

How comedy can be used for public health

January 15 2015, by John Mooney



Tight squeeze. Credit: Effets merveilleux des lacets, 1807/Haabet

Those working in public health would be the first to concede that our discipline has a bit of an image problem. If we're not despairing over the societal burden of obesity (step away from those pies), we're busy contesting the validity of [the "J-shaped" curve](#) for alcohol – in which non-drinkers show a statistically higher risk of mortality than moderate drinkers – to justify that guilt-free glass of (preferably red) wine.

But perhaps we're missing a trick: one of the most potent weapons that

corporations peddling tobacco, junk food and alcohol have cleverly used to engage their target audiences in recent decades – particularly with the younger generation – is humour.

Good news though: Seth Goddin, marketing guru and new prophet of profit, says the old-school TV media that so long afforded these corporations a virtual monopoly of prime-time advertising, [is now decidedly on the wane](#). Taking its place is a proliferation of new platforms such as social media, where the only survival rule is "remarkability" which inspires sharing through "engaging humour or emotional content". And in this sphere, it's anyone's game.

In the US, UCLA Fielding School of Public Health encourages applications from comedians and songwriters to their master's degree programmes. One of these, Jill Donnelly, who made her living [doing sketch and improvised comedy](#) – including an appearance in US show *Arrested Development* – won first place at the school's annual talent contest last year with her own written and performed song, [The Public Health Connection](#), depicting the tribulations and hopes of the [public health](#) practitioner.

Men's health checks and the demon drink

Cultivating the inner entertainer can also help communicate effectively with hard-to-reach groups. In Haringey, [one of London's most deprived boroughs](#), a [Men's Health Check comedy night](#) – originated and developed by Vanessa Bogle, a health psychologist, while she worked in Haringey's public health department – was organised in response to the particularly poor health status of African Caribbean men. The show's seasoned performers, largely drawn from black and ethnic minority communities, present a comic take on the perils of being overweight, the embarrassment factor in intimate [health checks](#) (African Caribbean men are [at significantly higher risk](#) of prostate cancer), mental illness and the

often insidious onset of alcohol misuse and dependency.

Mental health has a well-established tradition of comedy breaking down taboos. High-profile entertainers who have been affected by these issues such as Ruby Wax and Stephen Fry have very publicly led the way here. Additionally, [the capacity of humour](#) to bring issues and concerns into the cold light of rational reflection and combat isolation by emphasising shared human experience can help reduce stigma and encourage those affected to seek help.

The rules of Bright Club

Then there's Talkin' Bol***ks in Wigan, and Bright Club – the "thinking person's comedy night" – in which I have participated as a performer. They first began at UCL in 2009 with a mission to increase public engagement with research through stand-up comedy and now operate in 12 UK locations, the title being a take on the film Fight Club, but with the contrasting stipulation for participants that everyone needs to talk about Bright Club.

Bright Club shows are slickly organised with a professional compere. First-timers have a series of preparatory meetings, where they receive a basic grounding in stand-up techniques with feedback on developing material. My own Bright Club act, Hazardous Waists, is a take on preventing obesity in Scotland, and sends up the extremes of Scottish dietary behaviours including [an aversion to vegetables](#). Being a native Glaswegian myself, this was probably not as reckless as it sounds in a traditional pub venue in Glasgow.

The big takeaway

The major take-home lesson from Bright Club for me is that there is

humour aplenty to be harvested from the unlikeliest of topics. Academics who participate generally find the medium of stand-up to be a very liberating way of talking about their research and findings.

Corporations representing big food and big alcohol will no doubt continue to find ever more ingenious ways and means for promoting their wares. But as Bright Club's increasing popularity and participation grows, using humour is clearly within the reach of even the most retiring of academics and researchers. This is particularly the case for public [health](#), in which the funny side is seldom difficult to find – we've just got to tap into this and continue to explore new ways of communicating serious messages in a much more engaging way.

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