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The glocalization and management of professional basketball leagues: the Euroleague, National Basketball League of Australia and bj-league of Japan

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This study examines aspects of globalization and glocalization in three professional basketball leagues (the Euroleague, Australia's National Basketball League and Japan's bj-league) and considers the differences in basketball culture between Europe, Australia, Japan and the USA. Qualitative interviews were used to access the perspectives of representatives of the three professional leagues. The study adopts World-systems theory as its theoretical framework. The informants agreed that basketball has experienced globalization and indicated that the global broadcasting of US National Basketball Association (NBA) games has facilitated this. In addition, Japanese teams have developed their own promotional styles based on local traditions; this is evidence of glocalization in the bj-league. It was indicated that the Euroleague style of basketball is more team-oriented than that of the NBA. On the other hand, the style of play in Australia's NBL consists of a mix of US college basketball, the NBA and European basketball.

Keywords: globalization; glocalization; professional basketball; sport management

Introduction

The USA men's team, popularly known as the 'Dream Team' and composed of famous National Basketball Association (NBA) players such as Earvin 'Magic' Johnson and Michael Jordan, won the gold medal at the Barcelona Olympics in 1992. The team's impressive performances stunned basketball players and observers across the globe. After these Olympics, NBA games began to be broadcast outside North America, creating a basketball boom in some countries, such as Japan and Australia, during the 1990s. New professional basketball leagues were established in various countries. But to what extent, and in what ways, were these leagues influenced by NBA games? Furthermore, how far did they reflect an example of globalization, namely the impact of the NBA on basketball worldwide?

Various researchers have traced the globalization of basketball since the late 1990s (Andrews, 1996, 1997; Falcous & Maguire, 2005; Chiba, 2012). For example, Chiba (2012) investigated the increase in the number of foreign-born players playing in the NBA and clarified the global marketing strategy implemented by the NBA since the 1980s. David Stern, a former NBA commissioner, improved NBA teams' management and also guided the development of this global strategy, which included holding exhibitions or official NBA games in Europe, Japan and China from the late 1980s.

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The basketball boom occurred in Japan during the 1980s and 1990s, as the number of basketball players increased from some 400,000 in 1980 to a million in 1995.¹ Demachi (2003) observes that the popularity of the NBA and of the comic ‘Slam Dunk’, a popular cartoon in which high-school students grow up playing basketball,² was the primary reason for this increase in the number of basketball players. This Japanese cartoon was influenced by the NBA and was broadcasted in 15 countries including South Korea, Taiwan, the Philippines and Italy. This phenomenon is an example of the glocalization of basketball culture – in this case, the integration of American and Japanese cultures.

What is ‘glocalization’? Giulianotti and Robertson (2007, p. 134) offer definitions of the term in their study of North American supporters of two Scottish football clubs:

The word glocalization derives from the Japanese term *dochakuka*, meaning ‘global localization’ or, in micro-marketing terms, the tailoring of global products and services to suit particular cultural tastes. (Robertson, 1992, pp. 173–174)

Sociological usage of glocalization highlights the simultaneity or *co-presence* of both universalizing and particularizing tendencies in globalization; that is, the commonly interconnected process of homogenization and heterogenization. (Robertson, 1994; Robertson & White, 2005)

Giulianotti and Robertson (2007) suggest ‘a four-fold typology of glocalization projects, with reference to relativization, accommodation, hybridization and transformation’ to classify types of Scottish football supporters in North America. Furthermore, they proposed the notion of ‘duality of glocality’ when reviewing the literature on the glocalization of sports in Asia (Giulianotti & Robertson, 2012). After criticizing other interpretations of glocalization suggested by Ritzer (2004) and Connell (2007), they presented their own understanding of glocalization in the following manner:

Glocalization is not an abstract or static category, but is instead a dynamic social process that is of particular sociological interest when examined in operation. In our analysis, glocalization captures the complex interplay, and mutually implicative interrelationships, between the local and the global, the particular and the universal. The ‘duality of globality’ means that glocalization is a dichotomous process, in terms of registering trends toward both social convergence or homogenization *and* social divergence or heterogenization. (Giulianotti & Robertson, 2012, p. 448)

This study adopts Giulianotti and Robertson’s definition of glocalization and applies it to the case of professional basketball. It focuses on the ‘glocalization’ of basketball in the Euroleague, Australia’s National Basketball League (NBL) and Japan’s bj-league. The Euroleague and the NBL are transnational basketball leagues. On the other hand, the bj-league, founded in 2005, has sought to provide professional sports entertainment with a consciously glocal or community-based focus, meaning that the teams in the league seek to contribute to community development through the business of basketball and to produce elite Japanese players potentially capable of competing even in the NBA. In other words, the bj-league has sought to facilitate the glocalization of each member team since the league’s establishment.

The purpose of this study is to clarify (1) characteristics of globalization and glocalization in the three professional basketball leagues, (2) the differences in basketball

culture between Europe, Australia, Japan and the USA and (3) the management styles of these leagues.

Methods

Interviews were conducted with Jordi Bertomeu (President and CEO of Euroleague Basketball) in March 2009, Chuck Harmison (General Manager of the NBL) in February 2010 and Toshimitsu Kawachi (Commissioner of the bj-league) in March 2011. Each interview lasted for one hour. The study sought to understand the characteristics of globalization and glocalization in the three professional leagues through applying the framework of symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969). According to this theoretical framework, the researcher relies on the meaning of interviewees' observations to explain their actions and ideas. With this in mind, I sought to investigate the interviewees' opinions and interpretations. The interviews covered the history, development, management, globalization and glocalization of professional basketball leagues as well as the cultural differences between leagues.

World-systems theory and sports studies

This study applies World-systems theory, developed by Immanuel Wallerstein (2004), to interpret the structure of global basketball and to interpret the structure of the global migration of basketball players.³ Magee and Sugden (2002) interpreted the structure of soccer migration using the concepts of centre and periphery, based on World-systems theory. They classified Europe as centre, South and Central America as semi-periphery, Africa as periphery and Asia and North America as external world in terms of the political economy of soccer, the history of the sport's diffusion and player migration (Magee and Sugden, 2002, p. 428). While soccer spread gradually from Europe to the rest of the world, elite professional players tended to migrate to European countries such as England, Spain and Italy. World-systems theory holds particular appeal because it can contribute to the understanding of power relationships among sporting leagues and the structure of overseas player migrations across regions.

Figure 1 illustrates the power relationships between centre and periphery in the world of basketball and the tendencies of professional player migrations. In line with Magee and Sugden (2002), the figure shows North America at the centre, Europe as semi-periphery, Central and South America and Africa as periphery and Asia and Oceania as part of the external world. While elite basketball players aim to play in the NBA (in-migration), American players who cannot sign with NBA teams move to Europe, Asia, South America and Oceania (out-migration).

The development and problems of Euroleague basketball

The Euroleague was established by the International Basketball Federation (FIBA) in 1958. FIBA managed the Euroleague until 2000, at which time the Union of European Leagues of Basketball (UELB) formed Euroleague Basketball, which comprised 24 clubs from 12 European countries.⁴ Only the top clubs in domestic leagues can participate in this competition. Attendance at games in this league averages about 5000. The Euroleague does not regulate a quota system for foreign players or salary caps for each team because of the different taxation laws and rules in each country.

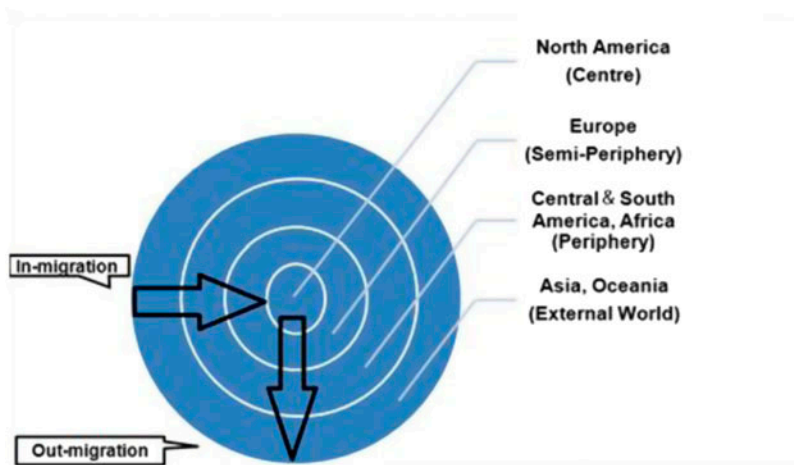


Figure 1. Structure of global basketball and flows of transnational basketball migrants according to the World-systems theory.

How then is the Euroleague influenced by globalization and glocalization? Jordi Bertomeu, President and CEO of Euroleague Basketball, agreed strongly that basketball is becoming a global sport:

Since we have players from everywhere, the NBA did a great job bringing basketball to this level because they have more than 80 international players. Today the game is much more global. A few years ago, basketball did not exist in China. Today it is the most important sport in this huge country. ... So it's becoming more and more global since we opened all the doors, we opened all the borders, so I think it's good. And then on the other side we have the television games, television broadcasts our game almost everywhere. We are in 201 countries and territories and the NBA is in more than 250 countries, which means that this is becoming global.

Bertomeu indicated that basketball is becoming global because of the increased number of foreign-born players in the NBA and because of television broadcasting of NBA and Euroleague games. However, when questioned about the world structure of basketball (as depicted in Figure 1, which originally placed South America in the semi-periphery), Bertomeu described the role of South American players in the following manner:

I think South America is more close to the third ring than the second maybe. The typical way of the South American players is that they first come to Europe and then from Europe they jump to the NBA. That's more or less the tradition of almost all the South American players in the NBA. ... You have examples such as Ginobili, Nocioni, Oberto, we have plenty of examples, players who first came to Europe and then they jumped to, Scola, many NBA players follow this path.⁵

The location of South America in Figure 1 was modified from semi-periphery to periphery in accordance with Bertomeu's indication, as some South American players utilized the Euroleague as a stepping-stone before moving to the NBA.

When asked what the biggest challenge is in relation to managing a transnational professional basketball league, Bertomeu stated the following:

It is important to understand that there are many different cultures, because people from Spain are not the same as people from Germany or people from Austria or Russia or Israel. So, you have to understand all these countries and all these cultures – how these people used to run the teams, how they approach different aspects of the business. And that is the more challenging situation, to understand each particular country and to give the prototypes to each one.

As the Euroleague is composed of 24 teams from 12 countries, it is difficult to understand the different cultures of basketball in each individual country.

However, when asked about the overall difference in the style of basketball between the NBA and the Euroleague, Bertomeu explained:

It's a different game. ... This is more sport than show. So we have both as they have both. But here it's more about the sport, winning and losing games. That is more spectacular. ... It's much more technical. It's much more a team game. That is the most important difference between European basketball and the NBA. Our game is much more a team game. It's not based on the one-on-one style of the players.

Bertomeu emphasized that the Euroleague's games are much more team-oriented than NBA games. For example, NBA rules restricted the use of the zone defence until the 2001–2002 season to preserve the high performance of star players who specialized in one-on-one styles of play. When asked to describe further the differences in playing style between the NBA and the Euroleague, Bertomeu answered:

I think it's always based on the same. So, in Europe the players are more disciplined, they follow the instructions of the coach much more closely than in the NBA. Here the coach is very important. In the NBA, there are some players that – they run the game. They are the ones who decide everything about the game. So, this is the concept of the NBA game. They are based on one or two players. It's not our style. We have ... teams and we have clubs. Some of the clubs are 100 years old. So, then the player is never more important than the club. In the NBA it's different. So, Michael Jordan is much more important than the Chicago Bulls, but if Michael Jordan plays in Europe for Real Madrid – Real Madrid is a 100-year-old institution, so Real Madrid will be always much more important. It's a question of culture.

Bertomeu argued that star players such as Michael Jordan are more important than teams in the NBA. On the other hand, clubs with histories of up to 100 years are more important than players in the Euroleague. Thus, culture is an important part of managing a team in Europe.

The next consideration was how Euroleague teams are managed. Bertomeu explained that there are three types of basketball teams: (1) teams supported by soccer clubs such as FC Barcelona and Real Madrid, (2) teams supported by corporations such as Laboral Kutxa Vitoria⁶ and (3) teams supported by rich owners (e.g. Panathinaikos and CSKA Moscow). Each team has a different budget for players. When asked about the disparity in player potential among teams, Bertomeu replied:

Well, the truth is that the teams that have been investing or spending money on players, like CSKA Moscow and Panathinaikos, have more chance to win. But at the same time we have teams like Laboral Kutxa Vitoria, which has spent half of what Panathinaikos is spending and has many more finals appearances compared to Panathinaikos. So, with less money they can make a very competitive team. So, it is not always about money. So, for example, Real Madrid and Barcelona – those teams in Spain have a higher budget because football gives money to basketball. ... Having more money doesn't mean that you are going to win.

Bertomeu indicated that while rich teams have advantages, they do not always win the championship in the Euroleague or the National league. When asked about the revenues of the Euroleague, Bertomeu explained that ‘We have our program of sponsorship and then we run the television rights of the Euroleague games and also our events’. Those are the three main sources of income: the events, sponsorship, and television rights revenues.

At the time of the interview, the Euroleague’s budget consisted of television revenues (61%), sponsorship (22%) and events and others (17%). Furthermore, while clubs receive 70% of the television broadcasting fees, the rest of the revenues are allocated to sports prizes and a minimum fee for each team, and to cover all operational expenses of the organization.

The development and challenges of Australia’s NBL

The NBL was established in 1979 as an amateur league in Australia. As it gained popularity in the 1980s, it developed into a professional league and a private ownership system was adopted. At its peak, in 1984, the NBL had expanded to 17 teams; by 2009, the number of teams had fallen to eight. In the 2014–2015 season, the NBL consisted of seven Australian teams and the New Zealand Breakers.

NBL general manager Chuck Harmison agreed that basketball is becoming a global sport and explained the reasons for this growth as the following:

There are so many kids in every country who are playing the sport now. When I was growing up in the 70s and the 80s, other countries didn’t play basketball. They played soccer. But I think as television has gotten into every corner of the globe, the NBA has spread the message, [and] lots of kids in every country are playing basketball.

Harmison understood that children around the world started playing basketball after watching NBA games on television around 1990. Furthermore, he evidenced as another example of globalization that the New Zealand Breakers now belong to the NBL.⁷ When asked about the cultural characteristics of the League, Harmison responded:

We have a cross between US college basketball and the NBA with a little bit of European style. It’s a mix of everything. Somebody once described this as the best 6’8” and under league in the world. We don’t have good, really big players. ... Very fast, the game moves up and down the court very fast. Not like the NBA where it’s one pass, shoot, one pass, shoot, and much more ball work. We look more like Europe but not as big as Europe, not as physical as Europe.

Harmison also described the influence of NBA players on Australian basketball:

The shorts, the ball handling, the dunks are very much influenced by that, and that’s a challenge for us because that’s not the style we want to see. It’s not the style that our national team wants to see, but it’s what the kids watch on television a lot. So, they see it, they want to play like that. So, the coaches have a real challenge to bring them back and focus them on the good techniques.

We can see from Harmison’s comments that young talents in other countries tend to imitate the acrobatic style of NBA players and seem to be influenced by individualistic, one-on-one styles of play after watching NBA games. This is an effect of globalization in the world of basketball, disseminated through the spread of NBA broadcasting.

When asked about the economic development of the NBL, Harmison explained the economic structure of the league and of each team:

Economically, we struggle a little bit. We can't attract as many sponsors as we need. We don't get as much revenue from our television broadcast partner as we need. But it is still a very good basketball product. In the early days, most of the teams were run by volunteers. They'd come out of the club structure, so they weren't privately owned. Now all the teams are privately owned except for Wollongong. ... They are kind of a community-based team. So, the people in the community have donated money really to help keep them going. Kind of like the Green Bay Packers in American football. They don't really have an owner. The town owns them, which is an interesting model. But the rest of the teams are all owned by one man or group of men.

The financial situation of some NBL teams is not good due largely to the limited amount of sponsorship. With the exception of the Wollongong Hawks, all the teams are run by wealthy owners. However, Harmison commented further on these team owners:

They don't focus on profitability. They are more focused on winning and losing. So, if a coach says, spend this much more money and I will win, but they are only bringing in this much money, the owner of the sports business will say, okay, I will spend that much money, I am happy to lose it. But in his real business he wouldn't think that way. If he can't make money in his real business, he is not going to be in business. But in sports, these owners are willing to lose money in order to win because I think the egos get in the way. That's a big challenge, I think, for all sports because you might have an owner that's happy to lose money for five years. But sooner or later they get tired of losing money. That's when the team falls over, that's when the league becomes not so popular.

NBL owners seem to regard operating a basketball team as a hobby or a gamble rather than a business. Thus, they tend to make uneconomic decisions even though they would never invest money in unprofitable ventures when operating their for-profit businesses. David Stern, former commissioner of the NBA, similarly commented on challenges facing owners in the league (Chiba, 2012).

The development and problems of the bj-league

The Japanese Basketball League (JBL) was founded in 1967 as a semi-professional league. Teams were supported by Japanese corporations such as the Toyota motor company and Panasonic, which used the teams to promote their brands. These corporations made no direct profit from elite basketball competitions and, in fact, subsidized the teams with annual contributions of US \$3.75 to \$6.25 million to cover, amongst other things, players' salaries and travelling expenses.⁸

The Japan Basketball Association (JBA) drew up plans to develop a professional league in 1995 and again in 2004. However, this was not possible because of objections from certain corporate teams in the JBL (Harada, 2009), some of which also ran professional soccer teams in the J League that operated with financial deficits. Consequently, these corporations were reluctant to also run professional basketball teams.⁹ As a result, two teams withdrew from the JBL and, in 2005, formed the first professional basketball league in Japan – the 'bj-league' – which consisted of six teams during its first season. Thereafter, the number of teams gradually increased, reaching 22 as of the 2014–2015 season. On the other hand, the JBL was reorganized to become the National Basketball League (NBL), which consisted of five corporate teams and seven professional teams

during the 2013–2014 season. Thus, there are now two elite basketball leagues in Japan.

When asked about the integration of the two elite basketball leagues in 2013, Toshimitsu Kawachi, commissioner of the bj-league, answered that it would be difficult if corporate teams in the JBL did not become professional. However, he also indicated that there might be friendly matches and a championship series between the two leagues in future. Kawachi added that the bj-league planned to expand to 24 teams. Moreover, following expansion, the possibility of the bj-league changing from two conferences to several divisions, as the J League has done,¹⁰ would be examined.

FIBA asked the JBA to have the NBL merge with the bj-league by October 2014. However, the JBA could not establish a single Japanese league by that date because of restrictions related to the names of the corporate teams and the professionalization of each team. The bj-league argued that each of its teams is professional and excludes the option of having teams named after corporations. On the other hand, corporate teams in the NBL object to this bj-league policy, because big businesses such as Toyota want to continue supporting corporate teams to advertise their brand. As a result, FIBA inflicted indefinite qualification suspension of the JBA licence because there were two elite men's basketball leagues in November 2014. All officers of the JBA were resigned en masse and Saburo Kawabuchi (former chairman of the J League) took office as chairman, supported by the FIBA. It was decided that NBL of Japan and the bj-league would integrate in one professional league from October 2016.

When asked why the number of teams in the bj-league increased so rapidly (from six in the 2005–2006 season to 16 as of 2011–2012), Kawachi explained that the management costs of bj-league teams were relatively low compared with those in professional baseball and the J League. Annual costs were about US\$1.5 million to US\$3 million. Furthermore, Kawachi noted that the bj-league had imitated the community-based business model developed by the J League and the centralization of power practised by American professional leagues such as the NBA and Major League Baseball. For example, each team has a hometown and competes in home and away games. The league has adopted a salary cap system. It negotiates with sponsors and sells television broadcasting rights, distributing the earnings to each team. Since the Japanese economy was depressed when the bj-league was established in 2005, it was difficult to attract big businesses such as Panasonic as corporate owners. However, each team was able to pursue local sponsors that had gained from the information technology revolution.

When asked about the economic situation of bj-league teams, Kawachi indicated that 10 of the 16 teams were profitable as of March 2011. While local teams such as Akita and Okinawa made profits, teams located in large cities such as Tokyo and Osaka were losing money, mainly due to expensive arena rental fees. It is relatively easy and cheap to use public gymnasiums in small towns because of the lesser frequency of entertainment events. On the other hand, the Tokyo Apache team's games took place on Wednesday and Thursday nights because of overcrowding of other events at weekends. Public gymnasiums are constructed by municipalities and the Japanese government for competitive and lifelong sports activities. In many cases, they are managed by Japan's 'third sector' (a business venture jointly financed by the public and private sectors). Thus, the capacity of local gymnasiums is often no more than 1000 spectators. On the other hand, professional teams in the bj-league need arenas that can attract 3000 fans. For example, Xebio Arena Sendai was constructed as a multipurpose arena with 4009 seats and managed by the Sendai 89ers in the designated administrator system. Kawachi

indicated that it is difficult for indoor professional teams to make a profit in cities that do not have arenas like Xebio Arena Sendai.

When established in 2005, the bj-league emphasized three objectives: to be professional, to provide sports entertainment, and to be both glocal and community-based. When asked what it meant to be glocal and community-based, Kawachi stated that teams had to become active in their own communities, first as professional basketball businesses and then by fostering the development of elite players who could compete internationally in Asia and even in the NBA. Kawachi added that he considered each team's 26 home games to be like local festivals for the team and its fans. Traditionally, there are local festivals in each Japanese town and village, and many residents of big cities such as Tokyo return to their hometowns to visit their family members' graves and participate in these Bon festivals around mid-August. Kawachi hopes that bj-league teams' home games can become similar events.

Each team has its own ways of attracting interest. For example, Osaka Evessa invites local comedians¹¹ to perform during the half-time show. The Ryukyu Golden Kings use BGM, including music played on a three-stringed Japanese banjo, before games. The bj-league encourages each team to develop its own promotional style based on local traditions, consistent with the league's philosophy of being glocal and community-based.

Conclusion

Representatives of the three professional leagues agreed that basketball has experienced globalization and indicated that the global broadcasting of NBA games facilitated this phenomenon. We can see evidence of this globalization in the foundation of the Euroleague and in the participation of the New Zealand Breakers in Australia's NBL. Young talent worldwide is inspired by the acrobatic style of NBA stars and influenced by the individual style of play that is observed in NBA games – a direct effect of the globalization of basketball through NBA broadcasting.

Furthermore, the three leagues have imitated NBA games in including other forms of entertainment, such as half-time shows and dance performances by young women. However, Japanese teams have also developed their own promotional and entertainment styles based on local traditions. This is an apparent instance of glocalization in the bj-league. Finally, Euroleague games are much more team-oriented in style than NBA games. On the other hand, the playing style in Australia's NBL is a mix of US college basketball, the NBA and European basketball.

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Notes

1. The data are derived from documents of the Japan Basketball Association (JBA). After reaching the peak, the number of Japanese players decreased to 620,000 by 2007.
2. This comic was written by Takehiko Inoue and published serially in a magazine from 1990 to 1996. The 'Slam Dunk' books sold more than 140 million copies in Japan.
3. See Chiba (2012, pp. 146–7) for an explanation.
4. The 12 countries are Spain, Italy, Greece, Israel, Germany, Turkey, Poland, Russia, Croatia, France, Lithuania and Serbia.

5. These players from South America signed with NBA teams after playing for European teams. For example, the Argentine star Manu Ginobili played for Kinder Bologna (Italy) in the Euroleague for two seasons and then signed with the San Antonio Spurs in 2002. In addition, Andres Nocioni, Fabricio Oberto and Luis Scola are also Argentine and transferred to the NBA teams after playing for European clubs.
6. Laboral Kutxa Vitoria is the name of Saski-Baskonia, a professional basketball club from the Basque city of Vitoria-Gasteiz, Spain. Saski-Baskonia was called TAU Cerámica Baskonia (derived from the name of its Spanish sponsor company) until 2009.
7. Harmison also noted the participation of the Singapore Slingers in the NBL from 2006 to 2008. However, this team dropped out of the NBL because of high travel expenses.
8. *Nihon Keizai Shinbun*, evening edition, 2 August 2010.
9. *Asahi Shinbun*, 17 February 2011.
10. J League has three divisions from J1 to J3, which can replace teams according to ranking between divisions. On the other hand, bj-league has two conferences, which cannot replace teams according to ranking.
11. Osaka is called the 'holy place of comedy' and residents of Osaka attach high importance to the art of making people laugh.

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