

Case #7: Is Political Correctness is a Joke?

Last year, Comedy Central chose Trevor Noah to take Jon Stewart's place on *The Daily Show*, and it did not take long for his tweets, many from 2012 and before, to cause a stir. The tweets included distasteful jokes about Jews and women, such as:

- “Behind every successful Rap Billionaire is a double as rich Jewish man.#BeatsByDreidel,” Trevor Noah (@Trevornoah), May 12, 2014.
- “‘Oh yeah the weekend. People are gonna get drunk & think that I'm sexy!’ - fat chicks everywhere.” Trevor Noah (@Trevornoah), October 14, 2011.

People were outraged.¹ Similarly, comedian Anthony Jeselnik was pressured to remove a joke that he had tweeted about the Boston Marathon bombing: on the day of the tragic incident, he tweeted, “Guys, today there are just some lines that should not be crossed. Especially the finish line.”² These are just two of many examples of comedians facing backlash for offensive and politically incorrect jokes. And this trend of being offended by—and even censoring—such jokes is not going anywhere. On college campuses, political correctness is paramount.³

Some feel that this trend toward political correctness is bad for comedy. For example, Jerry Seinfeld described it as a “creepy PC thing” that “really bothers” him.⁴ As one commentator analyzed the issue in the context of comedy on college campuses: As I listened to the kids hash out whom to invite, it became clear that to get work, a comic had to be at once funny—genuinely funny—and also deeply respectful of a particular set of beliefs. These beliefs included, but were in no way limited to, the following: women, as a group, should never be made to feel uncomfortable; people whose sexual orientation falls beyond the spectrum of heterosexuality must be reassured of their special value; racial injustice is best addressed in tones of bitter anguish or inspirational calls to action; Muslims are friendly helpers whom we should cherish; and belonging to any potentially “marginalized” community involves a crippling hypersensitivity that must always be respected. Moreover, the commentator noted, “These young people have decided that some subjects—among them rape and race—are so serious that they shouldn't be fodder for comics.”⁵

But others believe that the trend toward political correctness is a good thing for comedy. Comedian Sarah Silverman explains, “To a degree, everyone's going to be offended by something, so you can't just decide on your material based on not offending anyone. But, I do think it's important, as a comedian, as a human, to change with the times. To change with new information. . . . I think it's a sign of being old when you're put off by that.” For example, she used to argue that it was fine to use the word “gay” pejoratively, but now she has stopped

¹ Anna Silman, “Did Trevor Noah's Twitter history just kill ‘The Daily Show’?” *Salon*, March 31, 2015, http://www.salon.com/2015/03/31/did_trevor_noahs_twitter_history_just_kill_the_daily_show/.

² Jason Zinoman, “Political Correctness Isn't Ruining Comedy. It's Helping.” *The New York Times*, Oct. 20, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/21/arts/television/political-correctness-isnt-ruining-comedy-its-helping.html>.

³ Caitlin Flanagan, “That's Not Funny! Today's College Students Can't Seem to Take a Joke,” *The Atlantic*, September 2015, <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2015/09/thats-not-funny/399335/>.

⁴ “Jerry Seinfeld is Tired of Political Correctness,” *Late Night with Seth Meyers*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KXDHjwaUtPI>.

⁵ See also, Lindy West, “How to Make a Rape Joke,” *Jezebel*, July 12, 2012, <http://jezebel.com/5925186/how-to-make-a-rape-joke>.

because she felt like she had “become the guy from fifty years ago who says ‘I say colored, I have colored friends.’” She concluded that “You have to listen to the college-aged, because they lead the revolution. They’re pretty much always on the right side of history.”⁶ And despite any allegedly stifling effects on the comedy, the business of comedy is booming: ticket sales for live comedy events have increased, sketch comedy TV shows are extremely popular, and comedy podcasts are everywhere.⁷

Case from the 2016 Regional Ethics Bowls

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