

The rise and fall of the British comedy magazine

G Neil Martin

Abstract

Although humorous magazines have existed internationally for over a century, 1994 saw the publication in the UK of the first magazine about comedy. This article reviews the rise and decline of a specific type of professional comedy sub-culture, the comedy magazine. It describes and evaluates the genesis and production of the UK's first magazine about comedy, *Deadpan*, and its successors. The review contains reflections from two key contributors and creators (*Deadpan*'s editor and *Comedy Review*'s staff writer) and provides an analysis of the motivation behind these publications, their subsequent evolution, and their ultimate failure. Their rise is discussed in the context of societal changes in the UK in the 1990s, the development of lads' mags and their influence on comedy magazines, and the televisual and stand-up performance comedy output of the decade.

“There was no doubt whatsoever that a new-found confidence was ricocheting around the country...the 90s became a decade of change, exhilaration, and even over-stimulation. It was a ten-year scramble of hedonism and confidence driven by a lost generation tired of Thatcherism and jump-started by ecstasy-fuelled acid house which genuinely believed it was going to last forever.”

James Brown, *Animal House* (2023)

Introduction

Brown’s autobiographical account of the 1990s and his role in the development of *Loaded* magazine, provided a large, if grubby window through which a reader could observe the shifts in thinking and behaviour that seemed to characterise that decade. Always mindful of the danger that the imposition of schema- such as the concept of ‘decade’- will lead to over-generalisation and the assumption that a period began at one end and ended at the other and everything before and after was hermetically sealed from it, there is evidence that the 1990s was a period of significant shifts in linguistic, societal, governmental and political thinking, and in social attitudes, especially those concerning sex (Turner, 2013). The UK had witnessed the defenestration of its first woman Prime Minister and the election of the first Labour government since 1974. Devolution had occurred in two nations, Scotland and Wales, and the death of a Princess occurred as the decade drew to a close. It was the decade of Bridget Jones’s Diary, Hooper’s Hootch and Two Dogs, of The Spice Girls, Xena Warrior Princess (1995), Tomb Raider (1996) and Buffy (1997). The K Foundation burned a million pounds (1994), Jamie Oliver became *The Naked Chef* (1999) and men, in the form of first Harry Enfield and Martin Clunes, and then Clunes and Neil Morrissey, be-

haved badly (1992). In the art world, artists were young and British and numbered Damien Hirst, Tracey Emin, Marc Quinn and Rachel Whiteread amongst its phalanx. James Bond was rebooted (*Goldeneye*, 1995), Blur battled Oasis (or Oasis battled Blur), and *Four Weddings and a Funeral* (1994), *The Full Monty* (1997), *Trainspotting* (1996) and *Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels* (1998) amused or horrified viewers according to taste or disposition. Ben and Jerry's launched its Cool Britannia ice cream flavour in 1996 and, a year later, *Vanity Fair* declared that London was swinging again.

It also became the decade of another invented demographic, the New Lad, a phrase coined by Sean O'Hogan in the magazine, *Arena*, in 1991. This was a sociological group which was to propel -or perpetuate- the most successful periodical publishing phenomenon of the 1990s, the lads' mag (Jackson, Stevenson & Brooks, 2001). The magazines featured interviews with male icons and mavens, stacks of humour and a lack of seriousness, some sports, tales of drugs, drinking and adventure, paeans to celebrated geezers, and beautiful, frequently semi-naked young women. The predominant view of men in these magazines was of a sex that was young, ostensibly working class, hedonistic, ribald, unpretentious, naive and very interested in sex and alcohol. An alternative -or complementary- view held that these men were portrayed as deliberately weak- bested, unable to obtain unobtainable women, failing, and needing assistance in dressing and interacting with the opposite sex or not caring about either (Growse, 2012). Growse attributes the lacklustre launch of *FHM* in France to this self-effacing mentality and portrayal.

Brown's account of the shifting social and political ground of the time that lay the ultimate foundations of the success of the lads' mag -and the rise or salience of the Lad and Ladette as a sociological type- may also help explain the rise of another, particularly 90s

phenomenon: the British magazine about comedy, and its most significant exemplar, *Deadpan*.

Before *Deadpan*: the comedy periodical in the UK

Comedy magazines and periodicals written for an adult readership and designed to make people laugh have existed in various forms, and across different cultures and nations, for over two centuries (Gray, 1972). *Punch* was launched in 1841 (and closed in 2002), and the US's *Harvard Lampoon* was founded in 1876. The first German satirical magazine was *Kladderadatsch* (1848). Modern incarnations, primarily satirical, include *Hara Kiri* (1961), France's *Charlie Hebdo* (1970-1981; 1992- present day), the former East Germany's *Gulenspiegel* (1954), The Netherlands's *De Nieuwe* (1991-), Spain's *El Jueves* (1977), Germany's *Simplicissimus* and *Titanic* (1979), Yugoslavia's *Yesh*, Russia's *Crocodile*, Turkey's *L-Maynak* (1996) and *Lombok* (2001), the US's *MAD* magazine (1952-2018) and the UK's *Private Eye* (1961- present day) and *Viz* (1979- present). The first French satirical periodical is considered to be *Charivari* (founded in 1832) which led to *Punch*, which appeared a decade later, inviting the soubriquet 'The London Charivari' (Larsen, 1980).

Much of the impetus of satirical magazines, periodicals and cabaret in the early twentieth century was a reaction to unspeakable human horror and tyranny, what Gogol described as "laughter under invisible tears". The Lex Heinze laws in Germany, for example, prohibited works of art that were considered a danger to public morality. Troublesome satirists ultimately daring to poke fun at powerful people were deemed eminently extinguishable. Jokes about Nazis became underground jokes about Nazis ("Flusterwitze"- "whispered jokes"). In Bulgaria in 1963 it was an offence to tell political jokes.

While comedy and humour magazines had been in circulation for many decades, and continue to exist successfully in the 21st century, very few periodicals have had as their focus the topic of comedy itself. This article describes the condition and circumstances which gave rise to the first of such periodicals in the UK, *Deadpan*, and how its publication led to a surprising number of imitators all of which failed. Some of the reasons for these failures are discussed as are some of the themes, philosophies and changes in attitudes of the 1990s which gave rise to magazines about comedy specifically, and to more liberated, non-pornographic magazines more broadly. It draws on the recollections of two important figures in the rise of magazines about comedy, David Davies, the editor of *Deadpan*, and Danny Wallace, staff writer on *Comedy Review*. The comedy ground of UK television comedy in the 1990s was well-fertilised and the success of the performers who grazed on the horticulture of alternative comedy of the 1980s provided a huge commercial incentive for exploiting the audience's appetite and thirst for comedy and a powerful, if short-lived, momentum for magazines about comedy.

***Deadpan*: the 1990s and the UK's first magazine about comedy**

Deadpan magazine was launched in April 1994, a month before the publication of the first issue of *Loaded*. The magazine was inspired, professionally and practically, by the world of music magazine publishing. *Mixmag* was a dance and clubbing magazine launched in 1983 and continues in online form today. The editor of *Mixmag*, David Davies, became *Deadpan*'s editor. According to Davies, *Mixmag* "was going well and we started to think: was there another magazine we could launch? Plus, my deputy editor at *Mixmag* was getting headhunted to edit our rivals so we decided to promote him up to editor to keep him and I would move up to be the publisher and drive on with launching something new." (Davies, email interview, 2022). Both magazines were published by DMC.

Deadpan ran for 14 issues and each issue contained approximately 66 glossy black and white and colour pages and featured news items, reviews and interviews. The final issue was published in May 1995. Two other magazines about comedy followed much later- *Comedy*, published by IPL, and *Comedy Review*, published by Future. There was also a much cheaper, self-published fanzine-like magazine, *Mustard*, which featured a mix of comic pieces, and interviews with significant comic figures such as Michael Palin, Jesse Armstrong, John Lloyd, Fred Armisten and Carrie Brownstein. The early issues were available as black and white photocopies but eight colour issues were subsequently produced and were commercially available. Images of the first issues of *Deadpan*, *Comedy* and *Comedy Review* can be seen in figure 1.

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According to Davies, “*Deadpan* was basically me and Dan Prince. We both had some *Mixmag* duties but our main focus was *Deadpan*. We liked the comedy scene - it was a hot time with lots of new comedians coming through. And we were going to gigs and meeting the comedians and talking to people and just figuring out who could be good and then just asking them directly if they would be interested in getting involved, writing etc. Barry Took was extremely kind and helpful, he introduced us to people, did his column, encouraged us. Stewart Lee, I just contacted him directly, and talked him into doing the column. He just wrote what he wanted. The one person we really wanted and always seemed on the brink of saying yes - the tease! - was Bob Monkhouse” (Davies, email interview, 2022). The motivation was very much trying to capture the excitement and enthusiasm for comedy at that time: “we were quite pure and sincere in trying to capture the magic of this scene that seemed to be blowing up in front of our eyes.” The magazine took two months to develop and launch and Davies’s aim was to build a stable of magazines for DMC of which *Dead-*

pan was the first created from scratch. The launch date was slightly delayed because of the desire to attract advertisers to the first issue. The aim was to produce a magazine with long-term sustainability although Davies acknowledges that this was an unknown. To this end, costs were kept low.

Deadpan's basic structure was tri-fold and, in keeping with many new magazines of the time, was rather laddy. The front section of *Deadpan* was normally reserved for comedy-related news items written in a quirky, irreverent, occasionally boorish way, and short, comic pieces in the form of jokes or puzzles (a regular feature was "That's Shit" in which readers would submit items from the modern world which they considered to be less than satisfactory). This first section was titled "Warm Up" and was self-described as "tripe, shite and a load of made-up bollocks". The second part featured pages devoted to live comedy reviews, interviews with comedians and comic performers (such as Robert Newman, The Hole In The Wall gang and even old school comics such as Jimmy Jones and Bernard Manning) and columns from well-known comedy luminaries. The final third of the magazine was occupied by reviews -comedy books, TV, radio and films, and listings for live comedy shows, like a specialist *Time Out*, edited by Keith Dover. It was not a cheaply produced magazine. It was gloss stock, included colour photos, was lavishly illustrated and employed some star columnists. Stewart Lee had a regular column, as did Barry Took (Barry Took's Comedy Masterclass). Tim Cook began a gossip column from issue 11, and Malcolm Hardee published a monthly diary (The Secret Diary of Malcolm Hardee 44 1/2).

The first cover star was Sean Hughes and virtually every other issue featured a named comedian- Jo Brand (issue 2), Jack Dee (3), Bernard Manning (4), Lily Savage (5), Rob Newman (6), Frank Skinner (7), Lee Evans (8), Paul and Pauline Calf (9), Paul Merton (11), Eddie Izzard (12), and Lee & Herring (13, the magazine's first birthday). The only two

issues not to feature a comedian -or a celebrity- were the January 1995 issue (which featured a supermodel calendar and a cover pin-up of a naked, pinguid man daubed in gold paint) and the final issue (“Beer!”, with a filtered, close-up photograph of a man sipping a pint of beer). In that first issue were features on “why are our sitcoms so rubbish?”, Jenny Eclair, Steve Wright and his morning radio show posse, Whoopi Goldberg, and a report on Vic and Bob’s tour. The first comedian to feature was David Schneider. The first issue also features a critical review from The Nightliner at Wolverhampton University and its line-up of Dominic Holland and Bill Bishop, looking very much like Bill Bailey (Bailey had formed a double act in the 1980s called The Rubber Bishops). Nigel Floyd was responsible for the film reviews and Ivor Baddiel wrote a *Blue Jeans*-type photoplay stories about Rowland Rivron. Issue 14’s episode is called “Can he organise a piss up in a brewery?”

The magazine launched its own national comedy tour in association with Rizla at Jongleurs in Camden in 1995. Rob Newman, Phil Jupitus, Boothby Grafoe and Gayle Tuesday (Brenda Gilhooly) were the launch night acts. “Club nights had been a big part of *Mixmag*’s success,” says Davies, “so we were keen to find a similar formula for *Deadpan*. There was a great PR firm who believed in us and worked with us to take the tour idea to Rizla. And it did go very well but in the end that too drained our confidence as it didn’t seem to impact our sales.” (Davies, email interview, 2022).

Reasons for failure

The final issue of *Deadpan* appeared in May 1995 and the reasons for the failure were not unpredictable. Commenting on the last months of the magazine’s life and the reasons for its truncated existence, David Davies reflected that “looking back, I realise we were very UK focused and I guess that’s because our horizon was really the live circuit. That probably limited our appeal but on the other hand we were quite pure and sincere in trying to

capture the magic of this scene that seemed to be blowing up in front of our eyes. Reflecting on that now, I don't know how much we were covering a great moment in British comedy or just whether it was all new and fresh to Dan and me." (Davies, email interview, 2023). There was also the unavoidable issue of sales: "We just couldn't sell enough copies," says Davies. "I think we were doing about 10,000. We could have broken even at 15. And we began to lose confidence that we could see a way to get there - our sales weren't growing every month like they had with *Mixmag*." And if *Mixmag* was *Deadpan's* touchstone, it also became perhaps its death knell. "Without *Mixmag*", says Davies, "we wouldn't have launched but if we hadn't had *Mixmag* maybe we would have fought harder and found a way."

After Deadpan: Comedy and Comedy Review

Five months after *Deadpan's* launch, a competitor appeared although this appearance was short-lived. IPL Magazines' *Comedy* launched in September 1994 with Russell Bell as editor. Its cover star was Craig Charles who, in July 1994, had been charged with rape and indecent assault. The omens were not good. Neither, probably, were sales and a second issue did not materialise. Very much styled in the form of a glossy gentleman's periodical, it included features on fashion, a travel piece about Iceland, a column on music, and a food column written by Damned drummer, Rat Scabies. The first, and only, issue featured interviews with Charles, Leslie Nielsen and Danny Simon and an editorial about cats. It promised 'regular' features including comedians' best and worst gigs (supplied by Jo Brand and Mark Thomas in this issue), columns by Rowland Rivron and Dave Barry, news, a reproduction of a classic comedy script, a club of the month, listings, a horoscope, video, book, audio, film and live gig reviews, and a cryptic crossword. The first two-page advert was a colour promotion for the Rover 800. Its own horoscope, one line, was "People only

invite you to parties to laugh at your shoes.” To describe it as a curate’s egg would be something of an understatement. *Comedy* was an attempt to capitalise on the enthusiasm for comedy via the prism of thick, gentlemen’s magazines hewn in the *GQ* or *Esquire* style. In the end it satisfied neither constituencies because it served neither well nor consistently.

A third comedy magazine was launched much later and this entry did exist for a few months before also ceasing publication. *Comedy Review* was first published by Future Publishing in March 1996 and was very close to the content although not tone of *Deadpan*. Both magazines included features, interviews and reviews but *Comedy Review* appeared to take its comedy more seriously. Edited by Andy Lowe, its writers included Cait Hurley, Clair Woodward, William Cook, Nigel Floyd and Danny Wallace as official staff writer. Describing the genesis of the project, Wallace recalled that: “I’d been working in my spare time after school for a few years on video games magazines at Future Publishing in Bath. I met some very funny people, and one day I shared with them some tapes of *On The Hour* – the brilliant Radio 4 show starring Chris Morris and Steve Coogan and everyone else. It became our thing, everyone got into the Chris Morris shows on Radio 1, and it was like we were discussing bands. I took a year out and joined a Nintendo magazine. One night, an editor I’d worked closely with and shared the tapes with called Andy Lowe was out with a couple of my other friends. Around that time, Future was launching a football and a film magazine, and Andy and co said “what about comedy?”. They told me and as someone who loved both comedy and magazines, I was obviously excited. So suddenly it was me, Andy, and an art editor called Matt in a very tiny office next to a science fiction mag, planning the first issue.” (Wallace, email interview, 2023). The purpose of the magazine did not seem to be universally agreed. “The publishers trusted us,” says Wallace, “but I think the problem turned out to be they thought they were getting something other than what we

wanted to make. I think they thought when they heard the word 'comedy', they were going to get *Viz*. That wasn't the plan."

Comedy Review featured interviews with or articles about Bill Bailey, Stephen Fry, Bill Hicks, and Paul Whitehouse amongst others, and a column ("A Letter From America") by a young Louis Theroux ("the tall, thoughtful one with glasses from the BBC's documentary *TV Nation*"). Each edition featured around 90 glossy pages and the first issue featured articles on *The Fast Show*, the unpredictable nature of trans-atlantic sitcom transfers, Tim Vine, Jenny Eclair, Dennis Pennis, Matt Lucas, Lee Evans, Simon Day, Donna McPhail, Sean Hughes, and John Shuttleworth. There was an episode guide to *The Fall and Rise of Reginald Perrin*, an interview with a psychologist on the psychology of comedians, an interview with Michael Moore discussing his comedy documentary series, *TV Nation*, a topology of Cheddar by Richard Herring, a report from the Leicester Comedy Festival and a column by Peter Baynham which appeared on the last page and remained there until the magazine ceased publishing. Each issue was labelled- the first issue was the "debut issue, the second the "sofa issue", the third the "red issue", the fourth the "space issue" and the fifth the "manic issue". In an attempt to lure comedy fans with additional incentives, issues four and five came with cover-mounted comedy cassette tapes. In a development that probably signalled the death knell of the magazine, the fifth issue included a two-page market research "reader's questionnaire". Issue six promised a free guide to the Edinburgh Festival, a Comic Strip Guide and a feature on Laughter Therapy, but this issue did not materialise.

The magazine was a much more professionally produced and denser product compared with *Deadpan*. It did not scrimp on humour or light-heartedness but each article focused specifically on the comedian and comedy and took both seriously. Its longer articles were

well-researched and while both magazines celebrated the joy of comedy, *Comedy Review* appeared to do so with the dedication of a tenacious and well-informed fan.

Comedy Review, like *Deadpan*, was to fall victim to commercial winds and readership vagaries and ceased publishing after five issues. Danny Wallace, reflecting on the closure, has observed that “in our case, we were too expensive. The publishers wanted us to be glossy and aspirational. We should have had ads from Rizla and Foster’s, but instead we seemed to have watches and cars or something.” (Wallace, email interview, 2023). And this disparity between the intended audience and the likely audience was probably one of the reasons why *Comedy Review* failed. “I think,” says Wallace, that “while the editorial was aimed at proper comedy fans, we were in a position where we couldn’t find them, they couldn’t find us, and the ads weren’t bringing in enough, I think. After five issues, we had a great sixth in hand. We had Rik Mayall asking to be interviewed for a cover, we had John Landis wanting to get involved, the brand was establishing, and then one Friday night the whole thing was pulled. It was a real gut punch. But it clarified a decision for me, and I left the company a couple of months later and went to university in London – a new city in which my only friends were comedians.” (Wallace, email interview, 2023).

***Deadpan*, comedy magazines of the 1990s and their historical context**

That the first magazine about comedy in the UK, *Deadpan*, and the first irreverent, general interest, mass market men’s magazine in the UK, *Loaded*, dove-tailed was fortuitous but perhaps not entirely unexpected given the cultural, societal and political shifts in attitudes that occurred in the UK in the 1990s. These shifts had begun in the 1980s but represented the metaphorical divestment of the panoply of battles fought and won in that decade. The 1980s produced alternative comedy and the superficial rejection of conventional comedy:

sexism, racism, almost every ism became taboo and was mocked into virtual invisibility or shamed into darkened silos (Wilmot, 1989). Attacks on the privileged, the satirising of the entitled, and the stentorian support for the less advantaged characterised the rise of the new wave of comedians in the 1980s, the apogee of whom was Ben Elton and the figures who contributed to The Comedy Store (established in 1979), *Friday Night Live*, and Channel 4's *The Comic Strip* (which featured on the Channel's launch night). Benny Hill, speaking to Bob Monkhouse in 1992, remarked that "when you and I started in this game, we couldn't make jokes about politics and the church. Now we can't make jokes about women and race. All these politically correct geezers have done is change the taboos." (Turner, 2013). The rebel warriors of the 1980s became the mainstream face of comedy in the 1990s- Dawn French and Jennifer Saunders transferred their sketch show from BBC2 to BBC1 in 1994 and *Absolutely Fabulous* had been aired on BBC1 since 1992.

While 1980s comedy seemed very much a worthy and largely successful and funny attempt at ridiculing and bludgeoning old-fashioned views about women and race, this battle or mini-revolution seemed to have been won by the end of that decade, and the late 80s and early 90s beckoned a much more egalitarian, arguably harsher, harder, crueller form of comedy, as exemplified by the radio and TV series of *The Mary Whitehouse Experience*, *Knowing Me, Knowing You With Alan Partridge*, and *On The Hour/The Day Today*, *The Jack Dee Show* (Channel 4, 1992) and *Brass Eye*, as well as *Absolutely Fabulous*. Although these did not entirely dominate the comedy landscape, they did pitch a melanic, cynical tent on it.

Attitudes towards sex and the sexes appeared to be changing and the loosening of what was and what was not considered publishable and broadcastable in mainstream media was noticeable (Tippett, 2022). *For Women*, a pornographic magazine for women, was

published in 1992 and was followed by *Women Only*, *Women On Top* and *Ludus*, Virgin's Black Lace erotic imprint was launched in 1993 and sold two million copies in its first four years. It became the decade of the Lad and, later, the Ladette. The 1990s saw the genesis of the Essex girl joke, and a more liberated sense of sexual equality. Sara Cox, exemplifying the "ladette" demographic of this generation, summed it up as follows: "Women are choosing to have one-night stands, to have sex with whoever they want. Women now talk about shagging and not feel obliged to bring in the romance and the commitment" a view reflected back in the fictional world and Anna from *This Life's* (1994) conclusion that: "I don't want a boyfriend. I want a fuck". In 1995, Sky magazine published Zoe Ball's Women Behaving Badly Issue and eMap launched women's magazine *Minx* in 1996 ('for girls with a lust for life'). In the same year Bridget Jones published her first alcohol-soaked and cigarette-stained diary in *The Independent*. Wannabe became the biggest selling single by a girl band (The Spice Girls). Xena Warrior Princess appeared in 1995 and Buffy slayed her first vampire, televisually, in 1997. Lara Croft gamefully raided her first tomb in October 1996. *The Girlie Show* made its first appearance on Channel 4 in the same year.

The 1990s was also a decade that represented huge shifts in the type of comedy people sought out and watched and listened to, which saw the development of comedy talent, programming and live performances driven by the successes and innovations of the alternative comedy period of the 1980s which, more than any decade before it, saw a shift in the professionalisation of comedy with the establishment of independent television companies specialising in the provision of comedy programming (Tiger Aspect, Hat Trick) and comedy-specific talent agencies (such as Avalon).

In his autobiography, *Watching Neighbours Twice a Day*, Josh Widdicombe (Widdicombe, 2022) presents a strong argument that 1990s comedy in the UK represented an auriphry-

giate period of British television comedy. “One of the best things about the comedy of the ‘90s,” he wrote, “was just how endless it felt. This chapter could have been about one of at least 30 shows that I loved and can still recite jokes from 25 years later.” (p243). He lists a formidable number of 1990s British comedies including *The League Of Gentlemen*, *Father Ted*, *Mrs Merton*, *The Fast Show*, *Harry Enfield And Chums*, *The Royle Family*, *Red Dwarf*, *Smack The Pony*, *The Adam And Joe Show*, *Shooting Stars*, *Absolutely Fabulous*, *They Think It’s All Over*, *I’m Alan Partridge* amongst many others. Thompson (2004) has made a similar point, less autobiographically.

It did appear to be the decade when seriousness, and po-facedness, appeared to fall away (Turner, 2013). David Baddiel recalling an experience from 1990, crystallised this new philosophy. Attending a showing of the brutal *Henry- Portrait of a Serial Killer*, a film which had been refused a certificate for general release, Baddiel recalls a panel discussion in which a member of the audience complained about the failure to be warned about the degree of violence in the film. According to Baddiel, another audience member responded: “For fuck’s sake, what did you expect? It’s not called Henry the Elephant, is it?” “I think it was at that point, says Baddiel, “that the 80s fell away for me or at least that seriousness fell away for me; seriousness as that adolescent or post-adolescent concern with everything. I was never going to be intense again.” (Turner, 2013; p.46).

The abandonment of seriousness noted by Baddiel, as well as the launch of *Loaded* in 1994, reflected a change that was occurring in UK society more generally and this change gave rise to a micro-culture which although characterising a part of the 90s also blurred some edges. “In the hands of a new generation,” notes Turner, “untouched by the gender wars and sexual politics of the 1980s, the subtle nuances of irony melted away” (p.53). *FHM* was launched in 1997 and achieved a readership of over half a million, greater than

Cosmopolitan. It was separated from *Penthouse*, in Turner's words, "by an attitude of irreverence and a thong". James Brown, *Loaded*'s editor until 1997, commented that "Between the late 80s and mid-90s, the creative and social shackles came off and the world as we knew it changed...cheap flights, satellite TV, email, the internet, masses of drugs and a home-grown generation of superstars in comedy, football, politics and entertainment created a country that was unrecognisable from the one at war with itself in the mid-1980s" (p267). Until the advent of Wagadon's *Arena* in 1986, almost all magazines for men were either general interest -sport, fishing, motoring- or pornographic (Jackson, Brooks & Stevenson, 1999). With the launch of *Arena*, other magazines emerged that were specifically focused on men's lifestyle, fashion, consumer preoccupations, interests and issues, including British versions of American stalwarts such as Conde Naste's *GQ* (1988) and NMC's *Esquire* (1991). *Loaded* helped fill that gap left open by the more sophisticated, moneyed, and cologned gentlemen's periodicals by meeting the needs and interests of men who, while interested in food, travel, sex and fashion, were not interested in reading about it in the magazine equivalent of a personal jet or wood-panelled town house. Brown describes it as a "fanzine for men" and it was self-described as "for men who should know better" (Brown, 2023). Jackson, Brooks and Stevenson's focus group responses to these magazines clearly differentiated *Loaded* from the others, with the 1994 enfant terrible variously described as "blatant", "honest", "a celebration of the unacceptable face of men", "the lowest common denominator" but also as a refreshing alternative to the pompous and staid facade of the more traditional men's magazines.

Cresting this wave of male liberation and belt-loosening were a number of 1990s comedy scions: Newman and Baddiel became the first comedians to play and sell-out Wembley in 1993, comedy was the new rock and roll, and Mark Thomas began his activist agit-prop. It was the decade of *Vic Reeves Big Night Out*, *Fist of Fun*, *Fruit Corners*, *Men Behaving*

Badly, Have I Got News For You, Brass Eye, Fantasy Football, Cardiac Arrest, and of Pub Internationale. Two of the most successful comedy panel shows were *They Think It's All Over* (1995), a BBC television transfer of a radio show originally hosted by Des Lynam, and *Never Mind The Buzzcocks* (1996). In the year of the launch of *Deadpan* and *Loaded*, the Best TV Comedy Series at the British Comedy Awards was *Drop The Dead Donkey*, the Best New Television Comedy was *Knowing Me, Knowing You...*, the Best Comedy Film was *Four Weddings And A Funeral*, and the Best Stand Up was Phil Kay. This was also the ceremony at which Spike Milligan described Prince Charles as “a grovelling little bastard”. The BAFTA for best comedy went to *Drop The Dead Donkey* (winning against *Desmonds, Rab C Nesbitt, and Chef*) and Best Light Entertainment programme was *Rory Bremner- Who Else?* In the US, the Emmy winner for best comedy was *Frasier*, from a shortlist which comprised *Home Improvement, Mad About You, Seinfeld* and *The Larry Sanders Show*. *Friends* began broadcasting in the US on 22 September 1994, the year which also saw the arrival of *The Vicar of Dibley* and *The Day Today* in the UK, and *Deadpan*. Danny Wallace has remarked that it was a decade characterised by activity and excitement. “It was an extremely exciting time,” he says, “I was in a comedy club every week. The first time I had that absolutely glorious, uncontrollable, tears-streaming, painful laughter was thanks to a rum and coke and Tim Vine. Looking back, you had Armstrong & Miller on the circuit, Matt Lucas, Rich Hall, Al Murray, so many people on the cusp of something you couldn't really predict. Lee Evans was already stratospheric and a stand-out mainstream star but you could still find him doing secret gigs at the Comedy Store. You might find a small section of VHS tapes in your local WH Smith – Jack Dee, maybe. But a mid-90s night seeing stand-up was still a novelty, still felt underground, still felt alternative for anyone outside London. There were funny people about to do great things. As someone outside London, it excited me deeply.” (Wallace, email interview, 2023). That the 1990s represented a golden age for comedy is also acknowledged by writer/performers

such as Charlie Higson (*The Fast Show*, James Bond). Higson has commented specifically on the managerial and commissioning support for comedy in the 90s and cites figures such as David Liddiment, Paul Jackson, Jon Plowman Geoffrey Perkins and BBC2 Controller, Michael Jackson as crucial and influential figures in the development of British comedy on television at the time. “Because the BBC was making so much good comedy,” argues Higson, “it challenged Channel 4 to compete. So, there was a good creative competition going on between the two broadcasters, which led to many great comedy shows - Alan Partridge, Vic and Bob, *Blackadder*, Chris Morris's stuff, *Father Ted*, *Spaced*, *Red Dwarf*, *The Royle Family*... Unfortunately, when Michael Jackson left BBC Two it took a shift away from comedy towards lifestyle.” (Higson, 2023).

The future of magazines about comedy

There has not been a monthly, quarterly or annual publication about comedy since *Comedy Review* and it may be that these innovations are now artefacts of their time, preserved in comedy aspic, and that another such magazine will never appear. According to David Davies, there would be little likelihood of a *Deadpan*-style revival. “I am sadly of the view that magazines are dead,” Davies has remarked, “killed by Steve Jobs. Would I do it again? No. It was great and I am glad we did it. But not again now. I remain disappointed we couldn’t get it to work. I suspect there was a way to get it to work then - and maybe more so when the internet first arrived. But now I doubt it. I suspect the hard truth is that people’s interest in comedy is very specific to the comedians they like, rather than comedy in general. Which means Chris Rock’s social media account is going to be much more valuable than a UK magazine about the live comedy scene.” (Davies, email interview, 2022).

According to Danny Wallace, such magazines about comedy now would have to be on-line “for the simple reason that there’s just so much more content. There are so many more comics. There is so much more material. There is so much more news. I worked for a while, when I was a student, for BBC Online’s comedy site, and while I loved it, I had to come up with three comedy stories a day, complete with original quotes. That was hard. There’s only so many times in a week you can call up Lily Savage’s agent and ask whether the story in *The Daily Star* about them getting a new dog or they’ve repainted their kitchen or whatever is true. Now there’s proper news, real stories, and a wealth of video to go along with it all, so a print mag might end up being a star interview, tour dates, and a bunch of out-of-date news.” (Wallace, email interview, 2023).

That the internet has taken over the function previously undertaken by magazines such as *Deadpan* and *Comedy Review* is probably, to some extent, exemplified by the development of online UK sites such as Chortle, ‘fan’ fora such as Cookd and Bombd and even general, international sites such as Twitter/X. Perhaps presciently, the last line of copy in the last issue of *Deadpan* was appended to its regular back page questionnaire. It asked “Next month: Can you read?”. The answer, sadly, was no.

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Author bio

Dr G Neil Martin is Honorary Professor of Psychology and former Head of the Psychology Department at Regent's University London. He is Life Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts and the author of over 13 books including the UK's market-leading introductory text, *Psychology* (Pearson Education) now in its 7th edition, and *The Psychology of Comedy* (Routledge). He was Secretary of the British Psychophysiology Society, Associate Editor of *The Psychologist*, Assistant Editor of *Deadpan*, an editorial board member of the *Annals of Improbable Research*, the organisation which awards the annual IgNobel prizes, and is Consulting Editor of the APA's *Teaching of Psychology*. His research areas include comedy, horror, smell and taste, and the brain. He has written over 150 academic and popular articles on psychology, including journalism for *The Observer*, *The Times*, *Restaurant Magazine*, *Infinity*, *The Sunday Telegraph*, and *THES*. He acts as consultant to business and the media on topics related to the psychology of humour, smell and taste. He has given invited lectures and talks to the Royal Institution, the RSA, LUSH, the International Society of Humour Studies and the Recreational Fear Laboratory at Aarhus University, amongst others.

Figure 1. The front covers of the first issues of *Deadpan*, *Comedy* and *Comedy Review*



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