

A red silhouette map of Latin America, including Mexico, Central America, and South America, serves as the background for the top half of the page.

COMEDY AS CREATIVE DISSENT IN LATIN AMERICA

LESSONS FROM CROSS-SECTOR CREATIVE COLLABORATIONS IN BRAZIL, COLOMBIA & MEXICO

A REPORT OF THE CMSI'S THE LAUGHTER EFFECT IN
COLLABORATION WITH UNIVISION AND THE OPEN
SOCIETY FOUNDATIONS



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ABOUT THE CENTER FOR MEDIA & SOCIAL IMPACT

The Center for Media & Social Impact (CMSI), based at American University's School of Communication in Washington, D.C., is an innovation lab and research center that creates, studies, and showcases media for social impact. Focusing on independent, documentary and public media, the Center bridges boundaries between scholars, producers and communication practitioners across media production and business, media impact, public policy, and audience engagement. The Center produces resources for the field and academic research; convenes conferences and events; works collaboratively with media organizations and philanthropy; and works to understand and design media that matter. CMSI is directed by Professor Caty Borum Chattoo. www.cmsimpact.org.

Since its founding as the Center for Social Media in 2000 (re-branded as the Center for Media & Social Impact in 2012), CMSI has established successful models for showcasing media for public knowledge and action; has become a leader in the evolution of documentary film and video in the digital era; has developed and established best practices in fair use for creative communities; has launched creative efforts to highlight the role of storytelling and social justice; has published research about the societal effects of storytelling; and has documented and helped to elevate public media for dynamic and engaged publics. Working with foundations, media companies, scholars, philanthropists, media producers, communication professionals, and innovators, the Center has contributed vital resources to media makers of all kinds, especially civically-minded creatives, and has forged trusted connections between media practitioners, public media, scholars and issue experts.

In 2017, CMSI launched **The Laughter Effect**, a research and creative initiative that examines the intersection of comedy and social justice. Featuring research, case studies, and original creative comedy projects, **The Laughter Effect** aims to build a body of awareness and evidence for the use of comedy in service of public engagement in serious social problems.

www.cmsimpact.org/comedy



INTRODUCTION

Around the world, in countries immersed in varying degrees of political unrest, media censorship, and the collective frustration of the people, comedy offers a source of catharsis and form of political engagement with serious issues. Through comedy – from sketch to satire to street cabaret – performers, writers, and artists can communicate public outrage and interrogate power. Comedy also attracts attention and captures the imagination – crucial to encouraging audiences to engage and share information. Through comedy, complex issues can be unpackaged and translated to audiences who may otherwise find political issues daunting or confusing. Since the earliest days of Aristotle in Ancient Greece, comedy has been seen and used not only for entertainment, but as a form of social critique.

Despite the promising functions and influences of comedy in civic and political problems, the challenges inherent in creating humorous forms of civic engagement material are not well-known. Further, for serious social justice advocates and organizations, comedy is not taken as seriously as other forms of traditionally serious, informative, somber forms of public engagement with civic issues. And yet, persuasion through positive emotion and entertainment value – comedy’s superpowers – is not only powerful, but often is more potent for capturing a public’s attention and encouraging its civic participation than providing serious information alone.

“Comedy as creative dissent” is a term we’ve coined here. It draws from numerous historical examples of entertainment, activism, and performance art from Latin America and around the world. For instance, there is a rich history of critical pedagogy and social justice in Brazil often credited to both educator Paulo Freire and Augusto Boal, who translated Freire’s ideals into theatrical techniques and political activism (Freire, 1974; Boal 1979). More recently, and across the globe, media scholar Marwan Kraidy has used the term “creative insurgency” to describe examples of activism and art in the Middle East that evolved out of the Arab Spring and ensuing calls for social change (Kraidy, 2016). Still other examples from around the world have similar roots in street activism, performance art, theater, and other forms of artistic protest.


“SINCE THE EARLIEST DAYS OF ARISTOTLE IN ANCIENT GREECE, COMEDY HAS BEEN SEEN AND USED NOT ONLY FOR ENTERTAINMENT, BUT AS A FORM OF SOCIAL CRITIQUE.”

QUESTIONS ARISE WHEN CONSIDERING COMEDY AS CREATIVE DISSENT

How does the creative process work when it comes to comedy designed to interrogate power and engage audiences in civic and social justice problems? What are the challenges inherent in creative, strategic work that also incurs some risk, given political climates? How can philanthropists and serious social justice organizations support the development and dissemination of comedic messages around serious civic and political issues?

Comedy as Creative Dissent in Latin America was designed to raise and address these questions. The project endeavored to explore and understand the challenges for comedy groups in Latin America that sought to create original comedy work that spotlights civic and social injustice, and that captures public attention to encourage public engagement with serious issues. Between August 2017 and October 2018, three comedy groups across Latin America – Brazil, Colombia, and Mexico – created and distributed original comedy works as a creative response to various forms of injustice and oppression.

This report presents findings from research conducted to understand the creative process of developing these three comedic projects for creative dissent in Latin America. This research represents a collaboration between Univision, The Open Society Foundations, and The Center for Media & Social Impact (CMSI) at American University. Caty Borum Chattoo, Director of CMSI, directed this project as principal investigator, along with Dr. Amy Henderson Riley, post-doctoral



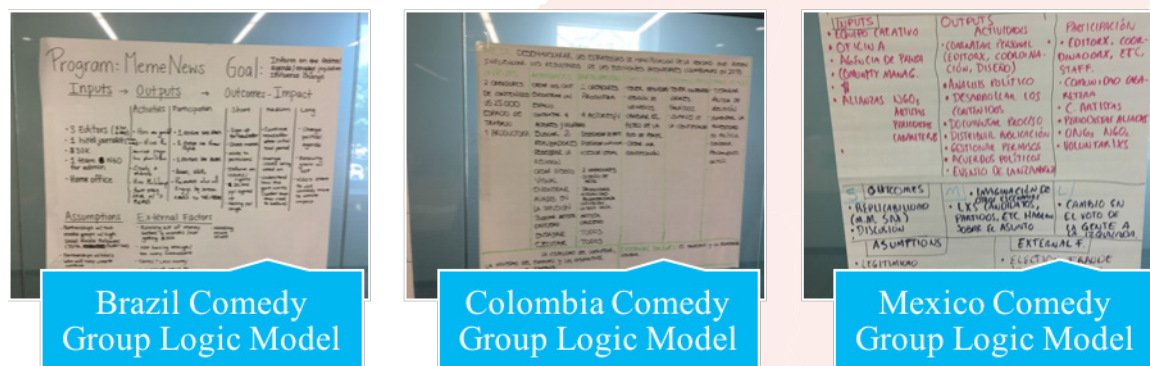
fellow at CMSI. For Univision, Claudia Bojorquez and Alexandra Barrera facilitated interviews (which were conducted in Spanish and Portuguese) and curated details about the three comedy projects. Additionally, given CMSI's prior research in comedy and social justice, captured through its research and creative initiative, **The Laughter Effect**, the three comedy groups also developed their original material, in part, through consultation with CMSI's existing research about how comedy works to engage for social justice topics. The Open Society Foundations funded the comedy projects and the present corresponding research. The goal of this research was to document program development, production, and launch of the comedic projects across the three geographical settings.

“COMEDY ATTRACTS ATTENTION AND CAPTURES THE IMAGINATION – CRUCIAL TO ENCOURAGING AUDIENCES TO ENGAGE AND SHARE INFORMATION. THROUGH COMEDY, COMPLEX ISSUES CAN BE UNPACKAGED AND TRANSLATED TO AUDIENCES WHO MAY OTHERWISE FIND POLITICAL ISSUES DAUNTING OR CONFUSING.”

THE RESEARCH APPROACH

This research unfolded alongside the iterative process of the creative work, from the early conception of ideas to implementation. To begin, in August 2017, Univision hosted the comedy groups from each country location and the CMSI research team at Univision headquarters in Miami for a kick-off meeting. The purpose of this meeting was to align the proposed creative comedy ideas with overall project objectives. Over the course of two days, each comedy group described their project ideas and presented a concept note. The CMSI research team then conducted a logic model exercise to further understand the project ideas and to help develop them. Logic models are a visual representation of a project and are used to illustrate project goals, activities, inputs, and outputs (The University of Kansas, 2018). **Figure 1** displays photos from this kick-off meeting exercise.

FIGURE 1: AUGUST 2017 “LOGIC MODELS” OF COMEDY PROJECTS



Over the subsequent months, the comedy groups honed their creative ideas and drafted project overviews. CMSI and Univision developed a qualitative research study designed to follow the projects over time, through 12 in-depth interviews comprising three one-hour interviews with each comedy group, at the beginning, mid-point, and end of each project; and one one-hour interview with a corresponding civil society organization in each country.¹

The CMSI team created the research and interview questions for this project, and the Univision team conducted the in-depth interviews with in-country comedy and social justice organizations.² CMSI designed the interview questions, which focused on the process of creativity, the process of collaboration between the comedy groups and the civil society and social justice organizations, and the process of engaging with audience/marketplace. Questions at Time 2 and Time 3 asked about positive developments and challenges, i.e., successes and failures, encountered along the way.

Univision recorded the interviews, translated and transcribed the interviews into English. CMSI conducted analysis of the translated and transcribed interviews in a stepwise process. First, each interview was cleaned and reviewed for major errors in Microsoft Word. Second, each interview was coded in Microsoft Word using a process of open coding. A preliminary codebook operationalized the initial codes. Next, the interviews were uploaded into qualitative software (NVivo) where they were coded a second time. The codebook was updated to reflect the second round of coding. As a final step, the codes were organized and summarized under five main topic areas that described the process of developing projects: 1) context for comedy creativity, 2) the creative process, 3) positive developments and learning, 4) challenges, and 5) perceived outcomes.

¹ The Univision team also agreed to deliver project metrics and indicators to CMSI, including: audience reach numbers; media coverage; quotes/comments/ testimonials from the community; and representative photos/images of the groups at work and/or the creative work in the marketplace.

² The interviews began with a process of obtaining informed consent. Univision team members provided a written informed consent document in Spanish or Portuguese that laid out the procedures, risks, benefits, expectations of confidentiality, and the right to withdraw at any time. Participants provided their written consent and then worked with the Univision team to set a time and date for a phone interview. The interviews lasted approximately one hour each.



THE COMEDY PROJECTS

Through this unique creative and strategic process, during which comedy writers and performers in three Latin American countries – Brazil, Colombia, and Mexico – were provided with strategic facilitation and limited financial resources to develop original comedy designed to highlight injustice and engage publics in their respective countries, three comedy projects were brought to fruition. The following overviews of each project were provided as self-descriptions by each creative team:



BRAZIL

OVERVIEW OF PROJECT

MemeNews (www.memenews.com.br) is a daily newsletter that publishes news about politics and human rights in Brazil, along with humorous memes. Through this approach, the team aims to educate the public on important issues in a more accessible language, using comedy to inform people and engage them in Brazil's political life. MemeNews was initially published for a period of five months, starting in March 2018. MemeNews returned in November 2018.

DESCRIPTION OF COMEDIC STYLE

The project aims to translate boring and complicated political news into memes picked up from the web. The team includes links to the original news or source, and when applicable, the option to act on a particular issue affecting the public agenda or their rights — i.e., send an email to government officials, politicians, and other actions. The comedic style is connected to quick and topical comedy using the aesthetics of internet memes.

DISSEMINATION

MemeNews is published daily, from Monday to Friday and sent at 2:00 pm. The newsletter includes three memes tied to three pieces of news a day. Instagram and Facebook also promote these stories.

SOCIAL MEDIA METRICS OF SUCCESS

AS OF AUGUST 31, 2018

Newsletter: **6,000 subscribers**

Instagram: **1,052 followers**

Facebook: **3,900 followers**

MEDIA COVERAGE

This project received both local and international media coverage, including:

- *Quando o humor provoca mudanças políticas e sociais, segundo este estudo (When humor provokes political and social changes, according to this study)*
 - Author: Camilo Rocha
 - Publication: Nexo Journal
 - Date: May 17, 2018
 - URL: <https://www.nexojournal.com.br/expresso/2018/05/17/Quando-o-humor-provoca-mudan%C3%A7as-pol%C3%ADticas-e-sociais-segundo-este-estudo>
- *Brazilian project Meme News joins journalism and humor for social transformation*
 - Author: Carolina de Assis
 - Publication: Knight Center for Journalism in the Americas Blog
 - Date: May 1, 2018
 - URL: <https://knightcenter.utexas.edu/blog/00-19605-brazilian-project-memenews-joins-journalism-and-humor-social-transformation>



IMAGES AND PHOTOS FROM THE PROJECT





COLOMBIA

OVERVIEW OF PROJECT

Emoteísmo is a satirical religion that defines itself as a polytheist and anarchist cult dedicated to the worship of emojis. It was created to counterbalance the toxic contemporary phenomenon called “post-truth.” The team created it with the idea that if they had to live in a world defined by lies, they would rather create their own system of deceitful principles, making sure it would be sweet, cuddly, soft, and pastel-colored.

With this premise in mind, the team created a whole theology with its own dogmas, commandments and sacraments in order to systematically spread the sarcastic beliefs into the world. In so doing, they were laughing at the

absurd lies, fake news, and ideas that politicians (and their religious allies) were trying to sell to their electors. With humor, they endeavored to fight the gullibility of people and to awaken the critical thinking that candidates were numbing with their emotive discourses.

The religion was founded under three main principles: mad excess, critical and individual thinking, and imagination as action. All of the original content (social media posts, cults, miracles and procession) was created around these principles, and it was spread using the whole city and the cyberspace as the team’s stage. They made fun of lies spread by preachers by creating a free and mad (but also well-structured) system of beliefs. It was meant to serve as an agglutinant of a community that resists the general tendency to attack political contenders and to stop spreading hate in order to reduce *the other*.

DESCRIPTION OF COMEDIC STYLE

Emoteísmo is a movement charged with satire and irony, aiming to offer a space — both physical and intellectual — to reflect upon many political and social problems that currently trouble Colombia. Secular on paper and constitution-wise, Colombia is a very religious country in which religion — mainly Catholicism and Christianity — seeps into most of the important and transversal decisions made in a political and social sphere. Cases have been reported where politicians generate alliances with local priests in order to convince the church’s believers to vote for X or Y politician. People have been manipulated through religion’s capacity to infuse fear and guilt, resulting in the election of politicians known for their lies and manipulation of facts. *Emoteísmo* was and is determined to fight post-truth preachers through comedy and satire.

After detailed and careful research of different fanatic sects and religions, the team created its own faux religion in which the objects of devotion and desire were *emojis*. Why? Because religion speaks to the pathos and moral-based part of human beings, and in the present day, technology appears to be speaking that language. Instead of worshiping ideas based on war, power, manipulation, ignorance or politics, we worship critical thinking, anarchism (beginning with Hakim Bey’s theories), sweetness, brotherhood, community, open-source information, and change. How? This occurs through two main channels that speak to different audiences: digital places (such

as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and YouTube fan pages) and physical spaces (including a procession spanning across a large part of Bogotá, open cults in two different garages of the city, and a massive “guerrilla technique” performance/set of actions that aimed to spread anonymously throughout the city).

Emoteísmo was created by Felipe Vergara and Verónica Ochoa, two playwrights and theatre directors who have worked together in several theatre projects in the past, increasingly more demanding of a political and social conscience and critical analysis of the country. For this project, they set out to unite a team of theatre and music professionals to create a satirical religion meant to have the same timeline as the 2018 presidential elections in Colombia. With a team of 30 people, the ideas and concepts needed to be shared and expressed in the times when it all happened, and the space to express sadness and the need for hope after the presidential elections. The cult was born on the internet on the same day the results of Congress elections were made public. The first cult opened its doors on Labor Day. The “guerrilla performance” happened on the first round of presidential elections. And the last cult of 2018 happened as a result of the elected president of 2018-2022: Iván Duque.

The team created an anonymous character on Facebook and for the press called Hakim Zizek, honoring philosophical prophets Hakim Bey and Slavoj Zizek. *Emoteísmo* connected and connects with an audience chanting for a new society, new ways of thinking, no more lies and political scams, and no more manipulation of faith in order to gain political power.

DISSEMINATION

Emoteísmo was disseminated in several ways:

- 1. Theory study sessions and rehearsals with our work team:** The team was composed of 30 or more collaborators, all with whom had study sessions before *Emoteísmo* launched. It was necessary to share the research done about how religions in history — Colombia and the world — have manipulated truth in order to gain political power. After putting the team together, acting and music rehearsals were needed before opening the doors to our satirical cult. The team rehearsed for 60+ hours and performed for 20+ hours during the time period of March to June of 2018.

- 2. Digital portals:** *Emoteísmo* began on March 11, 2018. The team held many meetings to make decisions about graphic design and communication. The team’s research demonstrated that most small and large religions have a YouTube channel and a Facebook and Twitter fan page. After defining a graphic identity, the team launched pages on the same social media outlets, in addition to an Instagram page. Every week the team created graphic designs, video clips, GIFs and memes posted three times a week, all focused on political parties, elections, and religious events happening in the country. They also communicated details for the live events held throughout April, May, and June. The team had a designated budget for Facebook ads directed toward the audience.

- 3. Procession around Bogotá:** On Tuesday, April 24th 2018, *Emoteísmo* was born on the streets of the city of Bogotá. The team created a 3M x 3M wheel emblem of the religion, mounted it on a crane, and facilitated a procession around the city. The whole team was present: four preachers, nine devotees, two philosophers, three producers, four photo and video recorders, and two musicians. The team preached the religion’s commandments, sang the religion’s songs, and spread *Emoteísmo*’s word around the city.

- 4. First open cult:** The team rented out a space in a central part of Bogotá, and through fan pages and personal uses of social media, communicated the opening of our first supreme cult. They rehearsed for more than 30 hours and created an *Emoteísmo* cult. Doors opened the 30th of April and the 1st of May, Labor Day. Anyone and everyone could participate for free.

- 5. “Guerrilla” performances / actions:** Right before the first round of presidential elections, the team decided to make a series of anonymous actions in order to stir people’s unconscious behaviors and incite critical thought. These included:
 - > Leaving a series of poems in random places where people could find them, anonymously,
 - > Leaving the *Emoteísmo* manifesto in random places where people could find it, anonymously,
 - > Leaving stickers that said “Are you really going to buy this?” and “This product is shit” in supermarkets, in products that are

widely known to cause diseases and cancer but that are sold anyways because they are owned by huge multinationals or powerful brands.

- Stamping money (bills) with different messages, including real bills and inserted in the market so they would circulate for many years to come and people will find them surprisingly.
- Presenting public actions happenings in public spaces focused on the dogmas and beliefs of *Emoteísmo*.

6. Second open cult: The team rented out a second space in a central part of Bogotá, and through fan pages and personal uses of social media, communicated the opening of our second supreme cult. The team rehearsed for more than 30 hours and created another *Emoteísmo* cult, all having to do with the presidential elections result. The president was elected June 17th; doors opened from June 18th-June 21st. Anyone and everyone could participate for free.

7. Beatification of assassinated social leaders: As a grand closure and gesture of the second grand cult, the team wanted to honor the hundreds of social leaders that have been assassinated after the peace treaty agreements in Colombia. The assassins are known to have ties with state and paramilitary actors.

SOCIAL MEDIA METRICS OF SUCCESS

AS OF AUGUST 31, 2018

Instagram: **328 followers**

Facebook: **1,797 followers**

AUDIENCE METRICS OF SUCCESS

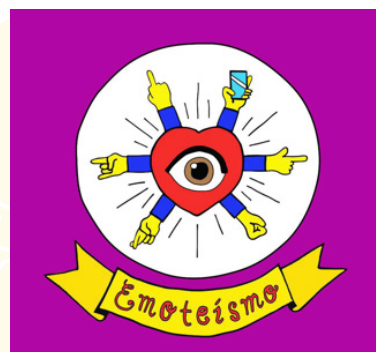
- April 24, 2018 Live Event: unknown number of attendees
- April 30, 2018 Live Event (First Cult): approximately 90 attendees
- May 1, 2018 Live Event (Second Cult): approximately 130 attendees
- May 24 and May 25, 2018 Live Events: unknown number of attendees
- June 18, 2018 Live Event (Third Cult): approximately 100 attendees
- June 19, 2018 Live Event (Fourth Cult): approximately 120 attendees
- June 20, 2018 Live Event (Fifth Cult): approximately 170 attendees
- June 21, 2018 Live Event (Sixth Cult): approximately 220 attendees
- June 21, 2018 Live Event (Beatification): unknown number of attendees (estimated impact of at least 3,000 people)

MEDIA COVERAGE

This project received both local and international media coverage, including:

- *El emoteísmo: Um proyecto satírico que critica la realidad social y política de Colombia* (*The emoteísmo: A satirical projects that criticizes the social and political reality of Colombia*)
 - Author: Famian Molina
 - Publication: Univision
 - Date: April 26, 2018
 - URL: <https://www.univision.com/noticias/univision-contigo/el-emoteismo-un-proyecto-satirico-que-critica-la-realidad-social-y-politica-de-colombia-fotos#ff7e18850001>
- *Emoteísmo: Ironía en escena para cuestionar la posverdad* (*Emoteísmo: Irony on stage to question the afterlife*)
 - Author: Yhonatan Loaiza
 - Publication: El Tiempo
 - Date: April 30, 2018
 - URL: <https://m.eltiempo.com/cultura/arte-y-teatro/dramaturgos-crean-obra-sobre-emoteismo-y-posverdad-211354>
- *Emoteísmo: La libertad es lo único sagrado* (*Emoteísmo: Freedom is the only sacred*)
 - Author: Unknown
 - Publication: Sentiido
 - Date: May 1, 2018
 - URL: <https://sentiido.com/emoteismo-la-libertad-es-lo-unico-sagrado/>
- *La política del emoticon* (*The politics of emoticons*)
 - Author: Laura Rubio Leon
 - Publication: esferapublica
 - Date: June 5, 2018
 - URL: <http://esferapublica.org/nfblog/la-politica-del-emoticon/>
- *En el #dialeleemoji, conozca el 'culto' a estos símbolos* (*In the #dayoftheemoji, know the worship of these symbols*)
 - Author: Unknown
 - Publication: El Tiempo
 - Date: July 16, 2018
 - URL: <https://m.eltiempo.com/cultura/gente/que-es-el-emoteismo-un-proyecto-espiritual-satirico-en-bogota-237448>
- *Satirical religion "emoteism" arises in Colombia*
 - Author: Unknown
 - Publication: Latin America News Digest
 - Date: Unknown
 - URL: <https://latinamericannewsdigest.com/satirical-religion-emoteism-arises-colombia/?print=pdf>

IMAGES AND PHOTOS FROM THE PROJECT





MEXICO

OVERVIEW OF PROJECT

Due to the devastating earthquakes that occurred in Mexico in 2017, this team – Las Reinas Chulas Cabaret – believed it was fundamental to support the reconstruction of the emotional and social fabric of communities, as a response to the suffering and lack of response from corresponding authorities. With this in mind, and after several changes to the original project, they decided to share their theater art with already established, organized women’s groups. With the support of Fondo Semillas, the team was able to identify six different groups of women who are already doing great work to support the communities where they reside. The team analyzed their needs and abilities to be able to help with the reconstruction, both on a physical and emotional level. The team then selected groups that then identified concrete steps and actions needed to reconstruct this social fabric. These groups would be working with different communities all across Mexico — in Santa Cruz, Tlaquiltenango, Colonia Juarez, San Luis Tlaxiátemalco, Sta. María Nativitas Zacapan, Sta. María Tepepan, Xochimilco, Huejotengo, Municipality of Ocuilco, Santa Ana Necontla, San Juan Epatlán Tepeacatzingo, and Santiago Pinotepa Nacional.

DESCRIPTION OF COMEDIC STYLE

“Icarus: Comedy Sketches to Engage Citizens in Mexico City Reconstruction Efforts,” is a project by Las Reinas Chulas Cabaret and Human Rights AC, which will empower six different groups of women who are working on different cabaret projects to help rebuild their communities as a result of the 2017 earthquakes in Mexico.

DISSEMINATION

The team will use existing digital platforms, such as a website and social networks – Facebook, Instagram and Twitter – to promote the work they plan to conduct with the selected organizations. This group had not yet implemented their project at the time of this report. The final results from the Mexico project will be completed in 2019.



INTERVIEW FINDINGS:

OPPORTUNITIES & CHALLENGES IN
CREATING COMEDY AS CREATIVE
DISSENT



PART 1

CONTEXT FOR COMEDY & CREATIVITY IN FRAUGHT POLITICAL CLIMATES

A deep contextual understanding of their countries – their political backdrops and realities, as well as their cultural histories and the state of mass media – was a core theme from these comedians, who understood that a deep appreciation for this level of political and social comprehension was key to making comedy that is both recognizable and funny.

CURRENT POLITICAL LANDSCAPES & COMPLEX HISTORIES

For each country, cultural translation and competence was key to the understanding of their political situations and the development of the creative work. All of the interviewees acknowledged the deeply complex and nuanced cultural, political and social histories of their countries, which need to be understood for the comedy to be accessible – and indeed, funny – for audiences. The Brazilian civil society group said it this way, although the quote is applicable to all three country contexts: “Brazil isn’t for beginners. Brazil is a super difficult country to understand.” In each country, the current political situations provided deep context for the creative projects and the source of the comedy. All three groups spoke centrally of recent political shifts and upcoming elections as a nucleus for contemplating the need for comedy as creative dissent. In short, the comedy requires a sophisticated grasp of cultural, political context and some dexterity and knowledge on the part of the comedians. In this way, briefings from civil society organizations can and do provide necessary expert-level knowledge of additional context.

COUNTRY OR REGIONAL EXAMPLES OF SIMILAR WORK

Both comedians and social justice groups served as sources of insight and inspiration for these comedy groups as they developed original comedy as creative dissent. Each comedy group cited

specific country or regional programs, and in some cases individual comedians, who served as leaders and role models in the area of comedy and social justice in their individual settings. The Brazilian group mentioned a television program called “Greg News” that they described as a Brazilian version of “Last Week Tonight with John Oliver.” They also made mention of Danilo Gentili, a well-known Brazilian stand-up comic. The Colombian group named the comedian Daniel Samper Ospina as a contemporary and spoke fondly of the satirical news site Actualidad Panamericana. And the Mexican group talked about the rich history of cabaret in Mexico City.

Civil society organizations, while facilitating serious work in each country to address political and civic issues, also are mindful of comedy that incorporates civic issues. The civil society organizations in each country, then, likewise provided examples of programs and individuals engaging in comedy and social justice work. For example, the Colombian civil society organization pointed out a hip-hop group called Casa Kolacho, which combines workshops, music training, and cultural tours in the city of Medellín. And the Mexican civil society organization mentioned

**“FOR THESE COMEDY
AND CIVIC JUSTICE GROUPS,
SPECIFIC MOMENTS OF
TRAGEDY FUELED OUTRAGE
THAT HELPED TO SPARK
AND INSPIRE THEIR
CREATIVITY.”**



Jesusa Rodriguez, a Mexican theater director and activist, and her wife, Liliana Felipe.

UNITED STATES AS A LEADER

When it comes to comedy role models – but specifically, “comedy as dissent” role models – the United States was a specific example cited by all of the comedy and social justice groups. All interviewees provided examples of programs and individual comedians from the United States who they considered leaders in comedy and social justice. Individuals included Jon Stewart, Stephen Colbert, and John Oliver. The Brazilian group explained about the United States, “You guys are really advanced in where humor has reached, the point it has reached, because you have an old tradition of humor.” The Colombian group remarked similarly: “The United States is really a pioneer in satirical religions,” and mentioned New York-based preacher and activist Reverend Billy and the Church of Stop Shopping as an inspiration to their work.

TRAGEDY AS COMEDY FUEL

For these comedy and civic justice groups, specific moments of tragedy fueled outrage that helped to spark and inspire their creativity. Nearly all of the interviews talked about a specific historical moment or person that had changed comedy and social justice in their country or shaped their project in a radical way. The Brazilian group brought up the death of Marielle Franco, a human rights activist and politician killed in early 2018. Both the Colombian comedy group, and the civil society organization in the country, included references to Jaime Garzón, a comedian and peace activist who was murdered in the late 1990s. The Mexican group also knew of Garzón and mentioned

him in one of their interviews. The Colombian comedy group said of him, “He taught an entire generation how to think, he made us wonder, he made us ask ourselves about the political situation in our country.” The Mexican group had a different historical moment that shaped their work. The September 2017 earthquake that struck Mexico drastically altered their project. The group explained, “our scenario changed a lot,” after the earthquake hit and ideas, and plans shifted as a result.

POLARIZED MEDIA ENVIRONMENTS

When news media environments feel closed or polarized, comedians feel their role is profound. In terms of the political and social context of the three projects, the final emergent theme was a shared perspective about polarized news media in the three countries. “Brazil is becoming, for some time now, very polarized and there is a divide,” said the Brazilian comedy group of the two sides of media in the country. The Colombian group had analogous thoughts and said of the mass media, “They’re completely distorted, both sides.” The Mexican group concurred and named specific national media stations with clear left and right political stances. That said, at the same time, the groups mentioned the need for humorous spaces for discourse – and the ways in which comedy lightened the political load. As one interviewee from Brazil said, “Politics has always had a reputation of being unfavorable to the people. The people don’t like politics, but they like comedy. They like humor.” From the perspective of the comedians, their work may provide a necessary, vital light to allow audience engagement, particularly when other avenues in serious media seem closed.



PART 2

THE CREATIVE PROCESS IN COMEDY AS CREATIVE DISSENT

A second core theme was the process of creating comedy as creative dissent – as well as the vital value of this cross-sector collaborative work between serious civil society organizations with comedians. The critical components of the process included: convening an initial kick-off meeting held in person; developing a practical, yet creative, understanding about an organic unfolding creative process; developing a delineation of the core team members and roles; understanding the importance of disagreement to ultimately create a funny product.

COLLABORATIVE CREATIVE MEETING WITH SOCIAL JUSTICE ORGANIZATIONS

In June 2017, in a creative strategy meeting in Chicago (coinciding with an event, Comedy for Change, at the Chicago Comedy Festival, with CMSI, Univision, and OSF, along with comedians and social justice groups from across the United States) the three participating comedy groups from each country were paired with civil society organizations from their countries. This served as a kick-off meeting to incubate a creative process for comedy development – but crucially, one that included subject-matter experts not there to restrain or correct the comedy ideas, but to provide context and helpful information.

During the day-long session, the civil society organizations provided deep insights about their work, as well as factual information and nuances about major civic and political issues, to the comedians. In essence, as subject-matter experts, the civil society leaders provided issue briefings to the comedians. All of the comedians described this collaborative, cross-sector session as a crucial, helpful germination of their eventual comedy projects. The Colombian comedy group explained, “I think at first, just as the project [was] proposed, when we were in Chicago and we didn’t know people, we didn’t know what we were doing, and we also didn’t know what we were going to make of everything... The project wasn’t structured, it was very difficult to make alliances, but I think little by little we have organically needed them.” This seemed to illuminate the particular value of such collaborations to the Colombian comedy group, who spoke of additional planned cross-sector collaborations unrelated to the current project. “We have come to understand how it works,” they said. “This is a very novel way of doing things.”

AN ITERATIVE CREATIVE PROCESS IS KEY

Over the series of interviews, each comedy group explained the steps taken to plan and implement their comedy projects. Each of these

“DISSENT IS NOT ONLY FOUND IN THE CREATIVE COMEDY MATERIAL, BUT IT MUST BE HONORED AS PART OF THE CREATIVE, STRATEGIC PROCESS OF BUILDING AND SHAPING THIS WORK, ACCORDING TO THESE COMEDIAN ACTIVISTS. THE MATERIAL IS NOT DEVELOPED IN A TIDY WAY, BUT IT NEEDS SPACE FOR DISAGREEMENT AND CREATIVE RESOLUTION.”

were portrayed as iterative, with adjustments made along the way. The process is a creative, artistic one, not necessarily the same as a strategic process engaged in research-based civil society organizations, and such a creative process needs an element of artistic freedom in the pacing and the ideas. In other words, none of the comedy projects were fully shaped and strategically built in the course of one tidy meeting or session, but instead unfolded over the course of several months. The Brazilian group used the term “organic” to describe their process. At their second interview, the Brazilian group said the project “depends on the day,” but that they were using a “structural approach” to the project. The Colombian group expressed a fondness for the format of the projects that provided an “impressive freedom.” This group explained that “a lot changed” from the beginning to the end of the project. Initially, they conceptualized the project in a grand way, but had to scale back because “as time overtook us, so did the investment.” Nevertheless, they explained, they made course corrections as needed to fulfill the same objectives, but in a realistic way. (As elucidated above, the earthquake in Mexico led to specific course adjustments for that project and only two interviews were conducted with this group.)

HOW COMEDY AS DISSENT TEAMS WORK

The Brazilian comedy group spent considerable time and thought developing and optimizing the makeup of their team, required expertise, and team roles and specific tasks carried out by each member of the group. This group explained, “Roberto does the text editing and Afonso is the person who looks for the images in the memes. He either finds them or produces them. Finally, the communications consultant assembles the newsletter and sends it to the entire database.” These roles were described as an essential way to draw on the strengths of each person – his or her background, education, and professional expertise. For instance, one team member had a journalism degree, while another had a background in comedy. A member of the corresponding Brazilian civil society organization said of the former group member, “It’s funny because personally, he is not hilarious. He’s not funny at all. But what he writes... [the interviewee laughs].” Interestingly, both the Brazilian and Colombian groups hired a specific person to handle social media, while the original group members focused on other tasks. In the third interview with the Brazilian group, an interviewee described how hiring this individual had turned out to be integral to the project’s success. Speaking of the individual, they explained, “She really did a good job. In two months, we got a thousand subscribers on Instagram.”

HISTORY OF KNOWING OR WORKING TOGETHER

Throughout the set of interviews, representatives from each of the three groups described how members of the comedy groups had existing personal or professional relationships prior to the projects. The Brazilian group explained, “We’ve known each other for some time, [but] we hadn’t worked together.” The Colombian group said, “We’ve been working together since 2012.” And one member of the Mexican group reflected, “We decided to form a civil association 13 years ago, right?” to which her colleague replied, “Yes, in 2005.”

IMPORTANCE OF DISAGREEMENT

Dissent is not only found in the creative comedy material, but it must be honored as part of the creative, strategic process of building and shaping this work, according to these comedian activists. In other words, the material is not developed in a tidy way, but it needs space for disagreement and creative resolution. A final finding from this thematic area came from the Brazilian comedy group. This group spoke at length about the importance of disagreement during the creative process. They called this “healthy disagreement” and illustrated its important role in the process. A group member provided the following as an example, “So, because Juana is more from the human rights part, and I’m from more of the animal rights part, and Afonso is more from the humor part, sometimes we have to get in agreement with the text that we’re going to publishing. Sometimes it’s too much human rights and we have to make Juana step a little bit back. Sometimes we have to step back so that it becomes more serious. But it has never... it has not been complicated.”

“CREATING THIS KIND OF COMEDY – COMEDY AS CREATIVE DISSENT IN RESPONSE TO CIVIC AND POLITICAL CONDITIONS IN LATIN AMERICAN COUNTRIES – BENEFITS GREATLY FROM CROSS-SECTOR COLLABORATIONS WITH CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS WHO CAN ACT AS SUBJECT-MATTER EXPERTS AND DISSEMINATORS.”



PART 3

POSITIVE DEVELOPMENTS & LEARNING

Learnings from the three comedy efforts emerged from both positive developments and challenges encountered along the way.

PARTNERING WITH EXISTING GROUPS

Creating this kind of comedy – comedy as creative dissent in response to civic and political conditions in Latin American countries – benefits greatly from cross-sector collaborations with civil society organizations who can act as subject-matter experts and resources for project dissemination. By far, the most common positive development named across the interviews was how partnerships were created with existing social justice organizations. The Brazilian group said, “So we got together with some organizations that we admire and are doing a great job.” And the Mexican group revealed that their process of establishing partnerships involved building rapport over a period of time, but that it was equally valuable. “We are in the process of allowing it to happen,” they described. “We aren’t asking anything of people yet. What we’re doing is sitting down with different organizations to see what is the most urgent... before asking them to participate in some way.”

SOCIAL MEDIA COMPONENTS

The tools of the digital era are key to dissemination of these projects and the feeling of collective efficacy on the part of these comedy groups; their work was not developed and distributed on major media outlets, but as grassroots forms of media engagement. Social media was central – a common positive development named by the Brazilian and Colombian comedy groups, although both teams explained that different platforms were more successful than others. By their second interview, the Brazilian group said, “we have some people commenting on Facebook” and, at the time, were planning to add an Instagram component. Similarly, at interview two, the Colombian group said of Facebook, “Right now, we must be at about 1,000 [followers]. Instagram is super slow, that’s at 200.”

DIFFUSION FROM FRIENDS AND PERSONAL NETWORKS LED TO GREATER REACH

Peer-to-peer sharing was key for the dissemination and distribution of these comedy works. A key positive development shared by the groups was how friends and personal networks shared initial outputs. For instance, the Brazilian group said of early memes, “We asked for friends to share the GIFs we produce, so we had many people sharing those GIFs.” In a similar vein, the Colombian group said of their live performances, “First, it’s the audience made up of people’s friends, the theater people, and then it starts to expand.” Of an early performance, they added, “Of the 100 people who were there yesterday, possibly 10 were complete strangers.”

As time went on, however, the projects caught on and the audiences expanded beyond friends and personal networks. The Colombian group described this rapid diffusion, “We had 300 followers on our social media networks who were our friends... three days later we had 900 followers.” By the third interview, the Colombian group had a dedicated following and recalled seeing faces of audience members they did not personally know at several of the planned religious events. Of this they laughed and said, “there’s things that we’ve planned and there’s things that have appeared miraculously.” This real-world observation from this project is rooted in communication theory of how ideas are spread and diffused throughout a community, particularly using mass media approaches. In other words, peer sharing and diffusion of ideas, a core characteristic of networked social movements in the digital era, is firmly at work in comedy as dissent.

PART 4

CHALLENGES

Challenges to creating comedy designed for creative political and civic dissent, meanwhile, spanned a wide array of hurdles – from financial to structural. In particular, deep thinking materialized as a challenge regarding how to make serious topics funny while participating countries reeled from somber national headlines.

BUDGET CHALLENGES

Making great comedy does require financial resources, and the creativity can be hampered by financial realities. The comedy groups mentioned several challenges, but the most common were responses that dealt with restrictions faced by the budgets for these projects. The Brazilian group said in the second interview of future plans, “depends on how much money we have,” and by the third interview said, “it’s [been] more expensive than we thought.” The Colombian group related to the same challenge, but described how they made changes along the way, “We hadn’t envisioned that level of investment either in time or in economic resources, right? So, little by little, we had to creatively make certain adjustments to how we were going to try to do things, to fulfill the same objectives, but in a different way.” Of the time required for this project, the Colombian group added, “If you could dedicate yourself to this full time you could assume these [financial] burdens, but we can’t dedicate ourselves full time to a project like this.”


MEDIA ENVIRONMENTS AS BACKDROP

Each group lamented the state of mass media and its control in their corresponding countries. The Brazilian civil society organization contextualized the situation in their country by talking about national media conglomerates. The Colombian comedy group likewise explained, “What is happening here in our country is the big media are companies that are owned by families that have strong ties with political powers,” a sentiment shared by their civil society organization counterpart. The Mexican group, meanwhile, shared their thoughts on the role of mass media and the government. “The State has a very clear agreement with the media, with the big media stations,” they explained.

SPARKING ENGAGEMENT WITH DISSENTERS

The comedy groups from Brazil and Colombia provided specific examples of how their respective projects were met with reactions and comments from dissenters, or people who disagreed with their viewpoints. During their third interview, the Brazilian group said of dissenting comments on social media, “Like right-wing people cursing us and that sort of stuff.” They added, however, “That’s cool, that’s what we wanted,” and, “It’s a sign that we’re being recognized.” They laughed about such comments and described these audience members as “good readers” of their newsletter. The Colombian group had a nearly identical

“CHALLENGES TO CREATING COMEDY DESIGNED FOR CREATIVE POLITICAL AND CIVIC DISSENT SPANNED A WIDE ARRAY OF HURDLES – FROM FINANCIAL TO STRUCTURAL. IN PARTICULAR, DEEP THINKING MATERIALIZED AS A CHALLENGE REGARDING HOW TO MAKE SERIOUS TOPICS FUNNY WHILE PARTICIPATING COUNTRIES REELED FROM SOMBER NATIONAL HEADLINES.”



reaction – that is, negative comments fueled their energy for the comedy project. One respondent said, “It’s really awesome because even the super offensive comments that exist on our social media, they cheer us up a lot. It’s like, ‘Yeah, we can do this,’” while a second respondent agreed and said the negative comments were, “exactly what we wanted.”

NEGOTIATING WHAT TO JOKE ABOUT

The comedy groups from Brazil and Colombia both shared the challenges of negotiating the humor regarding certain serious subjects. One group member, talking about violence against women, said, “I hate that, when we talk about it. I’m sorry, girls, but it’s horrible, I can’t joke about that.” Another respondent added, “Sometimes the topics are really sad and violent,” and, “It’s more challenging than I thought it would be.” The Brazilian civil society organization, explaining the difficulty of making jokes after the death of Marielle Franco cited above, explained, “Damn, if it was already hard to talk about human rights with humor, in this context, it’s 100 times more difficult,” and, “I feel a little ashamed trying to be funny in this moment, really.” The responses from the Colombian group provided a cultural context to this same challenge. “It’s a cannibal humor, it is a humor... it is a very crazy thing. I think Colombians laugh at these really mean things. It also happens in the theater and the big media. Our humor responds to a reality that is insane and cruel.”

In a similar vein, the comedy group from Brazil depicted a challenge regarding knowing whether or joke about something or whether to leave a

topic alone. This group told the interviewers this occurred on humorous issues about racial and ethnic groups different than their own, such as native Brazilians, for example. To address this they explained, “We have a network of people that, yeah, that can reach out to if needed.” But they added, “It’s easy to make a mistake.” This appeared to be a learning process, however, as they concluded, “It’s a challenge that really makes us grow, I think, because when you’re talking about issues that are not just your own, you have to understand other people.”

CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS: FIRST TIME WORKING WITH A COMEDY GROUP

The civil society organizations from Brazil and Colombia both had common descriptions regarding how this was the first time their organizations had partnered with comedy groups. The Brazilian civil society organization leader reflected, “From human rights for humor? I’ve never seen it.” This group further explained that comedy was but one new approach from a menu of alternative civic discourse approaches they were implementing across their organization, including photos, cartoons, and storytelling. Similarly, the Colombian civil society organization named other organizations in their country that had approached similar projects, but explained that this was new territory for their group. “We haven’t worked directly with comedy yet,” they said in their interview. The Colombian civil society organization leader, however, spoke of the value of artistic collaboration in forwarding their mission stating, “we believe that art and culture is part of the [change] process.”

PART 5

PERCEIVED OUTCOMES OF COMEDY AS CREATIVE DISSENT PROJECTS

The participants all shared similar ideas about how these projects might contribute to social change. The theme of critical consciousness was the big takeaway here, while additional outcomes seemed fuzzier and less clear.

CRITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS

Just how comedy and social justice projects work to engender social change was a topic of much discussion throughout the interviews among the comedy groups and their civil society partners. Overwhelmingly, the comedians and civil society groups agreed this type of cultural engagement work incites critical thinking and aims to bring about consciousness regarding social issues. The Brazilian civil society organization said of MemeNews, “I think that reading the news through a humorous lens can make people think a little more.” The comedy group in Brazil agreed, saying, “I think comedy, what it does is changes the axis of the view a little bit, so thing’s to look at it through a different angle.

The Colombian group said their work was designed, “[to] motivate people to imagine new potential worlds. And imagine other systems and ways of relating to politics. Because we think imagination is the first step, and if we can imagine a different system, we may be able to get it.” During a later interview, they added, “You’re planting many questions to the people.”

The Mexican group provided background about their current project, but also comedy cabaret work their company had conducted in the past. “We were born as a theater company, and basically what we were doing had to do with entertainment. But not just entertainment, because from the beginning of time, we were a cabaret company. And the cabaret is a genre of theater that responds to the social and political context of the moment. Meaning, we weren’t just an entertainment company, but also we were a company that specifically talked about problems and the national political context. And that gives a different tint to the entertainment, because what we wanted was to make people laugh, but at the same time create consciousness and produce collective reflection about what was happening in reality. That’s what the cabaret has that other genres of theater don’t.”

Finally, the Mexican civil society group provided the following explanation, “I always talk about hilari-ouch. So, it’s something that’s funny but ouch, that’s like pointing something out that you might have not seen it in that way before.” They also described satire as, “an amazing pedagogical tool in terms of teaching and critical thinking,” but added that comedy alone cannot change social justice. “It has to work in tandem with traditional media.”

EXPERIMENTAL OUTCOMES OF COMEDY WORK

Despite positive affirmations regarding consciousness-raising objectives, the groups described unclear expressions about additional impacts or outcomes of this work. The Brazilian civil society group explained, “This is a pilot project. For us it’s a pilot for using a tool. It’s not going to generate a change in the real world, nor does it propose to, but it’s going to generate a lot of learning about how to use a new language. The Brazilian comedy group agreed, saying, “I think it does [create] some change, but we can’t measure that.” The groups expressed the idea that the work may be meaningful over time, but it’s hard to be overtly proscriptive with what a creative art form like comedy is able to do in the short-term, particularly without adequate financial resources to articulate this kind of impact.

CONSEQUENCES OF PROJECTS

Although these projects were short-term, pilot comedy projects, there were at least two serious consequences of project-related activities. In Colombia, “They put two of our actors in jail for 12 hours,” for posting stickers on a supermarket. Although this was a short sentence and neither individual was harmed, this brings to light the gravity of the themes covered and the importance of safety and security. In Mexico, the comedy group experienced censorship for the first time as a result of project activities. “Now they have censored us,” they explained. “They took us down from a show in the main square of the city for saying things about the head of the government. That had never happened to us.”

STRATEGIC HIGHLIGHTS & FUTURE EFFORTS

Through this experience, creative comedic activists were afforded an opportunity to intentionally create comedy designed for public engagement in political, civil and social issues, using their artistic sensibilities to create works designed to provoke and perhaps motivate people. Future works should endeavor to include systematic tracking and evaluation to understand the influence of this work, but a first step – as illustrated in this report – is understanding the creative process. Based on the perspectives of the comedy professionals in the three groups profiled here – from Brazil, Colombia, and Mexico – we can see the promise of deeper engagement and investment in comedy as creative dissent. The creative process alone, the focus of this report, points to strategic highlights and learnings that can and should be applied to next iterations of these kinds of works. Although the entire report serves as a set of learnings and recommendations, we highlight a few salient points here:

➤ **CROSS-SECTOR COLLABORATION LEADS TO NEW IDEAS.**

Comedians and serious civil society organizations, including human rights and other NGOs, are not usual collaborators. Their work styles are different, as are their modes of doing business. However, when it comes to voices of dissent in the face of oppression, injustice, and corruption, they are allies. Cross-sector collaboration to inspire new comedy requires trust and space between both, and indeed, a facilitated meeting opportunity offers a chance for learning and new works to be created. This should be approached openly, however, providing both comedians and civil society groups the opportunities to share their distinct expertise, rather than thinking of comedians merely as “hired entertainment” or brought in simply to make a didactic message less boring. Collaboration requires equity in the approach.

➤ **FINANCIAL SUPPORT IS KEY.**

Creating original comedy work, and then disseminating it with a broad reach, requires a serious allocation of financial resources. With adequate funding, philanthropic organizations will have a better opportunity to learn about the power and potential and reach of comedy focused on serious social justice topics. Reach is as important as the creation of the work, and financial resources are crucial.

➤ **PEER-SHARING IS A SOURCE OF LEGITIMACY AND KEY FOR DISSEMINATION OUTSIDE MAINSTREAM MEDIA OUTLETS.**

Comedy may play an even more important role for public engagement and grassroots dissemination when media systems are seen as closed or oppressive. In that regard, a strong investment of mental and financial resources will be important in digital and social media strategy for outreach. It's worth noting, then, that comedians themselves may not be the same professionals to also conceive of the appropriate digital dissemination strategy that is crucial for the work to spread. As philanthropic foundations and social justice organizations consider engaging in comedy as public engagement strategy for serious issues, it will be equally important to strategically architect the appropriate outreach campaigns, including strategic partnerships and alliances to share the work, peer by peer.

➤ **RISKS ARE REAL AND NEED TO BE CONTEMPLATED.**

Particularly in country environments with oppressive government structures and media systems, risks of safety and security – particularly when comedians maintain public profiles – should be contemplated and planned for in the early and iterative part of any process that creates comedy as creative dissent.

➤ **THE CREATIVE PROCESS WITH COMEDY IS ITERATIVE AND MESSY (AND THAT'S OK).**

The creative process for creating comedy is not the same as strategic planning or communication work, necessarily. It is a cultural, artistic process and product, not necessarily synonymous with the message-development work of formal strategic communication. It involves time, space, and the opportunity to try out ideas that may not work. NGOs, civil society groups and foundations that endeavor to incubate cross-sector work between comedians and human rights organizations should respect this creative, messy process and allow time and freedom for the right – and hilarious – ideas to come to the fore. After all, if the comedy is not funny, and merely less didactic versions of the same kind of messaging, then the effort will not effectively use the best of comedy's perspective, attention-grabbing qualities. Comedy has special qualities for social justice efforts, and the process for creating it is as important as the outcomes of the work.

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