

# **Disabling Comedy: “Only When We Laugh!”**

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## **Abstract**

Traditionally comedy involving disabled people has extracted humour from people’s impairments – i.e. a “functional limitation”. Examples range from Shakespeare’s ‘fool’ character and Elizabethan joke books to characters in modern TV sitcoms. Common arguments for the use of such disempowering portrayals are that “nothing is meant by them” and that “people should be able to laugh at themselves”. This paper looks at the effects of such ‘disabling comedy’. These include the damage done to the general public’s perceptions of disabled people, the contribution to the erosion of a disabled people’s ‘identity’ and how accepting disablist comedy as the ‘norm’ has served to exclude disabled writers / comedians / performers from the profession.

## **1. Introduction**

Society has been deriving humour from disabled people for centuries. Elizabethan joke books were full of jokes about disabled people with a variety of impairments. During the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, keeping ‘idiots’ as objects of humour was common among those who had the money to do so, and visits to Bedlam and other ‘mental’ institutions were a typical form of entertainment (Barnes, 1992, page 14).

Bilken and Bogdana (1977) identified “the disabled person as an object of ridicule” as one of the ten media stereotypes of disabled people. Apart from ridicule, disabled people have been largely excluded from the world of comedy in the past. For example, in the eighties American stand-up comedian George Carlin was arrested whilst doing his act for swearing in front of young disabled people. The attitude that disabled people cannot be included in comedy, brought about by various myths and stereotypes over the years, was recently satirised by Ricky Gervais in the BBC series ‘The Office’:

**“Brent:** There are things that I will never laugh at. The handicapped - because there’s nothing funny about them. Or any deformity.”  
(The Office, series 1, episode 3)

Traditionally it is assumed that a disabled person’s medical condition is the root cause of their exclusion from society. This way of viewing disability is known as the individual (or medical) model of disability. In the mid-seventies a new way of thinking now known as the social model of disability (or the ‘barriers’ approach) emerged from the disabled people’s emancipatory movement (Union of Physically Impaired Against Segregation, 1976; Finkelstein 1980; Oliver, 1983). This stated that disabled people are those people who experience barriers within society related to their impairment. It is based on the following definitions:

- Impairment is a limitation to the function of a person’s mind, body, or senses;
- Disability is the loss or limitation of ability to take part in society due to physical, attitudinal and social barriers caused by a society that does not take account of people with impairments, thus excluding them.

Using the social model, it is up to the individual to self-define under the identity of “disabled person.” This means that the term can include people who:

- are Deaf or hard of hearing;
- have a visual impairment;
- have a learning difficulty;
- have a physical impairment;
- have a speech impairment;
- have restricted growth;
- are HIV positive or have AIDS;
- experience mental distress or are survivors of the mental health system.

Mainstream comedy involving disabled people has traditionally extracted humour from their impairments – i.e. a person’s “functional limitation.” Hasler (1993) states that “an important part of the movement has been to reclaim humour – to laugh at disabled people not as victims but as role models.” In

contrast, Barnes (1992, page 15) describes a brand of humour from disability arts which focuses on the absurd way our society treats disabled people, laughing at the disabling effect of society rather than disabled people themselves.

This paper focuses on comedy on British television, with some reference to British film, over the last forty years. Various standard comic devices and their impact on the general public's perceptions of disabled people are explored.

## 2. Ridicule

The exploitation of disabled people by professional non-disabled comedians on television is often overlooked. It is quite usual for TV scriptwriters or comics to use explicitly or implicitly offensive jokes and comedy routines about disabled people to get laughs (Barnes, 1991). Commonly disabled characters are ridiculed by extracting humour from the functional limitation characterised by their impairments. Speech impairment's are commonly ridiculed for comedic effect – for example the stutters of Jim Trott (The Vicar of Dibley) and Michael Palin as Ken (A Fish Called Wanda). Madame Fanny ('Allo 'Allo) was laughed at because she stayed in bed all day and used an old-fashioned ear trumpet to hear people. Ronnie Barker played Clarence, a visually-impaired removal man who constantly bumped into things in the sitcom of the same name. Robin's Nest derived humour from the character Albert Riddle, a dishwasher with one arm, which was later satirised by comedian Steve Coogan:

**“Alan:** Richard O'Sullivan ran this restaurant and it really was chaos. Yeah, and the man who did the washing up had one arm. When you think about it, it's ridiculous”  
(‘Knowing Me, Knowing You’, the radio series, episode 3)

Some authors have attributed Monty Python's Flying Circus' Gumbie characters to a comment on working class people (Cornell et al, 1993, page 140). However Barnes (1991) points out the negative implications for people who have difficulty walking or have learning difficulties, due to their badly fitting clothes, knotted handkerchiefs on their heads and slurred, monotonous voices.

The famous Peter Cook and Dudley Moore sketch “One-leg Too Few” from ‘Not Only... But Also’ ridicules the possibility of a

man with one leg playing Tarzan. Whilst the viewer must accept this possibility as ridiculous in order for the sketch to work, the sight of a two-legged man played a man with one leg is never questioned. With such discriminatory comedic material as part of our culture, it is little wonder that forty years later there are still so few disabled actors on television, and disabled characters are still predominantly played by non-disabled actors:

- “Peter:** Well, Mr. Spiggott, need I point out to you where your deficiency lies as regards landing the role?
- Dudley:** Yes, I think you ought to.
- Peter:** Need I say without overmuch emphasis that it is in the leg division that you are deficient.
- Dudley:** The leg division?
- Peter:** Yes, the leg division, Mr. Spiggott. You are deficient in it to the tune of one. Your right leg I like. I like your right leg. A lovely leg for the role. That's what I said when I saw you come in. I said "A lovely leg for the role." I've got nothing against your right leg. The trouble is - neither have you. You fall down on your left.
- Dudley:** You mean it's inadequate?
- Peter:** Yes, it's inadequate, Mr. Spiggott. And, to my mind, the British public is not ready for the sight of a one-legged apeman swinging through the jungly tendrils.”

Even the highly-acclaimed classics of British comedy use overtly disablist humour. The Fawlty Towers episode ‘Communication Problems’ consistently asks the viewer to laugh at the character of Alice Richards, described by Basil Fawlty as “deaf, mad and blind.” During the episode Basil insinuates that she can hear when she wants to, for example when financial negotiations are happening, thus perpetuating a common Deaf stereotype. Similarly the character is portrayed as rude and ignorant – another stereotype of hearing impaired people stemming from them appearing to be ignoring people by missing audible cues. Mrs. Richards is made a figure of fun as Basil silently mouths words to fool her into turning her hearing aid up, then shouts abruptly to shock her. The individual model of disability is beautifully illustrated by Basil’s line: “the radio works – you don’t!” All in all, this is a very negative portrayal from probably Britain’s best-known sitcom.

### **3. Physical comedy**

Certain physical characteristics of impairments have been used for comedic effect over the years. In 'Dad's Army', Corporal Jack Jones' malaria attacks frequently provide hilarity, as do Private Charles Godfrey's attempts to physically keep up with the rest of the troop. Practically every role ever played by 'Carry On' actor Jack Douglas involved some sort of comic turn reminiscent of an epileptic fit. The 'Monty Python' sketch 'Ministry for Silly Walks' has clear implications for anyone with an ambulatory impairment, as does the comic use of Herr Flick's 'sinister' limp in 'Allo Allo'.

Such techniques are most prominently put to use by British comedian Lee Evans in the film 'There's Something About Mary', in which he plays a pizza delivery boy who uses a pair of crutches. Throughout the film humour is frequently derived from Evans' attempts to pick things up from the floor whilst supporting himself using the crutches. Such crude humour can damage both the public's perceptions of disabled people and the self-esteem of people with similar impairments. Morrison and Finklestein (1993) believe that disability arts can be used to make disabled people question such a tragic view of disability, if "the struggle to remove barriers could be regarded as the seed bed for human arts."

### **4. The Monster**

Central to many sitcoms is a larger-than-life central character with an obvious, basic flaw that they themselves are unaware of. The audience is supposed to laugh at and pity them, and sometimes the addition of an impairment can heighten that effect. Most notable in this respect is Basil Fawlty (Fawlty Towers), a man who experiences mental distress. This can be most clearly seen in the episode 'The Psychiatrist', where he alters his behaviour to appear 'normal' to a psychiatrist, resulting in the person in question concluding: "There's enough material there for an entire conference!" The viewer is often encouraged to laugh at Basil, however in the case of Reggie Perrin (The Fall and Rise of Reginald Perrin), another central character with mental distress, they see the world through his eyes and laugh at his environment. Other examples of 'monster' characters with impairments include Arkwright (Open All Hours) and Rigsby (Rising Damp), both of whom have speech impairments. Similarly Victor Meldrew (One Foot in the Grave) and Alf Garnett (In Sickness and In Health) are both ogres who encounter the onset of impairment with age.

The counterpoint for the 'monster' to play off is the 'normal' character, there to provide the voice of reason. It is significant that whilst a number of monsters are characters with impairment, all of their counterfoils are non-disabled, as it demonstrates society's tendency to mock disabled people. It is also illustrative of a further media stereotype of disabled people identified by Barnes (1992, page 17), namely being incapable of participating fully in community life. Indeed the only disabled counterfoil is the severely under-used character Brenda in 'The Office' – a wheelchair user whose presence draws attention to David Brent's disablist remarks.

## 5. The Fool and the Clown

A tradition in British comedy dating back to Shakespeare is to laugh at a character's lack of intellect. Shakespeare frequently uses fools, characters who are thought to be lacking in intelligence by the other characters but are actually wiser, and clowns. Enright (2002, page 134) writes of the latter: "This clown is usually a good and innocent character, ignorant, sometimes dull-witted, who on many occasions blunders into a situation quite outside his scope... In comedies, their role is to keep the comic action going, maybe as a kind of side-show; in tragedies, they provide relief from the tension and serve to make the action that follows more hard-hitting." Clowns could be either professional comedians, or "...mentally handicapped individuals, known as 'naturals', whose innocent antics were considered humorous." (Dobson et al, 2001, page 148).

Sadly, this tradition of deriving humour from character's learning difficulties is very much alive today in almost every British sitcom. Examples of comedy characters with learning difficulties include Alice Tinker (The Vicar of Dibley), Father Dougal McGuire (Father Ted), Bubble (Absolutely Fabulous), Mickey (The League of Gentlemen), Frank Spencer (Some Mothers Do 'Ave 'Em), Peggy Ollerenshaw (Hi-Di-Hi), Frank Pike (Dad's Army), Compo (Last of the Summer Wine), Trigger (Only Fools and Horses) and Baldrick (Blackadder):

**"Edmund:** Right Baldrick, let's try again shall we? This is called adding. If I have two beans, and then I add two more beans, what do I have?

**Baldrick:** Some beans.

**Edmund:** Yes... and no. Let's try again shall we? I have two beans, then I add two more beans. What does that make?

**Baldrick:** A very small casserole.

**Edmund:** Baldrick, the ape creatures of the Indus have mastered this."

(from Blackadder II, 'Head')

It is interesting to speculate whether these characters would have been as funny to the general public had their impairment been explicitly stated. A few comedy writers have used character attributes other than learning difficulties to fulfil the same function. For example, Manuel's grasp of the English language (Fawlty Towers) and Gareth's prejudice towards minority groups (The Office) both frequently lead to humour being derived from them being less knowledgeable about a situation than others.

## 6. Exposition of impairment

A common comedic device used with disabled characters is concealing their impairment at first, in order to shock the audience and get a laugh when it is finally revealed. This plays up to the media stereotype of being sinister and evil (Bilken and Bogdana, 1977), utilising the practice of using disabled people as freaks to shock the public. For example, in Blackadder II Captain Rum's mobility impairment is hidden at first for comedic effect:

**Blackadder:** Well, let us set sail as soon as we can. *[they shake]* I will fetch my first mate, and then I'll return as fast as my legs will carry me.

**Rum:** Ah! *[pointing]* You have a woman's legs, my lord! I'll wager those are legs that have never been sliced clean off by a falling sail, and swept into the sea before your very eyes.

**Blackadder:** *[crossly]* Well, neither have yours.

**Rum:** That's where you're wrong.  
*(throws aside table showing his lack of legs)*

**Blackadder:** Oh my God!"

(from 'Blackadder II', 'Potato')

Similarly, in The League of Gentlemen, Pauline relays her hostage demands to a little boy who is then revealed to be wearing

a hearing aid, the implication being that he has not heard her. In the nineties BBC sitcom 'Chalk', the headmaster is relieved when the school inspector turns out to be blind, thus allowing him to deceive the inspector into thinking that absent pupils were present. The 'Absolutely Fabulous' episode 'Fat' sees Edina relieved when an old colleague also is revealed to be blind, again allowing her to pretend that he has a thin waist. Finally the first episode of 'Mr. Bean' saw the character make strenuous efforts to change into swimming trunks without flashing the person next to him, who is subsequently revealed to be a white cane user. Using images of disabled people to shock in this way can only have negative implications for the public's perception of them.

## **7. Disablist language**

Pejorative words and phrases about disabled people are often used to get cheap laughs in comedy – see Clark and Marsh (2002) for explanations of their various derivations. In research conducted for the BBC, ITC and ASA, respondents ranked derogatory words about disabled people on television in the highest category of offence (Millwood-Hargrave, 2000, page 16). The survey showed a much greater tolerance of disablist words in men, and that age also affects attitudes, with older respondents less likely to rate such words as 'very severe'.

Barnes (1992, page 14) writes: "Disablist humour is common in 'alternative' comedy also. The words 'spas' and 'spasy' - both derogatory terms short for the word 'spastic' - were repeatedly used as insults in the cult TV series 'The Young Ones'." British comedian Harry Enfield once used the offensive phrase 'special needs' to describe a boy character, in order to instil some level of fear of what the boy might do (Clark and Marsh, 2002). In the series 'I'm Alan Partridge', Alan says to an obsessive fan: "No way you big spastic! You're a mentalist!" In the recent BBC documentary series 'The Entertainers' comedian Bobby Davro performed a routine called "cripple-dance" at a charity event by attaching rag-doll effigies of disabled children to his shoulders and dancing. Whilst the routine itself was offensive, his dismay at the poor reception it received from the audience was very amusing. Charity performances by comedians who use disablist humour are common at benefit events by organisations such as The Variety Club of Great Britain and SOS (Stars Organisation for Scope).

Comedian Ali G has frequently been criticised for his use of derogatory words such 'spasticated' and 'mong'. Similarly the Christmas special of 'The League of Gentlemen' was heavily criticised in the press, as the vicar character Bernice referred to people with learning difficulties as 'mongers'. However the series has already firmly established that this character is prejudiced against disabled people:

**“Bernice:** And He will come and give strength to hands that tremble with weakness and to legs that are lame. The crippled will cast away their crutches, leap and dance, jump up and down in praise of the Lord and receive all the blessings of Heaven! But it doesn't say they have to have six parking bays at Safeways, does it? They're always empty. I left the car for five minutes... when I came out the bugger was clamped! I said to the feller: 'Would it be different if I had a stick and a limp?' Ramps outside libraries...and their toilets are massive! Hymn number 168 – 'Glad That I Live Am I'.”  
(from The League of Gentlemen, series 1, episode 6)

Therefore the use of disablist language by this character could also be viewed as satirising her attitudes, and indeed the attitude of the church, towards disabled people. It all depends on whether the words are being used to extract humour from impairment or disabling barriers within society.

## **8. Relationships with non-disabled characters**

Tensions between disabled and non-disabled characters based around 'care' have been used in British sitcom since the sixties. “Besides 'have a liking' or 'desire for', to 'care' means 'to be concerned about' or 'to look after'. It is also associated with the concepts of 'protection' and 'supervision' and is used with reference to many sections of the community. We care about family and friends. We care about particularly vulnerable groups such as small children, older 'frail' people, and people with serious and life-threatening illnesses” (Barnes, 2001). However, in reference to disabled people 'care' usually means 'to be cared for', 'to be looked after', 'protected' or 'supervised'. From the perspective of disabled people this is an overtly patronizing and unhelpful use of the term because:

1. "It implies that disabled people can never achieve any degree of independence within their communities.
2. It conceals the fact that there is overwhelming evidence that many of the problems encountered by disabled people are the result of society's failure to meet their needs" (Barnes, 2001).

'Caring' is an often-used topic in British sitcom. Many of the plots in the classic BBC comedy 'Steptoe and Son' concern Harold's life being held back because he has to live with his ageing father, Albert. A popular recurring storyline was Harold's attempt to place Albert in a residential institution against his will, a significant issue for many disabled people. Cornell et al (1993, page 107) state that the series exposed "a number of home truths about the nature of blood ties, fuelled by the selfish possessiveness that Albert felt for his son..." This analysis is a little harsh, given that many of Albert's actions to thwart his son's plans had the aim of enabling him to keep the support he needed to live independently.

Other examples of sitcoms deriving humour from such relationships include 'In Sickness and in Health' with first Else, and then Alf Garnett becoming wheelchair users. 'Only Fools and Horses' sometimes used tensions between the Trotter brothers and the older characters of Granddad and Uncle Albert. 'The Royle Family' derives humour from Jim Royle's resistance to the family having Nana live with her, despite her needing support due to various impairments brought on with age.

More recent comedies have taken the 'caring' relationship a step further. The BBC sitcom 'All About Me' featured a completely passive disabled character who was portrayed as incapable of interaction with his family – communicating with the viewer through narration. Such portrayals follow the stereotype of 'the disabled person as a burden' (Bilken and Bogdana, 1977), and fail "to recognise that with appropriate support disabled people are able to achieve the same level of autonomy and independence as non-disabled people" (Barnes, 1992, page 16).

In the same week the BBC also screened a modern adaptation of 'A Day in the Death of Joe Egg', a play about two parents supporting a disabled child. Darke (1999) writes of the title role: "Joe Egg - the character - is quite literally speechless. She

has to be, because to have given Joe Egg a voice would have put into doubt the whole point of the drama; it would have meant that she herself would have had a voice to be listened to". The lead actor, Eddie Izzard, had previously been involved in positive media publicity around his own impairment, dyslexia. However in this production he frequently lapsed into improvised comic monologues, deriving humour from ridiculing the Joe Egg character with lines such as: "Well it's not like she's going to go to college or university." The Telegraph review praised Izzard's "criminally insensitive Germanic paediatrician", who has the line: "your child is a wegetable", and the mother "caught between laughter and tears and her persistence in hope, and the unconditional love she shows for her totally unresponsive child." Portrayals such as this further the myth that disabled people are a burden on society. While such imagery persists, the belief that society would be better off without disabled people will never disappear (Barnes, 1992, page 16).

## 9. Satirising disabling barriers

Some modern comedies have shifted the emphasis from laughing at disabled people themselves, to deriving humour from attitudinal barriers. In 'The League of Gentlemen', Restart Officer Pauline Campbell-Jones constantly patronises Mickey, a character with learning difficulties, and is clearly the main factor holding him back. The episode where forum theatre company 'Legs Akimbo' rehearse 'Vegetable Soup' demonstrates the absurdity of impairment simulation. The character of Ernest Foot, so-called because he is always 'putting his foot in it', desperately wants to befriend disabled people but repeatedly his prejudice lets him down:

**Ernest:** *(to blind man)* How do you shave? I bet you cut yourself a lot, don't you? Is that why you see so many bearded... sightless? Well, they always look a mess, don't they? Dandruff and crumbs in their beard. Mum used to point at them on the bus and say 'that's what'll happen to you if you don't stop fiddling with yourself!' Ah...didn't stop me though, did it?  
*The blind man gets to his feet and walks off. Ernest doesn't realise this.*  
I expect you get lonely, don't you? Rattling around all day in your house... your hostel. Locked in your own

thoughts. You do better going for a little walk. As I say, it's all repeats, and who knows? You might even meet another...I mean, look at me.

*He turns and sees the blind man has gone. He shrugs. Huh! Was it something I said?"*

(from *The League of Gentlemen*, series 1, episode 4)

The Christmas special of 'Knowing Me, Knowing You' saw Alan Partridge patronising a disabled golfer who had just made his wife pregnant, causing the man to openly boast about his sex life to Alan's dismay. A recent episode of 'I'm Alan Partridge' satirised charity events by showing Alan skilfully manipulate a wheelchair user at the 'bravery awards' in order to further his career. As already mentioned, humour is extracted from the attitudinal and physical barriers experience by the character Brenda, who uses a wheelchair, in the series 'The Office'. The British film 'Four Weddings and a Funeral' featured the character David, brother to Charles, who is a British Sign Language user played by a Deaf actor. This facet is used for humorous purposes at the end of the film, when David and Charles are able to communicate without anyone else understanding them. Sadly writer Richard Curtis' next film, 'Notting Hill' is less positive about disabled people. This features a 'tragic-but-brave' portrayal of Bella, a wheelchair user, who is played by a non-disabled actress.

Two recent Channel 4 series have also featuring main characters who are wheelchair users encountering disabling barriers, both played by non-disabled actors. The character of Kenny ('The Book Group') is, on the whole, very well-observed. He often encounters inaccessible buildings and disablist attitudes, and most of the humour stems from these situations. However the lack of disabled people's input into the series shows, for example in unrealistic solutions such as Kenny pulling himself up several flights of stairs with his arms. Such scenes give the public distorted messages about how disabled people live their lives. Brian Potter ('Phoenix Nights') is a sarcastic nightclub owner who cynically uses charity boxes to raise money for himself. Again the portrayal is well-observed, and the fact that he is played by a non-disabled actor is more forgivable given that Peter Kay plays several characters in the show.

## 10. Conclusions

Although a common complaint from disabled people is that they are excluded from television, this paper has illustrated examples of disabled characters in practically every successful comedy show from the last forty years. However in all but a couple of cases, disabled people were not involved in the writing, acting, directing or producing. This has led to the majority of portrayals being unrealistic, inaccurate and negative. Barnes (1992, page 15) writes: "The negative implications for disabled people of this type of abuse should not be underestimated. On the one hand, it seriously undermines what little opportunities they have to be taken seriously by non-disabled society. On the other hand, it has the capacity to sap their self-confidence and esteem."

From the development of the disability arts movement in the late eighties arose disabled people's own brand of humour. Barnes (1992, page 15) makes the comparison with comedy which emerged from other oppressed groups (e.g. women, black people, gay men and lesbians), as it "makes sense of the senseless and, most importantly, satirises without rubbishing individuals." There have been a number of disabled comics emerging from the movement, such as No Excuses, Wanda Barbara, Julie McNamara, Mandy Colleran, the Nasty Girls and myself. However up to now the mainstream media has largely ignored the cultural expression of disabled people.

To return to the title, some people may argue that they are only having 'a laugh', and "all sections of the community are sometimes the butt of popular humour and that disabled people cannot and should not expect to be excluded from it" (Barnes, 1992, page 15). However, when assessing whether a portrayal is positive or negative, it must always be questioned whether people are laughing at impairment, or disability.

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