Humour and the public sphere

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Abstract

In this article, which serves as an introduction to a special issue on humour and the public sphere, we argue that humour has become increasingly central to public discourse in the 21st century, and that this necessitates a rethinking of the relationship between humour and the public sphere in contemporary democracies. In the article, we bring together the dispersed academic literature on humour and the public sphere, and show how humour and comedy scholars have engaged with the long-standing academic debate around this contested concept, which was coined by Jürgen Habermas in 1962. We also introduce the eleven contributions to this special issue and situate them within this ongoing debate.

Keywords: public sphere, politics, democracy, Jürgen Habermas, reason.

1. Humour and the public sphere: rekindling the debate about humour and democracy in the 21st century

In 2010, American comedian Jon Stewart organised the Rally to Restore Sanity in Washington D.C. This satirical yet serious rally for political reason was attended by over 200,000 people, who often carried funny signs (Steffen and Gold, 2010). Stewart had been the host of the influential satirical news show *The Daily Show* since 1999, rising to international fame in the months preceding the American invasion of Iraq in 2003. From early on, Stewart presented himself as the voice of reason (cf. Holm, 2017, Chapter 2): a moderate, sensible voice in a media landscape full of fanatics and loudmouths intent on going to war, demonising political opponents, and twisting the truth to further their political agendas.

With this combination of quick wit and puzzled confusion, Stewart managed to make reason funny. The Rally to Restore Sanity illustrates his comic style. It was organised in conjunction with his close collaborator Stephen Colbert who, in his parody of a right-wing pundit, held a simultaneous "March to Keep Fear Alive". Organised during the first term of President Obama,

Stewart's rally was intended to speak to the "silent majority" of people who have no extreme political views:

> We're looking for the people who think shouting is annoying, counterproductive, and terrible for your throat; who feel that the loudest voices shouldn't be the only ones that get heard; and who believe that the only time it's appropriate to draw a Hitler moustache on someone is when that person is actually Hitler. Or Charlie Chaplin in certain roles. Are you one of those people? Excellent. Then we'd like you to join us in Washington, DC on October 30 – a date of no significance whatsoever – at the Daily Show's "Rally to Restore Sanity." Ours is a rally for the people who've been too busy to go to rallies, who actually have lives and families and jobs (or are looking for jobs) – not so much the Silent Majority as the Busy Majority. If we had to sum up the political view of our participants in a single sentence... we couldn't. That's sort of the point. Think of our event as Woodstock, but with the nudity and drugs replaced by respectful disagreement ('Rally,' 2010).

Throughout his invitations to the rally, Stewart stressed the importance of civil disagreement. One of the suggested slogans for the march, unveiled in the TV show, read: "I disagree with you, but I'm pretty sure you're not Hitler."

Stewart's rally echoes many of the democratic virtues touted by the German philosopher and sociologist Jürgen Habermas (2022 [1962]): reason, commitment to open communication, emotional abstinence, and respectful disagreement. However, in his famous formulation of the public sphere, Habermas had little time for humour. Humour is unserious, inconsistent, emotional, and often transgressive, mocking or even insulting. All these things do not sit well with the rational, impassionate exchange of ideas that Habermas saw as foundational to a healthy democracy.

Many, however, have argued that Habermas was too strict in his delineation of democratic discourse. Scholars and thinkers, but also citizens, comedians, and politicians have not only argued, but also shown that humour has a place in democratic discourse. Satire may serve as a much-needed humorous corrective of the powerful (Capelotti, 2024; Simpson, 2003). Humour can mobilise publics and raise awareness of political issues (Baumgartner, 2024). And, as Stewart showed, humour can be a form or reason, especially in a political culture where emotions reign. Thus, as Boukes et al. (2015) have put it, laughing and thinking are not necessarily at odds.

In the 21st century, humour has become increasingly central to public discourse, including topics and types of discourse that were traditionally often separated from humour as they were deemed 'serious', such as political speech, news coverage and journalism, and intellectual discourse. With the rise of the Internet and social media, public discourse has taken new shapes: emotional, humorous, visual, short, omnipresent, and easily shareable. In today's media democracies, many politicians have discovered humour as a way to connect with their publics and to present an authentic, personable self. Especially populist politicians prefer to use a humorous, provocative communication style. In the public arena, such provocative humour both reflects and fuels political and affective polarisation (Reiljan, 2020; cf. Koivukoski, 2022; Kuipers, 2025). Moreover, political polarisation is accelerated by a mostly anonymous online humour culture, especially on the populist right (the so-called "alt-right"). Here, the digitisation of humour intersects with increasing social and political tensions (Attardo 2023). While politicians are acting increasingly like comedians – or, as some have argued, like clowns – comedians have taken up the garb of politicians: across Europe and North America comedians have become influential political voices, with Jon Stewart, Stephen Colbert, John Oliver, and Trevor Noah as the best-known examples globally. Thus, as Nieuwenhuis and Zijp (2022) called it, humour has become repoliticised, which means that 'humour and comedy increasingly take part in the power struggle over who is included and excluded" in society' (p. 343).

As humour moved from a rather marginal to a more prominent position in public discourse, it also became more contested. Across liberal democracies, we see a rise in "humour scandals": public controversies about humour that some consider transgressive or offensive (Kuipers, 2011). Some of these controversies became global events, such as the Danish Cartoon Crisis of 2005-6 (Kuipers, 2011), or the bloody attacks on the French satirical newspaper *Charlie Hebdo* (Smyrnaios & Ratinaud, 2017). Many of the authors in this special issue, along with many other humour scholars, have presented short analyses of such humorous controversies on a website: humorinpublic.eu and humourinpublic.eu (Chiaro, Chlopicki & Kuipers, 2022). In this special issue, Ivo Nieuwenhuis, Dick Zijp, and Juha Herkman & Joonas Koivukoski offer more extended analyses of national humour scandals in the Netherlands and Finland. As these analyses show, humour controversies are common occurrences in Europe, across countries and political systems. On social media, smaller spats about humour occur almost daily. As we will see, this rise of humour-related controversies does not necessarily mean that people are more easily offended. Rather, outrage and indignation are important ways to rally and signal political allegiance. Provocative humour has become not only a form of entertainment, but also a marketing instrument and a political tool.

Public debate looks less and less like Habermas's original formulation of a rational public sphere populated by reasonable, dispassionate gentlemen. Humour is used by public actors with established and outsider positions, in political office and in various roles as citizen, professional commentator, or humourist. In many cases, this humour is nowhere near as reasonable and moderate as Stewart suggested. While this prominence of humour has attracted considerable attention in public debate, there has hardly been any systematic analysis of the role of humour in the public sphere, and its transformations in the first decades of the 21st century.

This special issue takes stock of the many roles and functions of humour in contemporary democracies, and in doing so, allows us to rethink the relation between humour and the public sphere today. We present empirical studies from Belarus, Belgium, Finland, Greece, Hungary, the Netherlands, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States, discussing a wide range of humorous forms, from memes and tweets to pies, protests and comedy performances. Each of these studies presents, first, an in-depth analysis of a specific instance of humour that is "political" in the wider sense of the word: related to the collective definition, discussion, and possible solution of public issues – processes which are always shaped by systems for the allocation of power and responsibility. Second, all these humour exchanges about public issues take place in an "in between" realm that is neither purely political nor private, and never shaped or defined by a single institution.

In all articles, we see that such issues of public concern are not always treated with rationality and equanimity. Public issues become public precisely because people care about them: they arouse emotions and are tinged with conflicts of interests, even conflicting understandings of truth and reality. The humorous nature of these exchanges is instrumental to making these issues present, visible, and salient to more people – thus bringing them out in this "public sphere" where they can be discussed – though not always rationally and deliberatively. All the cases presented in this special issue revolve around the same question, which is simultaneously empirical and conceptual: What is the place and role of humour in the public sphere? As with all discussions about the public sphere, the questions it raises are, ultimately, also normative and political: should there be a place for humour in the public sphere, and if so: what place? When, how, and under what circumstances does humour contribute to the functioning of democracy? When and how might humour actually be detrimental? And when this happens, what might we do?

2. The public sphere: the contested history of a political idea

The German sociologist and philosopher Jürgen Habermas coined the notion of the public sphere in 1962 to describe the arena for free public debate and discussion, neither part of the private sphere nor controlled by governments or economic interest, as it emerged in early modern Europe (Habermas, 2022 [1962]). In German, Habermas used the word *Öffentlichkeit*, which literally means "publicness". The English translation adds a spatial touch that has led people to think of the public sphere as a place – many explanations cite Viennese coffeehouses as the prime example of such a place. But the public sphere can also be thought of as a cultural form, a situation, a mindset, a mode of communication, a set of relations and conventions, even a form of etiquette. For Habermas, the public sphere in its ideal typical form is a situation/relation/moment of rational and open exchange of arguments that happens between free, equal citizens. As such, it is crucial to the emergence and functioning of democratic societies. In essence, his work is a warning against the many perils threatening an idealised state of a "healthy" democracy.

Despite its limitations – particularly its normative, some say, unrealistic or utopian character – the notion of "public sphere" has proven good to think with for people in a range of fields and disciplines, in academia but also in public debates on politics, citizenship, and public participation. The notion of a public sphere directs our attention to the fundamental question for democratic societies: what is needed to make everyone participate? What sort of conversations can we have, and do we need to have, to create and sustain a free and open society? What sort of institutions and cultural forms can support a free and inclusive society?

Habermas situated the rise of a bourgeois public sphere in early modern Britain and France. The material conditions for its emergence were the rise of a market society and a free press, enabling a transition from the "representative publicness" (Habermas, 2022, p. 5) of the late Middle Ages – mainly involving the visibility of the ruler to the people – to a new understanding of publicness as the domain where private citizens (the upcoming *bourgeois* class) assembled to discuss matters of common (public) concern. This first happened in a literary public sphere of reading circles, coffee houses, and periodicals. Soon, however, a political public sphere developed, which became an important domain for the enactment of popular sovereignty and the control of state power. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, the political public sphere helped to prepare the institutional framework for basic legal rights and parliamentary democracy (cf. Habermas, 1992). According to Habermas, the public sphere degenerated in the nineteenth and twentieth century due to its privatisation. First, and paradoxically, the democratisation of the public sphere led to its deterioration, because the nineteenth-century social welfare states divided society along the lines of class interest. Second, increased leisure time and the accompanying rise of the cultural industries transformed public citizens into private, passive consumers.

Habermas's theory has both a descriptive (historical) and a normative (theoretical) element. The question if Habermas's discussion of the rise and fall of the public sphere is historically correct or convincing has been widely debated (e.g., Condren, 2002), but will not be our primary concern here. We are mainly interested in the normative question and the relevance of public sphere theory for an understanding of the present. From a normative perspective, Habermas's account has been criticised for being too rationalistic, universalist, consensus-oriented, bourgeois-centric, and patriarchal (Susen, 2011). We will focus here upon two of the early and most influential critiques, which have to a large extent prefigured and shaped later debates: Nancy Fraser's material feminist reading of Habermas (Fraser, 1990), and Chantal Mouffe's agonist pluralist critique of deliberative democracy (Mouffe, 1999; 2013).

Taken together, their work articulates three lines of criticism. First, both Fraser and Mouffe agree that Habermas does not acknowledge the fundamental role of power and contestation in

the public sphere. This line of critique rejects the universalist tendencies of Habermas's theory, or the belief that private citizens can and should "bracket" their personal interests and reach a consensus about the common good. According to Mouffe, this is not only impossible, but also dangerous, due to the existence of opposing world views and interests that can never be completely eradicated, but only pacified in the framework of liberal democracy (Mouffe, 2013). Fraser also rejects this universalising moment in Habermas's theory, arguing that the bourgeois public sphere was itself the expression of class interest, or a "masculinist ideological notion that functioned to legitimate an emergent form of class rule" (Fraser, 1990, p. 62). This line of criticism thereby also questions the *a priori* separation between the public and the private, arguing that this distinction can itself become the terrain of political struggle, e.g., when the division of labour between male and female caretakers in the household is being debated (Susen, 2011).

Second, the idea of a single public sphere which is open to everyone has been criticised for being unhelpfully utopian. In actual fact, the public sphere has always excluded particular groups, such as women, but also workers, people of colour, people outside of Europe, the colonised, and many others. Moreover, many public spaces, such as newspapers or social media, are moderated or – in the current age – dependent on algorithms. In both cases, this means they are selective in terms of who is allowed or given the room to speak or listen (Risse, 2014, pp. 7-8). Even if the public sphere would be open to everyone, a debate among equals would be hampered by the existence of power differences. A more viable alternative is provided by the idea of "counterpublics" (Fraser, 1990: 67), through which specific issues and interests can be debated, and the dominant culture potentially challenged. In today's digitally networked, fragmented, and globalised societies, the idea that there exist different counterpublics has been increasingly acknowledged. For instance, the notions of "issue publics" (Habermas, 2006) and "sphericules" (Bruns, 2023) have been proposed to theorise a plurality of (online) networked publics that overlap and intersect in complex ways.

Third, Habermas's theory has been criticised for its emphasis on serious, rational talk. Mouffe has argued that the focus on rational deliberation fails to acknowledge the important role of affect in the formation of social and political identities (Mouffe, 2013). Since Habermas's original analysis of the public sphere, the idealised notion of a public sphere populated by reasonable, carefully arguing citizens has only become less realistic. In today's emotionally charged media environment, both official political communication and everyday talk on social media is often passionate, transgressive, and banal rather than rational, polite, and serious, hence necessitating a rethinking of our conceptions of the public sphere (Bouvier & Rosenbaum, 2020; Chevrette & Dueringer, 2020; Rodriguez, 2020). As we will demonstrate in the next section, debates on the role of *humour* in the public sphere have given rise to similar criticisms.

3. Humour and/in the public sphere

Many of the public conversations, debates, and exchanges that make up the public sphere contain elements of humour. Liberal democracies are "uniquely friendly to humorous citizens," as Sammy Basu (1999, p. 385) has observed: they are generally opposed to the politics of curbing or regulating humour. Indeed, the regulation of humour and satire is generally seen as a key indicator of political unfreedom – the canary in the democratic coalmine. Accordingly, humour scholars have pointed to the pervasive presence of humour in today's public sphere(s) and have highlighted the importance of humour and satire for open and democratic societies. More recently, humour scholars have also pointed to the "dark side" of humour (Kuipers, 2008, p. 382), acknowledging that politicians, humourists, and citizens may use humour in ways that are less than conducive to free, equal, open, and democratic exchange. However, these insights

from humour research have rarely been connected with the "serious" political and philosophical debates on the public sphere.

Habermas himself initially excluded humour from the public sphere. He argued that "jokes, fictional representations, irony, games, and so on" are "category mistakes" (Habermas, 1982, p. 271), which conflict with the transparent, rational dialogue required for a good functioning public sphere. Later, Habermas acknowledged the contribution of humour and satire to public deliberation (Habermas, 1996), and pointed to the existence of "wild publics" (Habermas, 2006). Humour and comedy scholars have further criticised the initial bias against humour in the work of Habermas. However, the relationship between humour and the public sphere has, until now, only received scattered attention and has often remained implicit.

We can generally distinguish between three ways of thinking about the role of humour in the public sphere. The first, and least popular today, is the idea that humour is aggressive, cruel, hostile, or reactionary. The implication of this idea is that humour is detrimental to a well-functioning public sphere. Billig (2005) has been one of the few modern proponents of this negative view of humour. In his "critique of humour," he revived a longer historical-philosophical tradition of thinking about humour as an expression of superiority, degradation, and social correction (e.g., Bergson, 1911; Hobbes, 1999). Billig's argument that humour is cruel by nature has, in such a radical formulation, rarely been taken over by humour and comedy scholars. However, his argumentation has been important in formulating recent "critiques of humour", for instance in the recent work of Raúl Pérez on racist humour (Pérez, 2022).

The second idea is the opposite of the first and holds that humour is overall good. According to this view, humour brings people together and sparks joy, and to the extent that it has a sharp edge, humour is used as a weapon to "speak truth to power" and oppose dogmatism and oppression. The implication of this idea is that humour contributes to a healthy public sphere. Some authors in this tradition, which has dominated the emerging field of humour studies until the beginning of this century (Simpson, 2003, p. 1), have sought to integrate their positive views on humour with Habermas's writings on the public sphere. They have argued for humour as an important democratic "virtue" (Basu, 1999), which contributes to open and rational debate. We find this argument, in particular, in studies of satire and satirical television (e.g., Baym, 2005; Benacka, 2016; Simpson, 2003). For instance, Baym (2005) famously argued that *The Daily Show* presented by Jon Stewart epitomised the "discursive integration" of serious and comedic news programming (Baym, 2005: 262), and suggested that satirical news television had become an important domain for rational deliberation and political criticism at a moment when 'serious' news media increasingly forsook their critical function. This line of reasoning has informed many studies on satire until today, especially in contexts where 'serious' or conventional media are under fire. Echoes of this line of thought can be found in the article by Hyttinen in this special issue. She shows convincingly how the Hungarian "joke party" MKKP uses humour to create a public "sphericule" that challenges, with modest success, the "soft authoritarianism" of the ruling party.

While some of these 'pro-humour' authors have sought to integrate Habermas's ideal of a rational and inclusive public sphere with the alternative models provided by Fraser and Mouffe, they tend to place a strong emphasis upon humour as a form of reasoning. For instance, while Benacka (2016) acknowledges Mouffe's agonistic pluralism as important to an understanding of the contemporary public sphere, she continues to argue that the satirical television comedy of Stephen Colbert may help to repair agonist politics. She suggests that "the current divisive political climate requires a means to negotiate this antagonistic environment in order to bring about a unity" (Benacka, 2016, p. 25), and goes on to argue that humour "engenders active participation in democratic debates" (Benacka, 2016, p. 33), and "contributes to a co-construction of rationality and reality" (Benacka, 2016, p. 35).

Note that this analysis is very much in line with the self-presentation of contemporary 'moderate' comedians. Stephen Colbert, Jon Stewart, and John Oliver all consciously position themselves as the humorous voice of reason in an increasingly polarised, loud, and emotional public sphere (cf. Holm, 2017 for a convincing critique of this somewhat self-congratulatory positioning). As Nicolaï and Maeseele show in their article in this special issue, the Flemish comedian Michael Van Peel adopts a similar 'moderate' comic persona. This also has led some humour researchers to call for "humour literacy": the development of a more refined, reflexive understanding and use of humour as cultural and democratic skill (Tsakona 2019, 2020a, 2020b). Paradoxically, as the public arena in our current day and age increasingly becomes unlike Habermas's ideal public sphere, humour is increasingly touted as a strategy to reclaim political reason in a time of unreason, restraint in a time of political and public excess.

The third line of thinking is based on the idea that humour is inherently ambiguous and can thus both contribute to *and* detract from an open, free, and democratic society. Here, we find both revisionist critics of Habermas (e.g., Dahl, 2021; Koivukoski, 2022) and more radical critics, often emerging from a cultural studies tradition (e.g., Gardiner, 2004; Holm, 2017; cf. Dahl, 2021, p. 3). While not all scholars who follow this line of thinking openly engage with public sphere theory (e.g., Quirk, 2018; Nieuwenhuis & Zijp, 2022), there are some who do, and their work resonates strongly with earlier criticisms of the public sphere, as discussed in the previous section. Their work is often part of what has been termed "critical humour studies" (Lockyer & Pickering, 2005; Weaver, 2011, p. 8; Lockyer & Weaver, 2024). Here, humour becomes a lens through which we can re-evaluate and update some of the traditional ideas about the public sphere.

First, humour can help us to get into sharper focus the absence of power and contestation in Habermas's original model. Humour is bound up with social hierarchies and relationships of power. Kuipers (2011; 2015) has pointed to the limits of a liberal "humour regime" (Kuipers, 2011, p. 69) that tends to flatten out power differences and is based on the conviction that everyone should be able to take a joke. What such a liberal humour regime fails to acknowledge is that humour often mirrors social inequalities and can be used both to "punch up" and "punch down". Humour's fundamental ambiguity makes it susceptible to both emancipatory *and* conservative uses.

Holm (2017) makes a similar point when he argues against the liberal bias in humour and comedy research. Humour, Holm argues, is often understood as a form of "reasonable dissent" (Holm, 2017, p. 30), especially by scholars who study humour under the flag of satire (see the work of Baym and Benacka discussed above). This leads people to present humour as necessarily good for democracy. A more promising model of the cultural politics of humour, Holm argues, acknowledges that the politics of humour is always contested and its meanings and effects are dependent on social and political context. In his contribution to this special issue, Holm takes this reasoning further by taking up the relation between humour and dignity, which he analyses through the notion of *pie-ing*, that is: the public throwing of a pie at a person of importance. Around the world, this has evolved from a stock ingredient of traditional European clowning routines to a form of social protest – and though obviously not rational or deliberative, it has found its – contentious – place in public discourse.

Second, if humour is bound up with, and follows, social hierarchies, this means that not everybody has equal access to it or can use humour to the same effect (Lockyer & Pickering, 2005; Kuipers, 2011). Humour thus points us to the limits of the traditional idea of a single and inclusive public sphere that is theoretically accessible to everybody who wants to and is willing to make the effort. Lippert (2022) points to the historical exclusion of female bodies from both the field of comedy and the wider public sphere. Conversely, Gardiner (2004), drawing on the work of Mikhail Bakhtin (1984), points to the historical significance of humour as "a crucial resource through which the popular masses can retain a degree of autonomy from the forces of

sociocultural homogenisation and centralisation" (Gardiner, 2004, p. 39). Humour may thus both work to exclude particular groups from the public sphere, and be used by subaltern counterpublics as an alternative mode of communication and contestation.

In this special issue, several articles show how humour highlights unequal access to the public sphere. In her critical analysis of Greek satirical news, Villy Tsakona most explicitly shows how humour brings to the surface this blind spot of the traditional Habermasian notion of the public sphere:

> The case of written satirical news from the Greek sociocultural context shows that we would rather opt for broader and more inclusive public spheres, where ambiguities are not tolerated but *sought for*, since they emerge from interlocutors' diverse sociopolitical positioning and interpretations of discourse. In other words, we would rather go for public spheres where people from various sociopolitical groups will participate and offer their perspectives on topics of common interest. In this sense, Koivukoski's (2022) description of hybrid public spheres may be closer to what we are looking for. On the other hand, we always have the option of distancing ourselves from *mythologised, utopian*, *unrealistic*, *non-existent*, *idealistic*, *too limited*, and *normative* theoretical constructs [...] and account for contemporary public spaces of deliberation in their own terms and through new lenses (Tsakona, this issue).

Third, a look at the public sphere through the lens of humour highlights that the public sphere is not a static, timeless phenomenon. Although public sphere theory starts with an ideal-typical notion of a "good" public sphere, the subsequent sixty years of debate have made it clear that public spheres are not uniform, as they are shaped by wider social, cultural, political, and technological developments. In the 21st century, public discourse has become more globalised, digitised and fragmented, but many authors have argued that these developments can be helpfully understood through the lens of the (hybrid) public sphere (Peruško, 2021; Schneiders et al., 2023; Stegmann & Stark, 2023). As we see in Tsakona's quote, Koivukoski (2022) has successfully used this notion of the "hybrid public sphere" to make sense of contemporary political humour in Finland.

Depending on time and place, public spheres may be more or less agonistic, fragmented, rational or affective, encompassing or exclusive, and more or less encroached on by either state or economic powers. And, as we see in this special issue, in different times and places, public spheres can be more or less open or conducive to humour. This can be seen very clearly in the contrast between more liberal and more authoritarian systems. Apart from Hytinnen's analysis of Hungary, the analysis of humour in Belarus and Russia by Laineste and Fiadotava (this issue) clearly shows the distinct dynamics of humour in authoritarian regimes, where the public sphere is severely curtailed. However, rather than categorically suppressed or absent, humour in authoritarian regimes can carve out "sphericules" (Hyttinen), by using inclusive and subtle strategies that Laineste and Fiadotava find in "pro-democratic humour" in Russia and Belarus.

In liberal democracies, the fragmentation of public spheres due to globalisation and digitisation has opened up the way for new forms of humorous discourse. Over the past twenty years, we have seen a sharp growth in the global exchange of humorous forms. This has brought global fame to comedians such as Stewart, Colbert, Oliver, and Noah, but it has also facilitated the spread of "alt-right" discourses. Moreover, it gave a global stage to Donald Trump's anarchistically funny Twitter feed, analysed by Sammy Basu in this special issue. In the relatively autonomous democratic nation-states of the 19th and 20th century, the limits of humour, like all forms of discourse, were usually set by a combination of informal norms and conventions and, in extreme cases, the law. As the rise of transnational humour scandals show, in today's global and digital era such informal, national humour regimes are increasingly hard to maintain.

In this unravelling of national humour regimes, we can also see parallels with the contemporary public sphere. These national humour regimes can be seen as old-fashioned gentlemen's agreements: men, usually white and from better positions, used to establish and maintain the mostly unwritten rules regarding what can be joked about, where, and by whom. As we see in the historical analysis of Ivo Nieuwenhuis, such regimes ensured that humour scandals were contained. But in such a regime, many jokes cannot be made, and many people do not have the possibility to object to jokes. In a sense, the ideal-typical public sphere is also based on such a gentlemen's agreement; the fragmentation of the public sphere similarly threatens to break down this agreement.

This brings us to the final insight that we gain from looking at the public sphere through the lens of humour. In a media environment where humour often sparks heated debates and controversies, it is difficult to maintain that humour is simply a form of rational talk. A more helpful way to think about humour is as both rational *and* affective (Koivukoski, 2022; Lippert, 2022; Zijp, 2023). Some authors have tried to reconcile Habermas's conception of the public sphere with the affective politics of humour. Dahl (2021), for instance, points to the specific status of humour as an alternative, non-serious mode of discourse that can, however, have serious effects. While humour can thus not be reduced to a form of serious talk, Dahl argues that it can play an important role in "pre-deliberative processes of opinion formation" (Dahl, 2021, p. 27), and that its unique contribution to public debate results from humour's ambiguity, or "the interplay between humour's conventional [conservative] and creative [progressive] aspects" (Dahl, 2021, p. 8). Following this reasoning, humour can have various meanings, functions, and effects in the public sphere. However, rather than the endpoint of a discussion – humour is simply too ambiguous and contextual to make any definitive claims – we see this as the starting point for further discussion and analysis.

4. Humour in the public sphere today

The eleven articles in this special issue provide various insights – about humour, about the public sphere, and about the roles humour can play in the public sphere today. A first set of articles tackles the question discussed above: is humour in the public sphere bad, good, or ambiguous? These articles expand on what we have described above as the third line of reasoning: that humour is inherently ambiguous and can thus both contribute to and detract from an open, free, and democratic society.

We start with Sammy Basu's analysis of the humour of Donald Trump, as expressed in tweets during his first (and at the time of writing still potentially only) term as President of the United States. In his pioneering 1999 article on humour and public sphere theory, Basu wrote about humour as a virtue. In discussing Trump, Basu's take is considerably less positive, showing the dual nature of humour. Nicholas Holm, in the second contribution, introduces the concept of *comic indignity*, to show which members of a public sphere can afford to suffer slights to their dignity and which cannot. Holm argues that this unequal vulnerability to humour might provide the basis for a new model for assessing the politics of humour in the public sphere. Thirdly, Jonas Nicolaï and Pieter Maeseele discuss the Flemish stand-up comic Michael Van Peel's critique of "wokeness", showing how Van Peel, like many of his contemporaries, is "disoriented" in his attempts to surpass the boundaries of comedic critique. The authors try to take the political potential of comedy beyond traditional interpretations as subversive critique, towards a view of stand-up comedy as a site of democratic resistance.

All three contributions show the possibilities, but also the limitations of humorous contestation in the context of the current "repoliticisation" of humour. Most strikingly, these articles foreground the diversity of humour in the contemporary public arena, not just in

humorous genres, forms, and moods, but also in actors using humour. Basu looks at politicians, Holm at activists, Nicolaï and Maeseele at a comedian. All three use humour to tackle public issues, but intriguingly, the comedian Van Peel, who would seem to be the least qualified political actor, is the most "Habermasian" of the three, with a plea for balanced, critical deliberation that is reminiscent of Jon Stewart. However, of the three, Van Peel is by far the least powerful, and his reflections have had less impact than Trump, or the pie-throwing activists.

Following this, three articles show public humour at their most contested: in humour scandals. First, Juha Herkman & Joonas Koivukoski offer a novel methodology and framework for the quantitative analysis of humour scandals, which they use to show that in the past three decades in Finland, the number of scandals has increased exponentially, and also has become more diverse thematically. Second, Ivo Nieuwenhuis offers a historical perspective on humour scandals in the Netherlands. Comparing two humour scandals from the 1960s and the 2020s, he shows that these scandals roughly follow the same "script". Behind every scandal, a substantial moral, cultural, and often also social divide can be recognised. Finally, Dick Zijp analyses an unusual case. In 2021, he became the centre of a public scandal himself: he was chased by pundits and Twitter trolls after having published a serious opinion article on humour in a Dutch national newspaper. This "meta-humour scandal" demonstrates that not only humour, but also speech about humour has become increasingly politicised and prone to scandal, and has become bound up with anti-scientific discourses against "woke" humour research.

Then, two articles zoom in specifically on the relation between mediated humour and their relation to politics. Villy Tsakona analyses "antiracist" satirical news on Greek websites, arguing that distinguishing between antiracist and racist interpretations is not a straightforward matter, as humour blurs the boundary between racism and antiracism. Thus, antiracist humour might actually reinforce racist discourses despite good intentions. Nikita Lobanov looks at the right-wing humour on Twitter. He analyses responses of right-wing Twitter users to the terrorist attack on London Bridge in 2017, showing how these tweets mix humour with hate and with both physical and moral disgust. Both articles provide in-depth analyses of the mix of humour and affective politics so typical of online "sphericules". They highlight how humour can amplify the strongly polarised, emotional nature of online politics. In terms of the three possible "stances" on the role of humour in the public sphere discussed above, these authors are probably closest to the negative view: in these articles humour emerges as irrational, a disruption of democratic values and virtues, a vessel of negative emotions, and something that might misfire even when intentions are good.

The two final articles foreground the relation between humour and the public sphere in illiberal or authoritarian regimes. Hyttinen analyses the possibilities and limits of political humour in the Hungarian "illiberal democracy", showing how MKKP, as the "humour party," uses absurd humour to reveal the inherent absurdities of Hungarian political reality, and occasionally succeeded in entering the state-controlled public sphere. Laineste and Fiadotava analyse humorous motifs in the 2020 protests against the war in Ukraine in Belarus and Russia. They make a novel conceptual distinction between pro- and anti-democratic humour, showing that anti-democratic humour has fewer layers of reference and is less subtle than pro-democratic humour as the latter needs to circumvent censorship. Pro-democratic humour also needs to be more inclusive as it often spreads within a wider, more global audience catering to diverse tastes in humour. In these contributions, we see most clearly the vaunted qualities of humour as "speaking truth to power": precisely when a well-functioning public sphere is out of reach, humour can serve its positive functions most clearly and unambiguously (cf. Zijp, 2024). Moreover, these cases highlight the benefits of globalisation, digitisation, and the breakdown of national humour regimes: even in authoritarian states, humour is more difficult to control than before.

This special issue closes with an unusual contribution: a comic by Flemish cartoonist Steve Michiels. As a well-known, and occasionally contested cartoonist, Michiels is himself a notable voice in the Belgian public sphere. In recent years, he also became a humour scholar, working on a so-called "artistic PhD" exploring humour and self-censorship. In this comic, he reflects on the role of humour and the cartoonist in the public sphere. In a preface to his comic, he reflects on the relation between his work and the contributions to this special issue.

Taken together, these contributions show that humour in public discourse always shows a Janus face. On the one hand, the presence of humour and satire indicates, and maybe fosters, a healthy public sphere. Certainly, restrictions on humour are deeply at odds with the ideal of open debate, critique, and contestation, as the exchange of ideas and perspectives, also humorously, is central to public culture. On the other hand, there is a "dark side" to humour that has become increasingly visible in the past decade, with the rise of the radical (populist) right. For some forms of humour, it is difficult to maintain that they make positive contributions to public life. Humorous expressions can be clearly at odds with other principles of democratic societies, such as equal rights and non-discrimination. Humour can be divisive and aggressive. Despite its playful "non-seriousness", it can have real consequences, especially for people from less powerful groups. Thus, humour uniquely highlights the internal contradictions of the public sphere.

This makes it difficult to maintain that humour is an important public virtue, as Sammy Basu suggested in 1999, and Jon Stewart claimed in 2010. Looking back at Stewart, we can now say that his diagnosis was correct, but his cure contestable. Increasing polarisation and extremism is indeed a danger to democracy and to a healthy public sphere. However, the current special issue casts doubt on the effectiveness of the remedy he suggested: humour does not necessarily provide an antidote to the looming crisis of democratic politics. And in some cases it might actually make things worse.

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