

Cancel Culture's Impact on Comedians in 21st Century Britain: Case Analyses

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Introduction and methodology

Comedy and political correctness have always been inextricably linked, one constantly pushing the other to new fringes, both constantly pruning each other. But is the purpose of comedy to push back against any kind of speech regulation, and if not, should it be? And to what extent? Or is comedy merely adapting to the oscillations political correctness, and more particularly its current form, cancel culture, constantly undergoes without any intent to *respond* to it? Equally, what can be said of the attitude PC (political correctness) has towards comedy, a relation which under many circumstances might be construed as the ultimate arena where PC must face its eternal nemesis: comedy?

To what extent has comedy forced – or is still forcing – political correctness to push back against comedy’s steadfast growth and ubiquity? To what end? And to what consequences? These are some of the questions this thesis will tackle, or at any rate raise, with a particular focus on contemporary British comedy. Meanwhile, the two final chapters of this thesis will be less concerned with the philosophical aspects of this inextricable relation which binds PC and comedy together, but will rather delve into the limitations PC imposes on comedy, and what those limitations mean for British comedians.¹

The topics and cases expounded and examined in this thesis will more often than not go beyond comedy, taking detours mostly in the socio-political sphere. Though not the prime focus of this work, this broadening of the ground covered across its sections is inevitable for at least two reasons. First, comedy has always had an intrinsic political nature – which can easily be observed in most contemporary stand-up shows² as well as in the writings of the ancient Athens playwright Aristophanes “the comic genius of political criticism”, who humorously tackled subjects such as social status, war and power.³ Then, the inevitability for societal and political matters to be at the very least touched on in a thesis that focuses on

¹ By contemporary British comedy, I mean not to solely include people with United Kingdom citizenship who regularly perform comedy on UK soil. I also do not mean “the British comedy”, in the sense of the satirical or slapstick genre of comedy which respectively came to be known in the 18th and 19th century. Instead, “British comedy” is here meant in a broader and looser sense, which might in fact almost have been replaced by “Anglophone comedy with a focus on British comedians” or “comedy in the British culture”. It should also be pointed out that Irish comedy and Irish comedians, despite their being merely mentioned in this thesis, are also subsumed in this thesis under the phrases “British comedy” and “British comedians”.

² It should be underscored that not all comedians base their material on socio-political topics. Even though it can be affirmed that comedians more than others will indulge in “news” comedy (Geoff Norcott and Ricky Gervais being good examples). There are also comedians who will purposefully choose to avoid any political topics, out of professional prudence or because it simply does not fit their comedy style, which may rely more on slapstick comedy, as used to be Benny Hill’s case, for instance.

³ C. Schutz, *Political humor: From Aristophanes to Sam Ervin*, 1st ed, Rutherford, Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1977, p. 10.

comedy can also be explained by the consistency with which all kinds of news outlets feed on comedy. Just as journalists and newspapers can sometimes focus on arts like music and cinema, there is a particular value for journalists in comedy due to the hot-button, zeitgeisty topics comedians so often tackle. Therefore, comedy arguably tends to influence both social and political discourse thanks to the voice news outlets grant it – a theory that will be further discussed in throughout this thesis.

First, what the word “comedy” encompasses in the context of this work must be defined. I do not mean this question in the philosophical sense which would have led me to questions such as “What is comedy?” or “Is something which does not make anyone laugh still comedy?”. Instead, I mean it in the sense of: “What are the contexts in which comedy can traditionally be found might be relevant to the topic at hand?”. For instance, ought stand-up comedy, one of the most direct form of comedy, to be on a par with Shakespeare’s *Comedy of Errors*? Conversely, should only “professional comedians”, whoever this category actually encompasses, be considered in this work, or should even the most coincidental quip, such as that made by a nameless passer-by vaguely uttered during a documentary on tapestry, still be considered? Indeed, many movies and shows – if not most – include at least one piece of content which might be construed as comical or as a “bit of comedy”. In this particular case, should anything that has a comical essence, down to an isolated joke in an otherwise sad or harsh movie, still be relevant to the questions this thesis aims to enquire? The more time I spent reflecting on that issue, the more it became clear to me that two pathways stood before me: to go with a clearly-defined and categorical definition of comedy, i.e., stand-up comedy, shows, movies, etc, which all denote an ostensible and prominent comical nature, or to go with a looser, broader definition of comedy, i.e., anything to which a comical essence might be ascribed, in other words any utterance, gag, image or any other practice in which a will to make people laugh might be identified, regardless of its parent. Because this thesis does not seek to undertake an analysis of one particular aspect of comedy but rather its relation with political correctness and cancel culture, I chose to go with the latter pathway, namely the looser definition.

This decision came at a cost. The looser the target, the less accurate the results. However, this thesis’ main goal is indeed to get a clearer sense of the extent to which comedy in Britain can be performed freely in order to clear the air around all of current debate around the legitimacy, when not around the very existence, of the so-called cancel culture. In other words, this thesis means to enquire whether or not comedians living on the British Isles today are not as free to do comedy as they would have been in the past, or at any rate as they would want to be today.

The structure of this thesis can be laid out in three parts. The *raison d'être* of this three-pronged approach is to provide the reader with a fuller understanding of the topic, although this could have admittedly been done in a number of different ways. Still, the methodology used begins with a cursory account of what is comedy: from the examination of the roots of its evolutionary purpose followed by an overview of how comedy evolved in its modern form which we know today. Additionally, this account will also include a more thorough account of what constitutes British comedy in our day and age. Then, a subsection will be dedicated to a study of political correctness and cancel culture in the sphere of comedy, looking at both the “woke” and “cancel” culture movements along with some of the major changes they bring about.

The second prong of this thesis will focus on the interpretations and reactions of relevant figures, e.g., comedians themselves, comedy pundits, various academics as well as pop culture experts. The goal of this second section is to provide a clearer view of how cancel culture really impacts comedy, section in which different modern theories will be discussed. This second section will also aim at establishing what impacts is cancel culture exerting on contemporary comedian's careers and lives, along with providing a better understanding of how comedy is (re)shaping political correctness and vice versa.

Finally, the third and final prong of the methodology will delve into the core of the relationship between comedy and cancel culture with an analysis of carefully chosen contemporary cases highlighting frictional places where comedy and political correct meet. This analysis will seek to lay down the key facts of nine separate cases in which comedians or pieces of comedy sparked a friction with the aftermaths this friction led to, e.g., a tour or book being cancelled, a social media backlash, or anonymous death threats.

The works this thesis relied on were for the better part online sources such as online newspaper articles, websites, blogs, Facebook posts and tweets. However, a number of books, academic papers and journals were also consulted. The use of critical discourse analysis (CDA) has been applied to those sources when useful to do so.

Comedy and political correctness in Britain: History overview and contextualisation

In order to get a deeper understanding of the questions the thesis aims to inquire, a contextualising summary of the world in which comedy has evolved will be drawn. This will allow for a clearer contrast between the way modern day comedians are limited in their trade and those of earlier times, as well as providing a sense of the societal role comedians have been playing in British society.

Cursory look on the history of comedy

For at least three millennia, philosophers and thinkers alike have been probing, with varying resilience, the mystical-like essence that laughter and comedy seem to share, more often than not seeking a transcending meaning in this intrinsically human feature. From Aristophanes' *Clouds* to modern times comedians like Billy Connolly or Ricky Gervais through the humour of Henry VIII's fool Will Somer, laughing is by no means just another social by-product of one given movement or era.

But what is laughter, exactly? And where does it come from? Multiple theories are on offer. As Joel Warner and Peter McGraw reportedly mention in their book *The Humor Code: A global search for what makes things funny* (2014):

“Plato and Aristotle contemplated the meaning of comedy while laying the foundations of Western philosophy... Charles Darwin looked for the seeds of laughter in the joyful cries of tickled chimpanzees. Sigmund Freud sought the underlying motivations behind jokes in the nooks and crannies of our unconscious.”⁴

As a matter of fact, experts claim that the first signs of laughter can be traced back up to 16 million years ago in great apes, and that it can be observed in humans as early as in the first early months of our lives, even in blind or deaf children.⁵ So, it has been argued that laughter as it is known today might have evolved from interactive actions such as tickling, which triggers this uncontrolled form of breathing which fundamentally is what people do when succumbing to laughter. It is still unclear however, to world-leading evolutionary biologists as

⁴ M. O'Hara, 'How comedy makes us better people', *BBC News*, 30 August 2016, <https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20160829-how-laughter-makes-us-better-people>, (accessed 11 February 2022).

⁵ J. Raine, 'The evolutionary origins of laughter are rooted more in survival than enjoyment', *The Conversation*, 13 April 2016, <https://theconversation.com/the-evolutionary-origins-of-laughter-are-rooted-more-in-survival-than-enjoyment-57750> (accessed 11 February 2022).

well as thinkers from all walks of life, when exactly our species began to acquire the “ability” to laugh. In a not-too-distant past, the psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud tackled this question in his book *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* (1905), attempting to link laughter to deeper parts of the human mind, those same parts which, to him, would also be responsible for our ability to dream which he famously coined “the unconscious”. More precisely, he believed laughter to be a neurological process whereby a relief of repressed emotions, especially sexual and aggressive ones, would occur, a theory he called the Relief Theory.⁶

The philosopher Thomas Hobbes also had his own theory about the role and roots of comedy and laughter, and believed they both were a mean whereby one could exert one’s own superiority and power over others by mocking them, the so-called Superiority Theory.⁷ Others, who may not have dwelled as long as Freud or Hobbes on the subject, theorized that the existence of laughter would be in fact directly and inextricably linked to “human stupidity”.⁸ Finally, the predominant belief around humour and laughter is the Incongruity Theory, a theory held by several great philosophers such as Immanuel Kant, Arthur Schopenhauer, Søren Kierkegaard and James Beattie. Simply put, the Incongruity Theory contends that it is the dissonance between our expectations of a certain reality and reality itself that triggers in us laughter. In other words, the element of surprise would be responsible for laughter.

But when it comes to laughter’s evolutionary roots, some evolutionary biologists posited that laughter would have served us over the millennia to help us reinforce and manifest friendship. This theory argues that individuals laughing together would on the one hand mutually acknowledge their status of friendship and on the other hand would display this particular bond to surrounding individuals, possibly in order to show that an alliance existed between some individuals, should a conflict threaten to arise. Going with this last theory, laughter, comedy’s physiological mainstay, would then have emerged and developed in a deeply social context – an observation which coincides rather well with the role comedy is currently playing in today’s society, as will be demonstrated later in this work.

That comedy itself dates from more recent times than laughter stands as self-evident.

The word “comedy” itself is believed by some historians to be stemming from the Greek verb for “to revel” and would have first been manifested in a wine-worshipping ceremony called

⁶ M. Christoff, B. Dauphin, ‘*Freud’s theory of humor*’, 2017, p.1, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/317386267_Freud's_theory_of_humor, (accessed 11 February 2022).

⁷ J. Morreall, ‘Philosophy of Humor’, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 20 August 2020, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/humor/>, (accessed 11 February 2022).

⁸ S. Bliss, ‘The Origin of Laughter’, *The American Journal of Psychology*, vol. 26, no. 2, 1915, p. 236, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1413253>, (accessed 11 February 2022).

the rites of Dionysus,⁹ the Greek god of vines, around the beginning of the fifth century B.C.¹⁰ In the same era, the Greek philosopher Aristotle left behind evidence that the first true signs of comedy might have arisen under the form of improvisation in what is known as “phallic songs”, another Greek festivity that gravitated around, indeed, phalli, but also around fertility and physical pleasure in general. That being said, details on the evolution of comedy in ancient times are very scarce and difficult to identify, partly because comedy was not something taken very seriously at the time, or at any rate did not enjoy the same social status as did its counterpart, tragedy.

The role of comedians and comedy in British society

Sometimes considered essential to what one would call a “life well lived”, comedy and laughter are ubiquitous in our modern society, possibly more so than ever before. Speaking generally, comedians from all around the world have become masters at making whoever is listening or watching laugh. What is more, the best among them have also become unparalleled experts when it comes to pointing out the elephant in society’s living room.

As indicated earlier, comedy evolved following a different path than its counterpart tragedy, and would mostly stage material of a shallower emotional depth, at the end of which the protagonist(s) usually met a happy ending, which made it appealing to a larger audience. Going back a few centuries, comedy was mostly played by troupes of actors, who would either perform on stage or directly in the street, or by court jesters or fools. Although it can confidently be said that prior to the Enlightenment doing comedy was inevitably a dangerous business, jesters would run a higher risk due to their close contact to powerful (and perhaps more easily offended) characters. Still, jesters and fools alike would still occasionally raise societal and political issues and were sometimes even encouraged to do so. This was particularly true for German court jesters for instance, whose positions, degrading though it may have been even in comparison to British or French fools and jesters, nonetheless allowed them to exert a certain degree of influence on the monarchy.¹¹ It must also be pointed out that social, political and economical issues, usually being one way or another related to the leading class – including kings – inevitably made such topics all the more risky for court jesters to mock.

⁹ B. Näsström, ‘The Rites in the Mysteries of Dionysus: The Birth of the Drama’, *Brewminate*, 25 September 2018, <https://brewminate.com/the-rites-in-the-mysteries-of-dionysus-the-birth-of-the-drama/>, (accessed 29 April 2022).

¹⁰ C. Hoy, ‘comedy’, *Britannica*, <https://www.britannica.com/art/comedy>, (accessed 29 April 2022).

¹¹ S. Ziegler, ‘Fools who speak truth to power’, *University of Rochester*, 27 March 2019, <https://www.rochester.edu/newscenter/court-jesters-the-stephen-colbert-of-18th-century-germany-370312/>, (accessed 29 April 2022).

Henry VIII's fool Will Somer is among the most famous of those early modern comedians. In one instance, Will Somer is known to have joked in front of the King about all of the King's "fraudsters", "conveyers" and "deceivers" (which Somer wittily said instead of saying "auditors, surveyors and receivers), alluding to the fact that the King was being defrauded and lied to, something others in the then Tudor court would not have been so quick to voice by fear of reprimands.¹² Of course, whether or not the humour was considered acceptable by the King or by other aristocrats, which usually boiled down to whether the gag or joke landed or not, was never a given.

Again, it must be emphasised that the risk of offending a nobleman, king or knight or member of the clergy would always loom over jesters, but this was also the case for other types of comedians.¹³ One adaptive strategy to this risk is that employed by the playwright Shakespeare, whose plays mostly addressed the monarchy. In so doing, Shakespeare could (in theory) make sure that his plays would be "aristocracy friendly", thereby lowering the risks of reprimands. Even though the way in which modern comedians fall prey to criticism and censorship does not match the level of danger comedians once faced in times such as the Tudor or Stuart periods, it nonetheless constitutes a first point of comparison with the hurdles comedians are dealing with today.

It is indeed in an atmosphere of satire, farce and romantic comedy (as categorized by Aristotle) that comedy evolved across centuries and became comedy as it is known today. But how has its role changed, if at all? If we look at more recent comedians, what influence, if any, are they exerting on society? What consequences do the new media now available to comedy bring about? In their book *Humour and Laughter, Theory, Research and Applications*, Howard Pollio and John Edgerly describe the (modern) comedian's role as follow:

¹² The King's Fools - Disability in the Tudor Court, *Historic England* [website], <https://historicengland.org.uk/research/inclusive-heritage/disability-history/1485-1660/disability-in-the-tudor-court/>, (accessed 14 February 2022).

¹³ Comedy prior to the 20th century was not the comedy we know today in Britain. Stand-up comedy did not exist before comedians such as Billy Bennett (1887 – 1942) and Edmund Payne (1863 – 1914) partially introduced this genre, though the comedy format was still more akin to musical shows than to that of stand-up comedy. In other words, comedy prior to the 20th century mainly included fools and jesters on the one hand, and comedy in the form of plays on the other hand.

"In the end (...) the comedian, and all of his or her kin - the story teller, the clown, the fool, the comic actor, as well as the naturally occurring witty person - provide a situation which allows all of us a bit of transcendence; a bit of transcendence designed to make sport of those situations, events and taboos that lie heaviest upon us if seen only from an earnest and serious perspective."¹⁴

Meanwhile, in his 1974 play *Comedians*, dramatist Trevor Griffiths has one of his fictional characters, ex-comic Bert Challenor, say the following with regards to the comedian's role:

"The comedian, who to a certain extent cashes in on people's feelings and attitudes to earn his living, can ill afford to neglect or scorn them. He must, on the contrary, very often pander to them."

What we have here are two complementary views on the role of the comedian which both point in the same direction: the relief comedy produces in those on the receiving end. With Pollio and Edgerly's position, the emphasis is on the "transcendence" that comedy and laughter produce by belittling the things in people's daily lives which are yet too heavy and too serious to be laughed about spontaneously. This theory ties back to Freud's Relief Theory, which presents laughter as a mean to alleviate an energy in us for which we could find no other catalyst than laughing it off. To Trevor Griffiths however, the focus is rather on the comedian's capacity to "pander" to his audience's feelings. In other words, it is the comedian's capacity to make his audience laugh about the things they want to laugh about, even if those things are unknown to them, which best defines his role. The way Griffiths really adds to Pollio and Edgerly's position is by raising the fact that the comedian is tributary of his audience, and that he not only can scarcely afford to mock or belittle them, but that he also has to pinpoint what it is that the audience *needs* to laugh about and then to tackle precisely that. Griffiths equally adheres to Pollio and Edgerly's view, affirming the following through another *Comedians* character (Eddie Waters):

"We work through laughter, not for it. (...) It's not the jokes. It's what lies behind [them]. It's the attitude. A real comedian - that's a daring man. He dares to see what his listeners shy away from, fear to express. And what he sees is a sort of truth, about people, about their situation. (...) A joke releases the tension, says the unsayable (...) But a true joke, a comedian's joke, has to do more than release tension, it has to liberate the will and the desire, it has to change the situation"

Expanding on those views and taking for granted that they both hold some truth, I want to argue that that such a role be assumed in today's society will inevitably lead to turmoil and offense. If it is true that what comedians are really trying to do, or at any rate should be trying to do, is pander to people's repressed feeling (to put it in Freud's words) and to have them

¹⁴ H. Pollio and J. Edgerly, 'Comedians and Comic Style. Development of a Hollywood Humorist', in A. Chapman and H. Foot, *'Humour and Laughter: Theory, Research and Applications'*, London, New York, Routledge, 1996, p. 215-244.

foremost laugh about heavy and serious matters, it should then come as no surprise that such attempts would by definition be hit-or-miss when it comes to how well an audience welcomes such jokes. Furthermore, given modern Britain's divided zeitgeist, that comedians joking about earnest topics will garner different types of followers seems inevitable, which then further exacerbates the unrest whenever those jokes are heard by people whose views on those topics differ.

To conclude this subsection will be looked at a third theory on the comedian's role: comedy as a mean to deal with pain. The kind of humour which endorses this role is little talked about in academia, but is sometimes referred to in the popular culture as "sick jokes" or "sick humour". As reported in a 2011 BBC News article titled "Why do people tell sick jokes about tragedies?", British comedy past veteran Barry Cryer declared he had long been "fascinated" by sick humour, and that although people "cracking such [sick] jokes may be children in the playground or saloon-bar braggarts advertising their cynicism, making light of terrible events [could] be an entirely understandable coping strategy."¹⁵ Despite the fact that Cryer's analysis of sick humour paints a rather negative picture of people indulging in this kind of humour, he nonetheless appears to ascribe a utility to it and presents it almost as a psychological, not-quite-conscious mechanism which allows people to combat tragedies.

Still according to the BBC, stand-up comedy expert Dr Oliver Double also endorses this "coping theory". To him, "tackling offensive subjects can be a very effective tool of satire as well as a form of therapy". Conversely, he is also worried that modern media might make it harder for people to be able to tell "well-intentioned satire" from "cheap nihilism", warning against thoughtless indulgence into sick humour. On the medical side, Psychologist Linda Papadopoulos, while conceding that laughing at tragedy can effectively alleviate the pain it causes, also affirms that it might equally be a sign of a society in which desensitization of cruelty is being casualized, thereby partly adhering to Cryer's and Dr Double's take on the utility of sick jokes.

Finally, dealing with tragedy by laughing about it, though perhaps not suitable for everyone, constitutes one of comedian Ricky Gervais's bit in his show *Humanity* (2018), in which he presents it as core to his philosophy of life. In the show, Gervais reminisces of his father's funeral, in which he, along with his brothers, callously twisted the family members' names written in the notes handed to the priest in order to create confusion (and, he claims, amusement) during the ceremony.

Interestingly, out of the four views on sick jokes which were just discussed, only the experts expressed concerns about this type of humour, whereas both Cryer and Gervais appear to

¹⁵ J. Kelly, 'Why do people tell sick jokes about tragedies?', *BBC News*, 18 March 2011, <https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-12775389>, (accessed on 27 February 2022).

be adamant when it comes to laughing off tragedy: “There is absolutely nothing that cannot be joked about.”¹⁶¹⁷

What makes British comedy “British”?

Because the primary focus of this thesis is on British comedy (that is, British comedy as defined earlier), looking into what makes British comedy ‘British’ will help determine what the idiosyncrasies of this type of humour are, as these may influence British comedy’s relation to political correctness. The goal of this subsection will therefore be to establish whether or not the British part of British comedy implies anything other than comedians having British origins. Should this not be the case, the study carried out in this thesis could then be considered to be at least partly relevant to other national types of comedy around the world. No more than partly however, for any given, national style of humour needs to be put in relation with a given culture in order to assess tolerance towards unpolitically correct humour in this culture.

As has been argued by International Political Economy expert James Brasset in his work on British comedy, there arguably exists within British comedy an “elite form of satire, a sense of irony, a dry wit, an affection for pun and, more recently, an interest in the absurd and (a sometimes brutal form of) self-deprecation(...)”,¹⁸ a theory partly supported by a Times article which tackled cancel culture and comedy in modern days.¹⁹ However, Brasset equally recognizes the difficulty of comparing any national sense of humour to that of other countries. In fact, it can be argued that there are few countries, if any, whose “national sense of humour” would not also feature a “sense of irony and dry wit,” for instance. The three other elements which Brasset ascribes to British comedy (namely an elite form of satire, an affection for pun and a penchant for the absurd and self-deprecation), might not be as ubiquitous around the world, however. Regardless of those speculations, it is not obvious that any of these idiosyncrasies might render British comedy more prone to a higher sensitivity to unpolitically correct humour.

¹⁶ R. Gervais, ‘The Difference Between American and British Humour’, *Time*, 9 November 2011, <https://time.com/3720218/difference-between-american-british-humour/>, (accessed 6 March 2022).

¹⁷ M. Moore, ‘I’m Sorry I Haven’t A Clue stalwarts Barry Cryer and Graeme Garden take a breather’, *The Sunday Times*, 16 August 2019, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/im-sorry-i-havent-a-clue-stalwarts-barry-cryer-and-graeme-garden-take-a-breather-gzchj75rf>, (accessed 6 March 2022).

¹⁸ J. Brassett, “British comedy, Global Resistance: Russell Brand, Charlie Brooker and Stewart Lee.”, *Sage Journals*, 8 June 2015, pp. 168–191.

¹⁹ ‘The Times view on comedy in the age of cancel culture: Having a Laugh’, *The Times*, 22 December 2021, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/the-times-view-on-comedy-in-the-age-of-cancel-culture-having-a-laugh-qj0bxwfxw>, (accessed 22 April 2022).

Further delving into the “British” part of British comedy, comedian Ricky Gervais draws a contradistinction between American and U.K. humour by means of comparing the American and U.K. version of the sit-com *The Office*. To Gervais, British comedy feeds on the “doom and gloom” of everyday life, which leads to a more glum type of humour. He writes in a Time article:

“Brits are more comfortable with life’s losers. We embrace the underdog until it’s no longer the underdog. We like to bring authority down a peg or two. Just for the hell of it. Americans say, ‘have a nice day’ whether they mean it or not. Brits are terrified to say this. We tell ourselves it’s because we don’t want to sound insincere but I think it might be for the opposite reason. We don’t want to celebrate anything too soon. Failure and disappointment lurk around every corner. This is due to our upbringing. Americans are brought up to believe they can be the next president of the United States. Brits are told, ‘It won’t happen for you.’”²⁰

What Gervais describes here is akin to the theory on the role of comedy as a mechanism to cope with pain. While this fits a narrative shared by many, this does not hint at any elements which might lead to the belief that British humour harbours something particularly incompatible with political correctness. While it might be argued, though in a somewhat contrived fashion, that a greater proclivity to laugh about gloom should lead to more touchy subjects being joked about, it might equally be contended that this might in fact be just reinforcing the U.K.’s tolerance for un-PC, sick humour.

To conclude this brief analysis of the British sense of humour, I want to posit that, all cultures and comedy styles aside, the most renowned U.K. comedians doubtless play a substantial role in what this phrase evokes. Indeed, had it not been for names such as Rowan Atkinson, Benny Hill, Billy Connolly, the Monty Pythons or even Charlie Chaplin, names which often spring to mind when thinking about British humour, perhaps especially from a foreign perspective, British comedy would not have had the same reputation. In other words, rather than merely pointing at an overall style of humour, what people think of when talking about the “British sense of humour” or “British comedy” might instead be the various, highly idiosyncratic styles of these comedians.

The politicization of British comedy

Comedy often goes hand in hand with politics in that it so effectively raises otherwise unspoken issues present in a society. But it does not only have the power to raise these issues by means of making light of them. When performed correctly, comedy also sheds light

²⁰ R. Gervais, ‘The Difference Between American and British Humour’, *Time*, 9 November 2011, <https://time.com/3720218/difference-between-american-british-humour/>, (accessed 6 March 2022).

on how people feel about those issues. This happens by means of applauds, silence, anger, indignation, and so forth.

Historically speaking, there is one moment in the U.K.'s past we can point at when looking for a starting point in "political comedy": Margaret Thatcher's debut as U.K. Prime Minister, in 1979.²¹ This period has indeed witnessed the rise of alternative comedy, a new genre which mostly, on top of having a taste for intellectualism, was supported by left-wing comedians who prided themselves on being non-racist and non-sexist. One of alternative comedy's role was to oppose the Conservative government as well as a whole array of comedians deemed offensive and unoriginal whose time was long bygone, some believed. As comedy expert Oliver Double explains, "[t]hey threw aside the stolen Pakistani jokes of their predecessors and instead lashed out at the mood of the times."²² The "mood of the times" being, in this case, jokes whose butt were not ethnic group minorities, women, homosexuals, etc. Amongst the leading figures of the anti-Thatcherism in alternative comedy was Tony Allen, nicknamed "Lofty Tone" by other comedians for his outspoken left political views. Followed by many others such as Stewart Lee, Ben Elton, and Richard Herring, these comedians ushered in a new age in British comedy that was now more politicized than ever before. Especially thanks to the growing rate of the increasing number of British households who owned both a TV and a radio set, which gave comedians a much farther-reaching voice than they ever had before. This voice was not completely unbridled, however. The BBC, which until the late 1970's pretty much had monopoly over the airwaves, vetoed most of the content, forcing comedians and other speakers to observe strict guidelines, as will be discussed in the next subsection.

If alternative comedy usually had a deep political nature manifested by long(er) rants about observations those comedians would make on their own environment, this nature was never more than a by-product of their comedy.²³ Instead, it is the subjects they tackled and their angle of attack on these subjects which ascribed them this or that political label. That being said, a comedian becoming associated with a particular ideology, such as that endorsed by alternative comedy, was hardly happenstance. Indeed, most would more often than not proudly boast their own convictions during interviews or in their acts as well as speaking loudly their disapproval of the ideas they condemned. Still, alternative comedians occasionally participated in events ranging from punk rock concerts to, indeed, political rallies organized in support of mostly left-associated causes, thereby reinforcing their political reputation. This in turn shaped their careers in many ways: from the venues they would

²¹ G. Schaffer, 'Fighting Thatcher with Comedy: What to Do When There Is No Alternative', *Journal of British Studies*, April 2016, pp. 375-97, <https://www.cambridge.org/core/services/aop-cambridge-core/content/view/S0021937115002294>, (accessed 9 March 2022).

²² O. Double, *Stand-Up: On Being a Comedian*, London, Methuen Publishing, 1997; pp. 164-65.

²³ 'Alternative comedy [website]', *Academic Kids*, https://academickids.com/encyclopedia/index.php/Alternative_comedy, (accessed 1 May 2022).

perform at to the kind of jokes they would deliver and, most obviously, the kind of audience that would buy tickets to their shows.

Today, it is being argued whether alternative comedy is still as popular as it was 30 years ago. Some have even argued that a current trend has been gaining traction for a return to absurdism, possibly as an opposition to alternative comedy's intellectual and satirical nature.

The politicization of the media landscape also happened elsewhere than in comedy alone and was partly made possible thanks to a progressive and tacit abolishment of taboos revolving around political beliefs on television. As American comedian and TV host Bill Maher observed during a conversation with the American podcaster Joe Rogan, while in the past laying bare one's own political views publicly was something to be avoided, or at any rate frowned upon, many current channels can effortlessly be ascribed a political stance, no matter the platform.²⁴ To Maher, viewers and listeners seem to have developed a need to know if the people they are connecting to are supporting the same causes as them, something which, I argue, is automatically exacerbated in countries such as the U.S. where a binary party system has been in place for a prolonged period of time. This presumably may have been amplified by the Donald Trump presidency, which undeniably prompted a number of controversies in the United States. As film and television critic Charles Bramesco wrote in 2016: "(...) as the full enormity of the threat posed by a Trump administration has come into view, there's been a shift in the tenor of late-night's monologuing. What was once innocuously political has become more urgently politicized."²⁵

The influential power of the BBC in British comedy

Any review of the history and evolution of British comedy would be remiss if it failed to properly chart the media landscape comedians exploited in order to parade their craft. On the British Isles, one single actor was responsible for marshalling comedians under one same national corporation: the BBC. The British Broadcasting Corporation, on top of having built from the ground up a national radio and television broadcasting network, played a major role in the development of comedy and culture in general all throughout the 20th century and beyond. It should also be underlined that the fact that the BBC is fully owned by the British government played a huge role in its influence over the nation, as a matter of course.

²⁴ '#1804 – Bill Maher', The Joe Rogan Experience [podcast], interview with Bill Maher, Spotify, 12 April 2022, <https://open.spotify.com/show/4rOoJ6Egrf8K2IrywzwOMk>, (accessed 19 April 2022).

²⁵ C. Bramesco, 'How late-night comedy went from political to politicized', *The Guardian*, 5 May 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2017/may/05/late-night-comedy-political-politicized>, (accessed 2022).

Broadcast radio as we know it today made its debut in Britain in the early 1920's and only became commonplace after the Second World War, a time when television broadcasting was also gaining a lot of traction.²⁶ A few decades later, the BBC, which at the time had the monopoly on the sector, diversified its offer and ushered in a new variety department whose role was to entertain the British troops during the war. Max Miller, one of the early radio leading figures and one of the most influential British comedians at the time, even posited that radio had actually played a non-trivial role in garnering the nation to engage in a full-on war.²⁷ Ensuing from this period, it had become a normality for most British citizens to own a radio set and to listen to it on a regular basis. It is only during the 50's that radio's popularity really took off however, going from approximately 200,000 people owning a radio license to more than 10,000,000 in 1960. Among the first comedy shows was *It's That Man Again (ITMA)*, which introduced to the nation comedian Ted Kavanagh. The show, full of nonsensical comedy bits, had nonetheless to observe rather strict public morality rules imposed by the BBC, thereby introducing the traditional 30 minutes scripted show. In his essay *British comedy and Humour: Social and Cultural Background* (1984), British writer Richard Alexander argued that Ted Kavanagh is the comedian who "laid the ground work" and "exploited radio comedy to its fullest" with *It's That Man Again*. Following up on Kavanagh, *The Goon Show*, presented by Spike Milligan and Eric Sykes, also played an important role in early radio British comedy, a show which to Richard Alexander's words was a "show obsessed with Britain's Imperial Past". In fact, the context in which Britain then found itself – i.e., a time where it no longer was the global power it had grown accustomed to be – now had to get comfortable with self-depreciation. As was the case for *It's That Man Again*, every show broadcast on the BBC around that time were subdued to strict censorship rules. Most of these rules were featured in a 20 pages pamphlet released by the BBC in 1949 under the title "The Green Book".

In a Great Britain slowly recovering from a post-war austerity period, the Green Book's release represented a momentous milestone in the history of politically correct Britain. The BBC, in spite of having been officially nicknamed "Auntie" for its moralistic tendencies and PC nature, was at the time the most listened to broadcasting channel on the British Isles. Among the topics and slurs that were to be avoided could be found in the Green Book the following (a non-exhaustive list):

²⁶ 'A short history of the BBC', Oxford University Press, 2014, <https://elt.oup.com/elt/students/insight/dyslexicfriendlytexts/preint/a002000insightpreintsbdfunit9d.pdf>, (accessed 1 may 2022).

²⁷ R. Alexander, "British comedy and humour: social and cultural background.", AAA: Arbeiten Aus Anglistik Und Amerikanistik, vol. 9, no. 1, 1984, pp. 63–83, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43023313>. (accessed 1 May 2022).

<p style="text-align: center;">Jokes about:</p> <p>- Lavatories; Effeminacy in men; Immorality of any kind; Religious songs; Jokes pertaining to alternate meaning of the initials - AD and BC</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Suggestive references to:</p> <p>- Honeymoon couples; Excessive alcohol consumption (“one for the road”); Chambermaids; Fig leaves; Prostitution; Ladies' underwear; Animal habits; Lodgers; Commercial travellers</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">The use of the following words and idioms:</p> <p>- God; Good god; My god; Blast; Hell; Damn; Bloody; Gorbliney; Ruddy</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Miscellaneous implicit topics to be avoided:</p> <p>- Jokes about certain categories of people such as Jews; Marital infidelity; Pre-natal influences; The vulgar use of words such as “basket”; Jokes about the NHS and MP's, ministers and party leaders²⁸</p>

When writing about the period of the Green Book's release, British author Graham Stewart pointed out: “If a comedian wished to impersonate a real person, that person's permission was required. If he or she was dead, permission from the person's relatives was necessary.”²⁹ He then goes on to say that when Max Millian, a popular variety star at the time, told an “unscripted joke about a mountain pass, a girl and a blocked passage”, Millian's career as an actor was put on hold for 5 consecutive years. Namely, the punchline of the joke was: “I didn't know whether to block her passage or toss myself off.” Noteworthy is that the sexual innuendo mentioned above was nothing excessive compared to what one might have heard at a similar time in a pub or musical hall, places where this kind of double entendres were commonplace. Thus, the BBC's determination to stick to its “moral angel” role left it no other choice than recurring to cancellation as a last resort measure.

Along with the Green Book's release, the maxim “When in doubt, take it out” had also been instructed to all BBC writers as a rule of thumb.³⁰ But the BBC's ambitions were quickly foiled. All throughout the Fifties, the radio programme *The Goon Show* had been putting on offer a reliable escape route to the BBC's rigidity, a show whose sheer silliness Michael Standing, former head of the BBC variety department and author of the Green Book, had not yet thought of forbidding. Among the key figures in the show was comedian Spike Milligan, who had taken it upon himself to thwart the BBC's ambitions to regulate freedom of speech on their channels. Milligan said in the Seventies:

²⁸ It was actually rare for MP's to appear on any BBC show as it was generally construed as unsuitable by the BBC itself for them to do so.

²⁹ G. Stewart, ‘When the BBC banned baskets and fig leaves’, *The Times*, 1 November 2008, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/when-the-bbc-banned-baskets-and-fig-leaves-0vbr3q5crnk>, (accessed 2 May 2022).

³⁰ That Was The Week That Was [website], *BBC*, <https://www.bbc.com/historyofthebbc/anniversaries/november/tw3>, (accessed 1 May 2022).

"I was trying to shake the BBC out of its apathy. I tried to transform it and I had to fight like mad, and people didn't like me for it. I had to rage and bang and crash. I got it right in the end and it paid off, but it drove me mad in the process and drove a lot of other people mad."

In fact, things were already improving for the pro freedom of speech on mainstream channels thanks to the election of a new Director General at the BBC in 1960, Hugh Carleton-Greene, who himself would later play a key role in the highly satirical (and equally popular) *That Was The Week That Was* (also known as *TW3*). This highly successful series was short-lived, however. Following jokes made about then Prime Minister Lord Home in 1964, the BBC's Governors decided to cancel the show halfway through the second series, concerned about the impacts the show might have on the coming elections. *That Was The Week That Was*, expeditious though it has been, had yet managed to go down as a milestone in the BBC's history, heralding a new age that would be more permissive towards writers and comedians.

Political correctness and woke culture

Origins of the term "political correctness"

Historically speaking, the term political correctness, was introduced not so long ago in Britain. Believed to have first been used in 1917 by Marxist-Leninist adherents as a show of respect to the Bolsheviks' political agenda (namely, that of the Soviet Union's Communist Party), it was first the negative form of the word, "political *incorrectness*", which was mostly used, and referred to those who did not or would not walk the "party line". Throughout the decades, PC remained a mostly political term and was often used in the context of politicized discussions.³¹ English and Literature professor George Bornstein wrote about the World War II German-Soviet Nonaggression Pact: "... for example, it was correct that the world's leading Marxist country had signed a treaty with the world's leading Fascist country, but politically incorrect to say so."³² A few decades later, the same term would still be used by feminists in the 1980's, but now altered by an ironical overtone. As Bornstein observes, "the term [political correctness] appears to span the political spectrum rather than to belong to any special part of it." It is in the 1990's that the term PC really became more popular in Britain, however. This was especially so among Conservatives, mostly because of a four-centuries long colonialism era which was now coming to an end and made references to Black and Indian communities a much touchier matter. Shortly thereafter, the 21st century immigration crisis, which introduced a new wave of overseas ethnicities in Britain, reinforced the need for

³¹ C. Roper, 'political correctness', *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 31 January 2020, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/political-correctness>, (accessed 10 March 2022).

³² G. Bornstein, 'Can Literary Study Be Politically Correct?', *The Johns Hopkins University Press*, Vol. 100, No. 2, 1992, pp. 283-289, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27546526>, (accessed on 10 March 2022).

more political correctness.³³ Bornstein then goes on to warn about the potential threat which political correctness poses. He writes:

“[Political correctness] interrogates the literature of the past according to the standards of the present. PC thus lacks humility and the potential for correction: it represents an imperialism of time as obnoxious as an imperialism of space, imposing its own standards on the great world of time with relentless ethnocentrism ... The problem with Political Correctness, then, is not whether it is political or whether it is correct, but that it is narrow. It limits rather than enlarge.”

Complementary to Bornstein’s view is English writer Anthony Browne’s, who made the following observation with regard to “political correctness’ decline”:

“[A]s PC spread and deepened its influence, it became more dogmatic and intolerant of dissent, until it became a betrayal of the very liberalism that first fuelled it. It has led to new political censorship laws being introduced to curb freedom of speech, and membership of legal democratic parties being curtailed. Rather than opening minds, it is closing them down.”³⁴

Of course, Bornstein and Browne’s views are by no means universally agreed upon. That being said, while this thesis does not aim at settling the question of whether applying our modern values to works and deeds of the past is “good” or “bad”, the problematic has now at least been articulated.

The woke movement and political correctness

Among the cultural elements that are currently influencing British culture is the “woke movement”. The woke movement, also referred to by some as “wokeness” or “woke culture”, can be described as a set of values and beliefs which refers to a state of being markedly aware of social injustice (in the form of racism, sexism, etc.). What is more, the term “woke” was recently added in the Oxford English Dictionary under the definition: “Alert to racial or social discrimination and injustice.”³⁵

Links between the wokeness and cultural Marxism have also been made by academics such as Jordan Peterson as well as other reputable figures such as the Governor of Florida Ron DeSantis, presumably because of the shared dualistic world view the two movements endorse, namely that of a society divided into two social classes – the oppressors and the

³³ A. Fleras, ‘The Politics of Multiculturalism. Multicultural Governance in Comparative Perspective’, *Palgrave Macmillan*, New York, 2009, p. 176

³⁴ A. Browne, *The Retreat of Reason: Political Correctness and the Corruption of Public Debate in Modern Britain*, 2nd ed., London, Civitas, 2006, p. xiii.

³⁵ Woke, ‘New words notes June 2017’, *Oxford English Dictionary* [web blog], June 2017, <https://public.oed.com/blog/june-2017-update-new-words-notes/>, (accessed 12 May 2022).

oppressed.³⁶³⁷ Whereas in the case of Marxism, the oppressed were originally the proletariat and the oppressors those who owned the means of production, wokeness would, roughly put, rather see middle-class to upper-class white people – especially men – as the oppressors, mainly because of the aftermaths colonialism and slavery, along with a history of sexism, left behind. However, wokeness would not only see non-white people as the oppressed, but would also see other groups as oppressed victims such as (even white) people with a non-traditional sexuality or gender identity, women, and any other groups who may be perceived as systemically disadvantaged. Notwithstanding this view on wokeness, it must be emphasized that what wokeness actually stands for is no cut-and-dried matter. It is instead open to interpretation, not unlike political correctness.

This interpretation of wokeness, albeit quite easy to get by on the internet, is particularly worth articulating in and relevant to this thesis, as most of the pushback comedians are facing in the cases discussed in the case analyses chapter can be linked to either racial or social discrimination or injustice.

Being politically correct is not inherent to wokeness, however. Instead, I would argue that it is a direct and inevitable consequence of the social justice mantra championed by wokeness. “Direct”, because the woke, i.e., he or she who endorses woke values, typically condemns abusive and non-inclusive language, and “inevitable”, because of PC’s tendency to find itself brought up in the context of the protection of minority groups, just as wokeness does. It may then equally be argued that while not all PC-related matters are equally woke matters, most if not all woke matters may certainly fall within the definition of being PC. In other words, while being PC does not necessarily mean being woke, being woke does, to a certain extent, mean being politically correct.

In 2020, the political philosopher John Gray wrote about woke culture (or “wokery”, as he calls it):

³⁶ ‘DeSantis Confronts Cultural Marxism Of Woke Ideology’, *Clay & Buck*, 16 December 2021, <https://www.clayandbuck.com/desantis-confronts-cultural-marxism-of-woke-ideology/>, (accessed 12 May 2022).

³⁷ *Identity politics and the Marxist lie of white privilege* [web video], Jordan B Peterson, Canada Vancouver, University of British Columbia Free Speech Club, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PfH8IG7Awk0&ab_channel=JordanBPeterson, (accessed 12 May 2022).

“Wokery is the successor ideology of neo-conservatism, a singularly American world-view. That may be why it has become a powerful force only in countries (such as Britain) heavily exposed to American culture wars. In much of the world — Asian and Islamic societies and large parts of Europe, for example — the woke movement is marginal, and its American prototype viewed with bemused indifference or contempt.”³⁸

As Gray affirms, British culture, which for historical reasons has always been under a strong American influence, is not waiving the habit when it comes to the woke movement. Furthermore, I would argue that this movement, perhaps more than any other influence in the U.K., is playing a non-trivial role in the sea-change taking place in comedy – a sea-change which prompted the writing of this thesis. This theory has actually been shared by many comedians. For instance, pop culture journalist Rachel Aerosti reported that comedians such as John Cleese and American stand-up comedian Chris Rock warned that “wokeness” would “stifle creativity”. Aerosti is nonetheless herself highly sceptical that woke culture is having any stifling effects on comedy, and concluded in a Guardian article: “[T]he idea that cancel culture is killing comedy is a nonsense slogan – an absurdist joke in itself.”³⁹ This particular take on the matter will be further discussed later on this work.

Wokeness in private and public institutions

Comedy aside, the link between on the one hand political correctness and, on the other hand, freedom of speech, can effortlessly be made. And part of the reason why this link is so widely discussed has to do with the deontological pressure all kinds of institutions in the U.K. have increasingly been put on. This became clear when Hull University instructed their professors in 2021 to no longer correct spelling mistakes in student essays, tests and even exams, on the grounds that pointing out such mistakes was elitist behaviour and that it therefore widened the cultural gap between non-native and native British students.⁴⁰ Noteworthy is that in the same year, comedian John Cleese cancelled a talk he was himself meant to give at Cambridge University. He did this as a mark of protest against Cambridge Union’s announcement that historian Andrew Graham-Dixon, who had himself once given a speech at Cambridge, would not be invited back to address the university on the grounds that he had once made an impersonation of Adolf Hitler – something the institution

³⁸ J. Gray, ‘American unreality’, *The New Statesman*, 28 October 2020, <https://www.newstatesman.com/uncategorized/2020/10/american-unreality>, (accessed 10 March 2022).

³⁹ R. Aerosti, ‘Cancel culture killing comedy? What a joke’, *The Guardian*, 10 August 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2021/aug/10/cancel-culture-killing-comedy-what-a-joke>, (accessed on 10 March 2022).

⁴⁰ C. Turner, ‘Marking down students for spelling mistakes is ‘elitist’, says university’, *The Telegraph*, 11 April 2021, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2021/04/11/marking-students-spelling-mistakes-elitist-says-university/>, (accessed 17 March 2022).

deemed cross-border. In fact, Cleese had himself done such an impersonation in his show *Fawlty Towers* in 1993, which served as rationale for his self-cancellation.⁴¹

But the influence of woke culture does not solely target schools and universities. In fact, ever since the beginning of the century, measures and campaigns carried out in the name of progressive, woke political correctness are now ubiquitous amongst both corporate and public institutions, showing a stark intolerance towards intolerance itself. In his plea against political correctness, Anthony Brown wrote in his book *The Retreat of Reason* (2006) that “Political correctness started in academia, but it now dominates schools, hospitals, local authorities, the civil service, the media, companies, the police and the army.”⁴² In his book, Brown repeatedly contends that inherent to political correctness is the belief that “whiteness”, i.e., Caucasian people, is at the roots of the “evil” PC tries to combat. He writes: “The West always found faults in its own culture while finding virtues in others. This started in the first century AD with the Roman historian Tacitus who eulogized the German culture.” This view is widely shared among both academics and the public (something easy to get by in academic journals as well as in news articles), and corroborates John’s Gray affirmation that PC first came to be in the West, namely in the United States. The fact that the woke movement is believed to be linked to the #MeToo movement, a global trend which began in the U.S. and that aims at denouncing abusive behaviours such as insults, violence and rape, equally supports Gray’s claims.

Current observations partly disprove this theory, however. While it is true that wokeness mostly promotes people of colour’s rights, it certainly does not limit itself to that. As argued earlier, all ethnicity questions aside, the woke movement also overtly supports gay rights and trans rights, inter alia. Furthermore, that political correctness, unlike wokeness, would have first emerged in the United States is also questionable, as established earlier in this subsection.

By and large, endorsing woke culture within either corporate or public institutions often comes down to quotas ensuring that women and ethnic minorities are duly represented, along with steering clear of using any racist or sexist slurs, potentially offensive images or content, or endorsing any “un-woke” beliefs, more broadly speaking. Conversely, companies falling foul of woke political correctness often do so precisely because of a failure to taking these steps. Examples of this are Pepsi, accused of appropriating anti-racism protest movements such as Black Lives Matter; Nike, pilloried for releasing a shoe boasting a US flag with only 13 stars on it (as was the case when slavery was still legal); rice

⁴¹ ‘John Cleese blacklists himself from Cambridge University event’, *BBC News*, 10 November 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-cambridgeshire-59237741>, (accessed 6 April 2022).

⁴² A. Browne, *The Retreat of Reason: Political Correctness and the Corruption of Public Debate in Modern Britain*, 2nd ed., London, Civitas, 2006, p. 34.

manufacturer Uncle Ben's, whose name and branding had to undergo changes due to "racial stereotyping"; or Starbucks, assaulted for telling its employees not to wear Black Lives Matter apparels while on duty.⁴³ As Human rights activist Yasmin Nair wrote in 2019 in an article on wokeness within corporate institutions: "Corporate wokeness is now big business, quite literally."⁴⁴

It can certainly be argued that the haziness of what the woke culture exactly promotes is part of what endowed it with online ubiquity, although the opportunistic tendency of news outlets to cash in on divide arguably plays a substantial role in the "mainstreamness" of those stories. While it can be affirmed that there exists a leitmotiv underlying wokeness, it nonetheless often comes down to perceived feelings. What should be regarded as "offensive" and how offensive can one be are undeniably contentious issues. Some slurs are perceived as being more offensive than others. This problem is illustrated in an allegedly true story narrated by Psychologist Jordan Peterson during a public lecture given at a student conference. In the lecture, he tells his audience of a woman working in a "well known" company, confused because some employees working with and around her felt that the world "flip chart" should no longer be used on the grounds that the word "flip", innocuous in its official English definition, would also be a derogatory term for Filipinos.⁴⁵ Sources for flip being a racial slur seem unreliable and Peterson's story was not evidence-based, but regardless of the anecdote's veracity, it does illustrate the hurdles one must overcome in order to establish cut and dried rules around the question of offensiveness. In this scenario, one might wonder how offensive the word "flip" actually is to Filipinos, and if it remains equally offensive even when used in the context of talking about an actual "flip chart".

This phenomenon is something the political right has by and large made a habit of criticizing with unoriginal punchlines such as "the left has gone mad" or "political correctness is spiralling out of control" or "you can't say anything anymore nowadays". On the other side of the debate, more left-leaning institutions and newspapers, while whole-heartedly supporting these changes and often making sure any steps they take to further improve their inclusive creed is seen by most, are equally quick to jump on any occasion to put the blame on the right when things do not go according to what their newly-named "woke" agenda advocates.

⁴³ Z. Thomas, 'What is the cost of 'cancel culture'?', *BBC News*, 8 October 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/business-54374824>, (accessed 10 April 2022).

⁴⁴ Y. Nair, 'Believe in Something: Corporate wokeness is now big business', *The Baffler*, no.44, April 2019, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26639720>, (accessed 9 March 2022).

⁴⁵ *Jordan Peterson | How Social Media Affects Us* [online video], Jordan Peterson, Vancouver, BC, The Free Speech Club, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L6Wx_1daQJM&ab_channel=TheFreeSpeechClub, (accessed 14 March 2022).

Cancel culture: Self-censorship and no-platforming in comedy

Cancel culture, a term already referred to several times throughout this thesis, would benefit from being more rigorously unpacked. This is what this subsection will concern itself with: trying to better understand what this phrase really means before taking a deeper look at what I argue are its two main components, namely self-censorship and no-platforming.

Cancel culture

In 2021, British actress Maureen Lipman declared that British comedy could be “wiped out” because of a current “revolution” taking place.⁴⁶ More precisely, the revolution she talks about is that of cancel culture, defined by Political Scientist Pipa Norris as “collective strategies by activists using social pressures to achieve cultural ostracism of targets (someone or something) accused of offensive words or deeds.”⁴⁷

There seems to exist a consistent disparity between left and right wing voters on matters of cancel culture and freedom of speech. In the context of comedy, what cancel culture really does is threatening, when not proceeding, to denying comedians access from being able to perform publicly. This can result in being virtually muffled on social media, failing to sign contracts with agencies, or being denied the possibility to perform in both private and public venues.

By and large, cancel culture is something anyone might be faced with. But do people see that as a positive or as a negative? As just mentioned, political beliefs seem to play a huge role in determining this. In 2019, a Pew Research Center survey asked Americans if they thought calling out people on social media was either unfairly punishing people or if it rather held people accountable for their actions.⁴⁸ On the whole, the majority of the respondents went with the latter (58%) while only 38% appeared to believe that cancel culture was punishing people unwarrantedly. However, 56% of Republicans respondents believe it is the case, whereas only 39% of them said it held people accountable. Conversely, a staggering 75% of Democrat respondents said it held people accountable, and only 22% went for the alternative answer. In conclusion, the morality of cancel culture in general seem to be approved of by a majority of Americans, although political beliefs appear to strongly influence this (dis)approval.

⁴⁶ K. Razzall, ‘Maureen Lipman: Cancel culture could wipe out comedy’, *BBC News*, 22 December 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-59703257>, (accessed 17 March 2022).

⁴⁷ P., Norris, ‘Cancel Culture: Myth or Reality?’, *Political Studies Association*, 2021, pp.1-30, <https://doi.org/10.1177/00323217211037023>, (accessed 16 April 2022).

⁴⁸ E. Vogels et al., “Americans and ‘Cancel Culture’: Where Some See Calls for Accountability, Others See Censorship, Punishment”, *Pew Research Center*, 19 May 2019, <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2021/05/19/americans-and-cancel-culture-where-some-see-calls-for-accountability-others-see-censorship-punishment/>, (accessed 21 April 2022).

As to what people actually mean when they use those words, another study from the Pew Research Center tells us how Americans construe the term. Half of the respondents (49%) define it as “Actions taken to hold others accountable”. Again, noteworthy is the disparity between the percentage of Republican (36%) and Democrat (56%) respondents who define it that way. The second most popular definition for cancel culture amongst U.S. citizens is “Censorship of speech or history”. Again, a substantial difference between Democrats (6%) and Republicans (26%) can be observed, for an average of 14%. Other, less common definitions include “Mean-spirited actions taken to cause others harm” (12%), “People cancelling anyone they disagree with” (9%), “Those who are challenged face consequences like being fired or boycotted” (6%), or “A way to call-out racism, sexism, etc.” (4%). So, it appears that the most wide spread way to construe cancel culture is not one particular action but is rather to be understood as an undefined moralistic action.

Self-censorship

Pipa Norris’ definition of cancel culture, articulated on the previous page, was reported in a 2021 BBC News article in which the numbers in figure 1 were shared. Comparatively speaking, the juxtaposition of those figures onto others dating from a similar 2019 study for U.S. citizens, leads to a strong correlation between the two countries. Indeed, 40% of U.S. respondents declared that they did not feel free to speak their mind generally speaking – a threefold leap since 1954 in the same country.⁴⁹

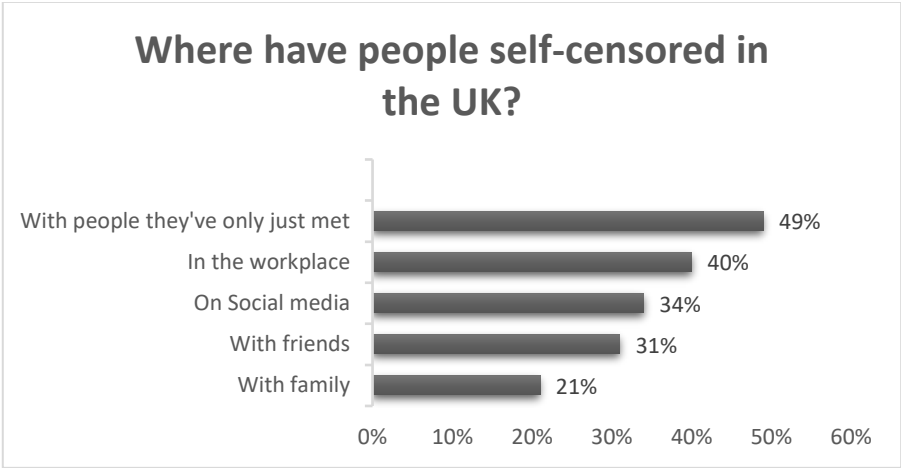


Figure 1: Frequency of self-censorship amongst British citizens in different situations, in percentage. Survey conducted 19 to 21 November, Great Britain, 1,677 adults. Source: YouGov

Noteworthy is that from the same YouGov study which yielded the U.K. figures also appears that 57% of the respondents claim they recur to self-censorship when asked about issues

⁴⁹ J. Gibson and J. Sutherland, ‘Americans Are Self-Censoring at Record Rates’, *Persuasion*, 1 August 2020, <https://www.persuasion.community/p/americans-are-self-censoring-at-record?s=r>, (accessed 16 March 2022).

such as trans rights and immigration, as reported in the same BBC News article. As will be demonstrated later, those numbers support the evidence which the case study analyses chapter of the thesis delivered.

Censorship does not always comes from external coercion: such instances will be referred to as “self-censorship”. In comedy, both censorship and self-censorship exist, and may both possibly be detrimental to comedians.

Self-censorship can be linked to Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann’s spiral of silence theory (1965). To the German political scientist, people would be more likely to self-censor when they feel the views they hold are unpopular.⁵⁰ A partly unconscious process, that is to say. Conversely, one may find it all the more easy to disclose views seen as popular in a given environment, regardless of how true those holding these opinions may think they are. This would have several impacts on comedy in the twenty first century, especially because of the interconnectedness people living in Western developed countries, such as the U.K., have acquired thanks to social media and the internet in general. Platforms such as Twitter, known for propagating before all else dramatic opinions and catchy content, inevitably erodes what social media users may perceive as being either popular or unpopular views.⁵¹ In other words, extremism gains traction on social media, unlike milder, more rational views, presumably held by the majority. This ties back to the phenomenon discussed in the previous subsection, woke political correctness. Indeed, it has been argued that this is why topics such as gender dysphoria seem to be getting such disproportional attention online, when one considers that people who belong this community represent less than 2% of the British population.⁵² As a consequence of the fierce protective movement for this community, contrarian views will be disproportionately seen as unacceptable. Not necessarily because the overwhelming majority find dissident opinions on this topic unacceptable, but because the often small number of people making the most noise about it tend to reap the most engagement, hence the greater visibility. As a YouGov study revealed in Winter 2021, 29% of the Britons who believe a transgender woman is not a woman “often bottle up” by fear of

⁵⁰ T. Peterson, ‘spiral of silence’, *Britannica*, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/spiral-of-silence>, (accessed 15 April 2022).

⁵¹ ‘Twitter’s algorithm does not seem to silence conservatives’, *The Economist*, 1 August 2020, <https://www.economist.com/graphic-detail/2020/08/01/twitters-algorithm-does-not-seem-to-silence-conservatives>, (accessed 3 May 2022).

⁵² S. Varrella, ‘Share of people identifying as transgender, gender fluid, non-binary, or other ways worldwide as of 2021, by country’, *Statista*, 15 January 2022, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1269778/gender-identity-worldwide-country/>, (accessed 15 April 2022).

repression.⁵³ This also applies beyond the internet to all kinds of places such as academia, where conservative scholars working in a mostly liberal environment are less willing to speak up, making liberal views all the more ubiquitous whilst muffling conservative ones.⁵⁴ This almost unconscious process of self-censorship thus possibly plays a non-trivial role in the perceived freedom comedians believe they have to perform comedy given the larger audiences they address, both directly during stand-ups and indirectly whenever their material is engaged with online.

No-platforming

The second component of cancel culture is no-platforming. Unlike self-censoring, no-platforming is both more coercive and direct. As is the case for cancel culture, the term no-platforming has not been around for very long and has therefore not yet extensively been discussed. It is not completely unknown in academia, however. For instance, researchers Uwe Peters and Nikolaj Nottelmann wrote a paper on the subject in March 2021 in which they described three types of no-platforming:

“It would occur, for instance, (a) when a problematic speaker S is disinvited or not invited to present a talk at university U due to a campaign against her, (b) when S is disinvited or not invited to present a talk at U because there is a policy forbidding S or her group from talking there, or (c) when S is disinvited or not invited to present a talk at U because the potential host (or an authority exerting influence on the host) is concerned about the controversy it would cause.”⁵⁵

Peters and Nottelmann are focusing on academia and universities, but those same examples could presumably be applied to other contexts, such as theatres and other venues hosting artists and comedians. As will be demonstrated in the case analysis chapter of this work, all of these scenarios are relatable to the field of comedy.

In the same article, the authors suggest that from a philosophical point of view, there are two fundamental categories of arguments underlying the approval or disapproval of no-platforming problematic speakers: one is moral, the other is epistemic. The moral argument contends that no-platforming is a righteous measure in that it “prevents certain speakers from causing physical or psychological harm, or even helps correct unfair advantages and social injustice.” Extrapolating this to comedy, it would be equivalent to arguing that comedians

⁵³ M. Smith, ‘Cancel culture: what views are Britons afraid to express?’, *YouGov*, <https://yougov.co.uk/topics/politics/articles-reports/2021/12/22/cancel-culture-what-views-are-britons-afraid-expre>, (accessed 16 April 2022).

⁵⁴ P. Norris, ‘Cancel Culture: Myth or Reality?’, *Political Studies Association*, 2021, pp.1-30, <https://eds-p-ebSCOhost-com.elib.tcd.ie/eds/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=1&sid=d0d710ed-19b1-4d8c-990a-d3ddec4d68eb%40redis>, (accessed 16 April 2022).

⁵⁵ U. Peters and . Nottelmann, ‘Weighing the costs: the epistemic dilemma of no-platforming’, *Springer Link*, Synthese 199, 27 March 2021, pp. 7231–7253, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11229-021-03111-w>, (accessed 16 March 2022).

deemed “too offensive” by some should be ripped from to right to perform publicly because of the potential harm they may inflict on people. Conversely, the epistemic argument, more intellectually grounded by nature, suggests that the policy of no-platforming “helps to curb problematic speakers’ negative influence on the pursuit of epistemic goals such as reliable belief-formation, the promotion of knowledge, the proliferation of accurate information, or the development of epistemic virtues.” We can derive from this argument a stand-up comedian being no-platformed on one or several platforms because of potential “bad ideas” he might spread by way of saying contentious jokes. It should be pointed out that while no-platforming has a digital overtone (the word “platform” being mostly use in reference to social media platforms or other types of online platforms), here the term does not only refer to the preclusion of a speaker to express himself on an online platform but also in physical venues such as theatres and semi-physical venues such as television shows. Illustrative of this is the case of stand-up comedian Andrew Lawrence, a moderately famous English performer who, subsequently to humorous tweets mocking Black football players’ performance after the Euro final 2020, had his Twitter account suspended. Shortly thereafter, he saw the majority of the venues he had booked for his stand-up comedy tour pull him from their rosters, as well as having his own agent terminating his contract.

Because this thesis does not aim at determining whether “problematic” comedians – to use Peters and Nottelmann’s term – should or should not be given a voice, the issue will not further be looked at. However, those interested in the deontological questions which no-platforming raises are encouraged to consult their work.

Legal restrictions on freedom of speech in British comedy

In the previous subsection, the social influence comedians are currently dealing with in Britain was examined. We will now move across the landscape that defines comedy by looking at the legal restrictions Britain imposes on comedy. This will not be an exhaustive analysis; more humbly, the goal of this subsection is to get a sense of the extent to which freedom of speech is legally framed in comedy.

In December 2021, an ex-police officer successfully challenged a U.K. policy which would have authorities record any gender-critical views as “non-crime hate incidents”. According the to College of Policing’s guidance on hate crimes, a hate incident is defined as “any non-crime incident which is perceived, by the victim or any other person, to be motivated by a hostility or prejudice.” The accusations were based on a couple of tweets – many underlaid by a humorous and ironical tone – made a couple of years before the event, tweets written in reaction to the Gender Recognition Act 2004. Following the Court of Appeal’s ruling, the College of Policing’s Assistant Chief Constable shed light on the case: “The balance we have

always aimed to strike is between the need to protect vulnerable people and communities from harm with the need to facilitate and protect freedom of speech.”⁵⁶ This search for “the right balance” between freedom of speech and the protective laws, as is beginning to become clear, will continue to undergird the vast majority of the cases discussed later in this thesis.

Historically speaking, all forms of legislative power, from democratic ones such as those we enjoy today to more authoritarian regimes, have at times imposed restrictions on what could be talked about, written about, sung about, etc.

Back in 1644, British poet John Milton wrote his *Areopagitica* (from the Greek *Aeropagus*, the hill on which the Council of Athens would meet), a plea written to the Parliament of England under the form of a pamphlet, contesting the State control of printing introduced by Henry VIII.⁵⁷ This had made the publications of subversive books and, more generally speaking, the possibility for new ideas to publicly blossom, a much more difficult task. In his work, which essentially opposed a law stating that every book should first be reviewed and approved before being published, Milton makes the case for freedom of publishing and of expression, writing that one might ‘as good almost kill a Man as kill a good Book’, arguing that without the knowledge of evil, there may be no wisdom.⁵⁸ Ironically, at least two of Milton’s books were destroyed after his *Areopagitica*, and the latter is thought to have had but little impact on the situation during Milton’s time. It is only some 20 years after his death, in 1695, a few years after the Great Revolution that led to the permanent establishment of Parliament as ruling power in England, that regulations on printing were finally loosened.⁵⁹

The following century, the playwright and satirist Henry Fielding, not unlike Milton, suffered the consequences of living under a regime where freedom of speech is not a given. Highly critical of the government, Fielding saw his career as a writer brutally put to an end when Robert Walpole, sometimes regarded as the first British prime minister, introduced the Licensing Act of 1737, under which “all new plays had to be approved and licensed by the lord chamberlain before production.”⁶⁰ This law, which also gave the lord chamberlain the power to uphold the monopoly on two London theatres, was introduced as a retaliation

⁵⁶ ‘Harry Miller: Legal victory after alleged transphobic tweets’, *BBC News*, 20 December 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-lincolnshire-59727118>, (accessed 21 March 2022).

⁵⁷ ‘Areopagitica by John Milton, 1644’, *British Library*, <https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/areopagitica-by-john-milton-1644>, (accessed 20 March 2022).

⁵⁸ J. Milton, ‘Areopagitica’, *The John Milton Reading Room*, https://milton.host.dartmouth.edu/reading_room/areopagitica/text.html, (accessed 20 March 2022).

⁵⁹ J. Kenyon, ‘James II, king of England, Scotland and Ireland’, *Britannica*, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/James-II-king-of-England-Scotland-and-Ireland>, (accessed 20 March 2022).

⁶⁰ ‘Henry Fielding’, *Britannica*, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Henry-Fielding#ref72418>, (accessed 21 March 2022).

against Henry Fielding, who had recently written a play in which he shamelessly ridiculed Walpole.⁶¹

Having made a lot of headway from a Britain where political agitators were executed because of things they either said or wrote, there still exist a number of framing laws and regulations which curtail freedom of speech in today's Britain. Since 2010 for instance, the Equality Act 2010 was enacted, which inevitably infringed on freedom of speech (all forms of verbal racism were thereby made illegal, for instance). The Equality Act 2010 itself superseded the Race Relations Act 2000, both of which condemn (or condemned) race discrimination in areas where the act was in force. It is important to underline that those legislations are in no way comparable to those wielded in 18th century Britain or earlier. Not only do the goals of those more recent acts have solid moral grounds, unlike the banning of a book because it ridicules a person in power, for instance, – these new acts were actually voted upon democratically. Generally speaking, reprimands for the violation of those acts, e.g., the Equality and Race Relations Acts, are also more human and milder than was the case in the past.

More recently, a legislative endeavour relevant both to comedy and, more generally speaking, freedom of speech, took place in the United Kingdom. In 2012, Lord Dear, previously HM Inspector of Constabulary, gave effect to the amendment for which the Reform Section 5 campaigners, spearheaded by comedian Rowan Atkinson, had lengthily been fighting. The amendment, which the then Home Secretary Theresa May had approved, targeted the removal of one specific word from Section 5 of the Public Order Act, which was part of the Crime and Courts Bill. The word in question was “insulting”. When first issued, the Act stated: “A person is guilty of an offence if he uses threatening, abusive or insulting words or behaviour.” Core to the issue was the principle that it would now technically be illegal to say anything that might be construed as insulting to anyone, virtually making anything one says prone to legal prosecutions. Eventually, the free speech campaign won the case, partly thanks to the active support of several British stars, human rights campaigners, and that of the former shadow home secretary David Davis.⁶²

In a speech given in the context of the Reform Section 5 campaign, Rowan Atkinson rhetorically asked, “Who would have thought that we would end up with a law that would

⁶¹ ‘Western theatre: Middle-class drama’, *Britannica*, <https://www.britannica.com/art/Western-theatre/The-18th-century-theatre#ref305971>, (accessed 21 March 2022).

⁶² R. Booth, ‘“Insulting” to be dropped from section 5 of Public Order Act’, *The Guardian*, 14 January 2013, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/jan/14/insulting-section-5-public-order-act>, (accessed 21 March 2022).

allow life to imitate art so exactly?”⁶³ This was reportedly said in relation to a sketch for the show *Not the 9 O’Clock News*, popular in the early 1980’s and in which Atkinson repeatedly appeared. In the sketch Atkinson referred to in his speech, the comedian played the role of a senior police officer who scolds Constable Savage, a young policeman who repeatedly arrests the same black man on ludicrous grounds such as “walking on the cracks in the pavement” or “urinating in a public convenience”, making the comparison between this unreasonable arrests and what might have happened had it not been for the campaign.

I would argue that this scene aptly sheds light on the growing swiftness in people to call something “an offense”, as the author Anthony Browne already observed in 2006.⁶⁴

Ofcom

Legislations aside, there also exist in Britain a range of regulating bodies. Some of these bodies include the ASA (Advertising Standards Authority), which establishes the kind of humour, inter alia, that can be used in ads. However, we will now focus on another major actor in the media regulatory landscape in the United Kingdom: Ofcom, a government-approved regulatory authority for the broadcasting, telecommunications and postal industries in the U.K. In other words, Ofcom actually benefits from a legislative bearing surface, making its guidelines something to be reckoned with by all British comedians performing on television or on the radio.

On Ofcom’s website, the section two of “the Ofcom Code” – which outlines the standards broadcast content must observe –, concerns comedy the most. Titled “harm and offence”, this section’s objective is to “provide adequate protection for members of the public from harmful and/or offensive material.”⁶⁵ Under rule 2.1, “Generally accepted standards”, is stated that “[Ofcom] recognise[s] that some programming may include material that has the potential to be harmful or offensive. This puts a responsibility on the broadcaster to take steps to provide adequate protection for the audience.” Directly relating to comedy is rule 2.4, “Violent, dangerous or seriously anti-social behaviour”. The full paragraph reads:

⁶³ *In full: Rowan Atkinson on free speech* [online video], Defend Free Speech, 15 August 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BiqDZIAZygU&ab_channel=DefendFreeSpeech, (accessed 21 March 2022).

⁶⁴ A. Browne, *The Retreat of Reason: Political Correctness and the Corruption of Public Debate in Modern Britain*, 2nd ed., London, Civitas, 2006, p. 32.

⁶⁵ ‘Guidance Notes. Section2: harm and offence’, *Ofcom*, 2017, pp. 2-7, https://www.ofcom.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0023/104657/Section-2-Guidance-Notes.pdf, (accessed 7 April 2022).

“Broadcasters should have the creative freedom to explore areas which may raise serious social issues. This editorial freedom may extend to the style and tone of the programme as humour or dramatisation may provide easier access to difficult topics. However there are a range of activities that may be more problematic and the approach, such as information given before the programme or before an activity and the tone of commentary, is important in setting the parameters.”

These two excerpts suggest that comedians have the right to offend whilst it is the broadcaster it behoves to ensure that due warnings are displayed. This is further elaborated on under rule 2.3 of Ofcom’s guidance Code, “Context and information”. The first subsection of the rule, which deals with “offensive language”, begins with establishing that “audience expectations and composition vary between television and radio and each medium has different listening/viewing patterns”, before adding that “Broadcasters should know their audiences.” This, once again, seems to be more on the contra-side of the “cancel offensive comedy” argument, implying that content deemed offensive might be acceptable so long as it is directed at an audience ready to welcome this kind of content. Later on, the use of language is addressed. After underlining that offensive language is highly open to interpretation, Ofcom says that offensive material “must be justified by the context”, thereby once more leaving a grey area between where the line actually is. Further elaborating on the question of offensive language, Ofcom then adds that the use of racist terms and material should be avoided unless justified by “the editorial of the programme”. Similar guidance is also outlined for the use of holy names.

Aside from Ofcom’s Code, Lord Michael Grade, appointed new Ofcom Chairman in March 2022, affirmed during a meeting with the DCMS (Digital, Culture, Media and Sport) Committee that TV channels could feel free to air the 70’s show *The Black and White Minstrel Show*, a light entertainment widely believed to contain racist tropes, arguing it would be “obvious to the audience that this was a piece of history”.⁶⁶ This is all the more noteworthy in a time where vintage shows such as *Fawlty Towers* and *Little Britain* recently had to face attempts of cancellation for offensive material such as blackfacing and the use of racial slurs, as will be discussed in the case analyses chapter.

⁶⁶ A. Sherwin, ‘New Ofcom Chair Michael Grade says The Black and White Minstrel Show could be repeated on TV’, *iNews*, 31 March 2022, <https://inews.co.uk/news/media/new-ofcom-chair-michael-grade-black-white-and-minstrel-show-repeats-tv-1550240>, (accessed 7 April 2022).

Current views on cancel culture's effect on comedy

In the previous chapter, we have first established what some of the intricacies the environment British comedy has been evolving in were. We also established which current societal influences and legal framing are currently determining what “the unsayable” is for comedians. Before moving on to the analysis of recent cases where comedy’s rights were “infringed upon” by political correctness, a thorough review of each side of the debate, namely the “is cancel culture really stifling comedy” debate, will be presented. This review will be made out of both dissonant and concurring views expressed by relevant figures. Relevant I mean here as anyone with an enlightened and educated opinion on the topic. This includes: comedians themselves; authors with a background in the comedy industry; and academics who are known to have taken an interest in humour and the psychological/philosophical aspects thereof.

In February 2022 aired the BBC Scotland documentary *#CancelKarenDunbar*. The one hour-long show presented how Scottish comedian Karen Dunbar lived her return to television after a 10 year absence from the scene. In it, she explains how difficult it is for her to do comedy nowadays because of the way taboos have changed, and how difficult it has been for her to catch up with current audience expectations. With regards to cancel culture, she equates it with “public shaming”. In her own words:

“Public shaming has been there as long as [the concept of] public has been around. I am sure there was a couple of cave people pointing at another cave person and laughing at them. Cancel culture is the new name for that.”

According to excerpt above, she does not seem to believe that cancel culture is something new, a view that has also been expressed by others. However, she acknowledges that what is offensive today is not the same as was the case in the past. During the making of the documentary, Dunbar consulted with the BBC’s TV and Media Operations (TMO) in order to learn more about a censored *Chewin’ the Fat* (2005) sketch. The sketch, in which she played the role of *Auld Betty*, a senior woman obsessed with sexual anecdotes from her youth, was actually not cancelled for her sex-themed quips, but for the use of the word “Japs”, a slur for “Japanese”. Seeing the clip, she reacted embarrassedly, admitting that “20 years ago, I [Karen Dunbar] just wouldn’t have thought about that, especially with it being an old woman, who was young in the war, saying it because she came from that era.” According to a Herald article titled “Karen Dunbar: 'I'm terrified of being cancelled over old comedy gags'”, Dunbar

would “wholeheartedly” agree that the sketch should not be shown to younger audiences.⁶⁷ She also told the Herald that she really “had a reaction to it”, worrying about how people directly affected by the slur might feel about it today.

In summary, Dunbar, while not showing particular enthusiasm towards shifting taboos in comedy, accepts that older content should be removed if deemed too offensive for modern audiences. The real problem to her is rather the difficulty to grasp what those new taboos are, something partly addressed in a 2019 interview given by Monty Pythons member John Cleese. In the 25 minutes long clip, Cleese posits a “new set of taboos” would have superseded an older, mostly religious one, something widely touched on in Monty Python’s movie *Life of Bryan*.⁶⁸ Later on in the interview, Cleese describes this new set of taboos as being “quite different”, allowing people to get away with “very bad language by the standards of the sixties and seventies.” This was partly adhered to by English comedian Ricky Gervais, who defined “sex [and] race” as “all the things that people fear to even be discussed or talked about now, in case they say the wrong thing and they’re cancelled.”⁶⁹

In the interview, Cleese appears to suggest that while in the past, “comedy used to have a low tolerance for bad language”, it was nonetheless acceptable for people to discuss “what the difference between a wop and a dago” was, whereas today, it would now be considered more acceptable to make fun of religion or to use bad words, or even a combination of the two, than discussing cultural difference or using racial slurs. Of course, the reference to “a wop and a dago” is in fact based on a *Fawlty Tower* scene in which the main character (played by John Cleese himself) is not so much “discussing” what this difference might be as he is tapping into the taboo element of these slurs in order to prompt laughter.

Later in the interview, Cleese names “gender” as being the main taboo in today’s zeitgeist. As a follow-up to his own answer, he then makes a link between the way in which people would have become particularly touchy around gender and his view on what would be at the core of this touchiness. To him, those who get the most easily offended are like the “maiden aunts or maiden uncles”; supposedly people Cleese views as prone to being easily offended and who therefore ought not to try and reshape the world by compensating for “their neuroticism”. Instead, he believes these people should rather leave those not so easily offended by jokes or words alone, people who, Cleese affirms, represent the majority of the population. Furthermore, he also indicates that “PC started off as a good idea”, that is, “let us

⁶⁷ S. Swarbrick, ‘Kare Dunbar: ‘I’m terrified of being cancelled over old comedy gags’, *The Herald*, 19 February 2022, <https://www.heraldscotland.com/news/19934196.karen-dunbar-cancel-culture-changing-rules-comedy/>, (accessed 7 April 2022).

⁶⁸ ‘John Cleese: *Philosophy, Spirituality & Political Correctness* [online video]’, Rebel Wisdom, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jr4wo0fG8kQ&ab_channel=RebelWisdom, (accessed 6 April 2022).

⁶⁹ ‘Ricky Gervais: *The Office would not be made today* [online video]’, Times Radio, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yFg19027CJk&ab_channel=TimesRadio, (accessed 6 April 2022).

not be horrible, cruel, and unkind to people”. Conversely, he also affirms that PC has now become “this blanket thing which looks as though it is trying to exterminate humour and fun”. A different and perhaps not as moderate conclusion than that drawn by Gervais, who wrote in 2019: “PC culture isn’t killing comedy. It’s driving it. As it always did (...)”.⁷⁰

In parallel to comedians expressing mild concerns about the subversive effects of political correctness on comedy are also other, not-so-mild ones. With trademark catchphrases such as “Cancel culture is killing comedy” and “you can’t say anything funny anymore”, numerous comedians are outspokenly fretting about their careers, or at any rate claim to do so. Stories with deep cultural ramifications, which those related to cancel culture and political correctness tend to be, seem to yield a fair share of success in all kinds of news outlets. This then arguably gives any comedian willing to testify to how their job is increasingly becoming difficult an incentive to do so as tolerance towards offense either shifts or recedes, regardless of the extent to which these claims are factually supported by reality. Examples of British comedians expressing such views are Maureen Lipman, John Cleese, Jennifer Sanders and Billy Connolly, to name but a few.⁷¹⁷²

Because dissecting such claims or articles would only deliver insubstantial data, this facet of the debate will not be as extensively examined as might perhaps have been useful to. However, keen readers with an interest in tackling those reports are encouraged to do so. Small variations between otherwise similar discourses and links to the utterer’s professional life – i.e., similitudes between comedians making the claim that PC is killing comedy – could potentially be worth looking into.

In 2015, Scottish comedian Frankie Boyle wrote a lengthy piece for the Independent in which he denounced the media for exacerbating the public discourse around offense.⁷³ More precisely, he argued that if people seem to be quicker to take offense in our day and age, then the main culprit are the media which are cashing in on controversies. Boyle writes: “Outrage just makes good copy. It’s easier to write, and simpler to understand.” He then further supports these claims by raising the fact that people “no longer need to hear the

⁷⁰ R. Gervais, 2019 [Twitter], 1 November 2019,

<https://twitter.com/rickygervais/status/1190041146585686016>, (accessed 10 April 2022).

⁷¹ K. Razzall, ‘Maureen Lipman: Cancel culture could wipe out comedy’, *BBC News*, 22 December 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-59703257>, (accessed 10 April 2022).

⁷² A. Phillips, ‘Alex Phillips: Is cancel culture killing comedy?’, *GB News*, 4 November 2021, <https://www.gbnews.uk/news/alex-phillips-is-cancel-culture-killing-comedy/153586>, (accessed 10 April 2022).

⁷³ F. Boyle, ‘Frankie Boyle: If you’re a writer these days our culture seems to say – ‘Please challenge me while I scream whenever I hear something I don’t like’’, *The Independent*, 17 February 2015, <https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/if-you-re-a-writer-these-days-our-culture-seems-to-say-please-challenge-and-provoke-me-while-i-scream-whenever-i-hear-something-i-don-t-like-10052188.html>, (accessed 14 April 2022).

actual content of the thing we're told to be offended by," and then exemplifies, "We hear of people being arrested for tweets without the tweet being reported; comics are blasted for routines that aren't [even] printed," Boyle observes. Elaborating on the media's deceitfulness argument, the Scotsman writes, "It's a feature of late capitalism that we get a lot of information thrown at us, and we have to make snap decisions and form strong opinions without really knowing anything." To him, it is the growing complexity of modern society, as opposed to media deceitfulness, which is at the root of this distortion of the reality. In parallel, Boyle thinks that modern people are too busy to get familiar with most issues and need oversimplified stories, hence the dramatic headlines. It should also be underlined that in 2012, Frankie Boyle sued a newspapers company, the *Daily Mirror*, over a libel case for having been called a "racist comedian", a case he eventually won.⁷⁴

If Boyle was not the first to make these observations, it can nonetheless be said that these can be refuted, or at least partly so. To start with, not all newspapers, to name but one type of media, oversimplify complex situations. In fact, some even pride themselves of the opposite. And their trustworthiness rates show: a range of 57 to 71% people reported that they trusted the BBC to help them "better understand what is going on in the world today."⁷⁵ What is more, overall low rates of trustworthiness for newspapers (44% on average) suggest that no matter what distorted view of reality they may be trying to convey, their persuasiveness may only be so effective since their readers are showing high levels of distrust towards them.⁷⁶ However, according to the website Marketing Charts, a 2012 Harris Interactive study showed that catchy headlines was in fact the greatest enticing factor for (American) people to read a piece of news. In the study, 2,000 adults were asked what factors would encourage them the most to read an article, a question to which the proposition "a catchy headline" received the highest approval (54%). Comparatively, the second most influencing factor was "An interesting picture with the article" with 44%, and "Interesting data or research which supports the article" came in third with 43%.⁷⁷

The "are the media controlling what people think?" conundrum has been raised by others before. To name but one example, comedian Stewart Lee called the turmoil around woke political correctness a "non-troversy", in a Guardian article whose subheading read "The

⁷⁴ 'Boyle wins £54,650 in 'racism' libel case', *BBC News*, 22 October 2012, <https://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-20033097>, (accessed 14 April 2022).

⁷⁵ 'Ofcom's Annual Report on the BBC 2019/20', *Ofcom*, 2021, <https://www.ofcom.org.uk/tv-radio-and-on-demand/information-for-industry/bbc-operating-framework/performance/bbc-annual-report>, (accessed 3 February 2022).

⁷⁶ A. Watson, 'Trusted media sources for news in the United Kingdom (UK) 2021', *Statista*, 7 February 2022, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1026666/trust-in-media-news-sources-in-the-uk/>, (accessed 14 April 2022).

⁷⁷ 'Catchy Headlines The Biggest Draw For News Article Readers', *Marketing Charts*, 28 September 2012, <https://www.marketingcharts.com/television-23675>, (accessed 22 April 2022).

right-wing press is practised at poisoning our politics with confected outrage”, thereby accusing right-wing press of deliberately creating a fuss around the freedom to do comedy.⁷⁸ This particular side of the debate has not been touched on in this thesis thus far, and deserved to be given a closer look. That the deceiving power of the media might play a role in what comedians *feel* they can or cannot say is all the more worth looking into when is taken into account that the vast majority of the sources this thesis relies on is media-based. What is more, I believe that determining the extent to which the media exaggerate stories and reports is key for the topic at hand, and deserves to be looked at separately on a broader scale.

Going back to other comedians’ views on the question of cancel culture in comedy, British stand-up Russel Kane explained in the comedy podcast *What Most People Think*, hosted by comedian Geoff Norcott, that he did not feel it was more difficult to do comedy today.⁷⁹ Instead, he shares John Cleese’s theory that people – and indeed comedians – are in fact much freer to say what they want. In other words, they theorize that, whilst some social subjects such as gender and ethnicity have increasingly become difficult to laugh about, it is a fact that sex and swear words have now become commonplace in comedy. So, Kane suggests that comedians are in fact better off today, arguing that trading off a handful of well-defined subjects for the ability to use whatever sex-related stories or swear words ultimately provides them with more freedom, not less. He says in the show:

“Yes there’s different things that you can be cancelled for, but they just replaced the other things that were much more difficult in the past ... So it’s not that it’s more difficult, it’s [that] public speech where you’re trying to be provocative has always been difficult. It’s just difficult in a different way.”

That being a comedian is difficult is also nothing new. In fact, this was already being posited in 1984 by Richard Alexander in his paper on comedy and humour, in which he discusses the comedian’s inevitable fate to give in to what his audience asks, and not the other way round. He does this by taking the example Trevor Griffith’s character Bert Challenor in his play *Comedians* (1976). In the play, Challenor affirms that the Comedian may only hope to make an audience laugh about whatever it is they want to laugh about. He wrote: “Any good comedian can lead an audience by the nose. But only in the direction they’re going.”

⁷⁸ S. Lee, ‘The divided land of ‘woke’ and Tory’, *The Guardian*, 6 September 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/sep/06/the-divided-land-of-woke-and-tory>, (accessed 14 April 2022).

⁷⁹ M. Parry, ‘Russell Kane defends cancel culture era: ‘At least we can joke about sex’’, *GB News*, 21 February 2022, <https://www.gbnews.uk/news/russell-kane-defends-cancel-culture-era-at-least-we-can-joke-about-sex/230689>, (accessed 12 April 2022).

Some comedians have also questioned the existence of cancel culture in comedy, i.e., the receding freedom comedians have in joking about anything they want whilst using any words they want. For instance, British comedian Shazia Mirza wrote in 2019: “Maureen Lipman is the latest to claim humour is under threat. I think that’s a joke in itself”. She supports this by alluding to her own numerous contentious comedy bits, some of which elicited indignation and even alleged death threats, something that “never deterred [her] from getting up on stage and doing the same material night after night.”⁸⁰ However, this does not disqualify the theory of there being growing hurdles for comedians. Instead, this simply demonstrates that she does not worry about it, or at least tries to pretend that she does not. Later in the article, she contends that cancel culture is a “media invention” which comedians are, given their “outspoken” nature, all called to respond to one in way or another, because it is good advertisement. She then adds, “Cancel culture is just a term used by people to put a cloak of respectability over the fact that they want to be able to say offensive things without consequences”, referring to comedians saying “bigoted things” on stage or online. That Mirza contradicts herself in first defining cancel culture as something invented by the media and then as a ploy used by bigoted comedians should not be overlooked as it sheds light on the shakiness of the artist’s argument. In conclusion, she foretells what she believe might be the future of comedians and cancel culture. She writes:

“When I first started standup, I got a death threat and it was considered shocking and dangerous. Now comedians get death threats on Twitter all the time. It’s the same with so-called cancel culture, it’s water off a duck’s back. In the future maybe every comedian will be cancelled for 15 minutes; it can be worn as a badge of honour, and none of us will ever shut up about it.”

In summary, Mirza does not really seem to believe that “cancel culture does not exist”, but rather seem to believe that it is widely overrated, and that however the actual impact of it may be on comedians, it could never hurt them more than superficially and temporarily.

Outspokenly left-wing comedian Ben Elton, who came to be massively popular in the previous century as a leading figure of alternative comedy, also shared his view on the matter.⁸¹ As a comedian who once joked that some claim he actually invented political correctness, Elton does not linger so much on the question of whether he feels limited in his freedom as a stand-up, but rather insists on the fact that it is irrelevant to him, as there has

⁸⁰ S. Marzia, ‘Cancel culture is a myth: nothing can shut us comedians up’, *The Guardian*, 23 December 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/dec/23/cancel-culture-comedians>, (accessed 12 April 2022).

⁸¹ J. Wigney, ‘Ben Elton on political correctness, cancel culture and returning to stand-up comedy in the COVID era’, *Herald Sun*, 15 March 2021, <https://www.heraldsun.com.au/lifestyle/smart/ben-elton-on-political-correctness-cancel-culture-and-returning-to-standup-comedy-in-the-covid-era/news-story/995d502c5175da93d524c534a7889a39>, (accessed 14 April 2022).

always been things that were not “sayable”. More precisely, he suggests that certain freedoms, such as the freedom to do comedy, were “once considered political correctness gone mad”. He exemplifies this by raising the fact that it once was unthinkable for British people that women might be given the right to vote, arguing that so long as one steers clear from un-PC comedy, the debate need not even be had in the first place.

Views such as Elton’s are not particularly helpful because they tend to deny the reality of the situation. Not being confronted to critics because he never indulges in “really offensive material” does not mean it is not the case for other, more provocative comedians. Moreover, even though he affirms that he has tackled “all the difficult subjects” in his career without ever “punching down”, i.e., making his audience laugh at more vulnerable people’s expense, his “PC philosophy” makes him a special case. Elton nonetheless adds a new facet to the debate: Can comedy be exclusively PC, and should it be ?

To conclude this chapter, two non-comedians’ views will be considered, namely that of comedy critic Dominic Maxwell and pop-culture specialist Rachel Aroesti. The former contends that it is not the case that comedians are no longer free to joke about anything they want and that no subject is so taboo it cannot be joked about. However, Maxwell believes that the rules to be respected have gotten tougher and that it has become trickier to deliver targeted jokes. Maxwell wrote: “You can still say what you want. But, for good or for ill, you have to be brave and you have to be accurate.”⁸² In his analysis of what it means for a “controversial comedian” to be “walking the line” nowadays, he makes the case that it is still possible for contentious comedians to perform on stage and get away with offensive jokes, but that it has somehow become more difficult to do so. In an opinion piece he wrote in 2021, Maxwell concluded that if right-wing comedian Geoff Norcott gets away with so much of allegedly offensive content, it is because he punches in both directions whilst showing no sign of racism whatsoever, on top of “nodding to centuries of sexism and racism”. To Maxwell, outright mean mockery is funny to no one – a line comedians all the way back to court jesters walked and still continue to walk today. In Maxwell’s eyes, neither racist humour nor die-hard liberal leftist humour are the kind of comedy people want. This could be called into question, however. In fact, a plethora of comedians have thrived on just that kind of humour, and although they may have had to face repeated backlashes because of that, it may nonetheless hardly be argued that comedians like Bernard Manning – widely regarded as a racist comedian – failed to make their audience laugh.

In parallel, Rachel Aroesti, who often writes on the topic of cancel culture and comedy,

⁸² D. Maxwell, ‘If you’re a controversial comedian, walking the line means being funny and accurate’, *The Times*, 12 October 2021, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/if-youre-a-controversial-comedian-walking-the-line-means-being-funny-and-accurate-z375673qs>, (accessed 13 April 2022).

appears to share Shazia Mirza's opinion.⁸³ She wrote in 2021 that she does not deny cancel culture's existence in comedy, but calls it "nebulous". To her, online criticism towards a joke almost never leads to actual consequences for its utterer, no matter how widespread the criticism is. In fact, Aroesti thinks, it mostly grants them free advertising and mostly boosts their reputation, except in some occasional cases. What Aroesti does in the article is deconstructing a number of cases where comedians claimed they fell foul to cancel culture before laying bare why it is actually not the case. She also argues that today's comedy is actually more boundary-pushing than has ever been the case before, referring to a "scatologically gross-out" or "sexually explicit" kind of comedy, one that shamelessly tackles all kinds of taboos. She exemplifies this by enumerating shows and comedians who tackle particularly un-PC subjects such as masturbation, incestuous paedophilia, parenting a disabled child, racism, etc. She also points out that the inconsistency in the media around PC humour is "nothing new". More precisely, she raises the fact that in 1995, the Independent was already writing about the "tired, boring, repetitive, unfunny PC rubbish" known as alternative comedy while the Daily Mail contended that all that alternative comedian Ben Elton's audience wanted was "cliched, progressive, political correctness dressed up as daring satire"; thereby demonstrating that more than 25 years ago, journalists were already dividing the public opinion on the subject. Finally, Aroesti makes the observation that "social media criticism is rarely a tool of oppression," before concluding that it is rather an "occupational hazard in many professions, and it doesn't destroy them."

In this chapter, several theories were looked at on the subject of cancel culture in comedy. The main findings this review yielded is that while many of the people discussed in this chapter seem to disagree on several points, a real change in taboos and in tolerance for unpolitically correct humour seem to be taking place. More precisely, a shift from sex and religion to race and gender, a change some comedians are struggling to cope with, appears to be the prominent theory.

⁸³ R. Aroesti, 'Cancel culture killing comedy? What a joke', *The Guardian*, 10 August 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2021/aug/10/cancel-culture-killing-comedy-what-a-joke>, (accessed 22 April 2022).

British comedy “stifled by cancel culture” - Case analyses

We will now look at practical cases where comedy was, to varying extent, altered by the various influences linked to cancel culture.

In keeping with the overall methodology of this thesis, i.e., contextualizing British comedy in before critically appraising the different restrictions it is currently facing and the extent thereof, the following cases do not all entail stories which took place within a given timeframe, but are rather all interspersed across a certain range of time. In other words, these stories either happened recently or, in the case of the three first ones, took place in the second part of the 20th century. Between these two categories will also be looked at, in a third intermediary category, two stories stemming from a more remote past, but which recently came under the spotlights again for reasons that will be critically discussed in the following pages. It should also be underscored that not all of these cases directly relate to comedy. For instance, that of novel writer J.K. Rowling and Monty Pythons member Terry Gilliam are admittedly not directly related to comedy. There are two reasons for this: first, defining what really constitutes a “comedy case” is a perilous task. As already established, comedy can manifest itself in various ways. For example, while a stand-up comedian performing at a venue or a comedy show airing on television arguably constitutes the archetypal example of a comedian, comedy and humour can also be observed in less archetypal circumstances. Such examples may include a politician making a quip during an interview, or a science-fiction author sharing humorous tweets online. The second reason why the following case analyses do not all directly pertain to comedians and comedy is that stories external to comedy can also have an impact on comedians. That being said, the majority of these cases do directly pertain to professional comedians.

The first case study will be that of British comedian Bernard Manning, a comedian who was known for his controversial jokes mostly based on race and ethnicity. Because of public opinion, a British venue took the decision to cancel a show Manning was meant to perform there.

The second case that will be looked at is that of Benny Hill, and more particularly his eponymous show *The Benny Hill Show*, which was also cancelled more than thirty years ago due concerns around sexist connotations. Furthermore, the show was recently reintroduced on British TV, a first in many years. The way it has been welcomed by current audiences will also be discussed.

Then comes the second subsection. The first case that will be looked at here is John Cleese's *Fawlty Tower* sit-com. Recently, one of the episode of the show, *The Germans*, had some jokes edited out by the BBC, and came close to being removed from television altogether.

Next, *Little Britain*, which recently came under fire after the murder of George Floyd in May 2020 because of the show's use of blackfacing, will be discussed.

The third and last subsection of this chapter will first give a brief summary of the J.K. Rowling case. Despite her not being a comedian, the whole Twitter scandal which took place in 2020 has, I argue, impacted British society as a whole, including comedy.

Andrew Lawrence, an English stand-up comedian, will then be looked at. Similarly to Rowling, Lawrence started a Twitter outrage, albeit of a lesser scale than Rowling's, because of tweets he wrote in 2020. As a result, many of the artist's shows were cancelled in top of being dropped by his agent.

The following case involves a joke made in a live show by English comedian Jo Brand, a joke that some have called an "incitement to violence", a seemingly innocuous story which nonetheless gathered a lot of attention by British news media.

The penultimate case that will be critically looked at entails Monty Python member Terry Gilliam and the 1986 play *Into the Woods*. The play, which was meant to be performed at the English venue the Old Vic, was cancelled because of some in-house disapproval of comments Gilliam had made online.

Finally, the last case that will be discussed in this thesis is that of comedian Jimmy Carr, who came under fire in early 2022 for a Netflix special in which one particular joke made about the holocaust created outrage.

As mentioned earlier, those nine cases were chosen based on two main criteria: a controversial nature of the story they entail which lead to the creation of a friction between freedom of speech in comedy and political correctness, and the media coverage these stories received. Following these two criteria, the final analysis delivers an heterogenous set of cases from which a clearer notion of the state of affairs around cancel culture in comedy can be grasped. Finally, as was already the case for the previous paragraphs of this chapter, most sources come from (online) newspapers. For this reason, it must be acknowledged the academic quality thesis somewhat suffered, and makes any observations made or conclusions drawn less reliable. However, because of the fast-moving landscape in comedy, this approach nonetheless constitutes the most valid approach, as academic sources on this topic were scarce, when not lacking, at the time of writing.

Older cases of cancelled comedians

Bernard Manning

On Monday 19th of June 2007, a Times article headlined “Bernard Manning, banned but never silenced”.⁸⁴ One year after his death, another newspaper’s headline, the Irish Times in this case, read “Offensive comedians should not get the last laugh”, article in which the first sentence of the second paragraph read, “When Bernard Manning, the racist, sexist so-called comedian died last year, it seemed like the end of an era”.⁸⁵ Through the article, it can be understood that the era the journalist was referring to was that of bigoted, non-alternative comedians.

Upon the comedian’s death, British writer and performer Barry Cryer said: “The thing about Bernard was that he looked funny, he sounded funny and he had excellent timing. It was just what he actually said that could be worrying”.⁸⁶ Bernard John Manning, one of England’s best known and most successful comedians, was indeed known for performing a particularly blunt, unbridled and stereotypical kind of comedy. He was namely famous for his appearances on shows such as *The Comedians* and *The Wheeltappers and Shunters Social Club*. While partly responsible for his success, the artist’s risqué style also got him in trouble more than once, especially in a United Kingdom on the way of becoming more and more inclusive and mindful of protecting ethnic minorities.

In 2002, the stand-up comedian had to face what is now sometimes referred to as the “woke mob”, in reference to the woke movement. One of Manning’s first confrontations with this “mob” was when The Pavilion, a venue located in the English seaside town of Weymouth, took the decision of banning Manning from performing at the venue. The impetus behind the ban was that local councillors were concerned that the artist’s racial jokes might cause offense to the ethnic minority communities living in the area. More specifically, those in favour of the comedian’s ban thought his comedy would actually be in breach of the Race Relations Act 2000, a now-repealed national law which placed a “positive duty on all public authorities to eliminate unlawful racial discrimination, promote equality of opportunity and

⁸⁴A. Sherwin, ‘Bernard Manning, banned but never silenced, dies at 76’, *The Times*, 18 June 2007, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/bernard-manning-banned-but-never-silenced-dies-at-76-z50wx3fr6nz>, (accessed 3 February 2022).

⁸⁵F. O’Toole, ‘Offensive comedians should not get the last laugh’, *The Irish Times*, 30 October 2008, <https://www.irishtimes.com/opinion/offensive-comedians-should-not-get-the-last-laugh-1.903011>, (accessed 1 March 2022).

⁸⁶ ‘Comedy star Bernard Manning dies’, *BBC News*, 18 June 2007, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/entertainment/6765093.stm>, (accessed 3 February 2022).

good race relations in all their functions.”⁸⁷ The movement to cancel Manning did not directly emanate from the county council however, but did from a local youth worker who had launched a campaign to this aim. Thus, a petition signed by no less than 200 people proved sufficient to convince local councillors to go through with the ban. According to a 2002 Dorset Echo article which headlined “Manning is banned”, one of those who endorsed the campaign against Manning at the time were arguing that Manning’s “brand of humour” was “deliberately designed to breed hatred among racial groups.” They added:

"If people wish to see Bernard Manning or buy his videos I [the campaigner] don't have a problem with it. What I do have a problem with and what I believe is wrong and potentially illegal is for us to offer the Pavilion as a venue for his material."

Of course, the campaigner’s worries that it would be illegal for “them” to have Manning perform at the Pavilion were far-fetched, since the Pavilion was a private company.⁸⁸ Still, those comments were reportedly all supported by the councillors. The then Dorset Tourism spokesman affirmed that they had “to stand up and say booking Bernard Manning [was] wrong”, while going as far as to alluding to Martin Luther King’s civil rights movement. The then Finance spokesman Coun Kay Wilcox also argued that there was “an ethnic minority in this area” and that it therefore was “important [to] promote racial harmony”.⁸⁹ According to a BBC article, one outraged fan of Manning described the city council’s decision as a “disgrace”, and said it “prove[d] Political Correctness in this country is spiralling out of control”. Unlike the BBC, the Dorset Echo article failed to mention any opinion supportive to Manning, which may be the BBC’s guidelines on impartiality at play.

In neither the Dorset Echo nor the BBC News article can be found terms suggesting the existence of a general trend whereby comedians would be stifled or cancelled. The comedian himself, in light of this affair, said to the Dorset Echo that he had personally been left rather unshaken by the Pavilion’s ban, even though he did believe his fans might be angry, especially given the fact that they had already bought their tickets.

Finally, it can also be noted that Bernard Manning, who has been a performing comedian for five decades, can hardly be said to have suffered from those anecdotal setbacks, at least

⁸⁷ ‘The Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000’ [website], Unison, <https://www.unison.org.uk/motions/2003/national-delegate-conference/the-race-relations-amendment-act-2000/>, (accessed 3 February 2022).

⁸⁸ History, *Weymouth Pavilion* [website], <https://weymouthpavilion.com/history/>, (accessed 1 March 2022).

⁸⁹ ‘Manning is banned’, *Dorset Echo*, 6 December 2022, <https://www.dorsetecho.co.uk/news/5383398.manning-is-banned/>, (accessed 3 February 2022).

from a financial point of view. The comedian in fact died with an estimated net worth of \$1.5 million, a sum mainly earned thanks to his career as an artist.⁹⁰

The Benny Hill Show

Alfred Hill, mostly known under his nickname “Benny” Hill, incontrovertibly represents a staple of British comedy and has reached heights of success few others have. In 1989 however, after two and a half decades of sheer success on television (BBC and ITV), his slapstick gags, ludicrous chase scene often featuring scantily-clad women and winsome silliness finally waned to the point of cancellation – though not for PC reasons this time, or not solely at least.⁹¹ Not solely because, as is well-established now, comedy featuring an arguably unsightly, beyond middle-aged white man ogling and chasing (or being chased by) lightly-dressed young girls is polar opposite to the current idea of what the woke movement promotes. If the alleged sexism – for not everyone agrees or agreed on the presence of sexism in Hill’s show – has impacted the declining viewing rates of his eponymous show or not is unclear, although one might assume that 25 years of prime time television was already in and of itself quite the long run, and that it only made sense that people simply outgrew or grew tired of Hill’s style, which tended to revolve around the same gag mechanic.

Whatever the case might be, Thames Television, the production company the *Benny Hill Show* was under the aegis of, cancelled the show for both waning viewings and a growing public distaste for racy, borderline sexist humour. The allegations of sexism in *The Benny Hill Show* were in fact far from being a scarcity. As a 2021 Times article puts it, Hill was “criticized for being smutty and sexist. [He] frequently objectified women in sketches and did blackface impressions of figures including Mr T, star of The A-Team.”⁹² Following the unrest created in the wake of the show’s reintroduction on British television, *That’s TV* chief executive Daniel Cass said in an interview with the Times that he did not “think it’s for us [*That’s TV*] as a modern broadcaster to patronise our viewers, but ... when we see any content that we think has the potential to cause offence, we always display information so that viewers are aware.” (The display information Cass refers to reads “This programme reflects the standards, language and attitudes of the time. Some viewers may find the content offensive.”) In the same interview, Crass also said: “These are finely balanced judgment calls. I’m not sure it’s always obvious where the line is,” before explaining that they

⁹⁰Bernard Manning, Famous Birthday [website], <https://allfamousbirthday.com/bernard-manning/>, (accessed 3 February 2022).

⁹² J. Kanter, ‘Surprise TV return for ‘sexist’ Benny Hill’, *The Times*, 19 November 2021, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/surprise-tv-return-for-sexist-benny-hill-xj36573sn>, (accessed 3 February 2022).

review every show on a case-by-case basis in order to decide whether a joke is socially acceptable or not. Moreover, the idea that the show was indeed sexist was partly nurtured by other contemporary comedians such as Ben Elton, who repeatedly criticized and made fun of Benny Hill in some of his own comedy. In 1986, shortly before Hill's career reached an all-time low, Elton referred to Hill's show in one of his acts as being what people should really be worried about when it comes to obscenity being shown on TV. That being said, Hill's fans were quickly tended to, as re-runs of the multi-awarded show was broadcast on ITV until 1992 in the UK.⁹³

Around the world, the show never really disappeared: having been exported to more than 140 countries in its heyday, there now seems to be virtually nothing which could silence Benny Hill for good, on a global scale at any rate. At its climax, the Bafta-winner Benny Hill scored higher viewing rates than the Moon Landing had done nationally.⁹⁴ According to a Daily Mail article published in November 2021, his work was described by British comedian Ben Miller from *The Armstrong and Miller Show* as “ground-breaking”, and described Hill himself as being “the most successful comedian on a world-wide stage that Britain has ever produced”.

In late 2021, the *Benny Hill Show* – which had not been licensed to any UK broadcasters in two decades – has nonetheless made its return on the national channel “That’s TV Christmas”, a seasonal rebrand of That’s TV Gold. So, what does the show’s re-airing after two decades of silence in the UK tells us about the way cancel culture is impacting comedy? According to Scotsman columnist Aiden Smith, it would be “precisely because of cancel culture that he’s [Benny Hill] made a comeback from beyond the grave.”⁹⁵ Unsurprisingly, not everyone is happy about the show’s comeback, although this does not necessarily imply that the show is not “PC enough”: Benny Hill has in fact always been a hit-or-miss type of comedian. Just as contemporary people disliked his style back in the 70’s and in the 80’s, it makes sense that decades later, the same phenomenon can be observed as not all type of comedy age equally well. The difference now being, of course, that discontent and offense are being given a voice far quicker and far easier now, thanks to social media and the internet in general.

⁹³ M. Williams, ‘Row as ‘sexist’ Benny Hill show makes a surprise return after nearly 20 years’, *The Herald*, 23 November 2021, <https://www.heraldscotland.com/news/homenews/19736407.row-sexist-benny-hill-show-makes-surprise-return-nearly-20-years/>, (accessed 3 February 2022).

⁹⁴ ‘Benny Hill back on national TV after two decades’, *PR Newswire*, 18 November 2021, <https://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/benny-hill-back-on-national-tv-after-two-decades-301427748.html>, (accessed 3 February 2022).

⁹⁵ A. Smith, ‘Aidan Smith: Whether wokies like it or not, Benny Hill is our heritage’, *The Scotsman*, 23 November 2021, <https://www.scotsman.com/news/opinion/aidan-smith-whether-wokies-like-it-or-not-benny-hill-is-our-heritage-3467367>, (accessed 3 February 2022).

Unfortunately, measuring exactly how British people (and beyond) reacted to the rebroadcasting of Benny Hill on television would require means that go beyond the scope of this thesis, but regardless of numeral details, at least one conclusion can be drawn: whatever toll cancel culture has taken on British comedy, there is still room for a show which objectively speaking commodifies humorous lechery towards young girls to run on television without any outspoken outrage, protest or conclusive censorship attempts.

Older comedy cancelled or re-edited today

Fawlty Tower

In June 2020, an outrage made itself felt throughout Britain around a first-censored-then-removed episode of the sit-com *Fawlty Towers*, which showcased Monty Pythons member John Cleese as Basil Fawlty, the show's lead character. First aired in 1975, the episode at hand, *The Germans*, featured Mr Fawlty, who repeatedly throws World War Two references at a German family waiting to order food. One of the episode's most successful and equally criticized joke goes as follow:

(Basil Fawlty) - "Sorry, I got a little confused 'cause everyone keeps mentioning the War. So could you ... [girl's cries intensify] ... What's the matter?"

(A German sitting at the table with his family, consoling his crying daughter) - "It's all right."

(Basil Fawlty) - "Is there something wrong?"

(The German, angrily) - "Will you just stop talking about the war?"

(Basil Fawlty) - "Me? You started it!"

(The German) - "We did not start it."

(Basil Fawlty) - "Yes you did, you invaded Poland!"

Later in the scene, Fawlty performs a satirical impression of Adolf Hitler by means of turning his forefinger into a mustache and speaking loudly and angrily whilst goose-stepping across the dining room, something he refers to as the "funny walk". This scene is not the one that really got the episode into trouble, however. Another of the episode's scene, which featured Major Gower, played by English actor Ballard Berkeley, had already by edited out in 2013 by some broadcasters due to racial slurs and sexist comments. In the scene, Fawlty and the Major are having a conversation in which the latter explains that "niggers" are in fact what he calls "West Indians" and that actual Indians are what people call "wogs". During the same scene, the two characters also make several questionable comments towards women, such as comparing women's brains with "Swiss cheese". Albeit understandably not politically correct, some claimed that the very essence of Berkeley's character hinges on that very

unpolitical correctness, as a Daily Mail article suggests.⁹⁶ According to the sensationalist newspaper, a fan would have written as a reaction to the episode's cut: "You can't airbrush history away and I doubt if anyone but the terminally thin-skinned could be offended by the major, a character we're clearly supposed to laugh at rather than with." Still according to the article, several other fans wrote similar complaining comments pertaining to the BBC's move. So, even a caricature of things that are not politically correct were still considered, in this particular case, to be out of line.

The unrest around this particular episode may in part have been bolstered by the Black Lives Matter movement, itself nurtured by George Floyd's killing in 2020. In light of the outrage, the BBC owned TV platform UKTV took the decision to temporarily remove the episode altogether in order to carry out a review which ultimately resulted in the episode's re-airing. In June 2020, not long after Cleese himself made online comments in which he expressed his dissatisfaction and disapproval of the corporation's move to take off the episode, UKTV issued a statement in order to clear the air around the controversy:

"We already offer guidance to viewers across some of our classic comedy titles, but we recognise that more contextual information can be required on our archive comedy, so we will be adding extra guidance and warnings to the front of programmes to highlight potentially offensive content and language (...) We will reinstate *Fawlty Towers* once that extra guidance has been added, which we expect will be in the coming days (...) We will continue to look at what content is on offer as we always have done."

At the time of writing, *The Germans* can be watched on the television network Britbox, with a warning saying "contains some offensive racial language of the time and upsetting scenes", and on Netflix with a warning that says "language" and "discrimination".⁹⁷

As is the case for the *Benny Hill Show*, *Fawlty Towers* has, or had, to deal with cancel culture, curtailing some of the aspects of comedy which were once allowed to go unnoticed in British society. Ethical standards are always evolving, and it only makes sense that what used to make people laugh decades ago does not necessarily continue to do so in the third millennium. So, editing out bits of *Fawlty Towers*, a show acclaimed by the Radio Times

⁹⁶ L. Cox, 'Don't mention the ***: Censorship row as BBC cuts the Major's 'racist' lines from classic *Fawlty Towers* episode', *The Daily Mail*, 22 January 2013, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2266738/Censorship-row-BBC-cuts-racist-lines-classic-Fawlty-Towers-episode.html>, (accessed 3 February 2022).

⁹⁷ 'Fawlty Towers: The Germans episode to be reinstated by UKTV', *BBC News*, 13 June 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-53032895>, (accessed 3 February 2022).

Magazine as being the best British TV sitcom of all time,⁹⁸ might indeed prevent some individuals from being offended by some arguably outdated jokes. By the same token however, editing out what many regard as beloved comedy bits could also be construed as offensive by others. Indeed, some may feel that a key part of their culture and history and own memories is being vilified, only to be jettisoned to unclear and morally grey ends.

Little Britain

In 2020, The Spectator columnist Brendan O'Neill opened an article titled "The madness of censoring shows like Little Britain" with the sentence: "Cancel culture is out of control".⁹⁹ The article was published shortly after duo Matt Lucas and David Walliams' comedy show *Little Britain* (along with their follow up show *Come Fly With Me*) was removed from Netflix, BBC iPlayer and Britbox earlier in June 2020. The Spectator is far from being the only news source having reported on the subject: around the same time, a slew of similar headlines could be read in all major British newspapers, questioning the show's withdrawal. Others took a radically different position however, questioning how it could have taken so long before the show was cancelled.

In this case will thus be critically discussed both sides of the argument along with any middle-ground positions in order to get critical insight of the various forces which have underpinned the show's withdrawal from the three mainstream platforms.

Little Britain, which is known for depicting a gross caricature of the 2000's British society, mostly came under fire for the portrayal of black people, a practice commonly known as "blackfacing". Unsurprisingly, there has also been a significant amount of voices that had acclaimed the show's withdrawal, although this feeling proved ambivalent. For instance, while the Spectator overtly condemned *Little Britain's* withdrawal, a BBC News article headlined "Little Britain pulled from iPlayer and Netflix because 'times have changed'", whereas the headline of an article in the American men's magazine Esquire went "How Did It Take This Long To Put 'Little Britain' In The Bin?".

From these three news headlines alone, it can be observed that with each article, a totally different position is being adopted. In the Spectator's headline, the emphasis is clearly put on the writer's disapproval of the show's removal. Conversely, Welsh columnist Zoe Williams titled an article she wrote for the Guardian "Little Britain is coming back. But was it ever really

⁹⁸ 'Fawlty Towers tops Radio Times greatest British sitcom list', British comedy *Guide* [website], 2019, https://www.comedy.co.uk/tv/news/5260/fawlty_towers_tops_sitcom_list/, (accessed 3 February 2022).

⁹⁹ B. O'Neill, 'The madness of censoring shows like Little Britain', *The Spectator*, 10 June 2020, <https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/the-madness-of-censoring-shows-like-little-britain>, (accessed 3 February 2022).

funny?”. Finally, the BBC News headline mentioned earlier (“Little Britain pulled from iPlayer and Netflix because ‘times have changed’”), unlike the Guardian’s and the Spectator’s, appears to be much more neutral, reporting on the issue without taking any clear stance on the matter.

For the sake of contextualizing this case, it must be underlined that *Little Britain*, one of the most acclaimed British sit-coms in living memory, is decidedly not a family hour show given its borderline humour. When it first aired, the BBC-financed comedy had originally started as many other contemporaneous comedies as a radio show, which had run from 2000 to 2002. Following the show’s success, it was then re-run in 2004 after the BBC had slightly edited some of the episodes which were now to be broadcast at 6.30pm, a time where sensitive audiences were more likely to tune in. Therefore, it can be argued that right from its burgeoning state, the show was already considered too borderline by some, and already had to face PC censorship then.

Regarding the authors’ reaction, David Walliams, one of *Little Britain*’s main writers and actors, was asked in a Radio Times interview if the public might see more *Little Britain* soon, to which he replied that he would “definitely do it differently because it’s a different time”, before adding: “There is all kinds of tolerances that change. People understand people’s predicaments more now.” According to several sources such as the BBC,¹⁰⁰ the Guardian¹⁰¹ and Sky News,¹⁰² the momentum which brought the show under fire at the time was greatly connected to the murder of George Floyd in May 2020 and the ensuing Black Lives Matter protests, which took place only a few days before most of the aforementioned articles were published. Prior to Floyd’s death, Matt Lucas, the other main actor in the show, claimed in another interview with the English news outlet Big Issue that he would not make *Little Britain* today, referring to his belief that it would “upset people”. More precisely, he affirmed that if he had the chance now, he would not play black characters or joke about transvestites. In the same interview, the comedian also described his past comedy as being more “cruel” than what he would do now, or in his own words: “than what I’d do now”. Noteworthy here is the conditional tense of his sentence (“I *would* do now). Arguably, the sentence can either mean that he would not do the same kind of comedy now because he would deem wrong to do so,

¹⁰⁰ ‘Little Britain pulled from iPlayer and Netflix because ‘times have changed’’, *BBC News*, 9 June 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-52983319>, (accessed 3 February 2022).

¹⁰¹ T. Moses, ‘Little Britain removed from BBC iPlayer, Netflix and BritBox due to use of blackface’, *The Guardian*, 9 June 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2020/jun/09/little-britain-removed-from-bbc-iplayer-netflix-and-britbox-blackface>, (accessed 3 February 2022).

¹⁰² ‘Little Britain removed from iPlayer and Netflix and NOW TV after blackface criticism’, *Sky News*, 9 June 2020, <https://news.sky.com/story/little-britain-removed-from-iplayer-and-netflix-after-blackface-criticism-12003558>, (accessed 3 February 2022).

but it might also mean that he “would not do it now” because he suspects this kind of comedy would no longer be accepted, or, in any case, could get him in trouble.

So what does that reveals about the ability of today’s comedians to perform in Britain? As has already been hinted at in the previous sections, it appears that not only comedians who are writing content today are being hampered in their ability to do so, but that even older material are facing backlashes, however successful they were (*Fawlty Towers*, *The Benny Hill Show* and *Little Britain* were all incontrovertibly massively successful). The current zeitgeist appears not only to be combing through the incoming flow of new material, but rather seems to be roundly reshaping it whilst making the attempt to sweep under the rug any other already-extant comedies which would no longer match the new standards. This observation, mostly inflated by those following a conservative political agenda, often makes the comparison with an Orwellian-like phenomenon which would be coercing Britons into reviewing their own beliefs, or stifling them if necessary.

In this case, we saw in Matt Lucas and David Walliams’ words when asked to discuss the controversy about *Little Britain* that they now both claim to firmly disapprove their own past sense of humour, a sense of humour they still shamelessly boasted 20 years old. Noteworthy is that this sense of humour – through *Little Britain* alone – grossed more than £17 million worldwide.¹⁰³ Moreover, the duo can hardly be said to have suffered from the pushback. As pop-culture expert Rachel Aroesti observed in 2021:

“In light of a public reckoning in the press, the careers of creators Matt Lucas and David Walliams have gone from strength to strength – the pair even reprised controversial *Little Britain* characters including Vicky Pollard and Lou and Andy for the BBC’s pandemic charity show *The Big Night In*.”¹⁰⁴

Naturally, it cannot be known for sure what the two actors and comedians’ true stance on the matter is. It could easily be assumed that they simply caved in to the pressure put onto them by the Black Lives Matter movement, exacerbated by both the media and broadcast corporations. It can equally be assumed that their stance genuinely changed after George Floyd’s death, or even before that. Lastly, a mix of both remains, in my opinion, the likeliest option. Simultaneously pushed on one side by the corporate media and the so-called “social justice warriors” (an informal term used to describe the most fervent and outspoken supporters of inclusiveness and equality) to apologize for previous jokes made in *Little Britain*

¹⁰³ T. Ford, ‘Little Britain Net Worth’, *Net Worth Post* [website], 2022, <https://networthpost.org/net-worth/little-britain-net-worth/>, (accessed 3 February 2022).

¹⁰⁴ R. Aroesti, ‘Cancel culture killing comedy? What a joke’, *The Guardian*, 10 August 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2021/aug/10/cancel-culture-killing-comedy-what-a-joke>, (accessed 22 April 2022).

whilst feeling guilt following the images of Floyd's 8 minutes long suffocation and all of the ensuing grief and anger it conveyed.

In this subsection were looked at two of the most successful British comedy shows which both first aired more than 20 years ago. From this cursory analysis can be concluded that not only the comedy being written and performed today in 2022 are in thrall to post hoc editing, in *Fawlty Towers*' case, and sometimes to almost complete censorship, in the case of *Little Britain*. On the contrary: some mainstream broadcast channels appear to be combing through the content they broadcast in a more rigorous way than in the past in order to respond to a given part of their audience's expectations. This ties back to Trevor Griffiths' view on the role of the comedian discussed earlier: "The comedian, who to a certain extent cashes in on people's feelings and attitudes to earn his living, can ill afford to neglect or scorn them. He must, on the contrary, very often pander to them."

Because of this, it can be posited that the rules for writing and performing comedy have changed. Because of the hurdles these shows already had to face in the past and because of the current trend to tighten more and more the screws of censorship on comedy, Ricky Gervais' comments comes to mind: "PC Culture isn't killing comedy. It's driving it. As it always did."

The rules underlying this growing censoring trend, as has already been argued, seem to focus on values such as inclusiveness, tolerance and minority groups equality. Conversely, freedom of speech and, to an arguable extent, freedom of thought, seem to be receding. In order to get a clearer view on those bold assumptions will now be critically looked at four cases which took place in Britain in the recent past.

Contemporary cases

As demonstrated in the previous section, comedy and comedians being either censored or plainly cancelled is not an entirely new phenomenon. But what about the material produced today? To what extent can current comedians freely perform in the United Kingdom when it comes to comedy? Are they being silenced, if at all, on sole grounds of their content being deemed inappropriate, or do their private lives also meddle with their careers? In other words, do their own personal beliefs also play a role in a comic being cancelled? In the following section, five cases relevant to those questions will be looked at, which will provide a better insight of how things currently stand in Britain.

J.K. Rowling

Though not a comedian (let alone a stand-up comedian), Joanne Rowling has arguably marked a milestone in the rise of cancel culture, thereby impacting (online) public discourse in Britain in a substantial way.

In 2020, the British writer started an online shockwave of hate and complaints because of a tweet she wrote which was considered offensive by some of her followers, a tweet some found to be offensive to people who suffer from gender dysphoria. In the tweet, which itself was a response to an article posted on the website of the reporting agency Devex, Rowling raised the questionable wording of one of their article's title, namely: "Opinion: Creating a more equal post-COVID-19 world for people who menstruate".¹⁰⁵ However, describing females as "people who menstruate" instead of "women" was too much for the Englishwoman, who derided the article's title with the following tweet:

'People who menstruate.' I'm sure there used to be a word for those people.
Someone help me out. Wumben? Wimpund? Woomud?

In reaction to the online uproar, the British author wrote a letter and an 11 tweet-long thread in which she tried to clarify her views on gender dysphoria, explaining that she herself had had a rough time as a woman and that eradicating womanhood was something she would not take.

While Rowling received all kinds of threats in the midst of the turmoil, ranging from beating to actual death threats such as bombs being put in her mailbox, she also received support from some British comedians (though she also received support from people from all around the world and all walks of life).¹⁰⁶ Among those who showed support are to be found American stand-up Dave Chappelle, who himself came under heavy fire for supporting the writer, and British actor Robbie Coltrane, best known for playing *Hagrid* in the cinematic adaptation of Rowling's saga *Harry Potter*. According to British newspaper the Evening Standard, Coltrane said the following in a Radio Times interview: "I don't think what she said was offensive really. I don't know why but there's a whole Twitter generation of people who hang around waiting to be offended."¹⁰⁷ Stand-up comedian, actor and English writer Eddie Izzard also showed Rowling her support when he told the *Telegraph*:

¹⁰⁵ A. Gardner, 'A Complete Breakdown of the J.K. Rowling Transgender-Comments Controversy', *Glamour*, 3 January 2022, <https://www.glamour.com/story/a-complete-breakdown-of-the-jk-rowling-transgender-comments-controversy>, (accessed 3 February 2022).

¹⁰⁶ W. Wong, 'Dave Chappelle criticized for defending J.K. Rowling in new Netflix comedy special', *NBC News*, 6 October 2021, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/dave-chappelle-criticized-defending-j-k-rowling-new-netflix-comedy-n1280928>, (accessed 3 February 2022).

¹⁰⁷ R. McGrath, 'Robbie Coltrane defends JK Rowling in trans row', *The Evening Standard*, 15 September 2020, <https://www.standard.co.uk/entertainment/showbiz/celebrity-news/robbie-coltrane-jk-rowling-trans-row-a4547546.html>, (accessed 3 February 2022).

I don't think JK Rowling is transphobic. I think we need to look at the things she has written about in her blog. Women have been through such hell over history. Trans people have been invisible too. I hate the idea we are fighting between ourselves, but it's not going to be sorted with the wave of a wand. I don't have all the answers. If people disagree with me, fine, but why are we going through hell on this?¹⁰⁸

Izzard's reaction is all the more relevant by the fact that he himself identifies as being transgender and has been a transvestite since a very young age,¹⁰⁹ which may have granted him shielding against criticism. Noteworthy is that Izzard himself received very little criticism for taking the writer's defence, as opposed to Dave Chappelle.

Among the comedians who reacted to the story, not all chose to take the defendant's side. Some opted for further fustigating Rowling, either by merely announcing that they did not condone the English writer's statement, as *Harry Potter* cast members Daniel Radcliff, Emma Watson, Rupert Grint and Bonnie Wright did, or by means of vicious mocking and attacks, as the American comedian Pete Davidson did in an *Saturday Night Live* sketch.¹¹⁰ Others seized the opportunity to reaffirm their support to the transgender community by (re)acknowledging both that "trans women are women" and the need for society to grow more tolerant towards people with gender dysphoria.

Rather tellingly, the story went as far as reaching the Kremlin, with President of Russia Vladimir Putin affirming in March 2022 that "The proverbial 'cancel culture' has become a cancellation of culture", affirming that "a number of Western countries" were gradually discriminating Russian writers and books.¹¹¹ Taking Rowling's defence, the President also said: "JK Rowling was cancelled because she, a writer of books that have sold millions of copies around the world, didn't please fans of so-called gender freedoms (...)".

As stated before, Rowling is not and was never even close to being a comedian. However, the aftermaths of this controversy are global, as demonstrated. The actual impacts it produces on comedians are difficult to gauge, and will likely vary from case to case. That being said, it can be argued with a degree of confidence that following this story, British comedians, and indeed anyone indulging in public discourse, might now feel a nagging threat

¹⁰⁸ "I don't think JK Rowling is transphobic," says gender-fluid comedian Eddie Izzard', *The Telegraph*, 1 January 2021, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/comedy/what-to-see/dont-think-jk-rowling-transphobic-says-gender-fluid-comedian/>, (accessed 3 February 2022).

¹⁰⁹ S. Hattenstone, 'Eddie Izzard: 'I've been promoted to she, and it's a great honour'', *The Irish Times*, 16 March 2021, <https://www.irishtimes.com/life-and-style/people/eddie-izzard-i-ve-been-promoted-to-she-and-it-s-a-great-honour-1.4508627>, (accessed 3 February 2022).

¹¹⁰ *Weekend Update: Pete Davidson on J.K. Rowling's Transphobic Comments – SNL* [web video], Saturday Night Live, 11 October 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AfexsSF0sw&ab_channel=SaturdayNightLive, (accessed 3 February 2022).

¹¹¹ 'Ukraine war: JK Rowling hits back at Putin's 'cancel culture' comment', *BBC News*, 25 March, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-60878133>, (accessed 5 May 2022).

whenever doing live performances or making online comments: the threat of meeting the same fate as Rowling's. A fate which, it must be said, mostly brought the writer emotional distress. Indeed, with an estimated net worth of \$1 billion,¹¹² she can be considered financially out of reach. However, the transphobic accusations against Rowling are still encroaching on both her professional and personal life. For instance, trans rights activists would allegedly have posted her personal address online,¹¹³ while her name is still being boycotted in several industries.¹¹⁴ Indirectly, every time such events happen and further fuel the J.K. Rowling controversy fire, British comedians are also impacted by the looming reminder that unfortunate comments are not easily forgiven by the mob, let alone forgotten.

Andrew Lawrence

Having been in the comedy business for almost two decades, stand-up comedian Andrew Lawrence is among those who have been hit the hardest by the cancel and woke culture. Having made his debut while studying at the University of St Andrews in Fife, Scotland, London-born Lawrence has always orbited around dark comedy, which doubtless played a significant role in his success both as a comedian. Without ever quite earning his place in the pantheon of the great British comedians, Andrew Lawrence nonetheless enjoyed a rather prolific career. Performing in venues all over the UK and Ireland, he won the BBC New Comedy Award in 2004 as well as the Chortle Award for the Best UK Headline Act in 2011.¹¹⁵

His thus-far-unscathed career took a damaging hit in 2021 however, when he wrote a series of tweets following the Euro 2020 final in July 2021, first tweeting: "All I'm saying is, the white guys scored", referring to Marcus Rashford, Jadon Sancho and Bukayo Saka's missed penalty shoots. Shortly thereafter, the comedian posted yet another tweet which read: "Equality, diversity, s*** penalties", before humorously addressing the wave of indignation: "I can see that this has offended a lot of people, and I'm sorry that black guys are bad at penalties."

The consequences of these tweets were unforgiving: many of his upcoming live shows were almost instantly cancelled by the venues' managers. Simultaneously, Lawrence's own agent, Richard Bucknall, announced on his Twitter page less than 48 hours following the events that

¹¹² D. Western, 'J.K. Rowling net worth [website]', *Wealthy Gorilla*, 2022, <https://wealthygorilla.com/j-k-rowling-net-worth/>, (accessed 5 May 2022).

¹¹³ 'JK Rowling says trans activists posted her address online', *BBC News*, 22 November 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-scotland-glasgow-west-59372838>, (accessed 5 May 2022).

¹¹⁴ L. Chilton, 'Boycotting Hogwarts Legacy over JK Rowling's transgender comments won't achieve much – but it's no surprise fans are considering it', *The Independent*, 19 September 2022, <https://www.independent.co.uk/games/hogwarts-legacy-jk-rowling-harry-potter-boycott-transphobia-b485188.html>, (accessed 5 May 2022).

¹¹⁵ 'About Andrew Lawrence', *Andrew Lawrence* [website], <https://andrewlawrencecomedy.co.uk/about/>, (accessed 3 February 2022).

he “no longer represent[ed] Andrew Lawrence”. Among the at least 9 venues the comedian was supposed to perform at the month ensuing the Euro final could be found Guildford’s G Live venue, Scallywags Comedy Club in Gloucestershire, The Cheltenham Club and the Stoller Hall, near Manchester¹¹⁶.

Below is an overview of how the venues’ reacted to Lawrence’s tweets and how they justified cancelling his shows on their premises. All of the following were posted on the venues’ official Facebook and/or Twitter page:

Scallywags Comedy Club: “We today, like many others I’m sure, have pulled Andrew Lawrence from a show he was set to do for us. Racism isn’t expectable [sic] in any form.”

The Stoller Hall: “Following his comments on social media after the Euro 2021 final his scheduled performance will no longer take place. Instead, we’re looking forward to welcoming musicians and performing artists who share our inclusive values.”

The Chesham Comedy Club: “I know you won’t particularly care, but we at Chesham comedy club will not tolerate racism in any form so please consider your booking with us cancelled.”

The Cheltenham Club: “Given his latest racist Twitter comments we’ve decided to remove Andrew Lawrence from a lineup in November.”

Hampshire’s Hanger Farm Arts Centre: “Following the racist comments made by comedian Andrew Lawrence on Twitter we made the decision to cancel his show. As a part of learning disability charity Minstead Trust, we work hard to promote inclusivity, provide safe spaces for everyone and have zero tolerance for racism.”

The Concorde Club (Eastleigh, Hampshire): “Following his comments on the Football last night we have taken the decision to cancel Andrew Lawrences appearance at The Concorde in January. We completely condemn the 'tweets' and his views do not reflect our organisation so as a result we cant go ahead with his performance. Together we must fight against racism...”

Subsequently to the Concorde Club’s post (mentioned above), the venue shared another post on its official Facebook page, claiming they had received an email “of the most evil kind” that had left staff members “shaken”. The email allegedly contained threats of various kinds, from “a hammer in the back of the head” to the claim that “family members will be targeted as we [the authors] gather their details”. Non-physical violence threats were also included in the

¹¹⁶ D. Jackson, ‘Comedian’s Manchester show cancelled by venue following racist tweets about England squad’, *Manchester Evening News*, 15 July 2021, <https://www.manchestereveningnews.co.uk/whats-on/comedy-news/comedians-manchester-show-cancelled-venue-21041928>, (accessed 3 February 2022).

email, such as: “We will run regular complaints about the quality of your food. For example, human faeces will be found in your food.”¹¹⁷

Despite the vast majority of his gigs having been cancelled and despite his Twitter account having been taken down, although it is unclear whether this was done by himself or by Twitter, Lawrence kept carrying on with his career as a comedian. Now regularly releasing comedy bits shot in a minimalistic fashion on Facebook and YouTube, the comedian is now (Spring 2022) focusing on the news, more often than not viciously attacking and deriding governmental measures taken around the healthcare crisis, the woke culture and politics in general.

Three months later, Lawrence posted a short clip on his YouTube channel titled “Why I'm banned from live gigs.”¹¹⁸ In the video, the artist affirms that the 2020 Euro football tournament was more likely to be remembered as being “framed in racial politics to an extreme degree”. He then goes on to say that the tournament was “pretty much highjacked by race campaigners pushing the Black Lives Matter movement”. As a matter of fact, the tournament had indeed been substantially hallmarked by the notorious killing of George Floyd on May 25, 2020, and by the anti-racism movement which had emanated from it.

Later on in his video, the comedian claims that after the Euro final penalty shootout, “everybody [was making] private jokes about it.” He then goes on to say that, just like “everybody”, he also joked about it, explaining that he had been “a professional comedian for 18 years”, hence his humour.

Lawrence then goes on to point out that, after the two jokes he posted on Twitter right after the final, “[his] entire live tour - much of which had already been sold out - was cancelled.” Where Lawrence’s message becomes more debatable is towards the end of the video, where he shares his belief that, given the swiftness of the aftermaths that befell him, he must have been victim of “an orchestrated campaign by a political collective within the arts, with a censorious agenda, who harassed and bullied the venues into submission.” He then explains that his agent, Richard Bucknall, had been threatened by one of his high-profile acts, who pressured the former into dropping Lawrence from his roster lest they would terminate their contract and sign with another agency.

In the final part of the video, Lawrence concludes with the following:

¹¹⁷ The Concorde Club, ‘Sometimes I despair at some people in the world and today is another day of this. Further to our difficulties yesterday [status update]’, *Facebook*, 13 July 2021, <https://www.facebook.com/page/107455139292578/search/?q=andrew%20lawrence>, (accessed 6 May 2022).

¹¹⁸ ‘Why I'm banned from live gigs.’ [online video], *Andrew Lawrence*, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mwZuijfg0c4&t=126s&ab_channel=AndrewLawrence, (accessed 3 February 2022).

“Hopefully we can put an end to identity politics, cancel culture and the extreme censorship that exists in the arts. It might be good intentioned, but personally I doubt it: I think it’s hard for anyone to argue at this stage that it brings anything other than misery, division and anger in this world. I think it’s time for a return to merit, openness and above all honesty”.

Since the controversy and at the moment of writing (Spring 2022), the comedian has not performed a single live show, and no performances are scheduled on his website “andrewlawrence.co.uk”. Noteworthy is that despite the noise the controversy prompted, next to no one actively – or at any rate publicly – took the comedian’s defence.

Jo Brand’s “battery acid joke”: hate speech?

In May 2019, British comedian Jo Brand joked during one of her shows about Brexit Party leader Nigel Farage’s being doused with a milkshake during a campaign walkabout.¹¹⁹ The quip, made on the Radio 4 satirical show *Heresy*, derided the use of milkshakes – a “pathetic” weapon to Brand’s opinion – and suggested instead the use of “battery acid”. Immediately after these comments, the 64 years old comedian jokingly added that she was “never going to do it”, i.e., to throw battery acid at Nigel Farage, and that it was only “pure fantasy”. Mr Farage’s reaction was nonetheless categorical, describing Brand’s comment in a tweet as “an incitement to violence”. In the same post, he also added that “the police need[ed] to act”. Following the events, then-Prime Minister Theresa May’s spokesman said the BBC “should explain why the joke was appropriate”, raising the possibility of a double-standards approach from the BBC. In response to this, the BBC retorted that *Heresy* is a “deliberately provocative » and is therefore “not to be taken seriously”. Furthermore, the BBC’s Executive Complaints Unit (ECU) reasoned that “whilst the ECU recognised that the wider message from this episode is an argument for more civility in political discourse, not less, and Ms Brand’s contribution is not intended to be taken as [sic] face value, the ECU felt that it went beyond what was appropriate for the show.” The ECU then concluded that “in the right context and with the right treatment, there is no subject matter which should be beyond the scope of comedy.”

Among the many reactions around the case, *Heresy* host Victoria Mitchell – who apologized right at the end of the show for Mrs Brand’s comments – also accused Mr Farage of double-standards, a man she allegedly perceives (or used to perceive) as “a free speech man [...] Especially when it comes to jokes”.¹²⁰ Furthermore, further taking Brand’s defence, Mitchell

¹¹⁹ ‘Jo Brand battery acid joke ‘went too far’, BBC rules’, *BBC News*, 29 August 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-49508231>, (accessed 21 March 2022).

¹²⁰ ‘BBC defends Jo Brand over ‘battery acid’ joke’, *BBC News*, 12 June 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-48611424>, (accessed 3 February 2022).

emphasized that the show's purpose was in fact precisely to "test the boundaries of what it's OK to say and not say".

In his LBC show, Nigel Farage brought up the affair shortly after the events and described Mrs Brand's behaviour as "completely and utterly disgusting". The former Member of the European Parliament then invited the show's guests to imagine what would happen if he was to make similar comments about somebody "on the other side", a question he himself answered: "The police would be knocking on my door within 10 minutes". In this context, it can be speculated that he was referring to left-wing voters.

Following these events, right-wing political website Guido Fawkes wrote a short piece about the situation prior to asking Mr Farage for a quote in which he described Brand's joke as an "incitement to violence". Shortly thereafter, Guido Fawkes shared the piece on Twitter using Farage's quote, under the headline: "Jo Brand's Hate Speech", starting point from which the whole story began to gain momentum.

Unlike in the Andrew Lawrence case, there is no talk of cancelling anyone or anything here, at least per se. However, this case is particularly telling of the atmosphere which seems to currently predominate the world of comedy in the United Kingdom. It also raises the question of hate speech: to what extent should comedy promoting hate speech be accepted, even when the speaker's foremost intentions are clearly to entertain and make their audience laugh? In addition, this case lays bare once again a major culprit in all of the uproar going on around comedy: social media. Here, the fuss is merely about one joke – one sentence – said in a live radio show, a joke which was immediately caveated by apologies and "humour warnings". In a Guardian article about Jo Brand's joke gone viral, journalist Miranda Sawyer draws the following conclusion with regards to how comedy is faring today:

Jokes are under scrutiny. Though the fundamentals of comedy haven't altered – comedians are employed to make people laugh – where those jokes go is changing. No longer does a gag stay in the room where it was told. If it's filmed on a phone and put online, it spreads to an audience for which it was never intended. If it's repeated on social media – clipped short, removed from the atmosphere around it, ripped from the buildup created by the comedian and sent out to people who don't even want to hear it – then it travels further (...)¹²¹

A conclusion which supports the findings made so far in this chapter, i.e., that jokes increasingly end up being decontextualized on social media. This in turn can lead to widespread indignation even around smaller controversies.

¹²¹ M. Sawyer, 'Can comedy survive in an age of outrage?', *The Guardian*, 28 July 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2019/jul/28/can-comedy-survive-in-an-age-of-outrage-jo-brand>, (accessed 3 February 2022).

Terry Gilliam's *Into The Woods*

On the website of the London-based theatre the Old Vic, an independent and not-for-profit venue, only three shows were displayed under the “postponed & cancelled performances” in February 2022.¹²² The first one, *4000 Miles*, was originally supposed to be postponed to Summer 2022, only to be definitely cancelled in early May 2022 due to lengthy Covid-19 delays. Before the cancellation, the Old Vic’s website emphatically indicated that it was “still very much our [The Old Vic’s] desire to bring this production to our stage”. The second show on that list was *Local Hero*, which ultimately met the same fate as *4000 miles* and was also cancelled. On the theatre’s website, it could be read under the play’s title that despite the team’s efforts to “make this work within the theatre’s schedule”, the Old Vic had no choice but to cancel the show.

The third show on that list was *Into The Woods*, under which one sentence reads “*Into the Woods* has been cancelled and all bookers have been contacted”. Better than nothing, but not quite the paragraph-long explanation *4000 miles* and *Local Hero* both had in early 2022. So why the terseness?

Into The Woods, a fairy-tale play originally published in 1986 composed by American composer Stephen Sondheim, has now as new director Monty Python member Terry Gilliam. While initially supposed to be played at the Old Vic, the decision was reversed after an all-staff meeting during which Old Vic executive director reported that there had been substantial animosity among staff due to Terry Gilliam’s recent comments on several subjects. From describing the #MeToo movement as a “witch hunt” to sarcastically claiming that he now identified as “a black lesbian” in an attempt to mock the woke culture, the American-born British director had already ruffled some feathers in the past. Along the same lines, Gilliam also said that he felt “tired of white men being blamed for everything wrong with the world”, something which was also interpreted as offensive by #MeToo supporters. The final straw seems to have been related to more recent claims however, when he praised and encouraged people to watch Dave Chappelle’s latest show, *The Closer*, which has widely been qualified as transphobic. (The Closer had itself created a wave of indignation among Netflix employees, some of whom felt that some of Chappelle’s materials was transphobic and ought therefore to be pulled from the streaming platform. Netflix refused to do so however, explaining that Chappelle’s previous show, *Stick and Stones*, while equally being “controversial”, was also Netflix’s “most watched, stickiest, and most award winning stand-up special to date.”¹²³

In his own words, Gilliam described the American superstar as “the greatest standup

¹²² At the moment of writing.

¹²³ Z. Schiffer, ‘Netflix suspends trans employee who tweeted about Dave Chappelle special’, *The Verge*, 11 October 2021, <https://www.theverge.com/2021/10/11/22720724/netflix-suspends-trans-employee-tweeted-dave-chappelle-the-closer>, (accessed 3 February 2022).

comedian alive today”, before ascribing him with the qualities of being “incredibly intelligent, socially aware, dangerously provocative, and gut-wrenchingly funny”.¹²⁴

Those comments were deemed intolerable by some of the Old Vic’s staff, mostly by some Fellow Old Vic 12 members, the “organisation’s artistic development scheme”, mainly made up of young collaborators. Even though no concrete arguments were given by the Old Vic regarding the show’s last-minute cancellation (bookings had been made available a couple of months before the play’s withdrawal), it was reported that staff members felt that Gilliam’s comments were “at odds with the Old Vic’s culture and values”. Following the show’s axing however, the Old Vic announced in a brief statement that it “wish[ed] the show well for its future life”.¹²⁵ While not all Old Vic staff members condoned the decision to axe *Into The Woods*, at least one resignation letter would have followed the initial decision to host the play.¹²⁶

About a month following the Old Vic’s decision to pull the show, Terry Gilliam, who had remained silent so far, posted the picture of a statement on his Facebook page, clarifying his own understanding of the case:

“It is very sad that a great cultural institution like The Old Vic allowed itself to be intimidated into cancelling our production of *Into The Woods* by a small group of small-minded, humour-averse ideologues on their staff who, absurdly, call themselves “The Old Vic 12” ... as if they are victims of some cruel injustice desperately fighting for their freedom!

My unspeakable crime was recommending my Facebook followers to watch a Netflix special by a brilliant and provocative American comedian, and then share with me their opinions. They did and civilization did not collapse! However, The Old Vic’s artistic credibility certainly has.

Freedom of Speech is often attacked, but I never thought that Freedom of Recommendation would be under threat as well.”¹²⁷

Despite an obvious sarcastic undertone, the statement can nonetheless be interpreted as Gilliam’s way of expressing a genuine fear and exasperation, as the last part of the statement’s final paragraph suggests. Theatre critic Dominic Cavendish also expressed his

¹²⁴ A. Pollard, ‘Terry Gilliam: ‘I’m tired of white men being blamed for everything wrong with the world’’, *The Independent*, 4 January 2020, <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/films/features/terry-gilliam-interview-harvey-weinstein-victims-metoo-race-a9269136.html#comments-area>, (accessed 3 February 2022).

¹²⁵ ‘Terry Gilliam’s *Into the Woods* cancelled by Old Vic after reports of staff unease’, *BBC News*, 2 November 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/59127144>, (accessed 3 February 2022).

¹²⁶ M. Hemley, ‘Old Vic cancelled *Into the Woods* after staff unrest at Terry Gilliam’s involvement’, *The Stage*, 1 November 2021, <https://www.thestage.co.uk/news/old-vic-cancelled-into-the-woods-after-staff-unrest-at-terry-gilliams-involvement>, (accessed 3 February 2022).

¹²⁷ T. Gilliam, ‘I want to let you know that our production of *Into The Woods* has found a beautiful and welcoming new [status update]’, *Facebook*, 13 December 2021, <https://www.facebook.com/Terry.Gilliam>, (accessed 6 May 2022).

own take on the situation in an opinion piece written for the Telegraph shortly after the controversy:

“If the adjudication of who gets to use a venue as famously pluralist and populist as the Old Vic is determined by alignment with an unyielding set of ‘woke’ progressive values, then British theatre is fast becoming a repressive Republic of Gilead. Who next will fall foul of those in the shadows whose watchword is change not continuity?”¹²⁸

So what does this case shed light on precisely? First of all, that cancel culture is involved in this case can hardly be denied. Comedians with a wingspan such as Terry Gilliam has, directing a rehashed Stephen Sondheim play – a play which objectively speaking contains nothing offensive – cancelled on the sole basis of some sarcastic comments made online by its director, comments which somehow failed to live up to *some* Old Vic members’ values, is hardly innocuous. Then, this case also raises another issue: are younger generations actually less tolerant when it comes to humour? Or would social media (once again) be responsible for the issue this story entails, as appeared to be the case for Jo Brand, Andrew Lawrence, and J. K. Rowling? To the former question, the most likely answer would seem to be “yes”. As a Pew Research Center study reported, only 58% of Millennials (people aged between 18 and 35) believe that people should be allowed to make public statements offensive to ethnic minority, versus an average of 67% for the average adult.¹²⁹ Additionally, 40% of the same group believe that governments should be able to prevent people from making such statements, versus a 28% for the average adult. To the second question (are social media responsible for the controversy discussed in this case?), that online platforms are only a mean by which cancel culture operates is arguably the most level-headed conclusion. Furthermore, the fact that Gilliam invited his followers to watch Dave Chappelle’s stand-up show on Facebook, that social media played a non-trivial role in this controversy is undeniable.

In conclusion, while this case may have known a “happy ending” in that *Into The Woods* was able to find another theatre to be performed at, I want to posit that this will not only make the British director more mindful of what he says in the future, but that all of those who came across this story might be indirectly impacted, as also argued in the J.K. Rowling controversy. In Gilliam’s case, the actual consequences were, at minimum, a delay in the

¹²⁸ D. Cavendish, ‘The Old Vic’s cancellation of Terry Gilliam is unprecedented insanity’, *The Telegraph*, 2 November 2021, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/theatre/what-to-see/old-vics-cancellation-terry-gilliam-unprecedented-insanity/>, (accessed 3 February 2022).

¹²⁹ ‘40% of Millennials OK with limiting speech offensive to minorities’, *Pew Research Center*, 20 November 2015, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/11/20/40-of-millennials-ok-with-limiting-speech-offensive-to-minorities/>, (accessed 6 May 2022).

show's schedule; a supposed box-office loss and, most of all, a possibly increased fear of doing comedy which could ultimately curtail comedians' creativity in general.

Jimmy Carr's Antisemite joke

The final case that will be looked at comes chronologically. More precisely, it was triggered in February 2022, roughly a month after British-Irish comedian James Carr, better known as Jimmy Carr, had his last one-hour Netflix special released: *His Dark Material*. The artist, despite being one of the most popular comic in Britain, had to face something more and more comedians have to face – a wave of online criticism. More precisely, Carr got lambasted for a knowingly callous joke about the holocaust and the death of thousands of Roma and Sinti, explaining that if this fact is so little known compared to the death of Jewish people, it is because “no one ever wants to talk about the positives” when talking about the war.

Despite the joke having manifestly well landed with the audience and his having warned the audience beforehand that a slew of “career ender” jokes containing “terrible things” were coming their way, it was, in the midst of jokes about overweight and unsightly women, paedophilia, homosexuals, death and racism, this one particular joke which got the comedian in troubles, prompting reactions from all walks of life – including the leading class. To start with, UK's current Culture Secretary Nadine Dorries, who called the joke “abhorrent”, affirmed in a Radio Times interview that new laws would soon “hold Netflix to account” in order to prevent jokes such as Carr's to be voiced again on streaming outlets like Netflix. Shortly after those comments, it was put to her that she herself had tweeted in 2017 that “left-wing snowflakes [were] killing comedy”, to which she responded that despite being “no angel on Twitter”, she had allegedly never posted any harmful content on the platform. Getting back to Carr, she concluded: “But (...) Jimmy Carr's comments, no one can call that, you know, snowflake or wokeishness, that's just... it was just appalling.” Then, on a Sky News interview, when asked whether those new laws could jeopardize free speech, the Culture Secretary clumsily said that, identifying as a Conservative, free speech would not be encroached upon, insisting on the fact that she had been “very, very careful about that”.¹³⁰ Unfortunately, the exact scope and intricacies of such laws are not yet known, nor are have their introduction been confirmed.

Furthermore, Health Secretary Sajid Javid also reacted to the joke and described it as “horrid”, whereas one of Prime Minister Boris Johnson's spokespersons said the joke was “deeply disturbing” and that it was “unacceptable to make light of genocide”, before adding

¹³⁰ T. Kingsley, ‘New law could see Netflix prosecuted over Carr joke.’, *The Independent*, 5 February 2022, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/jimmy-carr-holocaust-joke-netflix-prosecuted-b2008333.html>, (accessed 27 April 2022).

that the UK Government was going to legislate new laws so that social media and streaming platforms would be forced to cut out such content.¹³¹ The PM's spokesperson also added that the UK Government was "clear that any change in legislation needs to be proportionate, to ensure freedom of speech within the law is not stifled". No practical details about this last piece of information was shared, however.

Next to state officials, organizations such as the Holocaust Memorial Day Trust and The Auschwitz Memorial also reacted publicly by firmly condemning the joke, while the anti-hate group the Traveller Movement launched a petition for the removal of the show's segment in which the joke was made, which at the time of writing gathered close to 20.000 signatures as of April 2022.¹³² On top of public reactions, most major media outlets in the UK and in Ireland also reported on the episode.

As is by definition the case for such controversies, public opinion was divided. The debate mostly took place online, and more particularly on what decidedly seems to have become today's virtual town square: Twitter. On the one hand, countless regular citizens as well as figures of authority showed a stark disapproval of Carr's quip. Reactions ranged from sharing online indignation all the way to the demand that the comedian be not given a platform to perform comedy ever again. Apologies from the comedian were also often expected, when not demanded, although none were ever made. In parallel, this story also prompted reactions among those already wary of cancel culture and worried about the freedom to do comedy, accusing modern society, the woke movement, cancel culture or the Left of stifling comedy.

Besides a range of figures pillorying Carr for what the internet collectively coined his "holocaust joke", many also sided by him. Comedian Tom Walker and Channel 4 Chief content officer Ian Katz are such examples. While jointly disapproving of making light of the death of thousands of people, free speech overriding the right not to be offended seems to be their common ground. When talking to the radio station LBC in early 2022, Tom Walker explained what his own take on the matter was. "The line between offence and comedy is very thin, in Jimmy Carr's case they jump across that line gleefully", he starts, then making the case that for such jokes, two things should be considered: context and intent. He then rhetorically asks: "Are we seriously saying that Jimmy Carr actually condones the mass murder of Gypsies?", to which he then affirms it is not – and should not – be the case.¹³³

¹³¹ 'Downing Street calls Jimmy Carr's Holocaust joke 'deeply disturbing' and 'unacceptable', *TheJournal.ie*, 7 February 2022, <https://jrn1.ie/5675961>, (accessed 25 April 2022).

¹³² 'Jimmy Carr: The Genocide of Roma is Not a Laughing Matter [website]', *Action Storm*, <https://actionstorm.org/petitions/the-holocaust-is-not-a-laughing-matter-61fd5396bbebd#updates>, (accessed 25 April 2022).

¹³³ S. Hickey, 'Jonathan Pie: Jimmy Carr's Holocaust joke 'technically very well written'', *LBC*, 7 February 2022, <https://www.lbc.co.uk/radio/presenters/nick-ferrari/jonathan-pie-jimmy-carr-holocaust-gypsy-joke-very-well-written/>, (accessed 27 April 2022).

Following up on those observations, Walker claims that despite finding Carr's joke "tasteless", he would nonetheless "vehemently defend [Carr's] right to tell that joke." Looking at the bigger picture of the implications of this case for comedians, Walker argues that having many people judging a comedian's material without them having watched that material in the first place might be harmful to comedy, which is the kind of scenario the internet yet often gives birth to. To Walker's eyes, "comedians should be running screaming to Jimmy Carr's defence, even if they find the joke distasteful," because this kind of controversies jeopardizes their careers by making it harder for comedians to come up with new, non-controversial material. Next to Walker, Channel 4 Chief content officer Ian Katz also took Carr's defence. "I defend the rights of comedians to make offensive jokes and if they can't, then comedy is dead," he told the trade magazine *Broadcast*. However, he also said that Channel 4 would not have aired *His Dark Material*, as he believes it would have violated the Ofcom code.¹³⁴ Noteworthy is that in *His Dark Material*, Carr's "holocaust" joke delivered laughter all across the venue, without any distinguishable sound of manifestation of indignation or disapproval whatsoever. What is more, *His Dark Material's* release date was in late December 2021, whereas the controversy only began in early February 2022, which raises the question of how did the controversy actually begin, why, and who started it. Taking this and the fact that Carr's audience had an overwhelmingly positive reaction to the joke into account, the possibility of an artificially constructed controversy may be mentioned, although such claims would be difficult to substantiate.

Despite the noise the unfortunate joke elicited, Jimmy Carr's career appears to have remained mostly unscathed. This is what his stand-up rooster suggests: in 2022 only, he has at the moment of writing more than 60 shows scheduled around the world and another 72 in Ireland and the UK.¹³⁵ Channel 4, on which Carr hosts the TV game show *I Literally Just Told You*, also refused to concede to the online pressure by giving Carr green light for a second season of the show in spite of Channel 4 CCO's comments that the channel would not have hosted *His Dark Material* by fear of breaking the Ofcom code.¹³⁶

The exact reason why it was this particular joke which originated the scandal could be explained by the popular theory of race and gender being two of the main current taboos in modern society, theories suggested in the previous chapter of this thesis. However, *His Dark*

¹³⁴ 'Jimmy Carr show I Literally Just Told You to return for Series 2', *British Comedy Guide*, 9 March 2022, <https://www.comedy.co.uk/tv/news/6763/jimmy-carr-i-literally-just-told-you-series2/>, (accessed 27 April 2022).

¹³⁵ 'Jimmy Carr [website]', <https://www.jimmycarr.com/uk-tour-dates/>, (accessed 27 April 2022).

¹³⁶ 'Jimmy Carr', *Chortle*, 9 March 2022, https://www.chortle.co.uk/comics/j/261/jimmy_carr/news, (accessed 27 April 2022).

Material entailed many other jokes dealing with those two topics, none of which elicited a comparable reaction.

What this case reveals is that on top of race being a manifestly sensitive topic to joke about today in Britain, the internet, for better or worse, allows people to stumble across jokes out of context – people who perhaps would not have even wished to attend Carr’s stand-up in the first place. Being unaware of the context in which the joke was said (that is, as the comedian warned, in a series of “career ender” jokes), I want to argue that it is understandable that some might overly react when reading that Carr joked in front of an audience that the death of thousands was something people should rejoice about. This ties back to Miranda Sawyer’s view, discussed in the Jo Brand case (p. 60).

This case also reveals that even the fiercer cancel culture campaigns can almost be seamlessly weathered by comedians. However, I also want to argue that Carr’s fame and wealth at least partly allowed for this. With Andrew Lawrence, someone who had to sustain unrestrained online criticism for jokes which yet, unlike Carr’s, did not imply that the genocide of any racial group had a positive element to it, the case can be made that comedians who do not boast a large community of followers or sufficient financial withdrawals appear to suffer much more from these events. Of course, this analytical comparison is insufficient as it does not take into account the talent of the two comedians. Indeed, that Lawrence did not have as much success prior to his controversial tweets as Carr is likely no happenstance, and rather suggests that Carr’s comedy is in general more appreciated than Lawrence’s. Therefore, cancel culture seem to have a lesser impact on talented and successful comedians while mostly being harmful to those whose success is not unanimous.

Conclusion

This thesis took an in-depth look into the world of modern days comedy in Britain and sought to determine whether current comedians are more limited in what they can or cannot joke about than those of earlier times. This was done through a number of steps which provided a 360° view on the concerned environment: British comedy.

First, the history of comedy and comedians was looked at, which highlighted that comedy has been playing a non-trivial role in societies throughout the ages, namely that of raising otherwise unspoken societal issues. Additionally, this first subsection shed light on the extent to which previous generations of comedians had to be cautious in their craft. More precisely, this caution appears to mostly have been caused by the menace authorities posed on comedians, a menace which could be translated into punishments which could at times equate with death.

The role of the comedian in British culture was also examined. This was accomplished by means of aggregating and juxtaposing different views expressed by comedy pundits or by comedians. This allowed for a better understanding of the comedian's role to pander to his audience's expectations along with providing a first insight of the reason why comedy is so often contentious.

What constitutes the nature of British comedy was also discussed, which led to the conclusion that on the surface, there are no grounds for assuming that this particular genre of comedy should lead to more pushback than any other genre or comedy. Furthermore, it was contended that what really makes British comedy "British" might be British comedy's leading figures along with their unique styles rather than one distinguishable style.

Subsequently to these analyses, current societal influences were discussed. Starting with cancel culture and two of what I argued are some of its main elements (self-censorship and no-platforming), as well as the woke movement, a pro egalitarian and inclusive movement which is thought to be coming from the United States, it was established that political preferences played a non-trivial role in how one perceives political correctness. More precisely, left-leaning people tend to show more sympathy towards the woke culture and cancel culture than those whose beliefs err on the right side of the spectrum. That the woke culture percolated through both academia and the corporate world was also discussed, which extended the scope of the issue this thesis aimed to tackle by demonstrating how the influences that are reshaping comedy in the 21st century can also be found beyond the world of comedians.

The first part of this thesis was then closed with a review of what the legal restrictions pertaining to freedom of speech and comedy in modern day Britain were, which revealed that although free speech is regulated by legal acts as well as institutions such as Ofcom, these acts appear to be relatively hazy whilst claiming to be respectful of freedom of speech. In any case, no conclusive evidence was found that current legislations or guidelines are any tougher than was the case in the 20th century earlier. On the contrary, it appears that in modern times, British comedians were subdued to harsher, sometimes unilaterally enacted laws, which the John Milton and Henry Fielding cases both showed.

The second part of this thesis juxtaposed several views expressed by both British comedians and relevant pundits, while the third part critically discussed nine recent cases in which either comedy or humour in general was met with pushback.

Several comedians, such as John Cleese and Karen Dunbar, make the case that a shift in what is taboo to joke about took place in recent years. As repeatedly expressed throughout this thesis, a new set of taboos based on gender and sexual orientation seems to be predominant while also generating the most contentious issues, as demonstrated in the J.K. Rowling case or in the briefly discussed Dave Chapelle controversy. Additionally, race and immigration, a topic highly related to the woke movement and exacerbated by the killing of George Floyd, also appear to be sensitive themes in comedy, as the Andrew Lawrence case showed.

This new set of taboos in British society, whilst making it difficult for some comedians to adapt, simultaneously made room for new subjects to be joked about. As observed by John Cleese, sex, religion and swear words now seem to be widely accepted by new audiences in the field of comedy. Not only accepted in fact: these actually appear to be ubiquitous in today's idea of humour. This can also be deducted by looking at the BBC's pamphlet *The Green Book*, which makes clear that sexual and religious topics along with swear words were all part of an older set of taboos which seems to no longer exist.

On top of this shift in taboos, a new key element is arguably shaping the debate around so-called stifled comedians: social media. First, social media made it possible for anyone to share short clips taken from comedy shows or live stand-ups, which decontextualizes bits of comedy material before displaying those clips in sometimes unsolicited ways to audiences alien to the author of the material the clips feature. This arguably causes issue because of comedy's proclivity to push societal boundaries, a proclivity exacerbated by a range of comedians either knowingly or unwittingly unmindful of the new set of taboos. Furthermore, the contentious nature of social media such as Facebook and Twitter, i.e., the way those platforms tend to give better visibility to controversial posts and comments, may further fuel

the fire around the debate, albeit more virtually than actually so.

Even though the kind of controversies discussed in the last chapter of this thesis may have been near fatal to modestly successful comedians such as Andrew Lawrence, neither cancel culture nor no-platforming seems to be significantly harmful to more popular comedians, and might even produce the opposite effect. As established with Jimmy Carr, the comedian managed to retain an almost fully booked roster for 2022. However, Channel 4's Chief Content Officer claimed Channel 4 would not have hosted his show *His Dark Materials* because of its controversial nature, which means Carr's career might have suffered had the comedian wanted to seek a deal with the television network. Just as telling is the fact that Netflix, whose importance for British stand-up comedians today cannot be overstated, appears to be adamant when it comes to cancel culture. By keeping controversial shows such as *His Dark Materials* on offer, the steaming platform brings hope for the future of provocative comedians.

Finally, while cancel culture may be unduly magnified because of the unrepresentative ways social media algorithms work along with the tendency of current news outlets to overly report on comedians "being cancelled" – a subject which appears to yield a fairly high rate of engagement given the wealth of articles written on the subject in British newspapers – it can be argued that cancel culture's most pernicious and real effect is in fact psychological. Indeed, as argued by several figures quoted in this thesis, what cancel culture really seems to be doing at the moment is to give the impression that comedians do have to pay more attention to what they say now lest they get publicly called out for jokes or comments deemed unpolitically correct or "un-woke". Regardless of whether comedians actually take this element into account or not, this may ultimately curtail the creative process of writing humorous content either by means of instilling a fear of being publicly called out or by demotivating comedians to further pursue their careers altogether because of the seemingly increasing amount of hate comedians receive.

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