

How can comedy be used to engage men in feminism through character development?

“A Woman Walks Into A Bar Comedy Collective” will be referred to as “AWWIAB” throughout text.

“A Woman Walks into a Bar” is a comedy filmmaking collaborative with a core feminist message: men can and should engage in feminism. In this post-digital age, many women have discovered or rediscovered feminism through social media but feminist content for men has not existed until now. This project has not only empowered men to create feminist content - therefore becoming part of a conventionally exclusive movement - but it changes the perception that feminists must be female. The intervention is a six-part sitcom for men, written, directed by and starring members of the newly founded collective. The episodes are accessed via YouTube.com, and directed at men who enjoy comedy colloquially described as “Lads’ Comedy” using relevant tags¹.

Rather than recruit professionals with a feminist comedy background, male broadcasting-professionals were recruited to produce content for men who would not count themselves as feminists. The collaborators, screenwriter Matt Lovett and comedian Keir Carroll were recruited through ShootingPeople.org. Both showed interest in feminism in that they applied for the role, but neither had ever created feminist content. This resulted in a meaningful and tangible level of engagement in the collaborators, who cited that they became adept at analysing their own creative output, ensuring future production of implicitly or explicitly feminist content. Measured through script alterations and discussion, they developed a “feminist eye”, dissecting accepted derogatory gendered vernacular.

Feminism is imperative. Each year, up to 3 million women and girls experience rape, domestic violence or stalking in the UK² and a 19.2%³ gender pay-gap still exists. At the current rate of change, the economic gap will not close before 2133⁴. Additionally, there is concern expressed in the media that masculinity is in crisis⁵, alongside claims that young

¹ “Tags are descriptive keywords you can add to your video to help people find your content.”

Definition from www.google.com/YouTube

² <http://ukfeminista.org.uk/take-action/generation-f/statistics/>

³ <http://www.fawcettsociety.org.uk/2015/11/new-data-on-the-gender-pay-gap/>

⁴ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-34808717>

⁵ <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/men/thinking-man/11238596/A-crisis-of-masculinity-men-are-struggling-to-cope-with-life.html>

men are neglected by feminism⁶. The feminist movement provides the tools to unpick restrictive patriarchal norms, but for most men, the stigma and misunderstanding of feminism prevents engagement. AWWIAB counters those misconceptions with comedy characters. Research suggested that men would be deterred by explicitly feminist comedy, so the majority of the sitcom features non-political jokes and dialogue. The concept of feminism goes unmentioned until the fourth episode - "Femantic" - a 2-minute film explicitly demonstrating a male feminist.

Comedy and feminism may not be traditional bedfellows, but humour is a proven vehicle for social change⁷. Elucidating a complex, serious topic, AWWIAB developed characters, Grant and Joe who simultaneously clarify feminism and satirise traditional masculinity. Complementing the "lads' comedy" genre in terms of characterisation, setting and dialogue, the content also disrupted the "masculine" domain with feminist terminology and references. Through shareable videos, AWWIAB demystifies feminism; and indeed the first step to engagement may be sharing a feminist video on social media. As the format and graphics of the sitcom mirror videos typically found in "lads" websites such as www.theladbible.com, sharing feels less intimidating to someone whose identity is partly communicated in his "shares" and "likes" on social media.

Inviting members of the target audience (Keir and Matt) to produce the film ensured that the content was appropriately conveyed, preventing the audience from feeling reprimanded or mocked for their lack of feminist knowledge. This is a creative programme for small groups of men, but the output has the potential reach of millions, due to the shareable nature of the films. The formation of the comedy collective has also proved that it is possible to produce work which comfortably fits into the "Lads' Comedy" genre, and could be commissioned by "men's" TV channels such as Dave or Comedy Central, but still expresses a genuine feminist message.

In testing, the sitcom unfailingly provoked conversation, and thus engagement. The richly developed characters elicited further transformation in the collaborators, who intend to continue production next year, achieving the aim of ensuring that men continue to create feminist content for other men. This format of "engaging the perceived enemy" with comedy could be successfully replicated for any social change movement: identifying those who resist change and creating a safe space for them to participate.

⁶ <http://www.theguardian.com/news/datablog/2013/may/07/men-gender-divide-feminism>

⁷ http://www.comedy.co.uk/features/the_impact_of_comedy/