The Comic Effect: 
Humor and the Construction of National Identity in Northern Ireland

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Abstract

National identity behaves as a binding agent between people with massive impacts on the organization of the modern world. It is built and maintained through many processes that are institutional, linguistic, banal, and everyday. In Northern Ireland, a small country in the British Isles, national identity represents a major point of cleavage between Irish, British, and Northern Irish identities. This cleavage has manifested in large scale violence. The Troubles, a conflict between Irish Nationalist paramilitaries, British Loyalist paramilitaries, and British institutions such as the army and police, took place between 1968 and 1998. This violence, which resulted in over 3,000 deaths and 45,000 injuries, demonstrates the deeply held importance of national identity in the country. Divisions between identities remain evident in neighborhood and regional segregation as well as educational separation. This paper explores the impact of humor on the construction and maintenance of competing and unifying national identities in Northern Ireland. It examines the effect of television, live comedy, and social laughter, highlighting the roles of institutional, linguistic, banal, and everyday sites that intersect with humor theory, identity theory, and the methods of national identity construction. These sites and mediums interact in complex ways that determine the capacities of various national identity constructions. These include both the structural status quo identities: British and Northern Irish, and the opposition identity: Irish. The four sites of identity construction, through humor and its mediums, result in the continued existence of all three identities; however, they are upheld in distinct manners affected by site and medium. This paper illuminates how.

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Table of Contents

I. Introduction 4

II. Conceptual Foundations 6
   A. Construction of the Nation 6
   B. A Brief Political History of Northern Ireland 8
   C. National Identity and Northern Ireland 12
   D. Memory and National Identity 15
   E. Humor Theory 17

III: Comedy and National Identity in Northern Ireland 19
   Research Design 19
   I. Television 21
      The Power of Television 21
      Television and National Identity 24
      Northern Ireland and Television 27
      The BBC 28
      A Brief History of the BBC in Northern Ireland 28
      The BBC today, goals, and national identity 31
      Comedy, Representation, and the BBC 33
      Representation and Cultural Arbitraries 37
   Case Studies 42
   Give My Head Peace 42
      Narratives and Images 43
      Object and Interface 48
   The Blame Game 50
      Narrative and Images 50
   Derry Girls 53
      The Action Of Engaging With Television Through And Beyond The Screen 53
      Television Summary 62
   II. Live Comedy 63
   Space 65
      Contextual Power of Space 66
      Space and History 67
      Space and Change 69
      Space, Connotation, and Control 71
   Interaction 74
      Performer and Audience 74
      Audience and Audience 81


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Performer and Performer</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Live Comedy Summary</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III. Social Laughter</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Bonding</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stress Alleviation</td>
<td>102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organization</td>
<td>106</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Bonding Summary</td>
<td>111</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Media</td>
<td>111</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public, Public, Private</td>
<td>112</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comedy and Social Media</td>
<td>115</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Media, Publics, and Comedy in Northern Ireland</td>
<td>119</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online Comedy Content</td>
<td>121</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Media Summary</td>
<td>124</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV. Conclusion</td>
<td>126</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comedy and National Identity in Northern Ireland, Looking Forward</td>
<td>127</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beyond Northern Ireland</td>
<td>128</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V. References</td>
<td>131</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
I. Introduction

In September of 2013, *The Blame Game*, a popular comedy panel show produced in Northern Ireland, filmed an episode of its programme to a live audience in the Millennium Forum, a theater in Derry-Londonderry, as part of the city’s year-long celebrations for its title as the first UK City of Culture. It was then broadcast on BBC Northern Ireland. In the episode, Jake O’Kane, a comedian and panelist on the show, discussed the ongoing protests in Belfast that had erupted after the city council voted to only fly the Union Jack flag outside its building on select holidays. O’Kane put small versions of the Union Jack, the British flag, and the Tricolours, the Irish flag, on the desk in front of him and began to explain:

This is not a flag. This is a fleg. A fleg, a fleg [audience laughter]. People who have this fleg [gestures to the Union Jack]—suddenly the people who like this fleg [motions to the Tricolours] took this fleg [the Union Jack] down off the City Hall. Nobody noticed it was there until they took it down [laughter and clapping erupts]. Then, six weeks of mayhem:

six weeks of mayhem because the people who love this fleg [the Union Jack] are going:

“They have taken my fleg, my fleg. They have taken my identity. I don’t know who I am anymore.”

This 22-second comedic diatribe about flags, protest, and identity to the packed room in Derry-Londonderry, and the circumstances in which the address was filmed and broadcast, is perhaps the most succinct and self-contained representation of the connection between humor and national identity formation and construction in Northern Ireland. The content and context of this speech make this example an extreme one and intersects with the sites of national construction: institutional, linguistic, banal, and everyday, at every turn. Comedy here forms and
reforms the concept of the nation, which, in Northern Ireland, is in constant contestation between
and within Irish, British, and Northern Irish identities.

Humor, in Northern Ireland and beyond, acts as an embodied everyday practice that
engages with linguistic and banal characteristics that create the nation, through and under the
institutions within it. This paper investigates the role of humor, its production and consumption,
in the construction and reconstruction of the nation in Northern Ireland through the analysis of
television, live comedy, and social laughter both in person and online. Through ethnographic and
analytic methods, this paper explores the multifaceted effects and interactions between humor
and national identity formation, showcasing that the impacts of humor in Northern Ireland are
multidirectional as they relate to national identity. Humor in Northern Ireland creates and
embeds British, Irish, and Northern Irish identities in the country. This directionality of identity
construction depends on the source, location, medium and other features of humor propagation,
connected to its productive and consumptive methods. These distinctions live out in the
institutional, linguistic, banal, and everyday sites and characteristics where humor and national
identity construction intersect in both passive and active ways in Northern Ireland.

**Figure 1: Jake O’ Kane discussing “flegs” on the Blame Game.**
II. Conceptual Foundations

A. Construction of the Nation

The nation acts as an organized “human collectivity” that possesses power through harnessing individual beliefs that they belong to this body (Connor, 1978 pp 301). Primordialists prescribe to the notion of a long existent nation that is the natural result of history; in their view, the nation is rooted in time and place, and it is an entity because it is real (Connor, 1978). Modernists suggest that the nation is a political construction born of changing economic systems connected to industrialization in the mid-nineteenth century (Anderson, 1983). This process drove a distinct need for standardized schooling and language across states. Weber (1976) argues that the development of roads and infrastructure, the expanded economy along these roads, the introduction of mandatory and secular schooling, and mandatory military prescription, which were all introduced in France in the late 1800s, created the French nation. He emphasizes the institutional and structural elements of nation building. Anderson (1983) narrows this framework in his book *Imagined Communities*, in which he focuses on language. He places the credit of nation building with print capitalism, arguing that printing presses abandoned Latin towards regional languages that more people could understand. The printing presses did not, however, publish in all vernaculars, instead selecting a well enough understood language within each region which would drive their profit. Anderson explains:

Speakers of the huge variety of Frenches, Englishes, or Spanishes, who might find it difficult or even impossible to understand one another in conversation, became capable of comprehending one another via print and paper. In the process, they gradually became aware of the hundreds of thousands, even millions, of people in their particular
language-field, and at the same time that only those hundreds of thousands, or millions, so belonged. (pp 56)

That is, language connects people to each other in demonstrating that those beyond a kin group or small community can understand and interact with the same text; however, the group of people able to understand the language is bound. Anderson argues that collective imagined identities formed from this large but limited group.

Once these languages are conceptualized to contain a population, Anderson argues that they help “to build that image of antiquity so central to the subjective idea of the nation” (1983, pp 57). This answers to conceptions of primordialism which suggest that nations have ancient roots. Instead, this argues that such ancient histories of nations are drawn on selectively by elites and others to propagate the concept of the ancient nation, and therefore to justify its power. Billig’s (1995) understanding of “banal nationalism” seems to extend this into the modern reproductions of national identities and, thus, the maintenance of the nation since the time about which Anderson writes. Billig (1995) suggests that symbols of nationhood, such as flags or national anthems, are “embedded in routines of life” such that their power is unrecognized. He writes:

These reminders, or 'flaggings', are so numerous and they are such a familiar part of the social environment, that they operate mindlessly, rather than mindfully. The remembering, not being experienced as remembering, is, in effect, forgotten. (1995, pp 38).

In his understanding, national symbolism, which operates at countless levels and often surreptitiously, is key to marking and reinforcing both place and identity. Similar to Anderson’s understanding, this takes place without explicit, cognitive recognition of its existence. Fox and
Miller Idriss (2008) extend this concept into that of “everyday nationalism,” refocusing away from major structural or governmental analyses of national construction, such as Weber’s, into its propagation through the everyday. They write: “The nation, however, is not simply the product of macro-structural forces; is simultaneously the practical accomplishment of ordinary people engaging in routine activities” (2008, pp 537). In this regard, the nation is not simply a structural body but an enacted one that is elemental to embodied practices of self-identification. These four approaches: institutional, linguistic, banal, and everyday, are far from mutually exclusive. Together, they reinforce the notion of the pervasive nation whose existence is relevant across experiences.

B. A Brief Political History of Northern Ireland

The state of Northern Ireland, in its legal and border-based definition, has existed for just under 100 years, but its history and character extend back millenium longer. Throughout this time, the Irish and British states and British colonial practices have worked to determine and define much of the country’s political history. While this political history represents and explains only a portion of the lives of people in Northern Ireland, it is crucial to understanding the country’s modern political and cultural paradigm.

In his essay, “Conflict in Northern Ireland: A Background Essay,” John Darby establishes a few vital dates to the history of British and Irish interaction in Northern Ireland. Beginning in 1170 with the Norman invasion of Ireland, the British established some degree of control in Dublin. He writes, “Over the next four centuries this area was the beach-head for the kingdom of Ireland, adopting English administrative practices and the English language and looking to London for protection and leadership” (1995, pp 1). In this regard, while England had influence,
“dominion did not take place until the sixteenth century” (ibid). In 1609, the British established the Plantation of Ulster in what is now the six counties of Northern Ireland and three counties in the Republic. Darby writes, “The Plantation of Ulster was unique among Irish plantations in that it set out to attract colonists of all classes from England, Scotland and Wales by generous offers of land” (ibid). As a result of this, families, and thereby lineages, (re)settled the land, “excluding” native Irish people from the new towns. The new people spoke English, utilized a different economic structure, and were largely Protestant, as compared to the Catholic natives (ibid). In the decades and centuries which followed, population uprisings were frequent, as further British attempts to control the island took hold. Three-hundred years passed in this way.

In 1916, a critical rising took place beginning on Easter Sunday. Now known as the Easter Rising, a group of dissidents opposed British Home Rule on the island of Ireland. Githens-Mazer (2006) calls the rising the “cultural trigger point for the Irish nation” (pp 2). Githens-Mazer details the impetus and impact of the Rising. During World War I, he argues, the relationship between the United Kingdom and Ireland felt ambiguous, as people were unable to discern whether Ireland was a “colony or home nation” like Wales and Scotland. The war exacerbated these tensions, and it introduced weapons and training into the country (pp 161). With fears of conscription looming, “radical Nationalists began to capitalise on the concerns over conscription, and thought them real and urgent enough to begin preparations for their rising” (ibid pp 162). While Githens-Mazer suggests that the direct goals of the Easter Rising were hazy, it was clear that the “symbolism and imagery” of an Easter day rising were crucial to the cause (ibid). Following the Rising, the British government implemented martial law. Over the course of ten days, the British government executed fifteen of the Rising’s leaders and jailed over 1,500
people, all without juries (ibid). The mass detention and the prolonged executions of nationalists led to confusion, anger, and an increased capacity for a shared national identity.

The 1916 Easter Rising and the elections in 1918 culminated in a two year civil war which spanned from 1919 to 1921. This ultimately led to Irish partition from the United Kingdom, but not in full. Six of the nine counties in the Ulster Plantation became known as Northern Ireland and remained in the UK. Darby describes this region as “essentially the largest area which could be comfortably held with a majority in favour of the union with Britain” (1995 pp 1). That is, a great majority of the population in these counties, because of the history of settlement and colonization, considered themselves British even into the 1920s. These people were largely Protestant. Not everyone shared this view in both the new North and the new Republic. Border bombing campaigns by the Irish Republican Army, the paramilitary group which led the civil war effort across the island, occurred in bursts in the 1920s, 1940s, and 1950s, to little avail (CAIN). Within Northern Ireland, however, the effects of discrimination against Catholics in both the workforce and housing, and political gerrymandering to decrease their representation were catching up with the societal structure by the end of the 1950s (Bosi, 2006).

The civil rights movement in Northern Ireland began in earnest in the late-1960s, heavily influenced by the Black Civil Rights movement in the United States (Darby, 1995). Activists planned marches and protests regarding numerous issues of discrimination against Catholics. Concurrently, paramilitary groups such as the Irish nationalist IRA and the British loyalist Ulster Volunteer Force had begun a small arms race, each aware that the other was stockpiling weaponry (CAIN). In the decades that followed, a largely tit-for-tat civil conflict took hold of the small country. There were four primary violent actors: Republican paramilitaries, Loyalist
paramilitaries, the Northern Irish police, and the British Army. Outside of this, civil rights
groups, political parties, and the media played a large role in public life as it associated with the
conflict and beyond. The conflict, known globally as “the Troubles,” was ongoing from 1968 to
1998. There were several key moments that affected public consciousness throughout the
conflict. This included: the start of the internment of suspected Republicans by the British State
in 1971; Bloody Sunday, where the British B-Specials, a specialized, military-like group within
the Northern Irish Police, killed 12 civilians at a march against internment in 1972; Bloody
Friday, where 19 IRA bombs killed nine people and injured over 100 others in the span of 1 hour
and 5 minutes in 1972; and the IRA hunger strikes in the Long Kesh, a major prison in Northern
Ireland, in protest of losing their “political prisoner” status as a result of the end of internment, in
which 12 people died of starvation in 1981 (CAIN). Alongside these devastating, major events,
everyday violence took a major toll on the populous. All told, over 3,000 people died and 45,000
were injured as a result of the conflict (ibid). The thirty year long fight spanned the youths of
multiple generations, who were affected by the social and political instability in numerous and
formative ways.

The war ended with the ratification of the Good Friday Agreement in 1997, a
multinational treaty between the United Kingdom and Ireland that was aided in negotiations by
the United States which established many vital changes to the order of governance within the
country of Northern Ireland. The agreement, also called the Belfast Agreement, introduced
structural changes, such as the creation of a new elected assembly and a North/South Ministerial
Council. Provisions also included the assurance that a peaceful vote, a border poll, could lead to
the reunification of the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland. In the years following the
GFA, important parties made many smaller agreements in order to solve remaining issues. These
included decommissioning the paramilitaries, reforming the police, and working to find the bodies of people disappeared during the conflict. This work is ongoing in Northern Ireland still today.

C. National Identity and Northern Ireland

Within the boundaries of the Northern Irish state, three dominant national identities propagate: Irish, British, and Northern Irish. These do not align with the state territorial boundary of Northern Ireland, which sits on the Island of Ireland within the governing structure of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. The Irish and British identities, as a result of the colonial history of the country, map well onto the Catholic and Protestant identities, respectively. The two categories, religious and national, are often understood as interchangeable terminology, in which one term does more than signal the other - it also represents it. That is, people identify as “Catholic” or “Protestant” to express their ethnic national identity. In fact, Cairns and Mercer found that, in the 1980s, “almost half of those labelling themselves a Protestant and one third of those labelling themselves as Catholic did not consider themselves to be ‘religious,’” showcasing the “special ethnopolitical nature of these particular social identities in Northern Ireland” (Cairnes, 1982 pp¹). In other words, religious group names, in this case, are used to more accurately reflect one’s family and community ties, which are perceived to be inherited. This likens such groupings to common understandings of immutable ethnic identities. Cairns (1982) explains that the Protestant and Catholic identities are “denominational categories” that have “been termed a ‘terminal identity,’ that is one which embraces and integrates a number

¹ Certain page notes were omitted in this version of the thesis due to a COVID-19 related inability to re-access specific physical texts. This is indicated in a few places throughout the paper as (pp), recognizing their importance.
of lesser identities” (pp). In this regard, the Catholic and Protestant or Irish and British identities are the dominating identities around which individuals organize their world, while some people identify as specifically “Northern Irish.”

The Irish and British identities in Northern Ireland did not manifest magically. Views on whether nations are primordial or modern constructions will, in many ways, pre-determine understandings of their manifestations in Northern Ireland. It is impossible to understand the varying identities in Northern Ireland without first examining the Irish identity itself. While various scholars recognize the importance of history to the Irish identity, this does not suggest that it is innate. Instead, the interaction of history, memory, and infrastructure enabled the creation of a cross island, Irish identity, the propagation and maintenance of which was and is enabled through institutional, linguistic, banal, and everyday sites. Cathal McCall places Ireland in the context of the pan-European shift in social structure from religiously constructed to nationally constructed in the nineteenth century. He writes, “The battle between religion and secularism for influence over ethnic identity signified the beginning of the modern era. Up until then, the spiritual and social aspects of religion had been crucial to the survival of ethnic identity” (1999, pp). Modernization, he asserts, then resulted in an increased emphasis on the secular nation to contain the ethnic identity. From here, “The successful Gaelic and Christian past in Ireland was revived and provided the important buffer for the transformation from ethnic group to Irish nation” (1999, pp). In this regard, ethnic identities were absorbed into a national Irish identity which emphasized a shared religious and social history.

This social history is important. McCall (1999) suggests that the Irish identity has been “catalyzed” around “multifarious grievances.” In large part, these have focused on real or perceived mistreatment of Ireland and its people by the British. McCall traces this through the
Great Famine from 1845-51 to the Easter Rising in 1916, which he describes as a “reaffirmation of a collective Irish identity and further defined identity in terms of ‘us’ (the Irish) and ‘them’ (the British),” and into the 1980s IRA prisoner hunger strikes (pp). This analysis suggests that national identity is being continually formed and affirmed through events that fit into an established pattern around which the initial identity is constructed. In this regard, nationalists are incentivized to emphasize events that maintain this narrative in order to continually assert the understood conception of the nation. McBride (2001) reaffirms this understanding in his book *History and Memory in Modern Ireland*, in which he examines memory and identity formation. He explains, “Although remembrance is always selective, the selections depend upon a complex interaction between the materials available and dominant modes of political and social organisation” (McBride, 2001 pp 13). In this way, collectives, people, or elites are able to influence the broadly understood national narrative, through institutional, linguistic, banal, and everyday sites. He centers this in Northern Ireland, where he argues that while “nationalists and unionists have both acquired the ‘Irish habit of historical thought’, they have not only recalled different events but have evolved different ways of recalling them” (pp 15). This demonstrates a mechanism by which two, strong national identities grow within the same state boundaries.

This selective memory fits well within Tajfel’s (1979) Social Identity theory and Cairns’ 1982 application of it in Northern Ireland. Cairns examines the Protestant and Catholic identities within Tajfel’s theoretical framework, which suggests that groups strive for positive social identities, which are generally understood as relative to other groups. In the case of Northern Ireland, the author argues that social identities are clear, present, and salient in the country, and that “both [Protestants and Catholics] appear to possess, or at least have in the past possessed, relatively positive social identities. Further, it would appear that these positive social identities
have been achieved through a search for positive distinctiveness by both groups” (pp). In this regard, memories become important to the collective positive identity, in which past events are told and retold to reflect the positive standing of the group in the context of the society. This intersects with institutional, linguistic, banal, and everyday sites, where stories are told, manufactured, and propagated.

**D. Memory and National Identity**

Memory does not take root in a vacuum. It is informed and recreated in the public sphere through cultural production. Pierre Bourdieu writes at length about this concept in various works. Webb et. al. (2002) have synthesised much of Bourdieu’s musings, explaining that he argued: “the field of cultural production has symbolic power, and its products are among the means by which a society—including its way of life and its set of values—is objectified” (pp 4). In this regard, Bourdieu emphasises the relationship between the producer of art and of society at large. Like memory, cultural production itself is not created in a vacuum: culture, art, and collective experiences are continually re-informing and impacting each other. That is, real events or positions in society may inspire art. This production informs the cultural zeitgeist; the emotions around events are remembered through art that exists long after the event itself. New art is inspired by old art. The art takes the form of the memory; it is the symbol of real and imagined events and emotions. Here, the very notion of memory is then called into question. As Bell (2003) argues, “Memory can be shared only by those who were present at the event that is being remembered” (pp 65). That is, a true memory of an event is only held by an attendee or witness to its reality. Instead, Bell adjudicates that it is “national mythscape,” including myth as a “term to identify the simplified, dramaticized story that has evolved in our society to contain…”
meanings” (Hynes, 1999 qtd ibid pp 75), not a national collective memory that exists inside this art. Bell suggests that the myths which define nations are “constructed, they are shaped, whether by deliberate manipulation and intentional action, or perhaps through the particular resonance of works of literature and art” (pp 75). Here he delineates between two methods of myth building, one intentional and power driven and another through a seemingly natural emergence of art which innately speaks to a population.

The notion that certain art emerges as foundational to the national mythology or collective memory of a nation of its own volition must be challenged. Important to Bourdieu’s understanding of the field of production is the “cultural arbitrary,” or those that deem, by virtue of their societal status or cultural capital, which art is “universally significant” (ibid). Webb et al explain: “aesthetic judgements are not made on the basis of an abstract or universal standard. Rather, something becomes ‘culture’ because it is in someone’s (or some institution’s) interests for this to be so. And the ‘someones’ able to promote their personal interest include the government, the education system, major cultural institutions, and important gatekeepers” (2002, pp 6). This demonstrates the interaction between those with “arbitrary power” and the valued and disseminated forms of art. As Moore (2004) explains of Bourdieu’s argument, “Power valorizes culture and culture performs the service of disguising and legitimating power” (pp 448). This results in a self fulfilling cultural and social dynamic that does little to challenge the status quo. The presence of cultural arbitraries demonstrates the importance of the intersection of the nation and the state and the ways in which this relationship holds vital meaning. These ‘arbitraries’ reflect many bodies, such as the state, and operate within all artistic genres that inform the national mythscape, including fine art, literature, television, film, and street art, among many
other mediums. Here, institutions and the everyday both hold power. These mediums each take many forms. Humor is one of them.

**E. Humor Theory**

Humor occurs in and through institutional, linguistic, banal, and everyday sites and serves as a mechanism to aid in the construction of the nation through: narrative, active engagement, and the binding and divisive capacity of humor. Theories surrounding humor, its foundation and its use, are wide ranging. Morreall (1986) emphasizes three dominant theories: the superiority theory, propagated by Plato and other early scholars; the relief theory, common in modern psychology; and the incongruity theory, what he calls “the most popular current psychological theory of humor” (pp). The superiority theory suggests that “we laugh from feelings of superiority over other people, or over our own former position” (Morreall, 1986 pp). Conceptually, this paints laughter and comedy as potentially negative social processes that are utilized or experienced at the expense of others. Parting from this general belief, the relief theory posits that laughter is “the venting of excess nervous energy” (pp). That is, the physical process of laughing, of engaging with humor as a listener, stems from pent up energy which requires a mechanism of release; this comes in the form of laughter. Finally, the incongruity theory establishes the idea that people laugh when “some object of perception or thought…clashes with what we would have expected in a particular set of circumstances” (pp). This focuses on the cerebral features of laughter, suggesting that when individuals’ knowledge-based expectations are distorted, they laugh or experience amusement.

The three theories are deeply embedded in the existence of common understandings of society. The incongruity theory relies on the capacity of people to share notions of “congruity” and “incongruity.” The relief theory has been used to explain the propensity to laugh at taboo
topics which emphasizes built up “nervous energy” gained from interacting with the world (Butler, 2015 pp 48). Those discussing or performing otherwise taboo topics or actions, the theory suggests, may evoke laughter as a release of this energy. The relief theory suggests individuals operate within the world at a certain baseline level of stress that laughter helps to release. The theory supposes that people share certain types of stress relief if comedy shows are to succeed. Likewise, the superiority theory, which speculates that people are constantly laughing about the positions of others and their former selves, relies on a shared understanding of the relative positions of people in society, or even that positions exist at all. For all three theories, the common understanding of society need not be shared across all members. Different social groupings may have different interpretations of the relevant aspects of society for each type or theory of humor. These theories serve as a framework with which to understand laughter, humor, and society, which can enable a complex comprehension of the internal and external cause and effect of humor on the nation at large (Gordon, 2014) (Friedman, 2011) (Butler, 2015) (Kutz-Flamenbaum 2014) (Godfrey, 2016). Beyond the theories of humor, the structure and sites of its propagation are embedded into the everyday, banal, linguistic, and institutional aspects of national construction.
III: Comedy and National Identity in Northern Ireland

There are several sites of comedy production in Northern Ireland that enable national identity formation and reformation that are affected by, affect, and are embedded into the cultural landscape of the country. These sites are: television, live comedy, and social laughter. These three sites of production, consumption, and experience interact with the capacity of public creations, the didactic abilities of comedians and writers, and the cultural arbitraries who work to determine the voices with the ability to see the stage, literal or metaphorical. This interaction occurs in institutional, linguistic, banal and everyday sites. Each site of comedy production has slightly different effects, rooted in the medium of dissemination, from the technological capacities of the television to the spatial connotations of a comedy performance venue to the location of a neighborhood pub at which people socially convene, as well as many other features. In these differences, there is distinct power that plays out on small and large scales that affects national identity construction and reconstruction.

Research Design

This paper utilizes qualitative data collected through interviews that took place in June and July of 2019 in Belfast and Derry/Londonderry in Northern Ireland. Interview participants included subjects relevant to the world of comedy production in Northern Ireland, such as stand-up comics, improvisors, live show and television producers, writers, and performers. As well as this, participants included individuals engaged in various aspects of public life, such as former members of paramilitary groups, the police, the press, and political figures. All interviews, bar one, were recorded at the time of the interview. The eighteen recorded interviews were then listened to and transcribed where content was assessed as relevant or highly
informative. The decision to not transcribe interviews in full was affected by the time constraints of the project. The researcher transcribed over 30 hours of interviews by herself without a transcription service.

The interviews were largely conducted in public areas, such as coffee shops or libraries. Some were conducted in interviewees’ offices and one took place over the phone. Most participants consented to the use of their names in the paper, which helps root their answers in information around their jobs. Some names have been excluded but descriptions of interviewees’ broad roles have remained. The lack of anonymity may have softened some interviewees responses to questions, but the researcher assessed that the ability to contextualize their responses outweighed this. Interviews took between 30 minutes and three hours and focused on the interviewee’s specific perceptions of Northern Ireland and comedy in the country, where the interviewer largely asked the same basic questions to all participants, as well as the interviewee’s particular experiences as they related to their profession. These questions differed based on the assessed role of the interviewee in the country and on information the interviewer learned about the interviewee prior to the meeting, predominantly over the internet.

Interviewees were contacted for participation in various manners, including reaching out through comics’ agents or production companies with information found online, using contacts from the researcher’s advisor in Northern Ireland, through canvassing at comedy shows, and with snowball sampling. Three of the 19 participants were women, while the rest were men. This is largely the result of the composition of the comedy scene, paramilitaries, police, and the political landscape in the country. Not all interviewees disclosed their national identity to the researcher. This qualitative data, and the content of Northern Irish comedy productions, was analyzed in a manner consistent with grounded theory.
I. Television

Television serves an important feature of public and private life around the globe and as a mechanism of broadcasting comedy. Its influence has imbued itself into individual’s everyday lives, but it has had large scale impacts on the broad organizations of societies, through its banal features of imagery, institutional capacity, and linguistic, public creating powers. Television possesses power in a number of ways. These boil down to three loci: the narrative or images shown on television, the object and interface of the technology of television, and the action of engaging with television through and beyond the screen. Such loci have various characteristics that result in television enjoying broad societal impacts. These largely stem from the various ways in which television creates and maintains a public, as defined by Michael Warner, which results in the formation of an imagined community.

The Power of Television

Television has the ability to create meaning through narrative that performs didactically. In this regard, Wright suggests that television behaves as a “site of public pedagogy,” insofar as it “teaches audiences how to relate to the world through the ways it represents people and issues and the kinds of issues and the kinds of discourses it creates and disseminates” (2013, pp 192-193). This argument suggests that television has the capacity to impart information to viewers through illustration—these could be banal relationships between people or stories depicting the overtly political. Bourdieu suggests that this ability is dangerous. He writes: “The political dangers inherent in the ordinary use of television have to do with the fact that images have the peculiar capacity to produce what literary critiques call a reality effect. They show things and make people believe in what they show” (pp 248). This analysis suggests that
television has a specific capacity to act pedagogically, a power that can be utilized to normative ends. His analysis serves as an extension of Sontag’s work on photography and the power of images. She discusses Virginia Woolf’s evaluation that people interpret images in the context of “every past memory and present feeling” (pp 23). Sontag explains: “This sleight of hand allows photographs to be both objective record and personal testimony, both a faithful copy or transcription of an actual moment of reality and an interpretation of that reality” (pp 23). This conclusion, that images confuse a sense of reality, supports Bourdieu’s fears of television’s power. Saenz seems to further this, recognizing the interplay between various elements on the screen. He explains:

   Television’s informal "flow" (Williams 1974, 86-96) impels this reconsideration.

   Viewers’ interpretations are constantly redirected by television. The allegorical and moral dimensions of a commercial may still be lingering when a newsbreak appears; the import of a newsbreak may be half-perceived before a program’s narrative reappears in media res. (1992, pp 41)

In his view, consumers are rarely able to sit with a single idea for long enough that its interpretation is unaffected by other messages provided by other producers on traditional, network television. This demonstrates the blurred and complex site of television itself which mediates between entertainment, commercial, and news: three areas that have separate and ever-blending spaces on traditional TV.

   This speaks to the power of the medium of television, in both a technological and material sense. The discussion here, of the interspersing of programming and advertising, addresses the power that the form of television takes. It impacts a viewer’s understanding of images insofar as it both contextualizes them and decontextualizes them. Alongside this,
television is important as a medium in itself: the physical TV’s presence in the home ensures that it mediates between the public and private spheres. As a material object inside the domestic sphere, the television brings the outside into the home as people engage with its didactic elements in domestic space. This calls forth one element of the interaction between the screen and those watching it. That is, information is not simply shown, but internalized and understood through a process. As Saenz (1992) suggests:

Such interaction between programming and household produces a hybrid, processual sense not only of the television story, but also of one’s domestic pursuits. Occasional spontaneous conformity between events on television and around the household prompt any viewer, sooner or later, to ruminate over the social limits of coincidence. (pp 42)

He utilizes this dynamic, of household and televisual reflections, to suggest that consumers “establish a readily accessible interpretive dialectic between the two” (pp 42). Here, he argues that viewers engage with television as more than passive consumers. Instead, there is engagement with the material that is contextualized into the space of their own lives.

While the domestic interpretation of television is crucial to recognizing its influence, the act of watching television does not isolate people to the home. Although Ryan and Macey remark on the perception of television watching as a “delightfully antisocial activity” by many of their participants, the act of engaging with television comes with the understanding that people outside of one's own home are watching, as well (2013). In this way, Warner (2002) has demonstrated that watchers of the same television program become members of a “public” that is “constituted through discourse” (pp 52). Through television, people are bound to each other through the knowledge that others are watching. They understand that they are not alone. In many ways, this is emblematic of Benedict Anderson’s writing on the “imagined community,”
which is explained in his 1983 work specifically as it relates to the formation and maintenance of
the nation. Anderson explains his interpretation of imagined community as it relates to the
nation: “members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members,
meet them, or hear them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” (pp 6). In
this case, members of a nation are only able to imagine the existence of their compatriots, and in
doing so, they are able to assume many of their shared characteristics which may or may not be
real. This analysis constructs television, through its linguistic and everyday capacity, as both the
site of its own imagined community and at a position within the confines of national imagined
communities insofar as television itself serves the creation and generation of the national
imagined community and with it, national identity.

Television and National Identity

The three loci of televisual power play a large role in national identity formation as they
relate to institutional, linguistic, banal, and everyday sites, working to further create this sense of
a national imagined community. Again, these are: the object and interface of the technology of
television, the narrative or images shown on television, and the action of engaging with
television through and beyond the screen.

First and perhaps most simply, television channels root people in space and by name and
through borders. That is, television channels, as a technology, are either explicitly or practically
centered in the political construction of the state as well as the understood nation, through
institutional means. In explicit terms, channels such as the National Broadcasting Company
(NBC) and the American Broadcasting Company (ABC) in the United States and the British
Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) in the United Kingdom ground their names in concepts of the
state and nation. Even without such names, public and private channels across the world are often transmitted within the borders of the state. As such, any imagined community built around television is somehow connected to the concept of this space, and the imagined community that is built around such programming is done so within the confines of those who have the capacity to watch the same television channel or show. Beyond this, the borders of broadcasting contextualize the content and imagery shown on such channels. That is, the borders of transmission send information to the viewer about the way in which content should be interpreted, while the content sends information to the viewer about the way in which the borders should be interpreted. Representations of place can create a cohesive but imagined understanding of the nation.

Both the narratives and images on television and the action of engaging with it serve as mechanisms to produce collective memory. Ryan and Macey argue that this process takes place in two ways. First, the memories of the everyday action of watching television become ritualistic, and thus the content presented to a consumer and the experience of absorbing that content become a more singular moment in memory where the real and fictional become one (2013). Ryan and Macey explain: “Recalling old television shows is a ritualized narrative action, a performative language that helps the past come alive for people” (2013, pp 17). Here, they demonstrate the shared cultural significance of television viewing beyond the confines of the moment of watching. Talking about television and remembering television becomes a part of the experience which ensures the blend between past, present, reality, and fiction, and thus creates a “cultural memory” or mythscape that is shared between people. Such a collective memory is rooted in the content presented on television about the past and present and the ways it signals to its audience about how such events should be remembered.
This dynamic, of being presented, internalizing, and re-internalizing the narrative on television, is particularly important as it relates to the process of constructing national identity. Specifically, television’s didactic capacity enables it to present and emanate certain world views, especially those already supported by existing elites. McClain writes, while citing John Fiske, “television helps, shape, reflect, and maintain culture. Television is a ‘cultural agent,’ a ‘provoker and circulator of meanings.’ These meanings ‘reinforce the existent social structure,’ firmly establishing the status quo as ‘unchallengeable and unchangeable’” (pp 136). In this regard, McClain argues that television works on behalf of the “dominant interests”— in Bourdeian terms, cultural arbitraries are at work, and thus, the narratives woven into the screen enforce or reinforce the positions of the elite. These narratives can extend beyond storyline and into the representation of various ethnicities, nationalities, or languages on screen. This positionality of elites in narrative and representation is important to understanding national identity, which Price explains as, “any given set of language practices, myths, stories, and beliefs propagated to justify a dominant group in maintaining power, or to justify a competing group in replacing them or shifting power among them” (1995, pp 15). In this way, the elites and their institutions are central to some aspect of national identity formation. Thus, television may reflect or reinscribe dominance from the nation in terms of all such conceits. The mechanisms by which television reinforces or encodes national identity: through the use of collective memory and its pedagogical attempts to frame or represent nationhood on screen through processes such as the representation of an apparent shared culture all while creating the sense of an imagined, connected community in the form of a public watching television and later discussing it, are reflected institutionally, linguistically, banally, and in the everyday. These processes are of particular interest in Northern Ireland, where issues of national identity are at the fore.
Northern Ireland and Television

Television in Northern Ireland is a complex coalescence of public service broadcasting, commercial broadcasting, and streaming services (Ofcom, 2019). According to Oxcom’s 2019 report on television services in Northern Ireland, proportionally more people in Northern Ireland, 97.1 percent, than any other nation in the UK had a working television set. The report delineated the ways people receive television: “As of January 2019, 98% of premises in Northern Ireland had access to the core [Public Service Broadcasting] services. Coverage of the commercial multiplexes, which are carried on the main transmitters only, reaches 74.1% of premises” (pp 6). Further, the “main five” Public Service Broadcasting channels, “BBC One, BBC Two, UTV, Channel 4 and Channel 5” made up over half of all television viewing in the country (Ofcom, 2019). This is perhaps unsurprising as a result of its almost ubiquitous accessibility. Alongside these British channels, the report detailed that approximately one-fifth of viewers in Northern Ireland “claimed to watch one of the Irish channels at least weekly,” because they are able to “access Republic of Ireland TV channels from via overspill from transmitters based there” (ibid, pp 4) Here, location within Northern Ireland and proximity to the border shared with the Republic of Ireland impacts cultural production consumption. Still, the channels most watched are all British PSBs. They are, however, not all members of the same body. The BBC is largely funded through the licence fee, and Channel 4, for example, is publicly owned but has a great deal of commercial funding. These models impact each channel’s connection to constructing the nation. Because the BBC is perhaps the most overt public network with goals rooted in the creation and presentation of the state-nation, and whose history in Northern Ireland is explicitly bound to the boundaries of the country and its connection to the rest of Britain, its role in national identity construction is more than covert.
The BBC

“Yes Gerry, I accept [the ceasefire]. But it would have been nice to be told. You knew I’d be upset. I was more upset to hear about it on the TV, Gerry. I am the commander in chief of the Lower Falls Brigade [of the IRA]. It would have been nice to hear it from you rather than the British Broadcasting Corporation.”

—Da, Give My Head Peace

The BBC in Northern Ireland acts as a reflection and producer of forms of national identity in Northern Ireland. The interaction of cultural arbitraries within the BBC, the public and imagined community of those watching in Northern Ireland, and the collective memory that results from the narratives and production shown in the country are all vital to this process. The service therefore embodies television as a place of national identity formation.

A Brief History of the BBC in Northern Ireland

The BBC began broadcasting as the BBC Northern Ireland, following its partition in 1922, in February 1924 (Bardon, 2000). At this stage, and for the next 30 years, it only did so on the radio with the channel 2BE later renamed BBC Northern Ireland (ibid). Radio serves as an important medium in itself in creating national identity, but these years are also important insofar as they established the meaning of the BBC on the island and its position within Northern Irish society. The experiences of the producers and consumers of the BBC in the years predating television also influenced the later role that TV would play. Television first arrived in 1953 in the form of the singular BBC broadcast across all of the home nations, but in 1955, Northern Ireland was additionally granted BBC TV Service NI, what is now BBC One Northern Ireland (ibid). Nearly 50 years later, the service established BBC Two Northern Ireland. Alongside these
channels, Northern Ireland’s residents have access to the standard BBC channels such as BBC One, BBC News, BBC Parliament, CBeebies, and more. The presence and addition of radio and television stations in Northern Ireland is both symbolically and structurally important. Both Thomas Hajkowski and Robert Savage in their respective books, *BBC and National Identity in Britain 1922-1953* and *The BBC's Irish troubles: Television, conflict and Northern Ireland* delve deeply into many of these connections, commenting largely on the structure and inner workings of the studio and their outward impact.

The establishment of Northern Irish radio and television and the broadcast of other areas of the BBC in Northern Ireland had an impact on national identity rooted in the technology and medium of television as it relates to place. Hajkowski argues that the impact was two pronged. He writes: “First and foremost, the BBC represented a vital link to “mainland Britain” for the geographically disconnected statelet of Northern Ireland. The ability of radio broadcasting to create a sense of simultaneity and shared experience was particularly important” (2010, pp 1). He emphasizes the knowledge that listeners in Belfast had that people in Manchester and other cities in Britain “could hear the same broadcast at the same time” (*ibid*, pp 2). He suggests that this emphasized that “Northern Ireland was part of a larger national community” which included other Britons (*ibid*, pp 2). This speaks to the effect of the interaction between a public and the creation of the imagined community, one bound by state borders that are linked to nation (*ibid*). Second, he argues that establishing a station specific to Northern Ireland, or Ulster, allowed the BBC to “present the region, on a daily basis, as a bounded, knowable community, distinct from the Irish Free State” (*ibid*, pp 2). That is, the BBC both expanded the boundaries of the Northern Irish conception of the nation in the direction of the UK and contracted it in the direction of the Republic of Ireland.
Alongside the broadcasting boundaries of the BBC in Northern Ireland, the subject material shown on television and over radio was important to this construction. That is, the pedagogical nature of TV, shared by radio, comes to the fore. Hajkowski writes, “The BBC reinforced this communal re-imagining through news, talks, and entertainment programs that presented Ulster to itself. Much of the content of these broadcasts was banal; but such programs familiarized listeners with the terrain and boundaries of ‘their’ province of Northern Ireland” (2010, pp 2). In this regard, the very construction of Northern Ireland as a concept was taking place over the airwaves. In the 1983 BBC Annual Report and Handbook, the BBC reported a similar pattern, writing: “a large proportion of the radio and television programmes produced in Northern Ireland for local and for national consumption are about ‘ordinary’ life in the Province,” as opposed to the ongoing Troubles (pp 91). Savage explains this, suggesting that the move was conscious on the part of the BBC. He writes: “after the Second World War BBC NI carefully increased regional programming in an effort to try and create an Ulster identity that would set it apart from England, Scotland and Wales” (pp 6). This demonstrates the important role of elites in the creation and dissemination of nation building material. Alongside the banal demonstration of the nation, after WWII, the BBC took a more overtly unionist line. Hajkowski explains this, writing that after the war, “The BBC in London could do little to prevent BBC NI from celebrating the Twelfth, or any other heroic moment from the Protestant community’s past, such as the Siege of Derry” (pp 3). Unionists in Northern Ireland worked to take a more overtly British position than those in London were comfortable with. This history has brought the BBC to its current place in Northern Irish society and demonstrates the importance of the elites in these institutions. It is also true, however, that the general population had a great deal of influence over the content and style of programming. As Savage (2020) writes: “Referring to the
unionist majority in Northern Ireland, Robert McCall… had earlier warned the Board of Governors in London that viewers in Northern Ireland were ‘sensitive about sound and television being a potential source of evil to their way of life’” (pp 11). He includes this information after discussing an incident following a documentary series broadcast across the BBC about Northern Ireland and the public outcry that followed the country’s depiction. Savage details one such outcome: “Although it did not provoke a stir in Britain it caused outrage among unionists in Northern Ireland where an angry crowd attacked a BBC camera crew filming a football match” (Savage, 2000). This demonstrates the interaction between television and the world and the way in which this creates unifying meaning.

The BBC today, goals, and national identity

The more modern BBC is consistent in its application to the construction of the nation in Northern Ireland. Each year, the BBC releases its Group Annual Report and Accounts, which explains the explicit goals of the BBC and the steps it has taken and plans to take to ensure such goals are met. There are five “public purposes,” which are written in their 2018-2019 report. The first two are: “To provide impartial news and information to help people to understand and engage with the world around them,” and “to support learning for people of all ages” (pp 17). This supports directly the claim that television and its producers work to inform the public, to teach them, didactically, about the world around them, specifically in the way they see fit. For the BBC, then, Wright’s claim that television is a site of public pedagogy is explicitly true. Of course, the specific elements of these goals are important to understand: There is value in asking: “what is impartial news and who decides?” as well as questioning: “what is being taught and how?” The BBC’s following public purpose, “to show the most creative, highest quality and
distinctive output and services,” relates heavily to storyline and the aesthetic quality of television that compels audiences to watch and engage with its product. This, of course, is a feature of its capacity to hold power and behave pedagogically insofar as it retains and encourages viewership. As well as this, it interacts with the didactic quality of television in less overt ways. Specifically, the “quality” of “output and services” of the BBC relates to the narrative and representation of people on screen.

Representation is most clearly addressed in its final two purposes, which are perhaps most explicit in their promotion of the nation. These are: “to reflect, represent and serve the diverse communities of all of the UK’s nations and regions and, in doing so, support the creative economy across the UK,” and “to reflect the UK, its culture and values to the world” (pp 17). These speak to a kind of balancing act between the BBC’s understanding of Britain as both heterogeneous and homogeneous. That is, the corporation believes or works to make believable that a “UK” which shares “values and culture” exists. In this regard, the ability to contain and maintain a certain coherent and presentable image of the UK is held in high regard by the BBC. This is undertaken through all of its public purposes and produced narratives. However, as Price (1995) notes: “Nation after nation has learnt the modern impossibility of maintaining a monopoly over imagery... The task, then, is to determine how the state can generate, sustain, or encourage narratives to communal well-being and remain true to democratic values. If the state cannot undertake these tasks satisfactorily, the question becomes one of state survival” (pp 4). Wright’s (2013) analysis demonstrates that the nation is balancing, as the BBC does, a collection of identities that it hopes to make understood as singular through narrative. It is not clear that the BBC is successful in this task. According to their 2018-2019 report, only 56 percent of all UK adults “think the BBC is effective at reflecting people like them” and only 55 percent believe the
“BBC is effective at reflecting the part of the UK they live in” (pp 34). These numbers are lower in Northern Ireland, where only 50 percent “think the BBC is effective at reflecting people like them” (pp 45). The lack of understood representation is not delineated by genre at the BBC, however some of their goals on the topic are specific to them. Their report writes of comedy: “Scripted comedy on the BBC continued to hold a mirror up to the UK in unearthing diverse voices and presenting a huge array of talent, new and established” (pp 31). That is, similar aims in representation and diversity exist, but no such data on the success of such goals is available.

Comedy, Representation, and the BBC

In Northern Ireland, the sense of the lack of representation in comedy at the BBC manifests both on the basis of the characters and storylines on screen as well as the quality, quantity, and form of comedy available through the BBC and BBC NI in the country. Representation, then, comes in many forms and through various avenues, both on the greater BBC and within the BBC NI. Writer Billy McWilliams felt that Northern Irish voices did not receive proportional representation within the BBC. He shared:

> I think, in terms of Northern Irish voices on national British television... I think, if you’ve got a population of 60 million in the UK and 2 million of them [are] here, you’d expect, by that logic, one in 30 voices on the BBC to have a Northern Irish accent, but it’s not.

Here, McWilliams roots his sense of representation at the BBC in its broadcasting across the home nations, and not just the BBC in Northern Ireland. Northern Irish TV writer and creator Lisa McGee also identifies this problem, and relates it more specifically to comedy. She shares:

______________________________

2 Throughout the paper, double indented and italicized text are transcribed responses to interviews given in 2019.
There’s a BBC Scotland and a BBC Wales and there have definitely been big comedies from Scotland and Wales, but not from Northern Ireland. I think it’s hard. I think Northern Ireland is competing with the Republic of Ireland for slots on the BBC as well. You know there’s big shows like Mrs. Browns Boys and the Young Offenders and things that are from the Republic of Ireland. So, but also it’s just, it’s just historically tough to get anything Northern Irish on screen over here [UK].

This interpretation is revealing insofar as she underscores the way in which she believes the BBC perceives Northern Ireland. Specifically, she centers national identity and suggests an existence in which Northern Ireland is viewed by personnel within the BBC as Irish.

The lack of Northern Irish comedies across the BBC is more than a sentiment held by residents of the country. It is exemplified on screen. The BBC finished their “Comedy Archive” of “Classic BBC Shows” in 2014. The corporation included 170 television comedy programs in this list. Coding each of these programs for their “home nation of origin,” using information about the nationalities of the writers, creators, and actors in the shows, as well as their settings, each program was coded as being from either: England, Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland, Ireland, America, Canada, or some combination of these. The results are detailed below:

Figure 2: Classic BBC Shows, nation of origin
Within the 168 programmes coded, 79.1 percent were coded as solely “England” while zero percent were coded as “Northern Ireland.” Northern Ireland was also not coded as a member in any joint ventures across multiple home nations. That is, Northern Irish people were not the head writers, stars, or creators for any of the programmes selected by the BBC for this list. In this regard, Northern Ireland fared worse than any of the other home nations, Ireland, the United States, and Canada. While this list does not include all comedies commissioned by the BBC, it does reflect an important sample of such programmes insofar as they are a selection of shows that the BBC itself has deemed as “classic.” This suggests that the shows in question have some degree of influence within the broader UK. The BBC’s creation of this list in conjunction with its public purpose of ‘reflecting the UK, its values and culture” demonstrates a double usage of its power as a cultural arbitrary in both creating the shows and deeming them classic—a power that has, in this case, excluded Northern Ireland from being reflected.

The role of cultural arbitraries has worked here at two stages, both in production and promotion. Such arbitraries have excluded Northern Ireland as a representative of the UK’s

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<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Number of programmes</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<td>England</td>
<td>133</td>
<td>79.1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Scotland</td>
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<td>Wales</td>
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<td>Northern Ireland</td>
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<td>Ireland</td>
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<tr>
<td>England and Wales</td>
<td>9</td>
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<tr>
<td>England and Scotland</td>
<td>9</td>
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<td>England and North America</td>
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<td>England and Ireland</td>
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<td>England, Scotland, Wales, and Ireland</td>
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<td>England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland</td>
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<td>England, Scotland, Channel, Wales</td>
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values and culture and thus the British national identity shown to the world. As stand up comic and live show producer Graeme Watson suggests:

Northern Ireland has always been forgotten in terms of comedy here and in the UK. And of course, because we get BBC, like BBC from London, so we’re not really, we haven’t really been traditionally represented to ourselves, if that makes sense.

Here, Watson centers the role of the BBC in London at depressing the potential for comedy both created and broadcasted within Northern Ireland and that which is created by Northern Irish people and broadcast to all of the UK. In this sense, the process of English language acquisition in Scotland, as explained by Anderson in *Imagined Communities*, is a fruitful comparison. Anderson theorizes that no nationalist movement came to Scotland in the 18th century, when it did come to other areas of the world as a result of the spread of the English language. He writes: “Already in the early seventeenth century large parts of what would one day be imagined as Scotland were English-speaking and had immediate access to print-English… In the early eighteenth century the English-speaking Lowlands collaborated with Londen in largely eliminating the Gaeltacht” (pp 90). This demonstrates the value in a kind of absorption into a national identity. Anderson concludes that by virtue of spreading English to Scotland and then eliminating one of the Scottish dialects, England effectively absorbed Scotland into the notion of Britishness and thus reduced the threat of a nationalist movement. In many ways, this mirrors the behavior of the BBC as it relates to comedy and Northern Ireland. That is, the main BBC, based in London, is exporting the cultural language of comedy through television from mainland Britain to Northern Ireland while not absorbing Northern Irish comedy in mainland Britain. The
metaphor diverges where BBC NI comes into the fore; however, as Hajkowski has illuminated, this body serves its own role in consolidating identity (2010).

Representation and Cultural Arbitraries

The frustration associated with being “forgotten” by the BBC, or this lack of BBC comedy and representation in Northern Ireland is heightened by the perception that the BBC has near total control of television cultural production in Northern Ireland. As Garbhan Downey, an author who once worked for the BBC explains:

There is no other option. There is no other comedy funder in the North that is not the BBC, I don’t know if UTV do anything at all. They might have done, years ago, but not that, doesn’t sort of. I couldn’t think of any instance of it. The BBC, BBC Northern Ireland is the only agency in the North that will fund comedy. RTE will as well to a lesser extent, but even they partner with the BBC so if you’re gonna do comedy in the North, you’re going to have to deal with the BBC.

This perception reflects the belief that the BBC has a functional monopsony on television comedy production in the North and thus has final decisions as to the content produced. This bothers Downey because he believes that “ultimately the BBC is just not funny” because they are “completely compromised by their politics.” The perspective of the producers and creators of many of these projects is hugely important to understanding this dynamic. One playwright, Eddie Kerr, worked with the BBC on a comedy project for 18 months before walking away from it because of creative differences. He explained:

Kerr: Where I started off and where I ended up was two different places because I started writing something which I thought was important and then it ended up
being something that the BBC thought was important so I says, ‘not for me.’ So that was my experiment with... television, as well which, I had a horrible time.

Interviewer: Wait so, I’m sorry. So you thought it was important and the BBC thought it was important so you were—

Kerr: That’s where the process started, but it ended up that what I ended up with was not what I thought was important but was what they thought was important.

So they changed the whole process completely.

Kerr felt that the corporation had changed the tone of his writing to such a degree that it no longer reflected what he “intended.” In his view, the BBC was looking for a style of comedy different than his own. He suggests the BBC was saying to him:

    Well, we don’t really do that sort of stuff. You know what we need to have a much more of a Father Ted type like, ‘which was very popular at the time, ‘Can you be funnier? Can you give us situation, rather than, can you bejesus... You know these are Irish people. Let’s make the bumbling gunman who trips over his own weapon.

His specific interpretation of the BBC’s requests of his work are rooted in an understanding that the BBC views the island of Ireland in a reductionist manner that interprets national identity as both singular and rooted in violence.

After many months of work and meetings, Kerr decided he no longer wanted to be “associated” with the work produced. Importantly, Kerr has traditionally worked in theater, writing his own shows with a great deal of control over their content and outcome. This experience may not be specific to the BBC, but it does reflect the impact of the structure of television production, and the involvement of many people to the process of production and
pre-production. The role of television producers as cultural arbitraries is thus extremely important. As one interviewee shared:

*I often find that people who produce TV shows are rarely funny. They’ve produced TV shows for too long. They’re too polite to have a good sense of humor, almost. Obviously, I’ve never been a producer, there’s a lot of pressure in that job. I think that, I mean some of the things that do get made on the main BBC, like Mrs. Brown’s Boys... it’s fucking dreadful... It’s an Irish guy and an Irish family, but it’s made in London.*

Here, the interviewee is highlighting two dominant elements of television production as it relates to the BBC. While clearly they make the claim that, generally, television producers lack a “good sense of humor,” they also highlight their grievances with the national power dynamic of television production. Using Mrs. Brown’s Boys, a widely viewed comedy on BBC One and RTE One, as an example, they call into question the production location paired with the nationality of the creator of the show. In a way, the interviewee seems to ask whether the authenticity of the Irish identity can be maintained on screen if a program is filmed in London, England. The interviewee links this positionality with the standard of the final product, which they consider “fucking dreadful.” In this regard, they challenge the notion that Irish comedy produced in England can properly represent Irish people without becoming a parody of itself. The interviewee thus links people, place, and production under the scope of national identity reproduction in television.

Despite these perceptions, others in Northern Ireland view the corporation and its representation of the country in a more positive light. Tim McGarry, a successful radio,
television, and stand up comic and writer has worked with the BBC in Northern Ireland for more than 20 years. He shares:

*To be fair to the BBC, who are the broadcaster in the island of Ireland who have taken a risk and made a program like Two Ceasefires and a Wedding, and Give My Head Peace. UTV, a- for financial reasons and b- also for political reasons would never have made a program like that. The BBC, to be fair, always felt like they had some sort of obligation to provide comedy about Northern Ireland, which I think was really brave of them.*

McGarry, here, highlights the importance of the BBC in representing Northern Ireland to Northern Irish people. He mentions *Two Ceasefires and a Wedding*, a television special which became the pilot for his series *Give My Head Peace*. The show, which McGarry and his comedy group, The Hole in the Wall Gang, created in the early 1990s, initially for BBC Northern Ireland Radio, centers around two families, one in the Catholic community and the other in the Protestant community, whose lives become intertwined through a love story. The comedy revolves around the relationship between the families and the people in them, including two members of the IRA and a soldier in the British Army. The content of the show is highly specific, in ways that McGarry deems important. He shares:

*But we were very clearly of the mind: this is a local program for local people. We weren’t trying to pander to anyone. We didn’t care about anyone in the south of Ireland or anybody in England, this is clearly for our audience, and our audience who hadn’t seen much stuff about the Northern Ireland Troubles, and hadn’t seen it dealt with in a comedy way since the early seventies, suddenly saw themselves*
on TV or their neighbors on TV and saw the political situation on TV being mocked and satirized in a way that hadn’t happened in a long time.

In this way, McGarry roots his understanding of the BBC’s success at representation in BBC Northern Ireland’s success, not the London based, cross national BBC. He sees his own content as a part of this representation. He discusses this in terms of his work on a comedy panel show in the country, *The Blame Game*:

*There’s an argument that we’re pandering to a local audience, but that’s our audience, that’s what they want. Why would I? There’s no point telling jokes that they don’t want to hear.*

McGarry here places value on the Northern Irish voice and on the Northern Irish audience member. In this way, he works to justify his specificity in suggesting that the people in Northern Ireland and their disposition should be authentically represented on television made for them—in this case, with BBC NI.

A clear difference in the interpretations of representation between Watson, McGee, McWilliams, and Kerr and McGarry is rooted in the value attributed to the BBC and the BBC NI. That those who value BBC NI more heavily also felt that their voices were better represented is of little surprise. While no BBC comedies included in the Corporation’s list of classics had Northern Irish people involved in their creation, BBC NI does have such voices, as reflected by McGarry. Further, the corporation spent £194 million on “programmes for the nations and regions in 2017” (Ofcom, 2019 pp 101), and £22 million of this was spent in Northern Ireland. This reflects more than 11 percent as compared to the close to 2 percent Northern Ireland comprises of the United Kingdom’s total population. As such, it appears that, to some degree, understanding oneself to be seen by the home nations outside of Northern Ireland seems to be an
important feature of one’s own sense of representation. It is not enough to be shown on BBC NI. While very few programmes from NI have made large inroads in the broader BBC, one programme from the country, broadcast on Channel 4, has been a huge success. This hit, *Derry Girls*, forces us to examine television outside of the BBC, as well.

**Case Studies**

Several television comedy shows rooted in Northern Ireland are useful at showcasing connections between television production and broadcast, cultural arbitraries, and national identity. These include: *The Blame Game*, *Give My Head Peace*, and *Derry Girls*. These programmes reflect different eras, Northern Irish places, and comedy genres. The first two are broadcast on BBC Northern Ireland, while the last is a Channel 4 production. Together, these programmes help illuminate the ways in which the three loci of televisual power interact with comedy, national identity, and cultural arbitraries in Northern Ireland at a broad scale, interconnected to institutional, linguistic, banal, and everyday sites of identity production. Here, the relationship between comedy and national identity is at the fore.

**Give My Head Peace**

*Give My Head Peace* is the oldest of the four programmes. It’s pilot episode, called “Two Ceasefires and a Wedding,” aired in 1995, three years before the Troubles officially ended. The story centers around two families: one Catholic, the other Protestant. The pilot episode tells the story of Emer, the daughter of an IRA man, and RUC officer Billy falling in love and getting married. The family dynamics of both Emer’s household and Billy’s are central to the storyline and impact of this 30 minute episode of television broadcast on BBC Northern Ireland. The three
loci of television reveal crucial information about the interaction between this programme and national identity. Further, examining the theories of comedy in the context of national identity and its structures illuminate the potential impact of *Give My Head Peace* in the context of Northern Ireland.

**Narratives and Images**

The first episode of *Give My Head Peace* established a litany of characters and a location that reflected Northern Ireland. In the Catholic family, Da, Ma, Cal, Emer, and Paul all live together. Da and Cal are in the IRA, in which they are members of the Lower Falls Brigade. Ma and Emer oppose the use of violence and want the Troubles to be over, a hope that Da and Cal do not share. Paul, Cal and Emer’s brother and Ma and Da’s son, has come home from a 15 year stint in prison for a paramilitary related offense that the show suggests Da committed. In the Protestant family, Uncle Andy and Billy share a residence. Uncle Andy is an ardent loyalist with connections to the UDA while his nephew, Billy, is a police officer with the RUC. Outside of the families, the programme spends small amounts of time showing members of the British Army and other characters familiar to the Northern Irish landscape.

The depiction of people and the storylines in “Two Ceasefire and a Wedding” reflect two dynamics on the minds of the show’s creators. First, they wanted to show people in ways that were truthful to those they represented, even as some elements of the characters were outlandish. At Tim McGarry, one creator, remarks:

*You know, it is farcical, they’re cartoonish characters, but there’s a truth to them. There is a truth in all of these things. There’s a lot of bad marriages, there’s a lot of people on the fringes of Republicanism who claim to be, like the whiff of*
Cordite, like being associated with violence but they’re distant enough so they can clear their hands of it. There’s a lot of nasty sectarian bigots like Uncle Andy who are, when you objectively look at them, you know they’re very serious people but also farcical and idiotic, as well. Those people do and did exist, and still do exist, and we were able to tap into that and identify that and to make fun of it.

This comment illuminates one of the goals of the show: to tell these characters’ stories because they were real, and the people they reflected were real. This was sometimes done to showcase people’s failures, such as the sectarianism of Uncle Andy. Second, as McGarry explains, it was also to structurally undercut powerful groups with whom the writers disagreed:

*Paramilitaries did have power, did have respect, and the worst thing you can do to someone with too much power is to undermine them by ridiculing them and mocking them and taking away their feeling of impunity, saying ‘I don’t take you as seriously as you take yourself.’*

In the pilot of this series, the writers do this by questioning the size and dominance of these groups. In the opening scene, Cal and Da complete a roll call that includes only their names for the Lower Falls Brigade of the Irish Republican Army. Later, when Da calls the INLA, another Republican paramilitary group, and learns that they are supporting the ceasefire, he asks: “And that’s the position of both of youse?” Each of these instances serve to counter the narrative that paramilitaries possessed total strongholds in the country. As McGarry furthers:

*There aren’t any overt political messages in Give My Head Peace, apart from two things: we were clearly, clearly anti-violence: we did not think that political violence solved anything, and we were anti-sectarian.*
In this way, the programme is behaving didactically. The writers are working to teach the audience their value system. They attempt this on television through the use of comedy, which can be explained through its three dominant theories: superiority, incongruity, and relief. The Hole in the Wall Gang roots their comedic representation of paramilitary groups in the notion that such units are less powerful than they believe themselves to be. In this way, the public is positioned as superior to such groups, who are shown to lack both a sense of self awareness and real power. Alongside this depiction, however, the writers offer a kind of relief to an audience who has long been affected by the violence perpetrated by such groups.

Claiming that the IRA, INLA, or any other paramilitary group is less powerful than believed, or indeed making other jokes at their expense, repositions the seriousness with which an audience might otherwise view such characters. This offers individuals the ability to reframe the way they view paramilitary groups, demonstrating the important position of comedy in representation, narrative and the didactic capacity of television. Such reframing of paramilitaries may happen in more ways than one. As McGarry shared:

> And we wanted to undermine [paramilitary power], but also to humanize the other side. Most unionists have never even seen an IRA portrayed in a comedy way and they were just always guys in hoods shooting people, or guys with twitches. And we wanted to humanize them, and making people laugh at things is a way of getting to see things they wouldn’t normally see and accept things they wouldn’t accept if you’d said it in a different way.

That is, the writers and performers of *Give My Head Peace* wanted to oppose but not vilify members of paramilitaries. In this way, they hoped the programme provided didactic nuance. As one former member of the Ulster Defence Association, a Loyalist paramilitary, shared:
Give My Head Peace. Brilliant. Another show that, in my opinion, we can all laugh at because we can relate to because it actually takes the piss out of paramilitaries. They take the piss out of the Provises because of Da and Cal and they take the piss out of both the UDA and the UVF because of Red Hot Luke, Uncle Andy, and Pastor Bailey. And I think [that’s] a good thing because we can look at it and we can see where they’re coming from.

This demonstrates at least one case of the writers’ intentions being confirmed. This allows for audiences to alter the way in which they imagine the other through comedy.

The workings of comedic incongruity are also important to understanding the ability of the writers to emphasize elements of their didactic work. This is clearly shown in the ways the writers address the manner in which they believed Northern Ireland had previously been represented, especially in British media. McGarry explains:

>We had grown up with things like such a lot of bad Northern Ireland plays and films. They were all very wordy and they were all very serious and always ended up with somebody being blown up or cross community relationship and all that sort of crap, and we wanted to take the piss out of it.

This goal is exemplified throughout the pilot. First and foremost, the story is driven by the cross community love story between Emer and Billy, which plays explicitly on these tropes. There are numerous other examples of narrative clichés in this episode. The writers play on characterization tropes, as well. These are often depicted as self recognized. For example, when Uncle Andy meets Emer, Billy’s Catholic fiancé, the interaction is less than smooth:

Uncle Andy: Get the Fenian\(^3\) bitch out of here.

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\(^3\) This is a derogatory term meaning “Catholic” in Northern Ireland.
Billy: But Uncle Andy, there’s peace now.

Uncle Andy: So? Does that mean I have to like Fenians?

Billy: You don’t understand.

Uncle Andy: Of course I don’t understand. I’m a two-dimensional character. A... stereotypical loyalist bigot. I don’t understand until something terrible happens, and I realize the tragedy my hate has caused. See Romeo and Juliet, Act 5 Scene 3. But until then, get the Fenian bitch out of my house.

Here, the writers ground Andy’s character in tropes of the form of cultural production and the place of Northern Ireland. Further, they instill in Andy the awareness of these tropes. This acts as a moment of incongruousness that makes such awareness humorous but also forces the audience to focus on this moment because it is both distinct from life outside of the programme and the flow of other dialogue in the show. In this way, there is a double axis of incongruity. This moment, then, demands attention and is imbued with a degree of importance. The criticism it makes of other cultural production can therefore be viewed as one that the writers believe is crucial.

A similar criticism is made at the outset of the first episode. It more specifically speaks to the interaction between Northern Ireland and the British media. As Da and Cal have their two-man meeting of the Lower Falls Brigade of the IRA, the following conversation takes place:

Cal: [who speaks in an English accent] Why do we have to have a psychotic laugh, anyway?

Da: Because we’re evil godfathers of terrorism. How many IRA films have you been in? You get a manic laugh, a mad look—that’s it—and a thick Irish accent. That’s it.
Cal: [in his English accent] What do you think of my Belfast accent, daddy?

Da: Terrible. But it’s ok—no one in England will notice.

This dialogue emphasizes the place of *Give My Head Peace* as a part of the televisual landscape. That is, the characters in this scene recognize that they are being watched, in the form of television, while also positioning their programme in the context of other cultural productions. They note the interaction between previous depictions of the IRA, including that they are seen as the “evil godfathers of terrorism,” while also showcasing that such members have been traditionally played by individuals of English rather than Northern Irish decent. The double axis again encourages the audience to especially focus on this scene, and thus the didactic capacity is stronger. Here, this enables the writers to lodge a criticism highly embedded in the construction of the nation. While demonstrating the role of the English media in the past representation of Northern Irish people, the writers root the characters and situation well within Northern Ireland, as opposed to either Britain or the Republic of Ireland. This emphasizes the shared identity of those watching as situated within Northern Ireland.

**Object and Interface**

The medium of television and its position within the domestic sphere is crucial to the interpretation of *Give My Head Peace*. McLaughlin and Baker identify the programme as “the first time on television [that] depicted thoroughly domesticated versions of loyalists and republican paramilitary types” (2010, pp 66). In this regard, the domesticity is key to the understanding of the narrative and images on screen. The focus on the domestic space in the programme and the television’s position in the domestic space makes what Saenz explains as the “conformity between events on television and around the household” ever more likely in the
context of this programme (1992, pp 42). In particular, during the pilot episode of this show, the television itself features heavily, both in dialogue and in action. When Ma asks Da to move their IRA meeting from the kitchen into the living room, Da refuses.

    Da:    We can’t hold our IRA meetings with the TV on. Cal loses interest in the struggle once Noel’s House Party starts.

This comedic interaction between television and the Irish Republican “struggle” is illuminating. First, the writers are centering the power of television and narrative engagement that, in this case, had the ability to distract Cal. Second, they use this power to undermine the purported ideological commitment of the IRA, a group the writers have been committed to chastising. Finally, they place the characters in the context of Noel’s House Party, a BBC television show hosted by Noel Edmonds, an English presenter and comedian. This intertwines notions of identity and televisual power as it relates to British and English television in Northern Ireland. By suggesting that members of the IRA are watching Noel’s House Party, the writers are positioning them within the context of accepting certain cultural and institutional functions of the British state. This attempts to challenge their apparent ideological commitment to its downfall.

    Alongside discussing television, the programme shows the family watching the news and sports games on it. Within the episode, such experiences are specifically rooted in national identity. In one instance, Da calls the INLA to find out whether they are party to the ceasefire in the hopes that they could kill Billy, his daughter’s new Protestant fiancé. Da here had been pushed over the edge after watching a football game on television in the same room as Billy. The two men were supporting different teams: the Rangers and the Celtics. Such support represented a difference in their national identities, where Billy’s support for a Scottish team reflected his connection to Britain. This is a widely known line between British and Irish people in Northern
Ireland. It reflects the importance of the television as an object within the show around which people are able to impose their national identities. As such, the object and interface of television is rendered important by the television programme to the people watching it.

*The Blame Game*

*The Blame Game* is a comedy panel show broadcast on BBC Northern Ireland. The programme has one host, Tim McGarry, three regular comedians and one guest, who talk and joke about the week’s news. The discussion centers on both local and international news items, as the panel makes jokes about current affairs and pop culture. It is broadcast on a Friday night.

Narrative and Images

*The Blame Game* is illuminating insofar as it aptly demonstrates the interaction between various stages of the work of cultural arbitraries. Tim McGarry discusses the process of deciding what topics to cover on the show.

*We have a meeting the day before the show. We record the show on a Thursday and it goes out on a Friday night, so we meet on a Wednesday afternoon and go through the papers and discuss what are likely to be major topics and we try to get a mix of local and international. You’ll notice that the local audiences love the local jokes and we’ve done it for so long that some of the comedian’s and myself included sometimes go, ‘Ah jesus, we have to talk about local politics again.’ …

*So a stupid story like the ATM thefts that have been happening recently, we get weeks and weeks out of that because people like hearing about that sort of stuff. And they like hearing about local politicians that nobody in the rest of the UK*
knows about or cares about. That’s slightly limiting as well, and I think we try as
much as possible to talk about other things.

McGarry here reveals the process that he and his colleagues undertake when deciding what to
discuss on the program. The selections appear to be a negotiation between the topics the
comedians and producers want to discuss and the topics they believe the audience wants to hear.
This slightly disrupts the notion that cultural arbitraries have total power. In this case, the
producers and comedians are engaging with the public to best provide televisual content that they
will enjoy. This perhaps sheds light on the potential impact of the interaction between humor and
television, specifically in light of The Blame Game’s live studio audience. As one producer of
the show remarked:

There’s an authenticity, great humor is authentic. You can smell a phony laugh a
mile away. You can sit there and go, really not that big a laugh, you know. I
really really trust my instincts now. Sometimes I’ll leave in jokes that didn’t get a
laugh in, and in it’s own way that can be funny. Audiences are too smart, they’re
not some removed, and even in here. The thing about stand up, and what I know
is, there’s nowhere to hide in a live show, and I maybe bring that philosophy to
TV.

Here, the producer emphasizes two elements of the negotiation between comedy television,
audience, and his role as a cultural arbitrary. While the audience here can deliver “authentic” or
“phony laughs,” acting as immediate judges of the humor, the producer still has power when it
comes to the edit. He can include the content that he found most humorous, even if the audience
did not. Ultimately, the producer decides what part of the hour and twenty minute recording goes
into the twenty five minute broadcast, giving him arbitrary power that the comics and audiences lack. As one comedian shared:

Really early on I had quite a few experiences with television, and I got really disillusioned to it because, what would happen, you’d go and record something, whether it be a panel show, a stand up show, or even sketches, stuff like that, and you’d walk off set proud of what you’d just done and then it might be three months before it goes on television, and by the time it goes on you’re like: ‘Where did all the jokes go?’

This highlights the power of the editor to decide the shape of a programme.

While the comedians and television producers may be engaging in this way, there are other actors at play. As McGarry explains about both Give My Head Peace and The Blame Game:

We’ve never made an artificial balance. We’ve never [written] six jokes and said, right we’ve made 6 jokes about the IRA, we need to make six jokes about loyalists and vise versa. But the BBC would always look at it in the round and say over a series: ‘there is a fairness; there is a balance.’ This is not—you can’t count it to that extent—DUP got 1.5 minutes so Sinn Fein has to get 1.5 minutes. But that there isn’t a clear and obvious bias.

This recognizes a certain power of the BBC over production of a programme, especially one as politically adjacent as The Blame Game. McGarry suggests that the BBC is highly conscious of this balance because the Democratic Unionist Party:

Is very sensitive, and they are quite litigious and they like to shout at the BBC.

They hate the BBC so there are issues about how they are perceived.
This suggests another negotiation, this time between the political elite and the broadcasting elite in Northern Ireland and beyond. In this regard, both entities can be viewed as cultural arbitraries in Bourdieu's understanding, who determine the value and importance of certain art to be, or not be, broadcast. Such arbitrary power impacts the national identity representation on screen in Northern Ireland, especially as the DUP is a party that explicitly represents one such national group. We thus see the layers of power, from performers to producers to audiences to the government in cultural arbitration of television, reflecting institutional and everyday power, in particular of a programme that discusses both the political and the banal.

_Derry Girls_

_Derry Girls_ is a situation comedy broadcast on Channel 4 in the UK, including Northern Ireland, and on Netflix in many other areas of the world. The comedy centers on Erin Quinn, a 16 year old who lives in Derry, a city on the British-Irish border in Northern Ireland, in the mid-1990s at the tail end of the Troubles. The programme, written and created by Lisa McGee, explores life at Erin’s school, at home, and in the city. The characters within the show include her friends, family, teachers, and community members, each of whom have their own lives and stories showcased on screen. McGee suggests the show has “like eleven leads,” which ensures it resembles a “community.”

The Action Of Engaging With Television Through And Beyond The Screen

In 2018, _Derry Girls_ was the most watched programme in Northern Ireland across all genres. Its most popular episode had 608,000 viewers in Northern Ireland, over 100,000 more than the next most watched show. This reflected a 70 percent audience share (Oxcom, 2019). Its
average viewing figures in 2018 were higher than any television show in Northern Ireland since 2002, the year “records began” (Cumberbatch, 2018). This viewership has created a public that is “a space of discourse organized by nothing other than discourse itself” where discourse here is created through the writing and performing of *Derry Girls* that is then broadcast over the television (Warner, 2002, pp 50). Warner explains the element of a public that is particularly relevant in this case: that there exists “an awareness of the indefinite others to whom [discourse] is addressed as part of the meaning of its printedness” or, in this case, broadcast (2002, pp 66). That is, a public is constituted through both linguistic discourse and the knowledge that one is not alone in reading or viewing such discourse. This in turn creates a kind of imagined community between the individuals in Northern Ireland watching *Derry Girls*. As a result of the large viewing figures, which comprised a third of the country’s population at initial broadcast, this public can be understood as broad. Alongside this, interactions with others beyond the televisual experience has been crucial to illuminating this community for people on a qualitative level. As Ryan and Macey (2013) explain, the impact of the experience of discussing the programme cannot be underestimated in conceptualizing the effect on identity formation related to television, in particular to *Derry Girls*.

Important to the manifestation of this imagined community, *Derry Girls* represents a site of broader representation insofar as it is broadcast across the UK on Channel 4 and to the US and beyond via Netflix. This furthers influences the ways in which people think about the programme as it relates to the Northern Irish identity. As comic and live show producer Graeme Watson explains:

*Derry Girls... because it’s been such a hit on Netflix and everything, I think that’s a source of pride, you know, that something we’ve made has actually, is actually
good and not an embarrassment [laughs]. And does reflect, you know the reason people love that here so much is it...reflects their lives... So I think there’s a bit of pride around that.

Here, Watson identifies two elements of the successful reach of *Derry Girls* into international markets that bring the Northern Irish population a sense of gratification. First, that this programme is normatively “good”—the perceived quality of the show is high such that people across the world like it. This notion is supported by comedian Micky Bartlett:

* [Derry Girls] is a prime example of something from here...when you go, ‘fucking yes.’ Everyone’s proud of them, you know. And I’ve got a few friends who know Lisa, who writes it, and I think everyone’s just like [claps].

Second, Watson assesses that people are proud that a programme which showcases the specifics of their lives has an active international audience. As comedian and educator Teresa Livingstone details:

* I swear to god, that programme [Derry Girls], I’m like, ‘Has someone got my diary?’ I was 100 percent, I wasn’t like them, I was much more of a loser, but they, those- there was an episode where they went to see Take That. I was at that concert. I was at that actual concert. I have the diary entry to prove it."^4

Here, Livingstone remarks on a particular moment in the programme that she shared in her real life. This was possible because McGee centered plots in the show on actual events that occurred during the time about which she writes. She was able to do this largely because this time period reflected McGee’s teenage years in Northern Ireland, as well. This representation goes beyond

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^4 Livingstone goes on to explain: “So I was that age at that time, that exact time. I remember my friend and I got like a bedsheet and painted ‘Take That, Take Us,’ and then we left it out to dry and her dog walked all over it, so there were paw prints everywhere. You couldn’t read what it said. We were like ‘yeah!’ I remember it very well.”
these shared physical experiences, such as concerts. As Livingstone further explains of Derry Girls:

*They’re talking about just things like crossing the border and having your pump purse, that’s so particular to Northern Ireland and everyone’s like, there’s a lot of ‘I did that, I did that.’*

This represents Watson’s second claim, in which he suggests that to people in Northern Ireland, the international audience seems to reaffirm the importance of these specifics that represent their lives. Livingstone’s perspective reaffirms this:

*It made people sort of think: we’re funny just for being ourselves.*

This position demonstrates the two pronged representation offered to people in Northern Ireland through *Derry Girls*. It has reflected Northern Ireland to themselves and to other areas of the world, in a way that is both comedic and positive. The pride stemming from this occurs both throughout and after the moment of watching the programme. Audiences are engaging with it beyond the screen and carrying the emotions associated with the show farther.

Alongside engagement, the action of watching Derry Girls with the knowledge that others in Northern Ireland are doing so as well influences individuals’ perception and internalization of the show. As a former member of the UDA explains:

*Yes, I like Derry Girls. One thing about us, I think, we’re very, very good at laughing at ourselves. I think, I’ve always said to myself that you shouldn’t be able to laugh at anybody else until you can laugh at yourself. I’ve always said that, and I think, in Northern Ireland, we’re very, very good at laughing at ourselves.*
He highlights the perceptions he has of the other people watching *Derry Girls* in Northern Ireland by emphasizing a characteristic that he believes they share: a sense of humor about themselves. Here, he demonstrates the capacity of the comedy programme to create an imagined community, which Anderson argues possesses “fraternity,” or the understanding of likeness between people inside it (2005, pp 50). His thinking illuminates two important elements of his understanding of this imagined community. First, he includes himself in this group, initially saying “we’re very, very good at laughing at ourselves” He then binds the community, saying “in Northern Ireland, we’re very, very good at laughing at ourselves.” This reflects an important understanding of the shared characteristic between himself and the others he includes in his imagined community of Northern Ireland that the shared action of watching *Derry Girls* enables. This engagement goes beyond the capacity to laugh at the same show, which creator and writer McGee perhaps ensured:

*I’m very careful, I hope, with how I, where the jokes are aimed. If I’m taking a swipe at a Protestant tradition, I’ll make sure I do one after about a Catholic one, so that everyone, so that no one’s being laughed at. So I’m always very conscious of— I want everyone in Northern Ireland to be able to enjoy this show.*

McGee, here, bounds her audience in the same manner as the former UDA’r, emphasizing the people in Northern Ireland. Beyond this, McGee has manufactured a programme that potentially enables the feeling of sharedness between people in both the Protestant and Catholic communities by creating a kind of balance of jokes. To the former UDA’r, it is the capacity to laugh at the jokes aimed at oneself that he views as binding the collective in Northern Ireland. He cannot, however, be sure that this is actually how others in Northern Ireland respond to these jokes. In this imagined community of which he conceives, it only matters that he believes this is
how people behave. Such suspicions could perhaps be confirmed through engagement outside of the programme.

The response to *Derry Girls*, and the community created around it, is both interpersonal and has been institutionalised. In the first episode of series two of the programme, the girls attend a program called “Friends Across the Barricades” where they engage in cross-community building with students from one of the Protestant Boys Schools in Derry. One activity included listing out the similarities and differences between Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland. The students could not think of any similarities between themselves, despite prompting by the moderating priest, Fr. Peter, who implores: “I just want to pause and think about what’s in here [motions to his heart]. What about the fact that we all feel? And love and hope and—write this down—we all cry, we all laugh, we all dream? So I just want to think along those lines for a moment” (McGee, 2019). After this speech, the programme cuts to a scene of the students finishing filling out this blackboard:

**Figure 3: Derry Girls Blackboard**

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5 Londonderry to the boys.
The similarities board is empty. The differences listed here illuminate many specific or bizarre stereotypes the two identities have of the other, such as the notion that Protestants keep their toasters in a kitchen cupboard. The former highest ranking Catholic police officer in Northern Ireland, Peter Sheridan, speaks to his experiences with this episode:

So my wife comes from the Protestant community and there was a— one of the series they did was a blackboard ... before we discovered what was on the board, my sister had rang our house one day and my wife answered the phone and chatted to her and my sister says: ‘Can you settle something? Where do you keep your toaster?’ Michelle, my wife, didn’t know. She says, ‘It’s in the cupboard.’ And there’s this eruption of laughter. My family were obviously listening in, you know, Protestants keep their toasters in the cupboard. But it’s just the humor of it, Catholics love ABBA, Protestants hate ABBA.
This interaction speaks to engagement with television outside of watching it. This family utilized the episode of *Derry Girls* to address the perceived and, in this case, realized differences between this Protestant and these Catholics in Northern Ireland. That is, this moment on television and the ensuing discussion of the episode reflect the engagement with television that Wright (2013) discusses, and in turn creates a binding between those involved within the sphere of the everyday. In this case, people in different national groups are connected through their differences.

A replica of the blackboard has since been put on display in the Ulster Museum in the exhibition: “Culture Lab: Don’t Believe the Stereotypes” (McGreevy, 2020). The exhibit’s goal is to challenge the stereotypes listed on the blackboard. *The Irish Times* reported the museum chief executive Kathryn Thomson explaining: “The blackboard has been an opportunity for us to put it on display. Though we have taken a playful approach to it, we also want to challenge people’s perceptions and their stereotyping.” Thomson has recognized the power of this comedic television programme to explicitly and institutionally address the division between the two communities that has long been exacerbated by physical and educational separation. In Northern Ireland, only “6.9 percent of primary and post-primary pupils attend integrated schools” (Boorah and Knox, 2015, pp 2). This has a massive impact on the way the two communities are able to imagine each other. Multiple interviewees stressed the fact that they had not met a member of the other community until university, and explained the effect this separation had on the creation of their perception of the other. This was also the case for McGee, who met her first Protestant friends at Queen’s University, Belfast. Despite her conversations with these friends through her twenties about their lives, McGee was still unsure of how *Derry Girls* would be viewed by
members of the Protestant community in Northern Ireland, in part because of its central focus on a Catholic family and setting in a Catholic school. She hoped and thought it would work:

I think the thing is, it’s just about a family and a group of friends who are ordinary people trying to get on with an ordinary life in the midst of all this madness that they are not involved in, that they think is mad, as well, you know. That they would quite like for it all to stop. They just wanna love, you know, and be happy. I think everyone can identify with that, regardless of what your background is. So, yeah, I think that: it’s about an ordinary Northern Irish family.

Here, she focuses on the notion that the characters in the programme are defined less by their religious identity and more by their status as people who are Northern Irish. Watson, who is originally from the Protestant community, seems to confirm McGee’s hopes for the show:

With Derry Girls, in terms of those soft problems that are still around, I think Derry Girls makes us realize that we have more in common than we thought, than we think, you know.

This may happen in many ways. The blackboard in Derry Girls provides the opportunity for the Northern Irish audience to engage with the supposed stereotypes, especially in a way which felt as if they were included. The blackboard then takes the form of a kind of inside joke: people understand these stereotypes because they are all Northern Irish, regardless of their religious backgrounds. While the board writes out their “differences,” the action of watching and understanding the programme highlights the similarities between people across the country. In both a museum, institutional, and family setting, everyday, audiences are engaging with the blackboard narrative of Derry Girls well after the programme has aired.
This programme provides a litany of examples of engagement beyond the screen that create notions of imagined community. For example, between the first and second series of the programme, artists in Derry completed a mural of the five “Derry Girls.” Even this art project is more intertwined with the Northern Irish historical identity than is immediately obvious. As Davies (2001) explains, both Loyalists and Republicans in the country have, since the twentieth century, utilized murals as a mechanism to “enhance visibility” of their political identity (2001, pp 157). These murals have oppositional characteristics, depicting the Twelfth of July and loyalist paramilitary ‘heroism,’ for example, in Protestant neighborhoods, and government oppression and the Irish Republic Army in Catholic areas. As Davies explains: “A mural’s monumental scale and its link to architectural permanency make it a powerful articulation of this community’s presence” (ibid, pp 157). The *Derry Girls* mural exists in this context but behaves as a space of unity across the identity divide. It does so explicitly in the public sphere, bringing television out of the home and into the streets. The mural aptly demonstrates the power of television to create a broader imagined community, around which constructions of national identity can manifest.

**Television Summary**

In Northern Ireland, television acts as a site of cultural production where powers including the government, private industry, and television producers interact with two other dominant forces: content creators and viewers. As explained, these bodies work together to allow television to define boundaries, create a public and, with that, an imagined community. These multiple elements are institutional, where the government and private industry engage; linguistic, where language creates discourse around which a public and imagined community are built;
banal, where seemingly trite images of the country help define the boundaries of the nation; and everyday, where people watch, remember, and recall television. As such, television comedy is engaged in every process of nation building. As Give My Head Peace, Derry Girls, and The Blame Game have demonstrated, television comedy within Northern Ireland attempts to balance the competing national factions within the state: British and Irish. In all three cases, the programmes have opted to highlight the distinctiveness of the Northern Irish identity itself through the representation of local stories and characters. Creators, writers, and comics do this for a number of reasons. This includes personal ones, representing the features of one’s own life on screen, for example, and institutional ones, such as the threat of a political party suing the programme or channel. The BBC and Channel 4, both versions of public television in Britain, are motivated to encourage this framework for television shows in Northern Ireland because it computes with the status quo. While specificities about life in Northern Ireland may be refreshing for viewers to see, these television channels benefit from promoting the notion of an essential nature of this country, whose borders were defined fewer than 100 years ago. That is, emphasizing a Northern Irish identity de-emphasizes an Irish Republican identity because it celebrates positive aspects of the status quo, in which Northern Ireland is distinct from the Republic of Ireland. This serves to fold a civic Northern Irish identity into the construction of the British state.

II. Live Comedy

Sometimes it’s the only time of the day I get to talk to people. It’s such an addictive thing. I don’t know anyone whose ever done stand up just once. Even if they’ve been completely awful, they’ll get back up and do it again. So you get like, really sleepy stage before you go on because your
adrenaline is like, we need to save this up, and then it all kind of kicks in. and then you come off and you’re exhausted again. And you’re like, I have to do that again, tomorrow, or as soon as possible because it’s just a rush. And there’s just nothing better than the sound of people laughing at something you’ve made up or just let fall out of your face. And they give you money for it.

—comic Micky Bartlett, 2019

Live comedy, or comedic performances to crowds of people in real time, are a massive element of how people create and experience comedy in Northern Ireland and beyond. There are many critical distinctions between live comedy and broadcast comedy that ensure its importance in understanding the relevance of comedy and its impact on national identity formation. There are two key elements at play: space and interaction, that create this salience. Space here refers to the performance venue and many of its characteristics, such as its location and its size, that impact the way people contextualize the performance itself. Interaction in live performance occurs at three levels. The most obvious is between the performer and the audience members, in which the two engage in multiple ways: performers talk to and about audience members, audience members laugh and heckle performers, and in some shows audience members are directly asked to speak. The second level of interaction is between the audience members themselves, where people see and hear the reactions of others at the show. The third level is the interaction between the performers in shows, who create bonds between each other. These understandings of space and interactions in live performances are all crucial to the role of institutional sites: through segregation and space organization, linguistic sites: creating the didactic capacity of a comic, banal sites: hearing others laughing, and everyday sites: watching
and engaging with a performer or each other while in an audience. These make sense of the connection between live performance, comedy, and national identity construction in Northern Ireland.

**Space**

Space is hugely important to understanding the relevance of live comedy as it produces many meanings in this context. Most of these are related to the venue at which comedy is performed and its numerous characteristics. The four most important are: its location, its size, its general use, and its stage. Lockyer (2015) borrows from Mary Douglas’s understanding of the “total social situation,” which is integral to the “joke form” (2015, pp 588). Douglas and Lockyer argue that jokes are more than the words that comprise them. Other performance elements are relevant, such as the delivery style, the silences between words, and beyond. As well as this, the “total social situation” includes the location in which a joke is told. This encompasses both the broader place and the venue itself. Lockyer explains: “The stand-up comedy venue can facilitate, or hinder, the stand-up comedy process. The physicality of the venue is recognized as having significant impact on the stand-up comedian/audience relations, intra-audience activity and what is permitted in the performance space” (2015, pp 587). Lockyer focuses on the construction of the venue, including the elements that change its feeling and practical nature. To Lockyer, these characteristics of a venue may have an impact on her normative assessment of the quality of a stand-up show. Alongside this impact, these traits of a venue space contextualize the comic’s material. Likewise, the location of the venue within a city or town is important in providing context to a joke.
Contextual Power of Space

The construction of physical space and the context that accompanies it creates a different rulebook for comedians, which provides them the opportunity to speak in a distinct way from others while on stage. As comedian and compere Rory McSwiggan argues:

*People come in here and you can say things in here that you can’t say to people in the street or you can’t maybe say down the pub or you can’t say in your living room. You can say things like this on stage and people know it is a joke. That’s what performance is for. Performance is for, the stage is, an audience is, a microphone is, they are there and they provide a completely different structure for sort of the dissemination of people’s thoughts. And people, I’ve seen people laugh at things that I’ve said in here that are awful, and if I said those things to people that I know in the street or in a meeting or something, they would nearly call the police on me.*

McSwiggan here identifies the importance of space to the very function of comedy, especially in Northern Ireland. He suggests that the physicality of the room, the stage, and the microphone provides a context in which people are able to air opinions or thoughts that would otherwise be taboo because those in the audience “know it’s a joke.” McSwiggan’s interpretation of the power of the stage is rooted in a comedian’s capacity to enact the theories of comedy: relief, incongruity, and superiority. The context of the stage gives a comedian more room to challenge congruities, provide relief from taboo, or discuss societal positionality. Aarons and Mierowsky (2017) understand stand-up comedy as a speech act affected by context. They explain: “[A comic] enters into a place that on the face of it has more latitude than typical speech events. This latitude depends upon comic license. And license is the product of negotiation: between
performer and audience” (pp 166). In this way, while the space of the stage gives the opportunity for a comic to gain the “licence” to perform tabooed material, they have to work to maintain it through the interactions between themselves and the audience. Space serves as one crucial element to the power of comedy, and space is more than just the stage.

Space and History

The history of comedy performance in Northern Ireland is highly relevant to the concept of space. The comedy scene has changed dramatically in both the last few years and the last 50. Tim McGarry, who started his career in the late 1980s, explains the landscape of the city’s comedy at his outset:

*Because of the lack of infrastructure and because everyone was talking about the Troubles, there was nowhere to make a career here in that there were no theaters.*

*There was literally nothing in Belfast.*

This reveals two important ideas. First, McGarry roots his understanding of comedy careers, and the ability to start them, in the concept of performance space. To him, theaters play a vital role in comedy itself, even as his most prolific performances have been over television and radio. Second, he identifies the relevance of the Troubles to the practicalities of comedy in Northern Ireland. This goes beyond the capacity to make jokes on a cognitive level, and highlights how violence, and legacies of violence, disrupt the ability to have the space in which to perform comedy, a vital aspect of comedy production in McGarry’s eyes. Alongside this, violence disrupts spaces even when they do exist. A producer who started a live stand-up show in Belfast at the Empire in the early 1990s discussed this very idea:
You know, there are specific instances, nights I can remember when the bomb went off in Shankill Road on Saturday, and a week later there was a massive shooting... and you kind of had all these things to think about. You know, at a very simple level, when people come out to a comedy club, yeah people were frightened, so you kind of had security at the door... Was it appropriate to be doing comedy?

Here, the producer discusses the negotiations between location, violence, and comedy at many levels, including the safety of leaving one’s home and the presence of violence in both a literal and cognitive way. This relationship was, historically in Northern Ireland, at the forefront when comedy performance took place in neighborhood social clubs, rather than at venues in the city center. As one theater executive explained:

> With the advent of the Troubles, as they’re called, the conflict, people retreated—the city center became dead at night. People retreated to their sort of—their own areas. Ghettoization followed, and entertainment happened within those, the social clubs in those particular areas, regardless of their religious hue. Society became more segregated, so city center entertainment became less and less and less.

These social clubs took many forms; several were connected to paramilitary groups, the police, or the military. Gallaher (2007) describes paramilitary social clubs as “private, members only spaces” that are not “benign” (pp 216). They are and were places where people can and could gather and were sometimes where paramilitary members would plan attacks. Performances were also held here. Likewise, the police held events at their social clubs. Former officer Peter Sheridan described such:
I lived in Derry in a police compound and there was a social club as part of it. So the people who ran the social club were police officers. Yet they selected those comedians who largely dealt with the conflict to come and do events at the police club. If they were, if these comedians were inappropriate, even though it was poking fun at them on some occasions. If they had been that inappropriate, they wouldn’t have asked them.

Here, we see an important interaction between the location of a performance, at a police social club in Northern Ireland, and the connotations that come with that performance in that moment and historically. Although Sheridan works to highlight that the police were interested in comedy about the Troubles, he also presents the notion that the organizers had a degree of control over the material as it relates to “appropriateness.” Alongside this, performing in a space such as a police club may come with connotations of some degree of agreement with the police, whether or not a comedian possesses it. The once prevalence of these clubs and the connotations around them are undoubtedly linked to the Troubles and the national identity struggle surrounding them.

Space and Change

The comedy scene in Northern Ireland has been rapidly changing since McGarry’s early days, with the introduction of several new performance spaces. Micky Bartlett, who has been performing for the last 11 years in the country, gives his perception:

So there are like maybe ten extra comedy clubs in Belfast since I started. Because there’s a really vibrant scene here.

In an even shorter time scale, comedian and comedy live show producer Graeme Watson has noticed a shift:
two years ago I would have said to you, like, the comedy scene is about to die [laughs]... In the last 12 months there’s now comedy clubs that, you know, you have the Empire, you have the Limelight Comedy Club, you have Pug Uglies, you have Lavery’s Comedy Club, and that’s just in Belfast.

Watson here identifies several clubs located in Belfast’s city center, as many are. These exist largely outside of the segregated neighborhoods of the city, such as in public housing areas, run by the Housing Executive, where the most recent census data led to a Dissimilarity Index of .814, where 1.0 represents “total segregation” (Shuttleworth and Lloyd, 2018). This coefficient is much lower in areas of the city center, which is largely the result of its status as a predominantly “non-residential district” (Nagle, 2009 pp 332). Based on the 1991 census, the Botanic, the neighborhood where the Empire, Lavery’s, and the Limelight all operate, had a close to 50-50 division of Catholics and Protestants. Nagle (2016) argues that since the early 1990s, the city center in Belfast has become “a space in which nationalists and unionists are made to feel that they have equal access for cultural and political performances” (pp 130). In this way, the city center is perhaps best described as residing between segregation, not outside of it. As the producer at the Empire Comedy Club explains:

*At the end of that street is the Shankill Road or Sandy Ro, which is a very staunch, loyalist area, and at the end of that street is the Markets, which is a very strong Republican area, and somewhere around here it’s students who come from all over, and in that little former church [The Empire], there was a very different kind of thing going on.*

Here, he emphasizes the kind of liminality of the former church venue that exists between segregation that he argues enabled it to be a place of “relief” for members of an audience,
especially during the Troubles. In this regard, this analysis explicitly links space to the relief theory of comedy, suggesting that the location, in this case, allowed people to feel a sense of relief and the energy associated with that, which was brought into the venue and performance.

This understanding of place illuminates its importance, especially in the context of a segregated city like Belfast. Huck et al (2019) describe the notion of “shared space” in the city, where people feel safe to intermix. Most of these included “nonspaces” that were disconnected from “identity” such as “shopping malls or motorways… that are defined by their functional and transient nature” (pp 232). The city center, which is also considered safe, differs because of its historical legacy that nonplaces lack. The authors conclude that “the city center… has been established as a shared space due to extensive peace-making initiatives” (2019, pp 232). This suggests an active attempt, rather than passive one, at ensuring this area is considered shared, by both the government and individuals—the betweenness of the city center may thus be consciously recognized. As such, any comedy club in the city center is recognized in light of this manufactured sharedness which will contextualize all performances.

**Space, Connotation, and Control**

Beyond the physical locations of the theaters, the physical spaces have their own connotations that stem from both the standard uses of the space as well as their promotion. That is, some venues are typically large bars or clubs, such as the Limelight, while others, such as the Accidental Theater or the Black Box, are always used as performance spaces, even if they also
sell alcohol. On top of these general uses, the advertising and promotion of the comedy shows are relevant to the space. Micky Bartlett explains:

_The [Limelight's] got a completely different vibe because they've sort of marketed the gig to get younger students to go to the nightclub after the show. So, it's a lot of 18, 19 year olds who are dressed up for the night to find someone to have sex with, but they have to sit through a comedy show._

Bartlett’s reading of the Limelight is based on the venue’s marketing strategy that is linked to the club’s usual type of business as well as its proximity to universities in Belfast. This demonstrates the importance of space and connotation in creating the expectations of the comedian and audience members. The organizers of shows have the motivation to create a connotation for their venue space. Luke McGibbon, a comic who runs an open mic night at the Pavillion on Monday nights has thoughts on his show and space:

_I’ve always viewed the Pavilion as the bottom level, and I sometimes go to lengths to ensure it stays that way because the other gigs aren’t really very open, borderwise, to newer acts, which is a shame._

McGibbon emphasizes this goal on the backdrop of larger clubs, such as the Empire and Lavery’s, which he views as providing too little space for new performers. The relatively small size of the Pavillion, in part, allows newer acts to perform at a low risk. McGibbon is always working to ensure the space remains open compared to other venues. Watson also contextualizes The Black Box, where he runs many shows, in the scene at large:

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6 Accidental Theater, that hosts improv and stand up performances, as well as poetry readings and plays, does not technically sell alcohol. Instead, they have a bookshop where you may purchase a used book which comes with a “free drink.” The books have colored stickers on them, indicating the level of drink you may receive for “free.”

7 To themselves and others.
The Black Box, you know for me, and I have a thing coming up in July like a season of comedy which is like an Edinburgh Fringe Festival preview season. Mostly that’s how it started, it’s called Comedy Lab, and it’s there to provide a platform for performers to, well not just do their comedy club sets of 10, 20 minutes but to develop solo shows and do different things and experiment.

Watson refers to the Edinburgh Fringe Festival, a massive comedy and stage performance festival in Scotland where more experimental shows can be seen, as one of his big influences after describing his own taste in comedy as “artsyly pretentious,” which is distinct from some of the more “laddish” performers in Northern Ireland. He wants the Black Box to help hone the style of comedy that interests him. In this regard, both Watson and McGibbon demonstrate how space is interlinking with the work of cultural arbitraries.

Access to the control of a space, such as the Pavillion, the Black Box, or the Limelight, gives a person the power of a cultural arbitrary insofar as they are able to decide who to book and how to market them. Watson, for example, was one of the early comedy producers and promoters who booked Teresa Livingstone. This booking gave her entry to “this whole scene going on that I had absolutely no idea about.” For her, this booking was very important because it served as a ticket into the world of stand-up comedy in Northern Ireland as every booking gives you a “little credit.” That said, Livingstone has problems with the system, especially as it relates to power dynamics and gender. She shares a frustration with other women that many people with the power to book shows consistently underbook female acts. Livingstone explains:

There’s a real denial of there being an issue there. They’re like: ‘It just so happens that everyone I’ve ever booked is male, in six years.’
While she recognizes that this is a slight exaggeration, especially as bookers tend to use her presence as the example of their nondiscrimination, Livingstone is frustrated with elements of the booking system and the power many people have over access to space, dictating who is and is not able to perform. This grounded frustration demonstrates space-control as cultural power. Once booking is enacted and performances take place, other elements of live comedy become central.

**Interaction**

**Performer and Audience**

The interaction between the performer and the audience is of utmost importance in a live show, and it is the core of any comedy production. In the simplest terms, a performer speaks and an audience responds in the form of laughter, but the interaction is more layered than this and contends with more than a give and receive relationship. The performer and the audience negotiate a power dynamic, whereby individuals on stage are continually working to “control the room” (Carter, 2019 pp 772). In this way, performers of live comedy are constantly attempting to maintain the attention of their audience. Successfully predicting an audience, engaging with them on a personal level, and adjusting to them gives a comedian command of the stage and the power to behave as didactically as they please. This negotiation, however, enables the audience to share “power,” as it might be understood, with the performer. They are able to withhold laughter and applause, engaging in personal, and sometimes collective, everyday acts of resistance against a performer. Likewise, a performer may coax laughter from audience members unlikely to agree with certain material. As such, the power dynamic is blurred and interacting. Performers contend with an audience in various stages and levels.
Comedians and writers engage with an imagined audience before they arrive on stage. This is a well theorized concept that applies to the way individuals mediate with an unknown. Litt (2012) explains: “The imagined audience is the mental conceptualization of the people with whom we are communicating, our audience. It is one of the most fundamental attributes of being human” (pp 331). In this regard, Litt situates this concept in everyday interactions between individuals, providing the example of speaking over the phone to someone a person has never met. This theory aptly applies to performance, as well. Comedians and writers prepare material and scripts for performances to audiences they can only imagine. Like the person on the phone, they can only make assumptions about how the audience will receive this material. In the case of comedy, where immediate audience reaction in the form of laughter is important, comedians and writers must write to this imagined audience in the hopes that their assumptions about the audience are borne out. Oftentimes, this changes from show to show. As comedian Micky Bartlett shares:

\[ I \text{ look at them both as very different because, first of all, the ticket price of the Empire is double what the Limelight is... that creates a different atmosphere. If it's five pounds or six pounds, people come in, they'll take a chance, whereas for ten pounds, this better be fucking funny. So there's a little bit more pressure in the Empire... But in terms of the actual material, I don't know. I think here as well, a lot of younger people have grown up watching a different kind of comedy. } \]

Here, Bartlett identifies the ways he imagines his audiences, as well as the pressure this brings to his performance. He pinpoints two key distinctions between the Limelight and the Empire in Northern Ireland: the age of the audience and the cost of entry. To Bartlett, the age of the audience impacts the way he imagines their tastes, but the cost of entry influences the way he
imagines the audience’s expectations, or imagination, of him. This demonstrates that comedians and writers consider a great deal before each show. This can affect the material they choose to perform or the material they produce during their writing stages. Comedian Teresa Livingstone highlights this self-censorship in the name of audience impression:

*I used to try very consciously to be: ‘I’m not gonna do what they might expect a female comedian to talk about.’ Whereas now, why wouldn’t I? I am a female comedian, why wouldn’t I talk about that? You know I am going to talk about dieting because that’s something that I’m doing. You know, whereas before I would be like: ‘That’ll be too obvious. I must just talk about things that only everyone will identify with.’*

Here, we see Livingstone’s battle with herself and with her perception of what the audience might wish to see. This perception has changed the more she has performed:

*I don’t ever look down in a room and see just women laugh. The men find it funny, too.*

This may demonstrate that her previously held beliefs dictating that she could only perform material that “everyone will identify with” was incorrect and, as such, so was part of her conception of the imagined audience. Comedian Shane Todd reported a slightly different strategy to Livingstone’s initial writing process:

*No specific audience at the start. I want my stuff to be universal, to be funny. I don’t want to curtail the way that I’m thinking, too much. If I have a joke and it’s only going to work in Belfast, I will still do that, but just in Belfast. The rest of it I’ll try to keep open.*
Todd’s performance tactic takes place after, rather than before, writing, but he emphasizes that he wants his jokes, as best as they can be, to be universal. This is perhaps affected by Todd’s imagination of where he will be performing as opposed to Livingstone, who, for the time being, plans to stay in Northern Ireland. After writing a joke, Todd asks himself: “Would this work in Chicago as well as it would work in Belfast?” Although he claims to write for “no specific audience,” it is possible to recognize even this consideration as imagining an audience. In this way, an imagined audience has a great deal of power over the performer.

Imagining an audience with whom a performance will engage is important beyond the capacity to compel actual laughter. The functionality of utilizing humor itself as a way to navigate other material with an audience is not lost on performers and writers. Playwright Eddie Kerr shared:

_I always used comedy as a means to engage with an audience who aren’t familiar with theater. So humor was a very important mechanism. And also there was a gallowish element to it, as well, because sometimes the humor is very dark... I use plays as a political thing, but also as a community thing. Telling a story about community... Telling your story, telling my story. Telling our history, our culture, our identity. So to me it’s always been an important mechanism of engaging with communities who are sometimes disenfranchised from the cultural process._

Kerr uses humor as a form to encourage an audience to trust his message. In this regard, engagement with the audience is distinct because humor is the means rather than the end. Kerr highlights specifically how humor and audience engagement are crucial to his capacity to behave didactically and to produce effective political messages. His audience attendance numbers at his most popular play suggest he does. _Packie’s Wake_, a play set in Derry, “played to 48,000
people” in Derry alone, according to Kerr. That constitutes close to half the city’s population. This suggests Kerr correctly predicted his imagined audience and the actors and writing compelled continued attendance.

After their predictions, performers have the opportunity to engage with the actual audience. This happens differently across all genres. Plays are perhaps the most rigid in their capacity to directly engage with the audience during a performance as the script is determined before a show. This is particularly true in scenes of dialogue, where one actor’s lines are dependent on another actor’s commitment to the script. Improv comedy exists in the completely opposite direction as the performers are required to engage with the audience, who provide suggestions that determine the direction of the show itself. Alongside this, in every scene, performers can change their tone and style in response to an audience. The nature of stand up comedy allows the performer a certain malleability as they relate to an audience, sitting somewhere between a play and an improvised scene. As DeCamp (2015) suggests: “Stand-up comedy, among other art forms within the live performance genre, possesses the unique ability to respond in real time to the mood, energy, and overall engagement level of a crowd” (pp 1). The performer can thus adapt to an audience throughout their performance. In this way, the audience has a more active role in the direction of each show. Although performers can make these changes throughout a show, DeCamp (2015) identifies the “initial moments of contact between a comedian and the audience” as crucial to a “stand-up comedy performance’s success in fostering audience receptivity” (pp 1). That is, the stand-up comedian’s introduction to their audience is perhaps the most important moment of a performance. DeCamp’s interviewees in the American Midwest revealed how in their first moments they would “find a common referential point from which to establish rapport and relatability” (pp 7). One interviewee reported referencing a local
area that encourages the audience to trust them. In Northern Ireland, Bartlett reports the same
tactic:

Because the town I grew up in, Lurgan, is kind of almost one of Northern
Ireland’s punchlines. Like if you want to, if a comic comes over here, they’re like,
‘Where’s a bit of a shithole, so I can just change this joke?’ They’re like ‘ah
yeah, Lurgan.’

In this regard, the importance of gaining audience trust is rooted in understanding the local
landscape and identity. This is important to “winning over” a room.

Alongside the considerations of the imagined audience and the adaptations to a real
audience, there is literal engagement between the comic and their audience. Lockyer (2015)
highlights the importance of personal communication between a standup comedian and their
audience in creating the “comedy of experience.” Perhaps more profoundly than this, she
highlights that: “Communicating with the audience… was regarded by some stand-up comedians
as one of the most pleasurable features of their performance” (2015, pp 597). That is, talking to
members of an audience during a show is both pleasurable to a performer and the audience
because it creates a sense of “intimacy” at the comedy show. It also creates unexpected
moments. At Micky Bartlett’s June 11, 2019 performance at the Empire comedy club, of which
he was the emcee, he had a great deal of audience interactions, such as discussing an audience
member’s beret hat and speaking with a group of people visiting Belfast from Australia. This
interaction, while directly engaging with the Australians, worked with the broader reactions of
the crowd. As well as interactions on stage, interactions between the audience and performers off
stage are real. Hattingh (2018) discerned the motives to attend comedy shows held by audience
members, and found that “social bonding motives” were amongst the highest (pp 12). He thus
suggests that theaters promoting comedy shows should utilize ad-copy that promotes “opportunities to socialise with comedians” (pp 14). In this regard, Hattingh has identified this as an important aspect of the comedy experience. Comic Rory McSwiggan had three principle versions of audience interactions that highlight their importance. He runs an open mic in Derry, where audience interactions have occurred such that people have decided to perform, themselves. The second and third impactful audience interactions McSwiggan highlighted happened after his performance in a comedy game show in Derry called “Let’s Get Quizzical.” In the show, the comedians played a game with their audience in which people had to identify a very zoomed-in photograph to be either a “football striker, a hunger striker, or Commander Riker from Star Trek.” This spurred two responses. McSwiggan explains the first:

> A friend of mine came up to me afterwards and was like, or later on, and said ‘I couldn’t believe you were doing that. I hated you for doing it, but I was also really really glad you were doing it as well because we need to do the stuff like that in terms of talking about sensitivities of the Troubles.’

This audience member, who already had a relationship to McSwiggan, shared their appreciation for McSwiggan’s game, and the type of identity based conversation it may spark within the country, suggesting that this audience member recognized the capacity of comedy to shift taboos or provide relief from rigid norms. The second response was quite different. McSwiggan explains:

> Right after the show ended, I was going upstairs, and the guy at the bar, that guy with the hat that walked past twice, he said: ‘If you ever do anything referring to

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8 This audience interaction occurred in the same venue where I was interviewing McSwiggan, and one of the men about whom he spoke was, at that moment, tending to the bar only 15 feet away. McSwiggan spoke in a hushed tone, but this man’s presence may have shortened the story.
Bobby Sands or any of those hunger strikers again, I will personally take your head clean off your shoulders.

This reaction demonstrates the risk associated with comedy outside of failing to make an audience laugh. In this way, audience and performer interaction after a show takes away a degree of a performer’s power given to them by the protection of the stage. This type of reaction and interaction may discourage comedians from performing certain material, especially in a place with a history of violent sectarianism. The interaction also highlights the effect performers can have on members of an audience, to the extent that an audience member might genuinely threaten bodily harm to the performer. Although this interaction demonstrates actively the capacity of an audience member to take back power once a show has ended, it also illustrates the didactic power of a stand up comedian and the fear of this power.

Audience and Audience

The interaction between audience members at a comedy performance, as opposed to a musical or dramatic one, is particularly evident. Laughter is transmitted in both a visual and aural manner, and it has impacts on the way individuals perceive the material presented to them. Martin and Gray (1996) created an experimental design which tested the impact of laughter in a recording of a radio comedy programme on how listeners would rate the show. They found: “Those participants who listened with laughter present gave significantly higher ratings of the funniness and enjoyability of the recording. Moreover, they laughed and smiled more in the experimental condition” (pp 221). This finding suggests that laughter has a social power because it indicates to people places where others found jokes to be humorous. In this way, it sets a social norm as to what material is funny. Lawson, Downing, and Cetola expand on this impact in their
1998 paper which measured the impact of “strong” or “weak” laughter on participants’ “perceived funniness” of “humorous recordings” (pp 245). Across two experiments, the researchers demonstrated that individuals’ opinions on the quality and humorousness of jokes is impacted by whether they hear laughter, whether that laughter is “strong” or “weak,” and whether that laughter is “unconstrained” or “constrained” which are synonymous with real or staged, finding:

Planned simple comparisons revealed that participants in the unconstrained condition who were exposed to strong audience laughter perceived the jokes as funnier than those exposed to weak laughter... However, in the constrained condition, the strength of the audience laughter did not significantly affect participants’ ratings. (pp 247)

This demonstrates something crucial. Here, participants only rated material as funnier with statistical significance when they understood the laughter to have happened live, in response to the material with which they were presented. This highlights the specific impact of experiencing laughter live, which is viewed as authentic and thus behaves as “social proof of the funniness of material” (Lawson, Downing and Cetola, 1998 pp 243). The authors here suggest that live laughter compels listeners to find material funnier because others have confirmed that it is funny.

There are two important takeaways from this finding as it applies to live comedy performance in Northern Ireland. First, the laughter of audience members, so long as it is understood to be “unconstrained” or real, has “social” power. It demonstrates the capacity of a collective to influence the individual. In the case of comedy, this suggests that being around others laughing may have an impact on personal opinion. That is, jokes are built on facets of real life and a comedian or playwright’s relationship to them or interpretation of them—these do not exist in a vacuum. These jokes may operate at an intersection of applied versions of the
superiority, relief, and incongruity theories, each of which require a certain understanding of the world that is, in some way, shared between the writer or performer and the audience. This exact worldview, however, need not be shared by every member of the audience, given the research of Martin and Grey as well as Landon, Downing, and Cetola, who demonstrate that others’ laughter may compel one’s own laughter. So long as a critical mass of audience members share an interpretation of that which is incongruous, what is superior, and what causes relief, with the performer, others may begin to understand or momentarily share this view. In this regard, this collective moment encourages people to absorb themselves into the opinions of other members of the audience. In a way, this gives comedy the capacity to behave in didactic ways insofar as it provides a space that serves as a confirmation or promotion of a specific understanding of the world that members of the audience observe and potentially internalize or adopt. Here, it is not simply that individuals are compelled to accept a certain worldview; instead, experiencing audience laughter demonstrates to an individual that, at least, a collective shares a worldview. It is “social proof” that people share a point of view that enables the material to be funny, especially to those in the audience that remain unconvinced by a joke or comic persona when a large portion of the audience seems to be (ibid, 243). In this regard, they are able to observe that they are in the out group.

The “social” power of audience laughter suggests that people within an audience understand the group to be some kind of social collective that behaves as a subsection of the population as a whole. As opposed to television, the audiences attending live performances are bound by physical space. Only those in physical attendance are members of a live performance audience, and participants can be seen by other participants. As Derry-based comedian Rory McSwiggan explains:
Comedy is a great way of addressing that, that brings everybody together. That’s the unifying thing. People can drink in the house, why do they come to bars? To sit and look at other people. The comedy is the facility for gelling people together, for bringing people together about whatever.

Here, McSwiggan highlights the importance of an audience in both binding people and encouraging them to attend a show. The social power works to create an audience, which becomes a collective bound by physical space. In Warner’s (2002) view, this group does not constitute a public, however in almost all cases, comedy audiences are made up of people who do not all know each other. As such, audience members are only able to make inferences or assumptions about the nature of other members, whether they are representative of a broad or specific population, such as their average age range or national background. These assumed characteristics may be based on the venue, the size of the crowd, and other material features and visual clues from which an audience member may draw. These assumptions may then contextualize the laughter of other audience members, situating individuals within some understood collective, whether or not this understanding is accurate.

Experiencing the reactions of fellow audience members happens only in response to material. The laughter can then be understood in light of this content, as well as other contexts. In Northern Ireland, the coalescence of material and laughter may have specific influence. Comedians, improvisors, and playwrights in the country report performing and writing a range of material, balancing both local and universal themes in their comedy. Many people discussed walking the line between audience satisfaction and challenging themselves to write more universal comedy. As stand up comedian Micky Bartlett explains:
Obviously I started here and I live here. You can almost fall into this trap of doing comedy that only works here. Cause Northern Ireland, it’s still quite a colloquial place. Again, in the Empire last night local jokes are like: ahhh! [mimics a crowd going wild]. And anyone who isn’t talking about Northern Ireland straight away they kinda don’t trust.

Bartlett here highlights that audiences seem to most appreciate jokes about the specificities of Northern Ireland, above all else. This might entail many types of narratives. Bartlett later hones in on the idea of “comedy that only works here,” after explaining the differences between performing at venues across the country that attract distinct audiences:

The one thing that kind of keeps the [generational humor] gap together, here, is the sectarianism, weirdly, because that hasn’t changed. That’s the one thing in Northern Ireland where everyone still laughs at it.

He refers here to the type of comedy that focuses on ideas such as: “Catholics talk like this, Protestants talk like that,” which he claims draws laughs across various demographics throughout the country. Comedian Tim McGarry supports this claim:

We’ve got sectarianism. Basically, what it is, it’s a trope. It’s a fundamental basis, everyone here is familiar with it, everyone here understands it, and even 25 years after the ceasefires, 20 years after the Good Friday Agreement, we’re still a divided society. It dominates society. It dominates the political system.

In this regard, McGarry argues that sectarianism serves as a universal topic with which everyone in Northern Ireland can engage. In this way, his interpretation suggests that the theories of comedy, which require some shared worldview, can be applied to the concept of sectarianism in Northern Ireland, if not the specifics exactly.
In one performance of Bartlett’s at the Pavillion, which he posted to his Youtube page, he analyses the worthiness of the Ulster Scots language for a government funded grant. Ulster Scots is a traditional dialect that is both spoken in everyday life and has been a tool used by the Democratic Unionist Party to counter or delay an Irish Language Act in the country. This disagreement has been a political challenge in Northern Ireland for several years and played a part in stopping the Legislative Assembly from meeting for close to three years between 2017 and 2020 (BBC, 2020). In this regard, the discussion of Ulster Scots in Northern Ireland, on both sides, is imbued with sectarianism between British and Irish identities. Bartlett jokes at his show:

I don’t know if you’ve ever heard Ulster Scots, but I’m just saying, in my personal opinion, that’s just Culchies\(^9\) getting a grant [audience laughter]. That’s, it was made—

All the Catholics [in the room] going: ‘Fucking Micky, show them!’ Protestants are like [crosses arms]: ‘Fucking, it’s back on, boys.’ I just had this image, if you’ve ever heard any Ulster Scots words, it’s just an accent [laughter]. (Bartlett, 2019)

He goes on to give examples of Ulster Scots words that are the same as words in English, or are English words that have slightly different meanings, such as a “floor sucker” being the Ulster Scots term for vacuum. Bartlett also frames his dismissal of the language in sectarian terms, highlighting that he believes Catholics would respond one way to his opinion while Protestants would respond in another way, emphasizing this divide. His perception that people in Northern Ireland respond favorably to these types of jokes— those that highlight both Northern Irish specifics, such as the relevance of Ulster Scots and sectarianism between Catholics and Protestants— seems correct in light of this joke. The audience is laughing throughout, to the extent that Bartlett begins and stops sentences to allow them to continue. This laughter is

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\(^9\) This is a derogatory term for someone who speaks Ulster Scots.
impacted by the laughter of others. Bartlett’s material emphasizes the relationship between different members of the audience in the context of this joke. He suggests that the room would be, or perhaps suggests it should be, divided because of the content of his material which is poking fun at a politicized language most spoken by British Protestants and most understood to be of relevance to that identity. However, members of the general audience in the room are not able to decipher who is or is not laughing at this joke, and as such are not able to determine whether such a divide actually exists, and, in some way, rely on Bartlett’s interpretation of the crowd.

The interaction between members of the audience is thus confused by the very nature of an audience. In a large and relatively dark room where all people are facing the same direction, it is difficult to determine who among the audience is laughing, clapping, or not doing these things. Ritter and Sauter’s (2017) study demonstrated that “Neither frequentist nor Bayesian analyses yielded any support for participants being able to reliably perform group identification based on laughter sounds: Participants consistently performed below chance levels. Participants performed especially poorly with close out-group laughs” (pp 6). In the context of live performances, individuals are likely unable to identify the national identity of people laughing based on the sound of the laughter in the room. This is important in light of Platow et. al.’s finding that “participants laughed and smiled more, laughed longer, and rated humorous material more favorably when they heard in-group laughter rather than out-group laughter or no laughter at all” (2005, pp 542). In this study, participants were told which group comprised the laughing audience. This thus makes an individual’s interpretation of the live audience important to how they understand who they believe is laughing as well as their place within the context. Beyond this, whether they are or are not laughing will position them within an in-group or out-group, but
who else they believe to be in their group can only be assumed. As such, pre-existing characteristics about the space, as discussed, are crucial to these assumptions.

**Performer and Performer**

This interaction bears out in two primary dynamics: the interaction between performers during a show, as fellow actors in a play, as scene partners in an improv show, or as various stand up comedians on the same bill. Beyond this, these interactions lead to or are based on ones that occur outside of the actual performance, such as friendships formed by collective participation. This bonding is an important feature of live comedy that compels continued involvement, creates social networks for performers, and establishes certain power dynamics and forms.

Improv comedy provides the most stark example of the importance of the interaction between performers as it relates to one’s capacity to do comedy. Paul Mone, an improv comedian who started Belfast Improv, an organization that runs improv classes and performances in the city, expresses the importance of active engagement:

*If you’re only worried about your own performance or if you’re worried about other people judging you when you’re doing things, then you’re not really paying attention. You’re not really paying attention to other people.*

Here, Mone stresses that, in improv comedy, the interaction between the performers on stage and their ability to respond to each other is perhaps more important than the interaction between the performer and the audience. Teresa Livingstone’s experience as a member of the improv team WonderFrog in Belfast highlights this:
I’m in an improv group, as well, and when I’m doing a scene or am in any of those scenes, I don’t, it doesn’t faze me to be in front of the audience. It’s talking directly to the audience, even as myself just to introduce the game, I do get, I still get really like, oop.

Livingstone recognizes that in stand up comedy, as opposed to improv, she is more aware of the audience and their opinion of her. In improv, she is focused on reacting to her scene partners. This reaction is important to building the scene and ensuring that it continues moving forward, and, as such, the interaction between the performers is the lifeblood of improv. These interactions require trust between the performers who may be very different to each other, forged through practice and time outside of the shows.

Alongside the interaction in scenes, live comedy is a site of friendship creation in Northern Ireland. As stand up comedian Shane Todd explains:

I love the social aspect of it as well. You get to hang out with other comedians, and 99 out of 100 comedians are just very cool people that you can have a relaxed chat with, and there’s usually like a funny atmosphere there because you’re nervous before you go on stage, so you kind of talk a bit of shite, so I like that. A lot of my good friends are comedians, such as Micky Bartlett and all those guys. There’s a great, great scene here, so it's brilliant to be a part of that.

Here, Todd stresses the importance of the “scene” to his overall enjoyment of his comedic pursuits. This was also the case with several improv comics in Northern Ireland, many of whom join each other at a pub after their shows. These friendships have been important to the way people experience comedy in Northern Ireland and the way comedy is made. Graeme Watson explains:
And, so this was 2007 and oddly it was—I think the word is serendipitous—where a whole bunch of people who also wanted to do comedy and perform all found each other kind of around the same time. It was very odd. It was a small group of us and between us all we started a couple of gigs.

Here, the connections between the comics and their “finding” each other prompted the small explosion of shows that Bartlett and Watson had previously identified over the last decade. Such relationships were vital to this growth.

Several comics recognized the importance of timing to the way comedians form bonds. Teresa Livingstone feels that there is a sense of cohort between certain comedians:

There’s groups of people who all tended to start around the same time and then kind of develop, and, I’m trying to remember. I do feel a wee bit like I’m—I don’t mean this to sound like I’m some sort of pariah— but I’m not in any of those groups. I get along with all of them.

In this regard, friendship units of comedians seem to form in waves in Northern Ireland, dependent on the time people started, which generally correlates to age. Whereas McGarry’s Hole In the Wall Gang are approaching or are in their 50s, and Micky Bartlett, Shane Todd and others are in their early 30s, Livingstone is 40, sitting between these groups. Todd generally agrees with this assessment, applying it to a younger group as well:

[For] the 6 or 7 comedians I’d be really, really friendly with, there’s maybe the same amount of those of younger comedians. So we’re all like 30, and there’s like 22, 23 year olds, and there’s a group of them, about the same amount as us, so it’s kind of like a big brother-little brother thing kind of, which is great. So I think it’s a real accommodating scene, as well.
This comment is revealing in two ways. First, it addresses the impact of friendship groups on social networking in comedy. The “big brother-little brother” connection between the generations of comics suggests that the older cohort is assisting the younger comics, helping them gain access to resources or giving them notes on material.

In a way, these friendships intersect with the role of cultural arbitraries. Livingstone highlights this connection in light of the fact that many people who run comedy shows are comedians themselves, and many of these comedians exist in a friendship group of some form.

She assesses:

\[
\text{It has been— it’s good in a sense that there are more regular nights now, but they’re being run by, they’re... being run by people who—and they’re well within their rights to do that—who are putting on the people they like.}
\]

That is, friendships in stand up comedy are especially important when people within them play the role of a cultural arbitrary within the scene at large, deciding who to book on shows and when, thereby acting as gatekeepers. This role relates to the power of space. Relationships with these people are therefore important. The second revealing aspect of Todd’s comment stems from the notion of the “brotherly” relationship between the comics. It reflects the male dominated reality that is stand up comedy in the country. The importance of friendship groups in determining which people get booked on shows may impact gendered divisions in the field itself. Todd does not necessarily see it this way, asserting that his group of friends is not divisive or problematic in their language or interests that would prevent women from joining:

\[
\text{People talk about locker room talk, there isn’t that, and I am friends with a group of 30 year old male comedians and I, we don’t have that. I’ve never been in a}
\]
situation where the conversation wouldn’t be appropriate for a female act to walk into.

The appropriateness of Todd’s friends plays little role in the group’s impact. Because friendship groups are difficult to penetrate, and they are a determinant of access to performance space in Northern Ireland, their composition rather than their content may be more important. As Mehta and Strough (2011) find: “sex segregation in friendships… persists across the life span,” arguing that both sex segregation of employment or activity in adulthood, such as performing standup comedy as either a job or hobby, maintains this while also suggesting that “social norms that discourage friendships with other-sex peers” exist (pp 201, 202). This demonstrates that while single-sex friendship groups may emerge based on context, they are difficult to penetrate even if the context changes. As such, this big brother-little brother network of comedians in Northern Ireland may present problems for the women excluded from it.

There is ongoing and intense debate in the country about this issue, especially on the Facebook page “Northern Irish Comedians,” where people have discussed whether the onus is on bookers to ensure women are on the bill or on women to ask for space to perform. Whereas Rory McSwiggan will not host or plan a show that does not feature women, Shane Todd believes it is rude to ask a woman to perform on the basis of her gender alone. These different practices are informed by their own experiences and play out in their role as cultural arbitraries. Rory McSwiggan explains one moment that encouraged him to ensure his shows always feature women:

I’m gay and I did an LGBT gig four years ago. The people in the Brickwork asked me to emcee an LGBT gig, and I was the only gay comedian on the bill.
His aloneness on this bill was stark and made clear the need for some representativeness in comedy. Beyond this, he shares: “We need some women because there are women... What do you need a reason for?” Todd differs slightly, stressing that he does not know promoters who are actively preventing women from performing, saying:

*If that happened, if I knew of somebody who was stopping a female from getting stage time, I wouldn’t do that gig or I would have a conversation with that person saying ‘why are you doing that?’*

Beyond this, Todd believes more women will be booked on line-ups when there are “*more female comedians,*” although he does not explain how he believes more women will become comics without being booked on shows. This perhaps reflects the limited time, compared to McSwiggan and Livingstone, that Todd has considered this question. This further demonstrates the impact of individuals who play the role of cultural arbitraries in the country.

**Live Comedy Summary**

The interpretation and performance of live comedy in Northern Ireland is critical to the capacity of comedy to affect national identity formation in institutional, linguistic, banal, and everyday ways. Comedy is affected by space, at a practical, historical, and connotative level, that is deeply entrenched in institutional systems that engage with ownership of space and segregation, for example. Interaction, between performers, the audience, and both, reflect linguistic and everyday relationships between people. Where these interactions and the connotations of space intersect is perhaps most crucial to the role of live comedy in the production of national identity. Performances that include sectarian based humor to which people respond are most explicit in their relevance to national identity. The difficulty of discerning the
source of laughter may encourage people to assume that the entire audience is laughing. Because most of the live comedy performances in Belfast, specifically, are in the city center, an actively shared space, it is possible for an audience to interpret the laughter in the context of cross-community enjoyment of sectarian based jokes. Beyond this, however, the shared space of the city center, and the common laughter held between audience members at jokes such as Livingstone’s about dieting, for example, may prompt recognition of cross-community similarities unrelated to British and Irish identities, perhaps solidifying a broader, common identity. Whether material like this finds the space to perform is tied to the space-power of cultural arbitraries, who have a degree of control over the performances that people in shared spaces may see. As such, the shared or common features shown through comics with didactic power are relevant to larger structures of power, manifesting overtly here in gendered dynamics.

III. Social Laughter

Social laughter is a hugely important and ever changing aspect of human experience that engages and allows for human bonding in groups. The advent of social media has transformed some of the ways people interact on a social level. Small group social laughter and bonding, as well as the larger groups and publics allowed for on social media, ensure that social laughter is an important aspect of national identity formation in Northern Ireland that relates to the institutional sites: through technology and segregations, linguistic sites: through shared dialogue and public creation on social media, banal sites: through the unrecognized capacity of imagery through social media and small groups, and everyday sites: through engaging with people in person and online as an individual. These elements, and more that fold into them, are crucial to the nation building and defining capacity of social laughter in Northern Ireland.
Social Bonding

Humor is essential to the formation and maintenance of human collectives. Manninen’s (2017) findings reveal that “social laughter triggers endogenous opioid release, which could provide a powerful way for modulating social bonds in groups” (pp 6125). Manninen links social laughter to the human’s capacity to create social groups larger than their ability to utilize “social touching or grooming” that would otherwise “reinforce social structures” (ibid). Manninen explains: “Unlike grooming, social laughter allows engagement of the [μ-opioid-receptor]-dependent bonding mechanism among all members of an interacting group. Laughter is highly contagious” (pp 6126). In this analysis, the author suggests that social laughter is a mechanism that substitutes for grooming practices common among primates that induces similar biochemical reactions in human brains. This reaction allows for wide scale social bonding. Dezecache and Dunbar (2012) support this hypothesis, highlighting that: “the ‘grooming’ group for laughter is a little over three individuals. Since all members of the laughter group gain an endorphin surge… this would make laughter three times as efficient as grooming, which would in turn allow a very significant increase in the size of the community that could be bonded” (pp 778). This research suggests that social laughter has been evolutionarily necessary for the formation of integral features of human society. These findings remain relevant in the modern day, where we can understand laughter as a way in which individuals continue to bond with others. It does this both through the neurological responses experienced as a result of laughter and in its ability to “communicate to others a willingness for interaction, and therefore serves to facilitate bonding” (Nikopoulos, 2016 pp 1). Nikopoulos argues that laughter does this through its ability to “induce positive affect” in people such that it can be used as a mechanism to reduce “discord” in social
groups *(ibid)*. Laughter thus plays a role in both the construction of social groups and in maintaining them.

The social groups which form through or alongside laughter do not operate in a vacuum, and the existence of other people is often important to their own identity. Lynch (2010) finds that humor serves as “a communicative process that establishes the group's boundaries [and] the identity of the group members.” In this regard, while humor provides the opportunity for wide scale social bonding, it creates bounds for the groups it creates. From this, in-groups and out-groups are erected. In addition, humor can act as a tool to harden the boundaries of existing groups. As Thomae and Pina (2015) explain: “Disparagement humor targeting an out-group can increase in-group morale and solidify the in-group while, in parallel, introducing and/or fostering hostile attitudes towards the out-group” (pp 190). In this way, humor can create “cohesion” among members of the in-group, similar to Tajfel’s (1979) predictions relating to social identity theory. Further, social stigmas against speaking out against humor that targets out-group members are understood to exist. As Mulvey, Palmer, and Abrams (2016) find: “generally adolescents did not support race-based humor but that they also did not expect high rates of implicit and explicit intervention on the part of their peers, potentially because of concerns about social exclusion” (pp 1386). This research demonstrates that the existence of bounded social groups impacts the way humor is judged and the way in which people respond to it.

Social groups may be understood as both dynamic and context dependent. People are able to belong to more than one social group at the same time. These groups may be dependent on space: formed in school, the pub, work, home, and prison, among other locations. They may also be dependent on units such as family, paramilitaries, and so forth. Alongside this, ethnic and national identity groups, to which people may broadly feel they belong, may interact with social
groups based on space and units. Likewise, major structural realities affect space and units, such as segregation, which may impact the way such social groups form. The humor at play within all these groups may be both substantively different as well as functionally distinct. In Northern Ireland, these social dynamics are at work. As one former member of the UDA explains this broad phenomenon:

Probably the types of jokes I would probably make would be slightly different to the ones from home to coworkers to my contacts within paramilitary circles, would be completely different because, sort of in a way, I will try and compartmentalize the three things, from work, home, and my connections within paramilitaries.

This compartmentalizing demonstrates that the former UDA member views these contexts as distinct, bounded social groups that interact with humor differently.

The sense that these groups respond differently to different humor and that the appropriateness of jokes is context dependent is not a novel idea. Peter Sheridan shares this idea as it relates to the police service in Northern Ireland:

I think there was, there’s no doubt being in the police, and because it was during the conflict, it was a particular type of humor that you probably had to be in the police to understand or appreciate it and not to misread it...When I look back to some of the humor things, if that had’ve been outside people wouldn't have understood the same way as the internal culture would have.

Sheridan here suggests that the police existed as a form of an in-group. He believes that those on the outs would not understand the context behind the jokes made within the organization. That is, the social norms created by the in-group would not be understood by members of the out-group,
civilians, for example. While norms in some spaces are socially constructed, others are institutionally maintained. For example, certain spaces are manufactured such that other in- and out-group identities have more limited power over the space. Comedian Micky Bartlett used to work at a benefits office in Northern Ireland where this was true:

[The benefits office] was a weird environment, as well, again because it’s Northern Ireland, you weren’t allowed to talk about politics in work. Like it was a union rule where you couldn’t bring anything political up that might offend someone. There wasn’t a lot of conversation.

Bartlett here is discussing legislation, such as The Fair Employment and Treatment (Northern Ireland) Order 1998, that banned discriminatory employment practices.

This order specifically outlawed: “discrimination on the ground of religious belief or political opinion; or discrimination by way of victimisation.” The order dictates: “A person discriminates against another person on the ground of religious belief or political opinion in any circumstances relevant for the purposes of this Order if— on either of those grounds he treats that other less favourably than he treats or would treat other person,” as well as in other ways. This institutional order may have led to the practices of Bartlett’s office, where all talk of religion and politics were banned so as not to have the appearance of discrimination, especially in light of the many possible interpretations of “he treats less favorably.” Humor around these topics may be easily misconstrued, and offices are reluctant to allow societal constructions of in-groups and out-groups into their space. As such, Bartlett explains that the types of things people did to humor themselves while at this workplace looked different than in other contexts:

Our boss would be like: ‘just take two hours for lunch, there’s nothing to do.’ And we used to play a game of how drunk can we get before we go back to work, and
pretty drunk is the answer... Like we found a room in the building that no one had been in for ten years and just smoked in it.

This demonstrates the way in which institutional regulations determine the available methods from which people may elect to socialize and induce laughter. That is, social bonding is impacted by regulations and realities beyond the control of the group itself; as such, so is humor. Places like the local pub or the family living room have different social norms to the school and workplace. While they are very much rooted in place, as well, they lack some of the more institutional elements of educational or professional settings. Micky Bartlett suggests that, in Northern Ireland, some of the unwritten traditions of the pub and family dictate the type of humor propagation that occurs:

Everyone tells stories, basically—it’s not kind of— you get a turn, almost. An old school weird Celtic tradition. If you’re at a pub or a family gathering, it’s always like, tell that story about that time and then you have the floor and you tell that story. So I think everyone’s kind of grown up with that.

Here, Bartlett asserts that humor in the home and at the pub is key to culture and group formation in Northern Ireland, stemming from “Celtic tradition.” This is grounded in everyday actions of the population, but Bartlett also roots this in national identity by way of ancient tradition, interweaving memory and the everyday.

Groups that form at the pub, in the living room, at social clubs, and at schools are hugely impacted by segregation in Northern Ireland. As Lisa McGee explains:

I think people don’t have any idea how segregated it still is. That we live in different areas, still, that we attend different schools, that we play different sports,
Segregation in Northern Ireland appears differently across the country: some areas are more divided than others and segregation manifests in distinct patterns across places. While cities like Derry are generally divided through natural barriers such as the River Foyle, places like Belfast have residential divisions that “persist in a distinctive ‘checkerboard’ pattern...Communities have historically enforced these divisions using intimidation, rioting and violence, the erection of physical barriers, and the marking of spaces with flags and graffiti” (Huck et al., 2019 pp 225). Interface violence has been problematic, even in recent years. In 2014, the Belfast Telegraph reported that “more than 600 sectarian incidents, including assaults and intimidation, have been recorded by police at interfaces across Belfast within the past nine months” (McAleese, 2014). The government has brought in physical barriers in the form of peace walls with through-gates that close at night in the hopes of curbing this violence. Flags and murals pervade the streets of some areas that indicate community-understood national identity, such as the Union Jack or the Tri-Colors. A divided education system, as well as these literal and symbolic demarcations of division in Northern Ireland that manifest institutionally and banally are part of the reason McGee’s Catholic family is effectively isolated from the Protestant community.

These forms of active segregation impact both the group formation in places like pubs, schools, and homes and the understanding between group members. The pervasive existence of symbolic national identity in neighborhoods reminds and reinforces the individual identity of residents, as well as the importance of it on a community scale. Hughes (2011) finds “a relationship between ethnic isolation experienced by children and negative intergroup social attitudes” in Northern Ireland (pp 829). That is, this segregation results in stricter in-group and
Hughes’ research included interviewing 30 Year 8 students at a school outside of Belfast, where over 98 percent of the students belong to a family with a Protestant identity. The interviews revealed a great deal about the oppositional identity construction in Northern Ireland. It is evident in this interaction:

Interviewer: What do you think of Catholics?
First boy: I haven't met any of them face-to-face.
Interviewer: What would people in your community think of them?
Second boy: They would think they are just aliens, they are not liked at all.
Interviewer: Why?
First boy: Because we are Protestants, and they are Catholics. (pp 841)

This interview is revealing in a number of ways. First, it mirrors the reality of McGee’s family, but here in the Protestant community. It also demonstrates how a lack of contact impacts the way children view the other, essentializing their identity to their Catholicism, in this case. As writer Billy McWilliams shares:

*The myths, again it goes back to secondary schooling, to primary school. I went to primary school, there were no Catholics in my primary school. I didn’t meet a Catholic until I was 11, 12 years old, that I know of, because my secondary school, while being mostly Protestant, I would say 1 in 10 were Catholic, and there was a Catholic in my class. And we all knew that, we all knew that Paul was a Catholic. You wouldn’t know that in any other country in the world.*

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10 This is seventh grade in America. The children were between 11 and 12 years old.
Here, McWilliams illuminates how Paul was publicly viewed as a member of the out-group in his predominantly Protestant school. A large lack of contact, in schools or neighborhoods, seemingly limits social bonding to those within the understood in-group. As such, the effect of laughter as a means of bonding works largely within groups not between them. As predicted by the superiority theory of comedy, the content of the jokes built from the myths or stereotypes of the out-group that stem from this separation may be affected.

**Stress Alleviation**

In a divided country like Northern Ireland, with experiences of violence stemming from identity, stress may form around such groupings. As such groups form and are maintained, laughter is a useful tool in reducing group stress. As Scott, Chen, and McGettigan (2014) demonstrate: “Laughter is one of the positive emotional expressions which are expressly linked to a physiological reduction in the stressful reactions to negative emotions” (pp 619). Here, they argue that laughter is able to offset the impacts or effects of negative emotions related to stress inducing situations. Ridanpää (2019) makes a similar claim, suggesting that: “In times of crisis humor functions as a technique for neutralizing emotionally charged areas and by that means provides hope” (pp 901). This analysis proposes that laughter goes beyond mitigation and towards imparting ideas of change. Garbhan Downey suggests this power is the root of the “black humor” present in Northern Ireland:

> People can be very funny about awful things. Something will be terribly wrong and someone will make a joke... it transforms it. It makes it lighter. It takes some of the seriousness out of it. And that can be a very good thing, it really can.
Humor, and the introduction of levity in situations really can help. It stops people from going into the pits.

Downey implies that humor, when used as a defense mechanism against the dark realities of the Troubles, could keep citizen morale up. Tim McGarry recognizes the same phenomenon:

There were also really horrible, black jokes about the Troubles growing up at times. Remember, I was a teenager during the hunger strikes, and there were a lot of black jokes, as in dark, dark jokes about Bobby Sands.... People used to make jokes about bombs and losing limbs that were unrepeatable.

Peter Sheridan tells as similar story as it relates to the police:

Black humor. In many ways, even after the most serious incidents, you know humor played a part in reducing the seriousness of the incidents. There certainly was, certainly a black humor came with the police and you know the likes of the police clubs.

Sheridan, McGarry, and Downey root the humor that developed in the police clubs or civilian population to the specific experiences of the Troubles. This kind of mindset remains pervasive.

During one interview, a participant who lived through the Troubles received a text message from someone with whom he had a disagreement. The message was about a show the interviewee was hosting that night. He explains:

He messaged me, ‘Good luck tonight.’ What’s he going to do? Bomb the place?

[Laughs]

After the interviewee interpreted the good luck message as vaguely threatening, he makes a hyperbolic joke similar to those McGarry describes, which centers around the idea of bombs.
A former member of the UDA and a former member of the IRA report similar patterns within paramilitary groups. There were overt moments of stress, such as when the former member of the IRA remembers laughing with others about a bomb almost going off in a car they were in. This high level of immediate stress prompted one kind of laughter response. Likewise, both paramilitary men thought of building stress as connected to humor, especially during their time in prison. In particular, both men, who went to prison decades apart from each other, recounted stories of playing pranks on the prison guards. The member of the UDA remembers:

*I’m not going to say I enjoyed jail, but I had some good times and met some good fellas and we had some laughs in jail. About different things- about the screws coming on and saying: ‘We’re going to lock you up,’ and we saying: ‘Are ya?’ Screws saying: ‘We’ll be back in ten minutes to lock you up.’ So what do we do? Took all the locks off, walked around with hammers. And these locks were, see when we’re talking about locks, we’re not talking about a wee Yale lock... We took every single one of them off.*

This outburst led to the prisoners congregating on the roof and sleeping there for several days to challenge the prison guards. The member of the UDA recalled this, saying: “*Some of the laughs we had.*” Likewise, a member of the IRA discussed the “mixes” or pranks the prisoners would play on the guards, such as moving all of their beds to the roof of the prison. He attributed these actions to attempts to pass the time and relieve stress on the part of prisoners. Both of these stories also indicate a competition between the guards and the prisoners. In this way, pranks existed as a humorous way to challenge the authority structure in prisons, where institutional power did not rest in the hands of prisoners. In this regard, in-group and out-group membership

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11 This is a term for prison guard.
was clear, and these pranks both served as opposition against one group while bonding within another, as Thomae and Pina (2015) predict.

Stress relief may thus have personal and institutional goals. Peter Sheridan discusses its use in the context of negotiation. Since his days in the police force, Sheridan has been involved in various forms of peace talks, both on a small and larger scale. In one instance, he was working to reduce the threat of violence between two groups, The Apprentice Boys and the Bogside Residents, over conflict about the loyalist Apprentice Boys’ parade in Derry.

*I remember being in a meeting where a senior member of the Apprentice Boys and a senior member of the Bogside Residents were on opposite sides. It was always serious around these events, so we were trying to have these discussions… Just before it started the guy from the Bogside Residents went to look for a cigarette, ‘so have you got a cigarette,’ and then he went looking for his matches and he clearly didn’t have his matches with him, and somebody on the opposite side of the table who was from the Apprentice Boys kinda unthinking, you know, just chaked somebody over needed matches, and he throws these box of matches and goes: ‘Watch you don’t burn yourself.’ And you know, that deescalated the tension in the room like that [snaps] because there was a bit of banter that happened before then they got into a serious discussion.*

Here, humor has been used in a group setting to blur the line between the in-group and the out-group members, divisions that, on the surface, are very stark. This is especially true in a room where the groups are divided across the table. This comment, “Watch you don’t burn yourself,” is humorous in the context of the stress. It allows the relief theory of comedic construction and the understanding of social laughter to intersect. That is, this comment
encourages laughter only in light of its capacity to produce or create relief from the social situation. In other words, its deescalating power worked across group lines, not simply within them. Sheridan claims that this moment of humor “humanized the other side” and allowed for negotiation between the two groups.

**Organization**

Humor impacts the social organization within groups in many ways. First, it affects existing power relations at the intragroup level: it can condition how power is structured and maintained. Alongside this, humor in social groups acts as a site of cultural capital, wherein people judged to have “good” senses of humor gain power within the group. These processes exist at both an institutional and everyday level.

In organizations with pre-existing structures, such as in a workplace that has boss-employee relationships or in a school with teacher-student relationships, certain power dynamics are understood. Humor can be utilized as a mechanism with which to continually reinforce these positions. Wijewardena, Härtel, Samaratunge (2017) argue, for example, that it is good business practice for managers to use humor to their own ends: “humor is an event that managers must responsibly manage in order to produce positive emotional experiences for employees and support healthy emotion regulation at work” (pp 1316). Here, humor can be utilized as a strategy to extract “psychological capital” from the workforce (ibid). The authors provide lessons for managers to use in order to maximize their workers’ potential capital. Nikopoulos (2017) argues: “As with all aspects of social communication, conversational laughter is influenced by the hierarchy of social relations, hence why it oftentimes functions as a signal of
dominance or subservience,” suggesting that people, like the manager in Wijewardena et al’s paper, can utilize humor to indicate their positionality and reinforce it (pp 7).

Others argue that, within organizations, humor can be disruptive to standard power dynamics. Lynch (2010) walks the line between these positions, suggesting that a duality exists wherein humor both serves to: “(re)produce the status quo, but also provides a strategy for employees to subvert or challenge authoritative power and constraining organizing practices” (pp 127). In this regard, these powers are competing. Other scholars have assessed that both surface scenarios of maintenance or disruption benefit the status quo within a group. Godfrey (2016) argues that humor in the British military has served to provide small moments of rebellion for soldiers in rigid power structures that reduce the overall likelihood of wider-scale protest against the hierarchies, explaining that humor: “creates the conditions that allow for a controlled form of resistance” (pp 164). Alongside the dynamic between those with varying degrees of institutional power is how individuals with the same amount of limited power enforce these structures for themselves. Butler (2015) explains that humor: “plays a socially normative role in organizations through processes of ridicule and embarrassment” (pp 42). In this regard, people on all levels of a structure may work to maintain its organization in both active and passive ways through humor. These social features are clear in Northern Irish institutions, such as the police, as well as in paramilitary groups. Peter Sheridan, who rose to the role of second in command of the police in Northern Ireland shares:

Some of the individuals in the police were more the butt of jokes than other people were, as you’d imagine in any organization, but it was humor not humiliation, if you like. We [weren’t] ridiculing people for the sake of ridiculing. You had to understand it to be, if you’d have heard it, came into the space, and looked in on
it, you’d of thought, that’s awful. But you had to kind of understand it and understand the individuals for it to be relevant or understood.

In this way, the police in Northern Ireland utilized the ability to poke fun at members within their group as a part of their organizational culture. Similar practices took hold in the paramilitary groups. One former member remembered people in the IRA being given nicknames based on “stupid” things they were perceived to have done that could have killed them, but were seen as funny, regardless. This included Whispering Joe, a man who once lay down on a mine and heard it click. This dynamic existed in an organization that the member describes as very structured, with a clear pecking order. This was especially true during his time in prison. He judged that if someone was at the bottom of this pecking order of what he estimated to be 80 men, their perception of self worth was low within the group and relative to the institution of the prison. As such, this member viewed certain comedic elements of the organization as embedded into this pecking order.

The IRA and the police have very clear hierarchies that are enforced and reinforced through measures beyond humor, such as violence and pay grade. In other social groups, such as in cliques in schools or friends at the pub, these hierarchies are less obvious and are often centered around less tangible structures. A great deal of research has been conducted on hierarchies within adolescent cliques. Closson (2009) carried out a study to determine how power manifests within these groups, finding that: “the perceived popularity of cliques and the social dominance of individuals within each clique are associated with how one is regarded by friends and peers and also are associated with one's behavior within the clique” (pp 427). Specifically, the opinions of those within the clique and those outside it impact the positionality of the group members. The study finds that “popular youths” are commonly considered “funny”
by their peers, a “prosocial characteristic” that is relevant to their status (pp 408). Huuki, Manninen, and Sunnari (2010) report similar findings, suggesting humor is utilized to this end, writing of boys in Finnish primary schools: “Successful and credible use of humour could strengthen the status of an agent, and thereby his power position, whereas failure in using humour weakened it. The humour of the marginalised was not legitimated by those with high status. Therefore, humour not only influenced the status of an agent, but also the status of an agent defined the value of the humour used” (pp 380). In this regard, humor can help build status while judgment of it may be relevant to existing power structures in social groups. Müller and Ruch (2011) connect humor to positive virtues, suggesting that humor has a “common basis in humanity” and is “showed relation to strengths” (pp 368). This demonstrates links between humor and notions of value judgements. Friedman’s (2011) study utilizes Bourdieu’s theory of cultural capital to demonstrate these links to comedy. He defines “cultural capital resources” as the ability to acquire “certain cultural dispositions that orientate them towards a ‘natural’ and embodied understanding of ‘legitimate’ art” (pp 349). He then describes comedy in Britain as “being mobilized by the culturally privileged as an instrument of distinction” (pp 367). That is, comedy is a site at which people may make value judgments which are linked to status. This demonstrates the links between comedy and social power.

In Northern Ireland, this social power is connected to the construction of “good craic,” a phrase that, when describing an individual, indicates that a person possesses the ability to be funny and enjoyable in social situations. Playwright and director Andrea Montgomery employs this term to describe another writer:

*And she’s just very, naturally she has that charm, she is good craic, and she’s always entertained her friends with parody songs and making up stories... She’s*
Here, Montgomery praises this quality of her fellow writer, indicating that it enables her to operate well socially as well as motivates Montgomery to spend time with her. Beyond this, she links this idea to the place, highlighting that Northern Irishness is a feature of her ability to be “good craic.” Because this term and sentiment has social power, noted also by comedians Shane Todd, Teresa Livingstone, and Rory McSwiggan, its concept is important to the structure of social groups in Northern Ireland. As such, who decides the qualifications for “good craic” is important. Garbhan Downey takes issue with some social humor in the country that may qualify:

Some of it wasn’t very good, and this is my problem with Belfast humor. They would say: “We’re only slegging. Slegging.”\textsuperscript{12} And they’re not. It’s actual. It can be very hurtful and abrasive nastiness, and it’s not comedy, It’s not satire. It’s abuse.

Downey believes that this pervasive harshness is less prevalent in Derry:

Because we’ve got Donegal on the border and most of our parents are from Donegal and they’re, they’ve experienced a kinder world.\textsuperscript{13}

Here, Downey puts the social humor in Northern Ireland in the context of national identity and the history of the Troubles. Donegal, crucially, is a county in the Republic of Ireland immediately across the border from Derry that did not experience the violence of the Troubles. This position suggests that people can view social laughter and bonding, as well as ideas of “good craic,” as connected to the geopolitics of place and broad constructions of national identity.

\textsuperscript{12} Slegging is a Northern Irish term adapted from the more commonly used phrase: “Slagging off,” meaning “poking fun at someone,” often at an individual who is present in the social group.

\textsuperscript{13} He reminded me after this that this was only his opinion, not fact.
Social Bonding Summary

Laughter is a crucial element of social bonding that both forms and maintains groups. Within these groups, humor can work to relieve stress, further bonding the group, while also creating or maintaining group power dynamics. These groups, and the humor shared between them, are sites of national identity in Northern Ireland: at institutional, linguistic, banal, and everyday sites. First, they are often tied to place, where pervasive institutionalized segregation and isolation of national identities ensure that social bonding from laughter often occurs between members of the same In-Group. As well as this, isolation in the everyday encourages stereotyping, utilized in humor, of the out-group that further widens the identity divide. In a post conflict society with continued division, the stress alleviating role of humor has the capacity to further bring in-groups together, such as Republican and Loyalist prisoners or members of the police. Humor, however, may also act as a site of negotiation. Further, social laughter acts as a mechanism for institutions in the country to banally maintain power structures, such as the IRA and the police, which may limit participant rebellion and allow them to have continued societal power. Alongside this, humor may impact pure social power dynamics in the country that values “good craic.” Understandings of national identity are embedded into ideas of “good” jokes that result in social power within groups. As such, national identity plays a role in all features of social laughter in Northern Ireland.

Social Media

Social media has fundamentally changed the way many people interact with the world on a daily, hourly, minute basis. It is crucial to understand the shifting dynamics between people that have resulted from the capacity of online connection when analyzing social comedy. Social
media has blurred the public and private spheres and allows for the maintenance of an active public, in Warner’s (2002) understanding. These powers affect the didactic power of online comedy in the context of national identity formation in Northern Ireland.

**Public, Public, Private**

The private and public spheres are relevant to the way citizens experience society in numerous ways, and their conceptualizations are plentiful. The boundaries between public and private have been defined in both physical terms and action based terms. That is, conflation between the domestic and private sphere is common, while others define the private sphere as “personal, intimate, closest to the self,” which could indicate both a physical place or an emotional one (West et al, 2009). Likewise, public can be viewed as subject to space—life outside of the home, but may also be considered “political participation” or in Habermasian terms, the site of “public discourse” (*ibid*; Habermas, 1962). In many ways, these action based definitions of the public and private spheres have translated into spatial ones, such as Habermas’s use of the coffee house to explicate his understanding of public discourse and the public sphere. Social media, and the consumptive and productive methods surrounding it, blur the line between the public and private spheres in both physical and action based ways. People engage with social media both in the home and outside of it, through the use of smartphone technology or access to computers at their workplace, in a coffee shop, and beyond. Likewise, content creation for social media—posts, videos, and more—are produced by citizens both in private and in public. As well as this, people are able to engage in “public discourse” from inside the home through the use of this technology.
As such, clear divisions between the public and private spheres do not exist on social media platforms. McDonald and Thompson (2015) argue that: “social media disrupts traditional relations in organisational life… that (re)shape and (re)constitute the boundaries between public and private spheres” (pp 69). The authors here frame this in the context of employer and employee relations, shying away from notions of public discourse itself and into the idea of the public as broadcast or the private as within the home, or private as privacy itself. In fact employer and employee relations prompt Kruse et al (2018) to “refute” the idea of social media as explicitly a public sphere, insofar as their “results suggest that respondents do not engage in communicative action typical of the public sphere because they avoid political discourse online” (pp 62). In large part, they suggest this is the case because of fear of professional retribution. Conceptualizing the public sphere beyond political discourse and into ideas of public life may upend this analysis. The functionality of social media sites may result in individuals’ interpretations of its public or private nature. That is, many platforms have notions of privacy built into them: Facebook has varying degrees of privacy settings that limit the amount of information friends and the public can see, Twitter allows accounts to be either public or private, and the number of followers an individual has, as well as their connections to the individual, might impact the sense of private or public productions. Instagram allows this as well.

Recognizing that the boundary between public and private is blurred is crucial to situating social media within Warner’s understanding of a public as an entity that is a “relation among strangers.” Whether individual’s conceptualize their experiences on social media as “public” or “private” may underscore whether they are able to become part of “a public” through this medium. The larger the social circles on a platform, the more interactions with strangers an individual will have. Even with a bound friendship group on the platform, friends may still share
or be tagged in content from their other friends or from pages that will show up on an individual’s timeline. In addition, an individual may join large groups or like pages that are distinct from their group of friends. This contributes to the sense of strangership. On Twitter, while one’s own account may be private, people may follow other users who have followers that the individual does not know who engage with their common followee’s posts. To this end, strangers are almost impossible to avoid in online social media. McDonald (2018) recognizes this and its potential power, suggesting that stranger based interactions on the internet create “social imaginaries” of the people with whom someone is interacting (pp 76). Although McDonald’s argument focuses on the gendered and moral dynamics of strangerships, he also argues that stranger relationships made online “precipitate continual redefinitions of the kinship and friendship relations that they appear alongside” (pp 86), expanding notions of community.

There is no doubt that social media, like television, allows individuals to engage with the “outside world” while in their homes. Unlike television, however, individuals are also able to showcase their private life from inside their homes to various versions of the “outside world.” In the case of television, there are institutional channels that produce content which becomes the discourse around which a public is organized. Here, small groups of people create and disseminate to a much larger group, whereas social media allows for broad production. Not all posts on social media sites, however, do the work of “organizing” a public and maintaining its “attention” as Warner understands it should (2002, pp 50, 60). This suggests that not all production through social media has the capacity to create a public and the imagined community, as Anderson conceptualizes, which may form from this. As such, some individuals on various platforms have more cultural capital with larger capacities to organize a public than others, depending on the size and power of their following.
Social media has the capacity to serve as a site of public discourse that can be organized. El Marzouki (2015) recognizes the notion that social media can exist as “counter discourse,” writing: “the emergence of the web as a participatory medium and a competing cultural form is giving rise to new articulations of dissenting political culture through the enabling of (counter)publics” (pp 282). In this regard, he recognizes the power of the internet and forms of social media, as well as platforms such as Youtube, which themselves act as semi-social media, to create discourse that organizes and keeps the attention of a public. Calhoun (2019), who researched “Vine Racial Comedy” connects humor discourse and social media, suggesting that their intersection provides opportunity for “exposing, subverting, and restructuring cultural beliefs” (pp 46), suggesting that social media and racial comedy can have “anti-hegemonic” ends. Gal (2019) finds that “ironic humor” used on Facebook instead has the ability to “empower one group and marginalize the other, potentially deepening existing social gaps” (pp 729). These results reflect how different humor styles interact with distinct social media sites in various ways. That is, neither social media nor humor on it have singular effects on society writ large, and the publics they build and maintain may be distinct.

Comedy and Social Media

Comedy interacts with social media, and the publics it may maintain, in numerous ways. Broadly, humor engages with social media as both a means and an end. This distinction can be understood in light of who is posting humorous content online and whether that person is a professional comedian. While some comedy is produced, written, and put on social media for the sake of posting the content on social media, other online comedy is used by professional comics
or aspiring professional comics in an attempt to be seen or recognized by an audience and within institutions.

Performers can use social media as a site to increase their name recognition, increase attendance at their shows, and gain access to traditional avenues of success. Sturges’ (2015) research confirms this, finding: “[Stand up comics] use social media to test material and build their profile with potential audiences” (pp 1). In this way, social media use by stand up comics can be seen as a means to their end of performing to large crowds. In Northern Ireland, this has been the case on both an individual level and a group one. As comedian Shane Todd explains:

*I think if it wasn’t for an online presence, I wouldn’t be doing the slate of gigs that I’m doing, just yet. I think that would be a couple of years down the line, but it’s sort of accelerated the process.*

Here, Todd asserts that social media has given rise to his individual success. As of April 2020, his Facebook page has over 61,000 likes, and his Twitter has more than 19,000 followers. These are large numbers, especially for a comic based in a country with fewer than 2 million residents. As well as for individual affects, live comedy show producer Graeme Watson believes this has had an impact on the comedy scene overall:

*It just seemed like nothing was happening, that it reached a peak and nothing, it wasn’t really going to go any further. But then, there was this big cultural breakthrough, or some sort, mostly fueled through social media, I’d say. And people, the comedians who were good at doing that. So now you have about four or five guys, all men, who are locally, and literally just in this region, very famous.*
That is, Watson suggests that everyone in the comedy scene has benefitted from the online success of some of its participants insofar as they are drawing audiences into shows. One person highlighted in interviews as an internet success, Golin Geddis, runs a live show at Lavery’s. His Facebook page has over 44,000 likes as of April 2020. Other comedians perform in this traditional live show, benefitting from his online fame.

Because posting to social media sites online is considered freely accessible, there is a sense that this has democratized part of the comedy process, reducing some of the traditional barriers to widespread success, such as the BBC. Comic Micky Bartlett recognizes how this has changed the conceptions of the scene:

I think the traditional idea that you make your way through the circuit and then a television team call has gone, so social media have—a lot of people get their own voice and material out there.

In this regard, he assesses that social media is itself a worthy platform, usurping television in some ways. Comic Teresa Livingstone echoes this, sharing her perception that comics in Northern Ireland today do not share the pathway or goals of Tim McGarry’s generation, which included:

I’m going to do this and then I’m going to create this and maybe one day we’ll get on TV, we’ll get onto BBC1 Northern Ireland.

She believes that, now:

For a lot of these other guys, that is not of interest to anyone. I mean, I know I’m speaking on behalf of other people, but that is not of interest to them. They can get a bigger audience themselves, just online or podcast.

This demonstrates that social media is an important aspect in how people produce and experience comedy in Northern Ireland. Livingstone points out, however, that these changes do not lack
their own barriers. She highlights the time commitment of producing online material, feeling that, in many ways, it is out of her reach because of her full time job in the country’s education department. Despite this, many videos of her live performances have made the rounds online, such as some of her comedy songs. Watson believes that reducing some of the institutional barriers through the use of comedy on social media has impacted the sense of representation people in Northern Ireland feel:

That’s changed in the last couple of years, again social media has provided an outlet for that, and that’s what Shane and these guys, you know are reflecting back on mass to people their own kind of culture.

That is, social media changes both the form and content that has the capacity to be shared. In some ways, even live performance comics see it as one of their ends, even as they still believe that live performance is important to their craft.

Alongside professional stand up comedians, other forms of comedy see social media as their ends. This sometimes comes in the form of individuals with no professional comic aspirations posting to their own accounts, to pages, or to groups, such as meme groups, that develop an online discourse rooted in humor. One such group, “Northern Ireland Chat and Banter,” has over 7,000 members on Facebook.¹⁴ Alongside groups where people are able to post their own content, pages such as “Only in Belfast” exist with close to 36,000 likes, which equate to people who see their content on their feeds. The page posts or reposts content relating to Belfast and Northern Ireland, often with a humorous spin. These pages largely source material from other people across the internet to post. Professional or semi-professional writers also see social media as one of their ends. The Ulster Fry, an online satire website, also has a Facebook

¹⁴ This Facebook group is private and after I requested to join it, the administrator blocked me. I cannot access the contents of the page.
page, where they post links to many of their stories. The page has over 105,000 likes, demonstrating its popularity.

Social Media, Publics, and Comedy in Northern Ireland

Comedy on social media in Northern Ireland serves as a site of discourse that sustains an organized public of strangers. This is evident in the total number of likes on comedian or comic pages, as well as the ways people interact with these people and publications beyond the scope of the internet. Most obviously, attendance at live comedy shows demonstrates the success of this public creation. Comedian Paddy Raff, who only started performing stand up comedy just over two years ago, has 45,000 likes on his Facebook page. He recently performed his first show at the SSE Arena, which seats over 11,000 people. Colin Geddis performed dates there in January. As one comedian explains:

I don’t know if anyone has mentioned Paddy Raff... He’s got a song, you know like the song Stacey’s Mom Has Got It Going On? He’s changed it to ‘Stacey’s Ma has gone and joined the Ra.’ So he performed that this time last year, somebody put a clip of it, it went, a million views. And he started doing solo shows really quickly. Paddy who, by all accounts, is a lovely guy, but just out of nowhere this, based on these clips, he’s put out a lot of stuff online and now he’s selling out thousands, and thousands, and thousands. We’ve got people who’ve been doing stand-up for nine, ten years who can’t get anywhere near doing that.

While the video in question currently has somewhere between 350,000 and 450,000 views across various platforms, this assessment and Raff’s audience attendance numbers suggest that

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15 His later dates were cancelled as a result of COVID-19.
successful online comedy may have the capacity to create larger publics than traditional performance comedy. It also speaks to the specific nature of online popularity, such that people or pages can move from relatively small followings to much larger ones resulting from a “viral” video or post. Billy McWilliams believes this happened on his satirical page, *The Ulster Fry*:

> We got lucky, in a way. We launched just before Christmas, and we had a few stories go out, and none of them were particularly massive. And then... I wrote a story that there was rioting in Rory McIlroy’s hometown because he hadn’t won sports personality of the year.... This story was picked up by huge numbers of people because it looked vaguely true... but it was ridiculous, they had golf balls being thrown at the police and it was all golf related rioting [in the story]. And of course, you had loads and loads of serious, people coming saying, “this is a disgrace, showing ourselves up again, this is really bad.” But it was just nonsense. So suddenly our wee sort of 500 followers went to 10,000 followers.

Following the viral moments, maintaining attention to the discourse creates the publics, who demonstrate their commitment by attending Paddy’s shows, for example, or continuing to engage with his work online. Groups such as Belfast Girls, who have 114K likes on their Facebook page, have hosted shows in traditional performance spaces, such as the MAC, as well. Their audiences reflect a section of their publics. At the Belfast Girl’s 5 pm performance on June 21, 2019, as the audience lights went down, there were 36 attendees. Only 5 of these people were men. This reflects a subsection of the group’s activated public, who attend shows beyond engaging with material online.

*The Ulster Fry,* the online satire site, has an engaged public. This has been most clear after the publication of their story on its website: “Crisp sandwich gets new lease of life in hip
Belfast eatery,” which, to date, has over 13,700 views on their website. After its publication, someone decided to open an actual version of the parody shop. The Belfast Telegraph reported: “The pop-up cafe offering 35 different flavours opened following a spoof suggestion by the Ulster Fry satirical website and came after the establishment of a breakfast cereal outlet in London. Lines of mainly teenagers and 20-somethings formed from around 11am on Monday morning. By shortly after 1pm the snack bar had run out” (2015). This Crisp Sandwich café creation, inspired by a satirical article in *The Ulster Fry* demonstrates two things. First, it showcases active engagement in the discourse to a high degree, both in the café opening as well as the high patronage rates. Alongside this, it illuminates the proximity of *The Ulster Fry’s* writing to the desires or positions of other individuals in Northern Ireland. This takes form in high readership rates on their website as well as engagement on their Facebook page.

**Online Comedy Content**

The capacity of social media to create engaged publics is important in light of the material produced and shared through these mediums. As with television, the publics created around very popular online voices, such as *The Ulster Fry*, Belfast Girls, and others prompt the formation of an imagined community. This community is linked to concepts of the nation, especially in the case of *The Ulster Fry*, where the name of the publication indicates both location and tradition,¹⁶ and Belfast Girls whose name is also rooted in place. Their content is read and understood in this light. Billy McWilliams, one of the two primary writers of the *Ulster Fry*, recognizes this:

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¹⁶ The Ulster Plantation included the 6 counties of Northern Ireland before the partition. An Ulster Fry is a common breakfast plate served in Northern Ireland.
One of the things for our page; obviously Northern Ireland is a very divided society... We’re doing a national website that has to try to appeal across division, so your own, as you watch the news etc, your own political views have to be slightly put to one side. You have to look for what’s funny.

McWilliams here suggests that he and his fellow writer understand the importance of reaching citizens across Northern Ireland, ensuring that the content is humorous throughout the communities. This endeavor is perhaps aided by the fact that the publication’s two writers are from different backgrounds in the country. One was raised in a Protestant community in the Belfast area while the other is from a Catholic household in Derry. More so than gaining readers, McWilliams believes there is value in bridging this divide through the publication, sharing that they hope to:

*Strike a balance- that you’re not always poking fun at one side or the other. Or you’re not almost falling into the sectarian trap yourself, imposing your views.*

*You have to understand that what you’re taking the piss out of is important to some people. And you can take the piss out of things in a gentle way and you can hold a mirror up rather than just criticize.*

He speaks here to the relevance of community parades in Northern Ireland and the ensuing articles the website might post. One way McWilliams has identified of avoiding the “sectarian trap” is focusing on Northern Ireland in the context of the world stage:

*I have a particular thing of taking world events and putting them into Northern Ireland, so if Donald Trump is up to something, I don’t want to just write about what Trump’s doing. I will transplant him to a small village in county Tyrone and pretend that he’s trying to build a wall around, you know, Omagh or some other*
wee place and then have him have a row with the mayor of another wee area. It'll all be bringing to the local level.

Alongside this strategy, which, like the BBC’s use of banal footage of the country, helps reaffirm its boundaries, the website has had success in publishing articles that focus on the personality of the entire country. Its most viewed article, for example, has the headline: “NI unemployment solved as everyone now qualified barrister,” which pokes fun at people across the country for their personal beliefs that they possess “expertise in matters of the judicial system.” This article thus combines institutional elements of the country, such as the legal system, as well as a generalization that applies to the whole country, through their use of both “NI” and “everyone.”

Belfast Girls is perhaps less concerned with the “sectarian trap.” Their show at the MAC, which ran during June of 2019, centered on the story of various “Belfast Girls” planning a trip for their summer holiday. The characters included Big Bernie Greene, Michelle, Shankill Joe, and Ma. Except for Shankill Joe, who is a Protestant character whose name is rooted in a highly loyalist area of Belfast, the characters are members of the Catholic community. The show did not shy away from both the realities of sectarianism as well as some of the stereotypes borne from it. One song, a parody of Aqua’s “Barbie Girl,” sung during the show included the refrain:

I’m a blonde Belfast Girl

Living in a sectarian world.

In this regard, the group is upfront about the existence and prevalence of sectarianism within Belfast, where they base their show. The characters in the show are similar to what one theater executive called “Ulster stock characters,” who act as large representations of people from the area, including Shankill Joe, their representation of Protestant loyalists, or the girls as reflective.

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17 This includes the most in-text views as opposed to Facebook headline shares. This number may differ, affected by the type of headline, including how succinct the joke is.
of working class Catholics. The executive has worries about shows like Belfast Girls, which, to him, are:

*A case in point because I actually think it reinforces [stereotypes].*

That is, he fears such broad representations of people, as well as other content within the show, does little to challenge the way people imagine their notion of the out-group. Other comics have recognized the difficult balance needed to talk about stereotypes. As comedy show producer Graeme Watson explains of some comedians, generally:

*They’re still going, ‘He’s from Tiger’s Bay,’ or whatever.’ ... This no longer seems like daring. It’s not progressive. It seems like you’re reinforcing old stereotypes.*

It may be difficult to recognize these sectarian divisions in comedy without hovering over the line between “daring” and “reinforcing” and crossing over it in the minds of some and not others. The characters in Belfast Girls have no doubt led to the creation of a public around their discourse, suggesting that it has some degree of power, even as the characters may reinforce some stereotypes. This public has the power to impact how people engage with their imagined national community, both in divisive and disruptive ways.

**Social Media Summary**

Social media is an increasingly important part of individuals’ everyday lives and thus affects the collective in crucial ways. Comedy in Northern Ireland on social media interacts with the institutional, linguistic, banal, and everyday sites of national construction. Comedy on social media, which blends the public and private spheres in the everyday and has the capacity to create

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18 This is a staunch loyalist area on the Shore Road in Belfast.
publics, has many aims, including increasing live attendance at shows, as well as engaging and entertaining an online audience. The creation of publics through social media provides comedians didactic, linguistic power without the traditional barriers of the BBC or live show producers; however, it is not wholly unique. *The Ulster Fry* is not the first satirical publication in Northern Ireland that entered people’s homes and blended the public and private sphere. *The Derry Journal* used to run a weekly satirical column, “JED,” that focused on real and imagined people in the community. Pat McArt, the then editor of *The Derry Journal* explains:

> And there were people, we used to get things sent in, this was before email and all the rest of it, we used to get letters to the JED column and we used to get people ringing up, and all the rest of it. And it actually proved something- that there was a real, what would you say- people were crying out for something different, they wanted something different. The paper actually around then went from about 20,000 to about 28,000 on a Friday.

Like *The Ulster Fry*’s crisp sandwich shop, we see that the column served an important purpose in the community, focusing on real people and bringing out light in the area. As it entered people’s homes and discussed interactions in the private and public spheres, it had the same blurring abilities as social media. This suggests that while social media may not possess wholly unique powers, the powers are perhaps more implementable on a wide scale. As such, comedy on social media gives rise to didactic writing and performances that may focus on that which unites Northern Ireland, as *The Ulster Fry* hopes to do, or elements of the country that remain divided. What notions win out, however, may revolve around social media users and the platform algorithms, themselves combining institutional and everyday realities.
IV. Conclusion

The ethnographic and analytic methods utilized throughout this work demonstrate that humor manifests in and constructs national identity in Northern Ireland through the mediums of television, live comedy, and social laughter. These three sites, and the smaller level, distinct spaces and avenues of production within them, possess elements of institutional, linguistic, banal, and everyday features of the national identity construction process, as theorized by Weber (1978), Anderson (1983), Billig (1995), and Fox and Miller Idriss (2008). In Northern Ireland, where national identity reflects a clear cleavage in the country, this connection is perhaps exceptionally obvious, as demonstrated by Jake O’Kane’s discussion of “flegs” on *The Blame Game* in 2013. Insofar as scholars have theorized national identity in Northern Ireland as the “terminal identity” around which other life is structured within the country, it may come as little surprise that humor and its production are engaged in this work, as well (Cairns, 1982). Critical questions emerge in two directions: first, what are the implications of this finding to the identity conflict in Northern Ireland, especially as it relates to newfound questions surrounding Brexit? Second, how does this finding relate to other national identities beyond those in Northern Ireland, especially in places where national identity is neither a terminal identity nor does it reflect a major and defining cleavage within a state’s population. In countries such as the United States, where historical and dominant identity cleavages largely transpose onto race rather than the American national identity, humor may behave differently as it relates to various identities and is worth examining. Does national identity production occur through humor at the institutional, linguistic, banal, and everyday sites necessary to construct national identity if there is no national identity cleavage?
Comedy and National Identity in Northern Ireland, Looking Forward

In Paddy Raff’s now viral parody song: “Stacy’s Ma has Gone and Joined the Ra,” he sings the refrain: “I said: ‘I thought the Ra disbanded 20 years ago.’ / She pulled me close and said: ‘They haven’t gone away you know.’” This last lyric is an oft spoken quote in Northern Ireland about the status of the IRA, originally said by Gerry Adams, the former leader of Sinn Fein and suspected member of the IRA, at a rally in 1995 following the 1994 ceasefire in Northern Ireland. The line is well recognized, and in the live performance of this song, it garnered a large laugh from the audience. In laughter, there may be truth. The situation in Northern Ireland is precarious, especially as a result of the recent exit of the United Kingdom from the European Union, resulting from the 2016 Brexit referendum in which Northern Ireland voted overwhelmingly to stay in the EU. While the Good Friday Agreement effectively opened the border between Ireland and Northern Ireland, a feature of the peace deal that was hugely important to its success, Brexit threatens to close it. Already, comedy has begun to address this in Northern Irish life. The BBC now broadcasts the programme *Soft Border Patrol*, which establishes a fictional border agency that attempts to solve a potential border crisis related to Brexit. Yet, the problem remains to be addressed in real terms, and its impact on national identity construction and the salience of individual national identities has yet to be fully realised.

Reaction to this parody song suggests that paramilitary groups built on these identities still possess degrees of power in Northern Ireland that cannot be ignored in the future.

This parody song perhaps illuminates more elements of the current world situation than one would hope. One of the original writers and performers of “Stacy’s Mom,” Adam Schlesinger, passed away in April, 2020 from COVID-19, one of thousands across the world to

19 “Suspected”
Entire countries are shut down in an effort to stop the spread of this disease. This impacts comedy production and national identity construction in innumerable ways. Practically, the social distancing regulations create an inability to host live comedy shows and prevent television programming production. As well as this, it leads to the increased use of social media and online content creation and absorption. The pinned post on the Facebook Page “Northern Irish Comedians” has already shifted from a list of the recurring live shows in the country to a “list of streams, podcasts or content that [Northern Irish comedians] are making.” Beyond these effects, which are already on show, it is yet to be seen how this virus restructures society in the long term, from geopolitical effects, such as the relationship between the UK and the EU, or the public health implications of the cross island relationship between the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland, to individual and collective identity shifts as well as the foundation and continuation of cleavages within populations. These may shift in Northern Ireland from national identity to class based divisions and beyond. As such, it is challenging to make predictions about the future of comedy in Northern Ireland and its continued impact on national identity construction, except that humor will find ways to remain important to life in the country.

Beyond Northern Ireland

Comedy has the potential to enforce notions of shared national identities with the same processes that enforce competing and shared identities in Northern Ireland, elsewhere. In countries with limited identity competition, these humor production sites may serve as a space for national identity contestation raising. That is, rather than disputes between competing national identities as to which should compose the state and possess its bureaucratic powers, this reflects disagreement within identity groups as to the meaning of belonging to this group. As
Abdelal et al (2006) explain, “Contestation refers to the degree of agreement within a group over the content of the shared category” (pp 695). In other words, it illuminates how members of the same national identity group understand the meaning of this membership and the extent to which that understanding is shared by others within the identity. Abdelal et al (2006) frame these meanings within four “content” categories that may define an identity. They list these as such: “Constitutive norms… Social purposes… Relational comparisons… and Cognitive models” (2006, pp 696.” These expected norms, purposes, comparisons to other groups, and political worldview of group membership may remain open questions. Disagreement amongst members of the same identity group over any of the “content” of their shared identity is possible. The linguistic, public creating powers and didactic capacity of comedians ensure that they play a role in both defining these meanings and aiding to secure the boundaries of this content as it relates to the shared identity. Netflix, a platform that produces popular stand up comedy specials, provides useful and overt examples of national identity content being referenced and adjudicated by the comedian didactically. Explicit examples, such as specials referencing “America” by name include: Nick Offerman: American Ham, David Cross: Making America Great Again, Judah Friedlander: America is the Greatest Country in the United States, Katt Williams: Great America, Ronny Chieng: Asian Comedian Destroys America! and Gad Elmaleh: American Dream. These comedians render their comedy within the context of the American nation, but their understanding of this nation may be distinct from each other or from the ways their audience understands “America” as a nation. As such, this reflects contestation within the national construct.

These examples are clear; however, this contestation may occur in more subtle ways. In fact, by virtue of their connection to national identity construction: institutional, linguistic, banal,
and everyday sites that intersect humor and national construction are all at play in the
contestation of these meanings and a national identity writ large. This occurs in much the same
way as these sites work in places like Northern Ireland. While multiple, competing national
identities exist within the state boundaries of Northern Ireland, contestation occurs within
national identities in the country, as well. This allows Northern Ireland to behave as an apt case
study for comedy within and between nations of all kinds in all contexts where television, live
comedy, and social laughter exist. Key differences between Northern Ireland and elsewhere,
however, may be the extent to which comedy has this power or to which this power is obvious
within an identity group. Whereas in Northern Ireland, national identity is ever present to the
ways residents experience the world, the capacity of comedy to negotiate locations of
contestation within national identities elsewhere may be less overt but perhaps as powerful. More
research should be done to understand the effect of humor on national identity construction
beyond the scope of Northern Ireland to discern its power on a larger scale. There is always more
to learn.
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