



# COMEDY ~ FOR ~ CHANGE

A PRACTICAL GUIDE

v1.0

BY OMRI MARCUS

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# BACKGROUND

In our loud, media-heavy environment, where our minds are relentlessly bombarded with information, comedy has the potential to be a real game changer. It can amplify the message; it can take a harsh, complicated reality and turn it into digestible, bite-size portions. It can bring strangers together and help diminish fear. What's more, humor sticks. And, no less importantly, if people can laugh at their own flaws, there will be very little room left for hatred.

Comedy can also be a weapon — a weapon so effective that world leaders fear it. From the President of the United States to the Charlie Hebdo attackers, not to mention the Syrian regime, whose hit men recently smashed the arms of a famous cartoonist. The powers that be feel threatened by humor for a reason.

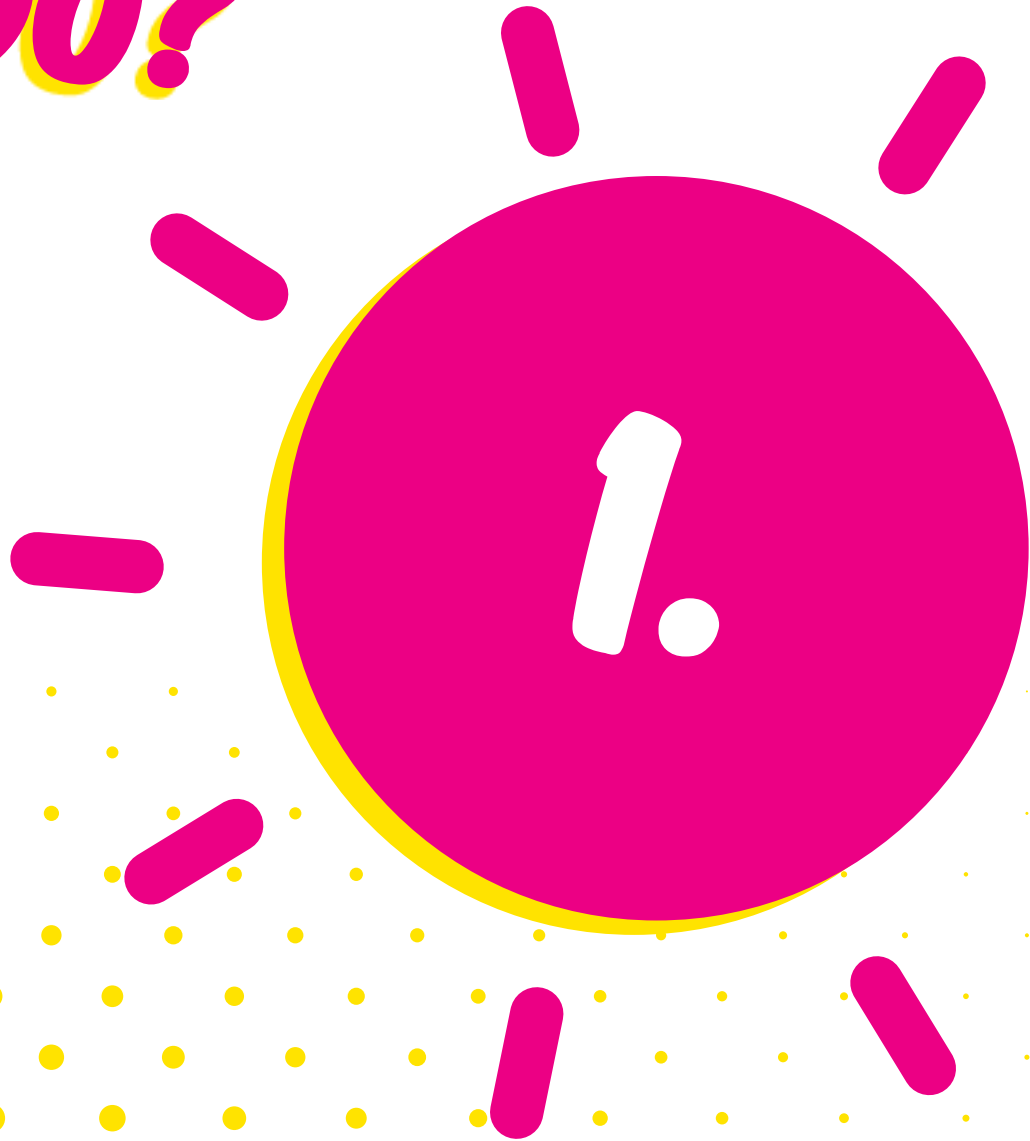
Back in 2014 we founded the Comedy for Change initiative and we knew we were onto something when a group of A-list international writers jumped on board and flew over to Jerusalem for a first-of-its-kind event. The amazing energy that it generated pushed us to create a sequel, then another, and another one after it. Today we are a global network of storytellers committed to comedy and to social change. It is more than just a profession for us. It is a mission.

The events take different shapes and forms, but the DNA is always the same: an international group of comedy professionals gathered in one place teaching, learning, creating and discussing myriad aspects of our work/mission. The bottom line is that content can make the world a better place and that we – as content creators – have the responsibility and the privilege of being the agents of that change. In this short report, we will try to break down the components of change-making comedy, a "Comedy for Change 101," if you will.



**VIDEO FROM 2014 COMEDY FOR A CHANGE: JERUSALEM**

# WHAT CAN COMEDY DO?



Laughter is the best medicine, they say. But if you have a heart attack, it won't do much good... Comedy is a great tool, but only when circumstances allow. In her paper [The Laughter Effect](#), researcher and former TV executive Caty Borum Chattoo typified five ways comedy can influence people, thereby instigating social change:

## **ATTRACTING ATTENTION**

An effective gag stands out among the endless stream of content we're constantly exposed to, and grabs the viewer's attention. That's half the job, at least.

For example, [the Ice Bucket Challenge](#) - dumping a bucket of ice and water over a person's head - either one's own or someone else's - is an activity meant to raise awareness of amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS), a neurodegenerative disease, and encourage people to donate to research. During the summer of 2014, over 2.4 million clips of people performing the Ice Bucket Challenge - either on themselves or others - were uploaded to the web. Suddenly, everyone knew what ALS was.



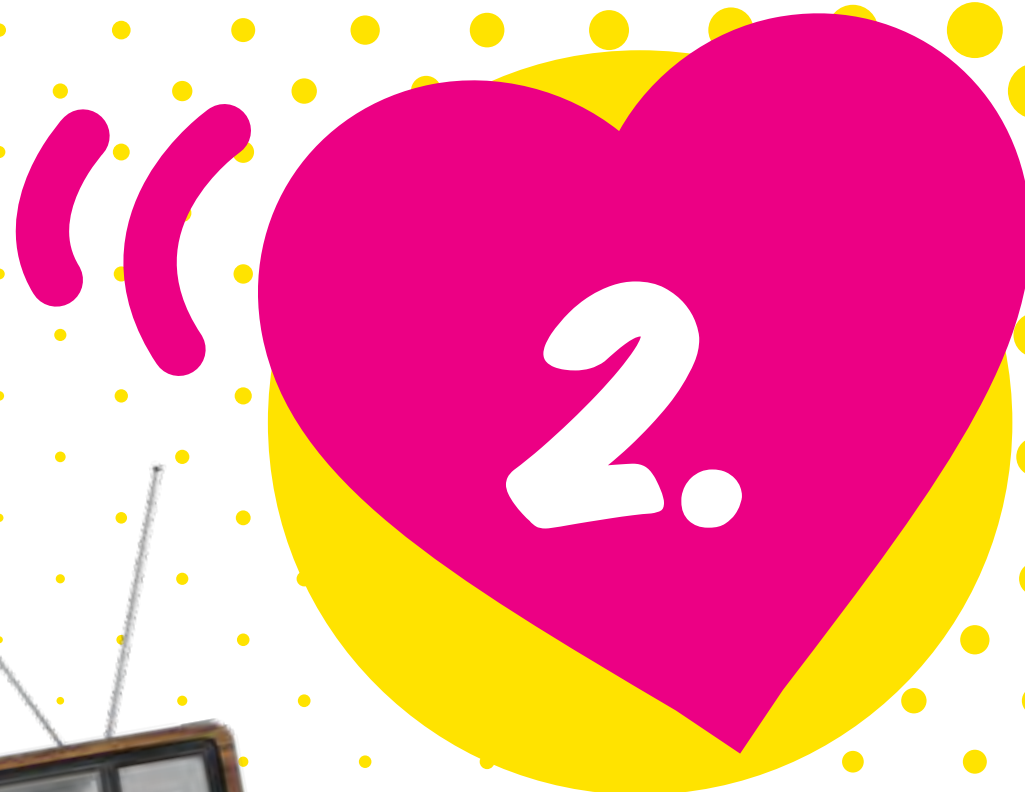
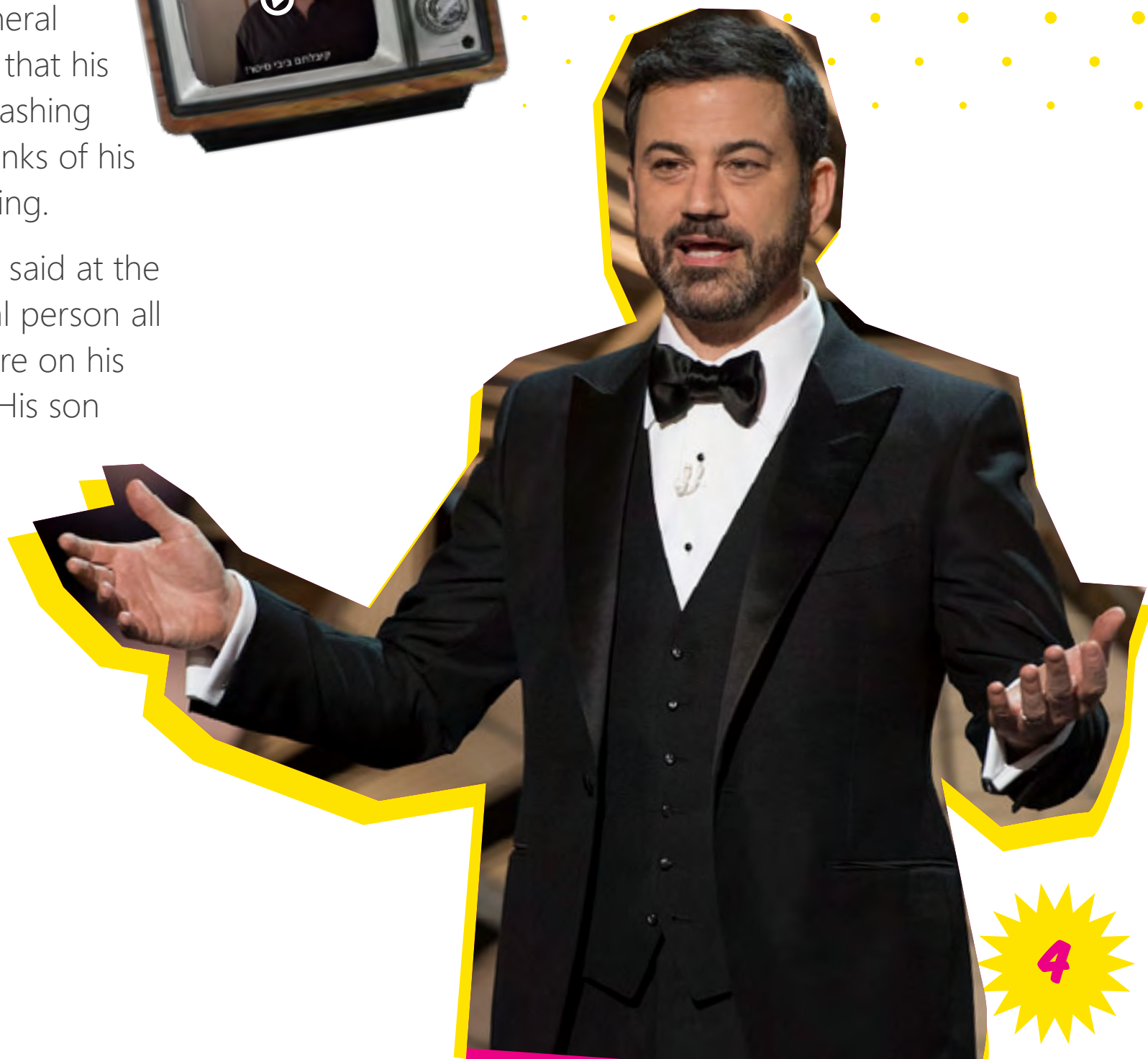


## **FEELING: COMEDY'S ROUTE TO PERSUASION**

Causing your interlocutor to laugh is known to lower his or her suspicion levels. This is why, over the last few years, it's not only been comedians who've resorted to comedy to deliver a message; in fact, comedy has become a permanent feature in the politician's toolbox. For them, however, it's a double-edged sword, since a badly delivered joke, or one that is unfunny or distasteful, could backfire and harm the cause or the politician.

For example, none of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's campaign ads in the 2015 general election were conventional. All four videos that his campaign released were sketches of him trashing his opponents. Irrespective of what one thinks of his policies, the man has impressive comic timing.

Jonathan Bines, a writer on [Jimmy Kimmel](#), said at the conference that Kimmel, not a very political person all in all, felt compelled to talk about healthcare on his show. For Kimmel, it was a personal issue: His son had undergone open-heart surgery. He has since taken America's healthcare to heart, so to speak, dedicating large segments of his show to the issue, keeping it high on the agenda of his millions of viewers and followers... [CNN reported](#) the following week about how Jimmy Kimmel killed that part of the healthcare bill.





## UNPACKING COMPLEX SOCIAL ISSUES

There is still no appropriate official term for what we're going to call "informational comedy," but it's apparent that over the last few years we have been witnessing comedy that also educates its audience.

It's not a new thing, but after the financial crisis in the US, [Jon Stewart](#) did the unthinkable and combined economy and comedy by drawing parallels between an easily comprehensible school exam fraud scandal and fraud in the subprime loan market. By poking a bit of fun while treating a serious issue, he opened it up to an audience that had never taken part in that discussion before. This is done by using silly metaphors, taking the topic to its extreme, and even ridiculing elements in it by making it personal.

Another example is [John Oliver](#). Almost every week, Oliver starts his opening monologue by stating the topic of the show and then asking the audience not to switch channels, promising it will be funny. Oliver is fighting an uphill battle insofar as he deliberately tackles topics that are not making the headlines or are too complex for the news cycle. He then proceeds to make his viewers feel knowledgeable about those issues and sometimes even take an active stand.

The team from the Finnish show *Noin Viikon Uutiset* shared a story that showed that even the very stable Finnish economy has its issues. An Australian company bought the national electricity infrastructure in Finland, promising not to raise prices. Fairly soon after the deal was finalized, you guessed it – they raised the prices. The writers found a promotional video produced by the company, where it touted the many advantages of investing in infrastructure, including their ability, as a monopoly, to milk the Finnish people. Following the segment and the ensuing public uproar in Finland, the Australian company issued a formal apology and removed the video from its website. The company has, however, proceeded to acquire the Finnish broadcast tower operator that provides television and radio coverage to over 99.9% of the Finnish population, so the comedians are remaining vigilant.





## BREAKING DOWN SOCIAL BARRIERS

They say that the best persuasion is to try not to persuade at all. The idea is not to educate the audience directly by preaching, but to create a reality that demonstrates the message - just like a good joke does. The set-up of comedy allows audiences to have intimate encounters with characters from different groups – different races, ages, genders, sexual orientations, cultures, or political affiliations. Getting to know these characters as people, rather than as news statistics, is a first step towards understanding their point of view.

Take, for example, [Modern Family](#). This show is credited as one of the reasons for the quick shift in public opinion regarding same-sex parenting. Mitchell and Cam visited the living rooms of millions every week and demonstrated a caring, loving household – just like any other average American upper-middle-class family; just like Murphy Brown legitimized single motherhood in the 1990s.

Another example was evoked by Kirker Butler from Family Guy. He recounted how the writers spoke out on illegal immigration by creating a storyline where the main character, [Peter Griffin, discovers he's an illegal alien himself](#), making this an issue that can affect anyone you know and ridiculing it at the same time.





## SHARING WITH OTHERS

In this era of social media, sharing is a basic feature of content creation. Content that is shared is amplified, it reaches audiences that extend far beyond the original audience and gives the sharer a way to express their opinion in a lighthearted way by sharing. In this digital age, the audience is encouraged to share funny messages with peers, which can start a discussion among the group. A petition to let 93-year-old comic Bette White to host SNL, for example, gathered hundreds of thousands of signatures and eventually it worked. [Ms. White](#) was invited to host the show.

From [Deville Late-Night](#), a Swiss late-night show, we have a great example of a video that has been shared and became viral, which was part of a series of clips that started in the Netherlands and parodied Trump's "America First" slogan following his inauguration speech by making the case for another country to be placed second. They brought a local perspective to the Trump issues and it gained attention around the world.

Another example of a video that was widely shared was a music video made by the German late-night show [Neo Magazin Royale](#) and filmed in the style of the metal band Rammstein. The video was a rallying call to the rest of Europe to be nicer. The video played on the fact that Germany had previously been wrongly perceived and is now a lot more tolerant by reclaiming the term of being "truly German", a term that was appropriated by the extreme nationalist right.





# HOW CAN COMEDY DO IT?

Now that we've seen some examples of the social influence of comedy and reviewed the various ways these comedic bits work, here is a breakdown of comedic techniques:

## SATIRICAL NEWS

A sub-genre of parody, satirical news takes on the look of a news broadcast and gives it a funny twist. Over the last few years, it gave rise to investigative comedy, another sub-genre. One of the first examples of this was [\*The Daily Show with Jon Stewart\*](#) that did a first-of-its-kind search of TV show transcripts to prove Governor Sarah Palin was soliciting donations for her presidential run when she had already decided not to run for office. This item was later quoted in all the major news outlets in the US. You could see the annoyed facial expression of the news anchors giving credit to a satirical parody.



## PARODY AND IMPRESSIONS

One of the oldest tricks in the book is to parody a topic in order to ridicule it. The latest example is Comedy Central's The President Show. The show is a parody of a talk show hosted by an impressionist of President Donald Trump.

Impressions can be an effective tool, as we witnessed in the 2008 elections with the character of Sarah Palin (played by Tina Fey), and surrounding the last elections with Alec Baldwin in an award-winning performance as Trump.

Parody is a very effective way to get attention. By taking on a famous person, a trend or even a viral YouTube clip, you can capitalize on some of their stardust (aka views).

Example: [Hitler rant about the British referendum](#).

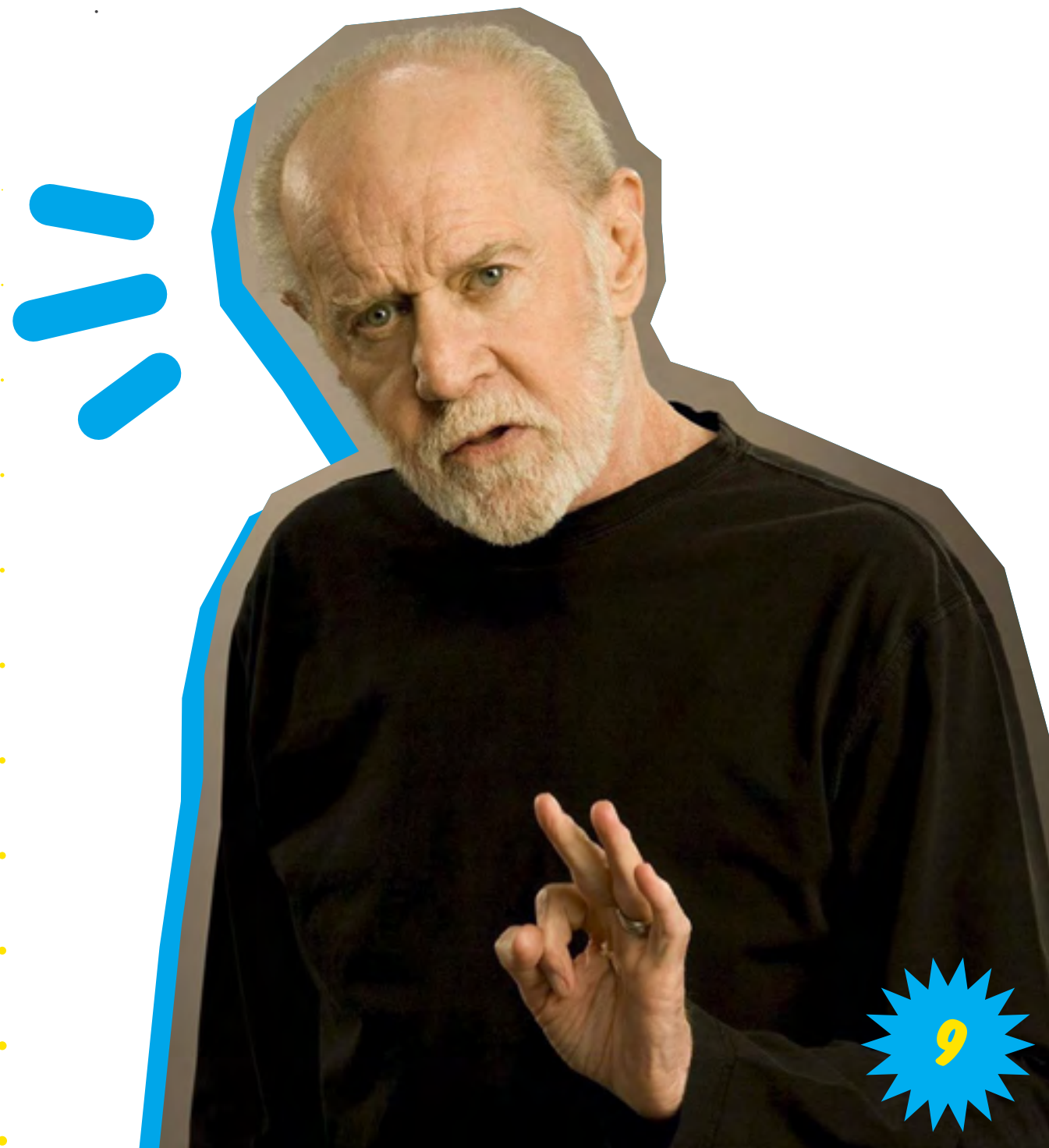


## STANDUP ROUTINE

Since the dawn of Western civilization, man has crafted the art of taking the stage to charismatically captivate an audience to challenge their thought paradigm.

When done effectively, this preacher-like monologue can make us rethink the core perceptions of our reality, our daily behavior and our life choices. Back in 1972, comedian George Carlin performed one of the most well-known standup routines of all time.

[Seven Dirty Words You Can't Say on TV](#) was about the anachronistic word censorship on American TV. Carlin made a convincing case that sparked a debate about the need for censorship and its role in society.





## COMIC SONGS

John Oliver did it with [his song](#) about the US prison system, as did Jon Stewart with his masterpiece [Go F\\*\\*k Yourself](#) and Amy Schumer with her [Girl, You Don't Need Makeup](#) song. But this privilege isn't reserved solely for prime-time TV stars. Sometimes it's enough to be an individual with the right tune.

The one for the history books is definitely Dave Carroll, who in 2009 inflicted painful financial losses on United Airlines.

Carroll, a professional musician, wrote a song about the agony of dealing with the company's bureaucracy, after it refused to compensate him for breaking his guitar on one of their flights. His gem [United Breaks Guitars](#) received more than 16 million views on YouTube and sent the airline's stock value on a downward spiral. After having exhausted all the alternatives, United did the right thing and invested millions in overhauling their customer service.

And you don't even have to write your own song. Sometimes, it's enough to take a well-known tune and turn it on its head, like this typically British initiative which, in the wake of Margaret Thatcher's death in 2013, attempted to get the classic tune "Ding Dong the Witch is Dead" to the [top of the charts](#). If successful, it would have made the BBC, the public TV channel, play it in full length on prime time.

Even though the initiative ultimately failed, the joke got lots of press coverage that dampened the earnest memorial services and embarrassed then Prime Minister David Cameron, Thatcher's biggest fan and devout disciple.

The juiciest example, perhaps, is courtesy of the brilliant Australian comedian Tim Minchin, who is likely to prevail over known singers at the Australian Performing Right Association awards, with his exceptionally vicious musical gag called [Come Home Cardinal Pell](#). Calling on the Vatican to extradite a prominent Australian priest accused of several acts of child molestation, the song was so controversial that every radio station Down Under that dared play it was immediately slapped with a letter from the Holy See's lawyers, threatening a libel suit.

Conscious of the controversy his song was likely to unleash, Minchin ended it on a whimsical note:

**"OH WELL / CARDINAL PELL  
IF YOU DON'T FEEL COMPELLED  
TO COME HOME BY A SENSE  
OF MORAL DUTY  
PERHAPS YOU WILL COME HOME AND FRICKIN' SUE ME"**

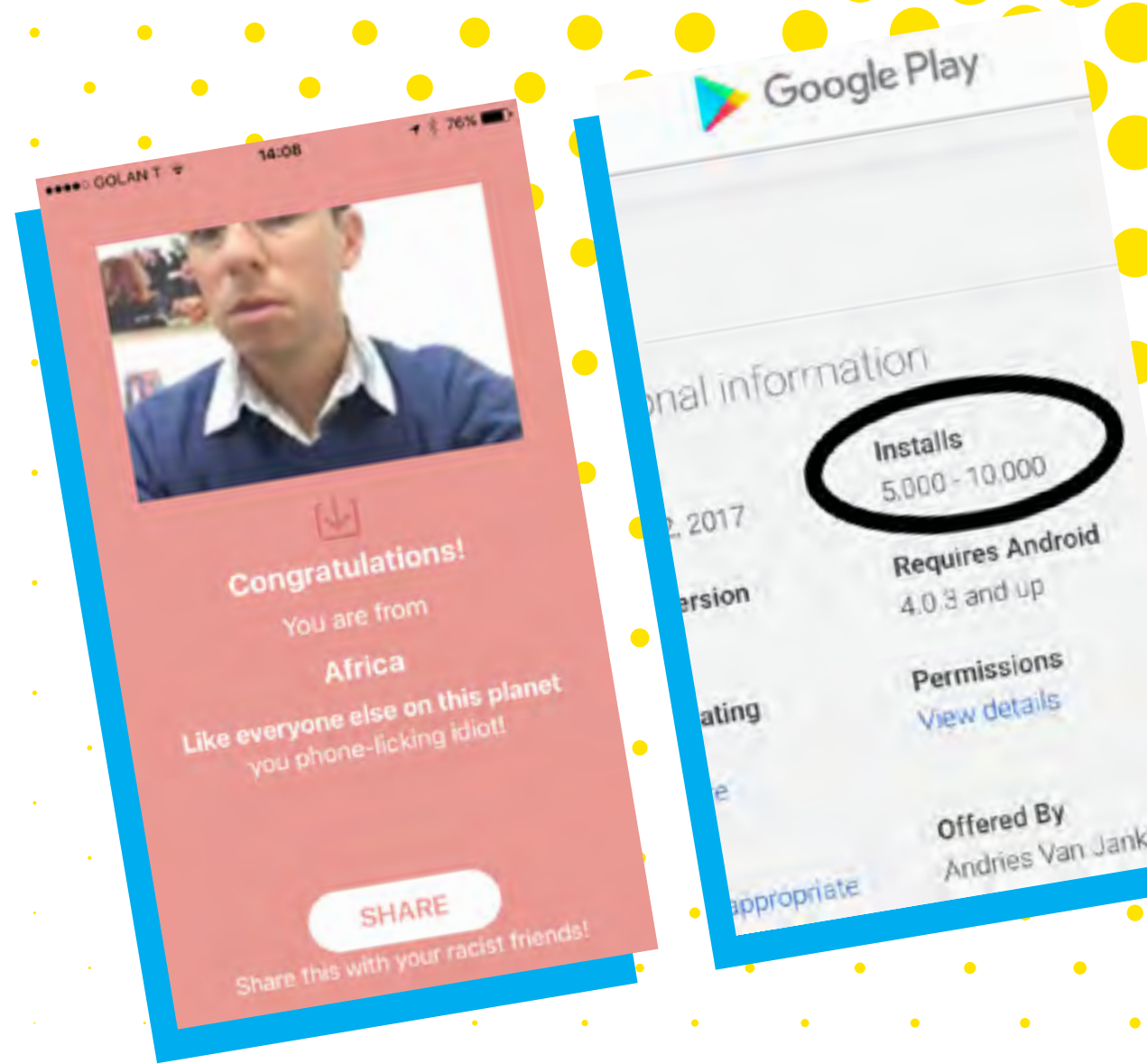
With one song, Minchin promoted a progressive cause in a way a million campaigns could not. Following the song's great success, more cases of sexual abuse have come to light and, most importantly, the church has gone on the defensive.



# PRANKS

A little over a year ago in London, we were able to gather a group of creative people from all around the world. The group represented various countries, religions, ages, genders and professions, all united by frustration with the negative direction our world has taken. Over the course of three days, we brainstormed and workshopped various ideas, ultimately settling on a “fake news” prank that would give racists a taste of their own medicine. Literally. We created and released a “scientific” [app](#) to Google’s Play Store, which purported to classify the user’s “DNA heritage” if they licked the phone’s touchscreen. The idea was to play into racists’ desire to check and proclaim their “purity.” To promote our preposterous creation, we launched a full-scale seeding campaign, activating blogs, Reddit, Facebook groups and contacting dozens of leading white supremacy-oriented communities. We took our marketing campaign to great lengths in order to seem as authentic as possible, including creating fake LinkedIn profiles for our scientist and others, a fake university and a full-blown press release distribution to major [media aggregators](#).

If you’re wondering what happens in the app after you lick the screen, all users get the same “results”: “Congratulations! You are from Africa. Like everyone else on the planet - you phone licking idiot!”



Alongside our so-called scientific result, we showed the users a video of themselves licking their own phone.

With a budget of just a few hundred dollars we were able to deliver some impressive results through our targeted efforts, a few paid ads and a massive amount of legwork pounding the pavement of hate-groups online.

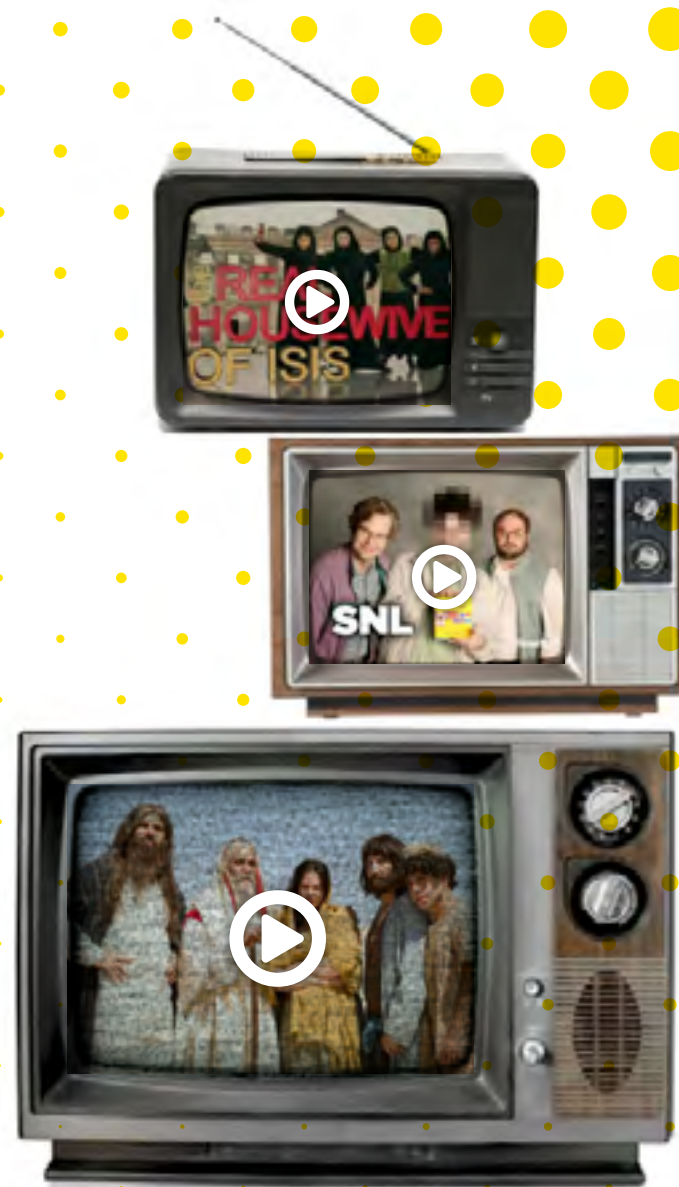




# SKETCHES

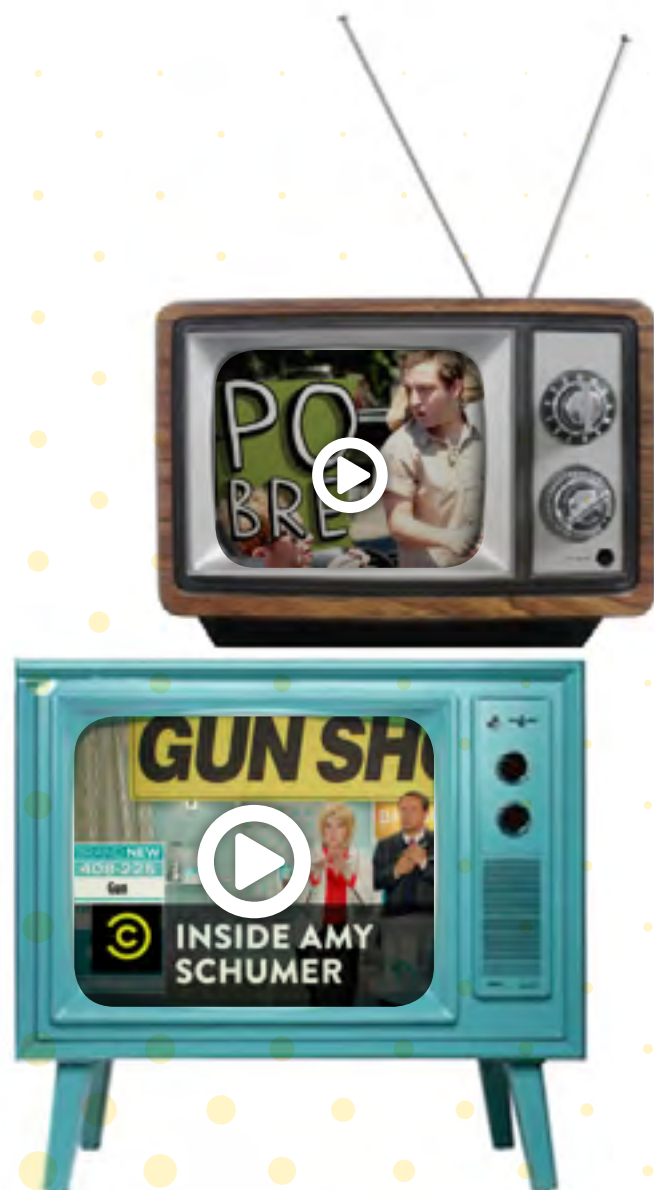
Sketch is a short scene or vignettes, commonly a few minutes long, used widely in comedy and variety shows, late-night talk shows and, these days, in social media and YouTube. It is performed by a group of comic actors or comedians, either on stage, on location or in a studio, and it's probably the most widespread form of satire.

Throughout the years, some sketches have made headlines, like the BBC's [Real Housewives of ISIS](#); [SNL's sketch](#) parodying a Rosetta Stone ad for teaching people to speak Thai that resulted in a complaint from the Thai government for portraying the sex trade as the main reason to go to the country; and Israel's [The Jews Are Coming](#) sketch that asked why the Ten Commandments do not include "Thou Shalt Not Rape."



Gregório Duvivier and Alessandra Orofino of Brazil's Greg News mentioned a sketch they made called [Pobre](#) ("Poor" in Portuguese). The sketch was seen by 15 million people and tackled the issue of class. It portrayed a group of rich people on a safari, only instead of exotic animals, the group was shown a poor neighborhood.

A different approach was demonstrated by Tami Sagher, a writer on Amy Schumer, who showed how they helped tackle [gun culture in America](#) through a sketch. It helped showcase the absurdity of how easy it is to purchase a gun in America and the hypocrisies of the people who can be granted access to such a liberty.





# HOW CAN YOU USE COMEDY?

- If there is one lesson YouTube taught the world it is that in this day and age, with a good idea and minimal production effort, you can find yourself with a viral hit on your hands.
- Making viral content requires grabbing attention, evoking emotion and encouraging people to share which, as we explored above, are all things comedy does effectively. It's far from being easy, yet **here are some exemple test-cases.**







## **OFFICIAL FURKIDS KITTY KOMMERCIAL**

A cat shelter in Atlanta, Georgia released a [clip](#) to promote cat adoption by spoofing a used-car TV ad. The combination of cute cats and funny jokes is irresistible despite the visibly unprofessional production.

## **BIKE LANES BY CASEY NEISTAT**

20 million people watched [this video](#) by Casey Neistat who, after getting a ticket for not riding in a bicycle lane, decided to show the world what would happen if he only used bicycle lanes. Spoiler: a lot of painful crashes.

## **DR. HOUSE OF CARDS**

In order to fight the loud anti-vaxxers, Zubin Damania, a doctor from Nevada, produced and starred in [videos](#) (under the pseudonym ZDoggMD) parodying House of Cards to try to show why not vaccinating is a poor choice. This is a good example that doesn't directly taunt its subjects: a parody notwithstanding, the clips do not truly ridicule the anti-vaxxers themselves.

# ***FURTHER READING:***

**The Laughter Effect**: The [Serious] Role of Comedy in Social Change - Caty Borum Chattoo

**Revisionist History** - Malcolm Gladwell's podcast about whether laughter and social protest are friends or foes

**How Laughing at Yourself Can Change the World** - Brad Jenkins



## ***ABOUT THE AUTHOR***

**Omri Marcus** is the founder of the Comedy for Change initiative. Marcus was a development partner at Red Arrow International, served as a senior writer on Israel's top TV shows, and continues to advise international production companies on global TV and digital trends.

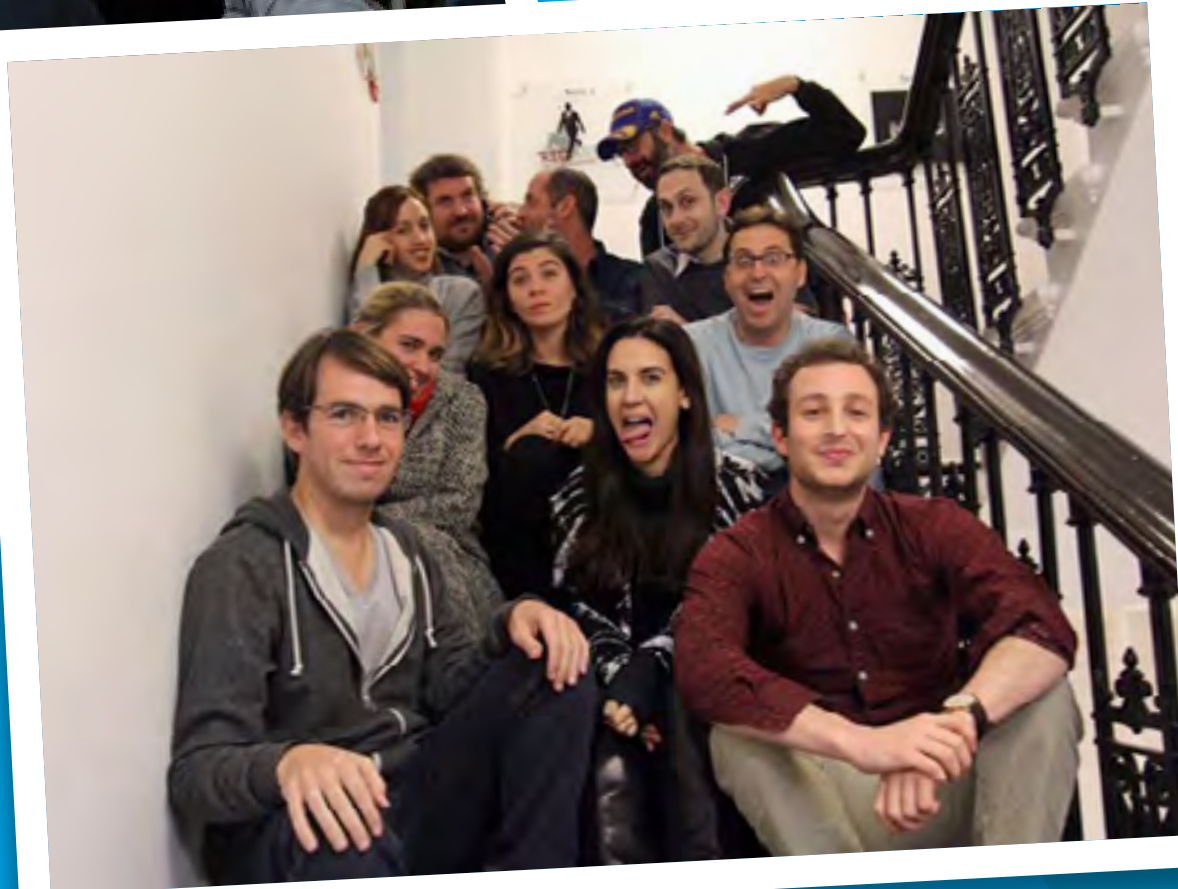


## COMEDY FOR CHANGE NYC:

Yael Rosen  
Simon Winkler  
Ido Rosenthal  
Omri Marcus  
Michael Schmidt



## JERUSALEM



## LONDON

***THANK YOU.***

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[info@comedyforchange.org](mailto:info@comedyforchange.org)