

Book review*

Zekavat, Massih, and Tabea Scheel (2023). *Satire, Humour, and Environmental Crisis*. Routledge.

Environmental issues have become a concern not only for biologists, ecologists and other natural scientists but also for communication scholars and researchers in the fields of social sciences and the humanities. This is due to the fact that possible solutions to environmental crises are tightly connected with scholars', NGOs' and policy makers' ability to raise public awareness about these issues and inspire individuals and institutions to take action. Given that humour is popular – and often powerful – rhetorical tool, it is natural that it is worth investigating its use in environmental communication. The study by Zekavat and Scheel is a thorough attempt of such investigation as it combines both theoretical modelling and the analysis of particular humorous examples.

The authors adopt a clear stance towards environmental crises and point out right at the beginning of the Introduction that their research work “investigates the potentials of humour and satire to overcome the existing barriers that withhold citizens, corporations, and political elites from taking concrete, meaningful, and proportionate pro-environmental action” (p. 1). Zekavat and Scheel also argue that the full potential of humorous popular culture has not yet been utilised for the purpose of enhancing pro-environmental behaviour. In the Introduction to their book, they outline the basic principles and objectives of their approach, such as exploring human behaviour both on individual and collective levels, providing alternative to anthropocentrism, and taking social, ethnic, political, economic and other factors into account when investigating people's environmental behaviours and attitudes. The latter aspect is of crucial importance as it prompts adopting a broader perspective on environmentalism that goes beyond individual psychology. The authors also acknowledge that humour can be used for various purposes and does not necessarily promote pro-environmental attitudes and actions.

The second chapter titled “Theories, types, and functions of humour: A brief overview” is exactly what its name suggests: it provides a summary of the main concepts (humour, satire and comedy) and theories of humour. Some of these theories are later referred to in the analysis, while others are just introduced in this chapter to give a more comprehensive overview of humour research. This chapter might not contain a lot of new information for experienced humour scholars, but it is a good way to introduce the field to people from outside of it.

In the third chapter titled “Determinants of pro-environmental behaviour” the authors first briefly describe various psychological theories and models that help to analyse pro-environmental behaviour, such as the Theory of the Meaning of Material Possessions (Gatersleben & Steg, 2013), the Theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen, 1985, 1991), Norm-Activation Model (de Groot & Thøgersen, 2013), Value-Belief-Norm Theory (Steg & Nordlund,

* This book review was commissioned by the Book Review Editor of the *Australasian Humour Studies Network* (AHSN), in collaboration with *The European Journal of Humour Research*. For additional AHSN book reviews, please visit the Australasian Humour Studies Network webpage at <https://ahsnhumourstudies.org>.

2012, 2018), the Theory of Reasoned Goal Pursuit (Ajzen & Kruglanski, 2019), and the Focus Theory of Normative Conduct (Stok & Ridder, 2019). By comparing these theories, the authors distil their key components – namely “goals, values, beliefs, norms, attitudes, and (perceived) behavioural control” (p. 45) – that determine pro-environmental behaviour. Later they also provide an overview of the studies in the field of environmental communication and list positive examples of satire’s impact on people’s environmental behaviour alongside the risks that the use of satire entail. The chapter also includes the perspective of literary and cultural studies on the matter. After uncovering the so-far inconsistent research findings on the issues of persuasiveness of humour and its ability to bridge intention-action gap, the authors look more specifically into the ways humour and satire can make an impact on pro-environmental behaviour. They address both psychological determinants (such as emotional appeal as well as shame and ridicule) and social determinants of behaviour (such as community-building, priming and framing, agenda-setting and others), and illustrate how humorous – as opposed to serious and often even apocalyptic – environmental communication can make a difference and stimulate pro-environmental actions. The authors also mention that some aspects of environmental crises cannot be solved or restored anymore; however, humour is valuable also in these cases as it can be a coping mechanism that helps people to foster their resilience to such issues (p. 70).

Chapter 4 “A modular interdependency model for the potential impact of humour and satire on environmental behaviour” contains the major theoretical contribution of the authors. Based on the theories and approaches described earlier they create a Modular Interdependency Model (MIM) tailored to the analysis of environmental behaviour and the impact humour can have on it. The model consists of three modules: (1) psychological mechanisms, (2) ecosphere and biological factors, and (3) social determinants. It also includes the dimensions of individual, ecosphere and society; the latter has cultural, political and economic components. The authors describe each of the sub-models individually and show how they integrate the key determinants of environmental behaviour. They acknowledge that the relationship between people’s values, beliefs, norms and actions is far from straightforward as people often do things that do not correlate with their beliefs and values (p. 92). They also contend that modules overlap and differ in terms of their complexity, with social module encompassing so many variables that it might be difficult to incorporate all of them into the analysis. After discussing how humour and satire can be used to address one of the most pertinent issues in the environmental behaviour, namely the intention-action gap, the authors list the strengths and shortcomings of their model. At the end of the chapter, they also provide a concise list of ways humour can help the environmental behavioural change as well as the factors that can inhibit the use of humour (and the ways to mitigate these factors). While this part of the chapter is crucial and presents the information in a structured and clear way, it is based mostly on previous research and not on the MIM, so its placement at the end of chapter 4 appears a bit surprising.

Chapter 5 titled “Humorous and satiric environmental advocacy in popular culture” makes a leap from theory to practice and is dedicated mostly to the analysis of humorous examples that revolve around environmental topics. The authors note that this analysis is based on the descriptive potential of their model. As this analysis is qualitative and draws upon the methods of the humanities, they simultaneously reaffirm the importance of the humanities as a field that can meaningfully discuss important current issues. The examples discussed in this chapter are *The Simpsons*, *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver* and *New Yorker* cartoons. Zekavat and Scheel mostly focus on the content of the data they analyse, but they also consider the genres and media themselves, the position of humour creators and the potential audiences of these humorous messages. Moreover, they outline the ambiguous relationship these cultural productions bear to consumerism and capitalism – on the one hand, they mock them and blame them for environmental issues, but on the other hand, *The Simpsons*, and *New Yorker* make

profits by selling their merchandise, thus encouraging the same practices that they ridicule. The interpretation of the humorous examples within the MIM is insightful (although the explicit references to the model are not too frequent in the analytical part), but some of the conclusions on the possible impact of humour seem to be slightly too far-reaching: for example, the authors argue that “[i]n this way, they [i.e. the *New Yorker* cartoons] encourage their audience to take responsibility, and revisit their beliefs and lifestyles. These can in their turn lead to changing norms, intentions, and eventually behaviour” (p. 164) Such a change in behaviour after the exposure to cartoons can be regarded as a positive outcome, but without meticulous studies on the reception of environmental humour it is difficult to back such conclusions up.

Zekavat and Scheel, however, acknowledge the importance of studying the reception side of humorous communication and address this issue in chapter 6 on “Measuring the potential impacts of humour and satire on environmental behaviour”. In this chapter they refer to a number of earlier studies that intended to trace connections between humour and pro-environmental attitudes. These studies include both experiments and surveys; however, the evidence of the impact of humour on pro-environmental attitudes remains inconclusive. Therefore, the authors conclude that further research is needed to measure the impact, and propose a research design for the future studies. Among the core aspects of this research design is the necessity to measure “the use or perception of humour and the relation to subsequent pro-environmental behaviour ... independently” (p. 196). The authors also provide the mechanisms of measuring both of these variables.

The final chapter titled “Conclusion and implications” sums up the key ideas of the book in a concise manner. The authors once again underscore the potential of humorous communication to impact people in a way that serious communication cannot. They discuss the scholarly value of their model (which is based on interdisciplinarity and transdisciplinarity), but also point out that

the implications of MIM and humorous and satiric environmental communication can go well beyond the academic sphere. They can be employed to raise awareness, and facilitate systematic change by engaging citizens, maximising participation, and inclusion. For one, they proffer new strategies for scientists and public policymakers to reach out to and engage citizens (p. 221).

At the end of the book the authors suggest the directions for further research.

The book by Zekavat and Scheel is a valuable contribution to the field of humour studies as it gives a comprehensive overview of previous research on the relationship between humour and environmentalism, and also creates a theoretical model for further research on this topic. This book, therefore, should not be viewed as an end in itself, but rather as a crucial and solid stepping stone on the path for future investigations of the potential impact of humour on pro-environmental behaviour. These future studies should integrate not only the production but also reception side of humour in order to test the MIM’s validity.

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