[Authorized preprint of Chapter 11 from ***Teach Library and Information Science with a Sense of Humor: Why (and How to) Be a Funnier and More Effective LIS Teacher and Laugh All the Way to Your Classroom*.** Kishor Vaidya, editor. The Curious Academic Publishing, 2021.]

ENGAGE, ENRICH, ENLIGHTEN, ENERGIZE: EXPLORATIONS IN INSTRUCTIONAL HUMOR

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> From the 2020 "Introduction to Government Information" syllabus:
>
> My favorite suggestion for restoring the public's trust in government information is to have more librarians *in* Congress, not just one Librarian *of* Congress. Even if you don't plan to run, we'll have some fun thinking about it!

Humoresque?

Although a sense of humor is often associated with faculty teaching excellence, it can be, as Meyer (2000) noted, a double-edged sword. A colleague of mine was recently disciplined by university administration for making what he presumed would be a mildly funny comparison in his journalism classroom, but which managed to horrify and offend the students in it. I would guess that many instructors who, like me, routinely employ and enjoy some humor in the classroom, are unfamiliar with contemporary research on humor and may well benefit from some of its findings. This book is an excellent way to begin the endeavor.

While the potential value of classroom humor in relieving stress, reducing perceived status differential, and arousing interest has long been recognized (Tedlow, 1995), it is still not

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fully understood (Banas, Dunbar, Rodriguez & Liu, 2011; Walter, Cody, Xu, & Murphy, 2018). Further, today's increased emphasis on online teaching offers additional challenges to the use of humor, as it may lack the paralinguistic cues (*e.g.,* nods, smiles) offered in face-to-face instruction (Smith & Wortley, 2017), but also offers additional opportunities to explore its usefulness.

One important research effort focusing on classroom humor is instructional humor information processing theory, which posits that humor directly relevant to instructional content is more likely to result in student learning than humor that is not (Wanzer, Frymier & Irwin, 2010; Machlev & Karlin, 2017). Empirical examination of this theory has also shown that humor is only one influence on student learning, and that student self-determination (Bolkan & Goodboy, 2015) and disposition (Tsukawaki & Imura, 2019) appear to be significant factors in determining whether relevant humor is effective in content retention and learning outcomes.

Thus, humor in the classroom may need to be not only appropriate to the environment and relevant to the material being presented, but also afford real advantages in information processing by the students themselves. Some of these advantages can be phrased as:

Will it help students to engage with the material?

Will it help to enlighten students on aspects of the material?

Will it help to enrich the material's meaningfulness for students?

Will it help to energize students in using what they have learned?

Grappling with Government Information

There can be few venues better for testing these potential advantages than an introductory online course in government information. Years ago, this used to be a specialized graduate class in library schools, often called "Introduction to Government Documents," that focused on the

formalities of the U.S. Superintendent of Documents classification system, the functioning of the U.S. Government Printing Office, and the building of a comprehensive depository collection, with very little relationship or reference to contemporary politics or policy issues. In today's information schools, however, it can be a much more user-centric class in neo- and non-depository government information literacy, involving datasets as well as documents, policies as well as procedures, social media as well as societal programs, and debates driven by local advocacy as well as by legal regulatory issues.

There is an entire government information infosphere comprised of hundreds of federal databases loosely connected by federated search engines such as metalib.gov and individual search engines such as govinfo.gov and usa.gov as well as other disconnected sites, such as governmental postings on commercial platforms such as Facebook and Twitter. The immensity, immediacy, and urgency of government information have dramatically increased, due to technological advances and efforts toward so-called "open government" and "e-government," which have had both positive and negative effects on civic engagement and political literacy (Bertot & Jaeger, 2019). The levels of public trust in the accuracy and availability of government information have been similarly mixed (Kubas, 2019).

Further, its creation and utilization often evoke controversy and consternation both inside and outside the government, despite the fact that vast amounts of information are essential to the operations of any government, and that these operations are essential to the functioning of any society. An understanding of this can be extremely valuable to information professionals, especially as the crucial importance of fact-checking primary sources extends to government information, which is no longer automatically assumed to be credible. For instance, a high school

class in Stilwell, Oklahoma recently found that the official mortality data from the National Center for Health Statistics about their hometown were seriously flawed (Korth, 2020).

This is not necessarily something that entering students realize, regardless of how many high school civics or college political science courses they have taken, so anything that can help motivate them to immerse themselves in government information more quickly and completely is useful for instructional purposes. Thus, besides the usual approach of providing students access to entertaining articles such as "The Leviathan: How to Move 2.9 Million Government Documents Offsite" (Wilhite & Haygood, 2020) and intriguing webinars such as "Aliens in Arizona, the Bermuda Triangle, and Area 13: Answering Controversial Questions From Our Users, Calming Fears, and Promoting Government Information as Reliable and Accurate" (Canfield, 2020), structuring assignments to draw on particularly relevant aspects of the course content may increase student interest and involvement.

While there are different approaches to doing this (for instance, focusing class attention on complex issues such as governmental interventions in the COVID19 pandemic, legal challenges to the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals presidential memorandum of June 15, 2012, or the 2020 U.S. election cycle), these can run the risk of being alienating or overwhelming to individual students. A pedagogical strategy that allows students to determine their own interests in government information, while still maintaining a high level of investment in course activities, may have a better chance of being successful with a wider range of students from different backgrounds. Humor can help to reassure students that this will work, even (and perhaps especially) if it's an unexpected approach to making the use of government information engaging, enlightening, enriching and energizing. The following are just a few examples drawn from the Introduction to Government Information course mentioned above.

Engaging: The FBI's Vault

A wide variety of implications and interpretations can be made when dealing with government information, some of which is directly or indirectly related to popular culture. For instance, there have been numerous films and novels based on the notion that the U.S. military has long been concealing vital data about sightings of unidentified flying objects (UFOs).

One of the most visited government information sites is the Federal Bureau of Investigation's Vault (its Freedom of Information Act online reading room) which offers a carefully curated selection of often highly redacted documents from various closed investigations and which can easily arouse student interest in allegations regarding celebrity indiscretions, conspiracy theories, and criminal investigations, but can also lead to discussion of important topics such as privacy, public records, and the Freedom of Information Act itself.

Enriching: The *Congressional Record*

Another fascinating but often overlooked aspect of government information work is the way in which various ideas compete to become bills and potentially laws. Morris and Joy (2017) point out that Americans love the idea of democracy in theory but do not like to see its highly deliberative processes play out in action, particularly the tediousness and partisanship often demonstrated during Congress's meticulous examination of and debate on political issues and events. For instance, the 116th Congress's House Resolution 7981 ("To prohibit the use of Federal funds to refer to the head of state of the People's Republic of China as 'President' on United States Government documents and communications, and for other purposes") or its Senate Resolution 4490 ("A bill to impose an emergency tax on the increase in wealth of billionaires during the COVID-19 pandemic in order to pay for all of the out of pocket healthcare expenses of the uninsured and under-insured, including prescription drugs, for one year" may

appear incongruous among the more routine exercises in legislation, but they can also heighten student awareness of the rhetorical aspects of congressional activities as shown via speeches chronicled in the *Congressional Record* or floor conversations caught on CNN but which are very often obscured by less public practices such as the senatorial hold **(**Howard & Roberts, 2015). This enriched perspective on legislation, both successful and unsuccessful, can help students to understand that when Congress does make a joke, it is often about serious business (Yarwood, 2001).

Enlightening: Presidential Tweetstorms

Students may or may not realize that many government agencies are now turning to social media, ranging from the National Institutes of Health's Facebook site to the Department of Labor's Instagram account to the Library of Congress's YouTube channel. These non-governmental platforms help to attract attention to government agency initiatives and informational efforts, many of which are eye-catching, empathetic to their audience, and surprisingly effective.

By far the most visible social media efforts by the U.S. government are those Twitter feeds emanating from the White House, which form part of the presidential record (Rausch, 2020). These include the White House Twitter account, the President of the United States (POTUS) Twitter account, and recent incumbent Donald Trump's personal Twitter account. This last, while often referred to by scholars as promoting "angry populism" (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2018), "extreme speech" (McGranahan, 2019), "white rage" (Kelly, 2019) and a "return to the paranoid style" (Hart, 2020), boasted 84 million followers and provides an ideal venue in which students can explore the hundreds of tweets produced there each month and to share their own opinions as to the kinds of humor employed there and its effects on the nation and the world. Guided by the

instructor, this exercise in sharing can help to illuminate the role played by social media technologies on government policy formation and expression.

Energizing: Administrative Regulations and Rules

"Regulations and rules" refer to the administrative laws created by America's executive-branch agencies (*e.g.*, Department of Transportation) and to the rules created by independent regulatory agencies (*e.g.*, Federal Trade Commission), both under authority delegated by Congress. These are initially made available for comment in the *Federal Register* and eventually published in the *Code of Federal Regulations*, after which they enjoy the full force of law. Both conservative (Crews, 2020) and liberal (Posner & Sunstein, 2017) commentators continually make attempts to assess the costs and benefits of government regulation as these continue to increase. Ordinary Americans are seldom familiar with the specifics of these regulations, even those that affect their daily lives, such as the food labelling requirements for allergen ingredients or the response time for image display by automotive rear-view cameras.

An entertaining example of this was expressed in the proposed Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) regulation "Operation of Small Unmanned Aircraft Systems Over People" (2020), which noted that "This proposal also builds on the performance-based regulatory philosophy [in which] the FAA recognized that the possibilities for innovation in unmanned aircraft technology are virtually boundless and that the industry can move in directions no one can predict… The FAA's challenge in developing this proposal, therefore, is to balance the need to mitigate the risk small unmanned aircraft pose to other aircraft and to people and property on the ground without inhibiting innovation. One aspect of the FAA's challenge is that technology moves at the speed of innovation while the administrative rulemaking process, by design, does not."

Such agency comments highlight the need for those people "on the ground" to be cognizant of and to comment on these regulations before they take effect. Regulations.gov is the online system for submitting comments that evidence support or dissent for a proposed regulatory action; not infrequently these do have a direct or indirect impact on the outcome. According to Looney (2018), "Comments that reflect the perspective of individual persons are valuable to government agencies in several ways: they can show the agency unique situations that it hasn't contemplated in its evaluation of the policy; they can then explain how that unique situation will impact individual behavior in response to the policy change; they can express third person, value-based judgments on the policy that speak to their general opinion of whether the agency is heading in the right direction."

Students can be alerted to the opportunities presented by the comment periods announced in the *Federal Register* and express their own concerns and knowledge (as well as that of their communities) as stakeholders in a wide range of issues, ranging from the imposition of cybersecurity protocols on public libraries, to the amounts of lead and copper allowable in pipes that carry drinking water, to the removal of long-standing sanctions against the killing of migratory birds. While not every student may be concerned with these particular issues, the awareness that information is available and communications channels do exist for intervention with government actions can help to foster a more energized, activist approach long after the class is over, both for the students themselves and the others they may help with what they have learned.

Questioning These Conclusions

The goal of seeing students make real use of their government information knowledge is, as Buschman (2019, p. 213) puts it, "going beyond political literacy…Whether explicitly

political or not, the imaginative uses to which libraries are put do enrich civil society and the public sphere. Libraries help to counter fake news both through specific educative actions aimed at it and as broadly educative institutions with a coherent notion of their relationship to informational discernment in democracy."

Will the use of these kinds of relevant material-focused humor that derive directly from the course content help to engage, enrich, enlighten, and energize the students learning about government information? Clearly such an outcome is desirable, but the assessment of whether this approach is successful can't be made by the instructor alone. Students should also be asked at specific points in the course: does this help to make the course material more engaging to you, does this help in enlightening you on aspects of the course material, does this help to enrich the meaning of the course materials for you, and does this help to energize you toward using what you are learning? The results should also be apparent in student work, both during the class and (hopefully) afterwards. If not, the joke will indeed be on the instructor.

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