Does humour belong in pro audio?

Ever conscious of the need to provide JOHN WATKINSON with a new challenge *(It is April, right? Ed)*, the Editor asked whether there is room for humour in pro audio, or is there too much already?

john watkinson

'There seems to be an ever-growing tide of marketing hype that is taking over in importance from good engineering. In part we encourage this stuff by accepting it when instead we should be showering it with derision.'

HUMOUR IS INSEPARABLE from the human condition, therefore unless we cease to be human when entering pro audio, I cannot imagine the absence of humour. Furthermore, humour has so many uses that its absence could be a positive disadvantage. In short, it can be a powerful tool, which is why I use it wherever possible and have actually carried out research into it.

There are a number of reasons why people laugh. The most basic is to express relief that something didn't happen to them by laughing when it happens to someone else. We see this in comedy from banana skins and custard pies to Mr Bean. It's easy to understand, transcending languages.

Another definition of whether a joke or story is funny is whether it delivers entropy. This is relevant to an understanding of compression algorithms, a topic that one might otherwise imagine to be devoid of humour. However, according to Shannon, any fact that is already known to the recipient, or which could have been anticipated, cannot be classified as information. One definition of why a joke is funny is if the punch line is completely unpredictable from the build up. In other words the recipient could not have anticipated it and information had to be delivered. As an example I like the one about the newly married couple who didn't know the difference between putty and petroleum jelly: all their windows fell out.

Knowledge of Shannon's theory and compression algorithms also allows one to predict that party political broadcasts can be compressed down to a very low bit rate on the basis that there is little that the recipient could not have anticipated.

In logic, in legal cases or in attempting to find a fault in a system, in order to draw a meaningful conclusion it is often necessary to hypothesise what may be the case. Each hypothesis is then tested against the evidence to see what can stand. However, the testing progress must be rigorously logical. In my experience logical rigour is thin on the ground and one often finds people putting forward arguments for their passionately held views in which the argument is flawed and the conclusion does not follow from the premises. This is almost the definition of a high-end hifi enthusiast.

The usual scientific method doesn't work on such people. However, what I have found to be very effective is a type of analysis called *reductio ad absurdum*. In response to a fallacious argument, I put forward a parallel argument using exactly the same logic, but applied to a topic that is common knowledge. I then follow the reasoning and show that from true premises it leads to a conclusion that is obviously incorrect, or absurd. If the premises are true but the conclusion is absurd, the reasoning must be flawed. I prefer to reach a conclusion that is absurd to the point of hilarity, not only to emphasise the point, but also to ensure it will be remembered.

The record companies often make claims about the amount of money they are losing because of home copying. However, it simply does not follow that everyone who contemplated copying a CD would instead buy it if copying was prevented. This requires a supply of money that doesn't exist. However, the best description I heard of home copying is that it allows one to breach copyright in the piracy of one's own home.

Certainly from the point of view of a lecturer, presentations that contain humour are more likely to be enjoyed, understood and remembered if the audience was falling about than if they were sitting in polite silence.

All industries have their own jokes and one of the consequences of working in audio is that there is no shortage of material. Of course there is a large overlap between audio engineers and musicians that increases the humour base. I now know that drummers are always found in the car park because they don't know when to come in. Furthermore I have learned why pony tails are so popular with audio engineers. Lift up a pony's tail and what do you find?

Production of certain types of musical genre is often accompanied by the use of hallucinatory substances. I recall a mixing console going back for repair being impounded by customs because of all the white stuff that had fallen down the fader slots. Those variable resistors aren't called pots for nothing.

I have argued before that one of the problems with audio is that the consequences of doing it badly are insufficiently spectacular. Generally there isn't the fireball and wailing sirens that would be the case in more critical industries. This lack of spectacle means that there is very little regulation. If audio equipment had to be built and operated to the same standards as aircraft, there would be better standards of equipment and user ability and the absurd views would abate a little.

I have had the privilege of discussing audio with a large number of people, and I am no longer surprised when I discover that someone who evidently has a good grasp of the subject also turns out to be a pilot or a yachtsman or to have some other activity in which the consequences of failure are serious. The necessary discipline in another field translates to a more professional outlook in audio. The converse would be the situation in which aircraft are designed by the hifi industry. In that case it would be necessary to live below ground.

One of the most powerful uses of humour is to find out whether people are genuine or not. People who know what they are talking about and are not seeking to mislead respond to teasing quite differently to those who don't understand their topic or who have a hidden agenda. The latter often take themselves far too seriously. One of the functions of the traditional court jester was to tease visitors in order to establish their bona fide. I have been acting the court jester for a long time now and I have learned that the people who matter don't mind and the people who mind don't matter.

There seems to be an ever-growing tide of marketing hype that is taking over in importance from good engineering. Much of this tide is either implausible or incorrect. In part we encourage this stuff by accepting it when instead we should be showering it with derision. Humour and satire are very powerful weapons against hype. They are also extremely effective against prejudice and bigotry and we should use them whenever something comes out of the woodwork.

People use humour in an attempt to deal with the most extreme and distressing circumstances. Such humour can be very tasteless indeed, but I find it difficult to be sanctimonious in such cases. In the aftermath of the New Orleans flooding, one US cleric was heard to say that it was due to God expressing his displeasure at an upcoming lesbian convention, whereas an Army engineer said the flooding was so extensive because there weren't enough dykes.

Certain observations in this article may not be

politically correct. I have serious reservations about the effects of political correctness, or should that be rectitude? Political correctness appears to stem from a desire to avoid causing any offence whatsoever to anyone under any circumstances. This seems to be important to people that are voted for. However, if society is to make any progress, it is clear that the ways we presently do things and think about things must change. It is quite natural for people to resist change and take offence if it is suggested. How will any change occur without the risk of offence? If we all become politically correct, ultimately we will be rendered completely anodyne with no opinions whatsoever. This is consistent with politicians transitioning from being leaders having opinions to administrators trying to align themselves to the views of the electorate. Given the choice of being innovative and offensive or anodyne and popular, I know which I would choose.

Political correctness is also diametrically opposed to humour, which is why I suspect its proponents to be humourless. I have said enough above about those who take themselves too seriously and rigorous political correctness is another symptom. It won't be long before negative feedback is banned because it uses the word negative and amplifiers might be offended by it.

There are plenty of PC terms that have been skilfully crafted and/or euphemised to avoid causing offence or negative connotations. My local rubbish dump is signposted 'amenity site'. The correct approach to political correctness is to satire it. Besides, it is good fun to think up new terms. Say goodbye to baldness and become follically challenged. It's far better to be aspect ratio impaired than to be short and fat or long and thin. ■