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The Difference between American and British Humour

It's often dangerous to generalize, but under threat, I would say that Americans are more "down the line." They don't hide their hopes and fears. They applaud ambition and openly reward success. Brits are more comfortable with life's losers. We embrace the underdog until it's no longer the underdog. We like to bring authority down a peg or two. Just for the hell of it. Americans say, "have a nice day" whether they mean it or not. Brits are terrified to say this. We tell ourselves it's because we don't want to sound insincere but I think it might be for the opposite reason. We don't want to celebrate anything too soon. Failure and disappointment lurk around every corner. This is due to our upbringing. Americans are brought up to believe they can be the next president of the United States. Brits are told, "It won't happen for you."

There's a received wisdom in the U.K. that Americans don't get irony. This is of course not true. But what is true is that they don't use it all the time. It shows up in the smarter comedies but Americans don't use it as much socially as Brits. We use it as liberally as prepositions in every day speech. We tease our friends. We use sarcasm as a shield and a weapon. We avoid sincerity until it's absolutely necessary. We mercilessly take the piss out of people we like or dislike basically. And ourselves. This is very important. Our brashness and swagger is laden with equal portions of self-deprecation. This is our license to hand it out.

This can sometimes be perceived as nasty if the recipients aren't used to it. It isn't. It's play fighting. It's almost a sign of affection if we like you, and ego bursting if we don't. You just have to know which one it is.

I guess the biggest difference between the U.S. version and the U.K. version of *The Office* reflected this. We had to make Michael Scott a slightly nicer guy, with a rosier outlook to life. He could still be childish, and insecure, and even a bore, but he couldn't be too mean. The irony is of course that I think David Brent's dark descension and eventual redemption made him all the more compelling. But I think that's a lot more palatable in Britain for the reasons already stated. Brits almost expect doom and gloom so to start off that way but then have a happy ending is an unexpected joy. Network America has to give people a reason to like you not just a reason to watch you. In Britain we stop watching things like *Big Brother* when the villain is evicted. We don't want to watch a bunch of idiots having a good time. We want them to be as miserable as us. America rewards up front, on-your-sleeve niceness. A perceived wicked streak is somewhat frowned upon. Recently I have been accused of being a shock comic, and cruel and cynical. This is of course almost solely due to a few comments I made as host of last year's Golden Globes. But nothing could be further from the truth.

I never actively try to offend. That's churlish, pointless and frankly too easy. But I believe you should say what you mean. Be honest. No one should ever be offended by truth. That way

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you'll never have to apologize. I hate it when a comedian says, "Sorry for what I said." You shouldn't say it if you didn't mean it and you should never regret anything you meant to do. As a comedian, I think my job isn't just to make people laugh but also make them think. As a famous comedian, I also want a strict door policy on my club. Not everyone will like what I say or find it funny. And I wouldn't have it any other way. There are enough comedians who try to please everyone as it is. Good luck to them, but that's not my game, I'm afraid.

Ricky Gervais, published in *Time*