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At 977 Weeks, Your Baby Can Make Jokes About These Stupid Billboards

In my final year of high school, I overheard an english teacher explaining an assignment to her students. They were to write a persuasive essay on the topic of their choosing--anything under the sun, so long as it would take them three pages, double-spaced, Times New Roman font. Later in the class period, a student approached her and said she planned to do her essay on abortion (a topic of her choosing, existing under the sun). The teacher promptly told her to find a new subject. I froze in my eavesdropping station, bracing myself for the inevitable discussion on the controversy and deep-seeded personal beliefs surrounding this vital aspect of women's reproductive health. But it never came. The teacher merely said, "I'm sick of reading those essays," and sent the student on her not-so-merry way.

As a society, we've been talking about abortion for a *long* time, and while we still have a lot to talk about, we've grown tired of the conversation. Abortion has become one of the most polarized issues in our society; everyone has opinions, and nobody wants to change them, so we continue to spew the same thoughts and ideas when we know nobody is listening. We cannot communicate, we cannot think critically about the issue, and therefore, we cannot act.

Stalemated abortion rhetoric creates a stalemated political climate. If we want to change legislation, we have to change the conversation, finding new strategies through which to convey our ideas. Our solution can be found in the most unlikely of places: comedy.

Before we can get to the funny business, we need to identify the source of all this funny business. How did abortion rhetoric become so irreversibly polarized to begin with?

In *Decoding Abortion Rhetoric*, Celeste Michelle Condit tracks the evolution of public discourse between the Choice and Life movements. In the sixties, both sides used narrative to strengthen their point; the pro-Choice (then pro-reform) movement relaying the struggles of women limited to unsafe abortions, the other side weaving a Right to Life for the fetus. The sides become difficult to compare because they champion the livelihoods of different entities. Next, visual communication comes into play, anti-abortioners plastering rural billboards with guilt-tripping ultrasounds; while the fetuses they displayed were largely biologically incongruent with the standard development at time of procedure, they far outpaced the coat hanger imagery of their opponents. By the eighties, both sides had grown hostile to each other, ideologically and--sometimes--physically. The points made by activists had become extreme and polarized, leaving little room for compromise.

Condit poses this as a non-issue: while primary speakers had turned their backs on the opposition, “the political and cultural process eventually takes the decision-making out of the hands of activists and places it in the hands of a larger audience with more diffuse interests” (166). But many members of that silent majority find their own truths unspoken.

In creating *Generation Roe: Inside the Future of the Pro-Choice Movement*, Sarah Erdreich interviewed everyone from activists to doctors to patients, finding that

even those on the inside were unhappy with their movement's rhetorical flaws. Activist Steph Harold, for instance, says "I wish we could talk about it with nuance more, but it's hard when abortion is so constantly under attack," (21) going on to explain that the pro-Choice movement ends up alienating ambivalent people or women who don't feel empowered by their abortions because of the constant reversion to war-on-women rhetoric and the need to focus on sunshine-and-rainbows abortion stories to combat pro-Life demonization. These constraints only work to further the forces that create them, because, as Erdreich explains, "Being able to talk about abortion with nuance and honesty is one way to achieve a more balanced perspective, but getting to that place even in private conversations, much less public discourse, can be difficult" (69).

So there are a few clear dilemmas that arise from abortion rhetoric as it stands today: it's preachy, it's heavy, and it's impersonal. It's clear that the conversation needs to continue, but we need to do that in a way that invites new conversants and perspectives. That's where comedy comes in.

In political discourse, we *know* somebody's selling us something, so we instinctively get our defenses up. Comedy is a lot sneakier than that. We don't look too far past the surface intent--to make us laugh--to see its deeper meanings. This is how the "new comedians" of the 1950's got to be so successful; trading gags for thought, their routines were "rhetoric more than a performance, and as such, their comedy was not only entertaining, it was also persuasive" (Meier and Schmitt xxii). The modern world has adapted traditional political discourse into a sort of *humor-atory*, blending the

subversions of comedy with the theses of politics to communicate social change through means more effective to changing demographics.

Standing Up, Speaking Out: Stand Up Comedy and the Rhetoric of Social Change outlines a few of the distinct benefits of humor as oratory, which directly combat some of the challenges of abortion rhetoric. First, it works against the weight inherently ingrained in the conversation. “Stand-up,” the authors suggest, “carries unique potential to affect discourses for change by providing an alternative mode of expression while operating outside the rules of serious discourse” (xxii). By operating on a completely different system than the hard-hitting and polarizing rhetoric used by activists and politicians alike, comedy can make the complexities of abortion less intimidating and more inviting for the common individual.

Second, it works to highlight information that may otherwise be overlooked. *SUSO* points to Stephanie Koziski’s explanation that “stand-up comedians function as cultural critics who ‘jar their [audience’s] sensibilities by making [them] experience the shock of recognition’ and by revealing ‘the hidden underpinnings of their culture’” (xxiii). This means that the comic is a vital force against the echo chambers ever present in the abortion debate, because they bring light to the facts and opinions individuals may have heard from the other side without going so far as to contextualize their consequences on those affected.

That context can be further explored in television comedy. Condit analyzes the effects of prime-time representations of abortion: “As the public argument moved from the distant realm of politics into the realm of people’s lives, this persuasive cultural

medium helped to translate the abstractions of political discourse into terms of real life practices” (141). With the extended narrative structure of television, the conversation on abortion becomes less of a commentary and more of a case study, exploring how the before and after can affect people’s lives in the long run. The same concept can be applied back to stand-up: when a real woman steps on stage and shows audiences a glimpse into her life in the aftermath, it’s easier to imagine the real impacts of abortion. Humor is driven by communication and laughter, yes, but most importantly, it is driven by honesty, and that honesty is necessary in humanizing the topic of abortion.

Finally, comedy can help us get to the root of the issues at hand. Certain jokes may make us uncomfortable, but it is important that we be conscious of what exactly it is we are uncomfortable *about*; often, all is not as it first appears. *Taboo Comedy: Television and Controversial Humor* describes this effect as Freudian displacement: “A shift of emphasis that allows the teller of the joke to disguise the joke’s aim and to reveal it at the most unexpected moment” (5). This idea is a little more complicated, but a *lot* more universal, so let’s jump right into an example.

At the 2018 White House Correspondents’ dinner, comedian Michelle Wolf made the following joke:

“Mike Pence is very anti-choice. He thinks abortion is murder, which, first of all, don’t knock it ‘til you try it. And when you do try, really knock it. You know, you’ve got to get that baby out of there.”

“And yeah, sure, you can groan all you want. I know a lot of you are very anti-abortion, you know, unless it’s the one you got from your secret mistress. It’s fun how values can waver, but good for you.”

The first half of Wolf’s joke may be somewhat in bad taste, but it also isn’t the joke. The *real* punchline is her riff on the room’s *reaction* to the joke, where she makes a clear commentary on the very situations of many of the politicians in the room. The joke here is not about abortion itself, but about hypocrisy, a much deeper underlying issue within the public debate.

This is the common theme amongst all forms of “abortion comedy”: *abortion is never the joke*. But by poking fun at the scenarios *around* the abortion, audiences pay more attention to the topic of abortion as a whole, gaining new ways to think, act, and interact with the idea within society.

Buckle up, kids; it’s time for some case studies.

In 2014, Gillian Robespierre’s Sundance sweetheart *Obvious Child* was referred to by-and-large as “the abortion comedy,” making her and star Jenny Slate two new poster children for the pro-Choice movement. In an interview with Huffington Post, the two explain that this was not the intent of the film nor its creators.

“The movie is not a comedy about abortion,” Slate clarifies, “nor do we think abortion is funny, but we think *people* are funny.”

“We wanted to humanize choice and we did it through humor,” Robespierre explains.

Obvious Child saw itself through a sort of *Will and Grace* effect. As explained by *The 25 Sitcoms That Changed Television: Turning Points in American Culture*, individuals as high up as then Vice President Joe Biden credited the show with championing same-sex marriage and encouraging support in mass audiences. The creators were flattered, but insisted this was never the intent of the program, and indeed it wasn't. The show focused on the friendship formed between a gay man and a heterosexual woman; any newfound support for same-sex marriage came from the audience's own internal thought processes. Humanizing the characters affected by an issue causes viewers to see it as a *human issue*; a human lawyer humanizes marriage, a human comedian humanizes choice. Normalcy, then, acts as a greater persuader than extremism.

The juxtaposition of the mundane and extreme can be effective in its own right. The mellow romantic comedy stylings of *Obvious Child* seem especially mind when compared to an episode of Netflix's adult animated comedy *Bojack Horseman*, entitled "*Brrap Brrap Pew Pew*." The episode follows teenage dolphin pop star Sextina Aquafina as she becomes the face of the pro-Choice movement by writing an "empowerment song" about her impending abortion. Waiting in the clinic for her own procedure, journalist Diane Nguyen is disgusted by the lazer-filled club anthem, particularly the lines "*I hope and pray to God my little fetus has a soul / Because I want it to feel pain when I eject it from my hole / [dolphin noises]*," and for good reason--it seems impossible to normalize abortion through such an abnormal (to put it lightly) disposition towards the topic. But the young girl waiting beside her puts everything back

into perspective: “Getting an abortion is scary, with all the protesters out front, and how you have to listen to the heartbeat and all that. And when you can joke about it, it makes it less scary, you know?” This girl reminds us who the conversation is *for*, even if the rhetoric can become a bit too much to stomach at times. She reminds us that the discussion *does* get scary, and not just because of the sudden appearance of dolphins with boobs riding coat hangers through space. And she reminds us that there *is* another way through all the commotion; a light joke can be the light at the end of the tunnel.

Of course, *talking* is one thing, *doing* is another; effective activism couldn’t exist without a healthy combination of the two. That’s why comedian Lizz Winstead founded the Lady Parts Justice League. The LPJL is a group of comedians that works to support independent clinics and educate about reproductive health through the very same strategies discussed here today, because they, too, found that the contemporary abortion rhetoric wasn’t calling people to action. “It’s not that millennials don’t care about these issues,” says Elizabeth Yuko, bioethicist and writer for the organization, “it’s just that the message being given to them was not effective.” So they changed the message, and thus changed the ways people care.

During the LPJL’s *Vagical Mystery Tour* (yes, that’s what it’s called), comedians tour clinics in particularly hostile states. They begin by providing aid and support to the clinics’ workers and patients. Then, at night, they put on a comedy set, with performers talking about their own experiences with the situation at hand. After the show, they invite one of the clinic’s workers on stage to discuss sexual health issues and tell the audience exactly what they can do to help out in their own community. Here, comedy

both opens people up to new ideas and tells them how to put those ideas to use, thus making it a prime example of how comedy can break the abortion stalemate.

No matter what side of the issue, we can all agree that something needs to change concerning abortions in our country. The only way we can do that is to change the way we talk about it. Here, we covered how discourse created a standstill in the abortion discussion, comedy as a solution to stalemated abortion rhetoric, and how theories of humor are already being applied to the abortion conversation to great effect. Current trajectories estimate that one in three women will get an abortion in her lifetime (Jones and Jerman), and that's no laughing matter. But when we can make light of the situation, we can destigmatize the issue, support the women it affects, decrease polarization and hostility, and learn to listen to all viewpoints. We can make this a topic we *want* to talk about because we *want* to solve it.

Abortion is hard to talk about. Abortion is hard to go through. Abortion is just plain hard. Comedy reminds us that even in the hardest of times, laughter is not inconceivable.

Works Cited

Bucaria, Chiara, and Luca Barra, editors. *Taboo Comedy: Television and Controversial Humour*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2016.

A collection of essays exploring the use of controversial humor in several forms of television: sitcoms, sketch shows, stand-up specials, and so forth. Early essays discuss the basic strategies of comedy as a medium, and how taboo topics fit into the patterns and tactics we expect. Later, they go into what topics are deemed controversial in comedy, what groups are affected by these stigmas, and how those groups use comedy to combat those stigmas.

This piece was relevant because it dives into the broader phenomenon abortion comedy falls under. It set out a framework for how and why taboo comedy is used, which could be easily applied in an analysis of the pieces discussed in this essay.

Calo, Joanna. "Brrap Brrap Pew Pew." *Bojack Horseman*, Season 3, episode 6, Netflix, 22 July 2016.

Episode six of the third season of Netflix's original animated comedy, *Bojack Horseman*. The episode discusses abortion through two different plotlines. First, a main character, Diane Nguyen, discovers that she's pregnant, and decides to get an abortion. While she has no regrets about the decision, it causes her a great deal of anxiety, which leads to the hijinks the comedy in the episode revolves around: she accidentally posts "I'm getting an abortion" on the twitter of her client, teen popstar Sextina Aquafina. The second narrative follows Sextina carrying out this faux-abortion, and becoming an

outrageous advocate for abortion in the process, writing a song in which she shoots her fetus with a laser gun and live streaming a fake procedure on TV.

The episode is one of the most extreme cases of tackling abortion in comedy, meaning it's essential to look at in order to understand the most radical applications of this topic. It is clear about its message: laughing about abortion makes it easier to deal with; this thesis vouches for every other piece of comedy taking on the topic of abortion.

Condit, Celeste Michelle. *Decoding Abortion Rhetoric: Communicating Social Change*.

University of Illinois Press, 1990.

An in-depth look at the rhetoric used on both sides of the abortion rhetoric throughout history. It looks at the specific language and rhetorical strategies used by pro-life and pro-choice activists, as well as who is taking part in the conversation about abortion and how that impacts the course of social and legislative action.

This piece describes the full development of the national abortion debate and how that has led to the current stalemate. It paints a clear picture of why we are where we are in the present day as far as abortion politics go. The rhetorical strategies described here can easily be contrasted with the rhetoric of comedy, and thus can be used to prove humor as a viable solution to the aforementioned stalemate.

Erdreich, Sarah. *Generation Roe: Inside the Future of the Pro-Choice Movement*. Seven

Stories Press, 2013.

Referring to the abortion debate as a touchstone of American controversy, Erdeich aims to point out the similarities between the two opposing sides in effort to iron out the current conversation. Tackling the most commonplace arguments against abortion one by one, she works to prove abortion as a fundamental, nonpartisan human right.

Whereas *Decoding Abortion Rhetoric* dug into the history of abortion language and conversation, this book looks at the future and offers solutions to the stalemated discussion. It emphasizes the importance and difficulty of speaking of abortion with honesty and nuance, which is not a far reach from speaking out through a comedic lens. It vouches for removing political overtones from the conversation--overtones which could easily be replaced with humor.

“Jenny Slate Explains Why 'Obvious Child' Isn't An 'Abortion Comedy'.” *The Huffington Post*, TheHuffingtonPost.com, 17 June 2014,
www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/jenny-slate-explains-why-obvious-child-isnt-an-abortion-comedy_us_5b5762cce4b07de723e98482.

An interview with the director of *Obvious Child*, Gillian Robespierre, and its lead actress, Jenny Slate. The two discuss the controversy the film has received for its comedic tone surrounding the subject of abortion, and insist that the film is not a comedy *about* abortion, but a comedy *around* abortion.

This interview is an important piece to include amongst other examples of abortion in comedy because it goes beyond mere analysis of media; it is two female

creators in the comedy industry specifically explaining the intent and impact of pairing abortion with this type of humorous rhetoric. The two make the important point that abortion comedy does not poke fun at abortion itself, but rather proves that comedy can still exist in the presence of abortion--abortion is the situation and not the punchline. This is important to understand for those who might be turned off by abortion comedy, as it significantly softens the blow and makes the conversation a little easier to listen to for those who need to hear it most.

Jones, Rachel K. and Jenna Jerman, "Population Group Abortion Rates and Lifetime Incidence of Abortion: United States, 2008–2014", *American Journal of Public Health* 107, no. 12 (December 1, 2017): pp. 1904-1909.

A survey conducted quantifying rates of abortion across age, income, and race and ethnicity. The survey describes how common abortions are among American women in recent years, as well as how those rates differ for women of different demographics. It found that overall, abortion rates have decreased, although they remain fairly common; it also found that the percent decrease has not been uniform across backgrounds.

The results of this survey show that abortion is still a common enough factor of American life for the conversation to be relevant; it proves that no matter how U.S. society has changed, the topic of abortion is still far from something that can be swept under the rug. There are plenty of women who need to hear stories of abortion like their

own, and there are plenty of women who are able to tell those stories in whatever medium they see fit.

Meier, Matthew R., and Casey R. Schmitt. *Standing Up, Speaking Out: Stand-Up Comedy and the Rhetoric of Social Change*. Routledge, 2017.

This book describes stand-up comedy as a distinct rhetorical technique, on par with formal speeches. It remains relatively unaffected in terms of censorship, unlike other forms of comedy, and thus is more equipped to tackle many hard-hitting issues with tact and elicit results. It describes significant ways in which stand-up has been used to further specific political debates.

The piece validates comedy as a legitimate and subversive method of sustaining public discourse on controversial topics. It proves that comedy is capable of having an impact on the social and political landscape. It lays out the specific rhetorical strategies of stand-up comedy, which can be applied in analysis of other abortion related stand-up pieces within this essay, such as Michelle Wolf's performance at the White House Correspondents' Dinner and the efforts of the Lady Parts Justice League. It allows for an explanation of the nuanced differences between stand-up comedy and television, while emphasizing the common underpinnings of the two.

Wolf, Michelle. White House Correspondents' Dinner monologue. Washington D.C.

April 28, 2018.

The speech given by comedian Michelle Wolf at the 2018 White House Correspondents' Dinner. Wolf made several jokes with heavy liberal implications, while speaking under the conservative roof of the Trump administration. Most notable among these were her two jabs at abortion, the first a simple pun eliciting a chorus of groans, the second a specific address to hypocritical Republicans in the office, who might be strongly blocking abortion-friendly legislation while utilizing abortion services themselves.

This is an interesting example of abortion in comedy because it speaks directly to legislators, whereas the other pieces target the general population. Wolf embraces the off-putting nature of abortion comedy and uses it to drive home a greater and more direct point. It is an important piece to analyze in terms of rhetorical strategy, audience, and the established nature of abortion comedy itself.

“What We Do.” *Lady Parts Justice League*, 9 Apr. 2018,

ladypartsjusticeleague.com/whatwedo/.

The informational website of the Lady Parts Justice League, a non-profit organization dedicated to using comedy to spread information about abortion and women's health, and to provide direct aid to clinics in hostile areas in the United States.

The organization's goals directly speak to the significance of using comedy in the abortion conversation. Their actions prove that the efforts of abortion comedy can reach beyond mere discourse into tactile action, providing direct aid rather than stopping at the abstract spread of ideas.