Humor can reduce stress and build bonds, as well as spread lies and breed cynicism

**Jokes about politics: The good, the bad and the ugly**

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This essay is about the psychology of sociopolitical humor. First, let me assure you that writing or reading about humor does not kill the fun, although you may not laugh out loud. By humor, I mean a joke or a funny communication with a social purpose clear to the audience – to provoke laughter and provide amusement.

Humor can be communicated in written, oral or visual forms. Social media is a photograph with the original image deliberately altered to elicit humor. In Facebook posts and chats on mobile applications like WhatsApp, friends often share jokes that are sociopolitical in nature, often not knowing who created the humorous item or intended its transmission to cyberspace. Marketing professionals examine how humor can influence consumer behavior. In advertising, humor is a serious business. In contrast, politicians, political analysts and social scientists have not given humor the attention it deserves, especially with regard to the sharing of sociopolitical humor in social media.

Sociopolitical jokes can influence us in ways beyond having a good laugh.

**Humor and health**

Political figures are often the butt of jokes in sociopolitical humor, with such humor most common in times of elections and political scandals or sagas.

Sociopolitical jokes circulated on social media are frequently irrelevant and sometimes reflect ignorance. But those that centre on issues that are emotive, unpleasant or confusing are often widely popular. That is because this humor provides comic relief that temporarily defuses the tension felt by the audience, by anger, anxiety or ambivalence. Research has shown that humor is sometimes associated with subsequent decrease in stress, and this occurs through two pathways.

The first pathway is neuro-physiological. When we laugh and enjoy humor, our nervous system relaxes and our brain releases hormones known as endorphins. This biochemical mechanism helps to regulate emotions and reduce pain, increasing physical and emotional well-being.

The other pathway is sociopolitical. Joking brings people closer together, forges better relationships and increases social support from each other. It also helps us reframe a stressful situation by seeing things from new perspectives.

But these positive effects on physical, emotional and social health occur only when the joke is acceptable. When we find jokes offensive or feel humiliated by them, it is harder for humor to work. We feel upset and may even become aggressive.

Also, some purported health effects of humor are highly exaggerated. There is no sound scientific evidence for claims that humor can cure any disease or other serious medical conditions. It is a false hope to replace your medical doctor with a laughter therapist.

WHEN HUMOR BECOMES HARM

Research has shown that a sense of humor is an attractive social trait, sometimes ranked as high as good looks and intellect. We like someone with a good sense of humor if we think it reflects social confidence, happiness and a healthy personality.

But individuals who use humor often are not necessarily happy and likeable people. Studies show that individuals who use jokes to ridicule others and put people down are disliked at the workplace. They have poor social relationships, and they tend to have lower well-being.

Of course, many jokes among colleagues or friends taking aim at work or political figures are harmless. They may even be downright hilarious with a positive binding effect for those who get the humor. But there are situations when sociopolitical humor produces negative effects, and these are not necessarily about the impact on individual physical and mental health.

There are obvious ways that sociopolitical humor can cause harm. For example, a joke may contain a claim that threatens or undermines the reputation of the person targeted. Such a claim can be legally defamatory, even when communicated as a joke in the context of an satirical meme. Jokes that result from prejudices or purportedly humorous statements that are highly injudicious, offensive or racist can result in disintegration, disharmony, distrust and even violence. Jokes that are for the sake of logic or humor can result in or cause serious damage in crisis situations.

But besides these more obvious situations how jokes can go wrong, there is a potential silent effect that has not received sufficient attention.

SLEEPER EFFECT

Sociopolitical humor in social media overemphasizes the issues that it targets. But it is rare to criticize the simplistic depiction. The simplification is psychologically acceptable to the audience, since a joke is meant to amuse rather than provide an intellectual analysis. And if anyone in a chat group tries to disagree with the message in the joke or point out its fallacy, he is likely to be deduced as lacking a sense of humor. That is quite a deterrent.

Jokes go viral because they are funny to those propagating them and funny to those consuming them with our friends. They are socially acceptable criticisms. But besides being a healthy mechanism, it can result in disinformation and the spread of lies.

Humor in social media, whether in the form of memes, is often characterized by a sociopolitical message. The message is a particular viewpoint, or and one selected aspect of an issue that is in fact multifaceted. We are drawn into a particular position in an all-or-nothing way, and in the context of an informal social interaction where there is no expectation to formulate any argument to support the position. The net effect of all these can be surprisingly uniter. Adverse impact can occur in insidious ways. One way is through a powerful psychological phenomenon known as the sleeper effect. It is so-called because it refers to when we remember a message but not its source, and a message becomes more persuasive over time even though the source was not highly trusted. This is how it works. The sociopolitical message associated with a humor item was not taken seriously when it was first received. After all, it was part of a joke. But over time, through widespread sharing and repeated exposure to the underlying message in recurse humor, a cynical position on an issue or a negative view of a target public figure becomes rooted in public consciousness.

The propagated positions and views in the message become socially as an acceptable criticism because they are perceived as widely held beliefs. We freely share them with our friends. They are salient and readily available for people to use to explain political events and actions, especially controversial and complex ones.

The remarkable thing about the sleeper effect is that we believe a message from a source that we had not considered trustworthy. That is possible because we remember the message but we forgot the source. If you find this hard to believe, see if you find this experience familiar. You and your friends were joking when you recalled a story or an allegation about a public figure that someone had told you, but you did not remember who told you, when and where.

In short, the overuse and overproduction of institutionalized humor not only reduces the quality of political discourse but also results in the creation of a false, limited and unbalanced discourse.

**HANDLING HUMOR**

How then do we handle humor? Humor can be useful but it is harm-less, and it can even be harmful. Funniness is a social construct, and it can become devalued or even offensive to certain groups.

Three simple guiding principles can be useful to explain why humor is sometimes dangerous. First, jokes can be sociopolitical messages. First, humor but do not take it seriously. Second, humor can be offensive or even offensive to certain groups.

As for politicians, analysts and social scientists, at a meeting with taking time to re-examine a subsequent decrease in stress, and it broadens our perspectives. We all have little or no humor, we can never be too sensitive to the feelings of others, especially when it involves hurt feelings. One way is through a powerful psychological phenomenon known as the sleeper effect. It is so-called because it refers to how we remember a message but not its source, and a message becomes more persuasive over time even though the source was not highly trusted. This is how it works. The sociopolitical message associated with a humor item was not taken seriously when it was first received. After all, it was part of a joke. But over time, through widespread sharing and repeated exposure to the underlying message in recurse humor, a cynical position on an issue or a negative view of a target public figure becomes rooted in public consciousness.

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