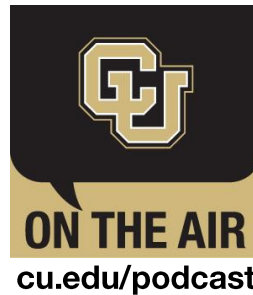




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Ep. 7: CU's laugh track: Examining the science of being funny Dec. 2017

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Host:

Ken McConnellogue, Vice President for Communication, University of Colorado System

Guest:

Peter McGraw, Associate Professor, CU Leeds School of Business, University of Colorado Boulder

KEN: We're chatting today with CU Boulder professor Peter McGraw, whose research examines what makes things funny, and its implications for marketing and management. With a talent for fostering fun and community, Professor McGraw explores the inner relationships of judgement, emotion, consumer behavior and public policy. Happy to have you, Professor McGraw.

PETER: It's great to be here.

KEN: Tell us what's new and exciting at the Humor Research Lab.

PETER: I actually prefer to call it HURL. It rolls off the tongue a little easier.

KEN: Or out of the mouth, as it were.

PETER: Indeed. So, we're doing actually a lot of really boring theoretical work these days.

KEN: It doesn't fit the profile.

PETER: It doesn't. I think that's a blessing and a curse of having a lab dedicated to the scientific study of humor, from the outside it just seems like it will be riot, but on the inside, it's actually much like the kind of deep thinking, slow thinking, tiring work that the average scientist does. We just happen to be able to crack better jokes along the way.

KEN: So, you're saying that humor can be taken seriously in an academic setting.

PETER: I think it has to be. One of the challenges of studying humor is that, at first, to an outsider, even to a scientist, it kind of seems like a frivolous topic. Unlike other papers that I write; for instance, moral psychology or public policy, or consumer behavior, or managerial decision making, when I write humor papers, I actually have to always include a section that talks about why it's important to be studying this, and now that's an easy case to make, but it's one that doesn't readily come to mind to an audience, and so, I have to kind of put it there for them.

KEN: I think that people don't often make a connection between humor and serious academic study, but the connection's there.

PETER: Indeed, yeah. I mean, if you think about it, you know, humor is an incredibly important part of our lives, so it's something that we pursue with our entertainment choices as a way to relax and cope with the stressful world. It influences who we spend time with, our friends, people who become our loved ones. It can even influence where we decide to work.

KEN: You've come up with a theory called Benign Violation Theory. Tell us about that.

PETER: I never set out to study humor. It was something that I kind of stumbled on nearly 10 years ago. At the time, I was studying what ended up being a closely related question, which is what makes things wrong. I was giving a talk at Tulane University, and I gave an example of a moral violation, and the audience laughed. An audience member -- faculty member raised her hand, and pointed out that people were laughing at this thing that we all agreed was wrong -- why was that? So, I came back to CU, and I was puzzling over this question. I just started googling the answer, and found that the existing theories have existed for 2,500 years, that our general understanding of humor was this age-old question and an age-old answer, and really and insufficient one, until I arrived at a paper that formed the basis for this notion of benign violations. Essentially, the idea is that we laugh at things that are wrong, yet okay -- things that don't make sense, yet, make sense -- things that are threatening, yet safe. So, my graduate student at the time, Caleb Warren, and I gave it this term, benign violations. So, humor sits in this sort of sweet spot between something that's wrong and something that's okay. It has both of those elements, concurrently.

KEN: So, it's different between what Uncle Joe will say at the thanksgiving table that offends everyone.

PETER: Right. So, what a good humor theory should do is answer a lot of questions related to humor. So, one question that it should answer is why are there two ways that a humor attempt can fail? The joke can be boring, or a joke can be offensive. The joke's purely okay in the former, or it's purely wrong in the latter. It also would -- should explain why there are vast individual and cultural differences in what people find funny. So, what Uncle Joe finds funny, and what you find funny might be different, because you have different values, and different beliefs, and different experiences, may even be in different moods at the time.

KEN: Are you a funny guy yourself?

PETER: Am I a funny guy? It depends on whom you compare me to. Compared to the average scientist, I do okay. Compared to the average comedian, no, I'm not funny.

KEN: All right. So, you're somewhere in the middle there.

PETER: I'm somewhere in the middle. I -- I try my best.

KEN: Have you ever done any kind of stand-up, any kind of humor related things outside the academic setting?

PETER: Yes, but I've done them for largely academic purposes. So, I've done some stand-up, actually many years ago -- actually the night before I turned in my 10-year packet, I went to the Squire Lounge, which is this dive bar on Colfax, and did an open mic with a journalist who had asked me if I'd be willing to come down to the Squire. I kind of offhandedly suggested I get up on stage and tell a few jokes.

KEN: How did it go?

PETER: Much like you might imagine. It -- it went really badly. That actually was good, because it turned into a book that I wrote -- I co-wrote with that journalist, in which, we then, subsequently, traveled the world in search of what makes things funny, and then the final chapter, I get back on stage, this time at the Just For Laugh Festival in Montreal, the world's largest comedy festival to prove that I've learned something.

(Section from page 7) KEN: I come from what I like to think as a family of funny people. We're Irish, and so that might be part of it, but do you feel like humor can be genetic or cultural?

PETER: So, yes, I do think that. So, the best that we can tell the genetic basis of a sense of humor is intelligence, and to the degree that's --

KEN: I'll agree with that.

PETER: I think most funny people agree with the fact that humor is associated with intelligence. So, to the degree that intelligence is genetically determined, then yes. So, why is that the case? Well, you need to be quick minded in order to make things funny, because you're looking for ways to create benign violations to find a way to make something both wrong and okay simultaneously, and that takes some horse power to do. I have a strange belief. I believe that everybody is funny in their own way. You have to find the right audience, and the right medium for them to be able to do that. We all have the genetic capability to be funny and to laugh, and it's just a matter of finding the right circumstance. Culture can disguise that. So, some cultures really encourage humor. So, culture in the United States, in Australia, in Ireland, certainly, you can -- there's a kind reverence for that -- for levity. For instance, for the *Humor Code*, we traveled to Palestine to seek out comedy, and one of the things that was really interesting is that everybody agrees in the Middle East that the Egyptians are the funniest Middle Eastern people. It's just part of the culture in a way that you can only explain culturally. We also went to Japan, and at first blush, it seemed like the Japanese weren't very funny. What we had to realize was that there are very strong cultural norms about when it's appropriate to express emotion and when it's not. So, the Japanese seemed very serious in business context, and educational context, and public in general, but in private, very funny people, really value comedy. There's a huge comedy scene in Japan, so it's a matter of finding the places where culturally it's okay to express that sense of humor.

KEN: What did you wanna convey in your book *The Humor Code*?

PETER: The book's sort of written as part pop science book, part travel log, and part memoir. The most important thing was we wanted to get this message out about this age-old question of what makes things funny, but quickly we wanted to move beyond that, and talk about the pervasiveness, the ubiquity of humor in people's lives, and how both has this sort of universal element to it, and then also this individual element to it, and that there are both risks and rewards associated with it.

KEN: In traveling the world, do you find -- are there are universal elements to humor?

PETER: Yes. Not many, I think. So, the most universal form of comedy is slapstick. Even more basic than that are things like play fighting and tickling. That is a -- that's not only culturally universal, but it actually even cuts across species, so mammals will do the equivalent of laughing when, kind of, tickled or jostled. You can find -- you can find YouTube videos of rats laughing, and it's not unlike the kind of experience that you might have with your children, tickling them.

KEN: Why is it important to know if animals or mammals have funny bones?

PETER: One way to study emotions in general is to look for them across species. So, if you can find the same set of conditions when studying, for instance, things like anger or fear, that's helpful to -- to really understand just the basic building blocks of emotion. So, if you can find humor or some evidence of that in nonhumans, that's suggestive of this sort of small set of conditions that lead to laughter, whether it be a monkey, or whether it be a person.

(Section from Page 10) KEN: Does humor have a role in evolution?

PETER: So, any good theory of humor should account for the evolutionary aspects of humor, and here's how we see it. So, humor arose from play fighting and tickling, so physical forms of comedy, these are harmless attacks. So, those are evident in humans, and tickling, for instance, and play fighting with kids, and the laughter that occurs there, but the question becomes, "Well, how does that help explain things like wordplay and puns? How does it explain set up and punch line jokes, and so on," and here's where those things have a commonality, is that, the tickling is a benign violation. It's threatening, yet safe. It has that element of wrong, yet okay, and as humans evolved and started to take on language and started to have societies and cultural norms, and societal norms, the things that could wrong, the things that could be okay, blossomed, and so this rule, this association that we have emotionally with threatening, yet safe, physical situations was extended to threatening, yet safe, social situations, threatening, yet safe, linguistic interactions and so on. So, for instance, puns and wordplay violate a linguistic norm. From one perspective, it's wrong,

but makes sense from another perspective. If I say to a baker, “Hey, nice buns,” that can elicit laughter, because it’s wrong to compliment him on his backside, but it’s okay, because I potentially am complimenting his bread.

KEN: Some of your work has also shown that in the workplace, humor can help people advance, so do I need to be more funny at work to get ahead?

PETER: It depends, actually. So, humor can be greatly beneficial. So, it can smooth social interactions. It can make a manager more approachable. Obviously, people like to work in a place that it is enjoyable, that’s not all serious. So, in that way, humor’s really useful at work. The problem is that it’s impossible to study humor and not recognize some of its dangers and down sides. So, whether someone should try to be funny at work, especially a manager, really depends on their comedy style. That is, do they tend to use comedy in a kind of positive way to kind of uplift, or do they use it in a negative to kind of put down. So, whether you should do that or not really depends on if the focus is on positivity or negativity.

KEN: What is the danger in trying to be funny and having it go horrible wrong?

PETER: The danger is that even a well-intended joke can fail to land, and can land in a way that people don’t see how it’s okay; they’re just offended by it, and that can be compounded, because the person telling the joke often doesn’t understand why other people don’t find it funny. They were well intended. They meant amuse. So, there’s a tendency to blame the audience for the failure of the joke teller.

KEN: I do it all the time.

PETER: Yeah. So, that -- so, when people are bored by your joke, that’s not terrible risky, but when people are offended by a joke, that’s when the danger gets enhanced.

KEN: I think it’s especially so in today’s enhanced sensitivity environment.

PETER: One thing about comedy nowadays is that it has much more reach than it ever did before. So, a joke told in a comedy club or, you know, intended for a small group of people, because of social media for example, it can reach a group of people who -- they hadn’t heard the jokes that led up to that. They hadn’t had the two drinks that we part of the two drink minimum. They’re hearing things and being exposed to things that are taken out of context that weren’t meant for them. They might purely be insensitive to a different group of people, and so -- and that way comedy has become better in the sense that you can find more comedy, but also more challenging, because it’s easier to fail than be funny.

KEN: How do your students react to the study of humor, or introducing humor as a serious topic?

PETER: I think my students are generally, I think, intrigued by the fact that they have a professor who studies humor. I think, unfortunately, it raises their expectations of about how enjoyable the class is going to be, and I try to deliver, but I also know I don’t want them to have too high an expectation.

KEN: Do you get any sideways glances from your colleagues about studying humor as a serious academic discipline?

PETER: I’ve never had any problems at CU. When I take the work out on the road, I sometimes get a little bit of judgement. My favorite story of this was meeting with a professor after I have given a talk, and he kind of backhandedly said, “You know, I’m really impressed what you’ve done with this topic, because studying humor is a career killer.”

KEN: Hadn’t turned out that way.

PETER: I’m mid-career, so one of the things I think is natural is to think, “Well, what am I doing? Where am I going? What effect is it having?” My suspicion right now is that when I look back on my career, this could be the biggest thing that I’ve done. People care about it. It’s a really important topic. It’s understudied. Selfishly, it’s been really fun to do.

KEN: You work with colleagues around the country, so it seems like the study of it is expanding.

PETER: Yeah, I think it is. So, as I said, about 10 years ago, I did that google search, and I found lots of stuff written by philosophers, and some stuff written by linguists, but now I find that there are more mainstream papers in the behavioral

sciences being written about the topic. One of the things I've really worked hard to do was to make this work accessible to a broader audience, you know, writing popular press articles, doing a popular press book --

KEN: Doing a podcast.

PETER: Doing podcasts, saying yes when journalists call, because I think there are a lot of people who are sort of thirsting for that kind of knowledge, and I think that universities have multiple constituents, it's not just students, but also government consumers at large -- the everyday person. I feel like work should benefit them, even if it's just to solve a curiosity that they may have.

KEN: You work here in the business school, and what is the application between humor and the kind of marketing courses you're teaching or work you're doing?

PETER: Marketers sometimes try to be funny when they communicate with their customers, in order to cut through the clutter, and in order to make their message more memorable, in order to enhance their brand. There actually has been a decent amount of research on that topic, and I've written some papers about that, mostly focused on the risks of trying to be funny, because that had been largely ignored in the literature. More recently, in this theoretical work that I talked about earlier, we've been focused on consumer welfare more generally, and that is that humor can help consumers achieve really important goals in their life. So, some of these goals may be relational, building relationships, being appealing to other people, navigating the complexities and conflict within social relationships. It may be health related. There's a lot of work that suggests how humor can help us cope with pain, stress and adversity, so, how do we use it to get through a tough day. Then, there are also sort of utilitarian goals; I wanna try to persuade someone to change their behavior. So, what we've been doing is looking at how either the appreciation, the actual amusement and laughter are beneficial, or the act of making other people laugh can be useful just to help us live better lives.

KEN: Are there companies you feel like do a particularly good job of employing humor?

PETER: I think the companies that use humor well tend to use it in their conversations with customers. So, for instance, Charmin has a really fun hashtag, #tweetfromtheseat, they use on their twitter account, and Wendy's has this kind of very authentic voice that can be kind of funny and charming. I think the companies that do it well, they're not always trying to be funny, they're being human in the sense that sometimes they find times where humor is appropriate, and then sometimes they know that they should be serious, or they should be apologetic, or that they should be employing some other form of positivity.

KEN: What about your own taste in humor? What kind of stuff do you find funny? What makes you laugh?

PETER: I'm really into improv these days, so I've been taking improv classes, Upright Citizens Brigade, in Los Angeles. I actually started to collaborate with them on some research projects, which I think it really exciting. I go down to the Voodoo Comedy Theater on Monday or Tuesday nights, and do the drop in. There's a Boulder improv collective that I participate in occasionally. I actually not only like doing improv, but I like sitting and watching improv. Part of the reason is that I'm able to sort of turn off my scientific mind. So, if I watch a stand-up comedian, I'll want to dissect his or her jokes, and figure out why they're funny, but with improv, I'm able to turn that off. It just feels so spontaneous, because it is.

KEN: You've come up with your own game show *Funny or True* that pits comedians versus Scientists, how did that come about?

PETER: Well, it came about largely for fun. I was starting to turn my attention to comedy as a form of entertainment, and then started to study the entertainment industry, and I thought one great way to understand the entertainment industry is to create an entertainment product. So, I had this idea to pit comedians against scientists to see who had the best blend of brains and funny bone. So, we do it as a live show ever so often, and it's -- I host it, and then help do the writing, and casting, and producing of it all.

KEN: What's the premise of it?

PETER: It's set up as a gameshow. The panel -- so, it's four contestants, two scientists, two comedians, and they're asked brainy questions -- you know, why do batteries run out? Why do dogs wag their tail? -- Things that the audience might not know the answer to, and the contestants answer those questions with two goals in mind, to make the audience laugh and to convince the audience that their answer is correct. So, we show the audience the answers

without attribution on this big board, and the audience votes on their smartphone for the funniest answer and the truthiest answer, and then we reward the contestants with points for playing to their weakness. So, comedians get double points for being truthiest, and scientists get double points for being funniest.

KEN: Who usually wins?

PETER: The scientists usually win.

KEN: Yeah.

PETER: That's because the comedians want to play to their strengths. They just always wanna be funny, and the scientists are willing to go either way. So, they get more double points, generally.

KEN: You've done some work on humorous complaining, and nobody likes to hear complaining, but I suppose adding humor to it makes it a little more palatable. How does that work?

PETER: Some of it is people believe it will help them cope, and it does mildly. It's not the best form of coping. They do it to make small talk. They do it to change other people's behavior. If I complain that you leave dirty dishes in the sink, you might be motivated to not do that in the future, but some people complain humorously. That is, they express their dissatisfaction in a way that amuses others, and the work that we've done on humorous complaining looks at the benefits and the cost of that. So, the benefits of humorous complaining is that it entertains other people. That is, we like humorous complainers more than we like nonhumorous complainers or just complainers.

KEN: Absolutely.

PETER: Humorous complaints are more memorable, so they're actually more attention getting. So, for instance, if you are a customer, and you're unhappy with the way brand as behaved, and you wanna get the message out, a humorous complaint is actually useful. So, you might be familiar with the "United Breaks Guitars" viral video -- millions upon millions of views, you know, a funny parody song. The downside of humorous complaining is if you're complaining humorously, it suggests that you've already done a good job coping with the thing that makes you unhappy. So, humorous complainers get less sympathy from the audience, and humorous complaints are less likely to actually spur behavior change. So, if I humorously complain about you leaving dishes in the sink, it may not have the same motivational effects as a serious complaint.

KEN: This field seems like it could go so many directions or so many avenues. Is it hard to focus?

PETER: I don't have too much trouble focusing, because I know what I'm good at it, and I know what I'm not good at it. I agree with you; this field could go in a lot of ways, and it does. So, unfortunately, there are other types of scientists, who are better at doing that work, so I'll give you an example of this. One of the ideas that I spent a long time developing was to try to answer the question, "Can we make people funnier," and I believe the answer to that question is yes, but the next question is, "If yes, then how," and I decided that I wasn't the right person to do that work. I would need a different type of lab set up, you know? I would just need to be in a different kind of place to do that, so I turned my attention to this questions of the, "So how is it that humor helps us live better lives, independent of proving it or not?"

KEN: Everybody likes to laugh.

PETER: Yes. You could look at the way that computer scientists are thinking about humor, for instance. I'm not tempted to do that work, but they want -- they wanna see, can you program a machine to be funny? Linguists wanna do this, because they're closely connected into that world, because comedy is a social domain, right? How is it communicated, and received, and perceived?

KEN: That's one thing that we have above the computers, I think.

PETER: Well, I think it's actually -- the question of computers and comedy is a really interesting one. I think it's sort of the holy grail of AI, so that's why computer scientists try to make funny computer programs, because if you can actually do that, it suggests that you're at the leading edge of creating something that can truly think.

KEN: Yeah, creativity and humor seem like two areas that would difficult for AI, but they're getting there.

PETER: Yeah. I think it's hard to be a stand-up, but at least you know that a computer's not gonna take your job.

KEN: Yeah, true. You hope anyway.

PETER: So, I've been taking improv classes at Upright Citizens Brigade, which is, I think, the premiere improvising training school in the world, and I've actually formed a relationship with them to actually test, scientifically, about the benefits of teaching improvisational comedy as a way to help people's improvisational thinking. For instance, business schools do a really good job of teaching strategic thinking, how to use excel, and how do you -- you know, how do you create a business plan and a marketing plan, you know, and sit for hours and work these kinds of things, but business leaders often have to think on their feet. So, they have to cope with crisis. They have to answer questions in shareholder meetings. They have to be able to do presentations. And that relies on thinking in the moment. The other thing is that business leaders have to cooperate with lots and lots of people. They have to lead. They have to create teams that the solutions that they seek aren't from the lone genius -- that you need teams in that way. So, now, you need to be able to work with other people, so what we're starting to do is actually start to test, can you teach some of those skills indirectly through the rules of improvisational comedy? Things like gifting, when you purposely try to help someone else in a scene, and the, sort of, commonly known, "yes, and" tendency, which is to try to move a scene forward, is a useful kind of way to be able to work within teams. You keep ideas moving forward, and generating and building them. It helps you find, for instance, more creative solutions. It helps with the actual task of innovation, which is executing a creative solution.

KEN: I just have this image of a bunch of Fortune 500 people in three-piece suits trying to do improv.

PETER: I love that image. Actually, I think that -- who wouldn't wanna work for that company?

The thing about improv that I love is that it really brings out the best in people. When I take these improv classes, I'll tell you, I sleep as well as I am able to sleep, and the reason is that how often do we get a chance to play for an hour, two hours, three hours a day, and improv really has its foundation in play. With the right rules, that play can be fun, uplifting, you laugh a lot, it's really energizing, and I think it's good for my health.

KEN: It's like Reader's Digest used to say, "Humor is the best medicine."

PETER: Yeah. I have to say -- and I mean, I joke that I have the best job ever, and I mean, I think it would be hard for me to find a better one.

KEN: Good stuff. Thank you for joining us today. We look forward to hearing more about your humor and HURL Research finding.

PETER: Thanks. I appreciate it.