Does humor on the Internet mold political thinking?

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Jokes are not merely a source of popular enjoyment and creativity; they also provide insights into how societies work and what people think. Humor is so powerful it can help shape geopolitical views worldwide, according to Professor Darren Purcell and his team from the University of Oklahoma in the US. Their study of humor including the analysis of two "Achmed the Dead Terrorist" skits, has recently been published online in Springer's GeoJournal.

Humor is a powerful communications tool with potential political implications at various levels of society, as the recent Danish political cartoon representations of the Prophet Mohammad and the political repercussions and resulting economic boycotts demonstrated. Purcell and colleagues' paper looks at humor as an important form of popular culture in the creation of geopolitical worldviews.

The authors use 'disposition theory' - a framework that allows them to understand who will regard which content as funny, and how derisive humor can be seen as amusing - to examine particular types of humor in texts which reflect society's concerns, developments and relationships, and by extension, the geopolitical implications of these texts. With an emphasis on social context, the theory suggests that the appreciation of humor is dependent, in part, on whether one holds a positive or negative attitude, or disposition, toward the object of humor.

Purcell and colleagues analyze two stand-up comedy routines performed by American ventriloquist Jeff Dunham. The skits center on the

character of Achmed the Dead Terrorist, an unsuccessful suicide bomber. The humor plays on anti-Arab/Muslim sentiment. Dunham uses his audiences' disposition towards terrorists to get laughs, while at the same time challenging his audience members to look at their own views of terrorism, Islam, and American efforts in Iraq.

Purcell and colleagues show that disposition theory is useful to help place humor as a fluid, global phenomenon shared through various social networks via the Internet. Thanks to new communication technologies including YouTube.com, audiences around the world are engaged and can participate. The technology takes participants seriously by providing a point of entry where they can put forward their views of the world. This amplifies the potential impact of any geopolitical text.

They conclude that "the diffusion of humor with geopolitical content to a global viewing audience, via personal networks spanning multiple scales, forces us to consider the role of individuals (via forwarding and dissemination) as producers and reproducers of geopolitical codes and active participants in constructing enemies and threats, even in the guise of a two-foot tall puppet."

More information:

1. Purcell D et al (2009). Achmed the dead terrorist and humor in popular geopolitics. GeoJournal; DOI 10.1007/s10708-009-9258-9

2. Link to YouTube Video on Achmed the Dead Terrorist skit
www.youtube.com/watch?v=psvL2eYQ7YM

Source: Springer

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