

2011

Not Seeing the Joke: the Overlooked Role of Humour in Researching Television Production

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Recommended Citation

Brennan, E. 2011. Not seeing the joke: the overlooked role of humour in researching television production. *Media, Culture & Society*. Vol. 33, No. 6, 2011: pp. 819–833. doi:10.1177/0163443711411003

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Not seeing the joke: The overlooked role of humour in researching television production

Media, Culture & Society
1–15

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DOI: 10.1177/0163443711411003

mcs.sagepub.com



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Abstract

This article argues that humour can provide researchers with a unique access point into the professional cultures of media producers. By reconsidering an earlier case study, and reviewing relevant literature, it illustrates how humour can fulfil several functions in media production. Importantly, humour is a central means of performing the ‘emotional labour’ that increasingly precarious media work demands. For production research, the everyday joking and banter of media workers can provide an important and, heretofore, overlooked means of accessing culture, meaning, consensus and conflict in media organizations. The article argues that humour’s organizational role should be considered as a sensitizing concept when designing production research.

Keywords

media production, cultural industries, production research, ethnography, theory, organizational sociology, humour, workplace

Making television typically involves creativity, large teams, expensive equipment, scarce time and lean budgets. Successful television work requires clear communication, discipline and the avoidance of overt conflict (see Caldwell, 2008). This requires that workers suppress or falsify their emotions to maintain efficiency and a positive working atmosphere (see Breed, 1955: 278–279; Deuze, 2007: 194; Grindstaff, 2002: 134; Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2008: 113). Media production research has overlooked workplace humour although it is a prominent means of performing such ‘emotional labour’.¹

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Like some other commentaries on organizational humour, this article emerged from revisiting a past study (see Collinson, 1988; Griffiths, 1998; Sanders, 2004). The original research set out to explore how the production system of a popular Irish soap opera, *Fair City*, constrained the social representations that the show could offer² (Brennan, 2004). Jokes and banter, on set and in the production office, proved to be revealing. They helped clarify aspects of the show's occupational culture. They also uncovered ways in which cast, crew and writers experienced its pressures and dealt with them. Workplace humour, however, was never considered while designing the *Fair City* research. Its significance only emerged after observation.

As past research demonstrates, light-hearted utterances can, unwittingly or surreptitiously, express consensus or discord (Burns, 1953; Collinson, 1988; Dwyer, 1991; Griffiths, 1998). The playful can be a window onto more 'serious' aspects of culture, hierarchy and conflict in television production. Here, with the benefit of hindsight, the organizational role of joking behaviour is considered using observations from the *Fair City* study, as well as former studies on workplace humour from medical, industrial and clerical settings. This article aims to demonstrate that humour is an essential part of the performance and management of media work. It also aims to highlight workplace humour as a 'sensitizing concept' to be considered as part of research design rather than being picked up retrospectively (see Blumer, 1954).

Getting ahead by getting along

... in brief, the size of permanent staffs with terrestrial producer-broadcasters has diminished, casualization of the labour force has increased, entry to the industry is more difficult and less well regarded or supported, average earnings have dropped, and working terms and conditions have deteriorated. (Ursell, 2000: 805)

Ursell succinctly captures the degradation of media employment since the 1980s. Today, working in television generally means a precarious working life. Jobs are short-lived with no certainty of the next one. Freelance, project-based work offers few guarantees other than 'continual transformation and shifting uncertainties' (Deuze, 2007: 173). Exploiting television's glamour, employers attract large pools of reserve labour. Ursell suggests that the 'acclaim, reward' and 'recognition' at the 'top end of the television labour market' may help 'keep the bottom end entranced and enlisted' (2000: 818). Increased formal training exacerbates this. There are far more media graduates than there are media jobs. Thus, 'tension runs high in finding, keeping, and consolidating jobs and, ultimately, a career' (Deuze, 2007: 174).

Historically, formal and informal networks have mediated access to media employment (see Breed, 1955; Gitlin, 1983: 117; Turow, 1982: 126). Recently, labour market flux has amplified the significance of such networks. In uncertain times, according to Ursell, freelancers have taken upon themselves 'the tasks of organizing their own labour markets'. There is a 'much strengthened role for the self-referential and partially closed occupational communities which have always characterized television workforces' (Ursell, 2000: 807). Through networks, television workers must build a reputation for

‘good work’ while cultivating friendships and acquaintances that offer recognition and employment opportunities (Ursell, 2000: 811–12).

Ursell describes networks as a ‘gift from the workers to the broadcasters’ in that they relieve the latter of the cost of more systematic and bureaucratized recruitment procedures (Ursell, 2000: 811–12). Thus, production companies often recruit a combination of regular staff, whose reputation is established, alongside ‘the use of reputation-based networks of colleagues’. Regular staff ‘function as intermediaries by recommending people from their personal networks for positions in new project teams’ (Deuze, 2007: 190). Reputation and familiarity are ‘conveyed in a mix of personal acquaintance, kinship, past working connections, and past achievements’ (Ursell, 2000: 811). For those seeking work in television, networks exert a ‘particularly strong need to maintain good working relations in short-term project work’. Future employment depends on making and maintaining contacts (Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2008: 104). Building and maintaining a career in television depends on informal peer relations as much as it does on technical skill.

Despite its demanding and uncertain employment conditions, television production emphasizes teamwork. Coordinated cooperation across several specialized teams requires an emotional atmosphere that is cordial, relaxed and efficient (see Hochschild, 1983: 115). Overt conflict must be suppressed. Deuze sees controlled conflict as ‘a key value in the culture of project-based work in film and television’ (2007: 199). Regardless of technical skill, doing good work in television means ‘avoiding behaviour which could be seen as awkward, inconvenient or confrontational’ (Deuze, 2007: 194). In a time-sensitive environment emotional outbursts, arguments or obstinate objections may delay and damage a production (see Grindstaff, 2002: 134). Doing ‘good work’ and building a reputation requires ‘emotional labour’ (Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2008: 113–14). With few exceptions, in order to be successful in television work one must suppress personal views and defer to a team. Although they are pressurized and transient, project work teams often form bonds of friendship, loyalty and trust. Thus, more or less enduring informal networks may form over time. These networks act like a form of professional closure, restricting access for outsiders and maximizing employment prospects for their members (Ursell, 2000: 813; see also Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2008: 111). Nevertheless, television workers often need to form new bonds of trust and conviviality with a changing flow of colleagues. Workplace humour facilitates production by providing an emotional shortcut to bonding such precarious and transient groups.

Jokes as social super glue?

Rose Laub Coser (1959) recounted how joking behaviour helped quickly to establish ties among hospital patients as part of a group with ever-changing members. As distinct from Freud’s emphasis on humour as a form of psychic economy or release, Coser stressed humour’s contribution to ‘social economy’. She particularly marked this social contribution in ‘groups whose membership is continuously changing’. Such groups are exemplified by the ‘transient little subgroups that are formed for short spans of time each day in wards and sitting-rooms’ (1959: 181). ‘In such a shifting and threatening

milieu', Coser writes, 'a story well told, which, in a few minutes, entertains, reassures, conveys information, releases tension, and draws people more closely together' can contribute more to the well-being of the 'frightened sick' than carefully planned lectures and discussions (1959: 181). The research identified 'jocular gripes' as a means of establishing consensus and 'in group' status among patients. Unlike humourless grievances, or 'canned jokes', these comic complaints were 'based on shared experience.'

In the complaint the patient admits his vulnerability; in the jocular gripe, as in humor generally, he overcomes it and allows his listeners to participate in his triumph over weakness. In addition to the humorist's triumph over his own weakness – the peculiar quality of gallows humor – there is the added gratification in the collective character of the triumph. The jocular gripe is peculiarly fit as a mechanism of adaptation to the hospital for it helps patients to regain their identity through collective triumph over their weakness and at the same time to release their grudges in 'substitute complaints'. (1959: 177)

Complaints are as unwelcome in television production as they were among Coser's patients. Doing 'good work' excludes persistent complaints, which suggest that those who complain will not surrender their personal position to the needs of the team. Hence making funny 'substitute complaints' is expedient. Sharing and making light of complaints can unify a team by 'allowing it to reinterpret together an experience that previously was individual to each' (Coser, 1959: 178). A worker who 'invites others to laugh with him', rather than making an individual complaint, 'creates or strengthens the feeling of equality in the participants'. For Coser, at the heart of jocular griping is the creation of social relationships through the reciprocal sharing of, and triumph over, fears, difficulties and anxieties (1959: 178; see also Griffiths, 1998: 892; Zijderveld, 1983: 47–8).

Jocular gripes and the Fair City 'family'

At the time of the case study (2004) *Fair City* was Ireland's longest-running soap opera. Nevertheless, it only offered part-time employment to most of its cast. Actors playing non-core characters faced regular periods of unemployment with no guarantee of a renewed contract. Despite their precarious employment actors saw themselves as part of a tight-knit group on set. A stage manager described the show's 'happy family' atmosphere, which persisted despite its ever-changing family members. There was a sense of fun between the actors, floor and stage managers, and the crew. No one hesitated to recognize a job well done and cast and crew regularly praised each other for good work. However, while the cast were friendly to each other they generally were not friends. Actors did not tend to create informal groupings outside of work. The stage manager who described the show as a 'family' also mentioned that there was no real external social life. Like acquaintances who only met through a sports or social club, the cast displayed an attachment to each other that was warm and convivial but confined to a single setting.

Bonds among the cast were manifested largely through humour that provided a unifying and affective but ultimately shallow means of relating to each other. Ironically, much of the fun, camaraderie and team spirit demonstrated among the cast was manifested through taking a dim view of the show itself. For example, the cast frequently made fun

of the show's mass produced, and often poorly written, dialogue. There were frequent jokes that I had been sent by the United Nations to report on the terrible food, pay and conditions that the cast were enduring. An actor, who had just joined the show at the time of the research, joked that he was 'new and still had some shred of integrity'. The 'jocular gripes' found on the set served multiple roles. They were a means of having fun, passing time and expressing solidarity. They were part of fabric of the *Fair City* 'family'.

Caldwell (2008) demonstrated 'trade stories' to be a source of industry knowledge and a means of induction for newcomers. They can also be a means of weathering the difficulties of economic and technological flux (Caldwell, 2008: 37). Sometimes apparently insignificant yarns or anecdotes can capture a lot of what it is to live or work in a particular social setting. On the *Fair City* set an actor harked back to the show's early episodes featuring a dog called Snaffles. The dog that 'played' Snaffles had been specially trained. A dog handler would give hand signals off-camera for the dog to perform the appropriate actions. The dog cost IR £100 (€127) per day. This he remarked was nearly more money than some actors were paid at the time. The dog was brought in for a day but was not recorded due to a production delay. It was decided that the dog cost too much for the show to pay for a second day in a row. This resulted in a scene the following day where Snaffles' owner entered his kitchen with the dog on a lead. The dog remained out of camera shot. The character held onto the dog lead and decided that Snaffles looked as though he did not want to come in. The character led Snaffles out into the backyard and closed the door on him. According to this actor, a crew member who tugged on the lead, crawling to keep out of shot, had replaced the dog. Whether this is true or not is irrelevant. Such comic stories can express workers' experience and their perceptions of what is typical in an organization (see Fincham and Rhodes, 1994: 410). Snaffles' low-cost replacement comically reflected the cast's view of a show that was produced on a shoestring budget. Yarns like this created solidarity. They also conveyed a sense of how the production operated and what one could expect when working on it.

Managing disappointment and contradiction

Jocular gripes and self-deprecating humour can also serve as a means of managing disappointment or perceived stigma. In *Fair City*'s production, it could be seen as an attempt by the cast, most of whom aspired to artistic expression beyond soap opera, to distance themselves from their existing low-prestige positions. Goffman identified roles placing an individual in an 'occupational setting he feels is beneath him' as a source of 'role distance' (2009: 106). 'Sullenness, muttering, irony, joking and sarcasm' may all be employed in such roles to 'allow one to show that something of himself lies outside the constraints of a role that is contrary to expectations, aspirations or self-image' (2009: 107). Cohen and Taylor (1976) similarly saw jokes, mockery, irony and sarcasm as means of distancing ourselves from routinized, predictable and boring parts of life. Through such devices 'the world is put in its place, held apart from ourselves and inspected with varying degrees of dislike and reserve' (1976: 34). For Linstead, this humour acts as a 'simple mitigation of failure'. It is 'a redemption of unpleasant situations; a means of establishing harmony in the face of loss; and generally a means of coping with defeat' (1985: 745). Like the 'jocular gripe', self-deprecating humour can

also be a powerful means of developing group solidarity and cohesion. Zijdeveld argues that, while it may be a product of a dominated social position, it does not signal an 'instability of identity' (1983: 51). It may rather serve to consolidate, energize and embolden a group (Zijdeveld, 1983: 47–8). Grindstaff also observed self-deprecating humour among talk show producers who made fun of their genre and their guests (2002: 85). Grindstaff admits that, while she worked as a talk show intern, she laughed at potential guests in a manner that could be seen as 'callous or cruel'. At the time, however, she saw it as the 'only way to stay sane and carry on with the work' (2002: 138). Humour can bind work groups while also serving as a means of coping with workplace pressures. Some commentators have gone further, arguing that humour may be a potent means of resisting workplace norms, structures and regulations.

Tiny revolutions or fantasies of resistance?

Several researchers have identified organizational humour as a site of resistance. Collinson, for example, found it to be regularly linked to 'particular manifestations of resistance and sabotage' (1988: 183). Holmes revealed office workers' use of 'contestive humour' in attempts to subvert workplace conventions (2000: 175). Lesley Griffiths argued that 'jokes often involve a confrontation with the dominant social pattern, and can disrupt that pattern by giving voice to its inconsistencies and irrationalities' (1998: 892). Here Griffiths echoes the seminal work of Mary Douglas, who argued that joking intrinsically rebels against established power through the juxtaposition of systems of meaning (1968: 365). Thus, humour occurs where alternative, resistive or forbidden ways of framing reality are briefly given rein in a social situation. As such, joking may be used to build and consolidate cultures of resistance within organizations (see Collinson, 1988: 184; Holmes, 2000: 179; Sanders, 2004: 283).

Humorous resistance may be most potent when it attacks dominant organizational definitions, and frames of meaning (see Holmes, 2000: 177; Linstead, 1985). Griffiths revealed joking to be a 'strategy used by rank-and-file team members to resist or attenuate instructions coming from powerful professionals' (1998: 874). Workers aimed to subvert power through attempts at 'frame shifting' (1998: 882). That is, they would try to subvert dominant definitions by offering an alternative framing of the situation through humour. Using such a strategy, for example, the gravity of a college exam board might be disrupted by a brief impersonation of an auctioneer. Humour can also be used to 'frame shift' by simply turning a serious discussion into an occasion for mirth. As Linstead pointed out humorous content can be 'transposed and defined as serious' but equally 'real-world content' can be transposed into the 'humorous frame' where it may be defined as 'humorous in an indelible and irreversible way' (1985: 763). Thus humour may diffuse and defuse serious situations.

Joking also offers a relatively safe means of resistance. It can be difficult for a manager to challenge a joke without a loss of face. Holmes found that 'humour permits the subordinate to embed the challenge, criticism or insult in a socially acceptable form, which make the negative communicative intent less easy to challenge' (2000: 179). An issue raised in jest makes it difficult for a superior to retaliate without appearing spiteful or unsporting (Holmes, 2000: 178). Humour offers a relatively low-risk means of

voicing criticism and objection in an environment like television production where a trenchant stance or angry objection is likely to damage one's work, reputation and career prospects. However, it is not risk free.

The ultimate prize in using humour as a form of resistance would be to have a lasting 'frame shift' where positions aired through humour become part of serious discourse. Such a 'transposition', however, can only be achieved through negotiation with dominant definitions of the work situation. Emerson (1973) described how doctors and patients would occasionally attempt to overcome institutional conversational taboos that 'assist the staff in concentrating on technical matters and avoiding the human, emotional side of the patient'. One means of pursuing 'deviant discussions' was to 'negotiate' the suspension of institutional norms by transposing a taboo topic from a joke into serious conversation (Emerson, 1973: 270). Such transposition, however, was the product of risky negotiation. It required the use of humour as a means of probing what was acceptable. In the workplace such trials have their dangers. As Griffiths observed, the 'balance between humorous and serious dissent is a fine one, and humour clearly carries risks' (1998: 892).

Negotiations about humor, then, may be regarded as bargaining to make unofficial arrangements about taboo topics. Two main issues pervade such negotiations. How much licence may be taken under the guise of humor? While it is understood that persons have some leeway in joking about topics which they could not introduce in serious discourse, the line between acceptable and unacceptable content is ambiguous. So it must be negotiated in each particular exchange. Anyone making a joke cannot be sure that the other will find his move acceptable and anyone listening to a joke may find he is offended. (Emerson, 1973: 270)

Emerson argues that when parties do successfully negotiate such an agreement they 'they establish a presumption of trust'. Through the transposition from the humorous and the playful to the serious, trust can be expected in routine matters but, more importantly, a shared complicity for 'rule violations' may be extended to the extent that this may 'encourage the formation of subgroups where an independent culture, subversive to the general culture flourishes' (Emerson, 1973: 280). As Emerson suggests, joking can be 'transposed' from the light-hearted and the ephemeral to the realm of the serious and the consequential. Following Douglas's conception of humour as a clash of meanings, spontaneous workplace jokes can be understood as moments where the meaning of a situation is left temporarily open to at least two possible readings. Moreover, the frames used to make sense of the workplace, its hierarchies and its culture are similarly temporarily put in flux. Spontaneous workplace jokes are fleeting semiotic upheavals. Transposition, and real resistance, may occur where the upheavals originating in humour persist in serious discourse and become part of a shared understanding.

Impotent resistance in the production of *Fair City*

On the set of *Fair City* humour was used to symbolically resist structures and routines put in place by the programme's producer. The cast and crew, for example, objected to a weekly 'production run' where every scene for the week was read through on set, in

broadcast order. The producer, editor and writers used this to oversee, control and standardize the week's production. The production run meant that the entire cast, crew and production team had to walk, in a snaking line, from set to set for an entire morning. Despite its importance to the production team, the crew thought it tedious and anachronistic. A stage manager nicknamed it the 'Benny Hill run'.³ At one production run, a sound operator made sheep-like noises as the group trailed between sets. The crew's humour attempted to frame the production run as a valueless, repetitive waste of their time. There was, however, no 'frame-shift' for the programme's management. The pace of production effectively barred procedural objections from the cast and crew. 'Slagging' the production run allowed the crew to announce their disagreement without damaging their standing as 'good' workers.

Holmes described humour as a 'powerful device for subtly signalling incipient rebellion in the ranks, or at least for encoding rebelliousness in a sufficiently indirect form to evade censure' (2000: 175; see also Griffiths, 1998: 875; Linstead, 1985: 743). This may be so but such deeply encoded resistance appears to be largely inconsequential. In theory, workplace humour can lead to organizational change. Unfortunately, this view of humour as a means of resistance appears to be unduly optimistic. In cultural and creative industries, workplace humour is more likely to act as a means of coping with workplace pressures. It is also more likely to serve as a managerial tool rather than a means of challenging deteriorating working conditions. In television production, humour appears to better serve the interests of managers rather than those of cast and crew.

Joking down

Holmes (2000) identified humour as a potential form of 'repressive discourse'. She writes that 'in an era when informality is valued, and there is a general trend towards democratization, and a reduction of emphasis on power differences' humour offers managers the opportunity to "do power" less explicitly (Holmes, 2000: 165). Humour acts as a repressive discourse where its 'intent is controlling or coercive'.

Repressive discourse disguises the coercive intent underlying an utterance, or fudges the power relationship involved. So while it is fundamentally based on a power imbalance, repressive discourse tends to distract attention from issues of power. It often functions to gain willing compliance, retain goodwill, promote social cohesion and, at least superficially, to reduce asymmetry. Humour is one means of realizing repressive discourse. (Holmes, 2000: 165)

While humour as a management technique can be found in all sectors, it is particularly relevant to television production, where informal relations, a positive emotional tone and the absence of overt conflict are paramount.

In managing media work, humour can be harnessed to decrease perceived social distance (see Coser, 1959: 172). As Holmes saw it 'in power-differentiated contexts, humour can be regarded as a discourse strategy which disguises oppression – a device to sugar the pill' (2000: 172). Collinson described 'joking down' as a 'pacificatory' device (1988: 182). Indeed, Dwyer (1991: 5) found managers more likely to use workplace humour than subordinates. Humour can function as a 'kind of legitimating force, strengthening

the authoritative quality of power' acting as a 'bridge between the powerful and the subordinate' (Zijderveld, 1983: 55). By joking among subordinates a manager may provide workers with a sense of 'belonging to the family' or may appear to 'identify with the troops' (Dwyer, 1991: 5).⁴

Holmes found that humour was used to hedge and soften managerial criticism. Critical comments were often 'attenuated' through humour, thus reflecting 'the speaker's awareness of the addressee's positive face needs – the need to have their wants acknowledged, and their values respected and shared'. Thus, humour offered a 'very useful strategy for softening criticisms in contexts where work is being regularly evaluated and assessed' (Holmes, 2000: 172). This is central to the management of emotional labour, where a perceived attack on a worker's reputation or self-esteem would be counterproductive.

Managers often work at the intersections between hierarchically separate groups. Mixing groups that are normally held apart can be an uncomfortable experience. Since we generally perform our various social roles for particular groups, occupying multiple groups at the same time can undermine our role playing. Tom Burns, however, argued that it is the 'characteristic double understanding of the joking relationship that permits the maintenance of two status positions through the same unit of social action, through performance in the same "role"' (1953: 655). Joking behaviour can allow membership and role performance across two groups at the same time. For Burns, this is clearest in banter where people 'play at being hostile, distant, unfriendly, while intimating friendliness' (1953: 655). Banter occurs 'when two roles are presented to an individual' who 'decides to retain the status appropriate to both, while, as he must, acting out the role of only one' (1953: 655). According to Burns 'in every case, the relationship with the group dominant at the occasion of interaction is retained'. It is the less powerful relationship 'which bears the episode of banter' being 'of less social significance at the time but nevertheless requiring safeguard for the future' (1953: 655).

the friendly ridicule of banter is an act of overt exclusiveness which, by sharing the joke with the excluded 'victim', includes him in a special relationship with the actor. The effect is to maintain undamaged the status pattern – the nexus of memberships – pertaining to an individual. (Burns, 1953: 657)

In television production, banter, as a particular form of 'joking down', can allow managers to work across status divides in an approachable and personable manner.

Jokes and motivational management on *Fair City*

On the set of *Fair City*, the floor managers exemplified the use of humour as a management tool. The floor manager in charge of a week's shoot oversaw production and relayed messages from the director to the studio floor. Beyond this, however, he had a more delicate and subtle role. It was necessary to balance efficiently shooting the show with maintaining a light-hearted and supportive atmosphere on the set. In achieving this floor managers displayed a peculiar set of interpersonal skills. Technical crew were different from actors, and actors were quite different from writers. The floor manager had to be able to communicate and get on personally with all of them. He had to be able to

mould himself and his conversation to suit the people around him. This ability to fit in with the diverse personalities and social types involved in making the programme was an essential part of a floor manager's job. A director explained that a floor manager's job was to re-interpret the director's orders in a manner that did not disrupt the ostensibly easy-going but very efficient working of the set. One floor manager, discussing workplace strategies, remarked that he would often share a joke with camera or sound operators. This, he said, was a routine that was often used to defuse tension and to maintain a pleasant working atmosphere. He remarked that part of his role was to protect actors' egos from time to time.

The floor manager was central to maintaining the emotional tone necessary for efficient production. The strategies employed here mirror those mentioned by Hochschild in the maintenance of 'emotional tone' among flight attendants. Attendants had to work closely with others on the crew, commonly saying that 'the work simply cannot be done well unless they work well together'. Hochschild writes that the 'reason for this is that the job is partly an "emotional tone" road show, and the proper tone is kept up in large part by friendly conversation, banter, and joking ...'.

Indeed, starting with the bus ride to the plane, by bantering back and forth the flight attendant does important relational work: she checks on people's moods, relaxes tensions, and warms up ties so that each pair of individuals becomes a team. She also banters to keep herself in the right frame of mind. (Hochschild, 1983: 115)

The floor manager was almost as much of an actor as any of the cast. He needed not only to feign good humour but also to conceal anger and discontent to prevent the disruption of production. The use of humour to blur management power delivered efficiency while preserving a sense of autonomy and a positive emotional atmosphere among the cast and crew.

Feeble resistance and consensus

As discussed above, while workers may attempt to resist through humour it is a weak means of challenging authority. It may be 'more a ritual statement of complaint than an indication of real opposition' (Griffiths, 1998: 892). Humour that is apparently resistive may unintentionally act to reinforce the structures it attacks. Ursell viewed media workers' organization of their labour markets through networks as a gift to employers. The jocular gripes, self-deprecation, slugging and banter of media workers may also be a gift that facilitates an efficient, non-confrontational and self-regulating working environment. Coser wrote that that 'jocular gripes' ultimately helped to 'shape the behaviour of patients according to the expectations of doctors and nurses'. They were an 'integrating element' between patients and the medical establishment where 'the patients themselves, by teaching and helping each other to suppress complaints through laughter, help to enforce the norms of the hospital community' (1959: 180). Similarly, the petty resistances and coping devices of media workers may only serve as a means of adjusting to, and reinforcing, workplace norms.

Hatch and Ehrlich (1993) argued that humour could help workers to cope with contradictions. At the same time, however, it may act as a conservative force by defusing the negative consequences of such contradictions:

humour may allow for the enjoyment of paradox and ambiguity, thus helping organizations to retain these conditions by removing them from the domain of serious discourse. If this is the case, humour offers individuals the freedom to confront contradiction, incongruity and incoherence ... without feeling the need to overcome or alter it (Hatch and Ehrlich, 1993: 524)

The fundamental short-coming of humour as a means of organizational change becomes apparent if we consider Douglas's distinction between the 'joke' and the 'abomination'. Dwyer commented that in Douglas's view 'humor has no "essence," it only has cultural compatibility or it does not. At one point in time, certain types of jokes may be regarded as appropriate by a milieu and at another time not so' (Dwyer, 1991: 3). Douglas classifies attempted jokes, which are not only incompatible with, but are actually contrary to, social structure, as abominations.

Abomination is an act or event which contradicts the basic categories of experience and in doing so threatens both the order of reason and the order of society. A joke does nothing of the sort. It represents a temporary suspension of the social structure, or rather it makes a little disturbance in which the particular structuring of society becomes less relevant than another. But the strength of its attack is entirely restricted by the consensus on which it depends for recognition. (1968: 372)

Humour may mock and undermine dominant norms but ultimately it depends upon, and is accepted as part of, social consensus. The person who utters an abomination cannot be tolerated while the joker on the other hand faces little danger since 'he merely expresses consensus'. He is 'safe within the permitted range of attack, he lightens for everyone the oppressiveness of social reality, demonstrates its arbitrariness by making light of formality in general, and expresses the creative possibilities of the situation' (Douglas, 1968: 372).

Linstead acknowledged the shortcomings of humour as a means of resistance and organizational change. However, he was not prepared to dismiss it entirely. He commented that 'to view humour as completely subversive fails to account for its apparent incapacity to change organizations or social institutions, to dismiss it as a mere frivolity underestimates its enormous symbolic power' (1985: 762). He acknowledged that humour feeds upon consensus and the shared meanings that it ostensibly mocks. Unlike other commentators he also recognized that the transformative potential of humour is limited by material circumstances.

While transposition from the comic to the serious, from one frame of meaning to another, may be possible through humour, such transpositions are shaped by structures of power. Linstead made clear that humour 'may momentarily demystify the social order, but against the forces of myth and cliché promoting unreflective inertia, sustained challenge requires enormous creativity and energy to be exerted' (1985: 762). Attempted transpositions are an uphill battle because they are not negotiated from 'an equal *material basis*'.

Not only does habit and inertia favour the dominant status quo, but interests, power and capital also lend the advantage to dominant-hegemonic formulations. This does have considerable influence on what may be defined as humorous and serious, without being absolutely determining. (Linstead, 1985: 763)

What is seen to be a joke and what is rejected as an abomination is a product of social consensus. It is also a product of power. Humour may emerge, or fall flat, in clashes between competing definitions of the workplace. As Dwyer pointed out, organizational humour is always tied to changes in organizational power (1991: 2). It is this connection to occupational culture that marks out humour as a valuable focus in production research.

Conclusion

At the heart of humour is consensus. It ‘emphasizes common ground and shared norms’ (Holmes, 2000: 167). Tom Burns discusses consensus shedding any ‘connotation of empathy, of emotional rapport’ simply referring to ‘agreement on the terms of which interaction takes place’. He defines consensus as ‘the tacit delineation of mutually accepted norms of behaviour’ (1953: 654). Pointedly, he comments that ‘in all societies, the joke is the short cut to consensus’ (1953: 657). We need to pay attention to workplace humour in production research because it reveals consensus. Workplace humour is typically spontaneous rather than consisting of ‘canned jokes’. Spontaneity offers researchers the opportunity to tap into aspects of organizational culture that may otherwise go unseen. As Burns argues, spontaneity arises from a shared and deeply ingrained cultural consensus.

Spontaneity in interaction springs from a consensus so comprehensive that the behaviour possible in the circumstances is no less than what each socialized individual would condone or approve in himself. Thus spontaneous interaction is determined by the existence of a consensus applying to all norms of social behaviour of the system into which the individuals concerned have been socialized. (Burns, 1953: 661)

As Fry observed ‘it is impossible to be simply spontaneous and simply thoughtful at the same time. These two states are mutually exclusive’ (2010: 5). Spontaneity signals a lack of conscious deliberation. Moreover, it suggests the presence of a strong cultural consensus. Echoing Fry, Burns distinguishes between spontaneous and ‘cliché’, or more rule-bound, behaviour. For Burns, ‘differences in the social behaviour of a person can be regarded as differences in the number as well as the kind of norms involved in the situation’. ‘Cliché’, formal or rule-bound ‘behaviour involves fewest norms and thus requires ‘little consensus’. Spontaneity, on the other hand, requires ‘maximum consensus’ (Burns, 1953: 661–2).⁵

For Bourdieu, humour and spontaneity are creatively but inextricably bound up with a group’s habitus.

If witticisms strike as much by their unpredictability as by their retrospective necessity, the reason is that the *trouvaille* that brings to light long-buried resources presupposes a habitus that so perfectly possesses the objectively available means of expression that it is possessed by

them, so much so that it asserts its freedom from them by realising the rarest of the possibilities that they necessarily imply. (Bourdieu, 1990: 57)

When making a joke one not only expresses the group's consensus but also one's own mastery of its cultural resources. Making a joke is a mark of a certain type of confidence. To risk 'slagging off' a colleague, or making a comical remark, one must be quite sure that it is unlikely to be received as an 'abomination'. This knowledge, and confidence, depends on a stable identity within a group. It also depends on the basic level of respect that group membership affords, and the knowledge that one has this respect. Everyday workplace humour is a product of culture, identity and power. Yet, to date, it has been largely overlooked by research on cultural production.

This article offers a general outline of the potential roles that humour may play in television production. The roles identified here, solidarity, coping, resistance and control all emerged from earlier research on *Fair City*, an Irish soap opera. Humour turned out to be an important source of insight into the show's production. However, as stated at the outset, this only emerged in retrospect. The research was not sensitized to the use of humour as a way in to the programme's culture and hidden conflicts. This article attempts to make the case for the inclusion of humour as a 'sensitizing concept' for future research on media production.

By way of example, a possible shortcoming in the initial case study might have been remedied by the inclusion of humour in the research design. The general discussion of workplace humour presented here has not explicitly considered the relationship between gender and humour. Gender, as a product, and producer, of power and identity, is intrinsically linked to humour (Johnston et al., 2006; Kotthoff, 2006). However, relationships between gender and joking behaviour are also shaped, for example, by age, occupational position, national culture and so on (see Holmes, 2000: 175; Sykes, 1966: 192). In any organization the relationship between humour and gender is likely to be shaped by several overlapping forms of identity and power (see Johnston et al., 2006: 124). A general discussion here would be unhelpful in clarifying these relationships. Future research could perhaps explore these relationships on an ad hoc basis to reveal the specificities of humour, gender and other structures of power in particular media work environments. In the *Fair City* study, soap opera writing emerged as clearly gendered work. Typically, women performed this team-based, production line writing. This reflected international gender hierarchies in drama production (MacMurrough-Kavanagh, 1999). There was, with the benefit of hindsight, an opportunity here to further understand gender as an aspect of power and identity in the production (for successful examples see Kenny and Euchler, 2007; Nixon and Crewe, 2004). The original study overlooked humour as a way in to this, and other, hidden aspects of the programme's culture. An initial awareness of humour as a marker of identity, culture and power might have avoided such oversights.

Notes

1. Hochschild differentiates between 'emotional labour' and 'emotional management'. Emotional labour describes the control of emotions where that control itself constitutes a commodity. This is particularly relevant in service industries such as air travel. It can also be an important part of creating the required emotional tone on a television set (see Grindstaff, 2002). Emotional

- management, however, describes the everyday non-commodified control of emotion (see Hochschild, 1983: 7).
2. The show depended heavily on the soap opera formula of limited sets, emotional themes and standardized storylines that orbited around the personal rather than the social. This reliance on tried and trusted soap opera convention was due to a lack of funding and an accompanying lack of appetite for risk. Large audiences had to be attracted regularly and reliably. This was achieved through a highly rationalized model of production which produced four episodes per week but which greatly curtailed the autonomy of actors and writers (Brennan, 2004).
 3. *The Benny Hill Show* was a BBC comedy series (1955–68). The comment here is an allusion to its end credits sequence, which always featured a chase scene with characters pursuing each other in single file.
 4. Of course, management humour is not always a success and can actually create antagonism and resentment. Collinson's study found that managerial humour which intended to 'reduce conflict and emphasize organizational harmony, had the opposite effect of merely reinforcing the polarization between management and the shop floor' (1988: 187).
 5. Rather than proposing a dichotomy Burns sees this as a description of 'two extremes' (1953: 661–2).

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