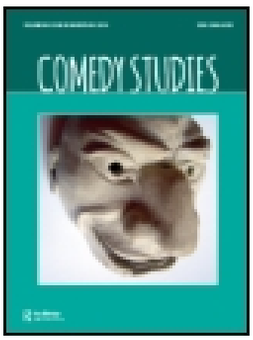

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A new economy of jokes?: #Socialmedia #Comedy

Rebecca Krefting[a]* and Rebecca Baruc[b]

[a]*American Studies Department, Skidmore College, Saratoga Springs, NY, USA;* [b]*Skidmore College, Saratoga Springs, NY, USA*

In this article, we examine the myriad ways comics harness emergent social media tools and these online platforms impact the production, exchange, and consumption of humor. Review of popular media, interviews, and scholarship yielded three important themes. (1) The comedy industry is in flux, but this is in no way a new phenomenon. (2) There are multiple uses of social media and how comics use these media tools often hinges on their intent and status. To illustrate this, we describe the six most prominent uses of social media. (3) The substance of humor remains fairly consistent in content and style of delivery but social media is giving rise to tribalism among like-minded comedy fans, which has an impact on audience composition and the content of comedy. We conclude by warning against any preemptive celebrations of the Internet and social media as democratizing forces that challenge existing social hierarchies.

Keywords: stand-up comics; stand-up comedy; social media; new media; tribalism; comedy industry

Introduction

This morning I turned off my alarm, which is also my phone, and while I was at it I used an app on my phone to check the weather and caught up on notifications from Facebook. I was notified of birthdays and dutifully posted a slew of 'Happy Happy!' and 'Let them eat cake!' on the pages of my friends born today. Next, I perused my morning Twitter feed. The Ukrainians are still pointing fingers at the Russians and vice versa for shooting a commercial airliner out of the sky, Hillary Clinton is signing her new book down at the local bookstore, and everyone's trotting out their brand of funny in 140 characters or less. People increasingly incorporate social networking platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Vine, Flickr, YouTube, and Tumblr into their daily lives for a variety of reasons both personal and professional. There is a bit of navel gazing going on, but it also allows you to stay connected to family and friends living far away, to keep abreast of current events and trends, and inform others of your accomplishments.

The central role of social media (SM) in so many people's lives changes how we interact and engage with each other. New media scholars Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford, and Joshua Green identify this dynamic online as new emerging forms of cultural participation and shifting sociality that lead to 'spreadability' or the ability for users to create and disseminate widely their own content (2013). This opens up commercial opportunities for those in the comedy industry, but also increasingly means that failure to incorporate SM in promoting a product or service can have serious monetary consequences for any commercial enterprise. In 2012, Patton Oswalt gave the opening address at the Just For Laughs Festival in Montreal, Quebec. He read two letters aloud: one for his fellow comics

*Corresponding author. Email: rkreftin@skidmore.edu

and one for industry folks. To both he stressed the importance of changing with the times. In his letter to comics, he crows: 'Everything I know about succeeding as a comedian and ultimately as an artist is worthless now and I couldn't be happier about that.' Referencing glacier-sized shifts in the comedy industry, Oswalt forecasts that comics are going to have to work hard using the technologies at their disposal. He concludes the letter: '… we're beginning to realize our careers don't hinge on someone in a plush office deciding to aim a little luck in our direction. There are no more gates' (2012). Taking a cue from Oswalt and myriad popular sources supporting Oswalt's claims, we seek to explore how changes in new media and emergent technologies impact the comedy industry and its many popular cultural forms. Our research questions include: How are comics harnessing emergent social media tools and to what effects? Do online platforms alter the exchange and consumption of humor and in what ways (if any) are these networking tools changing the substance, style, or means of humor production? What discourses are out there about what social media is doing to comedy and vice versa?

To answer these questions, we employed a dual-method qualitative approach incorporating critical discourse analyses and ethnography. The two methods make for a happy marriage that captures data at the macro and micro levels of interaction. Analyzing themes emerging in popular discourses via primary sources such as newspaper and magazine articles, online publications, blogs, reader comments, videos, and performances offers a macro-oriented understanding of SM and comedy; whereas, interviews conducted with industry executives, comedy club owners, comics, actors/performers, comic writers, savvy SM users, and digital studies scholars illumine individual perspectives and experiences in the entertainment industry. We conducted over a dozen interviews, among them with comedy titans such as: Caroline Hirsch, John Leguizamo, Ike Barinholtz, Rachael Harris, and Paul Provenza and distributed interview questions to a number of comic practitioners who responded via email.[1]

Review of popular discourses, interviews, and scholarship yielded three important themes germane to understanding comedy in the digital age. First, the comedy industry *is* changing; however, those changes do not come on the heels of a static industry up to this point. Technological innovations routinely do their work to shape the contours of every form of entertainment over time and, not surprisingly, have changed the comedy industry today. Second, there are multiple uses of SM, which we will enumerate, and how comics use SM often hinges on their intent and status. Third, on one hand, the substance of humor remains fairly consistent in content and style of delivery. On the other hand, SM platforms offer fans a way to find comics with similar comic sensibilities – creating tribes based on emotional and ideological congruence – which has an impact on audience composition and the content of comedy. Beneath Patton Oswalt's directive to comics to capitalize on SM lies a curious and oft-referenced allusion to the Internet as an egalitarian space where everyone has a shot at the limelight. While he is correct that the industry is changing, we are less optimistic that SM levels the playing field, so to speak, and conclude with some discussion of the problems inherent with maintaining this flawed conception, specifically as it relates to the enthusiastic declaration that 'content is king'.

The industry is (still) changing

Robin Zucker started her digital marketing career at Yahoo! as Social Marketing Director, treating early stage platforms as mature in an effort to promote an event or person in entertainment. Astutely aware of how audiences can be fickle with new platforms, Zucker

quipped at the end of our interview that what was true in the interview will not be in two weeks. Indeed, social networking sites are volatile and vulnerable to the rapidly changing tides of new media (Auletta 2009). The comedy industry and new media are moving in exciting new directions, but these two facets of popular culture are by no means unprecedented. The entertainment business has always confronted new technologies that shift aspects of content creation and distribution. Social networking platforms are no more exceptional than other past technologies, such as the telegram, the radio, the television, the computer, or the Internet, and garner similar public reaction, ranging from excitement to cynicism. Evgeny Morozov, author of *The Net Delusion: How Not to Liberate the World*, offers this perspective: 'The brevity of the telegraph's message didn't sit well with many literary intellectuals either; it may have opened access to more sources of information, but it also made public discourse much shallower' (2011, 277). The radio, the television, and the Internet all dramatically changed the distribution of comedy and comics have always learned to adapt to new technologies. Seeing SM in a historical perspective sobers the bombastic excitement surrounding it. In an interview with us, Peter Clemente, an Internet industry pioneer and specialist in customer relationship management (CRM) at a film distribution company in LA, asserted that, 'social media was a written letter and a telephone call twenty-five years ago' (2014). Clemente sees the Internet as supplemental to the fundamental business model of marketing for CRM: sending the right message to the right person at the right time. SM might be distinguishable from past industry game-changers in its ability to specifically target consumers from many angles based on retrieved data, yet one could still argue that it is simply augmenting how the comedy industry has always kept itself alive, i.e., with new communication mediums.

Major shifts are happening for comedians, distributors, and consumers, altering the relationships between these participants. Traditionally and most commonly, the power to produce and distribute creative content came out of major television networks and film companies and then spread to the consumers. Vis-à-vis SM, comics are finding new routes to success that circumvent the power of untouchable late night television talk-show hosts or business mediators. Comic actors like Abbi Jacobsen, Elaine Carroll, and Jen Kirkman are hailed as trail-blazers who found success using SM to skirt around traditional TV, which *GQ* writer John Naughton declares: 'no longer exerts an iron grip over the business of comedy' (19 April 2014). And as comedians are finding alternative entry points, gatekeepers have adjusted their orientation. Just as Peter Clemente's business model prioritizes customers, so do major comedy distribution platforms: Netflix, Hulu, SiriusXM, Spotify, and Pandora are all customer-oriented platforms. When defending SiriusXM's choice to withhold data intelligence from labels, CCO Scott Greenstein explained: 'This service was built to be a fan service. It was meant to be programmed and curated for fans, by fans' (quoted in Christman 2014). That means that these distributors will be interested in backing comics who can demonstrate a strong online fan base – thereby pleasing a known audience and assuring a profit for the distributor. Once gained, the immensity of a fan base can influence casting decisions by industry agents and executives, who are measuring SM fandom. To that effect, LA comedy agent Scott Matthews said that he often tells his clients that casting agents and producers will seriously consider the number of followers you have (2014). Though it may not be the result of better quality comedy, a bigger fan base increases the likelihood of getting job offers. For example, Comedy Central producers jumped at the chance to offer a TV deal to popular YouTube web series *Broad City*, a show about two young female best friends living in New York City. According to Paul Provenza, stand-up comic and host of *The Green Room with Paul*

Provenza, transition to TV is possible because 'anything that's popular on YouTube gives [network executives] the opportunity to bypass the pilot stage because they already have metrics' (2014). A fierce, visible following can be pivotal not just for stand-up comics and sketch teams, but also comedy writers. According to journalist Megan Angelo, Twitter has gone from 'novel to necessary' for any writer building their comedy career (*The New York Times*, 3 November 2011). One can easily assess the proficiency of a comedy writer on Twitter since tweets have the capacity to convey brevity, wit, and a strong handle on words. A writer's finest qualities on display combined with a formidable fan base can act as a desirable resume for major television opportunities, like when producers hired Bryan Donaldson (formerly an IT guy at an insurance company) as a writer on *Late Night with Seth Meyers* after amassing thousands of followers on Twitter for his wry and cynical tweets (Rogers and Wright 2014). Similarly, comic writer and actor Ike Barinholtz reported that his tweets helped him to catch the attention of Mindy Kaling who later hired him on as a writer for *The Mindy Project* (2014).

SM helps creative content flourish, but it also allows for more crap. More crap, not coincidentally, is what everyone in the comedy industry harrumphed about in 1980 s. With the influx of comedy clubs across the nation and the cable TV boom, the '80 s saw an inundation of cheap, inexperienced stand-up comedians squinting into spotlights on stages and coaxing chortles form viewers on cable television. At that time, veteran comedians and gatekeepers alike bemoaned this seismic shift in the industry, and today comedy bookers, managers, agents, and comedians have a similar litany of complaints about the changing quality of the content, the deflated value of comedy, and the emerging myth of a comedian building a career on his or her own.

Lots of content does not necessarily indicate quality nor does it boost the market value of comedy. 'I think you're getting people who are rising pretty quickly without the skills to back it up, and I think you're getting a lot of comedians that don't really deserve the success that they have in a certain way', noted Peter Clemente without mentioning names (2014). It's too soon to be sure, but perhaps Twitter isn't making legendary comedians because the medium itself is fleeting; sharing is quick and less thoughtfully crafted. In an interview, Scott Matthews pointed out that 'hour specials used to be something that was hard to get. And now you have forty different companies offering hour specials and three quarters of them are online so – what's so special about having an hour special now?' And while some folks see this as opening up space for comedic voices struggling to find an audience, some say that it is just breeding bad habits in producing comedy content. Gatekeepers are not the only ones skeptical about the flood of new comic material. Using SM, comics can bypass working the comedy circuit and some seasoned comedians lament the loss of this important form of training for novice comics. In a segment on *Herlarious*, Wanda Sykes scoffs at the prospect of SM replacing the kind of experience gained by traveling and performing live comedy (*Huffington Post*, August 6, 2013). Ironically, comics went on strike in 1979 to secure living wages for working the comedy circuit and now SM encourages comics to make their jokes/material accessible, if not free, to the public. Caroline Hirsch (2014), founder and owner of Caroline's on Broadway, is baffled by comedians performing their live work for the same price that consumers have come to expect to pay online: 'I've never been in business when I've seen so many free shows, all over town. From Manhattan to Brooklyn everything's *free*. Okay, there's no value then to your work, if you're giving it away for free.' The concern here is that these free shows uphold the supposition that the audience does not need to pay for comedy – a publicly held expectation bred from how we share content online and one that could adversely impact Hirsch's business.

Alongside the rise of SM and public triumph for all it can do, arose a belief that anyone who embraces the low-stakes tool of Twitter, hones their comedic voice, and builds an audience can launch their own career, i.e., the myth of the Rob Delaney effect. Rob Delaney, who struggled as a full-time professional comic, joined Twitter in 2009 where his funny tweets grabbed the attention of thousands. Within a few years, he had headlined for national comedy club chains, released a concert film, and written a book. Everyone thinks they can have the Rob Delaney effect – a meteoric, seemingly overnight, rise to fame – but few will rise above the din of funny voices clamoring for attention online. Talent agent Scott Matthews (2014) took issue with this myth, pointing out that attorneys, agents, and managers are still important. 'Will you need them for every single thing the way you used to?' Matthews shrugged, 'Maybe, maybe not. But depends on how smart you are.' Matthews admitted he has some savvy clients, but many still need agents to promote and advise them. If a popular comedian was sponsoring Bacardi but the new show they are on sponsors Absolute Vodka, 'Is this a conflict?' Matthews pressed. Yes, and it's probably not solved with a punch line. Agents will continue to play a role, albeit narrower, in the oversight of entertainment contracts and there will always be comics who earn incomes that allow them to outsource promotion and marketing to awaiting agents.

Social media as industry imperative

There is not just one approach for how comics use SM in the service of professional development or comedy production. Mindy Kaling boasts accounts with many social networking platforms, but primarily sticks to Twitter and Instagram, using them to build and sustain public excitement for her commercial ventures like the many films in which she appears, her comedic memoir: *Is Everyone Hanging Out Without Me? (and Other Concerns)* (2011), and her lead role on a sitcom, *The Mindy Project,* for which she also writes and directs. Importantly, Kaling puts a lot of funny material out there so the business of branding and promoting takes a back seat to her humorous posts. Alternately, Maria Bamford's platform of choice for dispensing the funny is YouTube where she posts web series like *The Maria Bamford Show* and *Ask My Mom!* and, unlike Kaling, she reserves Twitter for primarily promotional purposes with an occasional ringing of the bell for a charitable cause or non-profit organization. Gabriel Iglesias, a stand-up comic known for his high pitched giggle, 'fluffy' physique, and colorful Hawaiian shirts credits part of his success to syncing various SM sites so that a tweet, for instance, will also show up on Facebook. This allows him to access all of his friends and fans in a single post to any one platform: 'I can take a 10-minute stand-up comedy clip, I put it online, I send it out through Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and I could have 5 million views in probably a week' (quoted in Goldberg 2014). Comics may not have a unified strategy when using SM, but experts agree that whatever comics are doing is working. Over the past several years, a steady trickle of popular articles aimed at business owners delivered advice on how to use SM in the service of networking, marketing, and public relations. Many of them used stand-up comics as examples that illustrate some maxim for negotiating online professional sociality, like: 'Focus on your tribe', 'Engage Your Hecklers', or 'Don't Be Boring' (Klotz-Guest 2014; Shea 2011; Erickson 2012).[2] Journalists tout the particular way that comics navigate SM, i.e., using humor, being human, interacting with fans, etc., encouraging business owners to take lessons from comics, who are selling a brand just like they are. The underlying assumption is that being active on social networking sites is an industry imperative, which has become the reigning axiom of the twenty-first century.

This section catalogs the primary reasons for and usages of SM for stand-up comics, offering some commentary on the ways status informs comics' use of new media.

While individual comics may go about implementing SM in different ways, they still use SM for some combination of the same six reasons: (1) *To maintain and build relationships with fans*. Of all the social networking sites out there, actor John Leguizamo prefers Twitter to connect with his fans. As he can attest, a strong fan base has attachment and loyalty to the comedian and will promote and fight for his/her work (2014). Fans have quickly discovered that throwing their collective weight in the right direction helps renew a show or start a new one. Disappointed when producers fired Conan O'Brien from *The Tonight Show* in 2010, fans leveraged SM to show their support for O'Brien, inflating his popularity online and assuring a strong fan base for his own show *Conan,* airing later the same year ('What Late Comedians Can Teach You…' 2014). Realizing his fans were younger, socially active SM users, O'Brien structured promotion and distribution of *Conan* to cater to the myriad ways people stream media. Disavowing the staid rule in the business to not give anything away before airing a new episode, his promotions team released excerpts of exciting parts of the show on various platforms in order to stoke interest and enthusiasm for the show airing that night. When asked if he was 'bothered by the multitudes of ways people might watch his show (aside from tuning in live). Without pause or hesitation, O'Brien emphatically responded, "no, not in the least"' (Ingraham 2012). By tapping into the needs and wants of his most ardent supporters, O'Brien effectively changed how and when he distributed his show only further enhancing his own popularity and the show's.

(2) *To brand a comic persona.* 'Innovate boldy…or go home' shouts one article in the effort to direct business owners how to brand themselves (Klotz-Guest 2014). This also happens to be the credo of Nerdist Industries, an entertainment company 'focused on making programming and content that's very inclusive in a way that viewers really feel like they are hanging out with these people' (Chris Hardwick quoted in Poggi 2014). They brand themselves as producing hip entertainment for the digital native and consequently support creative projects that embrace new media both in content and distribution. Nerdist Industries' owner, Chris Hardwick, stand-up comic and host of *@midnight* – a game show using SM to challenge a rotating cast of stand-up comics – suggests that comics are the quintessential model for branding: 'In a stripped down way a comedian is an entrepreneurial brand machine–it's about relating to the audience and being able to talk to the audience with a distinct voice. These are all the same things you do when you are building a brand' (quoted in Poggi). For most comics, there is continuity between stage and online personae – with brand coherency there are fewer surprises at live performances and it becomes easier to retain and build a loyal following.

(3) *To know your audience.* At a live performance, a good comic will know a little bit about their audience and the city hosting the performance. Familiarity breaks the ice and helps the audience identify with the performer. The same is true online and comics must learn how to connect with their fans. Different platforms cater to different demographics and so it's important to know the capacity of that tool and the audiences you are likely to reach. Ike Barinholtz loves Twitter, likes Facebook, dislikes Instagram, and detests Vine. But, because Barinholtz is not trying to appeal to the tweens who flock to Instagram or Vine, he is exempt from needing to learn to navigate them. As he put it in our interview: 'I feel like Twitter is kind of my sweet spot for people in their 20s, 30s, and 40s who are actually saying things as opposed to "Oh my god, here's a picture of my brunch!" [*laughing*].' Loads of snarky tweets coupled with his many successful professional

ventures ranging from television to film have earned him 153 K (and growing) followers on Twitter who can trust he will deliver the funny.

(4) *To promote.* SM skills have quickly become a prized skill set and most companies have created positions devoted exclusively to management of SM accounts. In an interview with Scott Brown of *Wired* – a magazine reporting on how new technologies interact with culture – actor, writer, and director Paul Feig warns: '"If you're a comedian, you cannot be a Luddite anymore," Feig says. "You're shooting yourself in the foot"' (2009). Technological acumen is practically requisite for professional growth and visibility since most comics do not enjoy household name recognition and SM supplies a cheap, fun, though pretty time consuming way of staying connected with fans and enticing new ones. In this way, status informs usage of SM tools. Comics at different status levels utilize tools differently depending on their objectives. Lesser-known comics like Chelsea Peretti may seek to amass followers on Twitter by posting jokes or on Vine by posting short funny videos, while comics with more notoriety like Chris Rock may use Twitter strictly to announce shows to an existing (and substantial) fan base.

(5) *To entertain.* This might be the most important reason that comics flock to SM. In the comedy industry there is never enough stage time, but with social networking sites there is always an audience ready to supply comics with a steady flow of comments, favorites, retweets, and likes. Comics can work out new material online in what Scott Brown describes as 'a collective sketchbook, where comedians relax their legendary self-consciousness, territoriality, and joke-hoarding, and ideas evolve out of idleness, casually, almost by mistake' (2009). Plus, being funny helps engage their fans and keep them watching while also pushing comics to improve. Writer for *Splitsider*, an online news and information archive on all things comedy, Emma Soren says comedians on Twitter must deserve the retweeting and favoriting of their followers/fellow users, which is why she writes 'Follow Friday', a weekly column featuring 'one person whose consistent short-form online humor deserves your attention and to be on your Twitter feed' (2014). Positive media coverage and audience response can indicate to the comedian what jokes or ideas are worth developing more for the stage. While conducting interviews in New York City, we watched Phil Hanley perform at Caroline's on Broadway and later noticed he had 'performed' a couple of the same jokes on Twitter earlier that day – after all, he had another captive audience, albeit virtual.

(6) *To circumvent industry gatekeepers and lower costs.* Not everyone is in a financial position to produce their own concert film or fund their own national tour. Status and deep pockets allowed Margaret Cho to offer free download of *Cho Dependent* (2011) while trying to drum up enthusiasm and support for her Grammy nomination for the same and made it possible for Louis CK, Aziz Ansari, and Bo Burnham to eliminate the middle men and sell their work directly to the people online for as low as $5. HBO executives initially resisted the arrangement forged between Louis CK and HBO – that CK would sell his HBO special *Oh My God* online to fans after it aired on the network. Already having the $250,000 needed to produce the show. CK had the upper hand in this arrangement – HBO needed him, more than he needed them. Few comics have the fame necessary to negotiate similar terms and Louis CK acknowledges this saying: 'The power I had was to be able to keep saying: "I'll do it myself. I do not need you"' (quoted in Itzkoff 2013). But, for people without similar status, SM offers an affordable means of delivering content to the public. After Jenny Slate was relieved of her duties as *Saturday Night Live* cast member (2009-2010), she created *Marcel the Shell With Shoes On*, a series of short films shot like a documentary exploring the life of the animated soft-spoken shell, Marcel. The films went viral and led to the creation of children's books; offers for film roles came

shortly thereafter. Not everyone's efforts meet with this sort of success. Slate's existing status and visibility most certainly helped; however, SM provides comics, regardless of status, tools for communicating directly with people/future fans minus the complication of other mediators or filters.

Has the joke changed?

Indubitably, SM has impacted the comedy industry. It has changed modes of delivery and how we communicate with each other, but has it changed the substance of humor or the styles used to deliver humor? The answer is yes *and* no. No, because research participants resoundingly reported and our own observations confirm that all the major comedy styles – e.g., self-deprecating humor, physical humor, shock humor, political humor, satire, charged humor, safe/family-friendly humor, parody, etc. – continue to circulate and flourish. Today comics test their material online and on stage, so jokes might develop through the parameters of Twitter, WhoSay, or Facebook. Given the brevity of interactions on SM, one might expect to see the return of the formerly popular one-liner joke. When we compared Phil Hanley's jokes delivered in tweet form the same day as the live performance at Caroline's on Broadway, we realized how much context he removed to deliver the joke via Twitter. To his followers, he tweets: 'Some couples are embarrassed they met online. They should be happy and proud. Just think before the internet you would have died alone.' Later that night, in the live performance he bantered with the audience about relationships and threw in the line when it seemed natural to do so. Hanley was rewarded with a healthy wave of laughter, as might be expected since 44 followers retweeted the joke and 64 followers favorited the joke. Favorable online responses gave him metrics for the joke, but he also had to figure out how to package the joke for a live audience in the context of a different cultural form. *Wall Street Journal's* Christopher Farley reports that 'comedy is going through a digital shift' wherein '[v]iewers have grown accustomed to tweet-size comedy' (20 February 2014). But, in live comedy venues, the audience isn't expecting robotic recitation of tweet-sized comedy and unless you are Mitch Hedberg, you probably can't get away with it. So, like Hanley, comics are *not* hitting the clubs with one-liners and knock-knock jokes and they continue talking about what they have always talked about using a variety of styles to land their jokes.

However, the substance of humor is not entirely impervious to changes wrought by SM, like allowing for new kinds of exchanges between audience and comic that strengthen a comic's fan base. Comics can be vetted online now, attracting new fans who have never seen them perform live but who know it will be a good fit when they do. When supported by informed and committed audiences, Paul Provenza pointed out in our interview that the comedian has less to explain in their performance. A room full of loyal fans means that a comic does not have to work as hard to win over audiences – that work has already been done via online exchanges. For most comics, this is a welcome paradigm shift, one that will benefit both comics and their fans. For comics, it makes it easier to just do what they want to do onstage and fans excited about discovering a new comedic voice will happily spend money and encourage friends to do the same, engineering a kind of tribal orientation around certain comics. Comedy devotees enthuse over performers that most people have never heard of and the millions of stories, pages, and performances competing for our attention online ensure that our focus is increasingly diffused into small but scrappy homophilic tribes. Digital media scholar Amelia Wong noted in our interview that people's tendency towards homophily – the sociological concept that similarity breeds connection – in turn shapes SM, meaning in virtual communities, just as in our

real lives, we gravitate towards people like us, forming tribes. For example, interviewees often used Twitter to keep up with regional happening, such as Robin Zucker who spoke about checking Twitter to instantaneously hear what people were saying about the helicopter hovering over her home, or about the traffic disaster happening on U.S. Route 101. Tribes can be formed based on shared environments; however, they don't have to be. Paul Provenza, explains the impact of the Internet on homophily or tribalism:

> What the Internet does is basically create tribes. And we're all tribalists. It seems to be a basic fundamental aspect of human nature to be tribal whether it be sports teams you root for or the band you follow, the political ideology you hold, it's all tribalistic. It really is. And what the Internet has done is remove geography from that equation and you now have tribalism on an ideological level, tribalism on an emotional level, tribalism that's based not on the proximity of those who are not 'other.' You can find people who are not 'other' anywhere in the world because you ended up at the same websites. (2014)

Proximity and even shared experiences are not proscriptive of how people congregate into tribes. This was especially apparent the night we interviewed three recent Skidmore College graduates. We gathered at an apartment on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, catching up on post-college life, eating pizza, and, later, subjecting our guests to a battery of questions. Gathered, we had three savvy SM users inhabiting radically different spheres of Twitter: Rebecca Stern, prolific SM user and assistant to a councilman in Brooklyn who uses Twitter to follow politicians and has her account set on private; Matthew Schonfeld, Gothamist intern who engages with journalism, rap/hip-hop music, and NYC culture; and Benjamin Jurney, a comedy writer (published online in *The New Yorker*), performer, and purveyor, who follows all things comedy-related. All of them living in the same city, sharing a degree from the same college and many of the same friends on Facebook, and yet each one plugged into separate virtual tribes and niches. Homophily or tribal tendencies occurs in virtual forums like SM and secure admittance for Ben, Becky, and Matt into different interest-based communities online.

Virtual tribes are enthusiastic in sharing and reinforcing their community, thus comics can gain a following by appealing to the gays or the progressives or blue-collar workers. Tribes often form around social identities like ethnicity and sexuality and because comedy is such an identity-based cultural form it is easy to use shared social categories as the foundation for appreciating a comic. Using her own struggle with mental illness as comic material, Maria Bamford drew in fans experiencing similar difficulties. In a *New York Times* article, 'The Weird, Scary and Ingenious Brain of Maria Bamford', Sarah Corbett writes, 'After the show, a crowd lingered late in front of the theater, waiting to speak with Bamford. She is frequently approached by people who view themselves as part of her tribe, who want to talk about their own diagnoses and tell their own tales of being misunderstood' (July 17, 2014). People flock to voices that are speaking to their personal truth, who share the same tribulations and jubilations – especially when the speaker is adept at providing incisive and relieving commentary, such as a good comedian. The same dynamic and dialogue is happening in the virtual world, where SM makes one's own Messiah more visible and accessible.

Conclusion: May the best (funny) man win!

Patton Oswalt said it in his speech at Just for Laughs – 'Content is king!' – and John Leguizamo said it during our interview: 'Beautiful thing about all this is that it has made *content king*. This is a great time for writers and creators… All great writers are going to

cable TV, Amazon, Netflix. And great actors have gone to these too… where they are doing the most challenging stuff, the most freedom, the most mature.' Content is also king in live performance venues because the only thing keeping those club doors unlocked and swinging is well-timed, laughter inducing jokes. Declaring that 'content is king!' implies a sort of democratic triumph because it promises reward for the best material regardless of creator: May the best (funny) man win! Fostering the illusion of democracy when it comes to SM is not all that surprising since social networking sites began as grassroots efforts to connect with others.[3] A formidable number of popular articles characterize the Internet as a neutral space where all are welcome and all have the capacity to succeed. For instance, Christopher Farley enthuses: 'Social media humor is more democratic and diverse than the trickle-down comedy of the heyday of Leno and Letterman' (2014). Alex Leo champions SM for providing women comics with additional forums on which to capture an audience. '… [T]he level playing field of Twitter, Facebook and Tumblr means no one gets between ambitious talent and a potentially receptive audience. All it takes is perseverance, ability, skill and infinite patience' (2012). Leo's piece and another from Meredith Lepore (2012) making similar claims present a narrative of female empowerment and command over new media, omitting how issues of gender parity in comedy are not resolved online. Granted, women comics have alternative means of communicating with fans, but this does not do anything to disrupt common public misperceptions that are biased, such as men are funnier than women.

Social inequality transcends the physical environment, meaning the Internet is fair game for all the same cultural and social biases evident in society. Scholar Evgeny Morozov (2011) compellingly details media sources overstating the value, benefit, and power of SM and warns that new modes of technology do not disrupt traditional ideologies, they just reflect them. In other words, nationalism, extremism, and prejudice still play out on the Internet because technology does not eliminate the effects of religion, culture, nor history. In *Wired*, Scott Brown offers a more nuanced celebration of humor in the digital age that acknowledges an existing social order:

> Thanks to market forces, the creation and purveyance of humor have become decentralized and deregulated. The class clown's little monopoly is smashed: Laffs have gone laissez-faire. Obviously, some people are simply funnier than others, *and there will always be a comedy aristocracy, either natural or appointed*… But the implication here is that everyone can be funny. (2009, emphasis added)

While he teeters on the verge of waxing jubilant on the Internet as the great equalizer, Brown accedes that social structures inform who audiences 'appoint' as funny. Since the current problematics of reception (i.e., a belief that men are funnier) occur live and online, SM may not be the democratizing force many would like it to be. Like Scott Brown, John Leguizamo tempered his evaluation of what is possible with SM with what we are more likely to see given current social behavior: 'The digital age is very democratizing. I think it really equalizes everything because now everybody can start telling their story; everybody can start documenting themselves and their experiences … At the same time, you know people do put out a lot of bigotry and hostility' (2014). As long as humans hold beliefs about social superiority and inferiority, those beliefs will pervade how social networking platforms are developed and manipulated by users. And, in all likelihood, those beliefs will outlive this research or any current technology. It is important to recognize that technology is neither neutral nor should we make it the target of our utopic fantasies. Even as we celebrate exciting new shifts in the economy of jokes, it is paramount

that we remain critical. SM has done much to change the ways we exchange and consume humor. Unchecked celebration of SM – of the content-is-king-variety – ignores the transference of biases into virtual spheres and rejection of SM altogether ignores shifts in the industry that make SM proficiency requisite for success. SM offers a tremendously powerful tool for comedians of all ilks – and while it has not challenged the social hierarchies already in place, it has fragmented where anyone can choose to discover *their* funny.

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Notes

1. The digitally recorded interviews lasted anywhere from 60 to 120 minutes and were conducted in New York City, Los Angeles, or via Skype.
2. Comments were taken from the following articles, respectively, and are just a sampling of the many popular articles that use comics as model for good public relations and branding online.
3. For a lengthy and detailed discussion of the cultural history of Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, Flickr, and Wikipedia, see: José van Dijck, *The Culture of Connectivity: A Critical History of Social Media* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

Notes on contributors

Rebecca Krefting, who goes by Beck, is an assistant professor in the American Studies Department, Affiliate Faculty for Gender Studies, and Director of Media and Film Studies at Skidmore College. In 2014, she published her first book, *All Joking Aside: American Humor and Its Discontents* (Johns Hopkins UP) – charting the history and economy of 'charged humor' or stand-up comedy aimed at social justice – and is a contributing author to the forthcoming edited collection, *Hysterical!: Women in American Comedy* (University of Texas Press, 2016). Her next monograph focuses on SM and stand-up comedy.

Rebecca Baruc recently earned her BA in American Studies at Skidmore College. At Skidmore Rebecca produced, performed and hosted stand-up regularly and was on the premier comedy improvisational team. She was the co-producer of the National College Comedy Festival, which was founded in 1989 by producer David Miner (*Parks and Recreation, 30 Rock*). The National College Comedy Festival has played host to some of the brightest college comedy talent in the country, alongside established and up-and-coming professional acts, and has always been entirely student run.

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