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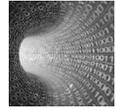
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Abstract

This article explores the uncharted territory of reflexive internet humor about networked computers. A combined quantitative–qualitative analysis of 250 texts sampled from popular websites yielded a map of the main themes underpinning this massive corpus of humor. We analyzed them in relation to three grand theories of the nature of humor – superiority, release, and incongruity – locating each theme on a matrix deriving from the theories: (i) a superiority axis, running between the powerful and weak players in the networked environment; (ii) an incongruity axis, running from the purely human to the strictly technical, and (iii) a release axis reflecting degrees of tension generated by the former two dualities. Our analysis suggests that humor about networked computers extends to a comment on the nature of humanness in a bewildering age of artificial intelligence. The communication of this reflexive comment may be shaping a global community of computer users.

Key words

computers, geeks, humor, human–machine interface, ICT-humor, internet, jokes, Luddism, Microsoft, tech support

Introduction: computers and funnies

Study of the new media has become a major research agenda over the past decade, while humor has been pondered since the days of ancient Greece. Nevertheless, the intersection

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of these two fields has not received much scholarly attention. The following is an exploratory foray into this uncharted territory. Part of the research interest in humor is due to its diagnostic powers. Since people often say humorously what they would never dare say blankly, a close reading of humorous texts can provide insight into what is lurking in the social mind, behind the façade of platitudes, conventions, and social expectations. In this vein, the present study looks into a particular set of social perceptions: those shaped by our encounter with computers and the internet. It does so by studying humorous texts mediated by these technologies.

In recent years the networked computer has become a dominant player in the production and distribution of humor. Countless websites are devoted to the comic, and an enormous traffic of humorous emails crosses the globe on a daily basis. One of the main themes of this humor is the technology which conveys it. The flow of humor over the net is replete with verbal and visual comic texts about the networked computer, its makers and its users. In fact, a recent study found that humor on new information and communication technologies (ICTs) comprised fully 9 percent of popular cyber-humor volume (Shifman, 2007). While understandably lagging behind topics such as sex, gender, and politics, the theme was more popular than intuitive winners such as ethnic jokes or jokes about professions. These latter themes, which touch directly on people's identity, could have been expected to be much more popular than jokes about a metallic object on one's desktop or lap.

At first glance, the popularity of computer-oriented humor seems merely to represent a new chapter in the old story of humor and the technological sublime. The incredulity and anxiety that people experience when a new ICT emerges has traditionally been expressed and processed by creating and sharing humor about it. But the case of the networked computer appears to add a unique dimension to the experience of coping with bewildering technological change through humor. Previously, humor about new ICTs tended to be conveyed by their predecessors; for instance, jokes about the telegraph were printed in newspapers and books (Johnston, 1877). But in the present case, the message is the medium: humor about networked computers is conveyed by them, and is therefore charged with reflexive qualities, which we shall address below.

Humor about computers and the internet is unique in another way too. While it can mirror people's interactions with their information and communication machines, at a deeper level it touches on what is human in itself. Although all media may be regarded as extensions of humans (McLuhan, 1964), computers are particularly humanlike since they can somehow 'think' – they extend not only the senses but also the human mind (Levinson, 1997). Thus, this brand of humor can be far more revealing than humor about other communication technologies: it extends to a comment on the nature of humanness itself in an age of artificial intelligence.

Unlike computers, humor – and its research – have been with us for so long that by now we know something about how the comic works. Scholars of humor tend to classify theories about its nature into three meta-families: superiority, relief, and incongruity (Billig, 2005; Oring, 2003; Lynch, 2002). Superiority theory, dating from classical Greece and formulated by Plato and later Aristotle, interprets laughter as the expression of the pleasant feeling of one-upmanship. As Hobbes put it in his seminal *Human Nature* (1969[1650], Ch. 8:13): 'The Passion of laughter is nothing else but sudden glory arising

from some sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves, by comparison with the infirmity of others, or with our own formerly.'

Release theory, now widely identified with Freud (1976[1905]), but originating with Spencer (1860), understands humor as enabling the discharge of pent-up tension and anxiety. Thus, in Freudian analysis, laughter is a socially acceptable way of releasing tensions caused by the suppression of sexual and aggressive drives. Over past decades the approach was extended to the release of other drives, and was even exported beyond the individual to the social. On the societal level of analysis, humor can function as a safety valve, or a buffer, for the relief of mounting social and political tensions (Benton, 1988; Mindess, 1971; Sykes, 1966).

The foundations of incongruity theory were laid by Kant and Schopenhauer and expansively developed by Arthur Koestler (1964). It holds that the comic derives from an unexpected cognitive encounter between two incongruent elements, or planes, a process which Koestler calls bisociation. Hence a pun, certain metaphors, or the sight of a dog wearing a fireman's helmet can invoke laughter. Henry Bergson's (1956[1900]) seminal casting of incongruity theory as an encounter between the living and the mechanical is especially relevant here and is discussed later.

In what follows, we apply these three theoretical families to the analysis of humorous texts relating to networked computers. We first address two descriptive questions: What are the central themes of computer-mediated humor about networked computers, and who are the main butts of such comic texts? Going beyond the descriptive mapping of the field, our interpretative analysis will try to evaluate the meaning and appeal of such texts, by locating them in the nexus of people, technology, and power.

The corpus

We addressed the descriptive questions concerning themes of computer humor and its butts through an analysis of a sample of 250 comic texts from popular websites. Since this study aims to understand popular notions, we sampled widely used repositories for comic materials, or 'humor hubs' – large, dynamic and heterogeneous banks of visual and verbal humor (Shifman, 2007). We selected six popular humor hubs as the source of two thirds of our sample (170 texts), using a combination of multiple search-engines and Google page-rankings (following Shifman, 2007).¹ The remaining third of the sample (80 texts) was culled from YouTube, due to its unique role and salience in contemporary 'participatory culture' (Green and Burgess, 2009; Jenkins, 2006). In selecting items from the six humor hubs, we used both internal search engines and site induced categories to identify comic texts on computers and the internet, and then sampled them randomly. In the case of YouTube, we used its internal measurement of popularity to identify the most viewed videos relevant to our topic. The sampling process yielded 250 comic items in script, image, voice, and in various combinations thereof.

We subjected these texts to both quantitative and qualitative analysis. Through quantitative content analysis we address the descriptive questions concerning the breakdown of themes and comic butts.² Then, by way of grounded analysis (Lindlof and Taylor, 2002), we used the results to map and model this field of humor. The

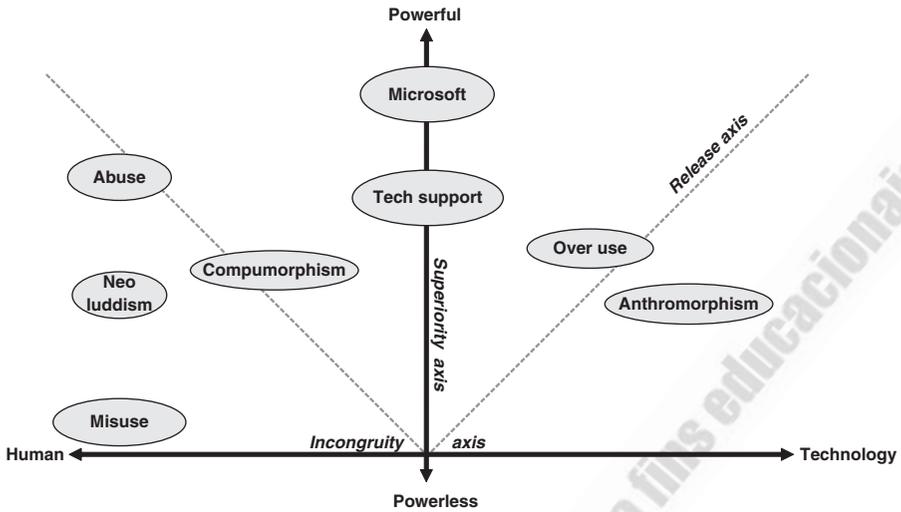


Figure 1. Humor on networked computers: themes and players

model charts the sample's structure and main themes, providing an integrative landscape of online humor on networked computers. The qualitative analysis featured a close reading of the sampled texts and the negotiation of their meaning, in an effort to address the higher order questions about the purposes and significance of this brand of humor. The richness of insights emerging from the discrete texts made us foreground the qualitative analysis, using it also to round-out and add depth to the typology and model.

The landscape: players and dynamics

The typology emerging from the combination of quantitative and qualitative analysis identifies the main protagonists in the humor and computer story, and locates them relationally. The core players are, of course, the computer and its user; but looking into the quantitative contours of the corpus we were surprised to discover the prominent role of two additional actors: the computer's makers, such as Microsoft, and those charged with the hopeless task of making it work properly, mainly tech support personnel. Figure 1 visualizes the two dimensions that anchor the analysis below: (1) a typology of the main players as well as the themes underpinning the corpus; (2) the links between those themes and the three main theories of humor – superiority, incongruity, and release. This linkage is represented by the relative location of the themes on a matrix created by the theories of humor.

The vertical axis of the model runs between the powerful players in the field and the weaker ones. This *superiority axis* lends itself easily to analysis driven by the superiority theory of humor. Reflecting the incongruity approach, the *incongruity axis* runs from the

purely human to the strictly technical. The tensions generated by the contrasting poles of each axis are well interpreted by the third major theoretical perspective on humor, the *release* approach.

We first turn to the humorous construction of the main players in the ICT field, to include (1) technology providers, (2) users, (3) facilitators, and (4) the networked computer itself. We then consider the dynamic relationship between them, constructed through their relative location in the matrix created by the humor axes.

Manufacturers, monopoly and Microsoft

A striking finding in our sample was the large number of comic texts (nearly a hundred) featuring companies in the ICT industry, of which more than half focused on Microsoft. Microsoft humor spans a broad range of topics, to include its products (which are usually depicted as flawed, unreliable, and unfriendly), its business strategies (which tend to be portrayed as aggressive, monopolistic, and generally obnoxious) and Bill Gates himself (commonly represented as a nerdy incarnation of the devil).

We suggest that Microsoft's prominence in ICT humor derives from both its 'hard,' political-economy related, power, and from its 'soft' power, embodied in subtle symbolic elements. To illustrate this, we propose a text from the sample that humorously describes a press release issued by General Motors, in response to Bill Gates' purported assertion that 'if GM had kept up with the technology like the computer industry has, we would all be driving \$25 cars that got 1,000 miles to the gallon'. In its reply GM points to other potential features of Microsoft-style cars, among them, that they would 'crash twice a day' (http://www.boreme.com/boreme/funny-2003/t_computer_v_car-p1.php).

This comic text, as others in our sample, highlights Microsoft's hard power. A leading aspect of this power is the company's great scale and scope – its ubiquitous presence, and the world's dependence on its products (Levinson, 1997: 88–92). A critical evaluation of Microsoft's near-monopoly is expressed in other clauses of the joke just quoted, such as 'Macintosh would make a car that was powered by the sun, five times as fast and twice as easy to drive, but would run on only five percent of the roads'; or 'Every time a new car was introduced, car buyers would have to learn how to drive all over again, because none of the controls would operate in the same manner as the old car'.

Indeed, this hard-power humor must stem, at least partly, from widespread frustration with the dependence of practically all users on Microsoft's products. This aspect of Microsoft humor seems equivalent to jokes in totalitarian regimes which serve as weapons of the weak against their dictators (Benton, 1988). In the case of Microsoft, the 'tyrant' subdues users and traps them, denying their freedom of choice in an aggressive, unfair manner. Such jokes can most readily be interpreted according to superiority theories, suggesting that the only power left to dependent users is to mock and diminish the mighty hegemon of the PC. Release theories of humor are also useful in analysing these texts, since Microsoft and its products are described in them as constant sources of frustration. Rather than leading to an aggressive response, frustration is sublimated to jokes.

Whereas Microsoft's hard power is mainly related to superiority theories, its soft power seems intrinsically linked to the humanness axis and to incongruity theories. From the soft-power perspective, Microsoft's dominance in the PC world leads to the blurring of the boundaries, even to synonymy, of Microsoft and the PC. This symbolic power can, however, backfire, turning Microsoft into a scapegoat for any and all discontents with the computing experience. By extension, Microsoft humor can represent a deeper sense of disappointment with the failure of man and computer to interact harmoniously. This notion emerges from the basic comic stratagem underlying the above comparison of computer to car. The automobile – the largest and most dangerous technological unit ordinary folks manage daily – is juxtaposed against the compact, harmless, and supposedly subservient computer. But while the good old car is managed unthinkingly, our new electronic companion proves to be the kind of capricious tyrant that denies one access unless she 'lifted the door handle, turned the key and grabbed hold of the radio antenna, simultaneously'.

Further, and paradoxically, the contrast between the friendly car and the nasty computer emerges precisely when the latter is behaving in its most social, communicative, and human-like mode: when it talks, asks, responds. Thus, the computer's most severe ailments are all expressed, according to the joke, by the same uninformative utterance: the 'illegal operation' warning. Its would-be airbags ask 'are you sure' before deploying, and it features the Orwellian requirement to press the *start* button when you want to turn it off. Clearly, the computer has no clue how to use language in a way that actually serves meaningful communication and understanding.

This failure to communicate can be tied to another attribute of Microsoft, beyond its hard power and its serving as a symbol for the computer. This is the nature of the company's line of products as a *master-interface*. There are three dimensions to Microsoft's role as an interface, and the first of them derives from its flagship product: *the operating system*. Appropriately tagged *Windows*, the operating system is Janus-faced: it mediates between hardware and software, the electronic device and its applications. By extension, this interface mediates between the technological and the human. Hence the location of Microsoft jokes midway between the technological and the human on the incongruity axis in Figure 1.

If the first intermediating layer – the operating system – is the corporation's core product, the second layer – *software applications* (bundled as *Office*) – is that through which users daily encounter Microsoft. The main role of *Office* applications is to mediate between specific, individually generated, content and general patterns for managing it (such as spreadsheets or word processing). These software packages are thus positioned on the frontier between the rigid and the flexible, structure and content, off-the-shelf products and personalized creations. A popular spoof on 'Clippy' – Microsoft's own representation of its role as mediator (Figure 2) – takes this aspect of mediation to the extreme.

Clippy and the suicide note can also highlight a third dimension of Microsoft mediation, focused on *interactivity*. Brought into focus by the user interface of both operating system and software packages, Microsoft's products have a back-and-forth quality, in that they both inform and are informed by the user. Unlike unidirectional television that can address the public but can't listen, the computer acknowledges the



Figure 2. Clippy and the suicide letter

Source: <http://www.visar.com/AssistedSuicide.html>

user's input and even provides constant feedback. It is precisely this intermediary nature that generates misperceptions and frustrations, which are ultimately expressed by humor. As an intermediary between the machine and us, we arrogantly expect Microsoft to take 'our side,' just to discover with frustration that the machine won again. We tend to forget that the company's interfaces are a feature of technology and not really human.

This duality, fleshed out in the above spoof on Clippy and the suicide note, re-caps the entire story of Microsoft and us in a nutshell, or rather, in a paper clip. To begin with, it is ironic that the 'human' face of the computer, the figure that was designed to guide folks in the bewildering world of digital skills, was shaped by Microsoft as a paper clip – the most mechanical contraption of the world of paper. The two main aspects of Microsoft humor discussed above – those related to its soft and hard power – are sharply represented in this visual text. On one level, it embeds the ultimate contrast between the human and mechanical: a paradigmatic intimate and personal moment – writing a suicide note – is disrupted by a technical intervention. Thus, the spoof mocks much more than a

specific Microsoft application – it ridicules the idea that computers can identify with, and cater to, human needs. At the same time, we can read the text as another comment on Microsoft's ubiquity and dominant presence – its hard power – that won't let go of us even when we are trying to depart. In tit for tat, a video clip which also appears in our sample features a frustrated customer smashing Clippy to death (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F6aXzMuYN7U>).

As noted above, a striking share of Microsoft humor focuses on the company's founder Bill Gates. We find a parallel between the salience of Microsoft in computer humor and Gates' salience in Microsoft humor. The flesh and blood image of Gates helps us frame, and to an extent grasp, the nature of Microsoft, just as Microsoft serves as the face of computer technology. As noted above, Microsoft's trio of operating system, applications, and interactive user interface try to give the illusion of human flexibility and responsiveness, even if with very limited success. This failure is reflected in Bill Gates' comic persona – in which his facade as the smiley bore next door is exposed as a disguise for the terminator-like brutality of the corporation he epitomizes. This duality is represented at its extreme in an offensive manipulated photograph from the sample, in which the smiling Bill Gates is positioned in front of a faceless crowd, wearing Nazi uniform and holding a giant flag which features the Window icon standing for the Nazi swastika. Incongruity here is taken to such an extreme that its comic effect seems to be compromised.

Users, aberrant and otherwise

Humor, by its very nature, deals with human faults; it builds on frustration, confusion, and discontent, not on beauty and harmony. Thus, it is not surprising that the ideal user – the perfect master, friend, and servant of the computer – is never at his desk. Who we meet instead are three main categories of flawed users that we tag *misusers*, *over-users*, and *abusers*.

Misusers A group of jokes in our sample focuses on users' inadequacy to operate computers properly. Such challenged users tend to be depicted as representatives of distinctive social groups that are stereotyped as slow or stupid. The list includes, beside the inevitable blondes and rednecks, representatives of the particular ethnic group singled out to stand for idiocy in a given society. A case in point is the spoof email presented in Figure 3, in which a manual Irish virus desperately attempts to spread itself. This spoof highlights the tremendous gap between computer-mavens and the uninitiated by reviving the stereotype of the rustic 'stupid Irish' against the sub-text of Ireland's rise to prominence in the high-tech world.

However, jokes in our corpus also mock misusers who do not necessarily represent social groups. Such jokes tend to highlight the incompatibility between the sophistication of information technology and the 'natural' cognitive processes of the savage human mind. Misuse jokes are located in the bottom-left corner of Figure 1, since they represent a combination of humanness and lack of power. In a majority of these cases, the alleged idiocy surfaces during an interaction with 'tech support' representatives. We therefore identify tech-support jokes as a separate category and discuss them below.



Figure 3. Irish virus

Source: <http://www.ebaumsworld.com/pictures/view/80446161/>

Over-users The comic mirror-image of misusers, over-users, just can't let go of their computers. If groups mocked in challenged-user jokes were stereotyped long before the computer age, over-users are constructed as a group precisely through their attitudes to their computers (Bardini and Harvard, 1995). The main theme emerging from humor about over-users is virtual life penetrating and taking over real life. Indeed, extreme over-users (known as geeks) are depicted as understanding computers so deeply that their own humanity is compromised. This is represented graphically in Figure 1: over-users are located close to the 'technology' end of the man-machine incongruity axis.

The theme of virtual life conquering over-users' humanity has three related dimensions, the most exotic of which is computer-fetish (Turkle, 1984). Jokes in our sample show over-users treating their computers not as tools used to achieve rational ends but as autonomous entities to which one becomes emotionally attached. These feelings lead to a semi-idolatrous relationship, in which the physical entity of the computer is celebrated or even worshiped. For instance, one of the symptoms of geekiness, in a text titled 'You are a geek if...', is 'You seriously consider devoting a web page to your computer. Not the brand, mind you, but the actual computer itself' (www.jokearchives.com/toplists/youknowyoureageekwhen.html). Complementary to worshiping the computer is internalizing aspects of it. Some jokes feature geeks who have become computer-like in their cognitive processes. For instance, another clause from the 'You are a geek' checklist proclaims you one if 'Someone asks you what languages you know, and you reply Upper Slavic, French, Esperanto and C'. Finally, jokes about over-users reflect an aberrant



Figure 4. Computer addict

Source: http://www.fugly.com/media/IMAGES/Random/computer_addict.jpg

social attachment to the PC and the virtual universe it is connected to, at the expense of ‘real’ relationships. This tension between the social and para-social or virtual world experienced by over-users is demonstrated in Figure 4. In this staged ‘funny-photo’ (Shifman, 2007), an over-user is literally being torn between his computer and family.

Abusers This third group of users invoked in computer humor does not under- or over-use computers, but somehow abuses them. In some cases the abuse relates to the physical attributes of the computer (such as ejecting the CD drive tray to hold a pint of beer); but in most cases in our sample, misuse is normative. It entails employing the computer for deviant purposes such as deceit, fraud, and most commonly, for audiencing porn.

In fact, whether or not to frame porn consumption as an abuse is the theme of the highly reflective and extremely popular song *The Internet is for Porn*. YouTube scores a startling number of user-generated versions of it, including edited animation, lip-synch, and video productions. Originating in the Broadway hit ‘Avenue Q’, the song features a comic debate between naive kindergarten teacher Kate Monster, impressed by the marvels of the internet, and Trekkie Monster, who insists on telling her what people *really* use the internet for. A shaken Kate responds ‘No really, you’re a pervert, normal people don’t sit at home and look at porn on the internet’. In response, Trekkie summons his ‘normal’ friends to join a jolly chorus singing time and again ‘the internet is for porn’. One obvious interpretation of this song’s popularity emerges from Freudian release theories:

humor enables us to manifest and process repressed issues such as porn consumption. However, the song goes one step further in its diagnostic qualities: it highlights the incongruence between the mass consumption of porn in private, and the normative world outside, which sees it as an abuse. Thus, the alleged abuse turns out to be the norm, a dialectic that is processed through humor.

But the privacy that may legitimize the consumption of porn is itself becoming somewhat murky. Some jokes touch directly on the potential for abuse emerging from the blurring of the boundaries between private and public, essence and appearance, in a networked world (Danet, 2001; Turkle, 1995). For example, in one item we sampled, we see an obese, naked, middle aged man presenting himself via chat to an attractive teen-aged female as '14 and a bit of a fitness fanatic' (source: <http://www.boreme.com/boreme/funny-2004/chat-room-fun-p1.php>).

As Figure 1 demonstrates, the abuser can be interpreted as the mirror image of the over-user. If the latter veers from the golden path between the human and mechanical towards the machine, the abuser, to whom the internet 'is for porn' (or for fraud), is engrossed with his computer in satisfying the most earthly human drives. Thus the abuser is located on the chart close to the 'human' pole of the incongruity axis. The abuser's focus on desire and its criminal or amoral manifestations, rather than on intellect or spirit, highlights man as a sensual machine, precisely what the computer is not.

Intermediaries: tech support

Comic texts about tech support are a noticeable part of our sample. Such texts deal with tech support representatives and their strange encounters with puzzled, annoyed, and sometimes incredibly inadequate users. Tech support represents a layer of mediation between man and machine, called to the rescue after the operating system and software mediators – described in our analysis of Microsoft humor – failed. The user, unable to communicate with his computer in a meaningful way, looks for a real human interpreter, rather than a pathetic talking paper clip. Users seeking the 'little man in the computer', find it over the phone.

The basic situation of tech support intervention incorporates dimensions of superiority/inferiority, frustration/release, and incongruity. Any of them can launch the process of consultation with tech support, and can also be its outcome. Frustrated by our computers and the incongruity between their language and mind and our own, we turn to the seemingly superior tech support representatives. Their failure to help is patently frustrating – indicating real incongruity in the encounter between the machine and humans. But a successful intervention can be no less frustrating; we fix it, but discover in the process how inferior, incompetent, and distant from the computer we really are. Dialogue is the dominant form of tech-support humor (12 out of 15 texts in our sample). This format can highlight the gap between ordinary users and computer mavens, at the same time that it provides a sense of 'authenticity' to their interaction.

Consider the following three texts, reflecting varying levels of user incompetence:

Tech Support: What's on your monitor now, ma'am? Customer: A teddy bear my boyfriend bought for me in the supermarket.

Customer: I have a huge problem. A friend has placed a screen saver on my computer, but every time I move the mouse, it disappears.

Customer: I can't get on the internet.

Tech Support: Are you sure you used the right password?

Customer: Yes, I'm sure. I saw my colleague do it.

Tech Support: Can you tell me what the password was?

Customer: Five stars

(<http://www.boreme.com/boreme/funny-2005/tech-help-p1.php>).

The texts progress from a user who treats computers only as hardware (hosting a soft teddy bear), through one's misperception of the screen saver's meaning, to the somewhat reasonable misunderstanding of the way PINs work. But in all these texts – and in most tech-support jokes in our sample – the underlying incongruity is between naïve human expectations and the way the machine actually works.

Yet there seems to be an even more fundamental explanation for the popularity of tech-support jokes, which derives from the unique nature of the computer as a household appliance. Numerous hours of work in the company of the PC tend to establish familiarity and rapport with it. However, unlike mechanical devices, the computer's workings remain non-intuitive; it can be unresponsive, and it's never transparent (Williams and Rice, 1983). This gap between hands-on familiarity and sublime irresponsiveness seems to be filled by the tech support representative, at least in jokes.

Accordingly, the tech support folks are unlike any other maintenance corps servicing household appliances, such as plumbers or TV technicians. The closest parallel may in fact be the Oracle's Pythia or the priest in confession, mediating between man and the sublime divinity. As in a confession, the user 'sins': being human, not a machine, he is eminently fallible, bound to transgress with his computer. But god is distant, unintelligible and uncommunicative, leaving us with the mediator: the Pythia/priest/tech support representative. Thus it is precisely the attributes of the computer just mentioned – its being sublime and its use hands-on – that gives tech support its mythological power. It may go as far as presenting the tech support personal as omnipotent:

Tech Support: OK, in the bottom left hand side of the screen, can you see the 'OK' button displayed?

Customer: Wow. How can you see my screen from there?

(<http://www.ebaumsworld.com/jokes/read/1012697/>)

Networked computers

While jokes about manufacturers, users, and intermediaries are explicitly about people, in a significant share of our corpus the computer and its attributes seem to dominate. What characterizes the jokes in our sample coded as dealing with computers is their juxtaposing of humans and computers. These texts respond to the tension in the relationship of person and machine either by speaking of one in terms of the other, or by highlighting the conflict between them. The former strategy assumes two forms: speaking of computers in human terms (anthropomorphism), and describing humans in computer-oriented terminology (what we tag compumorphism). The other approach



Figure 5. Computer virus

Source: <http://www.hireintel.com/html/virus.html>

underscores the human–machine animosity, and we see it as an echo or guise for veteran Luddism.

Anthropomorphism People have always tried to domesticate animals and technologies, first by naming them (Genesis 2:17; Blondheim, 1998), then by attributing to them familiar human cognitive and emotional traits (Sawhney, 1996). Such anthropomorphisms are particularly prevalent in texts addressing children and attempting to familiarize them with the natural and technological environment they are born into, a la Thomas the Tank Engine. Since the networked computer has become crucial to daily functioning there is a particular need for domesticating it, yet doing so is fraught with contradiction. On the one hand the computer is hopelessly complex and its operations mysterious, but on the other its affordances are more humanlike than other material objects in people’s environments. And indeed, some texts in our sample talk to the unique anthropomorphic strand in our relationship with the PC. They feature computers as having human traits – in the case of the cartoon above (Figure 5), vulnerability to viruses. This naive visual of a sneezing computer underscores the incongruity between the biological and the electronic, the painful and the unfeeling. As elaborated below, it serves both to demonstrate and to bridge the gap between techné and humanity. Another item from the sample, titled ‘icon story’, similarly tries to humorously attribute a disturbing human trait to software, by having animated graphic icons, rather than peacefully hanging next to each other on the desktop, begin shooting and bombing one another (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mCZa1_qsF7M).

This attribution of human traits to technology is not as theoretically trivial as it may appear; it even seems to turn Bergson’s (1956[1900]) theory on its head. Whereas Bergson suggested that humor is a way of penetrating the mystery of the human by juxtaposing it to the transparent machine, sentient computer jokes may help us penetrate and construct the computer through use of human traits and terms. Thus, on the one hand, these texts may serve as utopian bridges between the mystifying machines and the unfortunate humans that are destined to live with them. But, while laboriously stretching these

bridges, the jokes also highlight the insurmountable gulf between the two. This dialectic is funny, precisely because of what Oring (2003) – building on incongruity theories – terms ‘appropriate incongruity’: humor derives from the sudden perception of a connection or similarity between categories that are utterly different. What the text does is thus to simultaneously build bridges between the ‘human’ and ‘machine’ categories and underscore the abyss separating them.³

Compumorphism Diametrically opposed to anthropomorphic-oriented humor is what we call compumorphism: the use of computers and their traits for mocking individuals and social groups. Computers in this category thus serve as metaphors for human behavior, the metaphoric gambit likening man and machine. An example of this kind of humor is a text about an English class trying to address the question: ‘What gender is a computer?’ While women cast computers as masculine (since, for instance, ‘they have a lot of data but are still clueless’), men decided that computers should be considered feminine, (since, for instance, ‘no one but their creator understands their internal logic’). In this joke and others, computers are used as metaphors for distinct traits associated with men and women. The masculine-feminine divide injects a fundamental ambiguity into what is essentially human. Because of the delusive similarity between computers and humans, framing the other in computer-like traits does two denigrating things: it points to the other (gender) as not what a true human should be, and mocks it by evoking the incongruence of machines and humans.

Neo-Luddism If anthropomorphism and compumorphism point to similarities between man and machine, neo-Luddism posits the two as bitter rivals. A small group of texts highlights the physical aspects of conflicts with the computer, spanning the gamut of frustrated users cursing, attacking, or smashing their PCs to pieces, to a puppy pissing on a keyboard (<http://www.ebaumsworld.com/pictures/view/80547491>). Such jokes seem to reflect neo-Luddite tendencies, in the sense of ‘if you can’t join it, break it’.

This post-industrial incarnation of Luddism seems to both continue and contradict the 19th century movement. The original Luddites protested the replacement of people by the machines of modernity; namely, they saw machines as *too efficient*. On the side of continuity, jokes featuring frustration, even violence towards the computer, can reflect similar feelings of incompetence when one compares oneself to the new machine. However, the same act of punishing the computer may reflect an opposite experience: of computers not being efficient *enough*, in the sense of not performing as a proper surrogate for human activities (as when it loses a file or inexplicably shuts down an unsaved window).

In other words, computers can provoke violence both for being too effective and for not being effective enough. This of course is akin to the issue of superiority: we laugh either because the computer is superior to man or vice versa. For this reason neo-Luddite texts are located midway between ‘powerful’ and ‘powerless’ in Figure 1. And indeed, neo-Luddite jokes are especially polysemic: we can either laugh at the pathetic savage person, incapable of taming his mechanical shrew, or we can identify with the protagonist who has finally had enough and knows what needs to be done.

Conclusion

Even when they feature elephants and Volkswagens, jokes are essentially about people, and their ultimate target of mockery is the human. Thus, the title of this article may be misleading – the comic texts that we analyzed are not about computers, they are about the people using them. The popularity of this brand of online humor, as indicated by the Figures 2 to 5, would suggest that these users must be very funny beings, in many different ways. For the flow of computer humor incorporates a dizzying array of themes and personae – spanning Bill Gates and porn-crazed Trekkie, puppies pissing on keyboards and Microsoft's pathetic Clippy, challenged blondes and their nerdy tech support knights.

We clustered this ostensibly chaotic flood of humorous texts into four main thematic groups, focusing on: (1) perceptions of computer makers, predominantly Microsoft; (2) characteristics of computer users (including misusers, over-users, and abusers); (3) interactions with tech support, and (4) attitudes towards the networked computer (including anthropomorphism, compumorphism, and neo-Luddism). Seeking what makes these themes funny and popular, we resorted to three grand theories of the nature of humor – superiority, incongruity, and release. Applying them to the field of computer humor yielded two main axes underpinning humor on networked computers: a superiority axis running between the powerful and weak players in the networked environment, and an incongruity axis running from the purely human to the strictly technical. The third main theory of humor – release theory – comes into play in response to the tensions between the poles on either the superiority or the incongruity axes. Such tensions, we have shown, generate frustration that can be released through humor. All four major themes in our corpus, as well as their sub-themes, could be located relationally in the matrix created by these axes. Since the axes reflect humor theories, this positioning helps not only to chart the interrelations between the themes, but also to account for their funniness.

We found that in terms of superiority, humor responds to the troubling fact that many things we can do, computers can do better. This frustrating sense of powerlessness is magnified when dealing with mavens of the machine – the computer's makers epitomized by Bill Gates, or its human apostles, such as tech support representatives. Humor also responds to the incompatibility of man and his mechanical prostheses. For however closely we interact with the computer, it remains the ultimate, outermost, other – a woman for men, a man for women, and in either case one that can't sneeze. Inevitably, life with this kind of prostheses is uniquely frustrating, and this frustration too can be released by humor.

These notions of inferiority and incongruity, as well as the repeated experience of frustration, derive mainly from the computer's cognitive-like function, its performance as a thinking machine. Ironically, the remedy for the frustrating, perhaps unbridgeable, gap between humans and computers piggybacks on another central attribute of the computer – its ability to link up to other computers, and thereby to connect their frustrated users.

When broadening this perspective, our corpus of humorous texts can be seen as material for shaping and maintaining a global community of computer users. This process of community building combines what media scholars would call 'transmission' and

'ritual' models of communication. The transmission model describes communication as the imparting of information, its delivery and receipt across space. The ritual model invokes the notion of sharedness of values, symbols, and cultural sensibilities such as that which unites people in prayer or communion (Carey, 1989; Peters, 1999). In the case of circulating computer jokes online, transmission and ritual are intertwined: the mere traffic of jokes about computers transmitted over the internet forms the skeleton of a social network. Each person laughing at a computer-related text becomes a node in the global network of computer users, his/her click on the forward command effecting its scope and density. But in this act, users also transform the aggregation of computers, users, and the channels connecting them, into one community, as if sharing and performing a ritual. In the great cathedral of computer users worldwide, these comic texts transform the dilemmas of each agonizing user into a shared inter-subjective experience.

By sending and receiving jokes about computers through their computers, users not only underscore the links constructing this community, but also help probe what it is that they have in common. Here the reflexivity of computer humor is key: unless you are a geek or an ICT professional, the only texts *about* ICTs that you are likely to get through the network are jokes. This reflexive moment – the awareness of one's own positioning vis-à-vis his/her thinking machine – is utterly human. Ironically, the networked computer that enables the formation of this self-aware community of users is left out: it sends, but can't get, the punch line.

Hence, by sharing jokes about computers, users construct a multi-layered performance of the human. First, as suggested above, jokes necessarily highlight humanness, since a sense of humor is a distinctly human trait, one that can be learned by computers only to a very limited extent (Mihalcea and Strapparava, 2005). Second, the human-machine tension is often, as we showed, the substantive focus of computer humor. By extension, jokes about person-computer incongruity define the human as a category, even as a species. In this sense, such texts are functional equivalents of the burgeoning corpus of digital comic texts about animals (Shifman, 2007). This distinction of the human from machines, objects, and animals may carry special significance in an era described as 'posthuman' (Hayles, 1999) – a digital age of fluid identities and intelligence, distributed across networked humans and machines. Finally, this brand of humor can shape a putative global community that shares the pan-human experiences of both using computers and finding jokes about them funny.

But this discursive 'boundary work' in limning the human via humor encounters some major challenges that also chart an agenda for future theoretical and empirical research. We suggested above that humor about computers may help construct a global community of users. But since the use of technology is ever embedded in cultural and social practices, humor about computers may assume divergent themes, forms, and functions in different places and languages. Even in the same geographical space and the same linguistic group, divergent social sub-groups such as teenagers and the unemployed, geeks and desperate homemakers, may construct ICTs in different ways. Therefore, a breakdown of the flow of computer humor by regions, languages, and sub-cultures, and its empirical investigation, may demonstrate fundamental differences in constructing the human-machine nexus. Such variations would seem worth exploring given the deep meaning we just attributed to this brand of humor as a reflection and negotiation of that which is human.

The extension of this study in time may be just as necessary as its differentiation in geographic space and social inner-space. This article provides a mere snapshot of recent humor on networked computers. But since our relationship with technology is historically situated, comparing our findings with close historical studies of humor about earlier information and communication technologies – new for their times – is called for. This kind of historical perspective would help evaluate whether the theoretical model that emerged from mapping computer humor is applicable to jokes about new ICTs in other eras. While we assume that the dimensions of power, incongruity, and frustration may be relevant to humor about other media, the balance between them – as well as their specific incarnations – may vary. Such studies may therefore sharpen our grasp both of each unique technology and of the overall trajectory of adaptation to new ICTs.

Moreover, this kind of diachronic focus on change can work forwards as well as backwards. Follow-ups to this study could productively focus on future change in the nature of computer humor. These future studies would allow us to gauge the impact of our continuing engagement with computers in terms of both the humanness and the power axes. As we have seen, the incongruity between the computer and the human has been a constant source of frustration, and of humor. But advances in machine learning, in particular the emergence of ‘affective computing’ by emotionally intelligent systems (Picard, 1997) may lead to greater congruence between people and machines. In parallel, on the human side, as exposure to computers intensifies, and as a greater proportion of users are ‘born digital’ (Palfrey and Gasser, 2008), the relationship between people and computers may become less frustrating. In other words, keeping tabs on future trends on the basis of variables presented in the foregoing may provide a running commentary on change in ourselves, our computers, and the relations between the two.

Should incongruity between humans and computers indeed be declining, power will probably remain a central issue in that relationship, and consequently, in the making of humor. Yet the definition, visibility, and perception of power may well be undergoing a fundamental transformation. In this study, we identified Microsoft as a dominant target of humor about networked computers, due to its presumed hegemony in the political economy of our computerized world and its symbolic omnipresence. But other players seem to be rapidly gaining power in the ICT environment, even if they are invisible to users (e.g. ‘power by the algorithm’; Beer, 2009). Among them, players such as Google, Facebook or Twitter have fared well in the crucible of public sentiment, due to their presumed association with free information and participatory culture. However, as public education and fear of monopoly of knowledge and gate-keeping in the digital age increases, these spick-and-span images are becoming tarnished.

Thus, the positioning of players on both the humanness and power axes may well be in the throes of change. Since humor is a sensitive seismograph of collective perceptions, a continual exploration of humor about networked computers may lead to meaningful insight on the ways people conceptualize power and humanness in a changing world.

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Notes

- 1 We used the following humor hubs as sources for the comic texts: www.boreme.com, www.ebaumsworld.com, www.extremefunnyhumor.com, www.thehumorarchives.com, www.aha-jokes.com, www.comedy-zone.net.
- 2 The codebook for this analysis incorporated a series of variables, to include genre (e.g. riddle, cartoon, funny photo, animation); subject (e.g. email, operating system, blog); and target (e.g. users, machines, corporations). The comic texts were coded by two postgraduate students. To practise the coding procedure, we used a sample that was not included in the final analysis. Each coder coded half of the sample, with an overlap of 40 texts to assess inter-coder reliability. These inter-reliability scores proved satisfactorily high (Scott's pi): Genre (0.92), subject (0.86), target (0.81).
- 3 Whereas in this article we focus on the three central theories of humor, further studies may draw on other theories of the comic, in particular those analyzing humor as a playful mode of communication. Humor, like game-playing, is often engaged in for its own sake rather than to reach a specific goal (Morreall, 1987). In addition, both humor and play are based on multi-layered perception of social situations (Raskin, 1985). Looking at jokes about computers as forms of play may thus enrich our understanding of this phenomenon. For instance, Sutton-Smith's (1997) typology of the rhetoric of play (to include progress, fate, power, identity, imagery, self, and frivolity rhetoric) can complement humor theory in interpreting issues related to networked computers, such as the fantastical elements incorporated in 'anthropomorphic' humor.

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