

Offending None, Entertaining None: Acceptable Humor in After-Dinner Speaking

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Witnessing a truly funny after-dinner speech is a rare occurrence. The creation and use of humor can be seen as a finely-defined tightrope the speaker must walk, one side being offensive humor; the other being humor that draws blank stares. In fact, several researchers including Richardson (1999) and Hall (1999) have noted the extreme lack of creativity, originality, and—more to the point—laughter within after-dinner speaking rounds. After-dinner speeches aren't as funny as they used to be and the primary reason appears to be the fear of potentially intolerable or offensive humor. Students and coaches fear receiving last in a round because of one joke deemed "over the line." Thus, rarely does a student even come close to "the line" in an after-dinner speech. It appears that the only way to get students to try edgier, original humor is to redefine what judges see "the line" as being. For the purposes of this study, what judges do or do not tolerate will be used to determine what is or is not found to be offensive by the majority of the judging population. Through determining how judges define their line of tolerance, the study not only can allow students and coaches the chance to see what the forensics community deems unacceptable, but can also be used to show these same participants what still is considered within the realm of appropriate after-dinner speaking humor. Hopefully, defining the line of offensiveness can help students to construct speeches in a more free way, conducive to creativity and fun in an event clearly designed for both.

Humor Research

Young and Frye (1966) note that "laughter is one of a few universal forms of emotional expression" but that it has rarely been addressed in communication literature. Over three decades later, the research has improved, but still is sparse when compared to the importance of analyzing humor. O'Connell (1960) was the first to categorize and define three broad humor genres: humor, wit, and nonsense. Young and Frye (1966) added a fourth dimension: sex humor. The researchers found marked differences between the way a group responded to sexual humor as compared to the other three genres.

This finding prompted many researchers to analyze the influences of other

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genres of humor. Cantor (1976) and Chapman & Gadfield (1976) addressed sexist humor; LaFave & Mannell (1976) studied ethnic humor; Suls (1977) looked at disparaging forms of humor. Clearly, a wide array of humor forms and influences were developing. Priest (1966) even analyzed political humor, finding that people's perceptions of jokes about Barry Goldwater and Lyndon Johnson ranged greatly depending on their political vantage point. Categories of humor were deconstructed into smaller categories, with Winick (1976) using eighteen genres of humor for his analysis. Winick noted that while sexual and ethnic humor dominated culture, many other forms of humor were emerging. A quarter-century later, these forms of humor have been sub-divided into even more distinct categories. More topics have become subject to jokes that were considered off-limits previously. The result is that while humor is designed to skewer societal norms, more humor is found to offend and demoralize culture. The need to analyze offensiveness ratings of humor forms has never been more needed.

Standards and Assessment

In determining the formula for acceptable after-dinner humor, one must first understand the struggle to define a formula for after-dinner speaking as a whole. No individual event struggles for definition in the same manner as after-dinner speaking. The ideal balance between research and humor has been the discussion of debate for years. Andrews, Andrews, and Williams (1999) indicate that the purposes of after-dinner speaking should be to stimulate enjoyment, use humor effectively, deliver in an engaging style, and convey a meaningful message. However, anyone within the forensic community can notice that the after-dinner speaking textbook and competitive definitions are indelibly different. Scholars have attempted to find a representative criteria for after-dinner speaking (Swanson & Zeuschner, 1983; Mills, 1984; Dreibelbis & Redmon, 1987; Hanson, 1988; Holm, 1993; Billings, 1997). The studies offered insight into the variables judges claim to employ when judging a competitive after-dinner speech, yet underscored the problem inherent in contemporary after-dinner speaking: the evaluation criteria judges use for after-dinner speaking is more inconsistent than the criteria for any other individual event. Students have countered this problem by trying to be all things to all people; the prospect of such an achievement is nearly impossible.

Within the attempt to fulfill increasingly broadened judging criteria, after-dinner speeches have suffered in many ways—none more than humor. In a pair of papers exacting the problems with being funny in an after-dinner speech, Richardson (1999) and Hall (1999) argued that the implied after-dinner success formula was too stringent and placed humor and originality low on a relative scale of importance. Richardson (1999) writes that after-dinner speaking should offer creativity that no other event can match:

It is forensics outside the box, ideally. Unfortunately, current trends in the event threaten to stifle the very creativity that makes after-dinner unique. Narrow judging paradigms and paint-by-number, cookie cutter approaches reward imitation over imagination. Forensic convention is forcing ADS inside the box. (p. 1)

Also noting humor-related problems in after-dinner speaking, Hall (1999) notes that irony and other more subtle forms of humor are undervalued. Writes Hall:

Although we vehemently deny that after-dinner speaking resembles stand-up comedy, we do little to encourage the distinction. We call it whatever we want to ... but the only real difference between this year's national ADS champion and Denis Leary is that one uses biting, driven humor and one cites the *Wall Street Journal*, (p. 1)

Clearly, part of the reduced humor in after-dinner speeches can be attributed to an increasingly sensitive public, monitoring what is or is not acceptable humor. The age of political correctness alters the way students construct speeches, opting for safe humor over edgy humor, impeding creativity and the no-holds-barred nature of humor itself. As Richardson (1999) argues, "We don't necessarily tell the same jokes year after year. We tell the same kind of jokes" (p. 6).

Pinpointing what goes into a model after-dinner speech has been the focus of scholars for years. Many researchers have made attempts to ascertain so-called after-dinner speaking "formula." Mills (1984) notes content and style as the main categories of judging criteria that should be employed. The fact that Anderson and Martin (1983) argue that the implied definition of competitive after-dinner speaking was a speech that makes a humorous point implies that the overall purpose of the speech should be persuasive in nature. Yet, these scholars differed as to what the added criteria should be for the ideal after-dinner speech.

Billings (1997) conducted the most recent survey of attitudes regarding after-dinner speaking. Using the responses from 115 coaches and students, Billings noted several important findings. First, humor and research were found to be almost equally important in constructing the proper after-dinner speech balance. Thirty-five percent of all students and coaches surveyed noted humor is the most important element for success; 28% argued that research is more important; 37% argued they are equally important. Additionally, Billings found that overdone topics were a significant concern of 96% of all respondents. The study also found students particularly concerned with the lack of uniform judging criteria; 35% of all students surveyed listed it as the biggest problem facing after-dinner speaking. Billings concluded that attention should be paid to noting the difference between a set of event *criteria* and a judges' *formula* for a successful speech, arguing that the guideline of "a speech that makes a point through the use of humor" should be a common criteria, but that judges should abstain from invoking their own success formulas on each after-dinner speaking contestant. Writes Billings:

One of the strengths of after-dinner speaking is its lack of a "success formula." A final round can witness a speech with two sources followed by a speech with twenty. Speeches can employ different types of humor, from slapstick to deadpan. While preferences for certain humor formats will always be a matter of taste, this diversity makes the event stronger, (p. 48).

Research Questions

Thomas (1980) argued that forensics should serve as a laboratory for the study of real-world communicative settings. Thus, the study of potential offensiveness of humor forms has special significance beyond the realm of individual event competitions. Using the forensics as laboratory paradigm, humor that is found to be offensive or intolerable could apply not only to forensics, but also to many realms of society.

Still, most noted by the large majority of after-dinner speaking researchers is the problem with the lack of studies that address issues pertaining to the event. Because scholars have never attempted to rate potential offensiveness on a semantic differential continuum, the results of the study could not be hypothesized. Instead, three over-arching research questions were formulated:

RQ1: What genres of humor are not tolerated in after-dinner speaking?

RQ2: What genres of humor are moderately tolerated in after-dinner speaking?

RQ3: What genres of humor are generally tolerated in after-dinner speaking?

Method

Focus groups were used to determine forms of humor potentially judged to be intolerable by segments of the forensics judging community. Three groups of four identified humor genres used in after-dinner speaking. Each group consisted of one forensics coach and three individual event competitors. These groups then narrowed the list of humor genres by determining which forms of humor fit most closely with questions of potential offensiveness. Based on the findings of these groups, a total of 16 humor genres were deemed to be valid areas for measurement of potential offensiveness. All sixteen items were placed into semantic differential format, with the sentence: "I would say that, on the whole, I am tolerant of _____ humor in after-dinner speeches." Semantic scales ranged from (1) agree (tolerant), to (7) disagree (not tolerant). Respondents were also asked to indicate what form of humor was the most offensive to them, as well as any forms of humor they perceived as offensive that were not mentioned within the sixteen items. Judges were also asked to indicate how many tournaments they judge per year, in order to evaluate how experienced the respondents were in answering these questions. A full list of survey items can be found in Appendix A.

Surveys were distributed to judges at three prominent individual events tournaments in the Fall of 1999. After surveys were completed, results were calculated using SPSS for Windows 9.0 (1999). The final two items concerning the most offensive genre of humor and unmentioned offensive humor were coded using a single researcher and a second researcher was used for determining inter-coder reliability. Using Holsti's (1969) formula, intercoder reliability exceeded 99 percent.

Results

A total of 71 surveys were completed by judges and coaches at three indi-

vidual events tournaments in different regions of the country. The respondents were composed largely of experienced, seasoned judges with the average respondent judging 6.3 tournaments per year. The gender of the respondents slanted toward men (48/67%) and toward Caucasians (58/82%). Seven of the respondents indicated they were African-American; three self-identified as Hispanic; three more indicated Asian descent. Respondents were asked to rate their tolerance of a given after-dinner speaking humor genre on a seven-point semantic differential scale. Table 1 indicates the overall means and standard deviations derived from the humor tolerance scales.

Table 1: Overall Means of Humor-Genre Tolerance Scales

Humor Genre	Mean	Standard Deviation
Age	2.87	1.81
Audience members	3.67	2.42
Diseases/Disorders	4.26	1.61
Forensic-related	2.81	1.95
Gender	4.24	2.09
Homophobic	4.61	2.10
Mentally Handicapped	5.09	1.96
Physically Handicapped	5.05	2.08
Political	1.98	1.23
Profanity	3.99	1.87
Racist	4.87	2.04
Religious	3.36	1.81
Sexually Explicit	3.85	2.11
Slapstick	3.09	2.00
Tangential (Off-topic)	3.77	1.74
Violence	4.38	1.65
1.0 = Highly Tolerant		
7.0 = Not Tolerant		

Table 1 indicates large differences between humor type and evaluator tolerance. Research question #1 pertained to forms of humor that are not tolerated in after-dinner speeches. Because 4.00 was a statistical center for the items, any averages of 4.01 or higher were deemed intolerable to a significant segment of judges. Seven of the sixteen items fell into this category, with two scoring above a 5.00 (humor pertaining to mental and physical handicaps). Other humor types that were generally not tolerated included racist humor (4.87), homophobic humor (4.61), violence (4.38), humor dealing with disorders such as Alzheimer's and Epilepsy (4.26) and sexist humor (4.24). Basically, most major forms of identity-related humor (gender, race, sexual orientation) were deemed intolerable for forensic competition.

Research question #2 pertained to moderately tolerable humor (humor that lies on the fine line between offensive and acceptable). Six items with means between 3.00 and 4.00 fell into this category, including profanity (3.99), sexually explicit humor (3.85), tangential humor (3.77), the ostracizing of audience members (3.67), religious humor (3.36), and slapstick humor (3.09). Interestingly, pro-

fane and sexually explicit humor fell into this second category rather than the first, and religion (a primary form of identity for many Americans) did not yield nearly as high a mean as other forms of self-identification.

The final research question pertained to fairly acceptable forms of humor (yielding a mean of 1.00-2.99). Only three items were viewed as being generally tolerable: age humor (2.87), forensic humor (2.81), and political humor (1.98). The lack of more items in this category speaks volumes about the minefield of potential offensiveness that after-dinner speaking has become. The fact that the identity-related "age" item yielded such a low mean also was interesting, as all other forms of identity-humor were much less tolerated. Moreover, the extremely high standard deviations (all but one were 1.60 or higher) indicates that large discrepancies exist within judging criteria, confirming the student-based notion that in the age of political correctness, even the most menial forms of humor can potentially offend.

Regarding the two open-ended questions, responses did have common characteristics. The first question asked respondents what form of humor they find most offensive. In correlation with the tolerance scales, humor about physical and mental handicaps, often listed as a pairing rather than listed separately, were most-mentioned (20 mentions). Yet, more interesting was the second most listed genre: humor making fun of audience members (11 mentions). Despite being the eleventh least tolerated form of humor, it was listed as the second most offensive. The fact that this humor format yielded the largest standard deviation (2.42) indicated that this is the form of humor in which judges are most divided when assessing acceptability.

Several subjects also noted the same integral difference in whether a form of humor is offensive or not: the speaker's in-group or out-group status. Respondents indicated that if the person was telling jokes about a social, cultural, or identity group that he or she was a part of, they are much more tolerant of the humor. For instance, an African-American could use more racial humor without being judged as offensive; a person in a wheelchair could tell jokes pertaining to the physically handicapped that no one else could say.

The second open-ended question pertained to other areas of humor that the respondent did not tolerate. The most common response for this item was humor which involved the acting out of characters. A significant segment of after-dinner speakers rely on character pops, impressions, and bits as their chief source of humor. Respondents indicated that this type of humor was uncalled for in the majority of situations. One judge wrote that "Character pops in after-dinner speaking make the speech less of a speech. Many argue that ADS is not applicable outside of the forensic community. Why? Character pops. The outside public expects to see a speech, not an impressionist." Clearly, while the use of characters in ADS was not noted as offensive by anyone, it is a form of humor in which many judges have a low tolerance.

Discussion

Several important findings can be extrapolated from the data. First, the re-

suits indicate some significant problems with the acceptability of a large segment of humor formats. Thirteen forms of humor yielded scores of 3.00 or higher. While an average below 4.00 indicates that a humor-type leans toward the acceptable side of the scale, any form of humor that is viewed as intolerable, unacceptable, or offensive to even a minor segment of the judging community results in students dropping a joke from the speech because of these potential problems. While this could be viewed as being sensitive to cultural and moral issues, this lack of tolerance could more aptly be characterized as over-sensitivity. With so many forms of humor being viewed as intolerable or only moderately tolerable, the judging community need not be surprised when pun and imitation-filled speeches filter into national final rounds. Granted, some forms of humor such as racism or jokes about the mentally and physically handicapped should never be tolerated—and in this author's view should have yielded much higher ratings of intolerance. However, when all forms of humor except political, age-related, and forensic are viewed as forbidden, even highly-successful professional comedians would have a difficult time writing humorous material.

Yet another interesting finding is that humor pertaining to the ostracization of fellow audience members was tolerated more than ten other genres, yet were deemed the second most offensive genre in the open-ended question. The fact that these two forms of humor can be seen as most offensive yet not be listed as least tolerated indicates the importance of noting the semantic shift from the word "tolerant" to the term "offensive." A judge may not be tolerant of a particular form of humor, yet this lack of tolerance is not always because the judge was offended. Several forms of humor, including profanity and off-topic humor, were tolerated less than humor at the expense of an audience member. Still, none of these forms were listed as being "most offensive." Future research should take further steps to decipher what humor is merely disliked and what humor truly offends.

A final avenue for future research involves developing an even more detailed measure for assessing humor in after-dinner speeches. While this study measures what judges tolerate, future measures should assess what judges find offensive, or, better yet, what forms of humor judges generally find to be funny. This measure should also include additional forms of humor which were not listed in the survey for this study, including the use of character pops, visual aids, puns, and improvised humor. Most specifically, an ethos-based analysis of after-dinner speaking humor is warranted. Several respondents indicated that if a speaker were a part of an "in" group, they could tell edgier jokes without the risk of offense. Yet another noted that a joke that works for one person might not work for another. It appears that some speakers can "get away" with more concerning humor genres and potential offensiveness. Future research should analyze the aspects of credibility that allow or disallow certain forms of humor for certain speakers.

Conclusion

After-dinner speaking is creative, fun, original, popular, and (on rare occasion) moving in a way no other event can be. However, as the event enters the 21st Century, the humor and creativity have been stifled by the implementation of po-

litical correctness and implicit formulas for ADS success. After-dinner speaking does have a responsibility to the "thought police" to discern what is decent and what truly offends. However, when so many forms of humor become potential pitfalls that drop students to the bottom of a round, entertainment becomes a secondary function of after-dinner speaking—a prospect that should never come to fruition.

On the largest scale, these findings outline important guidelines for communication researchers interested in studying offensiveness of everyday humor. Using forensics as a laboratory for society, one could plausibly assume that these same attitudes toward humor formats occur in comedy clubs, workplace environments, and classrooms as well. In doing such, the findings of this study not only inform us about which topics are acceptable in speech competitions, but also give (at the very least) broad guidelines to acceptable humor in all forms of American society.

Specifically within the realm of individual event competition, this study should allow students to ascertain which forms of humor they can use and which forms should likely be avoided. Coaches can use these results to guide students as well. However, the primary way in which entertainment can be injected back into ADS lies with the judges. If judges choose to reward risks and serve as evaluators rather than censors, the laughs from an after-dinner speaking round can once again be audible.

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Appendix A

- 1.) I would say that, on the whole, I am tolerant of religious humor in after-dinner speeches.
 AGREE :__ : __: __: __: __: __: __: : DISAGREE
- 2.) I would say that, on the whole, I am tolerant of racist humor in after-dinner speeches.
 AGREE :__ : __: __: __: __: __: __: : DISAGREE
- 3.) I would say that, on the whole, I am tolerant of political humor in after-dinner speeches.
 AGREE :__ : __: __: __: __: __: __: : DISAGREE
- 4.) I would say that, on the whole, I am tolerant of sexually explicit humor in after-dinner speeches.
 AGREE :__ : __: __: __: __: __: __: : DISAGREE
- 5.) I would say that, on the whole, I am tolerant of forensic humor in after-dinner speeches.
 AGREE :__ : __: __: __: __: __: __: : DISAGREE
- 6.) I would say that, on the whole, I am tolerant of humor that disparages men or women in after-dinner speeches.
 AGREE :__ : __: __: __: __: __: __: : DISAGREE
- 7.) I would say that, on the whole, I am tolerant of slapstick humor in after-dinner speeches.
 AGREE :__ : __: __: __: __: __: __: : DISAGREE
- 8.) I would say that, on the whole, I am tolerant humor pertaining to violent acts in after-dinner speeches.
 AGREE :__ : __: __: __: __: __: __: : DISAGREE
- 9.) I would say that, on the whole, I am tolerant of humor using obscene or profane language in after-dinner speeches.
 AGREE :__ : __: __: __: __: __: __: : DISAGREE
- 10.) I would say that, on the whole, I am tolerant of homophobic humor in after-dinner speeches.
 AGREE :__ : __: __: __: __: __: __: : DISAGREE
- 11.) I would say that, on the whole, I am tolerant of humor pertaining to the mentally handicapped in after-dinner speeches.
 AGREE :__ : __: __: __: __: __: __: : DISAGREE
- 12.) I would say that, on the whole, I am tolerant of humor pertaining to the physically handicapped in after-dinner speeches.
 AGREE :__ : __: __: __: __: __: __: : DISAGREE
- 13.) I would say that, on the whole, I am tolerant of humor pertaining to diseases/ disorders such as Alzheimer's or Epilepsy or in after-dinner speeches.
 AGREE :__ : __: __: __: __: __: __: : DISAGREE
- 14.) I would say that, on the whole, I am tolerant of humor pertaining to age in after-dinner speeches.
 AGREE :__ : __: __: __: __: __: __: : DISAGREE
- 15.) I would say that, on the whole, I am tolerant of off-topic (tangential) humor in after-dinner speeches.
 AGREE :__ : __: __: __: __: __: __: : DISAGREE
- 16.) I would say that, on the whole, I am tolerant of humor that makes fun of audience members/fellow contestants in after-dinner speeches.
 AGREE :__ : __: __: __: __: __: __: : DISAGREE
- 17.) Of all the forms of humor listed above, I feel the most offensive type of humor is:
- 18.) Are there any other types of humor in after-dinner speeches that you tend not to tolerate?