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Comedy in the Dock: it's no laughing matter

by Philip Baum



There is an emerging threat to aviation, far more likely to cause the loss of an aircraft than any liquid explosive artfully concealed by an al Qaeda sympathiser and significantly harder to prevent from being infiltrated on board due to the sheer numbers of passengers unwittingly infected by its virus. I'm not referring to any chemical or biological agent concocted with ill-intent in a laboratory, as this germ is more subtle and even its creators would try to deny responsibility should a disaster occur.

Whilst intelligence agencies worry about the dissemination and proliferation of virulent material over the internet through covert religious fundamentalist websites, and attempt to intercept emails and bug telephones of target groups to identify potential plots, the latest cause for concern is being blatantly transmitted into the general public's living rooms, primetime, via the broadcast media.

Bizarrely, many of those guilty of being conduits argue that this is a price we have to pay for living in a liberal society that cherishes the freedom of speech. Aviation security has long had to pander to civil libertarians who seem to prefer moral crusades to effective security – arguing against the deployment of body scanners and passenger risk assessments being cases in point. Now their twisted, corrupt, rose-tinted glasses view of the world is resulting in the antithesis of any moral code, rather the promulgation of immoral, anti-social, destructive, hurtful and

incendiary transmissions to the masses.

The purveyors of bad taste are often the first to be seen fund-raising for worthy charitable causes and I do not doubt their sincerity when they champion the fights against HIV, malaria, poverty, homelessness, famine, child abuse, cancer or whatever other disease or societal ill may touch their hearts. However, they must also accept responsibility for playing a pivotal role in the breakdown of respect in the high streets, classrooms, bars and other public areas of western, excessively liberal, so-called civilised communities...

“...respect, or lack of it, is now plaguing the aviation industry on a daily basis...”

and it is that word “respect”, or lack of it, that is now plaguing the aviation industry on a daily basis.

Readers beyond British shores may not have heard of the likes of Jonathan Ross or Russell Brand; for your information, they exemplify the worst of British. The former is an intelligent, talented showman who commands a £6 million (\$11 million... although the exchange rate is somewhat volatile as I write this piece!) per annum salary from the BBC for hosting a variety of entertainment shows; he has a passionate

following of some of the brightest minds Britain has to offer and is renowned for his edgy, self-indulgent, provocative style. Brand, on the other hand, has made his name by being a self-professed former drug addict who has somehow made it in the world of entertainment and who uses his stardom to bed as many women as possible and then brag about his conquests. Both the brilliant Ross and the pathetic Brand are proponents of puerile humour, looking for sexual innuendo at every opportunity, who pander to the dregs of society and have allowed fame to go to their heads. And, if they are offended by that statement, they should review some of their own output.

One broadcast, this October, brought them and the BBC into public disrepute as, together, in a pre-recorded show they made prank phone calls to an elderly man (78-year old comedian Andrew Sachs who played Manuel in the BBC series *Fawlty Towers*, back in the days when comedy was actually funny) and left messages on his answerphone about Brand having had sex with his grand-daughter. Finally they had gone too far for the British public and rightfully action was taken against them – poor Jonathan Ross is going to only earn £5 million from the BBC this year.

I love comedy; a good laugh is a fantastic tonic. Yet the latest style of edgy (apparently that's the word to use) humour is being voraciously consumed by an ever-more insensitive society, where being offensive is not only tolerated but glorified. Both my wife and I see, in our everyday lives, the outcome. My wife manages inner-

London primary schools where it's not only the children that show a complete disregard for teachers, but the parents too. There is little that teaching staff can do – they certainly can't touch a child; just imagine what the civil libertarians would say! Meanwhile, I receive report after report (a few of which make it to the *Air Watch* pages of this publication) about disruptive behaviour on board aircraft, or even at airports, where the passenger is damned if they are going to respect the views of any authority figure telling them what to do, even if it is for their own good. I guess the fact that we are both, in our professions, having to deal with the results of indiscipline makes us all the more alert to its causes.

Of course, there are many households that have the intelligence to distinguish between "edgy" comedy and the need to be a good citizen. They and their offspring may still stand for the elderly on the bus and would never swear in a public place, yet even they argue that skits, à la Ross and Brand, "really were quite funny". Funny, that is, providing they and their families are not on the receiving end. Another British celebrity comedian, Ricky Gervais, may be the brain behind one of the UK's greatest modern-day comedy shows – *The Office* – yet, his other too-offensive-to-be-broadcast material is lapped up by short-sighted, "life's too short to worry", morally corrupt individuals. Jokes about subjects ranging from polio victims to the Holocaust are tolerated as we "need to push the boundaries in order to encourage creativity"; the humour is justified by getting somebody from the target group to be part of the fun. You can tell racist jokes if you are black, Jewish jokes if you are Jewish and mock the disabled if you are confined to a wheelchair. One problem: they forget, ignore or worse still, don't care, about the effect on the viewer. Not the educated ones who can, regardless, distinguish between right and wrong; rather the more vulnerable members of society who cannot.

A British couple were recently arrested in Dubai for inappropriate, lewd, public displays of affection on a beach – behaviour that stuck up two fingers at the mores of a Muslim society that is so keen to welcome visitors and which attempts to accommodate foreign values. Yet the more we offer, the more people take.

And so it is with comedy, which has always poked fun at human failings, yet has never been intentionally hurtful or spiteful in the public domain. I don't solely blame the likes of Ross, Brand or Gervais – they are businessmen. I do, however, think that broadcasters and their regulators – the government – have a duty to control output. It's no easy thing to do in the age of the internet where excesses will find their natural home. However, if we can't even start with the mainstream television and radio stations, then we are in a sorry state.

It is often said that celebrities have a duty to be role models, yet how often do they pay the price? Pecuniary penalties have little impact. As aforementioned, what's a million pounds here or there to Jonathan Ross? Criminal prosecutions have to be brought and the courts of law need, especially when a celebrity is on trial, to penalise in a way that teaches a lesson, ideally with a loss of freedom however short that period of time is. Remember the impact on Paris Hilton? She was traumatised by her imprisonment, which only lasted a matter of days. Naomi Campbell escaped gaol for actions on board a British Airways aircraft earlier in the year – what a missed opportunity for society to teach the public a lesson.

Oh dear, you may say, the Editor is a ranting, right-wing disciplinarian who'd bring back corporal punishment to our

classrooms and have adult miscreants publicly flogged. I do think that banishment of the cane by our idealistic civil libertarians was one step up the ladder towards an anarchic society, but only because we all have a duty to teach respect, demonstrate respect, and enforce respect...and that can only be done at an early age. We have an entire generation of people who care little for the views of others, unless they get to go to a rock concert and raise money having fun.

It is often said that religions were created as a way of controlling the masses. It would appear that there is considerable mileage in this argument, given the disparity in public obedience in religious states, especially in the Muslim, Buddhist and Hindu world, with that of the ever-more godless societies the western, so-called, civilised world is producing. Religions are primarily moral codes, where obedience is all important. We have seen, within the aviation industry, how total submission to religious extremism can have disastrous effects, so I would be the last to call for a return to religious control. Yet I would hope that believers and non-believers alike would wish to sign up to a moral code, enforced through the courts of law.

This is not sensationalism. Numerous times every day our aircrews are being asked to respond to acts of unlawful interference in the skies. They may not be as dramatic as any al Qaeda plot, but the consequences are potentially equally serious. We talk a lot about the concept of Risk Management, yet fail to manage the everyday risks we entice on board our aircraft. There may be little that readers of this journal can do to counter the threat of a morally corrupt society that glorifies disrespect, but we certainly shouldn't ignore the problem.

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