



Interview with Chalani Ranwala

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KENNEALLY: According to the Congressional Research Service, global research and development expenditures were \$2.4 trillion US in 2020. Since 2000, total global R&D expenditures have more than tripled. Clearly, spending on research is serious business. So why would anyone want to make fun of it?

Welcome to Copyright Clearance Center's podcast series. I'm Christopher Kenneally for Velocity of Content.

R&D plays a central role in promoting economic growth and job creation, as well as advancing knowledge in such critical areas as energy, agriculture, public health, and environmental protection. Public appreciation of research's value, though, has been strained in the COVID pandemic, as well as from the onslaught of online misinformation and disinformation.

An antidote to cynicism and suspicions may be humor, suggests Chalani Ranwala, a research communications specialist based in Colombo, Sri Lanka. In a recent contribution to the London School of Economics' Impact Blog, Ranwala proposes that repackaging information into humorous content creates an informal access point to audiences, one that the public will find more inviting than traditional forms, such as white papers and journal articles. Chalani Ranwala joins me now to share how laughter can open minds. Welcome to Velocity of Content.

RANWALA: Hi, Chris. Good to be here.

KENNEALLY: Thank you for joining me. Chalani Ranwala, humor has long played an important role in critiquing society. What effect do comic devices have on how we receive and process information?

RANWALA: Well, Chris, I grew up watching a lot of standup comedy and a lot of talk show hosts in their talk show monologues, and I always knew that satire and humor – it goes a lot beyond just for entertainment purposes, and I really wanted to – because my background is in research communications, I wanted to see whether there was some kind of way to bring those two worlds together. And I started reading up and digging a little deeper into what it is about humor that makes it such an effective medium, and what I



found is that satire relies on the ability of the audience to recognize the irony in what they hear in the humor. I think it's that irony that really makes humor an effective medium.

What I also found out was that humor also sort of – it reduces our counterarguments against information that's received in an entertaining format. So simply put, it's almost as if when a friend of ours makes a sarcastic comment in order to get a point across, we tend to absorb it differently or even remember it more, as opposed to if it was told to us in a regular or a serious tone. There is a lot of potential there in the way satire and humor functions itself that makes it a really good medium to communicate research and really other complex topics as well.

KENNEALLY: Chalani Ranwala, it seems that humor, then, breaks down our resistance to new ideas, and it makes that an ideal vehicle to transmit knowledge.

RANWALA: It does, Chris. I really looked into this and what academics have said about humor, and there is a lot studies, a lot of research being done on comedians, particularly comedians who talk about issues like racism and feminism and social issues faced in different countries. These are very serious topics, right? But what it is about humor that makes it OK to make jokes about it, and what is it about humor that makes us want to understand these issues in a different way? I found three things, really, about comedy and satire that makes it quite effective as a medium to talk about serious stuff.

One is that satire uses preexisting narratives. Satire is a form of reverse discourse, Chris. What this means is that – reverse discourse occurs when you kind of use the terminology of a preexisting narrative in society, and you develop an opposing interpretation. That's what a lot of standup comedians, a lot of talk show hosts who talk about politics and policy – what they do is they pick up something that's already being debated in the public eye, and they kind of hold a mirror against it in order to create an opposing interpretation, if you will.

Secondly, satire also problematizes the norm. It makes us see things in a different way. It invites us to look at things in a different way. This is not always obvious to the audience. It's very subtle.

Just earlier today, I was listening to a South African comedian talk about his experience with racism, and it was a lot of humor. He was sort of engaging his audience. But really, he was talking about an issue – a very personal issue that was very serious. But there is something about the way this information is conveyed that makes you look at it differently. So it's almost that a-ha moment – you know, when you hear a joke and you laugh, but then you're also like, wait a minute. Why is it funny, though? What's really going on here?



Finally, and this is where I feel like it's most relevant to working with research, is that satire creates a very comfortable, accessible, friendly access point to an audience. I worked in research communications for many years. And as you know, Chris, it's not always an interesting topic. Depending on what you're researching, it's not always the most exciting content to put out there, especially to a general audience. It can be quite heavy with jargon. It can be quite technical. But humor is a friendlier voice, and it's not as intimidating as, let's say, a research brief or a policy-related report. So what I find is that it kind of gives researchers an access point to reach an audience at a level in which they are more comfortable and also more willing to engage.

KENNEALLY: Sri Lanka, where you live, Chalani Ranwala, is suffering a long-term economic crisis, with Sri Lankans facing acute shortages of food, fuel, and medicine. This summer, the fiscal emergency in the country metastasized into a political crisis that brought down the government. A Colombo-based think tank turned to local comedians Blok & Dino as knowledge partners to create a video explaining how the country came to such dire straits. So how did they approach telling this complex story, and how was it received by the public?

RANWALA: Chris, this was a very interesting project. It was also quite experimental. Verité Research is an independent think tank in Colombo that does a lot of research in different areas, but particularly in economic research and analysis. It was doing a lot of work around the crisis, around debt restructuring in particular, and trying to break down to the general public what was really going on.

Blok & Dino are very popular and successful comedians in Colombo. They have a very successful YouTube channel in which they do comedy skits primarily for commercial advertising. So they work with brands to sort of market their products and services. We wanted to bring the two parties together, and the idea was to use the same model, where you create a satirical video or a skit, but you plug in research. You plug in information – real data and analysis – into the experience.

What came out of it was a video which used a key analogy to explain what was happening in Sri Lanka. The analogy was that Sri Lanka was a dying patient in a hospital. He was on his deathbed. And you see the patient's family, representing the Sri Lankan public, sort of crying over and wondering what to do. And you get the doctors and the hospital staff that represent the economists and the politicians and the policymakers in the country. So it was a very brilliantly written script, and it had a lot of funny moments of imitation and exaggeration of familiar faces that led to the downturn of the economy.

Where Verité Research or the think tank comes in is that at certain points in which the situation was being explained, there were prompts with real data and analysis based on the



economic situation, such as about monetary policy, about what debt restructuring was, why Sri Lanka had a problem or ran into such shortages in its foreign reserves, and information like that. So it was almost sort of folded into the narrative. It was very subtle. The comedy or the video was just for – it was entertaining. But through watching it, people were actually informed as well.

And the reaction was quite – it was well received. The video went on to get more than a million views in a couple of weeks. And the reaction that I saw was that people were really grateful for the fact that they are able to understand what happened, why it happened, and the decisions that led to the economic downfall, because concepts like debt restructuring – it was in the news every day. You hear about it. But it's not something that you really know about unless you are tuned into that information. So explaining things that led to the problems, but also sort of explaining how Sri Lanka can come out of it, which in this case was negotiating with the International Monetary Fund, which is also featured in the video as the patient being taken to the IMF Hospital for treatment. That's how it was explained to the public – what is the IMF, why is it important, and what can come out of it?

KENNEALLY: Chalani Ranwala, do you think more researchers around the world should use more humor to communicate these complex kinds of messages?

RANWALA: I would say it depends on the political situation. It depends on the audience. If you take Sri Lanka, humor has a very special place in how Sri Lankans not only look at issues, but how they process issues. So it was almost – humor is kind of used as a comfortable defense mechanism. It's sort of a very accessible format for people. But it may not be so in every country, in every political situation. For example, critiquing the government through comedy or critiquing the government's policymaking through satire may not always be welcome, not just by the government, but by the people themselves. So it's very important to know the audience that you're working with and the context in which you're working with.

But if you are in an environment where it is possible to use humor, I feel like the first thing researchers should do is just look at their work, look at their message, and look at their data, because sometimes, you don't even have to create humorous content. The facts and the truth are funny enough to expose, especially with things like contradictions in policymaking or certain expenditures that the government has made that hasn't been fruitful. There's always irony. There's always humor in the information that we already have. So looking for opportunities to bring those out and to use humor to communicate the message to your public – I think looking for those opportunities is where it can all begin.



KENNEALLY: How should researchers approach any collaborations with comedians and other content creators?

RANWALA: Well, Chris, this is actually an area which I am working on currently through a fellowship program that I'm doing with On Think Tanks. My project actually focuses on the different ways in which think tanks or academic institutions can work with content creators – not just comedians, but it can be other types of content creators as well. And I think the most important thing is recognizing the correct model to work with in a way that doesn't compromise the credibility of the research or academic institution, where it's sort of a collaborative partnership in which both parties are doing what they do best and coming up with the optimal outcome.

Having looked at these collaborations, there are a couple of things that I noticed as benefits. One is obviously the scale. Research institutions and think tanks do have large audiences, but in most countries, I don't think you can even compare it to the scale of audience that a content creator might have on their YouTube channel or on their social media. So having access to that scale of audience is something that you may not be able to get by yourself. By collaborating, you automatically have access to an audience that you may not otherwise have had access to.

The second thing is voice, which I already, I think, touched on a little bit earlier, about having that friendly, informal voice, because a lot of the research, obviously, that we do exists in reports, and it's communicated through events and documents which may not always be digestible to a general public. So being able to deliver a message in a different voice is another benefit of having such collaborations.

Finally, I think it's to do with creative license, right? Comedians and content creators have creative license that allows them to do things that a researcher can't do. A researcher shouldn't be making jokes about the government's policymaking. So I think making use of creators who have the license to comment on situations, who have the license to make jokes because that's what they do – I think that's another benefit of working with people who are in that space. And then as long as you kind of stay within your lanes – and you have to find a workable model that allows you to stay in your lanes – you can maintain your credibility as a researcher while also providing information or empowering a third party to take your information and deliver it to their audience in the format that works best for them.

KENNEALLY: Chalani Ranwala in Colombo, Sri Lanka, thank you so much for speaking with me.

RANWALA: Thank you, Chris. Good to be here.



KENNEALLY: That's all for now. Our producer is Jeremy Brieske of Burst Marketing. You can subscribe to the program wherever you go for podcasts, and please do follow us on Twitter and on Facebook. I'm Christopher Kenneally. Thanks for joining me on Velocity of Content from CCC.

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