

The Job of a Comedian: Make People Laugh

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The idea of 'punching down' is thought to occur when an individual/group with higher status/higher power makes jokes about individuals/groups with lower status/lower power. The growing consensus among those who write opinion pieces about comedy is that 'punching down' is bad, wrong, unethical, in poor taste, etc. The idea of 'punching up' is often referred to 'speaking truth to power' and is meant to reflect some noble attempt of an individual or group with lower status/lower power pushing back against individuals/groups with higher status/higher power. Thus, 'punching up' is good, right, ethical, sophisticated, etc. This basic assumption about punching up vs. punching down underlies a lot of conversations and thought pieces written about comedy.

I believe these discussions about punching up vs. punching down are pseudo-intellectual ramblings from people outside of a profession attempting to impose a job onto comedians that they never signed up for. By the way, some of these pieces are well-written and use persuasive language. If you've read such pieces and sympathized with the points, I understand. When one is purporting to find ways of fighting for social justice and end bigotry, it is hard to push back against such good intentions. However, I will start my argument with a simple question: what is the job of a comedian?

As you've likely surmised from the title, my answer to that question is, **make people laugh**. I will acknowledge that my favorite comedians do more than *just* make me laugh. Perhaps they make me think about things in a different way. Perhaps they subtly educate me about a topic. Perhaps they normalize having a conversation about a topic that I previously viewed as taboo (phew, it's been a while since that happened!). But, at the end of the day, if a comic goes on stage and gets the audience to laugh, they did their job, whether it is by using a clever anecdote about members of the LGBTQ going on a metaphorical car ride that brilliantly highlights some real areas of division among [LGBTQ activists](#), or if they poke fun of [intellectual dishonestly](#), or they imitate [a famous person](#), or they just [fall down](#).

If the action elicits laughter, it's a job well done! Now, if you spend \$X on the ticket, you may expect more, and that's your prerogative. However, if you are judging a comedian by how well they are telling you the truth, how well they are challenging prevailing stereotypes, or how well they are telling you stories that you can personally relate to, I urge you to be consistent. Judge your doctor by the quality of tax advice they offer you. Judge your accountant by their boxing abilities. Judge your politicians by their ability to play a musical instrument. The point is, comedy is really hard. Full stop.

You know what is not hard? Writing another article about how it's wrong to punch down, and comedy should punch up. I'd love to see those writing these articles that are trying to 'right the wrongs' uttered by some of the best comedians of all time go and perform stand-up and see how well they achieve the primary objective of the job: **make people laugh**.