The joke and the joker: Ascribing accountability for offensive humour in stand-up comedy

Abstract
The ongoing and divisive discourse regarding the use of offensive humour in stand-up comedy is taking place both off-stage and on-stage: comedians use jokes that target sensitive characteristics ostensibly to show that no topic is 'off limits', while also taking a stance against those who argue for more empathetic comedy that does not reinforce stereotypes and discriminatory beliefs. Taking Jimmy Carr's 'holocaust joke' (2021) as a case study, we examine the entire life-cycle of jokes from their live-performance context to entering the public sphere, questioning what a joker can be held accountable for in stand-up comedy. Specifically, we look at the performance frame, comedian personality and persona, and how different types of audience may react to a joke, in order to shed light on what exactly it is that the producer of an offensive joke can, or should, be held accountable for.

Keywords: offensive humour, accountability, comedic licence, audience reception, limits of humour

1. Introduction

Humour is a funny thing. It has the potential to bring people together through laughter, but it can also be divisive. While public and intellectual debates about what one can and should not joke about are nothing new, recent years have seen an intensification of this discussion, in part due to social movements such as Black Lives Matter and #metoo.[1,2] This discourse encompasses not only the issue of the limits of humour and comedy but also whether joke-tellers are responsible for any offence they may cause.

In this paper, we question the extent to which a speaker can, or should, be held accountable for offence caused through jokes. On the one hand, offensive humour affords the joker plausible deniability for having *intended* to cause offence: it was 'just a joke'. But even if the joker did not intend to cause offence, are they, or should they be, accountable for the offensive content of their joke? This question is made more complicated by the fact that humorous frames arising in spontaneous interaction differ from humorous frames in scripted and/or live-performed comedy. As noted by Wilk and Gimbel (2024), whether a joke is deemed permissible is dependent on a complex interplay of the joke itself, the teller of the joke, the audience, and the setting. In stand-up comedy specifically, how (offensive) humour is viewed and received is not only relative to the ascription of intentions, but is also complicated by factors such as the performance space and set-up, the comedian's on-stage and off-stage personality (or persona), as well as the range of different audiences who access the performance through different media.

A comedic script is almost always part of a discourse, which may concern any number of social and political issues, such as public health/vaccines, gender roles, discrimination, racism, lifestyle, capitalism, and so on. Crucially, the comedic script may also be part of the meta-comedic discourse (i.e. discourse about comedy). This discourse revolves around issues such as the limits of comedy and the notion of political correctness (Hunt 2010), with ideological positions lying on a spectrum from the idea that comedy should try to avoid further harm to oppressed or marginalized communities at one end, to the push-back against the

[1] https://blacklivesmatter.com/
[2] https://metoomvmt.org/

(perceived) limitations that political correctness imposes on comedy at the other. Contemporary stand-up comedians often choose to position themselves on this spectrum, not just by discussing comedy off-stage, but also by incorporating their stance within their comedic script and its performance.

Our case study, which can be classed as a 'humour controversy' (Pérez and Greene 2016), comes from Jimmy Carr's 'His Dark Material'. This stand-up comedy set was performed live and recorded as a Netflix Special, which was released in 2021.[3] The show's description reads, "Jimmy Carr finds humour in the darkest of places", adding that it features his "trademark dry, sardonic wit and includes some jokes that Jimmy calls 'career enders'". The show, and one joke about the holocaust in particular, later received widespread attention in February 2022, when a clip containing the holocaust joke in question circulated on social media. Aside from the general public, prominent politicians, including then UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson, engaged in the discourse surrounding the joke, following reactions by affected organisations like the Auschwitz Memorial and The Traveller Movement, who condemned it for fuelling racism, especially against the Romani people (Bagwell 2022; Iorizzo 2022).

By labelling his jokes 'career enders', Carr explicitly acknowledges the damaging potential they may have on his audiences, and indeed if any public backlash were to ensue, on his career. Carr begins his set with a disclaimer, stating that the show:

(1) [...] includes jokes about terrible things, terrible things that may have affected you and the people that you love. But these are just jokes, they're not the terrible things. There's a huge difference between doing a joke about a rape [pause] and doing a rape. I fucking hope, or I'm going to jail forever.

The show subsequently revolves around the idea that one can make jokes about any topic, no matter how horrible. This is because, unlike the events that are being joked about, jokes themselves are harmless. This disclaimer runs as a motto throughout his set, abbreviated as "terrible things [gesture to indicate contrast]; jokes about terrible things".

This set thus offers an interesting opportunity for analysis, as we are afforded not only the audience uptake via social media commentary, but Carr's own evaluation of the offensiveness of his jokes. There is thus a tension between the comedian's own perspective as to how audiences *should* receive the jokes, with how the jokes *are* received by different audiences. In what follows, we examine this interplay of speaker beliefs versus audience uptake, as they are mediated through the different platforms via which the joke was received.

2. Offensive humour and accountability

In general, offence is associated with the violation of social norms and expectations. As Haugh et al (2022: 118) summarise, offence has been conceptualised both as 'interpersonally transgressive conduct' (e.g. Culpeper 2011; Tayebi 2016) and as a '(perceived) moral transgression' (e.g. Kádár 2017; Parvaresh and Tayebi 2018). The former is typically linked to 'face', roughly defined as a person's self-image or wants (e.g. Goffman 1967; Brown and Levinson 1987); the latter relates to the concept of the 'moral order', i.e. "the socially standardized and standardizing, 'seen but unnoticed', expected, background features of everyday scenes" (Garfinkel 1964: 226) against which evaluations are made (e.g. Kádár and

[3] It is not clear how much of the script for 'His Dark Material' overlaps with that of his 'Terribly Funny' (2019-2021) tour, which he was on during the Netflix Special recording.

Haugh 2013). Although the two are often distinguished from one another, it has to be noted that interpersonal transgressions are often connected to moral transgressions (cf. Kádár and Haugh 2013: 60-73).

Associating offence with transgressions naturally lends itself to viewing both 'causing offence' and 'taking offence' as social actions. Here we follow work in interpersonal pragmatics (e.g. Haugh and Sinkeviciute 2019: 4-8; Haugh et al 2022: 119) in which 'giving' or 'causing' offence involves verbal or non-verbal conduct by one party that is perceived or treated as a transgression by another party. In other words, the act of causing offence is identified by, and dependent on, a recipient's reaction (see also Szabó 2020).

Humour, like offence, is a multifaceted phenomenon. 'Canned jokes' are commonly distinguished from 'conversational jokes' or 'conversational humour' (e.g. Norrick 1993; Attardo 1994; Dynel 2009). The former are characterised by their relative context-independence, whereas the latter arise spontaneously in interaction and are highly situational. As largely pre-scripted performances, stand-up acts mostly consist of canned jokes, although a certain degree of improvised comedy may be present as well. While (conversational) humour may arise unintentionally (Wyer and Collins 1992; Nilsen and Nilsen 2000; Attardo 2001; Martin 2007), as stand-up comedy is produced in a humorous frame (Goffman, 1974), the comedian is assumed to have humorous intent.[4]

Now, even if a speaker intends for their utterance to be humorous, a corresponding reception is not guaranteed, and different (groups of) recipients may perceive a humour attempt differently. For instance, joking about taboo topics, "restrictions that regulate some areas of social life, and that demand avoidance behaviour" (Freitas 2008: 39), is arguably intrinsically transgressive and may therefore be considered offensive by (some) recipients (cf. e.g. Mortimer et al 2010; Dore 2020). When specifically joking about (groups of) individuals, the 'intergroup sensitivity effect' means that it is considered more permissible for an in-group member to make a joke at that group's expense than it is for an out-group member to do so (e.g. Thai et al 2019). But whether an in-group member or an out-group member, it may be the case that a joker intends to amuse one audience by targeting – and offending – another (cf. e.g. Ford 2015). As a result, while some audiences - who are typically not the targets of the joke - may appreciate the joke, others may be offended.

Irrespective of *who* feels offended and/or takes offence, there is still the question of how far speakers themselves are responsible, or accountable, for causing that offence. On the one hand, by invoking a humorous frame, a speaker can arguably disclaim any underlying disparaging attitudes that their humour may reveal, whether inadvertently or purposefully (Attardo, 2001; Pérez 2013; Haugh 2016; Weaver 2016). That is, by claiming to be 'only joking', speakers can attempt to distance themselves from any offensive messages, and attempt to invoke plausible deniability for having intended to cause offence.

However, the possibility of deniability makes jokes a potent medium for perpetuating broader social prejudices, irrespective of the speaker's intent (Pérez 2022; Horisk 2024). Claiming not to have offensive intentions does not mean offence was not caused, and the speaker's intent does not necessarily absolve a joke from its potential to offend (Wilk and Gimbel 2024). It is therefore important to decouple a speaker's intention to offend from the act of causing offence, as the audience's reception and context equally matter in evaluating a joke's social implications.

[4] 'Unintentional humour' may also be termed 'accidental humour' (Nilsen and Nilsen 2000) or 'involuntary humour' (Attardo 2001).

With this broad overview of offensive humour in place, this paper addresses the questions of (i) on what grounds recipients treat a joke as offensive; (ii) how recipients can hold speakers accountable for having caused offence; and (iii) to what extent a speaker can disclaim responsibility for having caused this offence.

To answer the first question, it is worth considering what 'speaker meaning' is more broadly (see Elder 2021a for an overview). According to Relevance Theory (Sperber and Wilson 1986/1995), recipients hold speakers committed to the truth of what they are taken to have communicated. As speakers simultaneously communicate several messages through their utterances, recipients hold speakers committed to those different messages to different degrees. Recipients hold speakers more committed to strong implicatures that are clearly inferable as speaker intended, and less committed to weak implicatures that they may infer, but do not necessarily attribute as speaker intended. Moeschler (2013) further argues that speaker commitment is dependent on both how explicit a given meaning is, as well as how accessible it is to the recipient. Inferable meanings such as entailments and presuppositions - even if semantically 'strong' - are backgrounded information, and so less accessible to participants. As such, they are not expected to be consciously entertained, and a recipient will hold a speaker less committed to such messages (see also Morency et al 2008).

To extend this Relevance Theoretic view on speaker commitment to offensive humour, it should first be noted that feelings of offence take us beyond the realm of accessible meanings that are part of the representational content of what is said, to that of attitudes and emotions that are less easy to pinpoint. In other words, offence as an *intended* effect is more easily backgrounded (cf. Elder 2021b), and hence is less accessible to a recipient than, for example, humorous intent. As such, it is possible for a recipient to take offence without necessarily attributing offensive intentions to the speaker. That is, even if a recipient takes offence to a speaker's utterance, they may not hold the speaker committed to having *intended* such offence.

Of course, a speaker may not have offensive intentions (or at least, will not intend to offend all possible audiences); as Goffman (1967: 14) says, offence can be 'intentional', 'unintentional', or 'incidental'. So rather than holding a speaker committed to their offensive intention, another option is to say that – irrespective of the speaker's intentions – speakers simply *are* committed to what they say as a result of their utterance having whatever meaning it is expected to have in that context. Normative commitment-based accounts of communication (e.g. Geurts 2019; Viebahn 2021; Wiegmann 2021) typically work on the assumption that speakers are committed to what they say whether they believe it or not, including implicatures, presuppositions, entailments, and other meanings that are inferable from what is explicitly said.

Note that on the normative commitment account, speakers can, in theory, be committed to a range of *potential* meanings, even if the speaker themselves is not aware of them. But as Elder (2024) points out, the idea that speakers can be committed to unintended meanings may not sit well with the speakers themselves who are accused of having communicated such meanings. What the normative commitment account affords us is the theoretical rationale for why a speaker might attempt to deny their commitments (because they didn't intend to communicate them), while explaining why they are, nevertheless, committed to something they didn't intend to communicate, or even realise they communicated. So, if a joke has the *potential* to offend, for example by handling a taboo topic or denigrating a particular target, on the normative commitment account, a speaker is considered committed to having produced an offensive joke.

If a speaker is not necessarily considered to have offensive intentions, and yet is normatively committed to a joke being potentially offensive, it remains to be seen on what grounds a joke may be treated as offensive by recipients themselves. In other words, we come to our second question above: how can a speaker be held accountable for actually having *caused* offence in an audience? To answer this question, we follow work in interactional pragmatics (e.g. Haugh 2008; Elder and Haugh 2018, among many others) that starts from the perspective that we, both as analysts and interlocutors, do not have access to people's thoughts and intentions, but we do have access to what people say and do. In this respect, it is recipients' actual responses that provide the evidence for how they have understood what speakers have said. For example, in (2), B treats A's turn as a complaint for which they are apologising, while the alternative response by B' treats A's turn as an invitation. In other words, the way that B responds both demonstrates how they have understood A's turn, but in doing so, also influences the direction of the future interaction.

(2) A: Why don't you come and see me sometimes
B: I'm sorry. I've been terribly tied up lately (constructed)
B': I would like to (actual response)

(adapted from Heritage 1984: 255, discussed in Elder 2024)

Note that while recipient responses demonstrate how a previous speaker's turn has been understood, it is not that anything will go. Rather, speakers are presumed to have agency over their utterances, formulating them in appropriate ways at appropriate times. By responding in a particular way, a recipient holds a speaker *normatively accountable* for their understandings in virtue of the speaker having produced their utterance in the way that they did in the context in which they did (Elder 2021a). In the case of offensive humour, recipients can hold speakers accountable for causing offence by 'registering' (and sanctioning) their offence in interaction (Haugh 2015). And this can occur even when a speaker does not have offensive intentions, but has 'incidentally' (cf. Goffman 1967) caused offence by producing a joke that had the potential to cause offence (and that they ought to have known may cause offence).

If speakers find themselves charged with having communicated something they did not intend, it is natural to feel compelled to defend oneself against such claims and attempt to evade accountability. This brings us to our third question above: to what extent can a speaker disclaim responsibility for having caused offence? While displayed inferences can always be disputed by speakers, the act of denial as a communicative move is not always interactionally legitimate (e.g. Haugh 2013; Mazzarella 2021; Bonalumi et al 2022; Elder 2024). It has been noted that when an aspect of meaning is strongly inferable, its denial is less likely to be accepted (e.g. Pinker et al 2008), and that deniability depends both on explicitness of meaning and accessibility (Sternau et al 2017, cf. Moeschler 2013 on commitment as discussed above). Moreover, while speakers can (attempt to) disclaim intent to offend, repeated denial attempts can actually result in whatever is being denied becoming more salient and hence more entrenched in the discourse (Elder 2021b). As deniability is proportional not only to communicative strength but also accessibility, future denial attempts become increasingly less interactionally legitimate, and hence less likely to be accepted.

In summary, in the case of stand-up comedy, a comedian's aim to amuse (some) audiences during stand-up performances is generally not under dispute. The humorous frame in such situations means that comedians are expected to elicit feelings of amusement and are

readily understood as performing the social action of 'doing' (attempts at) humour. In the case of alleged offensive humour, however, the question arises whether a comedian also intentionally caused offence. As suggested above, it may be that the goal of the humour is to amuse one audience exactly by offending another. As offence-taking typically involves a perceived interpersonal or moral transgression, we can expect that such humorous attempts will result in some audiences taking offence, and (unless the humour fails for all audiences) in others feeling amusement.

So, we propose to define 'offensive humour' as follows:

> Offensive humour: A communicative act regarding which a speaker is held accountable by some recipients for:
>
> 1) intending to cause amusement in at least some recipients, and EITHER
> 2a) intentionally causing offence in some other recipients OR
> 2b) incidentally causing offence in some recipients by their communicative act having the potential to cause offence.

Note that in the case of the latter, a recipient may not necessarily hold the speaker committed to having caused offence, either in view of the speaker not having intentionally done so, or in view of the fact that the offensive intention is sufficiently hidden. In what follows, we look at how the entire life-cycle of jokes – from their being uttered in a live-performance context, to their entering the public sphere where they become the subject of controversy – affects our three questions above, namely, (i) on what grounds recipients treat a joke as offensive; (ii) how recipients can hold speakers accountable for having caused offence; and (iii) to what extent a speaker can disclaim responsibility for having caused this offence. We look at the performance frame, comedian personality and persona, and how different types of audience may react to a joke, in order to shed more light on what exactly it is that the producer of a joke that is deemed offensive is held accountable for, such as: the act of joking about an inappropriate issue, causing offence, holding personal (racist, in our example) beliefs, or the potential harmfulness of the joke. But we also look at *who* is licensed to hold the joker accountable for any of these things, whether that be solely the joke's direct audience, wider audiences in society, or even the targeted social group.

3. Jimmy Carr's Holocaust Joke: Factors weighing on the ascription of accountability

The life of a stand-up comedy joke begins in a script. It is then performed within the performance space, which includes the comedian performing the joke, the live audience, and the interaction and dynamics between the comedian and the audience. Other than the scripted joke, the performance may include improvisation and 'riffing' (i.e. back-and-forth) between the comedian and the audience, creating a unique dynamic moment (Double, 2005; Aarons and Mierowsky 2017).

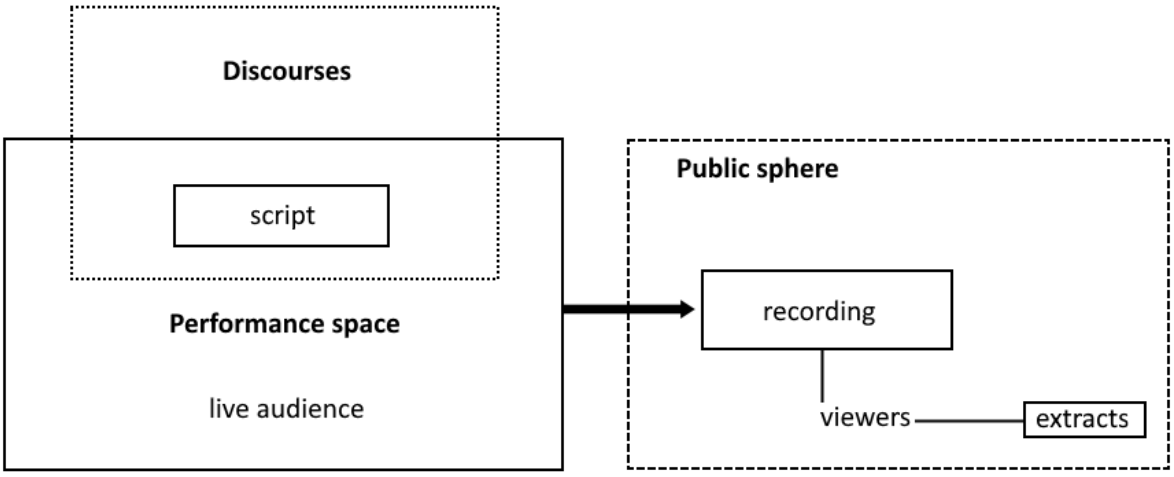

Figure 1 *The lifecycle of stand-up jokes*

Typically, in non-recorded performances, that's where the life of the joke ends, and it lives for as long as the comedy set lasts. Nowadays, however, it is common that comedy (and other) performances are recorded to be streamed for wider audiences through various platforms such as Netflix and YouTube. At that point, the recording itself has its own life in the public sphere (Brock 2015). Aside from the audience members who watch the recording in full on the platform on which it is originally offered, parts of the recording may be reproduced, either through clips or retellings, on different (social) media, which may be engaged with by user commentary and user creations (e.g. GIFs and memes). These reproduced parts of the recording thus acquire their own, new, (social) media life. They are initially curated (filtered) by the direct viewers, but soon they are accessed and reproduced by wider audiences on different social media platforms. The extended lifecycle of individual stand-up comedy jokes can therefore include multiple iterations and renewals depending on the platforms on which they spread and on the types of interest they garner from different audiences. It is even possible for an older joke to resurface after a long time, usually in light of developments that make it topical, perhaps in terms of content or due to a renewed interest in the comic's own life, work, or personality. Given this potential, we can never declare with certainty that a recorded joke has ever reached the end of its life-cycle.

As introduced in Section 1, we take Jimmy Carr's 'holocaust joke' as a case study to address our questions on offensive humour and accountability. The joke in question comes towards the end of his 'His Dark Material' set which was aired on the streaming service Netflix in 2021. It is prefaced with "this should be a career-ender, so strap in", warning audiences of its potential offensive content.

The full transcript is as follows:

(3) When people talk about the holocaust [pause for audience laughter; Carr nods with wide eyes] When people talk about the holocaust they talk about the tragedy and horror of 6 million Jewish lives being lost to the Nazi war machine. But they never mention the thousands of Gypsies that were killed by the Nazis. No one ever wants to talk about that, because no one ever wants to talk [pause] about the positives. (Carr 2021)

The joke ends on the punch line "no one wants to talk about the positives", delivered with a particular intonation and facial expression that can be interpreted as a (metadiscursive) comment on the act of having made the joke, rather than the punchline itself. In other words, he appears to signal to the audience that he dared to 'go there': to make an entirely unacceptable joke. While both Carr and his audiences generally acknowledge at least the joke's potential for offence, there is debate as to *why* people are (or should not) be offended and whether Carr is responsible for any offence caused.

In what follows, we examine the discourse surrounding this joke, including the comedian's own positions and claims as well as what different kinds of audiences hold him accountable for through their commentary. For the latter, we collected user comments from three sources:

(i) Twitter (now X), capturing the discourse that started with a post by the charity "Friends, Families & Travellers" (@GypsyTravellers), who made a formal statement of complaint against the joke on 4 February 2022. This was a widely circulated tweet, with thousands of engagements, followed by a comment thread with 113 initial comments and multiple sub-threads (henceforth referenced as the 'Twitter FFT thread'). Many users participated in the discourse, which was at its peak for about four days after the initial post, including public figures like Victoria Coren-Mitchell, whose tweet in support of Jimmy Carr also gave rise to many reactions, both within the ensuing thread of responses (henceforth referenced as the 'Twitter VCM thread') but also within individual tweets addressing her points directly or indirectly;

(ii) The comment section of the most viewed video extract of the joke on YouTube, as posted by the 'Comedy Centre' account, on 2 September 2022[5] (henceforth referenced as the 'YT thread'); and

(iii) User reviews of the entire comedy special on the show's Internet Movie Database (imdb) page.[6]

We chose these sources as representative of three different types of audience engagement with the joke (directly engaging with the matter of controversy on a highly interactive platform, discussing their reception of the joke while watching the relevant extract, and offering their evaluation of the entire show, respectively). Of this data, we extract and discuss representative examples that aid our analysis in a qualitative manner, without attempting to make any quantitative claims.

We have to remember that the dynamics of the live performance situation are not fully accessible to streaming audiences. While streaming audiences do still opt into the comedic frame when they press 'play' on the recording, they are not considered participants in the comedic event as they are not part of the original performance space. Moreover, people who encounter only an isolated clip on social media are even further removed from the performance situation and do not necessarily opt into a comedic frame at all. This distinction is important to remember when analysing viewer comments.

3.1 Performance frame

[5] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CJurYs12ay4 [last accessed: 28/11/2024]

[6] https://www.imdb.com/title/tt16259786 [last accessed: 07/10/2024]

Stand-up comedy is a very particular discourse frame that has its own rules and expectations from everyone involved (Double 2005; Aarons and Mierowski 2017). Crucially, within the performance frame, expectations of speaker commitment are suspended, as in other cases of nonserious talk (Attardo, 2001; Pérez 2013; Haugh 2016). That is, the speaker is not expected to believe the statements they utter, nor are they presumed to have any malicious intent with their performance. The audience opts into this comedic frame, having sought out the performance event with, presumably, some level of awareness about the particular comedian's persona and comedic style, expecting to be entertained and trusting that the performer will take them on that journey. However, when performances are recorded and published online, they are released to different kinds of audiences who will likely react to the material in different ways. The question we address here is how far the comedic frame and the context of the live performance are able to 'save' the comedian from being held accountable for the harmful potential of a joke.

When we look at viewer comments, we often find an emphasis on the comedic frame: (4) is reproduced from a Twitter user discussing the controversy, who suggests that the comedian's job is to make the audience laugh; he does not have any other responsibilities.

(4) A comedian's job is simple, be funny, make the audience laugh. He doesn't choose his audience, they seek him out (Twitter FFT thread, @D_S_Schofield, 04/02/22)

That is, the primary shared goal of the participants in a comedic event is laughter and appreciation of comedic skill. While within the comedic frame, expectations of commitment to having intended to cause offence are suspended, after telling the joke, Carr immediately opts out of the comedic frame, switching from his role as an entertainer to a role of an 'educator' (appealing to a common function of comedy, see Mintz 1985):

(5) That's a very good joke for the following three reasons: firstly, fucking funny, well done me [audience laughter]. Secondly, edgy, edgy as all hell, it's a joke about the worst thing that's ever happened in human history, and people say "never forget", well this is how I remember. I keep bringing it up [audience laughter]. Third reason that's a good joke is because there is an educational quality. Like, everyone in the room knows six million Jewish people lost their lives to the Nazis during World War II, but a lot of people don't know, 'cause it's not really taught in our schools, that the Nazis also killed in their thousands gypsies, homosexuals, disabled people and Jehovah's witnesses. (Carr 2021)

Here, we see a switch from a joking style to an 'academic' style, analysing the joke's components as a defence of why the joke is 'good', and hence should be resistant to negative criticism, including the claim that the joke is educational.

First, if the joke is intended to be educational, it arguably cannot be produced in a totally non-serious frame as an instance of inconsequential non-serious talk, as recognised by one YouTube user (6).

(6) What's all the fuss about sounds more like a lecture if anything (YT thread, @rob-890, 18/02/22)

So if the joke is intended to be received in a non-joking frame, the upshot is that Carr no longer has the get-out afforded by the comedic frame in which he is not held committed to having offensive intent. In this case, he arguably opens himself as a target for criticism more than if the joke were to be received within a purely comedic frame. To avoid such criticism, it must be the case that no offence was intended. And if the joke is educational as Carr claims, it should not be offensive, and hence Carr should be safe from such criticism. So the question at this point is, how far is his argument that the joke is educational a valid one?

On the one hand, commentary such as (7) argues that with appropriate contextualization the joke has the potential to fulfil its purported purpose in highlighting racism and raising awareness about the victims of genocide.

(7) The UK government has publicly called out Jimmy Carr for his joke, but they still have anti-Gypsy policies, both explicit and implicit [...] He could've done a lot better to situate this joke in that context, if that's what he intended. But regardless the publicity around this has done a lot to make people aware of anti-Gypsy prejudice across Europe. (YT thread, @ToaPohatuNuva, 07/03/22)

But other commenters as in (8) question whether the joke really has the power to educate when it simultaneously trivialises the event it is supposedly bringing to light.

(8) Ah yes the perfect way to be enlightened about Roma genocide is through a joke consign [sic] their death as a positive (Twitter FFT thread, @snapdragoncode, 04/02/22)

Irrespective of whether it was successful in educating or not, Carr's claim that the joke's *purpose* is to educate is countered by another commenter in (9), who points out that it is not possible to educate while promoting racist and harmful values.

(9) If you truly believe he was trying to educate the audience the laughter and clapping demonstrate the failure of his mission. Its simply a reinforcement of the existing prejudices of those who find it funny. Nothing more. (Twitter FFT thread, @LeeCraddock12, 04/02/22)

So, according to this commenter, if the joke is really intended to be educational, then it ought not have the potential to offend.

The fact that the joke does, in fact, have offensive potential is acknowledged by Carr himself. The holocaust joke appears towards the end of the set before the climax, where Carr argues in defence of 'dark humour'. At that climactic point Carr explicitly brings up the topic of offence, saying that he feels sorry for the people that get offended, since lacking a dark sense of humour means having fewer coping mechanisms for when life is terrible. So counter to his own alleged intentions, by explicitly acknowledging that people may get offended by his jokes, he also acknowledges the offensive potential of those jokes.

Mazzarella (2021) argues that a recipient is likely to accept a speaker's denial only if they are able to offer a plausible alternative context of interpretation of the offending utterance. In suggesting it should be viewed as educational, Carr attempts to deny the offensiveness of his joke by offering such a context. However, in showing awareness that some people might be offended, the plausibility that it is intended to be educational is reduced. That is, his attempt to

deny the potential offensiveness of the joke by being educational is not treated as a plausible alternative context of utterance, and hence he is unable to evade his commitment to having produced a potentially offensive joke, and hence opens himself to being held accountable for it.

Whether or not the joke has educational value, it goes without saying that, as a joke, it was produced in a comedic frame; as Carr opines in (5), "fucking funny". However, as discussed in Section 2, being in a comedic frame does not mean that jokes are devoid of offensive *potential*. While he may claim his joke to be 'edgy', aligning with his overall stance that any subject matter can become joke material and that 'dark' humour is to be particularly appreciated, as suggested by the commenter of (10), simply declaring that the joke is purposefully dark doesn't remove its offensive potential.

(10) The context? All that added was the self-awareness that he was about to go too far. That's not context. "But your honour, I announced my intention to rob the sub post office as I approached it & expect your sentencing to reflect that context". (Twitter FFT thread, @PoetSteveWallis, 04/02/22)

So, both his attempt to opt out of the comedic frame, alongside his backfired attempt to defend the joke, create a situation in which Carr denies himself plausible deniability for having produced a *potentially* offensive joke; he can only deny his intention to offend.

3.2 The joker: Personality and persona

As discussed above, the comedic frame protects the comedian from being charged with offensive intent because both the performer and the audience opt into this frame, suspending expectations of speaker commitment. As part of the comedic frame, the performer may adopt a comedic persona who is understood to express beliefs that the comedian does not themselves subscribe to. It is taken as a given that the person telling the outrageous jokes on stage is not the comedian himself, but is presenting an offensive persona for the purposes of mocking that type of person. As Pérez (2013:488) points out, "comedians will create characters or mimic dialects as a way to present offensive material through an 'authentic inauthenticity' – appearing to simply inhabit a role rather than express their own views". This distinction between on- and off-stage personas (Piper 2015) is what allows audiences to appreciate any outrageous elements of what is presented on-stage, without attributing them to the performer's back-stage personality.

Interestingly, in the aftermath of his set, personal acquaintances of Carr publicly came to his defence, pointing out the distinction between his on-stage comic persona and his off-stage character. Notably, Victoria Coren-Mitchell (a British writer and television presenter) tweeted the following:

(11) While I'm here, might take a moment to mention I also love [Jimmy Carr], a close friend who's made about a thousand jokes I wouldn't make myself, as a stage performer, but as a man is full of goodness and kindness. He's a properly decent person (Twitter VCM thread, @VictoriaCoren, 05/02/22)

This fits in with the view that there is a division between racist language (or specifically, racist humour) and racist people. There is, in other words, a common public perception that there are 'racist people, no racist utterances' (Saul 2019) and, as a result, a person who is demonstrably

'not a racist' in their personal lives cannot be accused of racism just because they (re)produced a racist joke. Under this perspective, a comedian who, in the public consciousness, has a progressive profile, with expressed political views that are incompatible with racism, is taken by default as contrarian to the racist views that their jokes may contain. In other words, their intentions in telling the joke are seen as non-racist. This line of defence is compatible with an intention-based understanding of commitment (as per Relevance Theory), where intentions are attributed on the basis of ascription of beliefs, based, in turn, on information about the joker as a person.

However, Coren-Mitchell's tweet sparked further public reaction, with comments such as (12) questioning how someone who makes such a problematic joke can really be a decent person, while comments such as (13) brought up information from Carr's personal life, namely his tax evasion scandal (which has been widely reported and debated in the media since 2012, see Mostrous 2012), in order to further question his character.

(12) How is encouraging people to laugh at genocide - or any ethnic or other group - the act of a "decent" person? He's still the same person when he's on stage, making a living, you know? (Twitter VCM thread, @EmJaRo2, 06/02/22)

(13) It's his job. He's making money. Making money off racist jokes and trying to avoid tax. He is not a mirror to society. Don't kid yourself. (Twitter VCM thread, @JG108, 06/02/22)

These two comments demonstrate different, but complementary, perspectives regarding the relationship between person and persona. The former (12) refutes the idea that whatever choices are made on-stage are separate from the person that makes them, thereby arguing against the view that there is a complete separation between person and persona. The latter (13) works towards a similar conclusion, but in a way that emphasises the comedian's privilege as a highly-paid professional entertainer, who does not demonstrate signs of genuine regard for morality nor for promoting moral values to audiences.

Under these views, a racist utterance cannot be separated from the beliefs of the speaker who utters them. In other words, the joker cannot be absolved from having committed a racist act simply on the basis of the audience's prior knowledge about the joker's personality. To do so would be to use context as a 'figleaf' (Saul 2019), i.e. an element employed for barely covering a problematic aspect of meaning, such as the racism expressed by an utterance. Saul's typical figleaves are utterances that explicitly attempt this cover, such as "I am not racist but…", but she notes that sometimes the context itself can fulfil the same role. In this case, the figleaf would include the comedic context as well as the public projection of Carr's personal views as a non-racist.

A further problem with the person and persona distinction is the fact that Carr's particular on-stage persona is not a consistent one. When he performs, he is not 'in character' as other comedians and actors are, who create on-stage personas that are 'acts' (e.g. 'Neil Hamburger', the stage name and persona of American comedian Gregg Turkington). Rather, Carr slips in and out of different modes that carry different degrees of resemblance to his off-stage personality.

It is perhaps because of this inconsistent persona that audience comments are divided. Contrary to those commenters who refute the distinction between comedian and persona, there are also comments viewing the racist joke purely as a case of echo and dissociation, as in (14).

(14) I kinda took this as a joke at the expense of people who are racist against Gypsies. Like, most people in UK (and across Europe) are prejudiced against Gypsies. (YT thread, @ToaPohatuNuva, 07/03/22)

This comment aligns with what Carr himself purports to be aiming at with his joke: by constantly meta-joking and pointing out how 'dark' and inappropriate his jokes are written to be, he demonstrates himself to be distancing himself from the joke, mocking and echoing racist views of others, rather than adopting them himself. Through this explicit dissociation, he evokes the 'use' versus 'mention' distinction (Sperber and Wilson 1981), whereby he does not use the jokes but merely mentions them in order to discuss their offensiveness and 'career-ending' potential. If his jokes are offensive, this is due to the topics that they are about, but as he did not 'use' the jokes himself, he is not responsible for having used an offensive joke, and hence cannot be held committed to holding any beliefs it entails.

Of course, the use/mention distinction does not provide a clear-cut tool to determine Carr's responsibility for his jokes. While Carr attempts to invoke the distinction by dissociating himself from the jokes, he also positions himself as an 'edgy' comedian who pushes the boundaries of what is acceptable to joke about. 'Edginess' usually carries positive connotations when it comes to comedy: it is associated with pushing boundaries and challenging the audience in a mind-opening way, which is in turn associated with greater comedic value. This type of comedy is often credited for 'saying the unsayable' (Piper 2015) and by being "able to get just close enough to that hurtline [...] without crossing it" (Pérez 2013: 489) Indeed, Kramer (2011:132) argues that metahumorous speech and "telling, laughing at, or disapproving of a [rape] joke becomes a socially significant act through which one can index one's identity as a 'type' of interlocutor, person, and citizen". Carr's purported main message is a defence of humour without limits - anything and anyone can be a target of a joke - and, in particular, a defence of what he calls 'dark humour' and 'dark themes', and through this message he positions himself as the type of person to perform such humour.

While the comedic frame might allow a performer to present an alternative comic persona, the division between Carr's on-stage and off-stage persona is rather blurred. His attempts to dissociate himself from the content of his jokes through his meta-commentary may allow him to distance himself from presenting personally racist views. However, although he purportedly steps out of his on-stage persona during the meta-communicative phrases of his act, he can never be assumed to be fully 'himself' and his personal views cannot be taken at face value. But while Carr's on-stage commentary cannot be considered a full reflection of his personal views, his presenting himself as the kind of comedian that jokes about 'bad things', alongside the attempt to license such jokes by claiming their positive place in comedy, calls into question the extent to which Carr can successfully dissociate himself from his jokes.

3.3 The joke and its audiences

Finally, due to the entire life-cycle of the joke, we discuss how the joke's audience has the potential to expand beyond the live audience to include not only viewers who have sought out the show on Netflix, but also to social media users who access parts of the show via different online platforms. These social media users may not have watched the full recording and may not be aware of the reproduced material's original context.

One of the possible repercussions of recording the performance and releasing it into the wider public sphere is that it may be weaponized and used to cause harm. In the case of Carr's

holocaust joke, the comedian here was very aware that the joke was being recorded, evidenced by him playing with the camera and addressing television audiences at home. This awareness entails awareness of the fact that the joke is being released 'into the wild' and has the potential to circulate out of context. As the commenter in (15) remarks, the dissemination of the joke opens a platform for explicit enjoyment and reinforcement of its racist potential by audiences who share negative attitudes towards the targeted group.

(15) Not clever, just gross. And by all the hate towards gypsies in the comments it's clear who this joke appeals to. (YT thread, @sunnymountainhoneyfountain, 30/07/22)

Using Saul's (2019) categorisation, we can discern (at least) three types of audiences in receipt of a racist joke: (a) anti-racists, who do not find the joke amusing given its racist messaging; (b) unconflicted racists, who enjoy the denigrating part of the joke, aligning with the negative attitudes towards the targeted group; and (c) conflicted racially resentful audiences, who simultaneously understand the negative impact of racism but also have negative attitudes towards the targeted group, which they normally suppress for reasons of civility. The latter audience category is the one that enjoys the joke through release, as their racist reflexes can be made manifest without immediate consequences, and it is members of the latter two audiences who are most likely to adopt and reuse the jokes online. On other hand, it is anti-racists, or much more specifically in the case of Carr's set, people who do not appreciate Carr's entertainment style, who are most likely to take issue with his performance.[7] We thus finish this section by asking: *what* can the joker be held accountable for by these wider audiences, and *who* is licensed to hold the joker accountable for those things?

We start with the more general question of: why does someone laugh at a joke? According to Hay (2001), 'getting' humour entails three steps: recognition (of humorous intention), understanding, and appreciation. Conversely, humour may 'fail' if one of these steps does not occur. Bell and Attardo (2010: 429) make a more fine-grained distinction and identify a wider variety of ways in which a recipient may fail to engage in humorous exchange. These include, among others, failing to process the language or understand the words, failing to understand pragmatic meaning, and of relevance to us here, failing to appreciate the joke. A failure to appreciate a joke occurs when a recipient "recognizes the intention of the speaker to frame the situation as a 'joking exchange' but for whatever reason [...] the hearer does not share the speaker's intention to frame the situation as 'non-serious'" (Bell and Attardo 2010: 437-438).

At this point it is worth considering in more detail what it means to 'appreciate' a joke. Humour theory identifies three main potential triggers of humour appreciation: superiority (e.g. Gruner 1978; Hobbes 1812), relief (e.g. Bakhtin 1984; Spencer 1911), and incongruity (e.g. Nerhardt 1976; Koestler 1969). Superiority involves the construction (or reinforcement) of a hierarchy between two people or groups, with one – usually including the joke producer – being elevated over another one.[8] Relief theories, by contrast, see humour as a coping mechanism through which interactants – and society more generally – can come to terms with difficult

[7] Anti-racists may appreciate a racist joke not for its content, but for the technique and subversive communicative strategy of the comedian, and hence constitute a further category of audience member in addition to Saul's (2019) three types. Thank you to an anonymous reviewer for pointing this out.

[8] Audience members can also position themselves as elevated over others, such as over the joke-producer, other recipients who don't 'get the joke', recipients who are targets of the joke, and so on. Thank you to an anonymous reviewer for pointing this out.

situations or taboo topics. Finally, incongruity refers to some kind of (apparent) mismatch, the resolution of which results in amusement. With regard to the holocaust joke, Carr himself argues in (5) that the joke should be appreciated on the basis that it's "fucking funny". We ask, then, what might trigger an audience to appreciate the joke - i.e. find it funny - and on what grounds might it fail?

First, the joke is clearly constructed around an incongruity, which is emphasised by a pause in Carr's delivery as repeated in (16).

(16) But they never mention the thousands of Gypsies that were killed by the Nazis. No one ever wants to talk about that, because no one ever wants to talk [**pause**] about the positives. (Carr 2021)

For the avoidance of doubt, the incongruity comes from a mismatch between the punchline ("positives") and the preceding co-text ("tragedy", "horror", "lives being lost") that gives rise to negative affect. Indeed, some (virtual) audience members such as (17) display their appreciation of Carr's jokes due to their structural properties.

(17) This was my first Jimmy Carr special and it is full of various types of (very cleverly written) one-liners that you'll either absolutely enjoy or totally hate. (imdb, u:TreeFiddy53, 29/10/21)

In addition to the incongruity that arises from the direct co-text, there is also a moral incongruity stemming more generally from the deaths of the Roma population being considered a 'positive'. For example, some comments (18) argue that this incongruence serves to expose society's contrasting attitudes towards the Jewish and Roma communities.

(18) I feel people are misunderstanding JC. It's satire. It's pointing out the fact that there is moral outrage on behalf of the Jewish community, while the roma community are still stigmatised as fair game. I think he has a point and is right to raise it. (Twitter, @AndreaTse7, 07/02/22)

In this interpretation, Carr's satirical description of the systematic murder of Roma people as 'positive' is understood as incongruent: while it is not acceptable to view their deaths as positive, his messaging as such calls out those who "still [stigmatise Roma] as fair game". In this light, Carr is distancing himself from those who hold such racist attitudes, releasing himself of any commitment to holding such beliefs himself.

However, comments such as (19) question whether Carr himself considers there to be such a moral incongruity, holding him accountable for knowingly producing a joke that presents the deaths of the Roma victims as, indeed, a 'positive'.

(19) You're either anti racist or you aren't. There's no grey area. That wasn't a joke it was a racist comment he felt able to get away with because anti GRT sentiment is still deemed acceptable. I don't agree, do you? (Twitter, @KernowDamo, 05/02/22)

Here, the comedian is both being held committed to holding racist beliefs himself, while also being held accountable for promoting those racist beliefs, which cannot be overcome by any

'just a joke' defence (cf. Zijp's (2024) questioning of the notion of 'comic innocence'); it "wasn't a joke it was a racist comment".

Even if we accept that Carr intended to base the joke on a moral incongruity (reflected by the joke's structural incongruity), the relief aspect of this joke can be – and is – debated. As reproduced in (5), Carr himself justifies his joke by pointing out that it is "edgy, edgy as all hell, it's a joke about the worst thing that's ever happened in human history, and people say 'never forget', well this is how I remember. I keep bringing it up". By describing the holocaust as an emotional and difficult topic he not only reinforces his position that he does not really view its outcomes as 'positive', and so strengthens his position that the joke is, indeed, based on an incongruity. But moreover, by joking about it, Carr supposedly not only keeps the holocaust in collective consciousness but also provides a coping mechanism by inviting laughter about a terrible event.

Indeed, Carr's entire set is built around the claim that one can – and should – joke about sensitive subjects. Throughout his routine, Carr works through a list of 'edgy' topics (dealing with rape, paedophilia, islamophobia, and the holocaust joke we have been examining) while constantly pointing out the inappropriateness of his jokes. Humour can be a coping mechanism through which taboo topics, or otherwise difficult subjects people struggle to discuss in a serious context (e.g. incest or faeces), are addressed. However, topics such as the holocaust are generally not considered taboo, but it is the act of *joking about* the holocaust that is taboo. This is acknowledged not only by Carr himself when he refers to his material as potentially 'career-ending'; but also by commenters, who point out that joking about the holocaust constitutes a transgression and therefore a source of offence.

(20) There are certain jokes you don't make, however nice you are as a person (Twitter, @robmarkf, 05/02/22)

(21) Dear lord. Defending the indefensible. Kind people don't tend to make jokes about genocide victims and they pay their taxes. (Twitter VCM thread, @supertanskiii, 05/02/22)

Through these comments, Carr is held accountable for intentionally breaking a taboo, namely joking about holocaust victims: an action which he clearly knows to be transgressive and therefore potentially offensive.

So, the argument that the joke should be appreciated on the basis that it provides relief fails because the holocaust (and other topics he jokes about) are not actually taboo. Moreover, relief humour is a way for survivors of (e.g. rape or islamophobia) to come to terms with their experience; however, it is not clear that any of the "terrible things" Carr jokes about have personally affected him. This is alluded to in (21): Carr is making jokes "*about* genocide victims", not *as* a genocide survivor. Crucially, the comedian appears to conflate the 'theme' (topic) and the 'butt' (target) of a joke. 'Dark humour' is primarily defined on the basis of themes, especially what is characteristically called 'gallows humour', in which the target is typically the situation itself rather than its victims. For example, the TV comedy 'Blackadder Goes Forth' is set in the World War I trenches and the humour derives from the horrible and near-death situations the soldiers find themselves in. The jokes there are not targeting the victims of the war, but the war itself. When, as in Carr's case, the butt of the joke is the victims (the Roma population killed in the holocaust in this case), the relief-argument no longer works. So, despite claiming that his joke is a way of remembering the holocaust and hence presenting

it as a type of relief, Carr's jokes are not obviously produced as a coping mechanism for those personally affected by that event.

This brings us to the question of who jokes about whom, and to the superiority aspect of humour: a factor Carr entirely overlooks (or ignores), but his audiences do not. Even some viewers with a generally positive attitude towards Carr, who do not display feelings of offence, point out that his comedy targets many different groups of people, as in (22).

(22) Seemed he was trying too hard to offend that it became unfunny at times, his one liners made me chuckle a bit. The easily offended should look elsewhere, **he literally offends EVERYONE** but as he says it's a joke. (imdb, emphasis added, u:mrdavidjamesbyrne, 28/12/21)

While this may suggest a sense of balance and fairness (i.e. "everyone" is made fun of), many of the more critical commenters address the obvious hierarchy between Carr and his targets:

(23) **Punching down** isn't funny. Especially when he's targeting those who are already stigmatised. (Twitter VCM thread, @Littlun007, 05/02/22)

(24) Maybe he's full of goodness and kindness to you **because you're white**. Kind people do not use their platform to **punch down on some of the most oppressed people in the world**, especially for profit. (Twitter, @salem5congress, 06/02/22)

(25) Another piece of Netflix garbage. Just stop paying this dude, he's just recycling old material. Bad jokes, making fun of the audience and **feeling superior**. Man is he annoying and tasteless. I liked his old stuff, but this is just a lazy money grab. AVOID! (imdb, emphasis added, u:myimdbisgood, 28/12/21)

What can be gleaned from these comments is that Carr's jokes are not based on relief (as he claims), and cannot be considered harmless or just a tool to make a rhetorical point. Rather, in "punching down" and "feeling superior', he is charged with denigrating groups of individuals for the amusement of others. Furthermore, in evaluating Carr based on his own social identity and ground membership (as a white person), the commenter in (24) highlights the importance of these aspects when it comes to how appropriate it is to make such jokes at the expense of others (cf. Thai et al 2019; Horisk 2024). Carr is therefore not only held accountable for knowingly producing and releasing a potentially offensive joke, but he is personally held accountable for also denigrating his targets, who are overwhelmingly marginalised groups. Since the establishment of a value-laden hierarchy is integral to this type of superiority or disparagement humour, a 'just joking' defence would once again fail. Put differently, the fact that Carr is joking about marginalised groups and positioning himself as superior is exactly why his jokes are treated as offensive.

In the most charitable light, Carr may have plausible deniability regarding his actually held beliefs and whether or not he positions himself as superior. However, the ways in which his wider audiences engage with the holocaust joke demonstrate that the possible grounds for appreciating it (incongruity, relief, and superiority) are unstable, and may even constitute grounds for depreciation. Thus overall, audiences are licensed to attribute to Carr an intention to promote disparagement humour directed at less privileged and victimized groups, and hence to purposefully produce jokes that are normatively offensive to at least some audiences. That is, on both a normative commitment account and an intention-attribution account, Carr can be

considered committed to having intentionally produced an offensive joke, and hence can be held accountable for *incidentally* causing offence in some audiences.

4 Discussion and conclusions

In this paper, we have examined the life-cycle of live-performance jokes as they are engaged with by the joker themself, as well as by different types of audience as the joke is released and reproduced online, exploring the tensions between the various factors that affect the joker's accountability. Needless to say, the levels and dimensions of the discourse are highly complex, involving both a joke and a meta-commentary, and, with them, a joker and a meta-communicator, neither of whom can be assumed to reflect Carr's off-stage personality, and both of whom hold different degrees of accountability for the joke's offence.

First, the comedic frame suspends expectations of speaker commitment: a joker is not assumed to believe everything they say when they are performing. In the case of our case study, defenders of Jimmy Carr's holocaust joke insist that this is the context that it should be read in, a context able to absolve the comedian from any accusations relating to his intention to offend, or from holding racist views. However, as discussed in Section 2, just because a joker does not have offensive intentions, does not mean that they have not produced a joke with offensive potential.

Throughout his set, Carr offers several disclaimers both regarding the general purposes of the show (defending dark humour and limitless comedy), as well as meta-comedic commentary on his specific jokes in terms of their offensive potential (as 'career enders'). Opting out of the comedic frame in this way may serve to limit the degree of commitment he attributes to himself regarding his offensive intent, or even his own views on the offensive potential of the joke. However, in putting on record his awareness of the *potential* offensiveness of the joke, he also threatens his level of plausible deniability for this awareness, and hence he can be held accountable for *knowingly* producing an offensive joke.

Next, providing meta-comedic commentary can serve to remind his audiences that his jokes do not reflect his own views, but 'echo' beliefs of other (racist) people who hold them. That is, he dissociates himself from 'using' the jokes as they are not presenting his own, personally held beliefs. While such meta-commentary cannot be wholly attributed to Carr's off-stage personality and beliefs, through such commentary, Carr does nevertheless position himself on the debate regarding the limits of humour, with the aim of demonstrating that no topic is off-limits to joke about. The themes and rhetorical purposes of the entire comedy set contextualise the joke as an exemplar of 'dark' and 'edgy' humour, saying things that are funny because they are so terrible. As such, Carr switches back-and-forth between an 'inappropriate' persona and one that seems to express sincere personal views. In this format, the boundaries between the person and the persona are not clear-cut, and this arguably renders his attempt to dissociate himself from using his jokes more tenuous.

Finally, a joke that denigrates marginalised groups normatively has the potential to offend, and its joker is (normatively) committed to having produced an offensive joke. That is, if a person produces racist/sexist/phobic utterances (whether joking or not) behind closed doors with an audience who supports the views being promoted without taking offence, the speaker is still committed to having produced offensive utterances and can potentially be held accountable for them: saying something offensive is independent of whether anyone takes offence.

Now, when a performance is recorded and posted online, it is released to different audiences who may not subscribe to the joker's performance style, or even be familiar with the

original context in which it was performed. Those audiences may include: those personally affected by the topic of the joke in question, those who harbour (e.g.) racist attitudes and take enjoyment from 'punching down' particular identities, and 'snowflakes', so-named for their fragility and likelihood to take offence. Carr had full awareness that his joke would travel beyond the immediate context of the show and enter the public sphere, to be made available to anyone to reuse with racist and abusive purposes, or to anyone who might be personally affected and offended by its content. If the comedian was aware of the risk that the joke may be engaged with by such wide audiences beyond his immediate and intended audience, can he be held accountable for the ways in which those 'unintended' audiences attributed views to him?

Audiences may attempt to hold Carr accountable for diverging views and social action, but of course it is not fair to say that a joker is responsible for all the ways a joke is reproduced and engaged with online. Audience comments hold Carr accountable for having produced an offensive joke (i.e. what he said), but it is more difficult to claim that Carr can be held accountable for holding personally racist beliefs (i.e. what he thinks), or for having performed a direct racist attack on Roma/Traveller populations (i.e. intended to cause harm, although the inclusion of the slur 'gypsy' in itself is problematic in its own right). What we have shown in this paper is that while Carr can be held accountable for producing an offensive joke, in overtly recognising the potential offensiveness of his joke, he can also be held accountable for *knowingly* producing an offensive joke, denigrating those targets, and hence can be held accountable for *incidentally* causing offence in those who did, in fact, take offence.

We finish with a note on the purposes - and limits - of comedy. Medjesky (2016: 199) suggests that one of the inherent features of stand-up comedy is being a rhetorical discourse that "strives not only to entertain, but to persuade" (see also Greenbaum 1999). Indeed, one positive review of Carr's 'His Dark Material' set on the imdb website states, "It's very funny and even funnier because it offends the snowflakes". It is clear that, for at least a portion of the audience, this comedy special is a recognizable contribution to the discourse regarding 'political correctness' and its relationship to free speech, which also includes debates on comedy and its limits (Elkins 2016). By using the running argument that joking about bad things is different to bad things themselves, Carr positions himself on this meta-comedic discourse, trying to make the rhetorical point that we have to challenge the limitations of so-called political correctness. Audience members who align themselves with this position not only support the specific joke, but also support the practice of challenging and deliberately offending 'snowflakes', i.e. a constructed outgroup who, in this case, are people who argue against language that can cause harm.

Throughout Jimmy Carr's 20-year career, he has presented himself as this sort of edgy comedian (despite being part of what would be considered mainstream entertainment) and it is on this backdrop that his new material is assessed. It is, however, quite interesting to note that the quality of 'edgy' is no longer straightforwardly defined in the context of the current 'culture wars': as Hunt (2010:181) points out, there is a fine line between "edgy and challenging versus reactionary and lowest common denominator". In these culture wars, comedians will create material which is deliberately offensive to disempowered social groups exactly to make the point about comedy itself: that it is 'egalitarian' and 'no one is beyond ridicule'. However, positioning oneself on the side of an argument that essentially attacks calls for inclusivity, social justice, and social change (attacking so-called 'woke' culture and so-called political correctness) can be considered part of a reactionary ideology that promotes preserving the status quo of oppression and discrimination.

Part of the reason why questions regarding accountability in stand-up comedy are so complex is because the public themselves are split: the jury is out which way audiences will go, with members of the public falling roughly equally on whether a comedian's show should be cancelled for using language offensive to people from minority groups (Duffy et al 2022). Whether or not members of the public would agree with our conclusions, what we hope to have shown is that when comedians position themselves on this debate and comedy itself becomes meta-comedic, the issues we have addressed relating to accountability, including intention attribution, normative commitment, personal beliefs, and offence, all gain an extra layer of complexity that is difficult to unravel.

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