

Claiming Comedic Immunity Or, What Do You Get When You Cross Contemporary British
Comedy with Disability
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Abstract: This article addresses the mechanisms by which contemporary British comedy about disability is *allowed* to be funny. It argues that the available academic literature on the phenomenon is scant and a critical public vocabulary missing.

Key Words: comedy, cultural criticism, tolerance.

“In the Cultural review we see,
Matt coughing and wheezing untruthfully.
After pushing Russell into a wheelchair
and claiming comedic immunity”
 (“Blame it on the Booties,” September, 2007).

The quotation in the title of this article is taken from a poem in *The Russell Brand Show* broadcast on BBC Radio 2 on a Saturday in September 2007.¹ At the end of each two-hour show Mr Gee, the resident poet laureate, recites a poem he has written during the course of the broadcast. This particular poem relates to an anecdote told on the show about an incident the previous week when Matt Morgan (Russell’s co-host) had to wheel Russell through an airport. The anecdote was followed by a conversation about whether that situation was *allowed* to be funny, resulting in the couplet quoted above.

As an intervention in that conversation and as part of thinking through the theorisation of culture and disability, this article addresses the mechanisms by which contemporary British comedy about disability is allowed to be funny. Its primary concern is not to answer in terms of essential comedic characteristics, but rather in terms of current discursive possibilities, in both wider public discourse and in the contracted world of the academy. This article will argue that, despite the comedic use of disability appearing to be increasingly conspicuous, not only is the available academic literature on the phenomenon scant but a critical public vocabulary is also missing. It suggests further that an impact of such neglect is that comedy’s claim for immunity in relation to how it treats disability remains publically unchallenged and theoretically unproblematized (a situation not mirrored in terms of race, gender or sexuality).

In an attempt to move beyond this impasse, rather than advocate the merits of an alternative disciplinary field, the article positions the second part of its title (what do you get when you cross contemporary British comedy and disability) as a question demanding facilitation from a range of disciplinary toolboxes. Concentrating on the British versions of two television series, *The Office* and *Little Britain*, the article utilizes tools from existing work on television comedy and identity, as well as from disability-orientated work that has already begun to reap the rewards of interdisciplinary dialogues. The article illustrates the benefits of taking the cultural theorisation of disability seriously and, in doing so, demonstrates the necessity of being promiscuous and suspending established academic boundaries. In this instance, it suggests that by broadening its current scope, British disability criticism can avail itself of alternative

perspectives on topics at the very heart of its project. In turn, the significance of such interdisciplinary dialogues is firmly established.

The Comedic Use of “Disability”: The Case of Contemporary British Television

Laughing at disability is anything but new. On British television, for instance, Ronnie Barker made much merriment from a stutter in *Open All Hours* and played a visually impaired character in *Clarence*, while other television sitcoms, such as *The Young Ones*, were happy to deploy words such as “spaz” and “spasy” (Barnes, 1991). Despite a long and varied history, at this cultural moment it does appear that the comedic use of disability is increasingly conspicuous. This is not to say that disability is being used more (to be supported this observation needs meticulous research), but rather that more recent comedic offerings demand attention because the disability element is unmissable and therefore its presence seems somehow different. A brief overview of a handful of British shows, all of which had their television debut within the past eight years, reveals just how prominent disability is.

The Office was a British television series, created, written and directed by Ricky Gervais and Stephen Merchant. It first aired in 2001 and ran for two six-episode series, along with two 45-minute Christmas specials. Set in the offices of a paper merchant, Gervais plays regional manager David Brent, and much of the comedy derives from his frequent attempts to win favour with employees or peers. *The Office*'s use of disability is conspicuous alongside race, gender, and sexuality in the range of subjects David Brent tries but fails to be “politically correct” about. Another example is *Little Britain*, which was a BBC radio show before it transferred to television in 2003. It is written by and stars comedians Matt Lucas and David Walliams. Two of the major characters are Lou Todd and Andy Pipkin; Andy appears to have learning disabilities [intellectual disabilities] and uses a wheelchair (of which he has no need); Lou is his kind yet oblivious caregiver. Both shows have since been bought and re-made by US networks for US television audiences: *The Office* by NBC and *Little Britain* by HBO.

A contemporary of these shows was *Phoenix Nights*, a British sitcom first broadcast in 2001. It followed the owner of The Phoenix Club, wheelchair-using Brian Potter (played by Peter Kay), as he led his dysfunctional staff (made up of an array of other misfits) in hapless pursuits of his dream to see the club become the most popular working men's club in North West England. Other recent “disability” moments on British television include a character in *That Mitchell and Webb Look* called “The Boy With An Arse For a Face” who appears in sketches satirising the voyeurism of “reality TV” and the *Comic Relief* telethon charity single “(I'm Gonna Be) 500 Miles” where two disabled characters (Brian Potter from *Phoenix Nights* and Andy Pipkin from *Little Britain*) teamed up with the Scottish band, The Proclaimers.

As I have concentrated here on sketch or situation televised comedy, I have omitted to talk about moments, for instance, in stand-up routines, chat shows, radio broadcasts and film comedies which also rely, however incidentally, on disability references. The significance of my focus on British sketch or situation television comedy is two-fold: firstly, it enables a defined category with which to work in terms of time (within the last eight years), representational mode (television) and genre (staged ensemble comedy); secondly, it enables a concentration on the geographical dimension of the resultant cultural criticism. It is to this I now turn.

Critical Engagement: The Case of *British* Comedy and Disability

In 1991, Barnes wrote a short paper entitled, “Disabling Comedy and Anti-Discrimination Legislation” in which he asked, “[S]ince comedy with an overtly racist or sexist bias is no longer seen on television, then why is disablist humor?” Eight years later, there was a special issue of the journal *Body and Society* that staged a transatlantic conversation about disability and humour involving four British scholars (Corker, 1999; Stronach, & Allan, 1999; Shakespeare, 1999) and two scholars from the US (Albrecht, 1999; Robillard, 1999). In 2003, an issue of *Disability Studies Quarterly* included a symposium on disability and humor. Apart from Sue Ralph (Haller and Ralph, 2003), all of the contributors were US or Australia-based. Similarly, when a paper appeared in *Disability and Society* in 2006 concerning stand up comedians, it was from a US perspective (Reid, Stoughton, & Smith, 2006). Only two out of the four solely British writings mentioned here address televised comedy, and even then the attention afforded is extremely brief.

The geography of these dialogues is significant as they demonstrate the peculiarities of *British* disability-criticism of comedy, which can be largely characterized by a reliance on a mode of *social realism* (Mallett, 2007, 2009; Mitchell & Snyder, 2001). By no means comprehensive, but significant enough to be noted, where British disability-criticism has engaged with comedy it involves presuppositions of the representational process that draw their foundations from the social model of disability as developed in Britain (Oliver, 1990: Union of Physically Impaired Against Segregation [UPIAS], 1976). In relation to critiques of comedy, when “negativity” is identified *in* the “joke” it is deemed to reinforce broader discriminatory attitudes. For example, Barnes (1991) argues that comedy “helps perpetuate the pre-conceived attitudes towards, assumptions about, and expectations of disabled people in the minds of non-disabled people.” The implication is that the “joke” is created by and produces these “negative” attitudes, with the “joke” consequently being condemned and its immediate retraction recommended. The posited solutions for this “problem” are also contingent upon social model discursive procedures. One solution is that comedy about disability should be made by disabled people or not at all. For instance, Barnes (1991) has discussed “the exploitation of disabled people by professional non-disabled comedians on television” and thus deploys an essentialist hint that non-disabled people have no business using “disability.”

The resulting assertions in the British literature are that mainstream disability comedy is the product, the symptom, and the cause of negative and discriminatory attitudes, with only certain sorts of comedic utterances from certain sorts of comedic authors being deemed acceptable. Via a range of diverse theoretical, methodological, and political mechanisms, these approaches produce sets of conditions for “critical correctness” (Mallett, 2009), or rather, they create what can and cannot be said about the comedic representation of disability. Not only does such a mode of criticism afford little room for other readings, other meanings, other contexts, but in doing so it also provides a criticism which has very little to offer beyond chastisements and does not offer much to support a sustained theoretical engagement.

The lack of critical engagement with British comedy's use of disability is further demonstrated if we consider the reaction to a comedic moment, which appeared on a mainstream British sports program in 2006. During the BBC's World Cup coverage a sketch was shown during a half-time interval on the flagship programme *Match of the Day*. The one-minute sketch was a "spoof" centred on the England football players Peter Crouch and Wayne Rooney. In the sketch, tall Peter Crouch is played by the equally tall Stephen Merchant (cowriter of *The Office*) and Ricky Gervais plays himself as a presenter/interviewer. The sketch is itself interesting as it deploys the actor **Warwick Davis** as Wayne Rooney and uses his small stature in juxtaposition to the tall stature of Crouch/Merchant to comedic effect. However, far more significant is the reaction (or lack of it) to Ian Wright's rejoinder at the end of the sketch. Ian Wright (former Arsenal and England footballer) was seated in the studio on the pundit's couch. When the sketch ended, the camera cut back to the presenter and the three pundits where upon Ian Wright laughed and said, "I don't know what it is about little people like that, I just love 'em man, I just love 'em."

Working on the premise that, "Whether or not it is acknowledged, any reading of a text will be constitutive" (Game & Metcalfe, 1996, p. 132), what we do critically with contemporary British comedy produces the text in a certain sort of way. In this example, the lack of critical engagement constitutes the text as benign. For Ian Wright what *allows* that sketch to be funny is quite clear. However, what *allows* it and his reaction to remain funny and not chastised is revealed in the lack of public outcry, official sanction or even public discussion. The only hint of disapproval was the slight awkward silence of his fellow presenters. More troublingly, a year later, the *Comic Relief* charity single, featuring the characters Andy Pipkin and Brian Potter, was met with universal acceptance. The contradiction of a charity using characters "pretending" to be impaired to raise money, in part for disabled people, was not questioned.²

I do not want to suggest that such texts should be censored or banned but rather to assert that they at least should be critically discussed. At present, as the Ian Wright moment shows, British disability-criticism is ineffectual. As the comedic use of disability is without an adequate critical vocabulary, then, cultural texts remain unchallenged, under-theorized and immune to scrutiny. On the one hand, we are left asking what we should do with a form of representation that is generally recognized as having an institutional generic requirement for indecorum and transgression: a form of representation that will not stand for chastisement. On the other we acknowledge that, to varying degrees, comedy's claim for immunity in relation to how it treats race, gender or sexuality has been publically challenged and theoretically problematized. It seems appropriate at this moment to step beyond the current boundaries of British disability-criticism.

Seeking Possibilities: The Theorization of Popular Television Comedy and Identities

Literature on popular comedy and the triad of identities (race, gender, and sexuality) is in better shape than that on disability. Havens (2000) has considered race in the *Cosby Show* and McEachern (1999) has analyzed the TV situation comedy *Home Improvement* in terms of masculinity and the men's movement. Tyler and Cohen (2008) have considered gender and heteronormativity in *The Office* whereas Medhurst (2007) and Stott (2005) have both included

substantial sections of their respective books on comedy to issues around sexuality. Beyond the triad of identities Medhurst (2007) has also, and comprehensively, considered the role of popular television comedy in the construction of national identity.

All these writings display an eclecticism and refuse to be corralled into neat disciplinary boundaries. Inspired by this wilful multiplicity, for the remainder of the article I offer suggestions for a critical vocabulary around televised comedy and disability. To do this I mirror the “reckless promiscuity of paradigms” (Medhurst, 2007, p. 2) on which studies of comedy and identities rely. However, as the possibilities are many but the space remaining is small, I focus selectively on moments from the British versions of *The Office* and *Little Britain*.

The Office: Performing Political Correctness

As outlined, *The Office* was a British television series set in an administrative branch of a fictitious paper merchant and starred Ricky Gervais as “self-deluded” regional manager David Brent. During Tyler and Cohen’s (2008) reading of the series in terms of gender performativity in the workplace, they note disability alongside the usual identity triad and advocate a link between David Brent’s need for recognition and his offensive comments. When discussing a scene in which Brent makes a sexist comment, Tyler and Cohen contend that the significance of the elongated and laboured silence which follows his comment lies in how he:

“Stands uncomfortably, seemingly awaiting some degree of acknowledgement of the ‘political correctness’ or radicalism of his position, or even some degree of concurrence (providing the apparently much needed reassurance that he has adopted the ‘right’ way of thinking about dealing with sexism in the workplace)” (p. 126).

Tyler and Cohen further posit that the humor here “lies in Brent’s apparent confusion over the position he should, as ‘one of the lads’ and as a manager, be seen to be adopting in relation to gender and sexuality” (p. 126). A similar reading of the social faux pas relating to disability could be proposed: a reading which locates Brent’s apparent confusion in terms of what position he should be adopting as both “a radical humorist not afraid to be controversial” and as a good manager who is fully aware of equality and diversity issues. An example of this occurs in Episode 1 of Series 2 when he recounts an impression he did of a colleague at the Coventry conference: “Some comedians will have picked on other stuff, you know been more nasty. Like he's got a little withered hand, like Jeremy Beadle - I didn't mention it. No need.”

As in all written discussion of televised comedy the extra-textual is in danger of getting lost (Medhurst, 2007), and here it is particularly important as Brent accompanies this statement by making his own hand appear “withered.” Here it is apparent that he senses that talking about “withered hands” is not appropriate. His attempt to highlight his knowledge of this is consistent with Tyler and Cohen’s argument that foregrounds his desire for recognition for being a good manager. However, the manner in which he does so here reveals a misunderstanding of the appropriate behaviour and his performance of the “politically correct” manager fails.

I argue that rather than measure the show and its jokes against criteria based on social-model informed notions of un/acceptability (Mallett, 2009), being attendant to how the comedy around disability draws on a critique of “political correctness” offers an alternative reading. Here Tyler and Cohen (2008) remain helpful when they emphasize the critical potential of cultural texts such as this one alongside the role of parody as a mode of cultural critique. In its use of disability *The Office* parodies a performativity of political correctness and all that entails (such as rhetorics of inclusion, equality and diversity). David Brent reveals, by a mechanism of excess, the provisionality of the “tolerant subject position,” with the comedy coming from the failure of that positioning.

I further argue that the presence of a “tolerant subject position” in relation to disability becomes significant if we consider the policy and legislative context. In 1996, barely a year after the passing of the UK’s first anti-disability-discrimination act (DDA) (HMSO, 1995) another BBC sit-com called *The Thin Blue Line* aired an episode called “Ism Ism Ism.” Set in a police station, the episode includes a scene where the characters are discussing racism, sexism, and homophobia in the police force. The subject is handled critically with the diverse cast of characters advocating a range of opposing views, but not once is disability mentioned alongside these oppressed identities. Since the episode was aired Britain has seen an acceleration in disability legislation, including an updating of the DDA in 2001 (HMSO, 2001) and 2005 (HMSO, 2005) as well as the amalgamation of separate equality commissions into the single *Equality and Human Rights Commission*. Since the turn of the century disability in Britain has become formally incorporated, alongside race, gender and sexuality, into diversity agendas and equality schemes making it increasingly conspicuous but less exceptional in, for example, the workplace.

Advancing the critical potential of such texts, *The Office* offers a critique of the associated rhetoric surrounding implementation of such legislative and policy developments. The ways in which David Brent’s words get tangled in webs of uncomfortable contradiction and how his actions often demonstrate a disparity between the two reveals the fragility of the “tolerant subject position.” In short, Brent’s logic reveals the arbitrariness of the boundaries such tolerance ought not to cross.

In the next section I further this argument and explore how such a position is contingent upon wider global shifts. To do this I draw on theories derived from the theorisation of culture and another identity grouping, this time around sexuality.

David, Lou, Andy, and Neoliberal Crises

Taking neoliberal capitalism as the dominant economic and cultural system in, through and against which embodied identities have been imagined and composed, the interdisciplinary Disability Studies scholar Robert McRuer (2006) discusses how, paradoxically we are in an era “characterised by more global inequality [...] and less rigidity in terms of how oppression is reproduced” (p. 3). He argues that such a system of economic productivity demands flexible bodies, or rather able-bodies, producing a system of unacknowledged compulsory ablebodiedness. Drawing on theories from Gay and Lesbian Studies he asserts:

“Neoliberalism and the conditions of postmodernity, in fact, increasingly need able-bodied, heterosexual subjects who are visible and spectacularly tolerant of queer/disabled existences” (p. 2).

In other words, neoliberalism demands a certain sort of “tolerance.” He expands on this by stating:

“The successful able-bodied subject, like the most successful heterosexual subject, has observed and internalised some of the lessons of liberation movements over the past few decades. Such movements without question throw the successful heterosexual, able-bodied subject into crisis, but he or she must perform as though they did not; the subject must demonstrate instead a dutiful (and flexible) tolerance toward the minority groups constituted through these movements” (p. 18).

Although McRuer’s focus is on how gay and disabled characters are placed in subordinate positions and asked to comply flexibly so that heterosexual, nondisabled characters can flexibly contract and expand, this is a useful idea for thinking through *The Office*. I suggest that it is from David Brent’s attempts and failures to perform a visible, flexible tolerance that much of the comedy comes. Brent’s utterances disrupt the “discursive climate of tolerance, which values and profits from diversity” (p. 18) precisely because, despite his better efforts, the heterosexual, able-bodied subject is shown as being in crisis.

Similarly, a reading of the BBC sketch show *Little Britain* could place the “carer” character Lou in the role of the neoliberal state (or one of its public-private partners), taking care of Andy’s needs and making sure at all times that Andy has a “choice.” However, Andy’s pretence of a physical impairment (demonstrated by Andy leaving his wheelchair whenever Lou’s back is turned) reveals a further discrepancy in this neoliberal relationship. A comparable reading of *Little Britain* could contend that the comedy produced by Andy’s lack of physical impairment draws on a similar disruption to the “tolerant subject position” to that used in *The Office*. Lou (neoliberalism) is being taken as a fool with the associated subject position being revealed as fragile and inadequate. However, as the discrepancy is seen to be in the status of who is being tolerated, rather than how the tolerance is performed, such a reading seems rather less adequate. Furthermore, Lou is not shown as the heterosexual, able-bodied “tolerant” subject in crisis because he never discovers the truth about Andy.

But perhaps that is the point. By returning Lou and Andy to their rightful place alongside the other characters who populate *Little Britain*, it becomes possible that the “crisis” has just been relocated. In order to explore where the “crisis” has been moved to I now turn this theoretical lens upon a relatively minor character, Linda Flint, who first appeared in the second episode of Series 2.

“You Know the One”: Linda Flint and the Other Side of the Desk/Screen

During the course of her first episode, Linda Flint appears in three sketches. In the first she is introduced as a counsellor at the University of the North West Midlands trying to help a student who has requested an extension on the deadline for one of her essays. Linda rings up

Martin (whom we never see but are led to believe is “in charge”) and, in putting the student’s case, attempts to describe the girl in front of her eventually settling on “the big fat lesbian.” The second scene involves Linda talking to a Chinese student followed by a further phone call to Martin. This time she describes the student as “straight black hair, yellowish skin, slight smell of soy sauce...that’s it, the ching-chong Chinaman.” In the third sketch, Linda’s visitor is a student of short stature. When required to describe the student she says, “Shoulder length brown hair, wears a lot of jewelry...looks up a lot, gets his clothes from Mothercare. That’s it, the Oompa-Loompa.”

It can be no accident that in those first appearances Linda addresses issues of sexuality, race, and disability. In *Linda* we are provided with an un-reflexive David Brent and “we” (the audience) are placed into the position of Linda’s reflexivity. We, on the other side of the screen, are asked whether her descriptions of those on the other side of her desk overstep the “mark.” We are asked to test out the boundaries of our own “tolerant subject position” in order to discover where our “marks” lie.

This strategy obviously runs the risk of being misconstrued. The critic Johann Hari (2005) wrote in *The Independent* newspaper:

“[*Little Britain*’s] targets are almost invariably the easiest, cheapest groups to mock: the disabled, poor, elderly, gay or fat. In one fell swoop, they have demolished protections against mocking the weak that took decades to build up.”

On first reading, this appears to be a statement in support of a disability oriented critique: the jokes perpetuate prejudice and jeopardize public support. However, the positioning of “the disabled” as “weak” evokes the sort of trouble David Brent gets himself into. We are returned to considering the crisis of a “tolerant subject position,” not on screen but within ourselves. In his critique of the show, Hari is attempting to perform a subjectivity which demonstrates “a dutiful (and flexible) tolerance toward the minority groups” (McRuer, 2006, p. 18) but, in doing so, trips over himself. The fragility of the “tolerant subject position” is revealed, thanks to the publication of Hari’s comments, but I argue that audiences are similarly caught in the double-bind of *Little Britain* and a neoliberal world order.

Conclusion

“We exist at a time when we aren’t sure what to say,” asserts British Comedian David Baddiel, speaking about “categories of people” on *Ricky Gervais: New Hero of Comedy*, Channel 4, 2008. Echoing the conversation between Russell Brand and Matt Morgan about whether the wheelchair incident is *allowed* to be funny and giving voice to the awkward silence of Ian Wright’s co-presenters, David Baddiel’s comment further hints at the void created when a critical vocabulary is missing. In concluding that the current discursive capacities of British disability-criticism do not offer the bases for an effective critical engagement, this article has widened the net in an attempt to seek alternative possibilities to the cultural theorisation of disability and British comedy. By offering some emerging thoughts on a number of comedic moments from two British comedy shows, the article has demonstrated how the presentation of what could be deemed prejudicial comments or actions should not be necessarily interpreted as

merely perpetuating such prejudice. Instead, I have advocated readings which pay attention to the social and political contexts of the texts and have drawn on existing considerations of comedy and identity to begin to unpack the disability-related comedy in *The Office* and how so many find *Little Britain* equally pleasurable and offensive. These readings are by no means complete and I would suggest that the use of irony, parody, and the grotesque as well as the difference made by the particular format (e.g., sitcom, sketch show) are just some areas in need of extended consideration.

However, the ultimate purpose of this article is to suggest that, like previous studies in television comedy, British disability-criticism should disregard disciplinary fences and reap the benefits of venturing further afield. Not least because a critical engagement with comedy holds the potential to explore alternative perspectives on topics at the heart of Disability Studies. In this instance, the significance of the interdisciplinary dialogues that a Cultural Disability Studies perspective can facilitate is bolstered by a demonstration of the ability of comedic texts to explore what Goodley (2007), borrowing from Azzopardi, has called the “cliché of inclusion” (p. 318), proof, if needed, that the theorization of culture has much to offer a realm that traditionally has focused on developing social policy and influencing disability practice.

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Endnotes

¹In October, 2008 Russell Brand resigned from his BBC Radio 2 show following controversy over "prank" phone calls made on air to a well-known actor. The controversy focused on whether the content of answer-phone messages left as a result of those calls were acceptable territory for comedy. While "disability" was not explicitly implicated, it is interesting to note that the mechanisms by which comedic "acceptability" is defined, assessed, and regulated were all too evident.

²St. Cuthbert Club for the Disabled and the Warwickshire and Coventry Council of Disabled People are just two "disability" organizations to receive grants from Comic Relief according to the 05-06 UK Grant Approvals declaration (Comic Relief, 2007).