

# Web site study is a laughing matter

By Andrea Widener  
TIMES STAFF WRITER

Have you heard the one about a priest and a rabbi who were surfing the Net?

They both stumbled upon the same Web site, created by a UC-Berkeley professor attempting to answer a question that has confounded comedians for centuries: What makes people laugh?

Ken Goldberg and his computer science students have created a program called Jester 2.0 to predict which jokes drag a giggle from a priest, a rabbi or anyone else.

By trying to use science to explore humor, the researchers are tackling a topic as hard to nail down as a carefully timed punch line, researchers say.

"Deciding what's funny is a complex process," said Barney Beins, a psychology professor who studies jokes at Ithaca College in New York.

The program, Jester 2.0, works on the theory that people who like the same jokes will find the same ones funny in the future, Goldberg said.

Readers rank a series of 15 jokes on sliding scale from "not funny" to "very funny." The computer will then find a sense-of-humor match, someone who liked the same jokes that you did.

Maybe you liked this one:

"May I take your order?" the waiter asked.

"Yes, how do you prepare your chickens?"

"Nothing special, sir," he replied. "We just tell them straight out that they're going to die."

But you didn't think this was funny at all:

A mechanical engineer, an electrical engineer and a software engineer from Microsoft were driving through the desert when the car broke down.

The mechanical engineer said, "It seems to be a problem with the fuel injection system. Why don't we pop the

## JOKE PREDICTOR

Jester 2.0, UC-Berkeley professor Ken Goldberg's humor-tracking Web site, can be found at:  
<http://shadow.ieor.berkeley.edu/humor/>

hood and I'll take a look at it?"

To which the electrical engineer replied, "No I think it's just a loose ground wire. I'll get out and take a look."

Then, the Microsoft engineer jumps in. "No, no, no. If we just close up all the windows, get out, wait a few minutes, get back in and then reopen the windows everything will work fine."

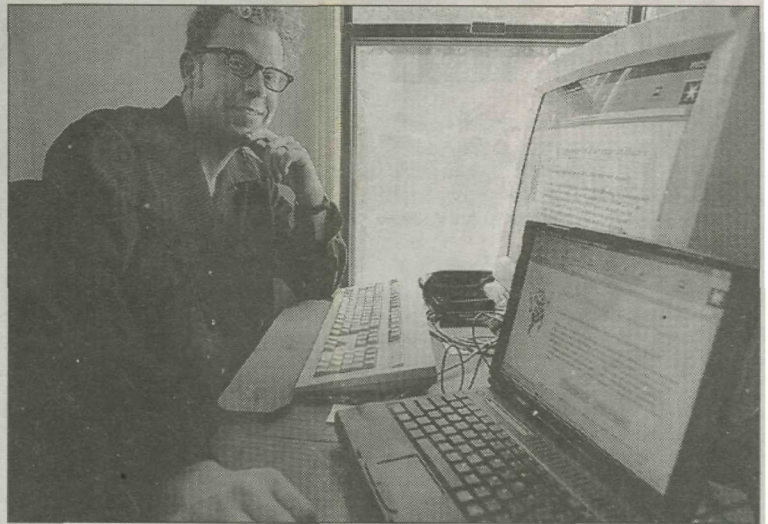
Then the computer will send you jokes based on what your "match" liked.

"It really doesn't consider what the person's sense of humor is," Goldberg said. "It's really just a matter of trying to identify patterns."

Jester 2.0 is similar to the program that helps Amazon.com recommend books or videos you might like based on what other people have bought. "But to our knowledge, no one has applied it to jokes," Goldberg said.

The more people who try Jester 2.0, the more likely a person will find a sense of humor match. Since the program began, nearly 10,000 people have registered their joke preferences on the site.

Though the computer challenge was obviously daunting, Goldberg said the most terrific task was sorting



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**UC-BERKELEY** computer science professor Ken Goldberg displays his class's program that tries to assess humor.

through thousands of jokes to find 100 that were "short and relatively clean." Even after their careful sorting, many of the jokes still deal with potentially sensitive issues, which warranted a warning on the site's registration page.

"It turns out that most jokes are about sex or ethnicity or gender," Goldberg said.

That's mostly because jokes induce a giggle only because they draw on people's experiences and current social trends, said Mel Helitzer, an Ohio University journalism professor and author of "Comedy Writing Secrets."

"For the most part, jokes have a target," Helitzer said. "They are actually socially acceptable criticism."

Women taunt men. People of one ethnicity target another. IBM users mock Macintosh owners.

Goldberg said he was most surprised that people's sense of what's funny varies so widely.

But that's what comedians have been trying to overcome for years. They know the same joke can draw anything from a giggle to a chortle to silence, depending on one's sense of

humor.

"There is no way you can predict a universal joke," Helitzer said.

Even among fairly consistent audiences, the response to a joke can vary depending on the time of day, your mood, whom you're with, even the weather.

Though Jester 2.0 won't necessarily resolve this divide, it might give psychologists some insight into the joking process.

"You know what you think is funny, but it is very hard to characterize," Goldberg said. "If you get it down to one in three jokes that is funny then you're doing pretty well."

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