

Book Review

Massih Zekavat and Tabea Scheel (2023). *Satire, Humor, and Environmental Crises*. Abingdon: Routledge. 276pp. ISBN: 9780367517687. £120.

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This book brings together insights from literary and cultural studies, psychology, and communication science to analyze the impact of humor and satire on both individual and collective behavior to mitigate the climate problem. It has emerged from a profound concern about climate change and the alarming findings of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). As our world is plagued by severe droughts, floods, and emerging diseases, the measures taken to address climate change often prove to be insufficiently effective. This book explores the potential role of humor and satire in breaking through the resistance experienced by citizens, organizations, and politicians when pursuing concrete and effective solutions to the climate problem.

Research on the impact of satire on the climate debate provides a refreshing and original perspective. The authors correctly point out that technocratic solutions are inadequate to address ecological problems; cultural, political, and social changes are also required. Art and culture can play a significant role in these societal transformations, as they can influence how people define, represent, and communicate the climate problem. Nevertheless, the influence of art and culture on societal outcomes is often underestimated in scientific research.

The authors aim to create a solid knowledge base, with a focus on the profound relationships among all forms of life on Earth. They strive for a more optimistic approach to the typically alarming communication about climate change. Furthermore, they aim to facilitate a just, inclusive, and sustainable transition, ensuring that the burdens of this transformation are not disproportionately shifted onto groups in society that already feel marginalized and excluded. An equitable and balanced process can also provide the green movement with the opportunity to unite various social groups.

The authors acknowledge that humor can play both a negative and positive role in the necessary transition. On the one hand, humor can be used to exacerbate existing problems, such as when politicians trivialize issues or marketers use humor to promote increased consumption. On the other hand, humor can be positively used to reduce existing problems, for example, by ridiculing harmful attitudes and

policies. Moreover, humor can help individuals cope psychologically with the irreversible impact of the climate problem.

Chapter 2 provides an overview of the key terms, concepts, and theories related to humor and satire used in this book. Descriptions of classical humor theories, such as the superiority theory, the relief theory, and the incongruity theory, will not surprise experienced humor researchers but are useful for novice researchers and professionals. Some more recent theories are also discussed, such as the reversal theory, the benign violation theory, and evolutionary explanations. The authors rightly underscore the versatility of humor and the impossibility of capturing its operation and effects in a single overarching theory. They also delve into the different styles of humor, both positive and harmful, and the various social functions of humor.

Some theories, such as Meyer's four basic functions of humor, are described succinctly, which may make it challenging for readers unfamiliar with this literature to understand the explanation without consulting the original sources. The listing of theories and concepts is done in a textbook-like style, detached from their potential application to pro-environmental behavior. It remains questionable whether readers who wish to apply these theories to such behavior will be able to make the connections themselves.

Notably, the section on humor theories is much more extensive and detailed than the section on satire. The discussion of satire remains concise yet includes an extensive list of references. The authors may be correct that satire is a vaguely defined and challenging concept, but the section on satire seems somewhat limited for a book in which satire plays a central role.

Chapter 3 summarizes some central theories and insights about sustainable behavior and its determinants. The authors refer to trends in the literature on pro-environmental behavior, distinguishing between approaches that focus more on rational considerations and those that pay more attention to affective and symbolic considerations. Like the previous chapter, the theories are listed in a textbook-like manner, largely divorced from the pro-environmental context in which they ultimately need to be applied. Researchers in the field of social psychology and behavioral regulation will recognize the theories mentioned, such as the Theory of Planned Behavior and the Focus Theory of Normative Conduct.

The second part of Chapter 3 describes insights from research on the influence of humor and satire on pro-environmental behavior, drawn from communication science, literary and cultural studies. The authors identify the complexity of this field by emphasizing the conflicting findings that research has yielded regarding the potential role of humor and satire in promoting societal change towards pro-environmental behavior. They explain in detail, through theoretical analyses, how humor could promote pro-environmental behavior. This includes discussions of both psychological and social determinants of behavior, as well as the resistances and

biases that can explain the gap between intentions and actions. This part of the chapter is interesting, well-developed, and clearly written.

It is important to note, however, that the analysis in Chapter 3 remains largely academic. The findings discussed mainly come from controlled studies isolating the effect of humor on isolated variables. While the impact of humor can be well predicted and measured in controlled settings, it is known that the application of humor in the societal context is often more complex and resistant. It is therefore commendable that, at the end of this chapter, the authors advocate for a more holistic model in which pro-environmental behavior is not merely seen as an individual choice but as the result of a complex interplay of psychological, social, and societal factors that collectively influence behavior.

In Chapter 4, the authors introduce their Modular Interdependency Model (MIM) of the influence of humor and satire on environmental behavior. In the MIM, individuals are seen as part of a society with its own economy, culture, and politics, and where systems of regulation such as shame, punishment, justice, and ideologies are in effect. Within these systems, the authors identify three different but interconnected determinants of behavior: psychological, social, and ecospheric components. Their explicit goal is to recognize that demographic and geographic factors play a role, so that individual citizens are not solely responsible for environmental problems. The book rightfully emphasizes that interventions that do not take this complex context into account are unlikely to succeed: for behavioral interventions to be effective, they must consider not only individual and psychological factors but also the societal and ecospheric context.

After the introduction of the MIM, Chapter 4 describes the psychological, ecospheric, and social submodules individually, using visual representations of the concepts and their relationships. I found this section a bit unevenly developed, mainly because the size and complexity of the different submodules vary widely. While the model for the psychological factor is quite extensive and contains many components, the model for the ecospheric submodule is relatively simple. The social submodule is extensive and includes as many as seven different figures, some of which appear to be similar and overlapping. The authors acknowledge this asymmetry and provide arguments for their choices. Nevertheless, readers may experience this chapter as somewhat unbalanced and challenging to read.

At the end of this chapter, it is explained how humor and satire can not only influence behavioral determinants but also reduce the gap between intention and action. This can be achieved, for example, by creating communities of like-minded individuals who take collective action or by removing obstacles and making people aware of factors that hinder behavioral change. Finally, an extensive list of factors that can promote or hinder behavioral change is described, along with practical solutions to overcome these resistances. This section will be valuable for applied researchers and professionals in behavioral change.

Chapter 5 of the book uses concrete examples from popular culture to apply and illustrate the Modular Interdependency Model (MIM). Comedy examples such as *The Simpsons* and cartoons from *The New Yorker* are discussed to demonstrate how they utilize the different dimensions of the MIM to promote pro-environmental behavior in the audience. This analysis is entertaining and interesting, although the number of examples is quite large. Instead of briefly discussing more than twenty different episodes, it might have been more useful to analyze a few examples in more depth. Nevertheless, the chapter succeeds in showing how satire and humor are used to convey environmental arguments to the public in a playful and engaging way. After reading the chapter, however, the question remains to what extent these shows have actually contributed to solving environmental problems.

Chapter 6 provides practical insights for novice researchers by discussing various methods that can be used to investigate the societal impact of humor and satire, as well as ways to operationalize humor, pro-environmental attitudes, and behavior for research. Examples of possible methods include experiments, diary studies, and the use of objective data. The authors refer to studies in which these methods have been applied in the context of pro-environmental behavior, discuss the advantages and disadvantages of the approaches, and mention some best practices. It is helpful that the authors add a section explicitly indicating which inconsistent findings, knowledge gaps, and open questions still exist. This chapter will be highly valuable for researchers and professionals involved in behavioral change.

Overall, this book is an innovative and thought-provoking read. The introduction of the MIM is a valuable addition to existing knowledge because it draws attention to the importance of a broad perspective that includes both individual behavioral determinants and the social and ecospheric factors. Nevertheless, the analyses and examples presented in the book have not yet fully convinced me of the usefulness of the MIM, possibly because there is still limited research with this model and thus little evidence of its effectiveness. My expectation is that most readers will find the literature reviews in Chapters 2 and 3 and the methodological explanations in Chapter 6 the most practical.

Most importantly, the book serves as a call to researchers and environmental communicators to work with a holistic approach to optimize humorous and satirical pro-environmental messages, followed by measuring the effects of such interventions. The influence of humor and satire on pro-environmental behavior has not been adequately studied to date, and the authors rightly emphasize this. They have taken a significant step in bringing together existing knowledge in a structured manner and providing practical guidelines for future research and applications in this field. So far there has been no comprehensive toolkit for systematically using satire and humor as interventions and study objects in the climate debate. The authors have succeeded in presenting such a toolkit.