

Abstract:

Freedom of speech, a principle that supports autonomy without the fear of retaliation or censorship, gains a lot of attention across the world. Ricky Gervais, a controversial observational comedian, uses social media to fight for this right through self-promotion and encouraging dialogue around contentious subject matters. This paper delves into the strategy behind Gervais's self-presentation online and his use of Twitter's affordances. Gervais takes use of the short character restriction to highlight controversial comments and jokes, meticulously structuring them with his deliberate self-presentation for maximum effect, resulting in debate and diffusion among the networked audience, advocating, provoking thought and generating conversations.

Comedian, actor, producer, and writer, Ricky Gervais, is renowned for shocking audiences with his jokes and views on a number of controversial issues. Gervais not only uses his public persona for fame he also uses it to form dialogue around taboo subjects and advocate for matters that are close to his heart such as animal rights. He is an ardent user of the social networking platform, Twitter, and has used it successfully to raise awareness for animal cruelty, dog adoption, and the international dog meat trade amongst others. Pushing the envelope of political correctness and social acceptance forms a large part of his comedy and Gervais uses Twitter to extend his reach and initiate topical conversations. Twitter's limited character allowance results in straight-to-the-point content that is sharp and concise, yet open to interpretation due to its large and diverse audience. Ricky Gervais uses Twitter to expose controversial subjects by performing strategic self-presentation and utilising the platform's affordances to provoke thought and create discussion amongst a networked audience.

Twitter is a public platform and Ricky Gervais uses it as a tool to encourage conversation leveraging on its networked audience. Marwick and boyd (2010) argue that unlike the writer's audience and the broadcast audience, networked audiences are connected not just to the content provider but to each other too. This connectedness provides an opportunity for discussion on the topic as well as offering differing opinions. Gervais has been on Twitter since 2009 (Gervais, n.d) and with 13 years of moderating debate and critiques on the platform, it would be feasible to say that Gervais's tweet "Twitter: Where people come to argue with jokes"

(Gervais, 2020a) came from his experience from his previously tweeted jokes, as well as potential bait for further discussion. Interestingly, Gervais's stand-up material over the years has included criticism of Twitter and social media in general, yet he tweets and likes things daily on the platform. Gervais has previously stated in an interview with *The Guardian* that "Twitter enables narcissism because it allows people to put in print and to publish alongside scientists and politicians their deeply held opinion" (Hattenstone, 2021). To be able to include criticism of social networking sites within his material it is imperative for him to be well versed and ready to defend his position. Participating on the very platform that you detest demonstrates that Gervais is willing to be amongst the discussion in order to relate to his audience. Twitter users do not have the ability to know who their prospective audience are, due to the content being consumed and shared in a variety of ways (Marwick & boyd, 2010). Control is taken from the user however the ability to engage in its' participatory culture gives Gervais the opportunity to defend his jokes by supporting his original statement. Twitter combines numerous audiences into a singular audience via "context-collapse" forcing users to imagine their audience (Marwick & boyd, 2010): "I don't know you. My tweets aren't to you. I don't know if you read them. So don't take them personally. If you do, you're a dopey gorp." (Gervais, 2012). Gervais utilizes his networked audience to create discussion surrounding offensive topics by relating to the audience with truthful, yet controversial, statements and responses to form validity.

Ricky Gervais performs strategic self-presentation in the form of authenticity. New technologies and the enablement of social connections have evolved together with people's routines, expectations, and social norms (Ellison & Boyd, 2013, p. 153). Gervais's use of Twitter exposes his behaviours, knowledge, preferences, and communication network connections in a public space (Treem & Leonardi 2012, as cited in Siegert, Caicedo, & Hansson, 2020, p. 2) which gives his identity a sense of transparency and consequently a sense of authenticity. Gervais told *The Hollywood Reporter* that "Real life is obviously the biggest influence on me" and "I think that resonates more" (Howard, 2015) this demonstrates his desire to achieve validity which marks his content as more relatable and in turn shareable by each user. As an observational comedian, it is his job to build a relationship with his audience and Twitter assists in giving them an insight into his personal values and morals. His responses to tweets as part of the participatory culture of Twitter furthermore build upon the feeling that users are dealing with a real person, and the crudeness and raw nature of some of those responses would be difficult to dispute that they are

from anyone but Ricky Gervais himself. Rui and Stefanone (2012) suggest that individuals are compelled to provide more information as the network grows in size and diversity, in order to preserve these interactions. Gervais's personal branding is a result of his social interaction via digital media but as Papacharissi notes, this can lead to a blurring of personal and professional identities (2011). "An individual's effort to act and behave in a way that influences how an audience sees him/her, usually with the intent to create, present, and maintain a favourable image in a social situation for a particular purpose" (Goffman, 1959) is evident in Gervais's self-presentation. However, it is clear through the shock-value content that Gervais sends out on Twitter that he does not aspire to a favourable image, just an accurate image. Uncovering a person's social capital is an affordance of Twitter (Siegert et.al, 2020), it makes not just who is participating in the discussion visible to all users, but the discussions too. Ricky Gervais manages his presentation on a public platform using cringe humour, guarding his jokes with facts in order to obtain relatability.

Ricky Gervais performs strategic self-presentation online with shock-value comments to connect with his audience. Gervais is known for his provocative statements and for pushing the boundaries on social norms and political correctness with his cringe comedy (Mayer, Paulus & Krach, 2021). Cringe comedy acts "as a kind of "release valve" to intervene into more or less stable systems of social norms" (Kotsko, 2010 as cited by Mayer, et al., 2021, p. 11) and Gervais manages to challenge these social norms further with the use of concise stand-alone messages on Twitter. For example, his recent tweet on the controversy surrounding actor, Will Smith and the slapping of host, Chris Rock, at the 2022 Academy Awards ceremony challenges the social norm of holding celebrities in high regard. Gervais wrote "Dear TV and film stars, why are some of you so f*****g weird? You're actors. Some of you, great actors. So just act normal. Simple." (Gervais, 2022). Gervais is not only a comedian but also a television and film actor too, yet he manages to set himself aside from this cohort with this comment, whilst also riding on the back of a highly trending topic on Twitter. Similar tweets such as "I can't wait to hear all your inspirational speeches about equality, and it's great that the 3 hours you're here tonight is the only time your badly paid migrant house staff will get some time off to sleep this week" (Gervais, 2020) again ridicules celebrities and affluent Westerners, which Gervais works to strategically set himself apart from through the use of the two-way communicative nature of Twitter. "Social network site profiles are co-constructed" (Ellison & Boyd, 2013) and with the

ability to respond and defend his position, Gervais seems to achieve an 'us versus them' style persona online. If interactions with one another shape our identity (Goffman, 1959), then it could be hypothesised that Ricky Gervais's regular use of a public platform like Twitter is representative of his endorsement for freedom of speech and his value in the user to assist in spreading his controversial messages or jokes. On the contrary, Thai et al. (2019) found that disparagement comedy is more appropriate if the comedian is seen as a member of the minority group being insulted (cited by Mayer, et al., 2021). Perhaps his ethos is not "us versus them" but in fact "you versus them/us". Gervais is famous for targeting Hollywood stars and wealthy socialites, but he does not refute that he is also one of them. In response to a tweet from Cameron Rehborn (2016) asking Ricky how he felt about the American Office being way better than the British version, Gervais tweeted a single word: "rich" (Gervais, 2016). It is apparent that for Gervais the punchline is not always in his own tweets but also in the conversation that results.

The short, brief character limit of the micro-blogging platform Twitter lends itself to Gervais's sharp remarks and serve as a punchline for his tweets. As professional stand-up comedians, performers are required to write hours of material creating stories and context around the jokes to maximise relatability and increase a single statement's comedy value. Twitter accommodates real-time user exchange in short messages which allows Gervais to almost 'drop a bomb' or controversial comment as a tweet and sit back and let the networked audience respond, discuss and share the comment further. The spread of that single comment, or joke, by retweeting - a practice that allows Twitter users to share another user's content through their own account - introduces the content to new audiences and also validates and engages with others (boyd, Golder, Lotan, 2010). A single statement lacking context can further inflate the remark potentially making it offensive or more controversial, and due to its visibility and invisibility (Siegert, Caicedo, & Hansson, 2020) is open to interpretation by the audience. Strong views can be expressed effectively on Twitter due to its text length restrictions which enables the use of innovative language such as sarcasm and irony (Ghosh, et al., 2015, as cited in Sykora, Elayan, & Jackson 2020). Gervais often uses sarcasm, with or without an image, to push his point across in his controversial animal rights tweets as seen in his tweet in 2015 about him eating tofu for dinner (Gervais, 2015) where he mocks people who eat meat. Twitter's concision of messages is

particularly useful for jokes and sarcasm, stimulating an emotional reaction that can have a compounding effect when shared across a network.

Ricky Gervais has been shocking audiences with his stand-up comedy and on-screen performances for years and Twitter provides an extension to that reach. Connecting individuals with various audiences, either independently or simultaneously, is an affordance of technology (Papacharissi, 2011) which Gervais capitalises upon. Social networks “are themselves capable of not only changing social relations, but creating new ones” (Delanty, 2018, p208), and whilst Twitter provides a third place for Gervais to interact with his existing audience base, it also offers the opportunity to build upon it. Given Gervais’s following on Twitter is substantial, at 14.7 million followers (Gervais, n.d.), there lies an opportunity to reach a wider number of present and potential users through his online interactions (Papacharissi, 2011). This further reach paired with Siegert et. al (2020) suggestion that the greater an account's following, the more valuable its mentions or retweets become, arms Gervais with an even larger audience to create discussion around controversial subject matters. Delanty (2018) claims that a “new intimacy” interwoven with subjectivity and politics is formed when individuals are brought together in a sociality. In pre-internet days intimacy would have less reach due to lower member numbers, however social media and the new intimacy of the internet brings exponential growth, linking users through a commonality such as animal welfare, atheism, or prejudism. Retweeting expands Gervais’s message to a wider group of people, including fellow influencers, by connecting “people’s previously disparate social groups” (Rui & Stefanone, 2013, p. 1287) and inspiring “users to broadcast messages across their entire online networks” (Rui & Stefanone, 2013 p. 1287). Addressing contentious issues can be confronting in a face-to-face setting, yet in a public online space such as Twitter, it can be problematic.

Ricky Gervais has a sizable fan base outside of the digital space as well as a vast following online. The popular social networking platform, Twitter, comprises of a large diverse audience where intentions can be misconstrued and sentiment questioned – this notion could be seen as a flaw however, in Gervais’s tweets it becomes a point of conversation, exposing ideas and positing them up for discussion. A key attribute of the platform is its succinct character limit and Gervais uses this to highlight controversial statements and jokes, carefully crafting them alongside his

considered self-presentation to achieve maximum impact resulting in dialogue and distribution through the networked audience.

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