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Humour as Edge-Work: Aesthetics, Joke-Work and Tendentiousness in *Tosh.0* (or Daniel Tosh and The Mystery of the Missing Joke-Work)

**Abstract**

This article interrogates the cultural politics of a 2012 incident in which stand-up comedian Daniel Tosh wished rape upon a female heckler and the substantial online debates that arose in response to his remarks. Through an investigation of the online reaction that followed Tosh’s remarks I illustrate how popular responses to controversial humour frequently follow discursive paths that characterize humour as alternately an aesthetic or ethical form. Drawing on Sigmund Freud’s theory of joking, I argue that these discursive paths can be aligned with Freud’s distinction between the formal ‘joke-work’ of humour and its potential to give voice to repressed statements of socially-forbidden aggression and obscenity. However, rather than accept this model as an explanation, I then argue that over-emphasis on the distinction between humour’s form and content inhibits attempt to make sense of controversial humour and renders it difficult to assess examples that lack clear formal joke-work. In order to address this problem, I present the notion of ‘edge-work’ to name a formally distinct mode of humour premised on an intentionally failed engagement with social standards of taste and decency and suggest the political potential of such forms of humour.

**Keywords:** controversy, rape jokes, Freud, joke-work, online culture; aesthetics
There are some topics that (apparently) we just can’t joke about. Indeed, regardless of whether you subscribe to such prohibitions or not, the social injunction against forms of humour premised upon subjects such as genocide, exploitation, structural violence and oppression, disease, disability, political struggle and rape, is usually acknowledged, if not always respected. As a consequence, instances of humour that do engage with such forbidden topics, or more particularly the comedians behind such instances, often find themselves the subject of impassioned debate, social censure and occasionally widespread condemnation. Nonetheless, such reactions do not seem to prevent such forms of humour rising again and again, and anecdotal evidence would seem to suggest that such condemnation might do as much to encourage this form of humour as it does to discourage it. As Michael Billig notes ‘jokes will abound where there are social prohibitions’ (2005, 154). Drawing on the work of American stand-up comedian Daniel Tosh, and in particular a short-lived but intense controversy that erupted after Tosh wished rape upon a female heckler during a stand-up show in Los Angeles in June 2012, this paper seeks to characterize such instance of humour as ‘edge-work’: a term that ties together the formal aesthetic nature of the humour involved and the wider political meanings and functions ascribed to controversial humour. To be clear, my purpose here is not to descend from the academy to adjudicate which topics should be considered the right and proper subject of humour and which should not. Instead, my goal is to explore a theoretical model for making sense of the distinctive formal, cultural and political aspects of such controversial forms of humour that often function either at or beyond the edge of reasonable, public discourse. In particular, I am concerned with examining the relation between the aesthetics of such humour – in particular how it marks itself as humour – and the political and social work such humour enacts. In doing so, I will draw upon Sigmund Freud’s theory of joking, where Freud
distinguishes between the formal ‘joke-work’ of humour and the ‘tendentious’ aspects that give voice to displaced social aggression. However, my goal in doing this is not to simply map Freud’s model onto Tosh’s humour, but to discuss how the ill-fit between the model and example points towards the particular feature of those forms of contemporary humour I characterize as ‘edge-work.’

**Daniel Tosh and controversial humour**

Daniel Tosh is probably not a familiar figure to all, or even many, readers: despite his growing profile in North America, Tosh is far from a global household name. During the 2000s, Tosh was one of the more successful stand-up comedians in the United States, with several appearances on the regular late night shows, television specials on the Comedy Central cable channel, a Taco Bell advertising campaign and even a minor role in Mike Myer’s commercial and critical failure, *The Love Guru*. Building on this early work, Tosh found a vehicle for more sustained success in 2009, when he became the host of Comedy Central’s unexpected hit *Tosh.0*: a post-’Funniest Home Videos’ clip show where Tosh screens YouTube videos and accompanies them with acerbic and horrifically tasteless commentary. In addition to Tosh’s commentary on online videos, the show also features related segments such as ‘Web Redemptions,’ where Tosh will interview the subjects of infamous and embarrassing videos in order to allow the interviewees to explain themselves or recreate the filmed events with less embarrassing results. Throughout its run, the show has been immensely popular and has been not only the most watched show on the Comedy Central channel over the past few years (ahead of *The Daily Show*, *The Colbert Report* and *South Park*), but has been feted on television industry websites as the most watched
programmes on all US cable television, finding especial success with males aged 18–34 (Szalai 2010, TV News Desk 2010, Stillman 2012, Kerr 2013). At the time of writing, the show is currently in its sixth season and has been renewed up till the eight season that is scheduled to air in 2016. In order to make my position clear up-front, I’ve found Tosh.0 quite funny on occasion, but have also found the show quite genuinely offensive: the first reaction is not uncommon for me, but the second is unusual, and is part of the reason why I initially became interested in Tosh’s humour.

Characterized by an arch-ironic style, Tosh.0 veers alternately towards reflexive, radical critique of social structural oppression or crude bigotry, depending upon the particular sequence and a viewer’s interpretative predilections. As a result, the show has attracted a great deal of criticism during its run: much of it accruing on the comment pages and review forums of the informal Internet. Indeed, despite its popularity, the show has been largely ignored in the sanctioned spaces of institutional review and comment: a situation which has left the interpretation of the show’s wider cultural meaning to be decided in the online equivalent of back-alley brawls and schoolyard scuffles. In these vernacular spaces, Tosh.0 has been frequently criticized as sexist, misogynist, racist, homophobic and able-ist, as too willing to take pleasure in the misfortune and injury of others’, as crude, vulgar and loutish, and perhaps most damningly as simply ‘not funny.’ While there are certainly some aspects of the show’s representation of non-dominant groups and celebration of callousness that would merit further critical consideration, it is this last point regarding the perceived funniness, or lack thereof, that I will argue is central to making sense of this form of controversial humour that is exemplified by Tosh’s comedy. While the question of funniness might appear to be a relatively innocuous question of subjective aesthetic judgement when compared to the more obviously political
charges around prejudice, privilege and identity, I want to suggest that it is the debate as to whether such material is comic or not that is crucial to the formal distinctness of such humour, its vexed relation to languages of oppression and violence, and thus its wider social, cultural and political work.

**What we talk about when we talk about rape-jokes**

In order to develop this point further, I will now turn to the aforementioned incident at Laugh Factory in Las Angeles in June 2012 when Tosh acquired brief but intense online infamy when he wished rape upon a female heckler whose critical Tumblr entry on her experience, ‘So a Girl Walks into a Comedy Club…’ (Anonymous 2012) was widely reposted and became the subject of attention on popular blogs and the websites of media institutions. The resulting brouhaha, largely waged between the online feminist communities and several establishment comedians, was in many ways a classic rehearsal of what Paul Lewis dubs the ‘edgy-jokes-lead-to-angry-criticism-and-countering-defensive-moves dance’ (2006, 6) As the initial incident was not recorded in any capacity, various details of the incident have been the subject of debate, and the accuracy of various recollections have been questioned by witnesses, most notably Jamie Masada, the owner of the Laugh Factory (McGlynn 2012). However, despite this refutations, I will be relying upon the anonymous Tumblr post as the record of note of the incident, as it is the most comprehensive account of that evening’s events and the version of events around which the subsequent debates were premised. According to the Tumblr entry, and not refuted in subsequent accounts, the confrontation between Tosh and the author took place during a set in which Tosh discussed the merits of rape jokes. By her own account, the author of the blog took offence to the
routine and yelled out, ‘Actually, rape jokes are never funny!’ to which Tosh replied, again by
the audience member’s account: ‘Wouldn’t it be funny if that girl got raped by like, 5 guys right
now? Like right now? What if a bunch of guys just raped her...’ The audience member and her
companion then fled the performance space, and spoke to the manager who ‘was profusely
apologetic,’ and provided complimentary tickets to another show as way of compensation
(Anonymous 2012).

However, obviously the incident did not stop there, because the audience member wrote
about the incident on the Tumblr account ‘Cookies for Breakfast.’ As is the case with Tumblr,
this initial post was picked up and shared across other accounts, before being addressed by other
prominent online outlets, including Pajiba and ThinkProgress. As often happens in digitally-
mediated controversies the battle lines of this debate were quickly drawn and viciously defended.
The initial round of coverage was characterized by a moral criticism of Tosh’s actions that also
integrated aesthetic statements about the failure of Tosh’s remarks as humour and the vulgarity
and crudity of his material. For example, Dustin Rowles, writing for Pajiba, opened his article by
declaring that ‘Tosh seems like a horrible human being, the worst kind of frat-boy dick’ (Rowles
2012), while the ThinkProgress article concluded by noting that ‘Tosh isn’t just failing at civility
here. He’s being a bad comedian’ (Rosenberg 2012). Following this initial outpouring of
criticism, Tosh both offered an apology through his Twitter account, writing ‘all the out of
context misquotes aside, i'd like to sincerely apologize’ (Tosh 2012a) accompanying a link back
to the original article, and attempted to offer his own interpretation of the event, adding ‘the
point i was making before i was heckled is there are awful things in the world but you can still
make jokes about them. #deadbabies’ (Tosh 2012b).
Tosh’s apology then provided the narrative for the second round of coverage as the story expanded out to more mainstream online sites, such as the Huffington Post (McGlynn 2012), ongoing coverage on BuzzFeed (a site with which Tosh enjoys an ongoing symbiotic relationship) (Jefferson 2012, Odell 2012), and eventually attention from print media such as the New York Times (Zinoman 2012). However, whereas the first round of coverage had been largely characterized by condemnation of Tosh on moral and aesthetic terms, the second round of scrutiny was characterized by a growing specification of wider terms of debate. On the one hand, there were a flurry of articles from both high profile blogs like Jezebel and Feministing and long-standing publications like The Nation, which denounced rape as a subject of jokes and condemned Tosh as alternately a lout, a frat boy and a misogynist (Katie 2012; Ryan 2012; Valenti 2012). On the other hand, a range of figures from the comedy establishment, including comedians usually regarded as progressive, like Patton Oswald and Louis C.K., asserted the freedom of stand-up as an art form and launched vicious attacks on heckling as a practice (Zinoman 2012). In doing so, they positioned the author of the blog post not as wronged political actor, but as a practitioner of a despicable and antisocial practice who was undeserving of sympathy. In this account, these two identities were largely presented as mutually incompatible: one could not be both heckler and victim. With the establishment of these two interpretive positions, the Tosh debate had settled into a somewhat familiar arrangement around the discussion of controversial humour: with one side de-emphasising the comic nature of the material and interpreting it as a directly offensive and hurtful statement, while the other side invoked a language of comic distance and performance that positioned the remarks as playful rather than aggressive. Now, I want to state very clearly here that my purpose in this article is not to advocate for one of these positions: I am not interested in declaring allegiances in some sort of
winner-takes-all conflict or pretending to be some form of all-knowing adjudicator sent from the academy. Instead, I turn to this example as a way to consider the relationship between the aesthetic logic, social function and meaning of controversial humour.

**Joke-work and Tendentiousness in the Freudian model**

Given what might appear to be the starkly contemporary nature of this debate, it may seem odd at this juncture to evoke a model of humour originally conceived in 1905 by Sigmund Freud. However, Freud is particularly useful at this juncture because what he present us with is a humour theory that distinguishes between two possible sources of pleasure in humour, which are in turn defined by their relation to either formal or social aspects.ii Formal humour is concerned largely with the craft of the joke – what Freud refers to as ‘joke-work’ – and therefore operates independently of the specific content of the humour. Freud identifies multiple possible iterations of joke-work, from condensation to duplication to misuse, which exist independently of the content or subject matter and thereby emphasize form over content as a source of pleasure with regards to humour (2002, 11–86). While Freud’s final explanation of the ability of such techniques to excite mirth is grounded in the dubious notion ‘economizing on psychical expenditure’ (2002, 117) what is nonetheless useful in this model is Freud’s abstraction of the formal properties of humour from any specific meaning. For Freud, these abstracted formal properties form the basis of what he refers to as innocuous jokes (2002, 87), which rely on the appreciation of joke-work for their humour and which thereby invoke an understanding of humour as a predominantly aesthetic phenomenon.
This appreciation of comic form is in contrast to the second source of pleasure: what is usually referred to as the tendentiousness of humour. In Freud’s analysis, the ‘tendentious’ qualities of a joke refer to its ability to make socially-charged or controversial statements from behind the cover of humour, such that there is a purposeful pleasure to the joke beyond enjoyment of its formal properties (2002, 87–114). More precisely, tendentious jokes allow humourists to communicate otherwise unacceptable opinions or ideas, which must normally be repressed, thereby allowing the humourist and their audience to temporarily escape their socially determined bounds, or in Freud’s words to ‘get around restrictions and open up sources of pleasure that have become inaccessible’ (2002, 100) Thus, in the case of tendentious humour, the joke-work is merely a cover for the true pleasure of giving voice to repressed and unpermitted thoughts, such as aggression, racism or misogyny. The humour of tendentious jokes, then, because it arises more from the statement they convey than the form they take, forces us to distinguish between the substance of the joke and the ‘joke-work’ which, in the case of tendentious humour, merely operates as a Trojan Horse, allowing socially impermissible ideas to be given expression.

The distinction between joke-work and tendentiousness can be seen most clearly in an example cited by Billig in his discussion of Simon Critchley’s theory of humour (2005, 158–159), which I’ve adapted for this discussion:

Q: How many ______ does it take to tile a bathroom?

A: It depends how thinly you slice them.

In an adaptation of Billig’s argument, I have left the subject, or butt, of the joke blank as a means to focus attention on how joke-work may be held constant while the content of the joke, and thus its larger social message, can be shifted. Consequently, depending on what we place in the blank,
we change the butt and thereby the tendentiousness of the joke, while keeping the formal structure of the consistent. For example, if we were to place ‘lawyers’ in the blank space, then the joke would seem banal and tired; if we were to place ‘Arabs’ in the gap it would seem racially charged and offensive; and if we were to place a subject that corresponded to our own political or institutional bugbears in the gap, then it might even seem entertaining. Thus, the perceived funniness can shift according to purpose, while form stays consistent. By the same token, if we’re very familiar with this specific joke-work we might not enjoy the joke regardless of the inserted subject.iii In such an instance, while those who enjoy the joke may point towards their appreciation of the joke-work as the source of their amusement, the potential to change the response by alternating the butt of the joke points towards a different source of the amusement. Rather than finding amusement in the play of words and ideas that gives the joke its form, the shifting levels of amusement based on the choice of butt would suggest that the opportunity to acknowledge uncharitable and even aggressive feelings towards the subject of the joke is as much a source of humour as the formal working. Such an example illustrates Freud’s notion of tendentiousness, whereby the joking form operates not as a key source of pleasure, but as a ‘bribe’ that allows the audience to bypass the restrictions of their moral compass and take pleasure in an expression of violence towards others. In this instance, the joke-work is an excuse, not a source of pleasure in itself.

**Understanding rape-jokes through Freud**

It is not particularly difficult to map this Freudian model onto the Tosh-Rape joke incident. Those parties who objected to the remarks did so overwhelmingly in terms of the content of the
humour, which is to say that the objected to the perceived purposefulness of Tosh’s remarks i.e. his condoning of rape. In terms of the Freudian model, to emphasize the joke in terms of message-content is to understand it as a tendentious joke, where the joke-work, the formal appearance of joking, is simply an excuse or a ruse that creates the conditions for anti-social and offensive speech. Read in this way, Tosh is hiding behind the idea of humour while he cites, condones and potentially even advocates the social acceptance of rape. Conversely, those who sought to defend Tosh can be seen to emphasize the joke-work over the particular substance: they present his remarks as what Freud (somewhat unhelpfully) calls an innocuous joke. By this, I do not mean that those how defended Tosh were suggesting his remarks be read as ‘innocuous’ in any broad sense, but that their interpretations privilege the formal craft of the joke over the tendentious content. We can see this in Tosh’s apologists’ emphasis upon stand-up as an art form with the heckler cast as disruptive philistine. By framing stand-up as an art, this position redirects attention from any message in the humour to the formal and aesthetic aspects of the humour. We can therefore capture much of the conflict over this incident through Freud’s terminology: opponents underscore the tendentious aspects, whereas apologists emphasize the centrality of joke-work.

Yet, while I think this correlation is very useful in distinguishing the opposing interpretations, such an operation is not particularly productive in an analytic sense. In fact, I think it might actually be preventing us from making sense of the social work of this mode of controversial humour, the cultural-political tensions it arouses and the relation of those tensions to the aesthetic form of the humour. It is not that either interpretation is wrong, per se, but that their readings of the situation are implicitly indebted to a framework that cannot properly account for some forms of controversial humour, such as Tosh’s rape comments. Moreover, as
mentioned above, Freud’s model has been critiqued and revised by many subsequent theorists of humour who have pointed out, at the most simplest, that it is not really possible to make a clear and final distinction between innocuous and tendentious jokes (Billig 2005, 155–156). Not only do all jokes have elements of both joke-work and tendentiousness, but the final decision as to whether a given example falls in one category or the other, will shift depending on the identity and motivation of the audience, not to mention their relation to the joke-teller. Consequently, when put into practice and up for debate, Freud’s clear structural distinction between innocuous formal joke-work and motivated social comment is a lot messier than it initially appears.

What’s more, complications regarding the precise applicability of Freud’s model are compounded in this instance when we return Tosh’s response to the heckler: ‘Wouldn’t it be funny if that girl got raped by like, 5 guys right now? Like right now? What if a bunch of guys just raped her...?’ If we were to follow the Freudian model as presented so far, and assert that the joke-work is what creates the conditions for the remarks to be interpreted as humour, then we encounter a problem: there is no immediately apparent joke-work in Tosh’s remark. The remark does not correspond to a recognisable rhythm or any standard set-up of joke-telling, nor to any of Freud’s techniques of joking. Consequently, given the absence of joke-work in this example – which is what Freud’s model asserts creates the permission for the offensive remarks in the first instance – it would therefore seem to follow that there is, in fact, no joking here at all. Taken at face value, such a situation would place Tosh’s statements outside the realm of jokes and humour as outlined by Freud, and would thereby suggest that, perhaps, it is a mistake to interpret this remark as humour at all. Moreover, by suggesting that the remark might possible be ‘not humour,’ this should not be taken to mean simply ‘not funny’: where funniness is taken as a subjective judgement regarding the success or failure of an instance of humour. Rather, I mean
that if Tosh’s remark does not include joke-work, then it technically is not humour in a more formal sense, prior to any subjective assessment of its merits. According to this reading, in the absence of the formal markers of joke-work, Tosh’s statement cannot be read as a joke, but instead appears more akin to a naked threat.

However, that reading seems unlikely, not least, because of the fact that, by all accounts, the audience laughed. Even in the initial critical Tumblr post, the audience’s laughter was noted as part of the horror of the experience. This is not to assume that all laughter is indicative of humour, but to make a more specific point that in the context of a comic performance by a stand-up comedian in a comedy club, it does not seem unreasonable to presume that laughter indicates an audience’s response to what they have interpreted as humour. In offering this interpretation, I am following John Limon’s notion of the ‘collective experience of [stand-up] humour’ (2000, 11) whereby the socially-shared laughter of the audience becomes the ultimate marker of funniness in the context of stand-up and against which individual resistance or subsequent recantation are largely meaningless. In other words, if the audience laughs, then this should be taken as an indication that they interpreted the remarks as humour and judged them to be funny. Given, then, that according to all accounts, the audience did laugh at Tosh’s remarks, this suggests that there is very likely a way in which Tosh’s statement can be, and indeed were, interpreted as humour. While, looking back on the event, members of the audience may regret their laughter or be unable to explain why they laughed, this does not change the most important, initial response of the audience. To be clear, this is not to say the remarks are ‘funny’ – the task of the analyst is not to permit or sanction the laughter – but to acknowledge that in its original content the statement evoked a response that suggests that to its audience it somehow fit the category of humour. This interpretation brings me to the second option for reading Tosh’s
statement: that we do understand it as humour, which then raises the question of the apparently missing joke-work. Formally, there is nothing about Tosh’s statement which corresponds to the typical markers of humour or explicitly flags the statement as a joke: no internal incongruity, no hyperbole, and no misdirection. This is a curious situation: how can a statement be interpreted as humour in the absence of any of the formal attributes of humour?\footnote{7}

The answer to this quandary, at least insofar as it fits Freud’s model of humour, can be found in terms of the category theorized by Freud as ‘bawdry.’ While it plays only a minor role in Freud’s overall theory of humour, Bawdry, defined as ‘deliberately emphasising sexual facts and relations by talking about them’ (2002, 94), sits at the heart of Freud’s development of the notion of tendentiousness. Pertinently in terms of the current analysis, Freud also suggests that bawdry arises out of the confluence of the sexual drive and sadistic hostility: an observation that would seem to tie directly into a consideration of a rape joke (2002, 96). However, the significance of bawdry for the current discussion goes beyond a similar concern with sexual aggression, because it is also the site at which Freud works through the distinction between joking and not joking. He does this through an examination of the difference between a bawdy remark and a bawdy joke. A bawdy remark is one which directly expresses an aggressive sexuality without the cover of formal joking: in Freud’s (translated) words is ‘to talk dirty without disguising it’ (2002, 97). In certain circles, such remarks will be met with laughter and invoke a mode of ‘cheerful humour,’ but should not be understood as humour, Freud suggests, because they lack the ‘formal requirements’ that designate joking (2002, 97). In contrast a bawdy joke makes use of ‘technical devices’ such as allusion, in order to hide the sexual aggression behind a more socially acceptable form (2002, 97–98). Hence while a bawdy remark may refer directly to sexual anatomy: a bawdy joke will refer only indirectly to such anatomy through the
use of simile and metaphor. The wide range of figurative euphemisms furnished by the English language for both the vagina and the penis indicate the broad reach and range of the bawdy as a cultural category.

Given the lack of apparent joke-work in Tosh’s statement, the bawdy would seem to furnish a suitable rationale for making sense of the social function and apparent humour of such remarks. While perhaps not exactly ‘bawdy,’ Tosh’s remarks would seem to align closely enough with that concept for it to serve as the means to square this example with the Freudian model pursued thus far. However, to draw such a conclusion would be to mistake the purpose of the analysis for an attempt to align this example with Freudian terminology and thereby declare it understood, when the actual purpose is to account for the aesthetic nature and social consequence of such instances of controversial humour. Hence, instead of being satisfied with such an interpretation as the final answer, if we are to make proper sense of the controversy surrounding this apparent non-joke, then Tosh’s remarks need to lead us to re-examine the Freudian category of bawdry and its relation to humour.

Consequently, rather than align Tosh’s statement with the category of bawdry in order to fit in into an existing interpretive paradigm, I will argue that this example furnishes us with the means to re-think the relation of joke-work and tendentiousness more broadly. In particular, rather than existing without joke-work, both bawdry and Tosh’s remarks involve a different and less explicit form of joke-work that plays upon the very unsayability of their subjects. Whereas Freud establishes a split between joke-work and tendentiousness as a fundamental tenet of his analytic method, this does not mean that such a split must always therefore exist in practice in the actual manifestations of humour. Like the working distinction between the signifier and signified in semiotics, this distinction needs to be understood as an abstraction for the sake of
analysis: not an actual split in the practice of humour. Indeed, the analytic ease with which Freud demonstrates his bipartite scheme might actually be a consequence of his focus upon jokes, which do lend themselves to a clear separation between their subject and their technique by virtue of their form. However, simply because this proves true of jokes, and in particular the jokes with which Freud illustrates his analysis, this does not mean that this model will apply as easily to all humour. Moreover, this tendency to distinguish between the content and form of jokes is by no means restricted only to Freud. As noted above, contemporary debates regarding controversial humour also align into opposing camps that can be relatively easily mapped onto Freud’s two categories: with those opposed emphasising the tendentious content, and apologists emphasising the humour’s existence as a formal, technical operation. Therefore, this is not simply to note a problem with using Freud’s model to analyse such humour (after all, it is my fault that Freud was introduced into this discussion in this instance), but to note that the manner in which debates around controversial humour play out, also contributes to a lack of clarity around the meaning of controversial humour. The evocation of Freud here thus allows us to clarify and address the main site of this confusion: the assumption of a clear distinction between the message of the humour and its formal properties as humour.

**Edge-work and the limits of the Freudian model**

In order to resolve this quandary, I will now return to Tosh’s statement for a third and final time: ‘Wouldn’t it be funny if that girl got raped by like, 5 guys right now? Like right now? What if a bunch of guys just raped her...’ As noted above, there is no obvious joke-work, but despite this lack, the statement was interpreted by the audience as humour. Where, then, is the missing joke-
work? As way of explanation, I want to suggest that the problem here arises when we try to locate the joke-work as something separate, because here the joke-work is not a thing in itself: it is implicit and inextricable from the tendentious comment. What I mean by this is that whereas Freud suggests that the joke-work functions to allow the permitted expression of the impermissible, here the joke-work instead lies in the unpermitted expression itself. That is to say the comic operation of the statement arises not from a flourish at the level of grammar or expression, but rather from a wider social and cultural incongruity: here, the hidden joke-work is in the deadpan declaration of the offensively unsayable. This is different from Freud’s model, where the audience is presented with the joke-work in order to request that they accept the tendentious statement: a request that the audience and comedian take mutual shelter behind the cover of the joke-work, behind the shelter of ‘just joking.’ Instead, here, the bribe of the joke-work is absent and the tendentious statement is consequently presented without camouflage, without distraction and hence as unacceptable: given the lack of joke-work, the statement can only be read as humour if one utterly rejects it and its content. Consequently, the interpretation of this statement as humour is inextricably bound up with the rejection of the statement: to laugh at humour without joke-work is to find the content of the statement itself ridiculous. Thus in order to interpret the remark as humour, we have to understand that the statement is not meant and that it is the not-meant nature of the statement that here comprises joke-work.

This form of joking then is a shift beyond a model where joke-work operates as an excuse for offence. This is a form of joking where the very offering of offence is the joke-work, is the incongruity, and this is the form of humour I want to define – in closing – as edge-work. I have chosen the term ‘edge-work’ in order to emphasize how such humour neither simply transgresses nor polices the boundaries of acceptable discourse. vi Understood as edge-work,
Tosh’s statement is therefore not a radical refusal of an idea of politically-correct speech, nor is it an affirmation and argument for the legitimacy of such statements. Edge-work is a form of humour that functions through an engagement with the edge of acceptable standards of social relations, but that does not constitute a rejection of those relations. Importantly, such humour, of which Tosh’s statement is indicative, does not subvert or tear down that boundary, because to do so would be to undercut its own claim to be humour. Tosh’s statement is therefore not simply bulldozing through social taboos in order to make an outrageous and offensive statement: to do so would be to simultaneously destroy the incongruity that functions to define the statement as potentially comic in the first instance. Instead, edge-work relies upon the audience and joker sharing that boundary in common and then acts to reaffirm the sanctity and social power of that barrier. Edge-work thus acts to confirm the legitimacy of the boundary even as it moves across it, because without a boundary to cross, such statements would simply not be humour. Thus, whereas tendentious humour succeeds to the extent to which it successfully circumvents social barriers, humour as edge-work succeeds to the extent to which it (intentionally) fails to overcome and thereby becomes hopelessly tangled and mired in that barrier. Tendentious humour seeks to avoid social censure through the cover of joke-work in order to give voice to otherwise repressed impulses, whereas edge-work invites simultaneous censure and laughter through a spectacular collision with social boundaries.

The concept of edge-work thus allows us to expand beyond bawdry, is that in contrast to that idea, edge-work allows us to interpret a broader range of comic techniques, while still making use of the productive aspects of Freud’s tendentiousness-joke-work model. This proves especially productive in the instances of controversial humour where, even though commentators do not refer to Freud directly, their assessment reproduces the logic of the bawdy: a lack of
obvious joke-work is taken as evidence that the statements are not operating as humour. This also has the benefit of overcoming a significant problem with Freud’s account of bawdry. In Freund’s account, among ‘country people or in lower-class taverns,’ bawdy remarks produce laughter without the need for the cover of joke-work (2002, 96). For Freud this is possible, because these ‘common people’ are not as repressed as the higher classes of ‘more cultivated society’ where such remarks are ‘tolerated only if [they] are witty’ (2002, 97). Freud attributes this difference to the manner in which ‘higher culture and education’ contribute to psychological repression: the wealthier and, almost inescapably in this account, more sophisticated and respectable classes learn to repress their base sexual drives from both themselves and their peers. In contrast, due to their relative lack of repression, the ‘common people’ are willing to openly break social taboo in order to express tendentious thoughts and thereby attain pleasure. Even if we putting aside its obvious class-based problems there is still a problem with this account, because it is the overcoming of repression that is source of pleasure, humour and laughter. It follows then, that if, as Freud, suggests, those who find pleasure in bawdy remarks rather than bawdy jokes can do so because they are not (as) repressed, then surely this would lead to a lessening of comic enjoyment. Freud notes no such distinction. Thus for Freud, the lower classes are able to enjoy tendentious comments even when they are not hidden behind joke-work, because they are not as repressed. However, given that the repression, and overcoming thereof, was the condition for pleasure in the first instance, it is unclear why such remarks should be comic at all. Edge-work solves this problem by arguing that the ‘common people’ are able to find pleasure in bawdy remarks not because they are without repression, but because there is a different, implicit form of joke-work in operation.
Moreover, the concept of edge-work can also assist in similar fashion with the analysis of Tosh’s statement. This is because even though Tosh’s critics are not interpreting his statement in the language of Freud, they nonetheless are falling victim to a similar oversight in relation to Tosh as Freud does in relation to bawdry. That is, they are assessing and interpreting Tosh’s statement solely in terms of the tendentious comments of the joke without any consideration of the influence of joke-work. In both cases, the result is the same, with the refutation of the statement’s status as humour leading to an interpretation that does not take humour into account. Moreover, in another similarity to Freud, this oversight is at least in part addressed through recourse to a language of class and taste: as mentioned earlier, many of the more critical responses to Tosh’s remarks decried him and his work as loutish, crude and vulgar. In the initial Tumblr post, Tosh was decried as a ‘Yahoo’ (Anonymous 2012): an insult whose Swiftian origins in Gulliver’s Travels evokes the very worst degradations and deprivations of the undeveloped rabble. In our post-Bourdieu era, the assumed hierarchy and privilege the lie behind this distinction between the bawdy remark and the bawdy joke appear quite stark: the superior taste of the higher classes requires the exercise of formal sophistication in order to overcome their deeply-ingrained sense of decorum, whereas the uncouth masses have no such need, nor appreciation, of formal technique in order to set loose their base instincts. Thus, in the instance of both Freud’s common people and Tosh’s yahoo-ness, this indictment of a crude aesthetic sense acts to conceal the possibility of the formal operation of humour, and the consequent complexity of interpretation which that would imply.

**Conclusion: Edge-Work as Emergent Aesthetic**
What the concept of edge-work offers us, then, is an analytic method that manages to sidestep the pre-formed polemical positions of current debates around controversial comedy while retaining the useful concepts of tendentiousness and joke-work, albeit no longer in pure states. Without reducing controversial humour to either subversive satirical transgression or an exercise in deceit, whereby the jocular appearance conceals an essence of offence, edge-work creates a space to consider opportunities for both offence and enjoyment without dismissing either as intellectually or ethically compromised. As a final note of caution, though, I want to be clear that by no means do I consider edge-work to be a widely practiced form of humour that supplants older more straightforwardly tendentious forms. Not all humour that offends or upsets is edge-work as I have defined it here, and there certainly exist many examples that fit Freud’s model of offensive or obscene material hidden behind a veneer of joking. Edge-work, I think, is a comparably rare form which I think could possibly be understood as ‘emergent’ in the precise sense meant by Raymond Williams, where the relation to the dominant culture – whether supportive or resistant – is always difficult to determine at first. Emergent culture refers to ‘new meanings and values, new practices [and] new relationships’ (1977, 123) which have the potential to disrupt existing social and cultural arrangements or to be incorporated into them. Such a description matches edge-work, whose function is no longer limited to peripheral comic culture, but is instead increasingly present in many forms of popular media humour. As to whether this new form will prove resistant or simply act to reaffirm existing dominant culture, I would suggest that the political work of edge-work is not only not yet known, but not yet determined. Thus the political possibilities of edge-work as a comic form help to explain why the humour of edge-work often invites furious controversy and debate, and hence also its importance as a comic cultural form.
References

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1 It may be of interest that *Tosh.0*’s predecessor in the fine art of re-purposing of amateur video for callous amusement, *America’s Funniest Home Video* (and associated international variants), has seemingly escaped similar on-line criticism for its long-standing presentation of injury as humour. This is despite the fact that the show is not only still in regular production but also has a substantial continued presence in syndication.
I acknowledge that this distinction is not without its problems, which have been documented by scholars such as Michael Billig (2005) and Neil Altman (2006), but the purpose here is not to take this distinction between formal and social aspects (and accordingly between conscious and unconscious processes) as a final statement of truth, but as a useful abstraction that allows us to think productively about the matter at hand.

As a quick note, I’ve been following Freud in equating ‘jokes’ with the wider category of humour, which is not a conflation I’m usually happy with, but I don’t think it’s a problem in the context of this argument.

It is difficult to imagine such a passionate reaction arising in response to any given joke-work: the separation of the aesthetic from the ethical is so complete in contemporary liberal-capitalist states that it is almost inconceivable to imagine outrage as a response to the formal or aesthetic qualities of any object.

We might state that the club and the context are sufficient markers of humour, but that would be extremely reductive – begging the question of how any non-comic statement could be made in the context of stand-up and how it is that stand-up performances often fail to elicit laughter – and drags us away from characterisation of joke-work as a formal, aesthetic category that aligns with controversial humour apologists and makes his model relevant in this context.

When I first suggested the term edge-work in an earlier presentation of this paper, I was seeking to coin the term in relation to Freud’s joke-work and was unaware of the similar sociological term ‘edgework.’ In sociological literature, and especially sociology of sport, edgework refers to be activities that ‘involve a clearly observable threat to one’s physical or mental well-being or one’s sense of ordered existence’ (Lyng 1990, 857) What I am referring to as edge-work bears some similarities with this older concept, but the dangers are more generally social, rather than corporeal or psychological, and the edges being skirted are the edges of social sanction, rather than cliff tops or the divide between sanity-insanity.