Comedy As The Completed Forward Pass

The quarterback takes the snap, drops back, avoids the monsters trying to bring him down, and throws a beautiful spiral pass waaaaayyyyy downfield somewhere.

Will it be caught? That really depends upon whether the receiver has some basis of commonality with the quarterback. Perhaps they had the same playbook, knew that they were on the same page of that playbook and perhaps through some previous practice knew that their particular actions and mutual understandings would just barely lead to this successful outcome.

I bring up this metaphor because it can lead to so very, very many things, and because it has a direct analogy to the process of delivery and reception of comedy from a comedian to his or her respective audience members.

Truth be told, I'm not just talking about comedy here. This article could have as easily have been titled "Human Communication As The Completed Forward Pass". Perhaps that is why a Charlie Chaplin film like "City Lights" can make me cry as well as laugh, or how I can actually feel the moment that Woody Allen's heart breaks when Louise Lasser's character rejects him in "Bananas". Robin Williams, who could make me laugh more times per minute than anyone, ever, won his Oscar for playing a totally serious role.

But let's just call it comedy, because this is a comedy class. And let's use American football's forward pass as the metaphor because it is relatively easy to understand.

Whether it is a football pass or a standup comedy routine, it breaks down the same way. There is a sender and a receiver, and there is some sort of action that happens in between them. As a result of that combination, there is some sort of outcome. If in football the receiver catches the ball and is tackled, one can even measure exactly how many yards have been gained. Or perhaps, like Bo Jackson of olden days, the receiver just keeps running past the goal line and out through the tunnel into the parking lot. In most events, a completed forward pass is a desired outcome and people (at least the ones rooting for it) are pretty happy about it.

In comedy the quarterback is the standup comedian. He or she delivers the action, which instead of a forward pass may be a story, an action, or even a joke. Let's call it a joke for now.

Each audience member is a receiver, who either does or doesn't get the joke, and if they do get the joke, either does or doesn't feel that it is funny, and if they feel it is funny, to what degree it is funny is very personalized to the recipient. In American football, there is only one forward pass thrown on the play and the referees can clearly mark where the ball is down, and thus have only one measurement of how many yards were gained on that particular play.

In a standup comedian's audience, each joke, story, action or line is a forward pass, and each of these may result in a different yardage gain or loss in the mind of each individual audience member. Sometimes, there are yellow flags all over the field, but we won't go there just yet.

The important thing to remember is that the elements are exactly the same:

- Quarterback, Pass, Receiver, Yardage (QPRY)
- Comedian, Joke, Audience, Reactions (CJAR)

Just to make it easy to refer to the above comedic process, I'll refer to it later as CJAR (pronounced "see-jar"). I'll work backwards in this process, first explaining the Reaction part (R), then the Audience part (A), and then tackle the Comedian and Joke creation parts (C and J).

The Reaction Matrix (R)

For the overall metaphor to hold up, we have to change our concept of what is meant by the yardage marker. In football, it is just one, static thing, the number of yards that the play gained going that way (my arm is pointed out in that particular direction).

If you have 50, 100, or 100 million in the room or virtual room, how do you measure the yard marker for a given joke or play? Well, first, let's just throw away the concept of the virtual room and use a real room, a nightclub, for example. If

we can get that part down, then the virtual audiences accessible through mass communication and recording means should just be an adjustment to that.

In the good ol' days of early television they used a laugh-meter to measure audience reaction or applause. This was a very primitive tool for summing up what the audience thought of a particular performer or a particular joke, as measured by the aggregate amount of noise that they were willing to make in response to the bit. If someone thought that a particular entertainer was hilariously funny, yet that person did not laugh out loud in proportion to how funny that he or she felt the joke was, it would be recorded as a zero. That's kind of a problem. If there is some director or applause sign manipulating the audience reaction, that is a problem too. For now, let's just assume that people's reactions are genuine and proportional to how they are actually reacting to the material.

Another problem is the author's intent. Even if everyone does laugh exactly in proportion to how funny they think a particular bit is, was the aggregate laugh meter result really the original intent of the author or comedian? Maybe when Lenny Bruce was telling a joke he was satisfied if there were five people in the room who got the joke and were laughing their collective asses off while the rest of the room remained in dumb silence. Not exactly a good business model, but still, it goes back to the artist's intent.

I read somewhere that Shakespeare (OK, Edward DeVere if you are a historical nit-pickers like me) said that he wrote his plays just for the one person in the audience who might understand them. That one person might have even been himself, or some future person who could understand what he was doing.

If he indeed said that, then I believe that, although he also did well enough on the laugh meters and cry meters to sustain the Kings Men (and previously the Lord Chamberlain's Men) playing company through a couple of decades.

My point is this: Audience reaction is not a single yard marker but an aggregate of individual reactions. It is, in fact, a matrix of reactions, with each element in the matrix being the reaction of one of the individuals in the audience. Let's not worry about how the rows or columns of the matrix are defined, whether the laugh meters are inside of people's heads or outside of them, and whether the reactions themselves are multi-dimensional or single-dimensional. There's just

one point: This blob over here is the audience reaction and I've called it the Audience Reaction matrix. It is the yardage marker of comedy.

The Audience Matrix (A)

So, if this blob over here is the reaction of the audience, how come the elements in it are all different? Why didn't everyone react in exactly the same way?

That question would lead us to examine what the audience itself is. Let's just be simple about it and say that the audience itself is just another blob, and let's call that blob the Audience Matrix.

The people who make up the audience are each themselves going to be very complex and individual blobs, which is what produces the individual reactions that go into the Audience Reaction Matrix, but just for the moment let's pretend that they are not. Let's pretend that, instead of going down to the microscopic level on each individual in the audience, we can instead draw rows in the matrix that correspond to certain characteristics that are common to a subset of the audience, and that becomes one row of the Audience Matrix.

This general idea might be illustrated with a specific example. Kathy Griffin, for example, tunes her comedic material to people who follow celebrities in popular culture, and to what she calls "her gays". If there is no one in the audience who has even heard of the Kardashians, for example, she can pretty much expect her Kardashian jokes to fall flat.

Lenny Bruce had a very different target audience. If he could have filled his nightclub audience with people of his choice, they would have all been liberal, very aware of contemporary politics, sexually liberal, very aware of the jazz and hipster music scene, highly skeptical of any "scheduled theology", and acutely aware of the differences between the moralities that people of power and influence proclaimed and the ones that they actually practiced.

Now we are getting to some of the general descriptors of the rows and columns of what might or might not become a description of the Audience Matrix.

This, by the way, is exactly the kind of analysis that is done on Madison Avenue to decide the best way to sell us soap, under-arm deodorant, cars, cigarettes, refrigerators, and beer. You get the idea.

The Comedic Process and Comedian Matrix (C and J)

Now we get to the description of the creative part of the process and I realize that I actually described both the football metaphor and the comedic joke process incorrectly. I described both from the audience point of view. The football audience sees the quarterback on the field, sees him throw the pass, sees the receiver catch the pass, and then sees the referee place the yardage marker (QPRY). The nightclub audience sees the comedian on the stage, hears the joke delivered, reacts to the joke and the reaction is measured (CJAR).

From the creative side, the football metaphor should be Play-Pass-Receiver-Yardage (PPRY), because before the quarterback ever took to the field, there was a coach who very carefully drew up the play and made sure that everyone on the creative side knew how to do it. Without coach Bill Walsh drawing up the plays, quarterback Joe Montana and receiver Jerry Rice would not have known exactly where to go and what to do during the play.

On the comedy creation side, the real process should be Joke-Comedian-Audience-Reaction (JCAR, not CJAR). Ad-libs and improvisation notwithstanding, the Joke (story, etc.) comes first, and the comedian is simply the deliverer of the joke. In the comedy classes that I teach, the writer and the deliverer are almost always the same person, so this distinction often goes away. As well as Billy Crystal and Meg Ryan delivered the comedy in "When Harry Met Sally" however, it was still the writer, Nora Ephron, who created the script. As audience members, we never see Nora Ephron on screen, but she was still the J in the JCAR process.

The First Test of Creative Material

I make all of these distinctions of the letters of JCAR very carefully, because the writer (J) is really aiming to achieve a reaction (R), and as such has to have a small model of the JCAR right in his or her own head as he or she writes the material in the first place.

It is possible to work backwards from the R back to the J, and this is what hack writers do at many of the networks. The underlying philosophy is that "this is the kind of reaction we want from this kind of audience, and it tested best with this kind of delivery, so we'll just write a variation on something like that." This is almost the definition of hack writing.

The people whom I feature in the "Contemporary Comedic Genius" series do not work this way. First, they are all writers themselves, and secondly they get their material from the world around them, do things with it that make themselves laugh, and then take it to the microphone or camera to deliver it.

Like I said, it goes all the way back to Shakespeare, whose main aim was first to get a rise out of himself as an audience member, and then hoped that others would follow. I will call this the JCA_0R_0 process, where the writer/comedian has substituted himself as an audience member, A_0 instead of the real audience (A), and gotten a rise out of himself/herself as a reaction R_0, instead of out of a collective real audience Reaction (R). Simply put, the writer has to start by making himself laugh or react.

Of James Joyce and Du Fu

Let me give two extreme and contrasting examples of writers following this process.

The first is James Joyce's writing of *Finnegan's Wake*. James Joyce wrote this entire book for an audience of one--himself. It contains jokes and passages in five or six different languages, and layered and very deep references to events surrounding the Irish history of his lifetime. The material is so deep that only a handful of serious scholars in the world could even pretend that they fully understand it and even those few might fail a quiz that James Joyce himself (were he alive to give it) could administer. If the goal is to sell a lot of books or create high network ratings for a given work, this is probably not the way to go about it, and it was obviously not James Joyce's goal. He had already created *Ulysses*, one of the finest works in all of literature and one that millions of people *could* enjoy, so mass market was not his goal.

On the other extreme, there was the 8th century Chinese poet and scholar, Du Fu. It is said that in his later years this great scholar took his poetry out into the fields and read it to farmers. If they did not understand any portion of the poem, he kept rewriting it until they did. Thus was born the ideal of the mass communications networks of today. If only we were so lucky.

The take-home point of the JCAR process is that it almost always starts with the writer of the material using himself/herself as the model of the audience matrix and then the material is modified from there.

Separating the J from the C

I admit freely that I have a bias. I am a writer first, and a deliverer of comedy somewhere about 47th. I have tried to move that latter number up a few notches at a time over the past several decades, especially as oftentimes one must recruit others to be part of the performance of the work and one must present a convincing enough presentation of the material for another person to want to work on the production of it as well.

In the early part of his career, Richard Pryor was enamored of the style of Bill Cosby's comedy. So much so that he delivered some of Bill Cosby's bits verbatim and years later one of Pryor's friends called him to say that he had just seen a Bill Cosby performance and that Cosby was stealing Pryor's material verbatim. Billy Crystal admits to doing Bill Cosby's *Noah* routine at a high school summer camp in his youth, and coincidentally, I too stole the same *Noah* routine for a talent show in the summer before I went to college in 1966. It worked very nicely, given that no one else in the room had ever heard the material.

The point is that there is a difference between the J and the C. Comedians who generally did not write their own material, or who just plain stole it from other comedians, would insist that timing and delivery was everything, thus giving importance to the C component of the JCAR process.

If we go back to the football metaphor for just a moment, I have to acknowledge the great importance of the deliverer of the material. Coach Bill Walsh could draw up all the plays he wanted on the whiteboard, but it was quarterback Cool Joe

Montana who could throw that perfect spiral 50 yards down field to the precise outstretched hands of receiver Jerry Rice, even though Montana was making the throw just as he was about to be thumped to the ground by a collection of rushing behemoths. The famous photo that everyone calls "The Catch" that signaled the rise of the San Francisco 49ers to greatness, Joe Montana calls "The Throw".

A Couple Tips of the Hat and Wags of the Finger

Although it doesn't mean much yet because I haven't gotten into enough detail, I'm going to mention that this whole JCAR comedy process description owes its roots to a few people whom I wish to acknowledge.

The first is Irish mathematician William Rowan Hamilton (1805-1865), after whom Hamiltonian quantum mechanics is named. The second is Carl Friedrich Guass (1775-1855), who formalized matrix algebra, and the third is physicist Paul Dirac (1902-1984), who incorporated matrix algebra into quantum mechanical physics in order to describe the possible outcomes that some kind of force or phenomenon might have on the state of the thing that it was acting upon.

Example: At the Stanford Linear Accelerator (SLAC) facility in Palo Alto, they shoot very high speed things at a small target, and--SPLAT--whatever it is hits the target and they somehow have ways to measure the reactions of the target to the phenomena. In Paul Dirac's matrices, each entry in the matrix is referenced as <the-state-that-it-is-was-in-before|the-phenomenon|the-state-that-it-become-afterwards>. Or, <a|b|c>.

In comedy, that corresponds to the state that the individual audience member was in before the joke, the joke, and the state that the individual audience member was in immediately after the joke. Call it $<A_0|J|A_1>$, where J is the Joke and A is the audience member.

Anyway, when I went to Caltech in the late 60s, Paul Dirac's way of describing phenomena impressed me. So, in the summer of 1969, when I participated in a project in which the nearby Jet Propulsion Laboratory gathered inter-disciplinary students from across the country to try to apply scientific principles to the study of housing in the city of Pasadena, California, my contribution was a paper

formulating social phenomena as if they were phenomena being described as quantum mechanical physics phenomena.

The specific question that the summer group was examining was "What happens to the housing scene in Pasadena when the racial mixture of the community changes by 15% over a short period of time?" Using the mathematical techniques of Paul Dirac, I broke this big question down into four smaller questions, each of which was its own phenomenon matrix. Basically, the paper was saying that the phenomenon was being applied to the home owners of Pasadena (the audience), and that the processes broke down into Perception, Values, Reaction, and Constraints (O=PVRC).

The reaction of each property owner in Pasadena depended upon (P) his perception of the phenomena happening, (V) the owner's value system, (R) the owner's reaction to P and V, and finally (C) the constraints upon the owner's Reaction. For example, if the property owner's perception and values provided a reaction of "Sell your property", that still might be negated by (C) "because of other factors, selling the property is impossible at this time." For some people that applies, for some it doesn't. That's why there is a matrix of people going into the process and a matrix of people coming out of the process. On the other end of the spectrum, there were the property owners who might have had the reaction "I was going to sell my property before this happened, this phenomenon makes no difference, so my end result is that I'm still selling my property."

Anyway, my original paper has gathered dust on the shelves of the JPL library for the past 45 years, but as I write this paper I just have to say that comedy, or the joke in comedy, is just a subset of social reaction, so the JCAR joke process is just an articulated specific subset of my original O=PVRC process about social phenomenon. If someone else knows about a similar formulation about these things that has emerged, please let me know.

The devil, and the real work, is in the details. So, let's get on with that part, focusing solely on the JCAR joke process, and specifically in the creation of the Joke matrix.

(Note: My wife says that I should delete the entire Caltech/PVRC personal story part of the above as self-aggrandizement. To me, it's just an attempt to tell you where this stuff is coming from in my head. My apologies if any of that part seems narcissistic. Besides, there is probably better work on the same

Creating the (J): Where Does The Material Come From?

I didn't intend for the process origination to be a two-page diversion, but since it is there, I now feel comfortable just describing the Joke matrix as an ordinary table. It has rows, it has columns. It is a table, just like the ones we use to figure out how much we owe the government in taxes.

If it's that simple, then what are the rows for a joke? What are the columns? How come there are a gazillion comedians trying to figure out a bazillion ways to make people laugh, and they spend decades trying to do it?

I dunno, but for a start let's say that the rows are the comedic techniques and the columns are the content sources of the joke.

For example, maybe the row descriptors might be (feel free to join in):

ROWS:
1. Juxtaposition
2. Exaggeration
3. Puns
4. Taglines
5. Irony
6. Parody
7. Physical movement (slapstick)
8. Physical movement (Lazzi from comedia del arte, false exits, etc.)
9. Exploded expectations
10. The Build
11. The Chain
12. Missing the mark in spectacular fashion
13. Derivative humor
14. Collision of cultures (subset of juxtaposition)

Columns:

   a. Hypocrisy: Political, religious, economic, social
   b. Sexual mores
   c. Current events
   d. Family interactions
   e. Status differentiations
   f. Drugs
   g. Social customs (e.g., swinging the chicken over your head)
   h. Other people's conversations in public
   i. Cultural specifics
   j. Marriage, divorce, motels
   k. Word usage (see hypocrisy)
   l. History
   m. Pop culture (songs, ads, people)
   n. Traditional Americana
   o. New trends
   p. New technology (Segue, iphones, etc.)
   q. Symbolism (also see hypocrisy)
   r. Characters
   s. Stories including characters, settings, accents, sounds, juxtaposed images

"We're Gonna Need A Bigger Boat!"

If this were the 1975 movie "Jaws", this would be the place where Roy Scheider first catches a glimpse of the jaws of the giant white shark. He backs away from it all the way into the steering room and tells Robert Shaw "We're gonna need a bigger boat!"

I mean, seriously, lots of people have been working on comedy for more than 2,000 years, and you're gonna attempt to model something you call the Joke matrix? Come on!

I admit, comedy is a big rock. But the way one tackles big rocks is to break them down into smaller rocks and to process the more manageable smaller rocks. I suggest that we take advantage of the fact that people *have* been grinding out

these many examples of comedy, and try to run them through the overall JCAR model. Maybe we will learn something as we go about the nature of the Joke matrix, and something about the Audience matrix, and the production of reactions that lead to our yardage marker, the Reaction matrix. Maybe we will learn that the whole JCAR process idea is wrong, or that it is missing some key idea. I suggest that we look at as many examples as possible and see how they might fit within the JCAR process, and thereby get a greater understanding of the process itself. What should be the rows and columns of each part, and how do you get the measurements? I suggest we not bust our brains too much on that just yet. Let's just look at several examples and see how they play out.

[By the way, I am very open to your suggestions of examples here as well. I'm trying to put this all into context, but the more brain cells on it, the better. Feel free to email me at martinmarshall@pacbell.net with suggestions and comments.]

Examples, Examples, Examples