

Jonas Nicolai*

Five theses on humor literacy in the public sphere

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Abstract: With humor increasingly at the center of social conflict, debates over the boundaries of subversive humor have moved to the forefront of public discourse. As a result, there is a growing need for a more grounded understanding of public humor literacy – understood as the ability to engage with humor in the public sphere in a way that is informed, reflective, and supportive of democratic discourse. By discussing five theses on the nature of publicly mediated humor, this article formulates a programmatic starting point for a framework on public humor literacy, and contributes to the growing academic and societal acknowledgement that humor increasingly functions as a politicizing form of public discourse and a tool for political engagement.

Keywords: humor; literacy; political discourse; public sphere; social conflict

1 Introduction

On March 12th, 2024, Dries Van Langenhove – Flemish right-wing politician and founder of radical right youth movement Schild & Vrienden¹ – was sentenced to one year in prison for violations of antiracism and -negationist laws through the dissemination of reactionary memes. The sentence ignited immediate backlash among supporters on the political right, and reached international audiences when Elon Musk retweeted a post by right-wing influencer, Eva Vlaardingerbroek addressing the case (Musk 2024). Later that month, comedian Joe Rogan defended Van Langenhove on his podcast² *The Joe Rogan Experience* stating that “shitposting is

1 The organization’s name is derived from the battle cry “shield and friend”, which is said to have been used as a shibboleth by Flemish rebels against the troops of the French king during the Bruges Matins in 1302.

2 Rogan’s podcast is the most viewed podcast worldwide with over 14.5 million followers on streaming platform Spotify alone (excluding even audiences on, for example, YouTube and Apple Podcasts).

***Corresponding author: Jonas Nicolai**, Center for Sociological Research, KU Leuven, Parkstraat 45, 3000 Leuven, Belgium, E-mail: Jonas.nicolai@kuleuven.be. <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8000-2935>

a thing, and you have to understand these people don't even mean what they're saying" (Van Langenhove 2024). During the trial, however, a judge rejected the defendant's defense that "merely" sharing jokes should be permissible. One instance of the court ruling read:

The humor used by Schild & Vrienden was intentionally and systematically employed to make racism more accessible and seem lighter. By encouraging the frequent posting of racist and denialist humor, the members were deliberately and progressively convinced of their own superiority and the necessity of achieving Schild & Vrienden's objectives through discrimination and violence. It is within this context that the posting of memes and messages by each defendant must be assessed. (Vanhecke and Andries 2024)

Notwithstanding the unprecedented gravity of the sentence, this event is not a singularity. Rather, it illustrates a trend in Western liberal democracies towards the increasing politicization of humor in the public sphere (Nieuwenhuis and Zijp 2022). As a result, humor is increasingly the topic of societal scandal, with events such as the 2005 Mohammed cartoon crisis (Kuipers 2011), the 2015 Charlie Hebdo attack (Oboler 2018; Sumiala et al. 2018) or the 2022 Netflix protests following Dave Chappelle's special *The Closer* (Krishna et al. 2023) moving debates on the boundaries of subversive humor to the forefront of public discourse. But despite the obvious societal impact of certain humorous expressions, debates on the limits (or limitlessness) of humor have become increasingly divided. Furthermore, humor's intersection with broader discussions on free speech fuels the politicization of attempts to constrain transgressive humor. Discussions on "cancel culture" or "wokeness," for example, reflect how humor has become a contentious subject which more often than not exacerbates antagonisms between reactionary or progressive ideologies – resistant to critique for some yet subject to moderation for others. Given humor's role in shaping social conflict, there is thus a growing need to examine the affordances of literacies pertaining to understanding how humor operates in an increasingly polarized and digitalized public sphere.

A cursory glance at scholarship on humor reveals near-consensus on the idea that views on humor have shifted from a 'positive' view on humor as a social cohesive or emotional relief, to an understanding of humor as a site for the negotiation and contestation of social hierarchies (Billig 2005; Holm 2018; Nieuwenhuis and Zijp 2022). By now, this paradigmatic awareness has congealed into a vast body of research exploring humor's intersections with, for example, social class (Friedman and Kuipers 2013), gender (Colpean and Tully 2019), or race (Greene 2019), probing how humor can perpetuate ideological divides or reinforce power hierarchies (see Kuipers 2011; Lockyer and Pickering 2008). In addition, other researchers have focused extensively on the constitutive elements defining humor, zooming in on the mechanisms of irony (Burgers and van Mulken 2017), satire (Day 2011), polysemy

(Boxman-Shabtai and Shifman 2014) or theories explaining humor's perceived functions in social interaction (see Billig 2005; Weaver et al. 2016). Taken together, research on humor has produced a wealth of knowledge on how humor operates linguistically, socially or politically, rendering the average humor scholar sociologically or critically literate, in that they are aware of power dynamics governing humorous discourse.

Yet, only rarely do such insights trickle down beyond the confines of academic environments, into popular discourse. On the contrary, humor's impact is often still trivialized in broader public debates. For example, the idea that humor can at any given time be considered "just a joke" remains a trope appropriated by a diverse cast of self-proclaimed defenders of free speech. Where politicians such as the former Italian PM Silvio Berlusconi or US president Donald Trump have turned it into a hallmark brand of their political style (BBC News 2013, para. 4; Dowd 2019), professional comedians such as Jimmy Carr or Ricky Gervais have found it a safe conduct for gratuitous transgressions through humor at the address of sexual or religious minorities (Jones 2024; Ricky Gervais defends 'taboo' 2022). To the layperson, the idea that some forms of humor can or should be taken more seriously often echoes semi-authoritarian sentiments of semantic policing or (self)censorship. This is not to say that all critical interpellations of transgressive humor are immediately justified or, contrarily, that freedom of speech should exist to the detriment of potential harm done. Rather, I contend that such discourses are often fueled by ideological antagonisms that supersede humor. In doing so, debates on the boundaries of humor can construct mediated social realities that are both fundamentally polarizing as well as polarized. This article starts from the observation that public discourse on humor seldomly facilitates mutual understanding on where the boundaries of humor lie. But as humor increasingly becomes a medium for political expression and civic engagement, a conception of public humor literacy is urgent as it offers ways to engage with humor more critically, responsibly and, ultimately, democratically.

Following an overview of the affordances of literacy studies, I argue for the development of a specific kind of *public* humor literacy. Such a view on literacy is needed as it are often distinctly publicly mediated instances of humor that become the topic of social rifts today. In this sense, I make no claim on individual-level literacies, but explicitly refer to a form of humor literacy related to the degree to which "groups can obtain, process, understand, evaluate and act upon information (...) that benefit[s] the community" (Freedman et al. 2009, p. 448). Thereafter, I outline five theses on the role of humor in today's conjuncture, each supported by a brief rationale on their importance for the understanding of public humor today. These theses are not exhaustive but aim to facilitate a general understanding of public humor, and strive to further discussion on the possibility of an inclusive conception of public humor literacy. This article ends with a note on how public

humor literacy does not overwrite the critical potential of transgressive humor, nor how thinking more seriously on humor would mitigate the conceivable lightheartedness of laughter.

2 Towards an understanding of public humor literacy

Literacies are increasingly recognized as core assets in facilitating citizens' critical engagement with information and media, empowering civic engagement (Polizzi 2020; Mihailidis and Thevenin 2013). As such, it has been argued that "to be engaged in democracy, there must be political literacy, the absence of which would make the prospect of meaningful social justice in society less likely" (Lund and Carr in Polizzi 2020). Such a view on literacy is not merely about the technical ability to read or write, but rather about fostering informed engagement with the various forms of media and communication that shape public discourse. As Mihailidis and Thevenin (2013) argue, "the engaged citizen must be made to understand the relationship between personal and social identity, and media as a sense of place, community, and democracy" (p. 1617). It is therefore crucial to include humor literacy in an extended interpretation of literacies pertaining to politics, as humor is increasingly a vessel for misinformation, ideological polarization, or the spread of anti-democratic discourses.

The notion of humor literacy – viewed here as not just a linguistic category but, equally, a form of discourse, both performing and performative – requires a multi-dimensional perspective (Zarcadoolas et al. 2005). In this sense, it humor literacy is enabled by other forms of literacy which are required to navigate humorous discourse in today's mediated public sphere. Civic or political literacy, for example, enables citizens to become aware of public issues and participate in decision-making processes (Zarcadoolas et al. 2005). Similarly, humor literacy equips individuals to recognize how humor can serve ideological ideals which can be linked to broader political debates, events or actors. As humor becomes an increasingly preferred mode of communication in political discourse, expanding humor literacy to include its civic dimensions is critical to understanding its role in shaping public opinion and ideology. Furthermore, to be politically literate entails not just factual knowledge of political history or the political system, but also the extent to which civic and political communication are increasingly digitally mediated and technologically embedded in power structures (Polizzi 2020, p. 9).

Additionally, cultural literacies have been put forward as playing a key role in facilitating intercultural dialogue (Maine et al. 2019), specifically promoting

educational attainment in multicultural contexts (Hirsch et al. 2002). This is relevant as cultural literacy fosters the ability to recognize and engage with collective beliefs, customs, and worldviews. As humor often draws on shared cultural references, taboos, and societal norms (Friedman and Kuipers 2013) it is essential to understand how cultural factors influence the reception and interpretation of humor across different social groups. Especially in a highly polarized and multicultural public sphere, the overlap of different cultural contexts can fuel misinterpretations of humorously intended messages, with undesirable consequences – ranging from mediated polemics to violence – as a result.

Similarly, literacies pertaining to the use of digital media function as a prerequisite for understanding public humor today as they facilitate understanding of how information is produced, and how to navigate and access this information considerably (Van der Meer and Hameleers 2022). As such, media literacy in the broad sense can support the combating of misinformation (Bulger and Davison 2018) and mitigate polarization in digital public spheres (Van der Meer and Hameleers 2021). More specifically, digital literacy has been described as “encompass[ing] the competencies and comportments needed to achieve the higher levels of ‘literacy’ in the digital era (...) engaging and participatory citizenship, expansive educational horizons, meaningful cultural and civic activity and ethical and fulfilling social relationships” (Hoechsmann and DeWaard 2015, p. 4). As such, humor literacy can be viewed not just as a set of utilitarian skills, but as a broad category of knowledge, competences and attitudes, which serve to navigate as well as assess the broader structures of meaning in which humorous discourse takes place. With digital humor often being consumed alongside other forms of digital information such as news or social media content, it is increasingly relevant to be able to decode humorous items in terms of their intended meaning or origin.

Moreover, to address humor’s role in facilitating or mitigating certain forms of public discourse, public humor literacy should build on distinctly *critical* interpretations of literacies (see Tsakona 2020). Critical literacy refers to the ability to decode information in terms of its ideological underpinnings, and the dominant interpretations or power structures that define it. Critical literacy thus “melds social, political and cultural debate (...) with the analysis of how texts and discourses work, where, with what consequences, and in whose interest” (Luke 2014, p. 4). Public humor literacy, then, involves more than just understanding the unique communicative mechanisms of humor, such as its use of irony, satire, sarcasm, and recontextualization. Rather, it is increasingly necessary to interpret humor in terms of its ideological dimensions and potential to perpetuate social inequalities e.g., racism, sexism, and classism. Evaluating content in today’s media landscape involves understanding the biases, prejudices, and trustworthiness of the sources from which information – and thus also humor – emerges (Polizzi 2020). This becomes especially

important in the context of so-called ‘post-fact’ politics, where humor can be weaponized to undermine facts and legitimize reactionary ideologies (Davis 2021; Greene 2019). In such environments, public humor literacy serves as a critical tool for discerning the difference between humor that promotes democratic dialogue and humor that serves to polarize, misinform, or manipulate public opinion and political identities.

Understood as such, public humor literacy entails an expansion of existing literacy literature in two regards. First, traditionally literacy frameworks emphasize the importance of understanding how information is received and interpreted by audiences, focusing especially on reading or decoding messages. However, in the context of a broad democratization of digital communication and subsequent mainstreaming of humorous discourse, where citizens become both consumers and producers of content, there is a growing need to emphasize the responsibility of content *creators* alongside audience reception. As Tully et al. (2022) suggest, literacy frameworks should consider the entire spectrum of media interaction, which includes context, creation, content, circulation, and consumption. This broader understanding of literacy acknowledges that media ecosystems are multi-layered, involving not only individual interpretation but also institutional factors that shape how information is disseminated and consumed.

Second, existing literacy research in the context of humor predominantly focuses on individual-level outcomes of literacy incentives, largely confined to educational contexts (e.g., Stark 2003; Tsakona 2019). Research on distinctly *public* humor literacy remains absent to date. Given the public impact of humorous discourse today, such a view on humor literacy must account for both individual interactions with digital humor and the larger systemic contexts that influence how humor is perceived, produced or disseminated (see Freedman et al. 2009; Steele et al. 2005). Taken together, I thus interpret public humor literacy as encompassing a twofold goal pertaining to humor as both a personal communicative tool and a site for collective political expression: On the one hand, it involves *humor literacy among the public*, emphasizing the ability of individuals to critically engage with humor and its social implications. On the other hand, it pertains to *literacy about public humor*, focusing on the broader effects humor has within public discourse, including understanding how humor shapes societal norms, influences public opinion, and impacts broader discourses.

3 Five theses on humor in the public sphere

Combining these insights, I propose a working definition of public humor literacy as *the ability to critically engage with humor in the public sphere – in terms of*

production, dissemination and consumption – in a way that is informed, reflective, and supportive of democratic discourse. This definition implies a particular focus on humor's relationship with civic engagement and democratic discourse, its function as a mirror for socio-political contingencies and, subsequently, as an arena for their ideological contestation. I define public humor as all mediated forms of humor created, disseminated and appropriated in (digital) public arenas, superseding interpersonal use in private contexts. This includes humor on social media, in entertainment industry contexts, or within publicly mediated political discourse. The following five theses outline an approach to fostering such a form of literacy, drawing on contemporary academic insights while emphasizing the real-world importance of humor as a medium for public debate and democratic engagement.

3.1 Thesis 1

Thesis 1: Humor has evolved to become a form of political discourse which simultaneously entertains and functions as a tool for political engagement.

Laughter, humor, comedy, and related concepts have long been intertwined with politics. As early as the third century B.C., satirists challenged the moral norms of their time, setting the foundation for the Western canon of political satire (Griffin 1994). Since then, politically oriented humor has taken numerous forms. From late-night talk shows, to stand-up comedians, or satirical political movements, humor is commonly associated with the subversion of hegemonic ideas and political suppression.

Nonetheless, public perceptions on humor are stubbornly marked by the moralist view of humor as existing in a separate discursive realm, free of real-world ramifications. In scholarship today, this view is partly supported by theories of humor as psychological relief (see Weaver et al. 2016), suggesting humor is light-hearted, playful, and ultimately harmless. Some scholars (e.g. Davies 2011) have remained faithful to this so-called exculpatory approach to the social impact of humor (for an overview see Weaver 2011, pp. 8–9). In such a view, humor is first and foremost a inherently benign form of communication. This perspective also allows humorists to dismiss critiques by claiming “it’s just a joke,” exonerating those producing it from any liabilities, or minimizing potential harm done because of it. Furthermore, it overlooks the notion that to joke “with total impunity would mean that there are no boundaries to push at anymore [as] humor is only possible because certain boundaries, rules and taboos exist in the first place” (Pickering and Lockyer 2005, p. 14).

But increasingly, the distinction between “entertainment” and “serious” discourse has eroded, blurring the line between humor and politics (Baym 2010; Gray

et al. 2009). Consequently, humor is now “no longer content to stand adjacent to political culture as a ludic companion” (Boyer 2013, p. 276), leading some to argue ours is the “new golden age of satire” (Holm 2018, p. 4). The rise of the internet – especially the user-driven, interactive Web 2.0 – has in previously unimaginable ways reconfigured the potential and vernacular for political engagement among citizens (e.g., da Silva and Garcia 2012; Trifonas 2018). Recent research has shown how digital humor primarily serves to express political subjectivity and opposition (Davis et al. 2018). Similarly, analyses of social media communication reveal that political engagement in digital environments is increasingly humorous, with the majority of posts either expressing criticism and protest, being humorously intended, or combining both (Teixeira et al. 2018). Such developments have by now mainstreamed modes of “silly citizenship” (Hartley 2010) or the more drastic “memefication” of political discourse (Bulatovic 2019).

All this underscores how humor has become a proxy for political discourse. Moreover, this shift towards a general “repoliticization of humor” (Nieuwenhuis and Zijp 2022) – the idea that humor can be instrumentalized as a form of political weapon – is now widely visible throughout society. Political campaigns, for example, are increasingly marked by a symbiotic relationship with popular humorous culture. To illustrate, after Trump’s 2016 electoral success, fringe platforms like 4chan celebrated with the acknowledgment that they had “actually elected a meme as president” (Ohlheiser 2016), while in 2024, the DNC credentialed over 200 content creators, to boost a virality of playful and humorous coverage supporting VP Kamala Harris among younger voters (Padilla 2024). Furthermore, professional comedians now often assume roles as journalistic figures (Koivukoski and Ödmark 2020) or social rights advocates (Waisanen 2018). And for audiences, political satire increasingly serves as a means of emotional and political understanding (Lee and Jang 2017), while shareable humorous content – i.e. gifs, memes and videos – has become central to everyday political engagement.

3.2 Thesis 2

Thesis 2: Humor serves a diversity of ideological agenda’s spanning a spectrum between progressive and reactionary, reflecting the epistemic uncertainty of the current political moment. As a form of politics, humor operates as an inherently ideological medium. Conventionally, it is assumed that humor serves a primarily progressive goal (see Holm 2018), and that humorous social critique ideally “punches up,” to question dominant power structures. In the last decade, however, anti-establishment critiques on the political right have been on the rise, and have managed to weaponize certain forms of humor to spread moral panics and

reactionary ideologies (Lamerichs 2018; Sienkiewicz and Marx 2022). Examples such as Fox' late-night show *Gutfeld!*, the conservative podcast *The Joe Rogan Experience*, or conservative Christian satirical news website *The Babylon Bee* interweave humor with the normalization of reactionary anti-woke discourses or even conspiratorial ideologies (Bozzi 2024).

What binds such examples is that they conflate humor with a deliberate form of anti-establishment social critique, often aimed at alternative interpretations of notions like 'elite' or 'truth'. In a way, this resonates with Billig's (2005) assertion that what is considered an act of contesting humor – i.e. punching up or challenging those in power – to one person or social group, could be interpreted as disciplinary of social conventions – i.e. punching down – by another, as "one's own power is curiously invisible, for power is always claimed to reside on the other side" (pp. 203–204). In other words, in a context of an ideologically pluralist political landscape where left-right dichotomies are challenged, critique is voiced by an ideologically heterogeneous cast of social actors, each laying claim to interpretations of what constitutes a valid target of humorous social critique.

The fact that humor embodies a diversity of ideological voices can be seen as the result of broader systemic changes in political culture, which alter the epistemic nature of comedic critique itself. Because humorous critique is always "an attack upon discernible, historically authentic particulars (...) possess[ing] genuine historic identity" (Rosenheim in Bogel 2001, p. 8), to be humor literate implies an understanding of the way that our current political context allows, facilitates, or negotiates the act of formulating humorous social critique. One model which captures the nature of these changes is what Anton Jäger has described as the shift from post-politics to hyperpolitics (Jäger 2022, 2023): The idea of post-politics asserted that the convergence of free market capitalism and liberal democracy solidified into an incontestable societal framework (Wilson and Swyngedouw 2014), equaling the exhaustion of political contestation. On the contrary, where "nothing was political" in a post-political moment, "everything is political, and fervently so" in the current hyperpolitical context (Jäger 2022, para. 8). Fueled in part by general processes of democratization and inspired by the possibilities of digital technologies, this hyperpolitical state brought about an unprecedented proliferation of critical discourses. Where conventionally the practice of social critique has been a privilege of a limited cast of social actors – e.g., journalism, the arts, politics – today "everyone is a *claimsmaker* and not just on social media" (Hochuli 2022, p. 418).

What this means for public humor is that societal critique has become central to humorous discourse, with critical memes, parodic gifs, sketch comedy, satirical news, and editorial cartoons all taking aim at a specific interpretation of a given status quo. Yet, this abundance of critique raises questions about its impact: As Holm (2018) notes, "in our current conjuncture (...) where we are called upon to act as

innovative individuals and free-thinking entrepreneurs (...) critique is hailed as a welcome, necessary and encouraged aspect, ultimately rendering it blunt” (p. 35). In other words, the public sphere may have grown so accustomed to humorous critique that it challenges our ability to distinguish substantive critique from, for example, mere criticism or ridicule.

3.3 Thesis 3

Thesis 3: Humor operates differently within distinct sociopolitical contexts, which define the interpretation of its impact across diverse cultural or social settings. As a universal human trait, humor appears across diverse cultural and historical contexts. However, interpreting humor’s meaning, intentions, or impact requires recognizing that its production and reception are deeply shaped by cultural norms and social hierarchies (Lu 2023). As Billig (2005) observed, “if there are no universal ethics, politics and aesthetics, which are shared by all cultures, then likewise there can be no universal humor” (p. 188). It can thus be said that humor is polysemic and open to interpretation. In today’s globalized, digitally connected, and culturally diverse society, this can complicate the relationship between comedic intent and reception, as humorous messages rapidly cross cultural boundaries and often spark “collapsing” contexts where “norms from one context seep into the bounds of another” (Davis and Jurgenson 2014, p. 477).

Research shows that comedic tastes are shaped by symbolic boundaries that shape what is considered suitably humorous (Kuipers 2011). These boundaries reflect social divides along lines of class (Friedman and Kuipers 2013), gender (Tosun et al. 2018), and ethnicity (Jiang et al. 2019). In the digital era, humor’s production and circulation have become public, with digital platforms facilitating the hypervisibility and mass sharing of humorous content (Sobande et al. 2022). When humor goes viral, it often presupposes a “global village” of shared values, but today’s highly polarized public sphere reveals humor as a marker of differing values: Shared laughter signals common ground, while taking offense suggests contrasting values or beliefs. Viewed as such, the recurrent claim in conservative circles that “the woke can’t take a joke” (Mann 2021) as well as critiques from the left that certain reactionary forms of humor are “just not funny” (Okundaye 2020) overlook how humor is first and foremost a reflection of distinct cultural contexts. To dismiss certain reactionary forms of humor as unfunny, for example, runs the risk ignoring the growing success of an entire industry of anti-establishment humor, both in the form of an organized community of professional comedians, as well as more decentralized but outspokenly partisan digital communities surrounding platforms such as *4chan*, *9gag*, *Gab* or *Truth Social*.

I argue that it is thus incorrect to equate approving or disapproving of specific attempts at humor with having or not having a so-called sense of humor. Instead, perceptions on the affordances and limits of humor go beyond content and intention when assessing intercultural differences. For example, when professional comedian Tony Hinchcliffe spoke at a political rally in October 2024, he was publicly condemned for racist jokes – referring to Puerto Rico as a “floating island of garbage.” Hinchcliffe himself, known for his distinct “roast” comedy style, was quick to publicly rebut his critics with the claim that “these people have no sense of humor” and that his joke was taken out of context (Hinchcliffe 2024). As such, discourses on humor are often problematically intertwined with issues of inclusion and exclusion, where taking offense is reduced to lacking a sense of humor. Yet scholarship underlines that stark differences indeed exist between cultures in terms of preferred humor styles, but also regarding views on when, why or even how to laugh (e.g., Yue et al. 2016). Contemporary discourses on the boundaries of humor thus often hinge on stereotypical us-them dynamics, taking form in terms of defenders of the freedom to mock, and a perceived “humorless Others” (Kuipers 2011).

Furthermore, claims that humorous free speech would be universal (and in extension untouchable) ignores the historical contingency of such a right and inequalities in access to it. Equally does it overlook the plights that it accompanies in a pluralist and multicultural society. To understand public humor, in other words, one cannot look beyond cultural differences both external as well as internal to the contexts in which it take place. In this sense, public humor literacy ideally facilitates cross-cultural dialogue and understanding, which acknowledges both the cultural relativity and ideological specificity of public humor today.

3.4 Thesis 4

Thesis 4: The voice of the speaker – i.e. identity, social positioning, and cultural authority – affects how humor is perceived in and influences public discourse.

Individual freedom of speech – i.e. the freedom to hold opinions and receive and impart information and ideas – is widely recognized and enshrined in different transnational declarations. Article 19 in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, for example, posits “the right to freedom of opinion and expression (...) through any media and regardless of frontiers” (United Nations General Assembly 1948). Similarly, the US First Amendment – by now an international shorthand for the right to free speech – delineates the limits to governmental interference in instances of public expression. However, debates on the boundaries of free speech have been around as long as the idea itself. In this context, article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights explicitly formulates how free speech “carries with it duties and

responsibilities [and] may be subject to such formalities, conditions, restrictions or penalties as are prescribed by law and are necessary in a democratic society” (European Court of Human Rights 2021, p. 12). In other words, freedom of speech in this sense can be seen as a normative goal rather than an inexhaustible principle, and is arguably subject to contextual limitations. Among these, are limitations pertaining to the voice or role of the speaker or producer of public humor.

Public humor literacy underscores the need for understanding *who* communicated *what* from which *position* and with which *intent*. In this sense, the speaker’s social positionality matters, for example if that actor represents specific ideological, economic, cultural or political interests. In other words, I contend that public humor’s impact is equally defined by its cultural or historic context, as by who expresses it. In this regard, research on public humor scandals (Herkman and Koivukoski 2024) has revealed how public controversies on humor are caused almost exclusively by politicians or professional comedians. This is not to say that public humor produced by less publicly visible actors cannot be transgressive or, vice versa, is immediately always innocuous. Rather, it underlines how humor’s societal impact, when produced in more private social contexts, often has far less societally detrimental potential.

The oft-cited platitude that humor’s ideally punches up and not down equally implies that the social position of the humorist plays a role in how humor is perceived among audiences, and what impact it has as a form of humorous critique. In the world of stand-up comedy, for example, a 2022 comedy special by UK comedian Ricky Gervais sparked backlash on account of alleged transphobic content, which the comedian frequently defended as “just jokes” (BBC 2022). The comedic bit in question – a graphic description linking transwomen to sexual assault – was seen by some as punching up i.e. questioning the prominence of discourses on comedic free speech and public sensitivities to trans-issues themselves. Conversely, it could be said that Gervais’ recurrent references to his financial wealth in the same show meant that he abandoned his humility as comedic underdog, undermining the subversive potential of his humor (Nicolai and Maesele 2024). In addition, as Zijp (2025) has discussed, professional comedians increasingly construct a troubled notion of their comic persona, which can obscure audiences’ perceptions of comedy’s claims to truth or authenticity. Notwithstanding that this “playing with the borders between real and staged” (Zijp 2025, p. 12) can inspire conversations on humor’s capacity as social commentary, it can also further the increasingly politicized nature of humor as anything can ultimately be ‘just a joke’ regardless of who does the joking.

Such observations underline the need for conceptual distinctions between ‘actual’ comedic critique and ‘mere’ comedic ridicule or criticism – a distinction between a bottom-up interrogation of deep-rooted structural contingencies, or mere subjective discontent disguised as a profound deconstruction of socio-political issues.

These tensions gain visibility today in the rising number of court cases on public forms of humor in Western contexts (Godioli and Young 2023). Yet, contrary to public perception, as fueled by reactionary discourses on cancel culture and wokeness, one common denominator in jurisprudence on humor is that courts ideally refrain from the restriction of humor which is offensive on a purely subjective basis (Godioli and Young 2023, p. 34). Rather, what is taken into account is whether humor is deliberately and recognizable framed as such by the speaker, or whether the transgressions serves any public interest. To be literate in public humor thus invites audiences to interpret the message in light of its source, and critically interrogate the intentions behind and positionality governing the production and dissemination of humorous messages.

3.5 Thesis 5

Thesis 5: Humor operates via distinct humor mechanisms and genres – e.g., satire, irony, sarcasm – which codefine its effects and potential as a tool for social critique. Public humor literacy necessitates understanding of distinct humor mechanisms and genres to avoid a monolithic understanding of humor. Rather, what we call humor is a diverse collection of genres, styles or forms of expression pertaining to the humorous, each with their own internal logic or rhetorical aim. In addition to the previous theses above – covering ideology, context, voice – I argue, that understanding humor on a content level is equally important to mitigating humor-related conflict in the public sphere. Examples are the nuanced differences between sarcasm and irony (Burgers and van Mulken 2017), or satire and parody (Salomon 2006), or the role of intertextuality in humorous texts (Tsakona 2020). Not being aware of such distinctions runs the risk of reductionist, dichotomous understandings of humor's role in the public sphere as either singularly lighthearted or, conversely, that humor has exclusively become a site of political antagonism. Furthermore, I contend that many controversies regarding humor have originated, at least in part, from the conflation of concepts such as irony, sarcasm, satire or parody, which fuel misunderstandings and obscure intentions or ideological underpinnings of certain humorous expressions.

By now, over a century of academic literature has attempted to define humor-related key concepts such as laughter (Bergson 1911), parody (Hutcheon 1985), satire (Simpson 2003) or the semantics of humorous ambiguity (Raskin 1984). Yet, even within academia definitional consensus is not a given and interpretations of humor mechanisms are contingent on normative or paradigmatic contexts (Nieuwenhuis and Zijp 2022; Peifer 2012). It is, however, commonly assumed that certain forms of humor ideally grant comedians a form of comic license (Quirk 2010) which allows

them to transgress the bounds of non-humorous speech. On the other hand, however, events such as the Van Langenhove trial and its public reception teach us that certain humorous genres are increasingly instrumentalized as rhetorical defense strategies – e.g. the claim that racist memes are ‘only satire’ – problematizing the perceived ‘comic innocence’ of humor in the public sphere (Zijp 2024).

The ability to recognize certain humoristic features could allow audiences to distinguish between, for example, distinctly racist humor – e.g., ridiculing or playing out racial stereotypes – and humor *about* racial issues – e.g., ironically referencing racial tropes to satirically critique broader discourses of intercultural tensions. In this sense, public humor literacy also ideally facilitates a tolerance towards the unique merits of humor in terms of challenging hegemonic discourses or status quos.

However, herein arguably lies the most pertinent challenge of an attempt at formulating guidelines for public humor literacy: In the context of increasing politicization of public humor, such insights are increasingly appropriated in defense of expressions that thread the line between humor and more disruptive forms of speech such as racism or hate speech. In recent years, it has become noticeable how satire or irony are increasingly strategically instrumentalized. To illustrate, in 2021 the owner of Flemish openly rightwing satirical magazine *‘tScheldt* was sentenced to six months in prison and a fine of 4,000 euros for inciting hate speech with the publication of a defaming photograph of spokesperson to the Flemish liberal party, Zelfa Madhloum – a Belgian citizen with Iraqi roots. In response to the ruling, the magazine posted a public reply asserting that the image was merely humorous “clickbait” and that *‘tScheldt* “does satire, and supports a non-violent, laughing society” (De Ziel 2021). In turn, the judge ruling in the case countered these claims, stating that “[*‘tScheldt*’s] questionable publications show no sign of satirical exaggeration, irony or sarcasm” (Meeussen 2024).

As discussions on the boundaries of humor grow ever more public, the role of jurisprudence plays an increasingly important role. A recent body of research (Godioli 2020; Godioli and Young 2023) has set out to chart this growing correspondence between humor, legal frameworks, and content moderation on freedom of expression. Here, findings show how courts transnationally strive to protect humorous free speech, but also stress the urgency of a uniform terminology to “set the basis for a more consistent approach to the subjectivity of humor” (Godioli and Young 2023, p. 36). To understand the complexities of humor as critique, some authors have attempted to distinguish between different forms of subversive humor. As such, the terms such as “pseudo-satire” (Medjesky 2016) or “weak reflexivity” (Colpean and Tully 2019) have been introduced to describe humor that appears satirical but lacks meaningful social critique. Such forms of superficially progressive humor, can then serve to reinforce the very ideologies they seem to target. In other words, it

is important to note that not all humor is satirical, and comedic ridicule or criticism does not always equate to profound critique.

4 Conclusions

A 2021 report by the European Commission's Radicalization Awareness Network (RAN) highlights the challenges posed by "a new generation of violent extremists emerging from digital subcultures without a clear organizational center." The report further emphasizes the need for prevention strategies that address "the intangible nature of online cultures" (Fielitz and Ahmed 2021, p. 4). Yet, it is not only humorous extremes that exhibit this intangible or abstract quality. Similarly to broader socio-political polemics that mark our society today, public discourse on humor also reflect what Phelan (2023) terms "an atmosphere of wild antagonism [where] discourses are recontextualized in unpredictable ways from one universe to another" (p. 16). As such, humor has become a pervasive theme woven into many broader societal conversations, encompassing debates on free speech, multicultural tensions, moral panics, and electoral conflicts. This article argued that such an entrenchment in public discourse accentuates the need for a form of public humor literacy – an informed, reflective engagement with humor that aligns with values of an open and pluralist public sphere.

Humor functions as a touchstone for freedom of expression, yet it is also this same freedom that can enable exclusion, division, and the reinforcement of anti-democratic sentiments. As humor theorists Sharon Lockyer and Michael Pickering observed over a decade ago, "anyone studying humor needs a sharp ear for the ambiguities and polysemy that are integral to its specific semantic domain and the ways in which it operates discursively" (Lockyer and Pickering 2008, p. 812). Once primarily the realm of scholars and professional comedians, the critical study of humor has now become an essential skill for broader audiences as well. The five theses in this article are not presented as a rigid framework, but as foundational inspiration for ongoing research, policy, and practical discussions surrounding humor literacy. These insights are meant to be a starting point rather than definitive answers – encouraging further exploration of humor literacy as it intersects with and informs public discourse.

A distinct core challenge in operationalizing public humor literacy is the inherently politicized nature of humor moderation, and the simultaneously important and contentious role of free speech in this process. Any initiative that seeks to moderate humor must grapple with the risk of it being perceived as breaching the fundamentals of free speech, or as exacerbating the same "us-them" dynamics it aims to mitigate. Highlighting these concerns, Tsakona (2020) has noted that certain forms

of literacy “consolidate the distinction between ingroup members, who understand the humorous text at hand and share its values and presuppositions, and outgroup ones, who cannot grasp or deliberately resist the values and presuppositions underlying the humorous text” (p. 43). This underscores the need for humor literacy to be inclusive and adaptable, recognizing the nuances of humor in diverse social contexts without imposing rigid boundaries.

To advance public humor literacy, future research must take an inclusive multi-level approach. First, (transnational) survey analyses could assess current levels of public awareness around humor literacy, identifying foundational factors that contribute to this citizens’ understanding of and engagement with humor in the public sphere. Additionally, comparative analyses of humor literacy practices in educational contexts could reveal how public institutions in the field of humor production – i.e., cabaret programs or stand-up comedy workshops – conceptualize the public role of humor. By conducting interviews and ethnographic research, research can examine the influence of local institutions, events, and cultural initiatives on humor production and interpretation. Finally, research can focus on the effects of humor moderation initiatives on social media platforms, which play an increasingly prominent role in the dissemination of partisan and ideologically divisive humorous content. Recent efforts to counter mis- and disinformation have led platforms like X and Instagram to adopt community-driven content moderation, which provides users with contextual information around potentially harmful content. Analysis of these moderation practices and their reception by the public would yield insights into the political and social dynamics surrounding humor regulation in digital spaces. Together, these research directions could foster a more nuanced understanding of humor’s role in a highly mediated, pluralist yet polarized society, guiding the development of a form of humor literacy that is emancipatory, critical and democratic.

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Bionote

Jonas Nicolai

Center for Sociological Research, KU Leuven, Parkstraat 45, 3000 Leuven, Belgium

Jonas.nicolai@kuleuven.be

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8000-2935>

Jonas Nicolai obtained a PhD in Social Sciences at the University of Antwerp in 2023. His dissertation explores hybrid role conceptions in political satire and the changing role of humorous social critique in public debate. He has published on hybrid journalistic identities, news satire and COVID-19, and stand-up comedy and discourses on 'wokeness'. Recently, Dr. Nicolai completed a postdoctoral research project at the Centre for Sociological Research (KU Leuven), where he investigated the role of humor in social (media) conflicts in the European public sphere. Currently he teaches at the Faculty of Social Sciences (KU Leuven) and contributes to projects on interdisciplinary literacy and citizenship education.