted the dark elements of their ‘comedy’. There was no tangible controversy any more and unlike other dark comedy there was no humour, just an attempt at public humiliation of a father who didn’t exist.

Comedy is often a tool to make the protagonist feel better about their situation. The Jalals portrayed a comically absurd vision of terrorism. Dressing in Arab caricature and hurling an object at people who immediately associated the two elements with an explosive outcome, gave them some power over the racism toward Muslims – while perhaps reinforcing the bigotry. They were – consciously or subconsciously –

calling out the fear some sections of society and politics stirred up about terrorism and Muslims. The 'victim' was reversed. But it is generally, the minority, not the majority that is the butt of the joke. Ordinary people with a Muslim faith have been cast as suspicious and alien to society. The familiar phrase, 'not all Muslims are terrorists but all terrorists are Muslim' explained the derogatory attitude. While there was a cruel envy associated with Jewish jokes and defensiveness with Asian jokes, the threat of terrorism by groups such as ISIS developed a broad fearfulness about ordinary people of Muslim faith and possibly less humour and more abuse.

Ben Clements in his journal, *Explaining Public Attitudes towards the Integration of Muslims in British Society: The 'Solidarity of the Religious'?* (2013), claimed that negative or stereotypical newspaper coverage of Muslims, particularly by tabloid newspapers, could be considered a contributory factor to a societal climate of 'Islamophobia' (2013). In their journal, *The Media and Muslims in the U.K.* (2012), Katy Sian, Ian Law and S. Sayyid revealed that Muslims occupied a central role in the British media following the Salman Rushdie Blasphemy Affair, conflicts in the Middle East and the global war on terror (2012). Muslims also feature in issues surrounding multiculturalism, crime, education and faith schools, immigration, and oppressed women linked to the Burqa debate. Sian, Law and Sayyid describe the portrayal of Muslims as largely negative and informed often by a virulent, racialised Islamophobic discourse. Muslim advocacy groups, academics and activists argued that representations of Muslims in the British media were persistently negative, unfair and discriminatory and contributed to establishing a climate of fear or moral panic with the 'Muslim folk devil' (2012).

Although anti-Muslim jokes haven't been prevalent, there were online jokes linking Muslims to bestiality and casting them as inferior (Bernie, 2008).

Q: What do you call a Muslim who owns 6 goats?

A: A pimp.

Q: Why are there only 2 pallbearers at a Muslim funeral?

A: There's only 2 handles on a garbage can.

Q: What do you call a bus with 2 Somalis falling off a cliff?

A: A waste, you could fit at least 50 in the bus!

(Bernie, 2008)

Fear of Muslims resulted in active denunciation of Muslim people – not just leaders – demonstrations against Muslims, the burqa and mosques, and calls for the end of Muslim migration led by political leaders such as Donald Trump in America and One Nation's Pauline Hanson in Australia. Hanson's first speech in the Senate in 2016 proposed that Australia halt Muslim immigration and stop building mosques and Islamic schools.

An Australian poll in 2016 claimed 49 per cent of Australians support a ban on Muslim immigration. The most common reasons for wanting a ban were fears over terrorism, and a belief that Muslim migrants did not integrate into society nor share Australian values (Kenny, M. 2016). The poll, with a sample size of more than 1,000, came a week after controversial Senator Pauline Hanson's first speech in the Senate in which she proposed that Australia halt Muslim immigration and stop building mosques and Islamic schools. The poll found a high level of support for her, with two-thirds of voters agreeing she talked about issues other politicians were afraid to tackle, and 48 per cent endorsed a national debate about Muslim immigration. (Kenny, M. 2016) In a separate poll the same year, 60 per cent of Australians said they would be concerned if a relative married a Muslim (Ashton, H. 2016).

In 2010, according to an Australian Gallup poll, close to half of Muslim-Australians are likely to have experienced some form of personal racial or religious discrimination (2011). John Cleese said with conviction that it was not easy to make jokes about Muslims. Asked on HBO's *Real Time with Bill Maher*, if he would be too scared of a backlash to joke about Muslims, he replied, 'The problem is, if you make jokes about people who are going to kill you, there is a sort of tendency to hold back a little, just a little (Daily Mail, 2014).

Comedians like Chubby Brown told derogatory jokes about Pakistanis and Muslims while others including Robin Williams, Bill Maher and Billy Connolly focused more on terrorists: The suicide bomber instructor – “Right lads pay attention I’m only going to show you this once” (Connolly).

In 2015 New York City’s first-ever Muslim stand-up comedy festival was organised to share the experience of growing up Muslim in America, and use comedy to process that experience. The festival featured Negin Farsad, a producer, actor and social justice activist and Azhar Usman, a former attorney turned comedian (Kuruvilla, C. 2015). Usman told of his discomfort at the airport as huge TV screens directly above him beamed the latest beheading on CNN. Much of the comedy was about reversing the ownership of fear. His argument was that paranoia about terrorist acts have created anxiety in the Muslim community that anyone who looked like an Arab would get shot.

The social and political awareness of terrorism has been the biggest change as the 20th Century turned into the 21st. Terrorism existed before September 11, including most famously the Iranian Embassy Siege of 1980 and the Lockerbie bombing in 1988 that killed more than 250 Pan Am flight passengers and crew and 11 on the ground. But the attacks on the 110 storey World Trade Centre and Pentagon in Washington on September 11, 2001 were televised live. The world watched as people leapt to their deaths from the towers as they collapsed in a huge cloud of black dust and terrified people ran for their lives.

The fearful attitude towards Muslims has been cultivated by terrorist groups that, to paraphrase their rhetoric, promoted themselves as ‘Muslims against the world’. Largely indiscriminate suicide bombings and graphic images of brutal executions of hostages online by military terrorist organisations such as Al-Qaeda and ISIS have encouraged a terrified distrust of Muslims. Terrorist acts by Palestinians and the IRA in the 20th Century were linked to claims of persecution by the perpetrators. Great Britain controlled Northern Ireland and Palestinians had been displaced by Jewish settlement. The ISIS attacks came more from a sense of superiority to, and high-minded offence of, ‘infidels’.

In January 2015 Cherif Kouachi, and his brother Saïd walked into the office of the satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo* in Paris and opened fire with automatic rifles. They killed 12 people, including a Muslim policeman on the street outside the building. The magazine had published several caricatures of the Prophet Muhammad since 2006, including a cartoon depicting the Prophet as gay, causing condemnation from the Muslim world (Taibi, C. 2015). The fact that Cherif and Said Kouachi, who were gunned down after two days of terror in Paris, were part of a growing number of 'homegrown' terrorists added to the worldwide terror. In December, gunmen killed 89 people at a rock concert in Paris in apparent retaliation to French bombing attacks on ISIS in Syria (Jones, B. 2015).

To joke about Muslims inspired by terrorist acts, and even the pronouncement of reticence to make jokes about Muslims for fear of retribution as Cleese had, is another example of 21st Century dark comedy attacking the vulnerable, the minority and the different. Just as Muslims find it difficult to avoid the ethnic slurs – 'Uzi carrying dirt-bag, camel-screwing towel-head' [anonymous description on internet] – women and the disabled are clearly vulnerable to attack in the new Century. Comedians and the new anonymous 'comedians' on the internet look to find that offensive 'Holy Grail'. The offended are cast as humourless, and dreary and the comic as righteous. Stewart Lee, a comedian who questions the righteousness of the politically incorrect ironically commented. "You can't do anything in this country any more, it's political correctness gone mad. You can't even write racial abuse in excrement on someone's car without the politically correct brigade jumping down your throat" (2014).

In the technological age, fear and loathing intensified. After the attacks in Washington and New York in 2001, comics were fearful to create satire around such a violent assault on America. Comedians largely remained silent or expressed patriotism. Eventually online 2001 conspiracy theorists emerged in a sinister, negative and destructive way. A new dark comedy followed as 'trolls' posted, often anonymously, online harassment with no understandable purpose other than to offend and provoke. It seemed that dark comedy online and in stand up and screen

had lost its purpose – to provoke thought, social response, and make people laugh. Bullying online posts incited a mob mentality that gave trolls a sense of power for no particular end and much of the mainstream comedy from Jimmy Carr, Sacha Bohen Cohen and Frankie Boyle offended for no good reason.

CHAPTER 6: Conclusion

2017: Comedian Kathy Griffin was broadcast on the World Wide Web holding an effigy of the 'bloody severed head' of President Donald Trump.

She was universally condemned on Twitter, on Facebook, and other media outlets.

Too soon? Too offensive?

She apologised for crossing the line on Twitter straight to camera to the internet.

✓@kathygriffin

I am sorry. I went too far. I was wrong.

9:54 AM - 31 May 2017

Too much pressure?

1962: Lenny Bruce asked for the house lights to be turned up – “Are there any niggers here tonight? ...”

Lenny Bruce never apologised.

He stood his ground under the threat of jail, violence and destitution. The threats sent to Griffin, 56, were mostly received via social media and her net wealth was regularly recorded at approximately \$20 million (Gambill, T. 2017).

So why the apology? After all, she said she was a provocative artist. It was provocative. If you knew you were being confrontational why apologise to those confronted?

Towards the end of his life, police, the courts and conservative commentators persecuted Lenny Bruce over his confronting comedy. He responded by standing on stage and reading out reams of courtroom transcript, pointing out the anomalies, where he was wronged and taken out of context. He appeared dishevelled, and paranoid. But he was defiant.

More than eighty prominent people, mostly entertainers and authors, signed a petition protesting the prosecution of Bruce including Bob Dylan, Richard Burton, Norman Mailer, Susan Sontag, John Updike, James Baldwin, George Plimpton, Henry

Miller, Gore Vidal, and Woody Allen (Linder, D. 2003). It was about freedom of speech – the right to outrage, to express opinion through satire in public. Bruce boldly challenged obscenity laws.

When Kathy Griffin was condemned for releasing the online video of her and a faux bloody decapitated head of Donald Trump, she caved. Days after Griffin's apology that was widely accepted as genuine, she, like other comedians before her – *The Chaser*, Ricky Gervais, Louis C.K., Sarah Silverman – found it hard to simply accept all responsibility. She called a press conference flanked by her lawyer.

Celebrity lawyer Lisa Bloom painted Griffin as a victim of online bullying as a result of the video. While standing by her original apology, Griffin and her lawyer lay blame on Trump, arguing that he and his family had bullied her and contributed to "specific, detailed" death threats (Huffington Post, 2017).

"I don't think I will have a career after this," Griffin said as she broke down into tears. "I'm going to be honest. He broke me. He broke me. He broke me" (Park, A. 2017).

"A sitting president of the United States and his grown children, and the First Lady, personally, I feel, are trying to ruin my life forever" (Chan, M. 2017).

"It is Trump who should apologise ... for being the most woman-hating and tyrannical president in history" (D'Zurilla, C 2017).

Her dramatic accusations against the man she portrayed as a bloody severed head, wiped away the soothing effect that her 'sincere' apology aimed to make at a time when the act was all but [publicly] forgotten. Like Bruce, who lost gigs after pressure from authorities she was abandoned by employers with no need for Trump's influence, and like Bruce she had her supporters – but not many – mostly comedians. Alec Baldwin overshadowed his support with anger about a forced apology he made 19 years earlier.

"Kathy Griffin, Kathy.... baby... I've been there," tweeted Baldwin, who impersonated Trump on *Saturday Night Live* after Trump's election.

"The whole Henry Hyde thing with Conan, where we bring out an oxygen mask at the end? A joke. That's what I thought. That's what we intended. No one walked out

of the studio and said, 'No! We're serious!' No one. But all your gutless, weasels in the GOP insisted that I actually threatened Hyde. They played the victim beautifully."

Baldwin was referencing his insincere apology after his 1998 television talk show appearance screaming about stoning then-Republican Rep. Henry Hyde to death (Spiering, C, 2013).

Jim Carrey, more known for gurning than rousing satire gave a convoluted endorsement of Griffin's actions. "I think it is the job of a comedian to cross the line at all times – because that line is not real," Carrey, said. "If you step out into that spotlight and you're doing the crazy things that [Trump] is doing, we're the last line of defence. And really, the comedians are the last voice of truth in this whole thing. It's impossible to get away from it" (Chen, J.2017).

And probably more coherently by Jerry Seinfeld – "I don't understand the big deal" (Chen, J. 2017).

So what was the truth in Griffin's image? Griffin said the image was inspired by Trump's offensive statement in August 2015 that a journalist had "blood coming out of her whatever", which had been interpreted by media as referring to menstruation (Rucker, P. 2015). "It was a parody of Trump's own sexist remarks taken to an extreme absurdist visual," Griffin's attorney Lisa Bloom said. It looked more like an ISIS beheading than a parody of a comment made nearly 18 months earlier and not referenced in the video. The U.S. has a history of assassinations and attempted assassinations of Presidents and Presidential candidates, and ISIS broadcast images of beheadings online. Similar to much of dark comedy in the 21st Century, it was personal.

Although Bruce used parody through political figures such as the Pope and President Kennedy, his humour was based on current events and social mores not individuals unless they typified his argument. George Carlin viewed stand-up comedy as social commentary, rebellion and speaking the truth (Zoglin, R. 2008).'*The Sick Humor of Lenny Bruce* [LP] let me know that there was a place to go, to reach for, in terms of honesty in self-expression." Richard Pryor decided to tell his truth – the demons, drug abuse, jail, beatings, growing up in a brothel, philandering

and the trials of living as a black man in America after listening to what he heard as 'the truth' in Bruce's records.

The dark routines of Lenny Bruce that provoked police presence at his gigs and ultimately arrests tested his audiences about social taboos and hypocrisy. They made them laugh, often despite themselves. There was truth in his routines about corruption in the Church and hypocrisy in society. Carlin followed Bruce with his controversial *Seven Words* routine. Comedy writer Tony Hendra said it was "rebellious on a sort of profound level and it also had a kind of jubilation to it." Comedian Lewis Black agreed that Carlin gave him and other comedians a profanity 'comfort zone' and freedom of expression. Carlin provided solace for comedians and the iconoclast Lenny Bruce was seen as a martyr for free speech and ultimately vindicated.

In 2003 Bruce was pardoned over his 1964 conviction for obscenity after a campaign by scholars, lawyers, and comedians including Robin Williams, Dick Smothers, and Margaret Cho, arguing that a pardon for Bruce would show the state's "commitment to free speech, free press, and free thinking". Pataki said the posthumous pardon – the first in the state's history – was a declaration of New York's commitment to upholding the First Amendment (Kifner, J. 2003).

So what is the spirit of free speech? The concept was about human rights, to allow people to express their beliefs without oppression and discrimination. Since Lenny Bruce became a 'poster boy' for freedom of speech it is difficult to offend with obscenity let alone be prosecuted. Comedians looking to cross the line had to find new ways to offend. Frankie Boyle mocked the way people with Down syndrome looked and spoke. Boyle was more interested in offending than making people laugh. At least he took responsibility for his words. Ricky Gervais continued to use the offensive word mong on Twitter taunting anyone who criticised him including disabled educators. When he finally backed down after a conversation with a mother of a Down syndrome child he disowned any responsibility. "Never dreamed that idiots still use that word aimed at people with Down's syndrome. Still find it hard to believe" (@rickygervais October 2011). *The Chaser* skit portraying dying children as unnecessary and unworthy, had no satirical purpose or even made comedic sense. They made excuses after it blew up in their faces, vacillating

between, they were not expecting to offend, they apologise but that's comedy, and they didn't mean it. This came after repeatedly declaring they make a point of trying to offend.

There is a common thread with *South Park* and *The Chaser's* approach to the satire – using tragedy and humiliation as a comedic tool. *South Park* creators, Matt Stone and Trey Parker were inspired by the Jerry Springer show with its formula of shaming and bullying. *South Park* is full of victimisation because Parker and Stone say, “kids are malicious little fuckers”, but it is also a popular source for academic study. They are unforgiving and unapologetic in their approach to the human condition. They distil a style of personal attack they enjoyed on *Springer* into a cynical mix of gross comedy and truth.

Many dark comedians after the 1980s had unremarkable middle-class upbringings including private school education. They were members of Generation X, who lived out their young adult years in the post Vietnam War, pre-September 11 times of relative peace and prosperity. Bruce and Carlin were products of broken homes, the uncertain aftermath of a world war and unusual parents. Bruce, Carlin and also Peter Cook and Barry Humphries, carried feelings of hurt and abandonment growing up. These feelings would encourage cynicism about human nature and power that including the Church, the law and conformists. They all loved words from childhood and used them to great affect.

The developing global multi-media age has seen less interest in words and more in image. A news item's importance is directly related to the image available. Whereas Bruce gained attention for saying cocksucker in public, Griffin silently shocked with a graphic image. The colourful world of celebrity has a direct relationship with the new media. Fame has become more ubiquitous and burgeoning. Celebrity once had a mystique, usually achieved over time. Now celebrities are reality television stars or contestants on cooking or invasive shows [*The Bachelor*, *Big Brother*] in an age when privacy has little currency. Everything is media – and social media – driven, including unproven accusations. It is, in many ways, a ‘celebrity world’, where pop and movie stars send ingratiating images and manipulating messages globally through instagram and endorse political candidates. A billionaire celebrity with no

political experience, whose favourite means of communication is Twitter, was voted into the White House in 2016.

Celebrities are now seen as easy targets for comedy. Sarah Silverman ridiculed two celebrities at their most vulnerable – Paris Hilton who was about to do jail time and pop star Britney Spears who was making her first major public appearance after a mental breakdown. As well as shallow celebrity jokes, Silverman has highlighted the current and important issue of violence against women in a smart, funny and provocative way. “Who is going to complain about rape jokes? Rape victims? They barely even report rape” (Gold, T. 2012).

Louis C.K. a famous, wealthy, popular white male who was outed in 2017 for instances of masturbating in front of several young female comedians, who has never been raped or apparently known a rape victim, said he enjoyed a good rape joke and feminists couldn’t take a joke. In a time when there is more focus on the issues of violence against women, rape jokes are the new ‘anti-establishment’ joke. Australian comic Jim Jefferies, who found success in the U.S., criticised women who challenge his misogyny and take on rape, calling them “uptight cunts who can’t take a joke”. Jimmy Carr disguised his misogyny with sharp one-liners and a beguiling post joke laugh, “What do nine out of 10 people enjoy? Gang rape. Ha ha.” Carr also played a game with the audience, telling an offensive joke and revealing that every joke will get progressively more offensive. This promise of something appalling was indicative of the modern black comedy objective – find the line and step over it. Get a reaction. Be controversial. But when you do cross it and public opinion weighs you down and threatens your popularity make excuses, hollow apologies and attack the victim’s credibility.

Conversely Lenny Bruce was described as a comic who would “... rip the covers off and expose the naked truth about religious hypocrisy, political corruption, race relations, sex, drug use, and homosexuality—all topics that other comedians of his day never dared to touch or address as openly, brazenly, and authentically” (Collins, R. 2012, p. 65).

The truth behind Sacha Baron Cohen’s comedy was that it’s a manipulation of the truth. He encouraged people to let their guard down by doing something ‘naively’

inappropriate or insulting, in character. To get to 'the truth' he created an elaborate lie, complete with producers with fake names carrying lengthy, real consent forms to protect his production from lawsuits. His satire hid behind impenetrable characters – Borat, Bruno or Ali G – that ridiculed unsuspecting people. To paraphrase *The Chaser* team, he was shooting fish in a barrel. In a rare interview as himself in 2006 in *Rolling Stone*, when he was trying to make inroads into the U.S., Baron Cohen said of Borat, "The joke is not on Kazakhstan. The joke is on people who can believe that the Kazakhstan I describe can exist – who believe that there's a country where homosexuals wear blue hats and the women live in cages and they drink fermented horse urine" (Strauss, N.2006).

Who would they be? And what influence would they have?

Michael Deacon wrote in the Telegraph:

It's hard to avoid thinking that, while Baron Cohen is using stereotypes to confront prejudice, he's also inviting us to snigger at those stereotypes; a lot of his jokes are puerile, even crass. In effect, he's being politically correct and politically incorrect at the same time (2009).

Political correctness is a derogatory term that has become useful to undermine objections to a statement or joke. Since Lenny Bruce and George Carlin spoke their minds in the 1960s and 1970s, political correctness and freedom of speech have become important social and political topics. Politicians and comedians, people in the workplace, in the street and online have all bemoaned restrictions to their right to act freely. Are humourless women and a whining minority eroding our rights in the 21st Century? Are comedians challenging an oppressive puritanism by stepping over the line? Is black comedy still about politics, protest, provocation and the human condition or become little more than a bully's playground?

'Political correctness gone mad' is the emotional catch-cry when a perceived racist, sexist or homophobic comment is challenged. Political correctness has morphed from a more inclusive but perhaps unnecessary change in language to a handy response to deflect criticism. This interpretation of political correctness became a tool to give people, often comedians, a sense of legitimacy. When Lenny Bruce or George Carlin 'crossed the line', people in power tried to stifle their freedom of

speech. When current comedians ‘cross the line’ popular opinion through social media would be more likely to determine their fate, and more often than not, their reaction to criticism is related to their commercial value. The more objections from people, or ‘consumers’ as we are now known, the more likely the apology, excuse or retraction. Ricky Gervais unconvincingly pled ignorance, Sacha Baron Cohen deflected criticism by remaining in character and John Newman and others diverted attention on offensive, racist and misogynist remarks by attacking the ‘politically correct’ – an entity that is not a registered group or political party, or even an identifiable person. His inflammatory insults focused on the wowzers, the complainers, and the dull elite that his audience wouldn’t want to relate to. It deflected from the crass, anachronistic character of Newman’s performance.

George Carlin performed routines explaining his reasons for rejecting political correctness. His comedy was about society and power and censorship and also simple offence – regarding Red Riding Hood, “wolves can’t be all bad if they eat your grandmother. Even Grandpa won’t do that” (Carlin, G. 1997). Carlin’s fight for free speech wasn’t just about the ability to say anything, anywhere about anybody. It was about the ability to speak freely, question and oppose – not to freely abuse.

Lenny Bruce and George Carlin, Richard Pryor, Bill Hicks and Chris Morris delivered provocative yet intelligent, funny and socially aware comedy that provoked laughter and debate. But the main objective these days, it seems, is to offend and offend in the belief that the notoriety will outweigh any punishment. Paul Krassner who founded and edited the satirical magazine, *The Realist*, in 1958 said, “Mainly, as a result of Lenny’s legacy, no contemporary comedian has to fear getting arrested for their performance. Not only for ‘profane language’ but also not to fear being busted for political and religious targets of their satire in the guise of breaking obscenity laws” (Lau, A. 2011).

Lenny Bruce inspired those who followed with his ‘truth’. The truth has much less currency today because we are living in a global village dominated by an unchecked social media and a mainstream media attracting views through populism reliant on celebrity. “Lemme tell you the truth,” Bruce liked to offer his audience, his wife,

anyone who would listen during his more philosophical moments, “The truth is what *is*. And what *should be* is a fantasy, a terrible, terrible lie that someone gave the people long ago” (Lau, A. 2011).

Bruce and Carlin may have used words like cocksucker and cunt freely, which contributed to their notoriety in a more conservative time, but their comedy was about humanity, change and understanding with a twist of profanity. They paved the way for comedians to create comedy without fear of arrest, jail, or legal suppression and for Kathy Griffin to hold up that bloody severed head, which was about as not much at all.

It is hard to envision Lenny Bruce making media statements apologising for any hurt caused, because his dark comedy was related to truth – our unformed perspective on sex, racial hypocrisy, and religious elitism.

Nothing is certain in the new consumer-driven age that put media in the hands of the masses via Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat and Twitter, and, to a different degree, Wikipedia. ‘Fake news’, has become legitimised as a catchcry with the demands of the instant news cycle. Media hoaxes, often the posting of death notices of celebrities when they are very much alive, and banter, a recent internet phenomenon, fool the mainstream media regularly. Archie Bland wrote in *The Guardian* of a fake story on the internet about a group of mates hiring a boat to watch dolphins, and accidentally ended up in Syria. The media took this on face value unchecked. *Hungover lads’ boat trip boob lands them in Syria* headlined the *Daily Mirror*; British holidaymakers board ‘party boat’ in Cyprus – and end up in a Russian Naval Base in war-torn SYRIA, wrote the *Daily Express*. “I could not believe how gullible they were,” Lewis Ellis, the perpetrator, said he found about 35 stories recounting the untruth as fact, “We were just having a laugh! It was banter!” (Bland, A, 2017)

Coined by the Quakers in the 1950s – speaking truth to power, which was such an important component to Lenny Bruce’s comedy and his influence on comedians, has, in essence, been lost in contemporary black humour. With a few exceptions, black comedy does not rely on a truth, but a victim. As noted earlier, Lenny Bruce and George Carlin built their comedy around what they believed they should say.

Black comedy is now largely built around what comics recognise as what they shouldn't say.

Milo Yiannopoulos, the former editor of syndicated far right news opinion website *Breitbart* and infamous internet troll, [introduced in chapter six] has become a self-styled champion of free speech. Donald Trump's former advisor Steve Bannon, who hired him as a *Breitbart* editor in 2014, championed him as a conservative truth teller (Faehi, P. 2017). In an article in Bloomberg (2016) Joel Stein described Yiannopoulos rising to his feet and clapping after viewing Hillary Clinton on television read out two headlines from his *Breitbart* articles during a speech attacking the alt-right [alternative right]:

Birth Control Makes Women Unattractive and Crazy

Would You Rather Your Child Had Feminism or Cancer?

Stein concluded:

Yiannopoulos has hit the troll jackpot: He wrote outrageous headlines trying to provoke liberals, and the world's top liberal read them with head-shaking seriousness, falling for the prank. He directs Bokhari, sitting 5 feet away, to quickly write an article for *Breitbart* about this. They give it the headline *Milo to Hillary: You Did This*. As crazy as that sounds, once you understand troll logic, it's pretty much true (Stein, J. 2016).

Yiannopoulos resigned his post at *Breitbart* and lost a book deal after public disgust at his apparent promotion of paedophilia as a positive thing during a keynote speech at the American Conservative Union in February 2017.

... In the homosexual world, particularly, some of those relationships to younger boys and older men the sort of coming of age relationships, the relationships in which those older men have helped those boys to discover who they are, and give them security and safety and provided them with love.... (Eleftheriou-Smith, L. 2017)

Despite that misstep, Yiannopoulos has remained a far right provocateur, calling his tour of American Universities the Dangerous Faggot Tour, as he took to the stage wearing large sunglasses and shiny suit. In Australia in he was invited to

speak at parliament house in Canberra by Liberal Democrat senator David Leyonhjelm.

The Canberra Times reported that:

While in Australia, Yiannopoulos has taken aim at both Islam - saying [Muslim] journalist and social commentator Waleed Aly was "dedicated to the destruction of Western civilisation" - and Aboriginal Australians - describing their art as "shit" (Burgess, K. 2017). Yiannopoulos denounced a feminist columnist as "unfuckable". Right wing commentator Andrew Bolt was uneasy with his comments that Muslim asylum seekers were skilled at raping women (which Yiannopoulos said was just a joke) and former Prime Minister Julia Gillard as a prick (Bolt, A. 2017) but thanked him for, "exposing the Left"

The Daily Telegraph in England reported Senator Leyonhjelm, described as a 'libertarian purist', as saying, ""Some people who don't like him are idiots, and violent idiots into the bargain."

Reviled by his critics as racist and misogynistic, Mr Yiannopoulos has cast himself as a gay crusader for free speech and against "political correctness" in all its forms. (Telegraph, 2017)

The public statements of Yiannopoulos have precipitated violence between from the extremist activists from the political left and right but are largely ignored by the wider community. His statements are not about the hypocrisy of institutions, corruption or the futility of war, our human nature, and our right to speak freely about what matters to us. The hyperbolic speeches are not even about comedy, more about narcissistic abuse and bullying from an attention seeker who most likely owes his fame to Twitter and being banned from Twitter.

With social media, and Twitter in particular, people are connected like never before. Lenny Bruce's audience filled a small nightclub in Los Angeles – now at the touch of a button we can reach millions worldwide. Today, black comedy has a more personal edge. Blogs, eBooks, YouTube, Twitter, News Feed and Flickr are shattering the boundaries between public and private, performer and audience, truth and fiction. Yet the countless abusive, obscene, offensive tweets, emails, and Facebook comments posted worldwide, don't have the lasting impact that one man,

Lenny Bruce, had from a small stage, delivering routines about sexuality and bigotry and using profanity to explain our humanity in the 1960s.

Today, to understand black comedy and its motivations is not so much about crossing the line, offending, being arrested or being vilified – it's about what we as a society find funny.

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