Humor. Seriously.
A Christian, a Muslim, and a Jew walk into a bar. Each orders a Screaming Orgasm cocktail...

Be honest, who just got a nervous batch of butterflies after reading that sentence? Feel an extra bit of tension, perhaps? After all, this is a university-produced magazine.

In a time when “political correctness” is the common rule, it’s reasonable to cringe, to wonder if this writer would dare follow through with such a setup, much less offer a punchline. And what if the joke was actually funny?

Humor can be a serious thing, and a joke can mean different things to different people in different circumstances. When used as a weapon, humor can wound, corrupt, and humiliate. Yet, when used as a tool, humor can establish rapport, educate audiences, and empower people.

Don and Alleen Pace Nilsen have spent the better part of their academic careers studying humor and its effect on culture and society. Both are professors of English at Arizona State University. Political correctness is just one of more than 100 topics they studied during background research for the Encyclopedia of 20th-Century American Humor. The new book is just one of the husband-wife team’s many professional collaborations.

“Humor serves very real and very important psychological and social functions. Humor can help us cope, save face, gain status, test limits, or bond with others. It also provides a topic for serious research by a pair of ASU English professors and their colleagues around the world.”

By Jessica McCan
ACCIDENTAL HUMOR

One type of accidental or unintentional humor is linguistic, such as in the form of misspellings or errors in logic. Headline writers, for example, are especially apt to create accidental humor because they are trying to attract attention and communicate a whole story in only a few words, as shown in these examples:

Dr. Ruth Talks about Sex with Newspaper Editors
Red Tape Holds Up New Bridge
Defendant’s Speech Ends in Long Sentence
Blind Woman Gets New Kidney from Dad She Hasn’t Seen in Years

SLANG

Long before the days of mass media, slang was effectively spread by word of mouth. Modern mass media can spread slang instantaneously around the world. Yada, yada, yada, master of my domain, and it’s in the vault all made their way into popular culture through television’s Seinfeld sitcom. D’oh! was adopted from cartoon character Homer Simpson’s expression of disappointment or self-disgust. Earlier generations picked up such signature lines as Jackie Gleason’s “How sweet it is!” Jack Parr’s “I kid you not!” Arte Johnson’s “Verrrry interesting!” and Gilda Radner’s “It’s always something!”

PUTDOWNS AND REJOINERS

Put-down humor is best appreciated when it occurs between people of equal status who respect each other and so can enjoy the teasing as a display of wit rather than meanness. Celebrity roasts succeed because the person being roasted is clearly respected. Snappy rejoinders are also funnier when the person on the receiving end has somehow “asked for it.”

When William Gladstone attacked fellow statesman Benjamin Disraeli in front of the British Parliament by saying that Disraeli would die “either on the gallows or of a horrible disease,” Disraeli responded, “That depends on whether I embrace your principles or your mistress.”

INTERNATIONAL WORDPLAY

Most players of the Pac Man video game do not know that its name comes from a Japanese slang word paku-paku. The word describes a person’s mouth opening and closing while one eats. Others have not heard the story about the almost as-popular Donkey Kong, which features an aggressive gorilla. According to the story, the Japanese manufacturer intended to name the game Monkey Kong in honor of King Kong, but confused a d for an m.

POLITICS AND HUMOR

Besides building a sense of community, self-deprecating humor can be effective in disarming political foes if a candidate is able to beat his critics to the punch by making voters laugh about something that worries them.

John F. Kennedy countered those critics who charged that he had an unfair campaign advantage because of his family’s wealth. He pulled an envelope from his pocket and read a fake telegram from his father: “Don’t buy one vote more than necessary. I’ll be damned if I’ll pay for a landslide.”
Many contemporary comedians and humorists have achieved fame and fortune by using ethnic humor and stereotyping—even vulgarity—to win over audiences. African-American comedians like Richard Pryor, Eddie Murphy, Whoopi Goldberg, and Chris Rock get laughs from diverse audiences, often by teasing them about their prejudices. Humor writers such as Dave Barry and the late Erma Bombeck have parodied sex, marriage, and parenthood in ways that allow readers to laugh at the stereotypes and also see beyond them.

Of course, ethnic humor and stereotyping can range from playful teasing to hostile hate-speech. Therein lies the problem. “How humor is received depends on who you target. It depends on your attitude and your audience. It depends on many things,” says Don Nilsen.

Humor’s effectiveness also depends largely upon its goal; whether it is intended as a tool or as a weapon. According to the Nilsens, jokes directed toward a particular group from an individual within that group are considered more palatable, even beneficial. Such humor can expand the horizons of the group and perhaps allow them to see themselves in an objective light.

However, humor that is from someone outside the group—especially from someone who is hostile toward them—tends to do the opposite. Such humor shrinks the horizons, makes the group smaller and more sensitive to criticism.

During its infancy, any particular group or movement is particularly sensitive to criticism, Don Nilsen explains. Still, to say that one should never poke fun at a particular gender, religion, or ethnic group is a discredit to them, he contends.

“When you say a group shouldn’t be criticized or joked about, what you’re really saying is they’re not strong enough to take it,” he says. “By not teasing, you’re making them invisible. But by teasing them, you’re saying they’re strong enough. They’re your equal. They can tease back. It’s empowering.”

Once a movement becomes secure enough to take criticism and accept teasing, it’s an indication that it has grown, evolved, and gained strength from its uniqueness. The Jewish culture is a prime example, says Don. Much of his research has focused on Jewish humor. The ASU scholar is a principal advisor for a three-hour documentary being produced for public television titled “A Gift of Laughter: Comedy and the Jews.”

Several pages of the Nilsen’s encyclopedia are devoted to Jewish humor, its evolution, and its impact on American humor. It notes that while Jews constitute a small percentage of the U.S. population, they also comprise a large percentage of the nation’s professional comedians.

Some famous Jewish comedians did not or do not use their religious background as fodder for their jokes. Jack Benny, Milton Berle, Jerry Lewis, and Roseanne Barr are examples. However, Woody Allen, Rita Rudner, Jerry Seinfeld and others frequently mine their heritage for material.

Comedienne Elayne Boosler, the Nilsens write, gives a new twist to an old Jewish stereotype when she jokes, “My brother’s gay. My parents don’t mind as long as he marries a doctor.”

The Nilsen’s point out that the idea of political correctness began to take shape during the 1960s and 1970s, as people’s social consciousness and general distaste for stereotyping grew. Yet, by the 1990s, the pendulum had already begun to swing back. As a result, “pc” had been around long enough to become fair game itself for America’s comedians and humorists.

Consider recent television shows like Comedy Central’s “Politically Incorrect” with Bill Maher. The show aspired to push its viewers’ sensibilities to the max. Such is our need to laugh with others, even if it means laughing at ourselves.

“We just can’t get rid of humor,” Alleen concludes. “It’s so basic to human life.”

So, exactly how many journalists does it take to screw in a light bulb? Four—one to change the bulb, and three to distort the facts.