

**“** When you've got a president tweeting much worse things than I say ironically, I can't push the boundaries enough. ... It is a challenge to be as arrogant and as stupid as the president of the United States, but I'm trying.”

**BY STEVEN MACKENZIE**  
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Ricky Gervais is sandwiched between Barack Obama and Bill Gates. Last year, Brandwatch named him the seventh most influential man on Twitter, keeping esteemed company alongside great figures of our time (but all trumped by some popstars, a soccer player and, well, Trump).

Gervais changed the way we looked and laughed at ourselves with “The Office” and has relentlessly continued to tease and provoke societal conventions that have led us to this bizarre point in human history. He regularly preaches a heady mix of politics, atheism and animal rights to his 13 million followers, walking the line between rudeness and righteous outrage. Speaking to Street Roots’ U.K. sister paper, The Big Issue, in his Hampstead office, he launches diatribes disrupted only by regular eruptions of guffaws and giggles. For every exclamation point in the following interview, imagine his howling hyena laugh.

March marked a massive milestone as his stand-up show “Humanity” debuted on Netflix, part of the biggest deal any network has ever paid a comedian. A new TV series will follow, and, who knows, maybe next year Gervais could climb even higher on the list of influential tweeters. As if he cares.

**Stephen MacKenzie:** With great Twitter influence comes great responsibility?

**Ricky Gervais:** Being the seventh most influential person on Twitter – I can't think of a terrible-enough metaphor. It's like saying you've got the seventh best fatal disease. Whether it was an award to be proud of or not, what's nice is having a platform. Everyone wants to think they're listened to. That's why some people are angry. That's what a troll is. That's what a heckler is. They're tired of people not listening to them. Cavemen used to blow paint over their hands on their cave wall to say, “I was here.” That's what everyone wants, to go, “I was here.” But to start taking myself seriously, I mean, to be put next to Barack Obama, that's embarrassing.

**S.M.:** You were above him in the list, so surely it's more embarrassing for him.

**R.G.:** But below Bieber! I think that says it all.

**S.M.:** How do you cope in a world where everyone says offensive things and is simultaneously so quick to take offense?

**R.G.:** I probably do go over the top a little bit with the faux arrogance. I don't know if it has the same impact since Trump. When you've got a president tweeting much worse things than I say ironically, I can't push the boundaries enough. People go, “Yeah that was quite offensive, but not as bad as the leader of the free world – and he means it!” It is a challenge to be as arrogant and as stupid as the president of the United States, but I'm trying.

**S.M.:** You have been very successful in multiple fields, but hasn't Trump proved that with ego and a certain way on Twitter, you could have ended up in a much higher office?

**R.G.:** I don't know if it was him. Looking back, I think it could have been anyone because of the swell of alt-right and hatred of liberals. It's like one of those '80s movies when a few billionaires get together: “I bet we can make America's biggest moron become president,” and someone says: “You're on, Hargreaves. See you in one year!” Somebody somewhere is trying to prove a point about humanity.

**S.M.:** Has humanity peaked?

**R.G.:** I don't know that we are on a downward slide. This is a blip. I think it'll be like scar tissue. Hopefully the world might learn a lesson from it. But ever since there was society, powerful people have confused and lied. And the basic lie is making the masses blame each other.

**S.M.:** Does a part of you enjoy offending people who don't get the joke?

**R.G.:** No, it gets in the way and muddies the issue. That's not what I'm trying to do. I don't need to court controversy. I usually explain my jokes. I actually want people to

know the point of a joke and what side I'm on. Because I'm proud of it. I don't go out willy-nilly to offend people then say, “Oh, it's just a joke.” I'm not one of these comedians who thinks comedy is conscience taking a day off. My conscience never takes a day off.

**S.M.:** Is it a defense mechanism for someone to be offended by a joke but to ignore the sometimes serious point of the joke?

**R.G.:** I remember Paul Hollywood was slammed in every paper for going to a fancy dress party as a Nazi. Right – bit clumsy, bit crass, bit boring. I tweeted, OK, enough now. There are actual Nazis marching on the street. Let's stop having a go at a Scouse baker. That sort of thing makes everything look trivial. You have to pick your battles. I'm a fan of political correctness, but it gets mugged and mistreated. However unpopular or however unpleasant something is, freedom of speech does trump everything, no pun intended. You have to be able to offend. You have the right to run around being a complete fucking arsehole, and everyone else has the right to call you an arsehole, but just because you can be an arsehole, you don't have to be. Sometimes I get lumped in. People see me tackling taboo subjects, like race, and they think that must be racist. Jokes about bad things aren't as

bad as the bad thing; they're not even condoning the bad thing; they could be anti the bad thing. But people get offended when they mistake the subject of the joke for the target, and they're not necessarily the same thing.

**S.M.:** Christians often aren't great fans of yours. If God really did exist, would the world be better?

**R.G.:** It might be if he was all he's cracked up to be. If he was a really omnipresent, all-powerful, loving God, then sure. It makes me laugh when people say, “God loves you and he gave you free will so you can worship him or go to hell.” To me that isn't free will! I'm happy with us being animals with however many years we've got, then our atoms return to the atmosphere, float around and get dispersed. We're all going to return to the stars that made us one day.

**S.M.:** Something to look forward to. You're also passionate about animal rights. Should hunting laws be changed so it's legal to hunt hunters?

**R.G.:** These rich American dentists who want to go kill something, let them sort out the poachers. I'm talking about cruel acts, not about people who cleanly shoot a

pheasant and eat it with their family. It's more the psychology of why people like to kill. Imagine if a vet paid you to put your cat down because he got off on it. And then said, “Do you mind if I take a selfie? Do you mind if I kill it with a bow and arrow today?” Blood sports, bull fighting. Why is someone torturing a bull in a ring for entertainment? Sometimes the bull is bled first so they're weak, their horns are blunted, their tendons cut.

**S.M.:** Does humanity have anything going for it?

**R.G.:** It's amazing. Being alive is amazing. Being alive is this multibillion-to-one shot. A little blob of proteinaceous spawn and after 3 and a half billion years of evolution, we've come to these amazing upright primates who invented art. We're here, and then we're gone. How arrogant to expect two helpings of that. People say, what's the point of life? What they mean is what's the point if it's going to be over soon. That makes no sense to me. You don't eat a lovely meal going, “Oh, there's no point in eating this because I'll be hungry again soon.” You're watching a film, go, “Oh, I might as well stop watching because it ends soon.” Enjoy it!

**S.M.:** Can you tell us about your next piece of art?

**R.G.:** The working title is “After Life.”

**S.M.:** Haven't we just decided the afterlife is not worth waiting for?

**R.G.:** It's after life. I play a guy whose wife has died. I'm devastated, and I nearly kill myself, but I think, well, if I'm going to live, I'm going to do what I want, say what I want from now on. And when it gets all too much, I can always end it. So it's like a superpower. But I can't wait to do another stand-up show. I could give everything else up.

**S.M.:** Is the desire to be on the road still there?

**R.G.:** You say “on the road.” I'm not in the back of a Transit van. It is the most luxurious tour invented. I pick my places and stay in castles, but I do it because I love every minute. I think art is making a connection with strangers. I've realized what an absolute privilege it is to say what I want to 10,000 people a night. I suppose that is my “I was here.”

Courtesy of INSP.ngo / The Big Issue UK  
bigissue.com @BigIssue



PHOTO BY REUTERS/PATRICK T. FALLON

# ‘I WAS HERE’

Ricky Gervais talks to street papers about his propensity to come up with the most offensive jokes, his new Netflix special ‘Humanity’, and why with great tweeting power comes great responsibility

## TWITTER'S MOST INFLUENTIAL IN '17

### Men

1. Justin Bieber @justinbieber
2. Donald Trump @realDonaldTrump
3. Justin Timberlake @jtimberlake
4. Cristiano Ronaldo @cristiano
5. Jimmy Fallon @jimmyfallon
6. Bill Gates @billgates
7. Ricky Gervais @rickygervais
8. Barack Obama @barackobama
9. Niall Horan @niallofficial
10. Narendra Modi @narendramodi

### Women

1. Katy Perry @katyperry
2. Shakira @shakira
3. Jennifer Lopez @jlo
4. Ellen Degeneres @theellenshow
5. Demi Lovato @ddlovato
6. Selena Gomez @selenagomez
7. Haruka Nakagawa @haruka\_nkgw10
8. Britney Spears @britneyspears
9. Oprah Winfrey @oprah
10. Alicia Keys @aliciakeys

Source: Brandwatch Audiences,  
www.brandwatch.com/blog/react-influential-men-and-women-2017/