

COMEDY OFF COURSE

The changing faces of political satire
in Flanders and the Netherlands



Jonas Nicolai

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**Universiteit
Antwerpen**

Faculty of Social Sciences
Department of Communication Studies

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**The changing faces of political satire
in Flanders and the Netherlands**

Thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor in Social Sciences
at the University of Antwerp to be defended by

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“You have people that want to hear comedy where
they don’t have to think about anything.
To me they are missing the point. They say ‘I just want to escape from reality.’
No you don’t. You want to escape from illusions.”
— **Bill Hicks (January 1994)**

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Acknowledgments

In 2006, I walked through the gates of the University of Antwerp for the first time. I was seventeen when I set my first insecure academic steps in the form of an overambitious enrolment in a bachelor's degree in Philosophy. Although the attempt was short-lived—illness in my family made I had to cease my education and pick up a job—a spark had been lit. A year and a half later, I returned to start anew—imagining myself somewhat older and wiser—this time taking my chances at a degree in Sociology. After the four years it took me to finish my bachelor's, I decided to take up my master's in another city. And so I left (again) and graduated from the University of Ghent. But the pull of the University of Antwerp remained. And so I came back (again) and took up a teacher's course in social sciences. Following a short but intense period as a substitute high school teacher, I returned for a third time, to work as a staff member at our university, in the field of diversity and equal opportunities.

A pattern was emerging. And although at times it felt more like Stockholm syndrome than a healthy career choice, when I read of a job opening as a Ph.D researcher at the Faculty of Social Sciences, I could hardly resist to continue the path that I seemed to be carving out here. Now four years later, I am twice the age as when I walked into this same building for the first time. Perhaps now I am twice as clever, twice as well-read, twice as grey, wear twice the shirt size. What is certain is that I am grateful more than a million times over.

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Now flip the page as I'll do soon.

Jonas Nicolai
Antwerp, 2023

English summary

Today's mediated public sphere is increasingly characterized by a proliferation of political satire formats, underbuilt by the growing acknowledgment that humour can enact political work and contribute effectively to public debate. This dissertation sets out to explore the societal role of political satire within contemporary media landscapes in Flanders and the Netherlands.

Given the nature of political satire, such an investigation requires a multidimensional approach. We explore the societal role of political satire by (i) examining the evolving roles and self-perceptions of satirists in Flanders and the Netherlands, and (ii) interrogating the evolution of satirical critique against the backdrop of shifting socio-political contexts. A first reading of the title of this dissertation refers to the need to critically unpack changing perceptions on the roles political satirists enact, challenging the notion that political satire is just *comedy, of course*. A second reading of the title of this dissertation alludes to the observation that the changing roles of political satire have in some instances resulted in satire having gone *off course*, reinterpreting its satirical role in our current socio-political conjuncture.

This dissertation predominantly draws from the fields of journalism studies and humour studies. From each field, it draws from a critical tradition of literature that interprets humour and comedy as potential sites of political contestation and acknowledges the contingency of journalism's authority as a "truth-telling" discourse. Additionally, it draws from media studies to link the two vis-à-vis their role in democratic debate and the facilitation of public discourse.

These insights are brought together in four empirical studies, formatted for publication in scientific journals. The case studies in this dissertation comprise two instances of political satire in Flanders and the Netherlands—television news satire and stand-up comedy—embodied by respectively the Flemish and Dutch television news satire shows *De Ideale Wereld* (2013–...) and *Zondag met Lubach* (2014–2021), and Flemish stand-up comedian Michael Van Peel. What binds these two instances of political satire is their combination of humour and non-humorous discourse in the deconstruction of current affairs which has validated their status as legitimate voices in public debate.

Study 1 focuses on the enactment and negotiation of genre hybridity and its effect on the role conceptions of satirists. It reports on an analysis of semi-structured (11) and conversational (12) interviews with staff of the Flemish political satire show *De Ideale Wereld*, combined with a three-week observational period in the show's "satirical newsroom." This study concludes that the show's inherent genre hybridity resulted in an ongoing negotiation of its creators' role conceptions. In contrast with predominant assumptions of satire's journalistic qualities, the findings show how *De Ideale Wereld* is characterised by a diversity of intentions located on different ends of the spectrum between comedic absurdity and critical commentary.

Study 2 sets out to investigate the reception of political satire in the media landscape and the journalistic community over time. It reports on an analysis of the metajournalistic discourse surrounding 64 media appearances of staff and host of the Dutch political satire show *Zondag met Lubach*. On the one hand, findings show how *Zondag met Lubach* inspired professional journalists and news media to critically question their own roles. Additionally, they reveal how *Zondag met Lubach* itself has, over time, acknowledged its role as a novel incantation of journalistic storytelling in the form of "investigative comedy".

Study 3 sets out to analyse the way political satire has engaged with scientific discourse during the global COVID-19 pandemic. Here, we present a qualitative content analysis of 30 COVID-19-related segments of the Dutch political satire show *Zondag met Lubach*. The analysis reveals how *Zondag met Lubach* adhered to its conventional critical stance towards policy-makers and shortcomings in news media practices, but expanded its satirical role to engage in a normatively guided didactical dissemination of governmental pandemic measures. Thus, the pandemic context allowed *Zondag met Lubach* to reimagine its satirical critique and expand its public role to a form of science disseminator and public advocate for pandemic measures.

Study 4 furthers this notion of a reimagined role for political satire in public debate through the case of Flemish stand-up comedian Michael Van Peel. It zooms in on the specific relationship between comedy, humour and the increasing societal awareness of issues of social injustice and free speech. A multi-modal analysis incorporates an in-depth interview with stand-up comedian Michael Van Peel; interviews in Flemish media, columns in Flemish

upmarket newspaper *De Standaard*, and stand-up special *Welcome to the Rebellion!* Findings reveal that stand-up comedians have increasingly and more explicitly begun to incorporate discussions on the role of comedy within their work, while at the same time conceiving the current political moment as a hurdle for comedic practice. To counter these tensions, it concludes that satirical critique serves public debate best by overcoming conventional notions of comedic critique as ridicule and reimagining itself as a form of resistance.

This dissertation contributes to broader discussions on the role of popular culture as a platform for public debate. Our focus on the hybridity that characterises the modes of political satire in our studies poses as a guide for research beyond the satirical, as the increasing hyperconvergence of communication media in terms of modality, genres, and discursive registers brings about a growing number of novel forms of hybrid political discourse. Second, this dissertation has produced insights into the nature of comedic storytelling as a valid epistemic practice. As such, this dissertation underscores the significance of storytelling in popular culture and journalism, emphasising its indelible role as a powerful lens through which we gain critical insights, navigate social complexities, and foster a deeper understanding of the world around us.

Nederlandse samenvatting

De hedendaagse publieke sfeer wordt steeds meer gekenmerkt door een overvloed aan satirisch formats, onderbouwd door de groeiende erkenning dat humor opereert als een vorm van politiek discours en effectief kan bijdragen aan het publieke debat. Deze dissertatie heeft als doel de maatschappelijke rol van politieke satire te onderzoeken in de context van hedendaagse media in Vlaanderen en Nederland.

Gezien de aard van politieke satire vereist een dergelijk onderzoek een multidimensionale aanpak. Deze dissertatie bevraagt de maatschappelijke rol van politieke satire door (i) de evoluerende rollen en zelfpercepties van satirici in Vlaanderen en Nederland te onderzoeken, en (ii) de ontwikkeling van satirische kritiek te ondervragen tegen de achtergrond van veranderende sociaal-politieke contexten. Een eerste lezing van de titel van deze dissertatie verwijst naar de noodzaak om veranderende percepties van de rollen die politieke satirici vervullen kritisch te ontrafelen, en zo te kijken voorbij het idee dat politieke satire “slechts comedy” is (*comedy, of course*). Een tweede lezing van de titel van deze dissertatie alludeert op de observatie dat de veranderende rollen van politieke satire er in bepaalde gevallen toe hebben geleid dat de maatschappijkritische rol van politieke satire wordt geherinterpreteerd in relatie tot onze huidige sociaal-politieke context (*comedy off course*).

Deze dissertatie put uit de vakgebieden journalism studies en humour studies. Uit elk vakgebied wordt geput uit een kritische traditie van literatuur die humor en komedie interpreteert als mogelijke terreinen van politieke contestatie en de contingentie van de autoriteit van journalistiek als een op waarheid geënt discours erkent. Daarnaast wordt gebruikgemaakt van media studies om beide vakgebieden te verbinden in relatie tot de rol van journalistiek en humor in het democratische en publieke debat.

Deze inzichten worden samengebracht in vier empirische studies, opgesteld voor publicatie in wetenschappelijke tijdschriften. De case studies in deze dissertatie omvatten twee vormen van politieke satire in Vlaanderen en Nederland—nieuwssatire en stand-up comedy—vertegenwoordigd door respectievelijk de Vlaamse en Nederlandse

nieuwssatireshows *De Ideale Wereld* (2013–...) en *Zondag met Lubach* (2014-2021), en de Vlaamse stand-up comedian Michael Van Peel. De groeiende populariteit van nieuwssatire en stand-up comedy weerspiegelt de steeds belangrijker rol van populaire cultuur in het publieke debat. Wat deze twee gevallen van politieke satire verbindt, is hun combinatie van humor en niet-humoristisch discours in de deconstructie van actuele gebeurtenissen, waardoor hun status als legitieme stemmen in het publieke debat wordt bevestigd.

Studie 1 richt zich op de uitvoering en onderhandeling van genrehybriditeit en het effect ervan op de rolconcepties van satirici. Het rapporteert een analyse van semi-gestructureerde interviews (11) en conversationele interviews (12) medewerkers van de Vlaamse satire show *De Ideale Wereld*, in combinatie met een observatieperiode van drie weken in de „satirische nieuwsredactie“ van de show. Deze studie concludeert dat de inherente genrehybriditeit van de show heeft geleid tot een voortdurende onderhandeling over de rolconcepties van de makers. In tegenstelling tot conventionele aannames over de journalistieke kwaliteiten van satire, tonen de bevindingen aan hoe *De Ideale Wereld* wordt gekenmerkt door een diversiteit aan intenties die zich bevinden aan uiteenlopende uiteinden van het spectrum tussen komische absurditeit en sociaalkritische commentaar.

Studie 2 heeft tot doel de receptie van politieke satire in het medialandschap en de journalistieke gemeenschap in longitudinaal perspectief te onderzoeken. Het rapporteert een analyse van het metajournalistieke discours rond 64 interviews van medewerkers en de presenter van de Nederlandse nieuwssatireshow *Zondag met Lubach*. Enerzijds tonen de bevindingen aan hoe *Zondag met Lubach* professionele journalisten en nieuwsmedia heeft geïnspireerd om kritisch hun eigen rollen te bevragen. Daarnaast laten ze zien hoe *Zondag met Lubach* zelf in de loop der tijd hun rol heeft erkend als een nieuwe vorm van journalistiek in de vorm van „investigative comedy“.

Studie 3 heeft als doel te analyseren hoe politieke satire zich heeft verhouden tot wetenschappelijke discoursen in de context van de globale COVID-19-pandemie. Deze studie rapporteert een kwalitatieve contentanalyse van 30 COVID-19-gerelateerde segmenten van de Nederlandse nieuwssatireshow *Zondag met Lubach*. De analyse geeft weer hoe *Zondag met Lubach* actief een kritische houding ten opzichte van beleidsmakers en

tekortkomingen in nieuwsmedia-praktijken uitdraagt, maar eveneens hun satirische rol uitbreidde naar een normatief geleide didactische verspreiding van overheidsmaatregelen tijdens de pandemie. Zo bood de pandemische context *Zondag met Lubach* de mogelijkheid om hun satirische kritiek te herinterpreteren en hun publieke rol uit te breiden naar een vorm van wetenschapsvoorlichter en pleitbezorger voor pandemische maatregelen.

Studie 4 bouwt voort op het idee van een herinterpretatie van de rol van politieke satire in het publieke debat aan de hand van de case van de Vlaamse stand-up comedian Michael Van Peel. Deze studie zoomt in op de specifieke relatie tussen komedie, humor en het groeiende maatschappelijke bewustzijn van kwesties met betrekking tot sociale onrechtvaardigheid en vrijheid van meningsuiting. Een multimodale analyse omvat een diepgaand interview met stand-up comedian Michael Van Peel; interviews in de Vlaamse media, columns in de Vlaamse kwaliteitskrant *De Standaard* en de stand-up special *Welcome to the Rebellion!*⁶. De bevindingen tonen aan dat stand-up comedians in hun werk steeds meer en explicieter discussies zijn gaan opnemen over de rol van komedie, terwijl ze tegelijkertijd het huidige politieke moment beschouwen als een hindernis voor het produceren van comedy. De studie concludeert dat, om deze spanningen tegen te gaan, satirische kritiek het publieke debat idealiter dient door conventionele opvattingen van komische kritiek als ridiculisering te overstijgen en zichzelf opnieuw uit te vinden als een vorm van verzet.

Deze dissertatie draagt bij aan bredere discussies over de rol van populaire cultuur als platform voor publiek debat. Onze focus op de hybriditeit die de politieke satirevormen in onze studies kenmerkt, dient als een gids voor onderzoek buiten de satirische context, omdat de toenemende hyperconvergentie van communicatiemediën op het gebied van modaliteit, genres en discursieve registers leidt tot een groeiend aantal nieuwe vormen van hybride politieke discoursen. Vervolgens heeft deze dissertatie inzichten opgeleverd in de aard van humor als een valide vorm van op waarheid gerichte storytelling. Als zodanig benadrukt deze dissertatie het belang van storytelling in populaire cultuur en journalistiek en onderstreept het de onuitwisbare rol ervan als een krachtige lens waardoor we kritische inzichten verwerven, sociale complexiteiten navigeren en een dieper begrip van de wereld om ons heen bevorderen.

INTRODUCTION



In 2018, the self-proclaimed leading satirical talk show hosts of five European countries—the Netherlands, Switzerland, Denmark, Germany, and Luxemburg—convened with the ambitious goal of organizing the first European Comedic Summit. The organizers envisioned a gathering of comedic delegates from across the continent, resembling an EU counter-summit reminiscent of the Eurovision Song Contest, to be held bi-annually at the Europe building in Brussels. The idea had grown out of the viral success of the Dutch satire show *Zondag met Lubach*'s video "America First, Netherlands Second": released a year prior, the video humorously mocked United States President Trump's "America First" motto in the form of a faux-promotional campaign for the Netherlands. A trend was in the making when the German satirical talk show *Neo Magazin Royale* released its own version of the video titled "America First, Germany Second." Soon after, the hosts of these two shows joined forces to create the online platform everysecondcounts.eu, which issued an open call for other satirists to contribute their own tongue-in-cheek "America First" parodies. In a single year, the platform amassed submissions from satirical talk shows from 41 countries worldwide. The contributions were not restricted to Western European countries but emanated from nations as diverse as Armenia, Chile, Namibia, Iran, and New Zealand.

Despite ending in a dud—the European Comedy Summit was postponed in 2018 to eventually be cancelled entirely a year later—this series of events illustrates the well-established presence of political satire in international media landscapes today. It seems indeed, that our current conjuncture functions as a "new golden age of satire" (Holm, 2023, p. 4), characterized by a "triumph of comedy [over tragedy]" (Kawalec, 2020 p. 3). As such, political satire has become a staple of many different genres in the realm of comedy. This is evident in the successes of satirical talk shows, but also in the market dominance on streaming platforms that stand-up comedy enjoys (Schwerdtfeger, 2017), or the playful politics of memes in the online worlds we frequent (Mortensen & Neumayer, 2021).

The European Comedy Summit and its preceding call for action mark some of satire's key features. Inherently liminal, satire blends humour with social commentary in a "playfully critical distortion of the familiar" (Steinberg, 1967 p. 19). In doing so, satirists aim their arrows from the margins and "call into question the taken-for-granted assumptions underpinning social life" (Hill, 2013, p. 330). Furthermore, it is increasingly acknowledged "that humour can be used as

a political weapon” (Nieuwenhuis & Zijp, 2022, p. 344). In this sense, our contemporary media landscape is characterized by an ever-narrowing epistemic disparity between comedy and other forms of political discourse, evidenced in the magnitude of public controversies such as the Danish cartoon controversy (Kuipers, 2011) or the Charlie Hebdo terrorist attack (Dawes, 2015). In other words, political satire has become a focal point in many public issues and plays a vital role in political sense-making for its audiences.

That satirists are boundary-crossers who set out to question those in power is indeed the standard line of argument. But satire remains a complicated beast. As a sociological lens on the world (Smith, 2015), satire has the potential to reflect the given order of a particular socio-political moment. Griffin (1994) has noted that satire always emerges at particular times and places (Griffin, 1994, p. 134). As such, the widespread proliferation of political satire we see today brings about the need for further assessment of the role of satirists in today’s hyper-mediated public arena. This dissertation sets out to investigate these changing faces of political satire in the context of Flanders (the Dutch-speaking region of Belgium) and the Netherlands. In order to understand the specific socio-political contingencies of political satire in these contexts, we do so by focusing on two distinct dimensions of its engagement with public discourse.

A first reading of the title of this dissertation refers to the need to critically unpack changing perceptions on the roles political satirists enact, challenging the notion that political satire is just *comedy, of course*. Political satire has always dealt with political issues and current affairs. But today, discussions on the impact of comedy and satire itself are increasingly finding their way into public discourse. Despite the growing prominence of political satire in public debates, satirists have in the past been found to minimise their role as political commentators (Young, 2004) and are often perceived as comedic outsiders by audiences (Feldman, 2007; Tenenboim-Weinblatt, 2007). For example, when Jon Stewart appeared on CNN’s current affairs show *Crossfire* back in 2004, then hosts Paul Begala and Tucker Carlson tried to hold him accountable for appeasing presidential candidate John Kerry in an interview. With a phrase he would frequently use and repeat, Stewart replied: “*You’re on CNN. The show that leads into me [n.b. on a network called “Comedy Central”] is puppets making crank phone calls*” (Bella, 2023). Similarly, stand-up comedians such as Ricky Gervais have recurrently reminded their

audiences to “remember, [it’s] just jokes” (Gervais, 2020), despite the often-polemic nature of their work.

But as political satire has proliferated, symbolical separations between the comedic and more “serious” forms of discourse have become porous. As a result, satirists are now also acknowledging their expanded roles as journalistic actors (Koivukoski & Ödmark, 2020) or social rights advocates (Waisanen, 2018). This has resulted in an increasing professional reflexivity among satirists which guides the production of political satire and informs the self-understanding of satirical or comedic roles (Koivukoski & Ödmark, 2021; Lichtenstein et al., 2021). Furthermore, in an era marked by concerns over misinformation, the need for the study of roles grows in importance as dimensions of credibility and trustworthiness in public debate take up a more central role (Ekström et al., 2020).

A second reading of the title of this dissertation alludes to the observation that the changing roles of political satire have in some instances resulted in satire having gone off course, reinterpreting its satirical role in our current socio-political conjuncture. This satirical role has conventionally been informed by an intention to interrogate power through humour or comedy. Traditionally, the practice of critique has been attributed to a limited number of social institutions and together with, for example, journalism or literature, political satire has been one of a few forms of discourse granted the licence to interrogate societal conventions with relative impunity. However, as our current socio-political moment is characterised by “the expression of a variety of resistance to the political and economic transformations seen during the years of neoliberal hegemony” (Mouffe, 2018, p. 12), critical reflections on the affordances of satirical critique have emerged (e.g., Holm, 2018; Kilby, 2019). Following Nieuwenhuis & Zijp (2022), we link this observation to what Jäger (2022) has termed the shift from a post-political to a hyperpolitical zeitgeist: Where “nothing was political“ in a mode of post-politics, “everything is political, and fervently so” in a state of hyperpolitics (Jäger, 2022a, para. 8).

As a result, in this changing socio-political context, the political work of satire has become more ideologically complicated than conventionally assumed. A large part of scholarly examinations praise political satire for its progressive contributions to democratic debate. Over the last two decades, scholarship has emphasised the role that humour plays in

facilitating public debate (Lockyer & Pickering; 2008; Kuipers, 2011; Becker & Bode, 2018), or pointed towards the inherently progressive power of political satire as a form of political counterdiscourse (Baym, 2005; Day, 2011; Petrovic, 2018). Recent research, however, has questioned the progressive potential of satirical talk shows in challenging the liberal status quo (Nieuwenhuis, 2022) or more broadly pointed towards the limits of satire in terms of its interventions in political issues (Holm, 2023).

Where some formats surely manage to spark public debate, it is conceivable that others fail to live up to their critical promise. On the one hand, the now widespread establishment of satirical talk shows has resulted in numerous shows internationally that draw on formulaic elements of well-known forerunners such as the United States' *Last Week Tonight*—known for its openly progressive project and critique of neoliberalism (Wild, 2019). On the other hand, the appeal of the satirical talk show format has also surged to such an extent that in Flanders, for example, Dries Van Langenhove, a noted right-wing commentator and ex-member of parliament, has launched a version of his own (KiesDries, 2023). In this web-exclusive satirical talk show, Van Langenhove ironically lampoons social issues, taking a right-wing stance to debate topics such as race, gender, and perceived encroachments on free speech. Evidently, then, not all satire is created equal, calling for further investigation into the changing nature of satirical critique.

What follows is an overview of the main research questions that guide this dissertation and the paradigmatic context in which they are answered. Thereafter, I elaborate on the inherent hybridity of political satire and the interdisciplinary nature of this work by introducing the fields of media studies, journalism studies, and humour studies, and their points of overlap. Following an overview of the case studies, I unpack the research design and empirical studies it comprises.

Research purpose and conceptual underpinnings

This dissertation sets out to explore the societal role of political satire within the rapidly changing contemporary media landscape in Flanders and the Netherlands. Given the nature

of political satire, such an investigation requires a multidimensional approach. Taken together, this dissertation explores the changing faces of political satire by:

- (i) examining the evolving roles and self-perceptions of satirists in Flanders and the Netherlands, and;
- (ii) interrogating the evolution of satirical critique against the backdrop of shifting socio-political contexts.

Political satire can take many forms: From television news satire to live theatre cabaret, and from satirical podcasts such as *The Bugle* to satirical social media content found on TikTok or YouTube. This dissertation zooms in on television news satire and stand-up comedy as they are among the more widely recognised and proliferated forms of political satire today. For one, different television news satire shows across the globe have recurrently received accolades for their successful contributions to political debate and public discourse. The notable *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, for example, has received multiple Peabody Awards for its “unmatched wit and unorthodox approach in putting the [2004 US] Presidential Election in perspective without diminishing its importance” (The Daily Show, 2004). Similarly, *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver* has won seven consecutive Prime Time Emmy Awards for Outstanding Variety Talk Series with critics and staff alike acknowledging the success of the show’s shedding light on social issues, through what Oliver himself terms “tenacious research” (Variety, 2016). As a result, these shows have become internationally recognizable formats, and a blueprint for many political satire shows to follow (e.g., Ibrahim & Eltantawy, 2017; Kleinen-von Königslöw & Keel, 2012).

Stand-up comedy, on the other hand, is increasingly acknowledged as a “political force” (Webber et al., 2021) and a form of performative satire characterised by authentic and intimate deconstructions of political issues (Deen, 2019). Streaming platform Netflix, for example, has made it a deliberate strategy to pursue the creation and acquisition of so-called stand-up specials—long-form stand-up comedy shows by a single comedian—paying exuberant amounts of money for the rights to established comedy stars such as Dave Chappelle, despite their often controversial status (Krouse & Toonkel, 2022).

However, following Meijer Drees and de Leeuw (2015), this dissertation starts from a view of political satire as a “culturally situated discursive practice” (Meijer Drees & de Leeuw, 2015, p. 1). Viewing political satire as culturally situated opens up the possibility to investigate it in light of its contributions to the shaping of knowledge and understanding within particular socio-political contexts. It has been observed how the “satirical turn in popular comedy” (Holm, 2023, p. 82) is spearheaded predominantly by United States satirical traditions, what Jon Stewart himself has ironically termed the “satirical-industrial complex” (Schaller, 2008). The influence of global comedic industries—in the form of the influential satire formats mentioned above—on the production of satire formats in Flanders and the Netherlands can hardly be overlooked. However, the underlying aim of this dissertation is equally to understand political satire through a localized understanding away from dominant theoretical perspectives originating from international contexts.

Towards an operationalisation of political satire

It is not my intention to offer a working definition of political satire. On the contrary, what we refer to with the term political satire refers to a broad family of satirical discourses. As such, we acknowledge the different attempts that have been made to essentialise political satire (e.g., Condren, 2012; Declerq, 2018; Holbert, 2005; Holbert, 2013). As a term, however, political satire is often conceptualised in an open-ended way, leaving open the possibility of a conflation of interpretations of the term ‘political.’ I operationalise political satire as a specific form of satire which is satirical in its intent to provide social criticism of perceived wrongs (e.g. Griffin, 1994; Gring-Pemble & Watson, 2003) and functions as an expression of political speech (e.g. Day, 2011; Holbert, 2013) through its focus on politics proper and broader dimensions of power and contestation.

Furthermore, following Gray et al. (2009), I contend that laughter and humour are not necessary components of political satire per se, but in the context of our contemporary mediated society audiences generally expect them to be (Gray et al., p. 13). As such, humour, comedy and satire are related but distinct concepts with different functions vis-à-vis our

research questions. Humour can be defined as the rhetorical tool necessary to facilitate laughter, and is used with various functions in mind. For example, humour can be incorporated to improve audience engagement or improve the recognizability and memorability of media content (Becker & Bode, 2017; Young & Tisinger, 2006). On the other hand, it has been shown that humour also reflects ideological dimensions that can divide audiences through, for example, stereotyping or ridicule (e.g., Billig, 2005; Colpean & Tully, 2019). Comedy, then, is a specific genre of entertainment that sets out to foremost entertain its audiences through the production of humorous content. Comedy can take various forms of which television news satire and stand-up comedy are but two. Through the use of humour, the license to disrupt is frequently expanded in comedy (Weaver & Mora, 2015, p. 480). This allows comedy to function as a site for the critical interrogation of social conventions. As such, I contend that not all comedy is satirical, yet the satirical cases analysed in this dissertation are inherently comedic.

My interpretation of political satire is rooted in the critical turn in literary studies: By introducing culturalist perspectives, satire is conceptualised beyond a purely literary art or exclusionary focus on its rhetorical qualities (Griffin, 1994, p. 29). Subsequently, conventional approaches to satire as a literary genre were replaced by conceptualisations of satire as a “rhetoric of provocation and inquiry” (Meijer Drees & de Leeuw, 2015 p. 5), acknowledging that “all literature is based on ideology” (Griffin, p. 2). As such, an analysis of political satire “which points only to its funniness must be so restrictive as to be virtually useless” (Purdie, 1993, p. 114). A critical approach to satire thus defines satire as a form of discourse in its own right. This paradigm shift towards a more culturalist interpretation of satire can be identified today in numerous studies which define satire, for example, as an entertaining “discourse of ironic iconicity” (Waisanen, 2011), an “instance of political discourse” (Day, 2011) or an “open space for dissent” (Bessant, 2017). This interpretation of political satire is explicitly normative in that it ideally functions as an alternative form of sense-making vis-à-vis taken-for-granted assumptions (Hill, 2013), and can take up a democratic role by introducing different perspectives into public debate (Ödmark & Harvard, 2021).

Furthermore, my analyses are embedded in a cultural studies approach which reorients the analytical focus to dynamics of power and ideology embedded in satirical modes of expression. Such an approach indirectly draws on the work of Stuart Hall (1980, 1990) which

presupposes that the process of communication is “in fact the process of (...) the sharing of common meanings and (...) the offering, reception and comparison of new meanings, leading to tensions and achievements of growth and change” (Williams in Hall, 1980, p. 59). It sees culture as a site of political turmoil and the contestation of power, a dynamic informed “by the struggles of the margins to come into representation, by the contestation of the margins for cultural power” (Hall, 1990, p. 21).

Already in the early works of cultural studies thinkers, the scope of analysis for investigating these power dynamics was expanded to include instances of popular culture (e.g., Hall & Whannel, 1964). Such recognition of popular culture’s social importance stands in contrast with, for example, conventional theories on deliberative democracy that assume deliberative discourse to be incongruous with popular culture or entertainment media (Weinmann & Vorderer, 2018). By now, however, the ubiquity of popular culture and its many interactions with the political underline the relevance of studying political satire as a form of discourse where power dynamics are reflected, negotiated or contested.

More specifically, a cultural studies approach to humour has recently been established by Nieuwenhuis & Zijp (2022). Setting out a programme for future research, they assert that such an approach hinges on four characteristics of humour. First, as outlined above, studying political satire in this light assumes that it is inherently bound within power dynamics, and aims to understand how it contributes to the negotiation or contestation of social hierarchies. Second, it is important to view humour in the plural, as a diverse set of cultural practices “not guided by one grand social or political function” (Nieuwenhuis & Zijp, p. 341). What this implies is that aiming to essentialise humour into all-encompassing humour theories can detract from the necessity to research humour in its cultural and political context. Third, a cultural studies approach to humour strives to look beyond the assumed inherently polysemic qualities of humour. In a context where the political work of humour is increasingly acknowledged and evident, rather, gratuitously assuming the open-endedness of humour—i.e., that humour is subjective—has become problematic. Often however, satire or comedy deliberately employs forms of “strategic ambiguity” which anchors meaning in such a way that it exploits the possibility of multiple meanings (Colpean & Tully, 2019; Perks, 2010), highlighting the necessity to zoom in on its ideological dimensions. A final point relates to the need to incorporate into

analysis satire's form and aesthetics to assess its supposed political meaning. As Goltz's (2017, p. 6) has claimed, "the political workings of comedy [and satire] involve much more complicated processes than merely what was said." This implies an analysis of political satire that discerns different ideological dimensions present in a satirical work and looks beyond conventional assumptions that view satirical critique as the conflation of target and ridicule (Simpson, 2003).

This dissertation follows these paradigmatic guidelines to the analysis of political satire but expands its scope to include role conceptions and self-understandings. To assess these dimensions, I apply a discursive approach to satirical identity (Bawarshi, 2000; Hanitzsch & Vos, 2017; Witschge & Harbers, 2018). Following Hanitzsch & Vos (2017, p. 8), I view the satirists' roles and identities as constituted by, and constituent of, the discourse surrounding political satire and its societal function. This allows me to assess the changing faces of political satire as guided by a collection of meanings and meaning-making strategies which infuse their social positions, and ultimately co-define the actuality of their impact. In this regard, Chapters 1 and 2 set out to assess how satirical identities are enacted in the production and reception of political satire. This provides insight into how these identities are reproduced and contested by discursively articulating and enforcing particular interpretations of political satire.

Political satirists increasingly take up the role of social commentator or interpreter of political discourse. Examining satirists' role conceptions may offer valuable insights into the mechanisms of power, resistance, and cultural interpretations of and within our socio-political systems. This is not to say that this dissertation attempts in any way to make claims about the impact of political satire on formal politics proper. The discussion of political satire's impact keeps surfacing, within public debate or, for that matter, in interactions with reviewers throughout the process of publishing our studies. The question of political satire's impact in such terms, however, is inclined more to a positivist and quantitative approach, which is not the approach of this dissertation. Of course, studies have addressed the policy impact of political satire (Boukes, 2019), its merits for knowledge gain on political issues (Becker & Bode, 2018) or its persuasive effects towards news-seeking audiences (Chattoo & Feldman, 2017). In function of our research aim, I nonetheless follow Tinic (2009) in asserting that "although political satire may not lead to extensive structural transformation, it has the capacity to enter the larger sphere of public dialogue through provocation (...) This, in and of itself, can be a

significant political intervention” (p. 176). The studies that do take political satire’s content as a starting point—Chapters 3 and 4—do so with the aim of interrogating how dimensions of comedic critique present in political satire interact with broader societal contexts.

Hybridity as sensitising concept

Throughout this dissertation, hybridity functions as a sensitising concept that guides the execution of our research, its theoretical underpinnings and the collection and analysis of our data (Smaling, 2021). Hybridity can be seen as an all-encompassing concept that describes heterogeneity and blending in different forms. This multiform hybridity offers a necessary foundation to understand the emergence and proliferation of political satire as a hybrid media phenomenon and has inspired a large body of research (Baym, 2005; Day, 2011; Brugman et al., 2022). Below, I discuss how I understand hybridity and how it informs the remainder of this work.

Three distinct dimensions of hybridity can be identified (Baym, 2017), which inspire our study of political satire on multiple levels. On the textual level, first, hybridity refers to the combinations of generic forms and styles. What is termed genre appropriation or genre switching denotes how texts take on the formative structure of another genre but ultimately maintain their original genre identity. On the contrary, cases of genre blending result in ambivalent generic identities or even the creation of new genres (Mäntynen & Shore, 2014, p. 794). The concept of genre blending denotes how infotainment genres mix entertainment with informational genres in the form of, for example, soft news, entertainment talk shows or political fiction (Boukes, 2019). As such, television news satire often mimics genre tropes of broadcast news—the visual style of the show’s décor, the use of an anchor behind a desk, or the use of faux correspondents—with comedic conventions such as the use of humour in a set-up/punchline delivery.

In this sense, satire can be seen as intrinsically liminal in that that it operates as a type of “higher-order discourse” (Brugman et al., 2021, p. 1193). This means that in itself, satire is pre-generic, existing not as a genre in itself but drawing on existing genres and discourses to convey its message (Knight, 2004): Satirical cartoons such as *South Park* or comedian Bill Burr’s

F is for Family, for example, incorporate elements of the recognisable genre of a family sitcom. The satirical format of television news satire combines the performative elements of sketch-comedy and stand-up with the epistemic dimensions of news and journalism. Similarly, more overtly “political” forms of stand-up comedy can be seen as discursive hybrids because of their conflation of entertainment and political discourse. Additionally, the generic hybridity inherent to these shows informs the perceptions of satirists on their identities, and ultimately also the production of their work. In Chapters 1 and 2, I assess how the conflation of comedic and journalistic genres results in either an ambivalent genre identity or the creation of new hybrid role conceptions for satirical practitioners.

Systemic hybridity, second, reflects the way contemporary media systems are characterised by a convergence of old and new media, ultimately fostering new forms of production, distribution and consumption of cultural and political content (Chadwick, 2017). As such, Jenkins’ (2006) landmark work *Convergence Culture* predicted a media system that is increasingly interactive and participatory, where audiences actively engage in the creation and dissemination of content. In the case of television news satire and stand-up comedy, this is evident, for example, in how the interaction between creators (i.e., the satirical talk-show host or comedian) and their audiences increasingly takes shape in the form of participatory and subjective forms of storytelling, facilitated by online dissemination of content. As such, the analysis in Chapter 3 zooms in on the rhetorical strategies that television news satirists employ to engage viewers directly by circumventing the conventionally linear audience relationships of television broadcasts.

Additionally, on a media industry level, the systemic hybridity that characterizes the current media landscape is reflected in the convergence of commercial and public broadcasters in terms of mission and programming. Chapters 1 through 3 discuss television news satire shows that are aired on Flemish and Dutch public broadcasters respectively. The specific history of Flemish public broadcaster VRT, for example, reflects broader trends towards an increased need to compete with the growing market share of commercial broadcasters, and a need to adjust their objectives accordingly (Dhoest, 2015). Notwithstanding that political satire is found to be ingrained in the histories of public broadcasters internationally (e.g., Bailey, 2018, Bruun, 2017), the historically increasing integration of information and entertainment arguably

influences the production and reception of television news satire formats. These dimensions are explored through analyses of respectively the self-perceptions and reception of satirists in Chapters 1 and 2.

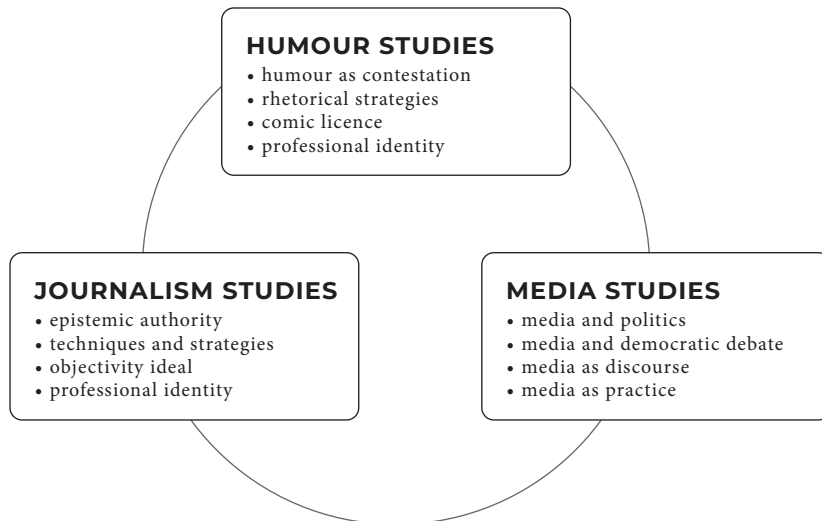
Discursive hybridity, third, can be understood as the way that previously well-delineated discourses have now become porous and intermingled. In the interest of political satire, the most pressing aspect in which discursive integration can be seen is in the loss of distinction between discourses of the “politico-normative” and “aesthetic-expressive” (Baym, 2010). In other words, while politics have increasingly become more entertaining, entertainment has just as much become a source of political discourse (Jones, 2010, Riegert, 2007). As Delli Carpini and Williams (2001) have noted, this discursive erosion between news and entertainment reveals their distinctions as a false dichotomy and highlights the political significance of popular culture (Delli Carpini & Williams, 2001, p. 161).

By blending elements of different discursive registers, television news satire draws on the “allure of [television news’] liveness” (Day, 2009), granting it the authoritative status of broadcast news as a form of journalistic truth-telling (Meddaugh, 2010). Such discursive integration (Baym, 2005) is furthermore what allows television news satire to engage in media critique: By comedically reinterpreting existing news discourses it can highlight the otherwise covert constructedness of the news and facilitate media literacy among its audiences (Basu, 2018; Peters, 2013). Throughout this dissertation, the discursive hybridity of such shows is analysed with the aim of understanding the epistemic spillover that occurs when news items are discussed humorously or, vice versa, comedy takes place on the thematic background of current affairs issues. Chapter 3, for example, takes the discursive integration of television news satire as a starting point to investigate how information and entertainment discourses coalesce in the satirical coverage of pandemic discourse. Similarly, Chapter 4 analyses the way that stand-up comedy threads the discursive boundaries between seriousness and laughter in the form of comedic social commentary.

Bridging comedy and journalism

To understand how political satire is determined by its hybridity, it is important to assess which discourses it incorporates and engages with. This requires a multidisciplinary approach. This dissertation predominantly draws from the fields of journalism studies and humour studies. From each field, I draw from a critical tradition of literature that (i) acknowledges the social constructedness and contingency of journalism's authority as a "truth-telling" discourse, and (ii), interprets humour as a potential site of political contestation. Additionally, I draw from media studies to link the two vis-à-vis their role in democratic debate and the facilitation of public discourse. Much like a triquetra or trinity knot, these three fields are interrelated in no specific hierarchical order. In the remaining chapters, I apply insights from each of these fields to varying degrees. Below, I discuss the key points for each field that have guided our studies and form the background for how I operationalise and research political satire.

Figure 1 Multidisciplinary background



Media studies

From **media studies**, I draw on a distinct body of normative literature which evaluates media “on the extent to which they either impede or facilitate democratic debate about alternative ideas, values, and identities in the society” (Raeijmaekers and Maesele, 2015, p. 1049). This view on media is rooted in an agonistic model of democracy which does not deny conflict and difference but embeds it as a constituent of public discourse (Carpentier, 2017). Such a pluralist view of public discourse is considered advantageous to democratic debate and implies a media sphere which enables a free-flowing conduit for the contestation of existing ideas and perspectives.

From a democratic theory perspective, media serves as a fundamental bridge between citizens and the political. It is axiomatic then that media serves to inform citizens in a way that allows them to make sense of and engage with public and political issues. To this end, media content is found to facilitate democratic debate when social issues are presented through exposure or expansion (Raeijmaekers, 2018). Exposure, here, refers to media content that recognises and lays bare existing shortcomings in representation and expands the debate in scope or form. Expansion, then, is aimed at introducing alternative viewpoints in debates (Raeijmaekers, 2018, p. 60). As Boukes (2019) asserts, to maximise the political engagement of citizens, political issues should be presented in a wide range of styles, modes and genres that transcend elitist or partisan discourse. Political satire can facilitate democratic debate by rendering obscure political topics relevant to broader audiences or by introducing alternative perspectives through the critique of dominant societal discourses (Boukes, 2019, p. 3).

However, it remains important to look beyond the “celebratory claims about the democratising power of interactivity” (Andrejevic, 2009, p. 35) and also assess what political satire does aside from reimagining political engagement. On the one hand, this entails a view of media that takes place on a discursive level. The analysis of media—and by extension political satire—then proceeds through the analysis of discursive strategies. Discursive strategies refer to how media frame and present information, including or excluding, legitimising or delegitimising, certain viewpoints, narratives, or sources. This perspective links well with our approach to

political satire as a discursive mode and allows us to investigate how political satire operates as such in conjunction with broader media content, actors, and contexts.

On the other hand, I draw from practice theory to view media as „the open-ended range of practices focused directly or indirectly on media“ (Couldry, 2004, p. 117). A bottom-up approach is key as the broad inclusion of media-oriented practices implies a step away from a focus on media products (texts), media structures (political economy approaches), or media effects (audience studies). Furthermore, focusing on media as practice discards a priori conceptions of political satire as the starting point for analysis because “we cannot operate simply by our instinct as media researchers [but] must look closely at the categorisations of practice that people make themselves” (Couldry, 2004: p. 121).

I do not wish to analytically isolate either discourse or practice. Rather, I aim to consolidate both by assuming that practices are to some extent always discursive in the sense that they cannot be conceived outside of discourse, which shapes practice but is simultaneously shaped by it. In other words, I interpret discourse (on an ontological level) and practice (on an ontic level) as two sides of the same coin (see Benson, 1999; Phelan, 2014). Practices are first and foremost grounded in their explicit materiality: They concern routinised behaviour, bodily or mental activities, or objects and the styles and forms in which they are used. Practices are also epistemic in that sense that they foreground specific underlying knowledge and through their interrelatedness assume an understanding of broader symbolic structures of meaning. These symbolic structures of meaning constitute the discourses that function as a discursive reservoir through which practices are granted said meaning. Finally, practices are proxies for discourse, or discourse enacted. Throughout the individual studies that make up this dissertation, I have aimed to study the practice of political satire as iteratively embedded in discourses of humour and journalism. Chapter 3, for example, brings together these views by assessing how political satire manages to humorously deconstruct and supplement journalistic shortcomings in the context of a global health crisis.

Finally, the field of media studies allows us to understand the specific embeddedness of political satire in the broader dynamics of the media industries in which they are created. In this sense, it is important to look beyond conceptual ideal-type reflections on political satire

as a critical mode of comedic discourse and take into account the structural strategies that influence the production of satirical content. After all, cultural industries are industries all the same and are thus equally embedded in economic and commercial logics (Hesmondhalgh, 2013). In this sense, the production of political satire as a media product is, for example, also guided by the pursuit of viewership success. In other words, ratings are arguably an influential factor guiding the creation of satirical content—in the form of linear television viewership or online engagement for television news satire, or live show attendance in the case of stand-up comedy. Chapter 1 expands on these ideas in the analysis of the production process of television news satire in Flanders.

The cases discussed in Chapters 1 through 3 consider the role of the public broadcaster in the production and dissemination of television news satire. Here, I am informed by the observation that the public service mission of European public broadcasters is associated with Enlightenment ideals and traditions (Jauert & Lowe, 2005) which have in the past brought about tensions between informational, educational and entertainment goals that public broadcasters strive to fulfil. In an increasingly globalized media landscape, however, the ideological resistance towards more commercialized developments rendered some public broadcasters illy equipped to deal with global influences that reshaped European media ecosystems at the end of the twentieth century (Palkangas, 2007). As such, “the Enlightenment template with its ambivalence about entertainment combined with growing competition (...) [was] likely to promote a situation where public service entertainment remains a target of sharp critique” (Palkangas, 2007, p. 124). As Bruun (2007) pointed out, this has led public broadcasters to develop novel interpretations of entertainment functions, to distinguish forms of public service entertainment from commercialized forms of comedic media. These changing perceptions of the civic affordances of entertainment genres then ultimately also inform the production of satirical content. In Chapters 1 and 2, I zoom in on these processes by investigating the points of contestation in satirists’ roles between the functions ascribed to, for example, entertainment and information, humour and factuality, or subjectivity and objectivity.

Journalism studies

Within the field of **journalism studies**, I am informed by a critical strand of research that underlines the need for research into alternative modes of journalism which reimagine the future of journalistic discourse beyond journalism as we know it (Deuze and Witschge, 2018). This need is preceded by the observation that professional-commercialised journalism does not always live up to its promise of fostering political debate (Maesele & Raeijmaekers, 2020). In the light of our research aim and the discursive approach to political satire it presupposes, I focus on aspects of journalism pertaining to (i) the identitary and (ii) the epistemic. Throughout this dissertation this allowed me to identify and assess political satire in terms of its role conceptions—i.e. the identitary—and the changing nature of comedic critique—i.e. the epistemic.

On an identitary level, journalism studies offers insights into journalistic roles, which facilitate understanding of the role political satire takes up in public discourse. Traditionally, research has outlined four distinct roles that journalists embody, although these roles are not necessarily mutually exclusive (Tandoc et al., 2012; Weaver & Wilhoit, 1996): (i) the disseminator, tasked with promptly conveying objective facts to the public; (ii) the investigator, responsible for analysing issues and scrutinising claims; (iii) the adversarial/watchdog role, critical of government, officials, and business; and (iv) the populist mobiliser, stimulating public participation in civic activities. By now research has included info-tainment—a journalistic approach that emphasises personalisation and emotions—in the repertoire of journalistic roles (Mellado et al., 2020). This underscores the fluidity of the perceived continuum between journalism and political comedy.

To understand how these roles influence or inform political satire, I view journalism as discursively constructed and subject to contestation in terms of its normative, epistemic and identitary underpinnings. Following Hanitzsch and Vos (2017), I assert it is within discourse that journalistic culture and identity are reproduced and contested by discursively articulating and enforcing particular roles (Hanitzsch & Vos, 2017, p. 8). Methodologically, this allowed me to identify particular aspects of journalistic practice within certain forms of political satire that do not necessarily corroborate conventional ideas of what constitutes professional journa-

lism. I am in this sense inspired by Witschge and Harbers (2018) who claimed that “we need new, more inclusive ways of locating and defining journalists, focusing not just on what happens in the centre of the newsroom, but also in the margins and outside of the newsroom” (p. 109).

Additionally, I see political satire as a potential site for professional reflexivity on journalistic role conceptions (Ahva, 2017). By “performing” journalism, some forms of political satire embody both internal and external critique towards journalistic practices and conventions. Studies on the production of news satire have emphasised the particular benefits of the collaboration between professional comedians and staff members with a background in professional journalism (e.g. Koivukoski & Ödmark, 2021). I explore this further in Chapter 1 by assessing how the satirical and journalistic identities are negotiated in the “satirical newsroom.” Chapter 2 expands the analysis of professional reflexivity to the interaction between political satire and professional journalists and their shared acknowledgement of political satire’s journalistic qualities.

On an epistemic level, I understand journalism as a collection of practices and assumptions which together take up a central place as “[a] system of ideas fundamental to knowledge, justification, experience, evidence and understanding” (Hermann, 2016, p. 263). Following Baym (2010), I interpret political satire on the background of a shift from a modern ethos of journalism to a postmodern ethos (Baym, 2010). The first is defined by the prevalence of a “regime of objectivity” (Hackett & Zhau, 1998), characterised by a reverence for the “god-terms of facts, truth and reality” (Zelizer, 2004, p. 100). To cover reality “objectively” remains the chief occupational guideline for much journalism today. However, the shift towards a postmodern ethos reflects ongoing discussions on competing journalistic paradigms which challenge professional-commercialised journalism’s ideological predilection for objectivity (e.g., Broersma, 2010; Deuze, 2005, Wahl-Jorgensen, 2020). Such an ethos, on the other hand, is associated with “a normative relativism which refuses moral judgements” (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2013, p. 82) and which brought about fragmentation of journalistic identity (Koljonen, 2013) and declining trust in journalism’s epistemic authority (Bennett & Iyengar, 2008). This leaves room for alternative voices engaging in journalistic discourse, originating from outside of the bounds of conventional professional journalism. Additionally, alternative forms of journalism consolidate both ethoi by bridging a modern agenda with a

postmodern style. This allows them to construct alternative ways of knowing in the form of, for example, more affective, personalised, and experience-based coverage (Van Zoonen, 2012, Wahl-Jorgensen, 2020).

This dissertation uses these insights to assess the possibility of political satire as a form of discourse that “originate[s] from outside the boundaries of the traditional journalistic field, but whose work nevertheless reflects the socio-informative functions, identities, and roles of journalism” (Eldridge, 2019, p. 858). The inherent hybridity of political satire—blending humour with social commentary—assumes an epistemic overlap between journalism and satire in that they share a penchant for critical inquiry and public deliberation (Peifer & Lee, 2019). For one, both journalism and satire can be seen as forms of discourse that “lay claim to offering a lens for understanding the surrounding world as it is or could be” (Peifer & Lee, 2019, p. 2). Moreover, each pertains to a form of public discourse that has the potential to contribute to public discourse and foster democratic debate. Furthermore, both satire and journalism share the ethical ideal of functioning as a critical watchdog to those in power (Baym, 2010; Deuze, 2005). To make claims about political satire then ultimately results in, either explicitly or implicitly, making claims about the state of journalism and the broader societal contexts in which they interact.

Given the culturally authoritative status of journalism as a “truth business” (Harcup, 2015, p. 81) it is not surprising that satire has drawn on and interrogated journalistic methods. By adopting “journalistic” textual and narrative strategies, political satire functions as a form of journalistic discourse, but also manages to confront hegemonic journalistic ways of configuring reality (Jacome, 2016). Thus, some forms of political satire embody what Broersma (2010) has termed a reflective style of journalism. Such a form of journalistic discourse abandons adherence to objectivity ideals and neutrality and is marked by a transparent adherence to factuality and the explicitly mediated subjectivity of its creators (Harbers, 2016). “Viewing political satire through a lens of alternative conceptions of the journalistic opens up room for a view of journalistic discourse that is both informative and entertaining, both factual and affective. Or as Delli Carpini & Williams (2001) have asserted, “the opposite of news is not entertainment” (p. 162).

Humour studies

From **humour studies**, I actively incorporate a critical body of research that looks beyond humour as inherently light-hearted and interrogates its intersections with notions of power (see Billig, 2005; Lockyer & Pickering, 2008). Throughout this dissertation, it guided me in answering questions on the link between comedic and journalistic identities in Chapters 1 and 2; the epistemic authority of political satire as a form of political discourse in Chapter 3; or the possibilities and limits of satirical critique in Chapter 4.

The critical study of humour comprises the overlap between the fields of humour studies, critical theory and cultural studies. This relatively emergent scholarly field is critical in the sense that it actively deals with the critical interrogation of the perceived aspects of humour as a social positive and asks questions regarding humour's role in mediating discourses of power. The first use of the term critical humour studies can be traced to Lockyer and Pickering's (2008) overview of then-prevailing scholarly contributions. The authors described the core business of this scholarly field as the sociological critique of humour and comic media. As such, it set out to overcome the boundaries of existing humour theories which, as Weaver et al. (2016) have stated, "have slowed the development of critical humour studies, as all three [humour theories], in their original articulations, were decidedly uncritical" (Weaver et al., 2016, p. 228). As a result, studies in this field have focussed on the intersections of humour with, for example, social class (Lockyer, 2010; Friedman & Kuipers, 2013), issues of gender (Colpean & Tully, 2019; Han & Kuipers, 2021), or issues of race (e.g., Boundana, 2015; Peréz, 2022).

A consequence of such an approach for the assessment of political satire is the knowledge that humour does actual political work, and can subsequently be analysed as a discursive strategy. For example, it has been shown that humour can foster public debate by highlighting positions between actors, ideas, or perspectives (Anderson & Kincaid, 2013). Additionally, through comedic juxtaposition, humour can be used to construct multiple identities (Filani, 2020) or play multiple voices against each other, revealing argumentative contradictions. Or by humorously reinterpreting complex issues, political satire can scale levels of social systems—micro, meso, and macro—and creates innovative ways of knowing (Boykoff & Osnes, 2019).

Through the use of humour, political satire can thus potentially (re)frame, (re)define, and (re) conceptualise social issues through what Critchley (2002) termed “miniature strategies of defamiliarisation” (Critchley, 2002, p. 18).

Furthermore, this dissertation is indebted to critical reflections on the predominant focus of humour’s subversive potential within critical humour studies (e.g., Holm, 2018; Holm, 2023). In this regard, I look beyond a view of humour as an “entirely liberatory force that stands in opposition to oppression or domination” (Holm, 2018 p. 32). This asserts that to assess the critical dimensions of political satire, one has to first and foremost take into account a contextualised approach to the political function of humour. After all, the political moment in which satire operates today is no longer dictated by one-dimensional power hierarchies. Rather, our current conjuncture is characterised by an unprecedented proliferation of critical discourses—from the rise of progressive social justice movements such as #MeToo or Black Lives Matter to debates on pandemic scepticism and other forms of anti-establishment or anti-government commentary.

It is possible then, that political satire’s critical edge becomes blunted, or that its critical potential is curtailed in function of expanding satirical aims. Medjesky (2016), for example, has put forward the concept of “pseudo-satire” which describes a form of satire that does not manage to surpass gratuitous mockery under the guise of social commentary. Similarly, Colpean and Tully (2019) describe a form of “weak reflexivity” which refers to satirists that acknowledge their ideological positioning while at the same time dismissing and reproducing other dominant ideologies. In satire which is reflexively weak, “gestures that may seem reflexive in their marking of [e.g.,] whiteness fall short of critical examination and operate to excuse [e.g.,] racist commentary rather than address structures of privilege and inequity” (Colpean & Tully, 2019, p. 167). Whether satire succeeds in illuminating hegemonic discourses or merely rearticulates them through humour or “surface parody” (Poggi & D’Errico, 2016), has to be traced site-specifically within each particular discourse. In other words, I assert that not all political satire is per definition subversive, or for that matter has to be to fulfil its democratic role. Chapters 3 and 4 explore political satire’s potential for comedic critique in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and ongoing debates on “wokeness,” with the aim of analytically and empirically distinguishing between humour as a form of critique, subversion, or resistance.

Case studies

The case studies in this dissertation comprise two instances of political satire in Flanders and the Netherlands: television news satire and stand-up comedy.

The growing popularity of television news satire and stand-up comedy reflects the increasingly important role of popular culture in public discourse. Despite their differences, what binds these two genres under the umbrella of political satire is their potential to critique existing societal norms, practices, or discourse in the broadest sense. Both, first and foremost, do this through the combination of humour and non-humorous discourse (see Ödmark, 2018; Wiesman, 2011; Webber et al., 2021). In this sense, what these forms of political satire share is their overt subjectivity in the presentation of issues. This makes that television news satirists can be seen as an “everyman’s stand-in” or audience surrogate (Day, 2011). Similarly, stand-up comedians often operate as “native critics” (Timler, 2012, p. 50) by engaging in autobiographically inspired critiques of local culture. Viewed as such, television news satire and stand-up comedy comedically make sense of the world for their audiences.

Second, both genres generally deal with topical social issues and current affairs, and as such are increasingly validated as legitimate voices in public debate. Traditionally, television news satire is geared towards comedic coverage of the news of the day, but more recently some formats such as *Last Week Tonight* have been found to incorporate social issues outside of the mainstream news spotlight (Davisson & Donovan, 2019). Despite being less engaged with news discourse, a large number of stand-up comedians today combine comedy with social commentary in a way that renders them an effective conduit for sociological insights (Bingham & Hernandez, 2009, Smith, 2015). Through the combination of humour with news, and comedy with social issues, these formats are “simultaneously informative and comedic, serious and silly” (Baym, 2010 p. 103). In other words, both television news satire and stand-up comedy can operate as valuable sites for political discourse through highly subjective mediations of current affairs and social issues.

Television news satire: *De Ideale Wereld* and *Zondag met Lubach*

The first two cases—the Flemish and Dutch television news satire shows *De Ideale Wereld* (2013) and *Zondag met Lubach* (2014–2021) represent the proliferation of the news satire genre. As news satire expanded internationally, different formats emerged while older formats such as the United States’ *The Daily Show* garnered increasing recognisability. This maturation of the genre results in a spectrum ranging from, on the one hand, more absurdist forms of current affairs comedy to, on the other hand, more overtly “journalistic” forms of news satire (Koivukoski and Ödmark 2020), or “satirical journalism” (Fox 2018). Arguably then, fictional sketch programmes such as *Saturday Night Live* could be located on one end, while shows such as *Last Week Tonight* can be positioned on the other. Although Dutch satire has, since the start of this project, picked up attention in academic literature (Boukes, 2019; Nieuwenhuis, 2022, Zijp, 2023), the Flemish satirical landscape has received no scholarly attention to date, at least to our knowledge.

In terms of their approach to news and comedy, *De Ideale Wereld* and *Zondag met Lubach* can be seen as examples of the increasing hybridity of our media spheres and the blurring boundaries between entertainment and political discourse. The selection of these two shows in our analyses is inspired equally by their similarities as by their differences. In this sense, both shows were selected on account of their diverse approach to the news satire genre, while all the same incorporating similar formative elements.

The starting point for our interest in these cases has been the acknowledgement of their contributions in this regard in the form of different industry awards presented to both. In 2014, *De Ideale Wereld* was awarded the Flemish Television Award for best information programme, and subsequently the same award for best comedy programme in 2015. Similarly, two years after its debut, *Zondag met Lubach* won the prestigious Dutch Silver Nipkow Disc award where a jury of journalists and media critics dubbed it “a unique and successful combination of entertainment and investigative journalism [and] an important interpreter of the news,” (Nipkowschijf, 2016) placing it square on the intersection between comedy, journalism, and broadcast news.

Furthermore, both *De Ideale Wereld* and *Zondag met Lubach* have aired on the Flemish and Dutch public broadcasters VRT and NPO respectively. As European public broadcasters, they follow the BBC's ideal type model and enact the triple assignment of offering audiences information, education and amusement (Dhoest, 2015) in contrast with, for example, their more commercially oriented United States' counterparts (Palokangas, 2007). As a result, *De Ideale Wereld* and *Zondag met Lubach* both reflect the observation that satire specifically suits well with the public broadcasters' mission: As "the heartland of public service entertainment" (Palokangas, 2007, p. 125) television news satire in fact brings together the civically oriented functions of informing and educating through entertainment. Political satire's role in the public broadcaster thus underlines, rather than counters the public service ideology of offering reliable information, and expands instrumental interpretations of entertainment "merely" serving commercial means (Bruun, 2007, p. 196). Furthermore, the cross-media formatting strategies of these shows have managed to mobilize younger audiences in engaging with socio-political issues and news content.

Nonetheless, as a researcher and audience member myself, I have watched the development of these shows with great interest and grew an awareness that both shows are also remarkably different. Aside from shared generic traits and similar positions in their respective media landscapes, these shows are embedded in distinct cultural frameworks that influence their production. For example, when *De Ideale Wereld* aired its first episode in 2013, it was very much rooted in absurdist sketch comedy, inspired by its founders' background in cabaret. When *De Ideale Wereld's* first host Otto-Jan Ham was replaced by Dutch comedian Jan Jaap van der Wal, the show was deliberately remodelled to resemble what van der Wal termed "the American school" (De Kock, 2023a) i.e. shows such as *The Daily Show*, *Late Night with Seth Meyers*, or Stephen Colbert's incantation of the flagship of American late-night talk shows, *The Late Show*. This included the introduction of a satirical intro monologue, more in-depth coverage of political issues, an in-house band, and a more prominent role for guest interviews. With episodes ranging from thirty to over forty minutes in length, the show covered several different topics, styles and formats. Nonetheless, *De Ideale Wereld* remained most known for its absurd pre-recorded sketch comedy segments or voice-over parody videos, which found their way to audiences in the form of individually disseminated online clips. Additionally, the change of hosts was accompanied by a reduction in the frequency of the show's episodes, from four to

two times a week. The formative and stylistic changes that the show has undergone with each new host throughout the years are discussed in Chapter 1.

With the end of van der Wal's tenure as host, *De Ideale Wereld* got its first female host in 2022. Under Ella Leyers' tenure, critics noticed how the show has "lost its critical bite" (Droeven, 2022), despite that its broadcasters' Director of Content, Ricus Jansegers, claims the show is more successful in its audience to younger and more female viewers (De Kock, 2023b). What this illustrates is that *De Ideale Wereld* has been in part acknowledged as satirical, while remaining comedic at heart. As van der Wal asserted in an interview with Flemish up-market newspaper *De Standaard* after his leave from *De Ideale Wereld*, "cynicism doesn't work in Flanders (...) I wanted to do something bigger, engage more profoundly with the news, but editors mostly just wanted to make funny clips" (De Kock, 2023b).

Across the Northern border, *Zondag met Lubach* has known a different trajectory in its development. Following its debut in 2014, the show could be described as a satirical talk show in the style of *The Daily Show* under Jon Stewart's tenure. The combination of different shorter satirical news segments combined with in-studio acts, made it a widely successful format in the Netherlands, as managed the blend the Dutch traditions of, on the one hand, cabaret with, on the other hand, current affairs talk shows. As the show grew more popular, *Zondag met Lubach* solidified its format into a form of television news satire akin to the *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver*. In individual segments ranging from ten to over twenty minutes, host Arjen Lubach deconstructed single social issues in-depth. Drawing on existing news coverage and own research, *Zondag met Lubach* managed to do what *De Ideale Wereld* never did. Throughout the Dutch media landscape, it therefore quickly become known for its influence on public debate and successful "agenda-setting" influence on politicians (Boukes, 2019).

The inclusion of two satirical shows thus allows to critically unpack television news satire, and assess the different ways in which these shows are produced and received within their local media landscapes. Furthermore, it raises questions about the cultural specificity of these shows and their influence in their adaptations of internationally recognized formats which predominantly originate from the United States.

Stand-up comedy: Michael Van Peel

For the third case, I have expanded the interpretation of political satire beyond the scope of television news satire. Contrary to television news satire, stand-up comedy does not interact as strictly with the normative assumptions and practices of the journalistic. As mentioned above, stand-up comedy and television news satire are arguably different in form and content but maintain similarities in terms of their production of satirical and comedic critique. Nonetheless, on the background of changing perceptions of comedy and satire in the public debate today, both stand-up comedy and television news satire embody the way such critique is negotiated and reimagined by its creators. To investigate the way that political satirists reflect on these issues, Chapter 4 explores the material and self-perceptions of Flemish stand-up comedian Michael Van Peel.

Van Peel has had a longstanding career as a stand-up comedian, garnering nationwide attention with a decade of performances of yearly “years-end conferences,” *Van Peel Survives* (2009–2018)—a typical Belgian and Dutch tradition dating back to the 1950s in which comedians offer audiences an overview of the past year’s noteworthy events. Critics have dubbed him the “best current affairs comedian in Belgium” (Van Loy, 2022). And for his latest show *Welcome to the Rebellion!* (presently touring), Van Peel has been praised as a “true court jester of comedy” who “holds up a mirror to the people and challenges current affairs and the current zeitgeist” (Michiels, 2022). Furthermore, Van Peel has expanded his role as a commentator through the frequent publication of socially critical op-eds in Flemish quality up-market newspaper *De Standaard*.

All this connects Van Peel to a strand of stand-up comedy known for dealing with social critique in more overt ways than others. Lenny Bruce’s oeuvre, for example, has stood out internationally as a masterclass in socially critical comedy since the 1950s (Mello, 2017). And in the 1980s and ’90s, famous United States stand-up comedians George Carlin and Bill Hicks paved the way for others to use comedy as a means for progressive political critique (Sullivan, 2010). Today, however, the stand-up comedy landscape has transformed substantially with the well-established success of streaming platforms having altered the way audiences view it.

This contributed to the growing cultural significance of stand-up comedy, underlining that humour and comedy have become quite “serious” business indeed, and are deserving of scholarly attention.

Research design

To reach our research goals, I have conducted four separate but interrelated studies that offer a multi-level understanding of political satire’s production and reception in the Flemish and Dutch media landscape. Findings are presented in Chapters 1 through 4. Of these studies, three have been published or are accepted for publication in the form of research articles i.e. Chapters 2, 3, and 4. Each article aligns with and answers a set of overarching research questions, detailed further in the table below. This research design is the result of conceptual as well as pragmatic considerations.

Figure 2 Research design and empirical studies

	RESEARCH QUESTIONS	EMPIRICAL DATA	METHODOLOGY	
1	How do satirists enact and negotiate genre hybridity in practice?	Semi-structured (11) and conversational (12) interviews with staff of Flemish political satire show <i>De Ideale Wereld</i> ; Three week observational period in the show’s “satirical newsroom.”	Semi-structured/ conversational interviews and non-participant observation	ROLES & IDENTITY
2	How is political satire received in the media landscape over time?	64 media appearances of staff and host of Dutch political satire show <i>Zondag met Lubach</i>	Qualitative textual analysis; interview analysis; metajournalistic discourse analysis	
3	How does political satire interact with COVID-19 discourse?	30 COVID-19-related segments of Dutch political satire show <i>Zondag met Lubach</i>	Qualitative content analysis	SATIRE IN CONTEXT
4	How does stand-up comedy interact with discourses of “wokeness” and “cancel culture”?	In-depth interview with stand-up comedian Michael Van Peel; interviews in Flemish media, columns in Flemish upmarket newspaper <i>De Standaard</i> , stand-up special <i>Welcome to the Rebellion!</i>	Multi-modal qualitative analysis	

Our first study functions as an important starting point to understand the inherent hybridity that marks these shows. Through the operationalisation of hybridity as an enacted practice, I question what the combination of comedic and journalistic discourses within news satire means for its creators. In doing so, this study functions as exploratory conceptual groundwork for the following chapters: As a study on hybridity it provides a necessary understanding of television news satire in Chapters 2 and 3, and as a study of satirical identity it furthers our understanding of the increasing reflectivity in stand-up comedy discussed in Chapter 4.

Furthermore, the first two studies presented in this dissertation function, on a conceptual level, as an exploration of the ongoing diversification of the television news satire genre in terms of its roles and identity. I assess these dimensions through the empirical analysis of (i) the role conceptions and role enactment of *De Ideale Wereld*'s hosts and staff, and (ii) the reception and evolution of *Zondag met Lubach* within the Dutch media landscape and journalistic community. Together, these studies provide the reader with a detailed image of the various intentions behind different television news satire formats and the way that these inform their production, reception, and ultimately their place within the public debate.

Following the assessment of satirists' identities, Chapters 3 and 4 can then be understood as an investigation of political satire in practice. The overarching question posed here is how—assuming the increasing reflectivity towards and acknowledgement of political satire's societal role—this informs the critical potential that political satire holds. In other words, how does satire operate within a dynamic, ever-changing socio-political landscape? I assess these questions by (i) analysing the way political satire has engaged with political and scientific discourse during the global crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic, and by (ii) investigating the notion of satirical critique in the context of discourses on “wokeness” and “cancel culture.” In these studies, I aim to reach beyond conceptions of political satire in identity terms and equally research its interaction with public discourse on epistemic grounds.

Methodologically, this research design reflects some pragmatic and practical considerations that have guided this dissertation. When the pandemic took the world by storm, a near-global lockdown limited data gathering that required physical contact and forced me to rethink the central research questions of this project. At that point, only the data gathering for our first

study had taken place. Additionally, the host and staff of *Zondag met Lubach* are notoriously known for refusing interviews (Lubach, 2020, p. 234) which prevented an initial inquiry into the production of the show parallel to the study in Chapter 1. As a result, Chapters 2 and 4 provide insights into secondary data such as media appearances and interviews. In another sense, the COVID-19 pandemic provided me with a valuable context in which to investigate the socio-political embedding of political satire, empirically addressed in Chapter 3. So when life gave me lemons, I decided to critically analyse how they informed political satire's interaction with scientific discourse.

Recalling the title of this dissertation, I set out to investigate the changing faces of political satire through the voices of satirists themselves. This has warranted the methodological choices I made i.e. in-depth interviews—Chapter 1—and secondary interviews in public media—Chapters 2 and 4. However, in a sense, each of the four studies I present is multi-modal as they set out to understand the complexity of political satire in full. They entail analysis beyond the level of text, incorporating dimensions of identity and self-understanding, but also image, tone, or emotional display.

Finally, the meaning and experience of political satire are defined by the cultural context in which it is produced and consumed. Interpretative qualitative research methods help uncover this multiform complexity. As Schwandt (1994) has stated, an interpretative approach entails that “the world of lived reality and situation-specific meanings that constitute the general object of investigation is thought to be constructed by social actors” (Schwandt, 1994 p. 221). The data and methods I have selected throughout this dissertation strive to capture this constructionist view on political satire with scientific carefulness, but also with dignity towards the social actors involved.

CHAPTER 1

Satire between the lines:
Negotiating genre hybridity in the satirical newsroom
of Belgian news satire show *De Ideale Wereld*

Nicolaï, J. & Maesele, P. (under review).

Satire between the lines: Negotiating genre
hybridity in the satirical newsroom of Belgian
news satire show De Ideale Wereld.



Abstract

The proliferation of news satire has internationally produced a wide variety of news satire formats. This paper investigates the production of the Belgian news satire show *De Ideale Wereld* through a lens of genre theory, viewing genre as an enacted practice. It reports on 23 interviews with the show's hosts and editorial staff and a three-week observation period in its "satirical newsroom." The findings reveal how the creators of *De Ideale Wereld* engage in an ongoing negotiation of comedic and journalistic roles inspired by irreconcilable genre identities. This article contributes to the limited understanding of the production of news satire and the implications of hybridity on the understanding of news work for audiences.

Introduction

News satire has proliferated internationally over recent years, garnering increasing attention in public debate and academic research. An oft-cited argument for news satire's success is that the combination of discursive elements of journalism, broadcast news, and comedy allows news satire to bring alternative perspectives into public debate. Koivukoski and Ödmark (2020), for example, have shown how Scandinavian news satire shows benefit from bringing on board editors with backgrounds in comedy and professional journalism. Other studies reveal how satirists ascribe themselves the hybrid roles of entertainers and political analysts vis-à-vis public debate (Lichtenstein et al., 2012), or how they see themselves as “eye-openers” on account of their comedic deconstruction of news items (Ödmark & Harvard, 2020).

As a result, academic attention has mainly been directed at a specific subset of news satire formats such as *The Daily Show* (e.g. Baym, 2005; Day, 2011), *Last Week Tonight* (e.g. Brewer & McKnight, 2017; Davisson & Donovan, 2019), or spin-offs such as the Dutch *Zondag met Lubach* (e.g. Nicolai et al., 2022). Such shows have been described as journalistic news satire (Koivukoski & Ödmark, 2020), satirical journalism (Fox, 2018), or investigative comedy (Nicolai et al., 2022)—reflecting the way that they overtly incorporate journalistic aims and/or techniques. Today, however, a wide array of news satire formats exists. Shows such as *Saturday Night Live* also incorporate news satire segments, but are arguably characterized more by their use of parody and absurdist comedy sketches (Hakola, 2017). News satire shows can thus be said to exist on a continuum ranging from the predominantly comedic and humoristic to the more overtly journalistic.

What previous studies often have in common is that they positively interpret news satire's generic hybridity as an implicit criterion for its success, as it allows it to bring together the merits of comedy (e.g. audience engagement through entertainment) with those of journalistic discourse (e.g. news dissemination and critical inquiry). In this study, we contend that managing genre hybridity in practice is arguably not always self-evident. To this end, this study analyses the Belgian news satire show *De Ideale Wereld* (literally: *The Ideal World*, *DIW* hereafter) and its understanding of its hybrid identity as comedy, satire and news work. To achieve this, genre theory is employed to reinterpret news satire's discursive hybridity (Baym, 2005) as an arena where satirists actively negotiate their role conceptions.

By examining how genre is negotiated within the — rhetorical and embodied practices of the show’s creation, this study aims to uncover the identity ambiguities experienced by its creators.

A discursive approach to genre hybridity sees the discourse surrounding satirical roles as the central site where satirical identities take shape. *DIW* is an interesting case as its combination of a diversity of segments—e.g. satirical intro-monologues, comedic news overviews, guest interviews, sketch comedy segments, cartoons, and in-studio acts—has made it hard for audiences to identify the show as either satire, comedy, or news commentary. Concurrently, the show has received industry awards for both best information program (2014) and best comedy program (2015).

Through the analysis of 23 interviews with the show’s hosts and editors, combined with a three-week observation period in *DIW*’s “satirical newsroom,” we address the perceptions of *DIW*’s staff on their hybrid roles. How satirists themselves reflect on their roles remains an underlit aspect in academic literature (see Koivukoski & Ödmark, 2020; Lichtenstein et al., 2021). Nonetheless, understanding satirists’ role conceptions is of vital importance to gain further insights into questions about satire’s place in public debate, and more broadly, the role of comedy in the context of an increasing repoliticisation of humour in society (Nieuwenhuis & Zijp, 2022).

Following a theoretical paragraph on genre and hybridity, we discuss *DIW* and its role within the Flemish media landscape. The methodology section details how a combination of interviews and observations allows us to capture the creation of the show as an embodied hybrid practice. Our analysis distinguishes between three dimensions of *DIW*’s interaction with its genre hybridity: (i) the show’s ongoing negotiation with comedy and news work; (ii) the comedic negotiation of the creators’ own voice, and (iii) the construction of a hybrid storytelling logic. We conclude this article by discussing how *DIW*’s inherent hybridity reflects incongruent understandings of journalistic and comedic identity, and how it broadens our understanding of news satire as an ongoing interrogation of the blurring boundaries between comedy and journalistic inquiry.

Satire and genre hybridity

Genre, in its most essential form, refers to a principle of classification of texts that share similar recurring characteristics (Mittell, 2001). A more detailed definition of genre is obscured by the multiple levels on which genre operates. On the level of the text, genres bring together subjects that — exhibit formative commonalities in thematic, stylistic, or historical terms. For example, all Western movies play out, in some form or other, a narrative plot of exploration of the Western frontier during the 18th and 19th century, packed with action and adventure. Such identifiable genre tropes serve in part to instil in audiences what Jauss & Benzinger (1970) termed „a horizon of expectations” (p. 13). However, when analysing genre it is important to look beyond the text, to see genre as “a property and function of discourse” (Mittell, 2001, p. 8). As such, genres become more than formative scaffolding and can be analysed as cultural categories that interact not only within or between texts, but also influence audience perceptions and interact with broader socio-political contexts. In this sense, as Dango (2022) has noted, genres function as “bounded spaces that concentrate affective experiences from their cultural atmospheres, simultaneously compartmentalising and intensifying social and political feelings” (Dango, 2022, p. 510). In other words, genres are then first and foremost a form of cultural practice. Following Mittell (2001): “If our goal is to understand genres as cultural categories, we should first examine the discourses that constitute the category before examining the texts that seem delimited by the genre” (p. 18).

When striving to understand news satire through a genre lens, a recurrent focal point is its multiform genre hybridity. For example, *The Daily Show* with Jon Stewart—a notable forerunner to many news satire shows today—is seen as “a hybrid genre marked by multiple articulations among discourses of news and entertainment and politics and popular culture” (Baym, 2013, p. 76). On the one hand, satire can engage in genre appropriation or genre switching. This denotes how it takes on the formative structure of another genre, but ultimately maintains its original genre identity—e.g. that of comedy. Cases of genre blending, on the other hand, result in ambivalent generic identities or even the creation of new genres (Mäntynen & Shore, 2014, p. 794)—e.g. that of satirical news.

However, multiple scholars have pointed out the difficulty of defining satire as a genre itself (see Declerq, 2018). Rather, satire is considered pre-generic—a type of “higher-order discourse” (Brugman et al., 2022, p. 1193)—as it draws on existing genre tropes to convey its message (Knight, 2004). As McKain (2005) noted, satire is “parasitical” of its “host,” and makes use of the process of remediation—e.g. the appropriation of pre-existing items to construct novel perspectives. As such, news satire always effectively functions as a form of genre critique rather than functioning as a genre itself. So what then, are the genres that news satire draws on? And how does their hybrid reappropriation influence the production of news satire?

Journalism and comedy as generic building blocks

As genre hybrids, news satire shows invariably bring together the performative and epistemic aspects of journalism with the rhetorical and visual aspects of the world of comedy. Already at the start of the 21st century, news satire was hailed for its supposed journalistic qualities. When in 2000 a Pew Research Centre study found that 47 percent of US audiences under the age of thirty were “informed at least occasionally” by late-night talk shows (Pew, 2000), *The Daily Show* with Jon Stewart came in the crosshairs of journalists and critics eager to assess the show’s journalistic merit. In its wake, shows like *Last Week Tonight* have been described as opinion news formats, because of their focus on investigative segments that incorporate issues outside of the traditional news spotlight (Brugman et al., 2021). This shows the wide variety of journalistic entry points that can be traced in news satire today.

In terms of genre, what defines something as journalistic is predominantly related to its perceived capability of presenting an objective account of political and social issues. Despite the journalistic objectivity ideal having been called into question for decades (e.g. Tuchman, 1972; Broersma, 2010), the pursuit of truth remains a self-evident hallmark of professional journalism in journalists’ role conceptions (Donsbach & Klett, 1993) as well as in audience perceptions on what constitutes “good journalism” (Karlsson & Clerwall, 2019). Traditional accounts of journalism divide journalistic genres into two groups (Colussi & Rocha, 2020): Informative journalistic accounts, such as news stories or live reports, are aimed at informing audiences of newsworthy events in a neutral and objective fashion. Opinionated

journalistic accounts, such as opinion pieces or investigative deep dives, incorporate the mediated subjectivity of the journalist to interpret, rather than merely report, on social issues.

Additionally, journalistic professionalism is institutionalised in legal frameworks or through the socialisation of journalistic standards in educational programmes and professional style guides (Broersma, 2010). In the Belgian context, for example, the statute of professional journalist is protected by a Royal Decree from 1965 (*Erkenning als journalist van beroep*, 2023). This decree enumerates the conditions that the journalist (and the journalistic profession) must meet in terms of content, methodology, and form in order to be recognised as a professional journalist and to obtain a press card. Such measures make that professional journalism remains organised predominantly around a relatively rigid set of journalistic core practices—i.e. witnessing, — verification, or interviewing techniques (Salter, 2008)—which together make up a widely shared tradition of journalistic professionalism or a “consensual body of knowledge” (Deuze, 2005). As a result, talk of politics in the public debate has for most of the twentieth century been conventionally accredited to public affairs media or professional journalism (Delli Carpini & Williams, 2001).

But the generic dimensions of the journalistic profession are not fixed entirely. Rather, they are “contingent and transitory, shifting over time and taking on new meanings and definitions in different contexts” (Mittell, 2001, p. 11). The shift from print media to the digital realm, coupled with the rise of social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, is one impactful change which has prompted an evolution in journalistic genres. Consequently, both journalists and audiences have adapted their routines related to the production and consumption of information (Colussi & Rocha, 2020). A result of this is that recent trends in journalism studies begun to foreground affective storytelling and the role of emotions as a vital constituent in news production and discourse (e.g. Wahl-Jorgensen, 2020), while traditional views on news often treated emotions dismissively, as markers of flawed journalism (Peters, 2011: 298).

On the other side of the satirical coin, news satire shows display a wide variety of comedic genres. *Saturday Night Live*, for example, is arguably characterised more by the use of parody and absurdist comedy sketches (Hakola, 2017) than the rhetorical wit of *Last Week*

Tonight (Davisson & Donovan, 2019). But as with journalism, attempting to compartmentalise comedy in exhaustive generic categories is an impractical and perhaps unnecessary task. To illustrate, Davis (2014) has identified existing genre distinctions based on the level of content—e.g. absurdist humour, gallows humour—on the level of structure—e.g. cabaret, stand-up, or improv comedy—on the level of linguistic register—e.g. irony, wryness, wit—or on the level of tonality—e.g. “carnavalesque” or “farcical” comedy. More importantly, incongruities inherent to humour allow satire to disrupt genre boundaries for journalistic and comedic genres, and deal with truth and absurdity simultaneously (Weaver & Mora, 2016, p. 481). As Gray et al. (2009) noted, when viewing news satire as a form of genre critique on news and comedy, “today’s increase in news [satire] may be signalling the genre[s]’ dire need for innovation” (p. 19). In other words, what is analytically interesting about the satirical mode is how it incorporates, and subsequently translates and refracts, existing generic modes and their epistemic connotations. As such, the widespread acceptance of the satirical mode reflects evaporating distinctions between politico-normative and aesthetic- expressive discursive registers, facilitating further hybridization of news and entertainment genres (Baym, 2010).

Hybridity as vice or virtue?

Hybridity has been advanced in media studies as “a particularly rich site for the analysis of forms and processes of experimentation [and] innovation (...) where traditional categories and classifications are interrogated, expanded, recombined or subverted” (Mast et al., 2017). Correspondingly, research on news satire particularly frames satire’s hybridity as an asset: By satirising broadcast news coverage it could facilitate an effective form of media critique (Littau & Stewart, 2015), and by blending popular culture with political discourse it could become a meaningful resource for civic engagement (Day, 2011). However, reception studies reveal how satire’s hybrid nature is perceived as at odds with values inherent to the professional journalistic community on which it borders. Feldman (2007), for example, concluded that news satire functions as a critical incident in journalism “[problematizing] for journalists the increasingly blurred distinction between news and entertainment“ (p. 410). Similarly, Tenenboim-Weinblatt (2009) and Carlson and Peifer (2013) have traced how *The Daily Show* was discursively excluded from the journalistic

community as it challenged journalistic insider-outsider dichotomies. What this teaches us, is that news satire's hybridity can also complicate satire's role within the broader media landscape.

To date, less attention has been devoted to investigating how satirists themselves negotiate the hybridity of their roles as comedians, media watchdogs, or political commentators. As media and communication technologies evolve and new formats emerge, the boundaries between different genres are becoming increasingly porous. Satire has been particularly adept at exploiting this fluidity, operating at the intersection of various genres and playing with their conventions to create novel forms of expression. In this regard, although some have claimed that in a fundamentally hybrid media environment, the concept of genre may have outlived its usefulness as a predictive analytical tool (Baym, 2013), we argue that in the case of news satire it can shed light on how satirists experience and enact their hybrid roles. This reflects Bawarshi's (2000) claim that genres function not just on a textual, but also on an ideological and thus identitary, level by "[operating] as conceptual schemes that also constitute how we negotiate our way through discursive reality" (p. 349) and, ultimately, "[creating] the conditions in which not only texts but also their writers and readers function" (p. 351).

Additionally, following Hanitzsch & Vos (2017), we see the discourse of satirical roles as the central arena where satirical identities are reproduced and contested (p. 8). In other words, as genres shape role conceptions, the combination of multiple genres in news satire can complicate genre identities for its creators. What we call the "satirical newsroom" can then be seen as a site of genre and identity construction and contestation. Such a view of satirists' roles reflects an understanding of hybridity as a dynamic but not wholly unproblematic concept, contingent upon the individual understandings of satirists. Partly embedded in the genres of comedy, the satirist's aim is undeniably to facilitate brevity and laughter. However, drawing on journalistic genres for its social commentary, news satire embodies roles that may not always be compatible with its self-ascribed comedic mandates. The realities of genre hybridisation mean that satirists have to occasionally reconcile generically conflicting demands, expectations, and socio-cultural assumptions. Therefore, it is relevant to assess how different genres are enacted in the production of news satire as it provides insights into how satirists navigate their hybrid roles, identities, and practices.

De Ideale Wereld

In 2013, *DIW* aired its first episode on Flemish commercial broadcaster *VIER*. Across the pacific, *The Daily Show*'s Jon Stewart was solidifying his legacy as the godfather of political comedy. At the same time, internationally similar formats were increasing in popularity (Baym & Jones, 2012). Closer to home, writers in the Netherlands were preparing behind the scenes for the launch of the now widely acclaimed *Zondag met Lubach* (Nicolai et al., 2022), and Germany had its own *The Daily Show* spin-off with the public broadcaster ZDF's *Heute-show* (2009 – present).

Since its start, *DIW* offered a peculiar blend of late-night talk show elements interspersed with in-studio acts and comedic sketches. Part current affairs program, part absurdist comedy show, on first glance it echoes elements of other known satire shows within the genre. For example, in likeness with American benchmarks such as *The Late Show* with Stephen Colbert, *DIW* opens with a so-called monologue where the host satirically tackles a single topic¹. A few minutes in, a guest is announced who takes their place aside the anchor after which both engage in light-hearted conversation while sifting through the news of the day. Occasionally, this is interjected with pre-recorded comedic sketches or in-studio acts. In true late-night fashion, a live band accompanies the whole with intro tunes and custom farcical jingles. A television screen behind the host presents audiences with sketches, comedic photo montages, or news media excerpts. What *DIW* has in common with most contemporary forms of news satire is its penchant for blending comedy with news. This hybridity has been explicitly acknowledged by the Flemish media industry as a whole when it was presented the Flemish Television Star award for best information program in 2014 and best comedy program in 2015, leaving “real” broadcast news shows *Het Journaal* (VRT), *VTM Nieuws* (VTM), and current affairs program *Reyers Laat* (Canvas) to bite the dust.

1 The intro monologue was introduced as a fixed segment by *De Ideale Wereld*'s second host Jan Jaap van der Wal, who presented the show for seven seasons (season 11 – 18, September 2018 – May 2022). Following the introduction of the third host, Ella Leyers, the intro monologue was removed.

With a track record of almost a decade, *DIW* has evolved visibly over the years. After mixed ratings and increasingly declining audiences, commercial broadcaster *VIER* announced the show's cancellation in 2015 as its rating average remained below the broadcaster's ambitions ("Komt 'De Ideale Wereld' Nooit Meer Terug?" 2015). Surprisingly, in late 2015 it was announced that public broadcaster VRT had purchased the show. Starting from 2016, it would be broadcast on VRT's second television channel, Canvas, curated for "an audience that seeks depth and desires to be challenged with new insights" (VRT, 2023). In a bold move aimed at targeting younger news audiences, VRT decided to adjust its programming so that *DIW* aired immediately after the daily news and current affairs shows *Ter Zake* and *De Afspraak*, which made that the show was now increasingly associated with conventional current affairs programs (Saerens & De Wolf, 2015).

However, despite an initial rating boost after the change of broadcaster, *DIW*'s broadcast frequency was reduced from four to three, and eventually two broadcasts a week in late 2017, only to be reintroduced four days a week under the tenure of its third host in 2022. Following the ripple-effect caused by the show's award for best information program, *DIW*'s shift from commercial to public broadcaster solidified its image as a current affairs program within the industry, in addition to its already longstanding comedic reputation. Furthermore, it is telling for the increasing systemic hybridity that characterises the Flemish media landscape, one which warrants to look beyond either-or distinctions in terms of commercial or private, informational or entertainment-oriented, mainstream or alternative.

Over the years, audiences saw *DIW* evolve from its initial boyish and clumsy appearance to a more formatted show in line with broader late-night comedy tropes. *DIW* has also seen a number of faces come and go, in front as well as behind the camera. Nonetheless, it has proven a constant in the Flemish media landscape. Even when the show's second host announced his departure in late 2021, neither the network's editor-in-chief or manager saw any reason to drastically alter the show's course (Dumon, 2021). What this tells us is that *DIW* has managed to present its audiences with a consistent image with which it is associated. This image is one that is characterised by an eclectic form of news satire own to *DIW* and unique in the Flemish media landscape.

Methodology

We collected data through a combination of in-depth interviews with *DIW*'s creators and an observational period of three weeks in the show's "satirical newsroom." The interviews focussed on self-attributions of the show's creators regarding the intertwined genres of comedy, satire, and news work. We conducted formal semi-structured (11) and informal conversational (12) interviews with hosts, editors and editors-in-chief.

Interview studies on journalistic practitioners have focussed on the aspect of journalism as practice (Ahva, 2017), the relationship between journalists' professional identities and values (Statham, 2008), or journalists' otherwise tacit self-understandings related to the production of news content (Schultz, 2007). However, similar methods have only scarcely been applied to the relationship between journalistic practice and humour (e.g. Chattoo & Green-Barber, 2017), or news satirists' perspectives on their work (e.g. Koivukoski & Ödmark, 2020). For the observational component of our study, we were present on nine recording days over the course of three weeks. Observations took place in a non-participant context in order not to bias the natural flow of respondents' work practices. During these observations, we were invited to observe all stages of the show's production process. Access to creative brainstorming was limited to group briefings which took place after one-on-one brainstorming between editorial staff. Furthermore, continuous open access to recording sessions as an audience member allowed for additional moments of observation and informal conversation with staff.

A combination of these two methods has multiple advantages. Firstly, observational findings could be applied as contextualisation for interview data during the interview process and the different stages of analysis. Such situated knowledge offers an open-ended view on news satirists' role conceptions, intentions and work practices, and a materially grounded complement to respondents' self-attributions and perspectives (Ahva, 2017). In this sense, it allowed us to decentre the study of news satire away from the study of media texts or production structures, and focus on the practice of creating news satire as the "nexus of doings and sayings" (Schatzki, 2002).

Secondly, juxtaposing satirists' self-perceptions with their actual work routines validates insights in the potentially conflictual dimensions of their hybrid identities. It has been

shown that journalists and comedians engage in forms of boundary work aimed at delineating their practice from other professions (Carlson & Lewis, 2015; Koivukoski & Ödmark, 2020). Additionally, research on satirists' role conceptions reveals a significant overlap between journalistic and comedic roles pertaining to their work (Nicolai et al., 2022), underlining the fluidity of the perceived continuum between the journalistic and the comedic or satirical. Furthermore, following Witschge & Harbers (2018), such an approach pays attention to the definitional struggle surrounding the genre traits of news satire, rather than adopting certain definitions a priori (p. 108). As a result, we assume that the negotiation of different genre boundaries in the rhetorical and embodied practice of *DIW*'s creation process can expose how its self-ascribed genre hybridity translates into identitary ambiguities for its creators.

After transcribing interviews and observation logs, all textual output was formatted in NVivo for coding and analysis. All data was anonymised and is presented as such in the analysis. To this end, hosts, editors-in-chief and editors are respectively labelled with *H#*, *EC#* and *E#* combined with numerical references. A qualitative content analysis resulted in the conception of multiple codes driven by our central research interest regarding the negotiation of *DIW*'s hybrid genre identity. Here, we approached *DIW* as one example of a wider trend in the news satire genre, but strived to not a priori define it as an alternative form of journalistic storytelling. Rather, our pre-existing knowledge of certain prominent staff members' background in comedy made that we focussed on respondents' own conceptions of news satire which more often than not were rooted in comedic discursive registers.

ANALYSIS

Between satire and current affairs comedy convenience

A central thread running through *DIW*'s creators' conception of the show is the acknowledgement of *DIW*'s definitional ambiguity. News satirists' self-identifications have been shown to be diverse (Lichtenstein et al., 2021). Often satirists attribute themselves roles partly overlapping with journalistic values while simultaneously embodying perceptions on the irreconcilability

between entertainment and news. Similarly, *DIW*'s creators act out multiple, often contradicting views on the show's core business, exposing a split in perceptions on their aims. For one, this is reflected in an ongoing definitional negotiation of the show's identity between editors—predominantly with professional backgrounds in comedy—and editors-in-chief—of which at least two have a professional background in radio or television journalism. *DIW*'s editors—tasked with conceiving and developing content—were more inclined to minimise the show's journalistic identity. Among editors the ability to induce laughter was often described as *DIW*'s main goal:

We don't always manage to make a point, but we try every time. Often we'd be in a brain storm in the morning and get an idea (...) But at some point, [the editor-in-chief] would go 'What is actually the point?' And often we'd say, 'there is none, but we're doing it anyway because it's funny.'

[EC#4]

Additionally, for most editors the show's fundamental asset is its successful showcasing of a wide variety of different comedic genres. These can range from "toilet humour" to sketch comedy segments on current affairs topics, or to more critical satirical quips at politics. However, the content of the humour that editors draw on is rarely just a form of comic relief. Rather, two intertwining core functions ascribed to humour can be summarised as, first, the deliberative roles of disciplining those in power—through humour as a tool for ridicule—and second, to nuance public debate—by offering alternative comedic perspectives to "serious" news items. In this regard, the comedic professionalism of *DIW* is grounded in distinctly critical comedic genres that often take socio-political issues as their subject matter (Bingham & Hernandez, 2009). This coincides with what Nieuwenhuis & Zijp (2022) have recently termed the repoliticisation of humour, which refers to the observation that apolitical views on humour have been "replaced by the acknowledgement that humour can be used as a political weapon" (Nieuwenhuis & Zijp, 2022, p. 344). Despite their self-ascribed mandates to facilitate laughter, editors thus also acknowledge an understanding of humour as a site for cultural politics (Holm, 2018).

Editors-in-chief pointed out how their professional background in journalism renders them the self-ascribed custodians of the balance between the comedic and the critical. Partly in line with editors' views, editors-in-chief see *DIW* as a platform for offering media critique "by reading the news from a distance" [EC#2] or "sizing up the media" [H#2]. As such, they bring a journalistic "gut-feeling" (Schultz, 2007) to the table, which validates the need to incorporate news values related to journalism's watchdog role (Deuze, 2005). This inherent hybridity of *DIW* allows for ambiguous identifications in terms its creators' intentions: it is both "bullshitting" and "reading the news from a distance," both "carrot" as well as "stick" [EC#2]. As one host put it, "we want to make good jokes in which the attentive viewer would notice the critique between the lines. And if they don't, so be it" [H#1]. This makes *DIW*'s humour both means and end: A goal in itself, and a vehicle for the satirical critiques interlaced between the lines. As a result, *DIW*'s aim is summed up as serving a "deliberately inherently contradicting" purpose [H#1] as the hybrid logics of comedy and news continuously diverge and intersect throughout the show.

According to one editor-in-chief, the "tug-of-war" between news and comedy has characterised the show from its onset, and is "*DIW*'s strength as well as its weakness" [EC#4]. As the context around the show evolved, so did *DIW* evolve along with it. One editor-in-chief describes how the 2016 acquisition by the public broadcaster meant an evolution from "what used to be a playground for just talking about the news in our way, (...) to [offering] analysis to people who haven't seen the news yet" [EC#2]. Over the years, *DIW* evolved from absurdist "authors' television" [EC#1] to a more strictly formatted news satire show. As a result, different interpretations of *DIW*'s relationship to current affairs circulated among editors and editors-in-chief. With the term "current affairs comedy convenience" [EC#1], two of the founding members describe the show's news function as an "accidental by-product" of *DIW*'s initially commissioned assignment to "do something daily" [EC#1; EC#2]. This led to a form of current affairs comedy as, according to one former host, "the newspapers were available [in the editorial room] anyway" [H#1].

A key moment for *DIW* to come to terms with its role as a current affairs program only came later, with its 2014 award for best information program. When reflecting on this award, a new generation of editors-in-chief self-identified more overtly with taking up a valid position within the news media landscape:

[The award for best information program] was a painful moment. There was a lot of critique, and even [the editor-in-chief] said “this makes no sense.” But I always thought it does, because we are an information program. We say what the news of the day is, what happened, and we comment it, and make some jokes, but somehow we do bring information. So I didn’t think it was entirely unjustified.

[EC#3]

This underlines that the genre of news satire is not fixed, but rather fluid and adaptable, and subject to evolving in response to cultural shifts. *DIW*’s discursive and institutional context thus helps shape its generic make-up, oscillating between the comedic and journalistic. As one editor puts it, *DIW* “is not broadcast news, and viewers know that” [E#1]. Similarly to what Koivukoski & Ödmark (2020) have shown for Nordic satirists, *DIW*’s editors identified with a type of news satire that embodies genre traits of current affairs programs and opinion journalism: “if I compare [*DIW*] with news, then it’s more like *Ter Zake*², or news with a studio guest” [E#1], on account of their focus on an in-depth commentary on news items. But rather than resorting to a full-fledged form of genre blending, resulting in the creation of fixed genre identities (Mäntynen & Shore, 2014), *DIW*’s creators struggle to reconcile the appropriated genre tropes of entertainment and news. The way the creators of *DIW* navigate this negotiation between the genre characteristics of journalism and comedy is reflected in their perceptions of the role of subjectivity in their reporting.

The comedic negotiation of *De Ideale Wereld*’s own voice

When in January 2021, *DIW*-sidekick and actress Sarah Vandeursen announced her retirement from the show, she claimed that the relentless comedic spin on things had turned her cynical:

2 *Ter Zake* (1994 – present) is a Flemish current affairs program which combines news reports with in-studio expert interviews. Contrary to broadcast news, its focus lies on in-depth analysis of societal topics.

“All that was left was the idea ‘Where’s the joke in this?’ But some things are not funny. Things can also be beautiful, sweet, good, or cute. And I’d lost that” (Sarah Vandeursen Stopt, 2021). As a co-editor, Vandeursen’s job may have been to produce comedy-on-demand, but her lament for the dominance of comedic professionalism obscures the fact that *DIW*’s production logic is also necessarily guided by the inherent subjectivity of its creators:

What pushed us was our frustration with things you read in the newspaper, or how they were presented. I say “frustration”, but we also just felt joyful about certain topics which we saw or thought so absurd that we had to do something with them. It’s also not that we just covered big topics, we always had a fondness for trivialities.

[H#1]

In relation to its identification with opinionated strands of journalism in the Flemish media landscape, *DIW* is found to navigate between different interpretations of the journalistic. Despite emotions taking up a central role in the creation of *DIW*, the show’s creators struggled with reconciling aspects of journalism pertaining to neutrality and factuality with the presence of their own satirical voice. As part comedy program, it may seem self-evident that one of *DIW*’s key objectives is to facilitate joy through laughter. However, the show’s creators ascribed a more profound dimension to the relationship between humour and emotionality. According to one editor-in-chief, humour is an emotional relief valve in the processing of things: “The moment you can laugh about something, it means you’ve gone through the whole process of anger, amazement, disgust (...)” [H#2]. *DIW*’s humour was valued as a way to relieve tensions or “appease polarisation” [E#1] in the public debate. This view on comedic news coverage supersedes the role of a news reporter as a civic educator. Rather, by viewing joy as a “news value” (Parks, 2021), *DIW* strives to create a journalistic experience of involvement (Peters, 2011), in addition to comedically sifting through the news of the day.

Most editorial staff described how their emotions are a key criterion in selecting which items to cover. Recurrently, staff pointed out how personal frustrations with “mainstream” news coverage or political rhetoric fuels morning brainstorm sessions [EC#1; EC#2]. In one exchange, an editor-in-chief went as far as describing her career switch—from being a

professional journalist to becoming *DIW*'s first female editor-in-chief—as originating directly from her “disgust” with “seeing how the news was made” [EC#4]. By allowing emotions to influence the selection and interpretation of current affairs, *DIW* expands existing broadcast news roles by legitimising discursive frames that favour personal perspectives. *DIW* strives to create material aimed at being “true to themselves” (Sturges, 2015), favouring a type of comedy “which reveals personality and which involves drama and a story (...) and contains some humanity” [H#2]. But here again, the complexity of *DIW*'s genre hybridity is not without complications for its level of personalisation. In addition to being comedians, their self-ascribed role as current affairs commentators also implies imposing limits on the level of subjectivity in *DIW*'s production process:

During a rehearsal, there was an exchange between [the host] and [the editor-in-chief] in which the editor-in-chief said that something in the monologue wasn't entirely correct, that we couldn't do this. [The host] replied that that was his subjective opinion, that he wanted to bring that message. But it wasn't true, so in that moment [the editor-in-chief] is fact-checker on duty.

[E#4]

Subjectivity can be defined as elements of the show's production logic originating in the creator's own lived experience. This lived experience is anecdotal, emotional, and as being comedians, voiced predominantly through the registers of comedic genres. But despite openly speaking from their own experience, *DIW*'s production process is also guided by a clear indebtedness to the positivist principles of more traditional news coverage, i.e. an intentional attempt to uphold factuality. In order to fulfil the task of safeguarding the balance between comedic absurdity and social commentary, editors-in-chief consistently uphold factuality of content, allowing it to function as a counter measure to the pitfalls of its creators' subjective stances. For example, *DIW*'s editors-in-chief began to sustain what one respondent terms a “trigger of topicality” [E#1], describing the necessity to make sure each episode covers a proportional share of trivial and weighty news topics. To do this, the show's creators started each day with a thorough reading of legacy media outlets such as Flemish newspapers *De Standaard*, *De Morgen*, and *Het Laatste Nieuws*. By clinging to a factually correct rendition of news

items, they acknowledge the risks of epistemic relativity for their self-ascribed news function. Discussions between editors on the work floor reveal detailed interrogations of news items in order to get the story right. Editors underline how “falsehoods are avoided at all times in non-comedic sections of the show” [E#1]. In other words, *DIW* draws on generic journalistic tropes of factuality as an anchor for comedic scripts to counter what one editor-in-chief calls “the banality of our own opinions” [EC#1]: “if the joke fails, at least people still get the news of the day” [E#2].

On the one hand, *DIW*’s perceptions on what constitutes the journalistic and comedic are often viewed as irreconcilable, reflecting the limits of Delli Carpini & Williams’ (2001) now widely endorsed idea that “the opposite of news is not entertainment” (p. 162): Comedy and satire, according to one editor-in-chief, has “the freedom to be hypersubjective” [EC#2]. Journalism, however, is often framed as having “the duty to be objective [and] without opinion” [E#2]. On the other hand, part of *DIW*’s identity ties in with more affective types of news work which openly incorporate the role of emotions (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2020) or intimacy (Steensen, 2017). The way that *DIW*’s creators acknowledge the impact of their voice in the show’s creation embodies what Schmidt (2021) called augmented objectivity (p. 1147)—the infusion of reflexive emotionality in news work. As such, as an end product the show reflects an ongoing negotiation between the subjective voice of its creators and their work as comedic current affairs commentators.

Set-up and punchline as hybrid storytelling

As Buoziš & Creech (2018) have stated, genres can function as tools for organising storytelling conventions that reveal epistemic perceptions on news work (p. 1430). As Bird and Dardenne (1988) already concluded, “while news is not fiction, it is a story about reality, not reality itself” (p. 82). In an attempt to reconcile its comedic goals with news commentary, *DIW* resorts to the construction of a hybrid form of storytelling which defines its format as a whole:

(...) we had a segment on the [election] campaign being in a state of despair. It’s kind of something I come up with, but it’s also the case if you see three or four things, ask

questions, you can make a story out of it. Only, it's not one hundred percent the truth that this campaign is in despair, it's so to say my perception (...) by bringing together perspectives I try to get the story to come to life.

[H#2]

DIW's creators described the show as a form of storytelling in service of a comedic re-interpretation of the news through the subjective lens of its creators. Storytelling refers to the presence of a narrative structure that incorporates elements of plot, scenes, actors, or the anticipation of a conclusion (Markova & Sukhhoviy, 2020). In journalism studies, storytelling has been framed as a midway perspective overwriting journalism's professional dilemma of choosing between "the demands of reality" and "the demands of narrativity" (Bird and Dardenne, 1988; Groot Kormelink and Costera Meijer, 2015). Where some have distinguished between storytelling and other modes of communication in terms of information delivery or attraction (e.g. Ekström, 2000), more contemporary readings put forward an integrated perspective in which forms of storytelling can be simultaneously instructional, affective, and emotional (Harbers and Broersma, 2014; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2020).

DIW's creators showcased an awareness of the need to produce the show in terms of narrative—the whole as well as its subsegments—creating a retelling of the news which is both funny as well as informative. At the core of its success, according to one editor-in-chief, lies the responsibility to "take the humour seriously" [H#2]. The show's content is therefore the result of carefully curated professionalism, resulting in staff members dissecting jokes, critically questioning specific wording in scripts, and focussing heavily on capturing the right visual comedic essence during recordings. On a structural level, *DIW*'s creation is guided by what we call a **set-up/punchline logic** of comedic storytelling. With an average length of 45 minutes, *DIW* offers room for a wide array of segments with each offering a specific opportunity to discuss current affairs.

The set-up

With the exception of certain forms of anti-humour, the stylistic rhythm of set-up and punchline are part and parcel to a comedian's practice (Keisalo, 2018). Beyond the textual level of the individual joke, the set-up/punchline logic in *DIW* also reveals the show's inherent hybridity in terms of format and work routines, and functions as a way to negotiate any potential incongruities between entertainment and news. As jokes need to give the right amount of information in order for them to be understood by audiences (Keisalo, 2018, p. 2), the *set-up* in *DIW* is described as being both a set-up to comedic content, as well as a set-up for news understanding. In light of such a comedic logic, *DIW* acquires what we call an "accidental news function": news content becomes a requirement for comedic success while simultaneously news awareness is facilitated among viewers.

Recurrently, *DIW*'s creators underlined the importance of the guest interview as a prime storytelling device in function of offering necessary background knowledge to audiences. One host described how the role of guest interviews has undergone an evolution from being "a soundboard for the [comedic] clips" to a "meaningful player in the whole of the show" [H#2]. Throughout the show's period on Belgian television, *DIW* has seen a wide range of prominent guests appear such as well-known actors, journalists, and prominent political figures. Guests would often be invited to participate in pre-recorded sketches or in-studio acts following the example of Saturday Night Live's co-editor tradition, which allows customisation of episodes based on who appears on the show. Nonetheless, most staff members describe the guests' function in the first place as "a set-up for offering audiences current affairs insights needed to understand the sketches" [E#5]. In such a view, guest interviews were framed as a vehicle which communicates to audiences that *DIW* is simultaneously "just for laughs" [E#1] and an emulation of "broadcast news with a twist" [EC#3]. The guest interviews in *DIW* are not so much interviews in a strict sense. Rather, they are a form of semi-manufactured comedic dialogue aimed at sparking audience engagement by constructing a form of anecdotal and personalised storytelling.

The punchline

A punchline answers the questions hinted in the set-up in an unexpected way (Keisalo, 2018). In its set-up, *DIW* raises implicit questions concerning the genre expectations of comedy and news. *DIW* drives home its punchline through a mix of both comedic sketches and highly personal commentary when constructing the show as a whole. Notwithstanding that audiences often find their way to the show via individual online segments, each episode showcases a wide range of different and often recurring segments. According to the show's creators, this diversity is one of its key advantages [H#1; EC#1]. More importantly, segments are consciously created to serve a specific purpose located somewhere on the continuum between absurdist comedy and satirical news commentary:

Our notion of critique exists in the mix of the show. You can't have five items which are too haphazard, too weird or absurd. Within that mix of the show—that can be in guest interviews or the monologue as well—you should have an indictment, some outrage. That can concern politics, or how the news works, or how newspapers react to things.

[E#1]

As such, a relatively new segment of the show is the host's opening monologue, reflecting *DIW*'s evolution towards a more tight formatting à la (predominantly North-American) late-night comedy shows. The monologue, according to one editor, is “an easy way to cover news items which are not easily translatable to humour” [E#1]. More serious in tone and less reliant on visual comedic elements, it tackles one topic in detail, ranging from three to sometimes seven minutes of satirical commentary. A second example—the recurrent cartoon character *Sociaal Incapabele Michiel* (literally: *Socially Incapable Michael*)—is described as an outlet for more scabrous forms of humour. According to editors, it is a fitting vehicle for taboo topics, ribaldry or downright nonsensical views which do not work in verbal expositions or live-action sketches. A third segment which captures *DIW*'s hybrid storytelling is *De Woordvoerder* (i.e. *The Spokesperson*). In this widely popular segment, a “spokesperson” for different public figures or companies is interviewed and asked to explain a topical news controversy. After a few dull retorts—parodic of a clichéd idea of actual spokespeople's generic apologetic rhetoric—the

camera cuts to a behind the scenes interaction between interviewer and spokesperson in which the spokesperson addresses the controversy more candidly, now in a thick colloquial accent. The segment, according to one editor-in-chief, is designed deliberately to “say what everyone is *actually* thinking,” [H#2], and what the hosts of the show would not be able to voice themselves.

As a result, each segment in the show embodies a mediated negotiation of the creator’s own voice to some extent, dangling between the overt and literal on one hand, and the absurdist and obscure on the other, woven together in a form of hybrid storytelling. Ultimately, in an attempt to reconcile perceived genre conflictions between comedy and journalism, *DIW*’s hybrid storytelling functions as a structure on to which creators can hook comedic segments and news items, bridging the gap between both.

Conclusion and discussion

This article set out to analyse Belgian news satire show *De Ideale Wereld* in terms of how it understands its hybrid identity as both comedy and news commentary. Our situated analysis of interviews with the show’s staff and observations in *DIW*’s “satirical newsroom” revealed how the show’s inherent genre hybridity resulted in an ongoing negotiation of its creators’ role-conceptions.

Rather than starting from the assumption that *DIW* functions as an alternative form of journalism or broadcast news, our findings show how it is characterised by a diversity of intentions located on different ends of the spectrum between comedic absurdity and critical commentary, resonating with the self-ascribed label of *DIW* as “current affairs comedy convenience.” But this generic hybridity is not without complications. By drawing on genre elements of professional journalism, the show’s creators experience limitations to the subjectivity inherent to their roles as comedic professionals. This ongoing identity shift is rooted in traditional understandings of the journalist and comedic, often perceived by its creators as irreconcilable: It reflects a modernist view of a supposedly mandatorily detached and neutral journalism, in conflict with a view of comedy as distinctly aimed at comic relief.

Viewed as such, the contradiction of such genres is reflected in the inherent contradiction in the role-conceptions of *DIW*'s creators. In an attempt to reconcile its comedic goals with news commentary, we described how *DIW* resorts to the construction of a hybrid form of storytelling. To capture this logic, we described *DIW*'s production process through the metaphor of set-up and punchline. In the set-up, guest interviews are viewed by staff as a vehicle for offering news-related background knowledge necessary for understanding the show's comedic content, granting *DIW* an "accidental news function." The show's *punchline* consists of a consciously diverse array of segments, each reflecting the creators' own voice on an individual level, and the show's hybrid identity as interchangeably comedic, satirical, and informative as a whole. In this sense, *DIW* can be seen as the embodiment of literary theorist Thomas Kent's assertion that "just as there is no escaping history, there is no escaping genre" (Kent, 1986, p. 152).

Our findings contribute to the emerging strand of scholarship aimed at understanding satirists' perceptions, by expanding our focus to satirical practitioners outside of the Anglo-Saxon canon. They confirm that satirists' role orientations are diverse and reflect an ongoing conflict between comedic professionalism and characteristics akin to professional journalism (Koivukoski & Ödmark, 2020; Lichtenstein et al., 2021). Additionally, our findings showcase distinct aspects of genre hybridity that also complicate the creation of satire. Contrary to previous studies, *DIW*'s creators only rarely aligned themselves with more critical, deliberative satirical roles of "eye-openers" or "interrogators" in the public debate (Ödmark & Harvard, 2020). And in contrast with more overtly journalistic satirical formats in Scandinavia (Koivukoski & Ödmark, 2020) or the Netherlands (Nicolai et al., 2022), *DIW*'s creators predominantly drew on explicit comedic registers originating in absurdist or stand-up comedy. If *DIW* produces satire, then it does so between the lines. And between these lines, *DIW*'s creators cultivate a deliberate air of ambiguity, in terms of content as well as identity, which sets it apart from its satirical contemporaries. As Rob Wijnberg, editor-in-chief for the journalistic platform *The Correspondent* stated, "satirists are journalists without the dead weight of journalism" (Wijnberg, 2018). Our analysis of *DIW* reveals that for some, the creation of satirical content does involve a struggle with the weight of journalistic accountability.

Finally, our study can be seen as a continuation of the longstanding tradition of newsroom studies in the study of news work in its broadest sense (Deuze & Witschge, 2017; Wahl-

Jorgensen, 2009). Methodologically we have shown that newsroom ethnographies are a vital site for research beyond the scope of conventional journalistic actors (see Domingo & Paterson, 2011). As such the “satirical newsroom” functions as a valuable starting point for analysis, supplementing interviews (e.g. Koivuskoi & Ödmark, Lichtenstein et al., 2021) or textual analysis (Brugman et al., 2021) as a way for understanding news satire in practice. Combined with a genre approach, we have shown that hybrid media formats such as news satire are still often understood in terms of their generic building blocks by their creators. Future studies could expand this line of study by continuing “to dive, head first, into the chaos” (Deuze & Witschge, 2017, p. 166) of news satire, giving voice to satirists and the way they make sense of the creation of their work as a hybrid genre.

CHAPTER 2

The “humoralist” as journalistic jammer:
Zondag met Lubach and the discursive construction
of investigative comedy

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Abstract

This study contributes to ongoing discussions on the societal role of satire as a platform for public debate. To this end, we analysed the metajournalistic discourse surrounding Dutch television news satire show *Zondag met Lubach* to assess how it has been received and discussed in the Dutch media landscape. Through an analysis of 64 media appearances (2014 – 2020) with the host and staff members of the show, we zoom in on how discursive exchanges between *Zondag met Lubach* and media professionals reflect and shape understandings of the journalistic. Thereby, we distinguish three phases of identity construction for the show. Our findings reveal how *Zondag met Lubach* entered the Dutch media landscape as a comedic non-journalistic outsider, but has gradually become legitimated as a quasi-insider to the journalistic field, embodying the nuanced role of investigative comedy. We conclude by discussing how the concept of investigative comedy elicits reflection on the epistemic authority of novel incantations of journalistic storytelling, and how it contributes to the expansion of conventional assumptions among satirists and media professionals about what journalism can or should be.

Introduction

The news satire show *Zondag met Lubach* (*ZML*) debuted on the Dutch public broadcaster VPRO in November 2014. Since its release, *ZML* garnered both popular success and critical acclaim, resulting in up to an average of two million views per episode (n.b. on a population of only 17 million)³ and numerous television awards. Two years after its release, the show won the prestigious Dutch 2016 Silver Nipkow Disc award after a jury of journalists and media critics dubbed *ZML* as “a unique and successful combination of entertainment and investigative journalism [and] an important interpreter of the news,” (Nipkowschijf, 2016) placing it square on the intersection between comedy, journalism, and broadcast news.

ZML's hybrid mix of comedy and news is part of a broader boom in the genre of televised political satire, taking off in the first decade of the 21st century—hallmarked by noteworthy forerunner *The Daily Show* (Baym, 2005; Gray et al., 2009)—and gathering international momentum in following years (Baym & Jones, 2012). Nonetheless, *ZML* stands out in the Netherlands because of its distinct long-form satirical format, which covers societal issues through a well-researched comedic narrative. Boasting a team of both professional comedic writers and researchers, the show resembles other political comedy formats such as *Last Week Tonight* (Nieuwenhuis, 2018), which on a weekly basis offers a form of investigative reporting on topics that are often not in the spotlight of the current news cycle (Davisson & Donovan, 2019).

Notwithstanding the many accolades and popular appraisal, *ZML* has proven hard to classify as its multiple hybridity breaches genre boundaries for both journalistic and comedic discourses. This paper argues that *ZML*—by embodying elements of both investigative journalism and scripted television comedy—has fuelled public discussion on where to place shows like this within the broader media ecology and, in doing so, functioned as a site for reflection on the boundaries of legacy journalism itself.

3 After recurrent peak ratings over two million, the final season of *Zondag met Lubach* broke its previous record with 2.3 million views, engulfing conventional evening news programmes on both the public and commercial broadcaster for that evening.

In this study, we assess how perceptions on journalistic and comedic identity are negotiated in interviews with staff of *ZML* conducted by members of the journalistic community. Bringing together theoretical reflections on the societal role of journalism and the inherent ambiguity of humour, our study explores the interplay of processes of identity construction within the metajournalistic discourse (Carlson, 2016) surrounding the reception of *ZML* in the Dutch media landscape. To this end, we analysed 64 media appearances of the show's host and staff members.

In a 2017 interview, Bob Thompson, founding director of the Bleier Centre for Television and Popular Culture at Syracuse University, referred to the current news satire landscape as displays of “investigative comedy” (Kennedy, 2017). Since then, the term has been picked up in different forms. We contribute to academic debate that intertwines the proliferation of news satire and journalism's problematised epistemic authority by identifying investigative comedy as one specific subgenre within the expanding landscape of television news satire shows. We trace investigative comedy and its attributions within the discourse surrounding *ZML* and discuss the implications it has for *ZML*'s evolving role within the Dutch media landscape. As it is within discourse that journalistic culture and identity is reproduced and contested (Hanitzsch & Vos, 2017), the analysis of discursive articulations surrounding *ZML* sheds light on the place that the show ultimately takes up in the Dutch media landscape. By analysing the discourse surrounding *ZML*, this article not only broadens the literature's geographical scope, but also adds to earlier theoretical insights about the news satire genre and how it could be understood.

Mirror or prism? Reflecting journalism's many faces

Satire has been conceptualised as a mode of political discourse that interrogates societal issues and critiques power relations (Holbert, 2013). Viewed as such, its aspirations are akin to professional journalism's claims to capturing and narrativizing real-world events and portraying them as truthful interpretations of reality. Because satire recurrently parodies dominant societal discourses (Griffin, 1994), many satirical phenomena also draw from recognisable patterns of journalistic style and practice collectively understood as an authoritative way of gathering and covering news.

Television news satire specifically is often a stylistic referent to broadcast news and implements similar visual tropes or argumentative techniques (Baym, 2005). However, what distinguishes television news satire from “serious” broadcast news is, at least in definition, its mode of information delivery. By bringing together the performative aspects of news with the rhetorical and visual aspects of comedy, it opposes conventional journalistic ideals of an impartial, neutral and detached way of (re)presenting news issues, and thereby takes up an adversarial relationship regarding the high-modern journalistic ethos organised around an ideal of achievable objectivity (Baym, 2010).

As such, television news satire’s proclivity to the comedic and therefore subjective analysis of current affairs displays elements of a reflective style of journalism (Broersma, 2010a, Harbers, 2016). This style of journalism is characterised by an openly transparent and participatory search for truth as mediated by the subjectivity of its creators. In line with core tenets of literary journalism (Hartsock, 1999), satire openly acknowledges the tentative nature of its coverage (Day, 2011). Rather than bringing disembodied “news from nowhere” (Baym, 2010, p. 2; Epstein, 1976), news satire engages in a form of openly subjective storytelling that brings together facts with personal lived experience (Sims, 1995) dedicated to facilitating democratic debate (Berning, 2011). This in turn aligns television news satire with more opinionated strands of journalism and their distinct opposition against positivist epistemology (Steenen, 2017). Its coverage is non-descriptive but interventional, and in a sense often solution- and public-oriented, corresponding to elements of the constructive journalism movement (Hermans & Drok, 2018). Beyond its mode of delivery, certain strands of news satire openly draw on values and practices akin to investigative journalism. Stetka and Örnebring (2013) define investigative journalism as “sustained news coverage of moral and legal transgressions of persons in positions of power (...) that requires more time and resources than regular news reporting” (p. 415). In terms of topic selection and topic coverage, this definition of investigative journalism resonates with the long-form, single-issue segments on politically-relevant topics that television news satire shows often produce.

A brief look at the topics covered by *ZML* in 2020, for example, shows episodes that deconstruct issues ranging from a local marketing company’s dubious regard for intellectual property to the Chinese oppression of the Uyghur population (VPRO, 2021). Such segments

often last between twelve and twenty minutes, reflecting long-form journalistic content (e.g., Boukes, 2019) that manages to slow down the 24/7 news cycle in a similar vein as long-form investigative journalism. This allows satire shows to make sense of current affairs in a more slowed down and digestible fashion, thereby countering the disorienting “media torrent” of conventional news formats (Basu, 2018, p. 252). Thus, *ZML* can be said to reflect slow journalism’s key goal of enacting “a critique of the limitations and dangers of the speed of much of the mainstream contemporary journalistic environment” (Le Masurier, 2016, p. 439).

Licence to laugh

On the other side of the satirical coin, news satire applies comedic framing to maximise humorous output (Wiesman, 2011). In contrast to regular news programmes, satirical news shows often blatantly acknowledge their pre-framed and scripted nature and, thereby, potentially add to the legitimacy of the host as an authentic purveyor of information (Tally, 2011; Vraga et al. 2012). Furthermore, news satire’s humoristic delivery renders the genre an inherently polysemic form of news discourse. As Marsh (2018) stated, the comedian does not commit to the truth of what he says, but neither does he commit to speaking untruth either. By crafting a deliberately ambiguous space of comedic licence (Lockyer & Pickering, 2008), news satire has the power to speak freely on certain topics that are avoided or difficult to address in non-humorous modes of communication (Richmond & Porpora, 2019; Boukes & Hameleers, 2020). As such, it embodies the problem of ambiguity (Kuipers, 2011) by implicitly contesting notions of the public sphere as a space where common ground is sought through rational debate and a minimisation of communicational misinterpretations.

What Petrovic (2018) termed the “politics of ambivalence” can be used to operationalise news satire’s inherent humoristic ambivalence as politics, rather than merely a characteristic of political commentary: “The features of humour that are usually thought to diminish its political potential—its ambiguity, elusiveness, resistance to clear-cut interpretations and unpredictability of its effects [become] actual loci of its political relevance” (Petrovic, 2018, p. 203). However, the idea that humour exists in a separate realm, free of real-world ramifications, falsely assumes the amoralist stance that satirists are never accountable for potential conse-

quences of their actions (Carrol, 2014). *ZML* seemingly overcomes this pitfall by, paradoxically, carefully balancing the roles of comedian and reporter in a form of comedic earnestness in which humour becomes a vehicle for a complex argument, rather than the goal in itself. Despite its occasional absurd humoristic style, the show addresses audiences in an explicitly didactic manner, likely rendering it hard to be misinterpreted by its audience (Boukes & Hameleers, 2020).

Discursive constructions of journalistic insiders/outsideers

Although news satire resides outside the boundaries of professional journalism, it can be argued that it nevertheless “reflects the socio-informative functions, identities, and roles of journalism” (Eldridge, 2018, p. 858). Viewing journalism as subject to a plurality of interpretations implies that competing definitions of journalism exist and potentially interact.

Journalism scholars have focussed on multiple interpretations of its subject as a social practice. For instance, Zelizer (1993) proposed viewing journalists as members of an interpretative community who constitute meanings of journalism through shared discourse and collective interpretations. To this end, journalists engage in boundary work aimed at delineating the field of professional journalism and enlarging its institutional authority (Carlson & Lewis, 2015). By drawing on a myriad of possible conceptions of journalism, journalistic practitioners shape their identities through processes of definitional control of a shared set of discursive understandings of what makes a journalist (Witschge & Harbers, 2018, p. 110).

Correspondingly, satirists also actively sustain social boundaries between themselves and outsiders by differentiating the roles they perform from those associated with broadcast news and other satirical genres (Koivukoski & Ödmark, 2020). In practice, news satire has been found to embody the roles of *interrogator* (Day, 2011), *interlocutor* (Baym, 2010), or even a form of *comedic opinion news pundit* (Brugman et al., 2021). This was not only found in the context of Western satire shows, but for example also in context with much less press freedom, such as Zimbabwe (Zirugo, 2021).

News satirists themselves describe three specific roles that characterise their work (Ödmark & Harvard, 2021): (i) the role of *eye-opener*—offering perspectives absent in mainstream public debate; (ii) the role of *questioner*—exposing hypocrisy and interrogating dominant ideas; and (iii) the role of *reporter*—functioning as agenda-setters through independent journalistic investigation (p. 12). These three roles often characterise news satire in terms of its position in the public debate vis-à-vis perceived roles of professional journalism.

Similarly, among journalists a wide range of role conceptions exist about how they should fulfil their professional responsibilities (Patterson & Donsbach, 1996). Traditionally, research distinguished four roles that journalists take up, although these are not mutually exclusive (Tandoc et al., 2012; Weaver & Wilhoit, 1996): (i) *disseminator*—getting objective facts to the public quickly; (ii) *investigator*—analyse problems, investigate claims; (iii) *adversarial/watchdog*—being critical of government, officials, and business; and (iv) *populist mobiliser*—motivating people to participate in civic activities. However, this list is not all-encompassing. More recent research also added *infotainment*—journalism addressing the audience as a spectator and centralised around personalisation and emotions—to the list of journalistic role conceptions (Mellado et al., 2020), underlining the fluidity of the perceived continuum between journalism and political comedy. Such reciprocal insider-outsider dynamics are fruitful sites to assess the intricate relationship between news satire and journalism. Emerging satirical phenomena as *ZML*, existing on the peripheries of the journalistic field, can foster normative debate on what is (and what is not) perceived as a legitimate epistemic form of journalistic storytelling.

The framework of metajournalistic discourse

As Hanitzsch and Vos (2017) stated, it is within discourse that journalistic culture and identity are reproduced and contested by discursively articulating and enforcing particular roles (p. 8). To assess which role *ZML* is ascribed within the Dutch media landscape and how it evolved over time, we draw on Carlson's (2016) framework of metajournalistic discourse.

Metajournalistic discourse can be seen as a discursive field which “connects the creation and circulation of journalism's sociocultural meanings to the social practices surrounding

news production and consumption” (Carlson, 2016, p. 350). Furthermore, metajournalistic discourse grasps how multiple actors “inside and outside of journalism compete to construct, reiterate, and even challenge the boundaries of acceptable journalistic practices” (Carlson, 2016, p. 349). Altogether, this assumes that journalism’s definitions are subject to a relational dynamic through which different practitioners seek to establish legitimacy, as journalists alone cannot coerce acceptance of their preferred meanings. In other words, an analysis of metajournalistic discourse surrounding *ZML* provides insights into whether and how the show has gained a place within the broader journalistic ecology (Perreault & Vos, 2019). As parodic performers of news, satirists are embedded in their subject, and as a result, they are at least indirectly defined by journalism’s traditions (Borden & Tew, 2007). Therefore, such a framework allows us to analyse how discursive roles concerning journalism, comedy and satire are negotiated within the discourse surrounding *ZML*.

Previous studies on the discursive construction of news satire have exclusively focused on the figure of Jon Stewart and *The Daily Show*, limiting their results to a very specific character from the U.S. context of almost a decade ago (Carlson & Peifer, 2013; Feldman, 2007; Tenenboim-Weinblatt, 2009). Their findings revealed how news satire functioned as “outside critique” which “challenges journalists to revisit the standards and assumptions of their professional practice” (Feldman, 2007, p. 407). Tenenboim-Weinblatt (2009) focussed on the discursive transition of Jon Stewart within the journalistic community from late-night comedian to political commentator. Ultimately these studies describe a process similar to what Eldridge (2018) termed *journalistic realisation* or the way in which news texts reflect either peer-legitimation or peer-marginalisation of non-journalistic contributions (p. 858).

Carlson and Peifer (2013) revealed how processes of journalistic realisation of news satire occur, but are often accompanied by the construction of binary oppositions between journalism and non-journalism, or seriousness and humour. These studies offered relevant insight in how news satire managed to invade journalism’s self-ascribed epistemic authority in the public discourse by muddying the boundaries between the discursive realms of journalism and comedy previously perceived to be distinct. More than a decade later, we further this body of research by expanding our analytical scope beyond the already well-researched examples

originating from the United States. Additionally, we adopt a rigorous discursive approach by zooming in on the interpretative strategies that offer an encompassing view of the discursive interplay between *ZML* and the broader Dutch journalistic community. Whether and how the television news satire of *ZML* is discursively legitimated by media professionals has to be site-specifically traced within the discourse surrounding those shows. Moreover, such meaning-making structures could potentially shift over time with increasing popularity or perceived influence of a show.

Methodology

We investigate what position *ZML* is ascribed within the Dutch media landscape, and which interpretative strategies are put forward to legitimate, define, and delineate said location. To this end, we analysed 64 media appearances of the show's host and *ZML* staff in Dutch-speaking news and popular culture media. Our analytical scope contains the period of 2014-2020, which covers the full airing period of the show at the time of our analysis. Although *ZML*'s final episode was aired early 2021, we assert that this body of media texts allows us to adequately pinpoint the show's processes of identity construction throughout its presence on Dutch television.

To gather our data, we made use of the search engine Nexis Uni, covering a broad spectrum of journalistic and popular outlets, and made use of the website Zwartekat.nl, which archives most media appearances of Dutch comedians and cabaret artists. Because *ZML* is aired on Dutch television, occasionally Flemish (Belgian) news media covered the show, which we have included in the analysis as well. The data makes up a diverse body of different media genres such as journalistic (radio) interviews, podcasts, appearances on current affair programmes, professional (academic) interviews, long-form newspaper interviews, or appearances in popular press. As some segments were taken offline throughout our analysis, an initial larger body of texts was reduced to the data presented in our analysis.

After transcribing each appearance, a close reading of the texts resulted in a thematic analysis based on the three theoretical dimensions of metajournalistic discourse (Carlson, 2016): (i) definition making, (ii) boundary setting, and (iii) legitimation. We applied these concepts to reiteratively conceptualise how discursive exchanges between *ZML*, media

professionals, and journalists shaped mutual understandings on the journalistic. The concept of definition making, for example, allowed us to identify which definitions were points of contestation in acknowledging elements of *ZML* as journalistic, or how certain definitions were expanded or resignified. Processes of boundary setting guided the identification of insider-outsider dynamics present in *ZML*'s media appearances, and allowed us to identify how perceptions on *ZML*'s role changed over time. Processes of legitimation, finally, were identified in discursive exchanges on the epistemic validity and authority of either comedic or journalistic ways of covering news. As Carlson (2016) underlines, these concepts are “presented as distinct processes for the sake of explanation” and “certainly overlap in practice” (Carlson, 2016, p. 359). But applying them as theoretical guidelines can reflect relationships between journalistic discourse and practice—in this case the television news satire of *ZML*.

A second reading of our data allowed us to identify thematic shifts throughout the show's airing period, resulting in three different chronological phases of the show's reception and identification. We present our findings in chronological order to demonstrate how the show—and its location within the journalistic field—has developed over time.

ANALYSIS

Negotiating a comedic identity (2014-2015)

At the start of the show's airing period, metajournalistic discourse on *ZML* was characterised by a discursive struggle with the show's hybrid format. Its novel blend of comedy and news made *ZML* an ill fit within the existing broader Dutch media landscape of that time, which resulted in different attempts among interviewers to fixate *ZML* within pre-existing genres. For example, the show was introduced as a “satirical talk show in US style” (EénVandaag, 2015), or its relationship to the news was emphasised as explicitly parodic and compared to comedic talk-show peers, such as *The Colbert Report* or *The Daily Show* (AD, 2015).

In interviews, *ZML*'s host Arjen Lubach underlines how the show imitates features of the television news genre and merely “plays [as if they were] authoritative news” (DWDD, 2014).

For example, Lubach describes the show as having a “newsy feeling” and “semi-journalistic appearance” (LINDA.nl, 2014). However, during its introductory year, Lubach predominantly self-identifies as a comedian (EénVandaag, 2015; Jinek, 2014; PersTribune, 2015). In 2015, media attention for *ZML* focuses on several segments covering topics outside of mainstream news debates. Among these were the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (Boukes 2019), the use of drones in governmental surveillance, and criticism on the Dutch monarchy⁴. Consequently, we could observe how early on *ZML* was increasingly framed in terms of journalistic professionalism:

INTERVIEWER: Despite being funny, it was also a great journalistic scoop, the rules about drones are completely unclear, and actually no one really knows whether or not it is an offence or not, to record [the Prime Minister’s office], it also reveals something.

LUBACH: Yes, “a journalistic scoop” is maybe too much credit, but this is what we do strive for, to add these layers. And we’re the last to pretend to do journalism, or to come up with scoops, but the joke is that it’s (...) what in the States is called investigative comedy and that could be what it is.

(Nooit Meer Slapen, VPRO, 2015)

By addressing the show’s coverage on the underlit topics of both drone regulations and governmental officials’ privacy, the interviewer legitimates *ZML* as a public investigator. Similarly, the host of current affairs show *EénVandaag* (2015) describes *ZML* as managing to do “what politics and serious media don’t manage,” associating the show with the adversarial watchdog role; functions commonly assumed to fit role conceptions of professional journalists (Tandoc et al., 2012; Weaver & Wilhoit, 1996; Zirugo, 2021).

However, there is a distinction between outlet types and processes of *ZML*’s legitimation. Current affairs programmes and late-night talk shows are found to address *ZML* more often

4 Lubach proposed to have himself elected Pharaoh of the Netherlands, launching a successful petition on the topic receiving more than 65.000 signatures making it legally fit for assessment in Parliament.

in terms of its comedic characteristics. In contrast, the print press and radio interviews in our analysis tend to discuss the show more explicitly in light of its perceived journalistic value. Such a distinction follows the argument that *ZML*—through its distinct discursive hybridity—functions as a site for professional reflexivity regarding journalism’s role and the re-articulation of its core dimensions (Feldman, 2007). As journalistic self-understandings are shaped by internal and external influences (Ahva, 2012, p. 790), *ZML*’s presence in the metajournalistic discourse especially invites traditional journalistic media to question their own values and practices.

Nonetheless, the show’s staff members themselves predominantly discard claims of journalistic legitimation by referring to the binary divide between the intention to produce comedy on the one hand and journalistic accountability on the other hand:

INTERVIEWER: Is there an activist behind the comedian?

LUBACH: We are comedians, we do humour

INTERVIEWER: But you want to get topics on the agenda?

LUBACH: We want to make jokes about topics which I find interesting.

(EénVandaag, 2015)

Throughout this period, Lubach sustains discursive boundaries between attributions of professional journalistic practice and an outsider identity as a comedian. However, the host is increasingly explicit on being inspired by US satirists, such as Seth Meyers and especially *Last Week Tonight* with John Oliver, in his media appearances throughout 2015. The explicit comparison to *Last Week Tonight*—known for its satirical news coverage that tends to highlight stories outside of the current news cycle (Davisson & Donovan, 2019)—showcases an incipient awareness of a specific strand of political comedy which not in the least is acknowledged for its investigative efforts and impactful role in the news media landscape (Becker & Bode, 2018). By explicitly addressing the existence of investigative comedy, Lubach acknowledges that *ZML* is potentially neither journalism nor just for laughs.

In this sense, discussion on *ZML* already shifted to questions of its ability to deconstruct societal issues through the use of its humoristic storytelling qualities. Quickly after its introduction, the show thus contributed to a fundamental renegotiation of assumptions regarding journalism's epistemic authority and the practices that it constitutes:

INTERVIEWER: You used a fragment from [a quality newspaper], and you make it funny, which makes it accessible for a very large audience who then knows what's going on.

LUBACH: It feels like translating a book, or reinterpreting a very old text. Indeed, we make it accessible for people who otherwise wouldn't think about it or wouldn't have known anything about it. And we re-tell the story, and we do that [bringing together different sources, remixing the news] but with humour.

(Nooit Meer Slapen, VPRO, 2015)

Through such statements, a discourse is constructed which aims to validate humour as a mode of political communication. In contrast with broadcast news (Borden & Tew, 2007), *ZML* thus blatantly acknowledges its constructed nature, potentially adding to the legitimacy of the role of the host as an authentic purveyor of information (Tally, 2011; Vraga et al. 2012;).

Towards journalistic realisation (2016-2017)

From 2016 onward, the metajournalistic discourse on *ZML* is increasingly characterised by a negotiation regarding the show's legitimation in either journalistic or comedic terms. Specifically, the exchange between interviewers and the staff of *ZML* is organised around a discourse of journalistic impact on the one hand, and a discourse of comedic intention on the other hand. Where *ZML* remains persistent about their comedic mandate, interviewers become more adamant in addressing the show's societal impact and topicality:

LUBACH: We do what you do, but then a parody thereof. I'm sorry.

INTERVIEWER: But, it's not just news parody that you do, because you also tackle important topics.

LUBACH: Our foremost intention is—and it will always stay this way—comedy.

And the idea is that if people haven't laughed for a few minutes, then we're doing something wrong. And of course, as a comedian you often arrive at topics which are important, and then yes, it touches upon news.

GUEST: But it goes further than that, no? On my show I've never seen Minister Ploumen give guarantees about TTIP, and you've managed to achieve that."

LUBACH: "Yes, well that also surprised us, I have to admit.

(Met het Oog op Morgen, NOS, 2016)

The openly parodic nature of *ZML* is assumed by interviewers to go beyond mere comedic evocation of the news. Instead, *ZML* is seen as a ludic imitation that simultaneously interrogates the original. In doing so, interviewers are found to actively move toward acknowledging *ZML* as more than just a non-journalistic outsider, based on its intertwined relationship to the genre of broadcast news. Interview questions increasingly reflect this awareness of the show's societal impact. Subsequently, we find interviewers pressuring *ZML* into acknowledging its role as a valid voice in the public debate by, for example, underlining how the show has "acquired an influential position (...) in the political arena" (De Wereld Draait Door, 2017). This results in a gradual shift in *ZML*'s own discursive positioning, where Lubach increasingly acknowledged public ascriptions of journalistic relevance while explicitly addressing how his dismissal of a journalistic label is a deliberate discursive strategy in function of the show's comedic licence:

INTERVIEWER: How do you see your role as a late-night host in relation to your public impact?

LUBACH: The problem with this matter is that as soon as we see that we have this part, or take ourselves seriously, see ourselves as journalists, than I fear the comedy will suffer. So, for once and for all we have to underline that we are comedians, that we make jokes (...) And of course, secretly, I get that our role looks a bit like that of a journalist and that it could have somewhat of a societal impact, only we have to be the ones who say
'what are you talking about?'

(College Tour, KRO-NCRV, 2017)

Here, we see an evolution towards a less conflicting dynamic between interviewers and the show's host and staff. As the show garners attention and adherence, *ZML* no longer unilaterally dismisses journalistic accountability or opposes instances of journalistic realisation by reporters.

Rather, it aligns its comedic mandate with investigative journalistic aims to reveal information previously concealed, which is in the public interest to be revealed (Abdenour, 2018). In this sense, the show begins to self-identify with the roles of comedic interrogator (Day, 2011) and eye-opener (Ödmark & Harvard, 2021) as valid alternatives to conventional interpretations of news narratives.

Consequently, *ZML* has been found to contribute to a definitional expansion of journalistic practice. We specifically noticed how the host and staff of the show addressed multiple dimensions of subjectivity in their satirical coverage of the news. In this period, metajournalistic discourse on the show exhibits elements of a reflective style of journalism (Broersma, 2010a; Broersma, 2010b), characterised by the mediated subjectivity of the host, and the overt subjectivity of the selection and coverage of the show's topics:

INTERVIEWER: And how do you deal with truth? How true does it have to be?

LUBACH: "What we say has to be true. Sometimes we make jokes, but of which you can obviously tell that it's a joke (...) We found out that the deal is, when you hear [the

narrator's] voice it has to be real, and if I then say something it be can an absurd joke. So, we do try to clearly show where the division between information and jokes lie, but the information part must be true. And sometimes we take a shorter turn or withhold something, but not to such an extent that it corrodes truth. We do not lie about the story.

(Onder Mediadoctoren, 2016)

Such exchanges underline how the humorous approach of *ZML* is a discursive strategy through which a form of subjective but journalistic truth-telling is enabled: “Because of our comedy, [we] can take a standpoint of, let’s say rationality, or showing unjust claims or inconsistencies; that’s what we find interesting” (College Tour, 2017). Additionally, interviewers aim to link Lubach’s personal political stances—Lubach is a staunch critic of the Dutch monarchy and self-declared adherent of republicanism—to the show’s selection of topics.

Nonetheless, *ZML* actively promotes an image of itself having an openly diverse political spectrum within the editorial board. At first glance, such claims of political neutrality could seem at odds with the show’s open subjectivity in its coverage. However, it is in the infusion of a form of journalistic storytelling with humour that the show’s subjectivity comes to the fore. Political neutrality is put forward as a self-ascribed necessity in function of a critical distance from their topics, while it is through critical humorous interrogations of political topics on either side of the political spectrum that the show expands conventional notions of journalistic objectivity. Ultimately, this underlines how humour is gradually defined as both a means and an end, and increasingly invites definitional associations of *ZML* which go beyond mere entertainment as the show had become the flagship of Dutch political comedy.

Acknowledging investigative comedy (2018-2020)

The final years of *ZML* are characterised by a further increase in journalistic realisation of the show by interviewers and journalists, fixating *ZML*’s role as a relevant actor in the media landscape of the Netherlands. Media appearances in 2018 ongoingly reveal legitimisation strategies that frame this role in distinct opposition to the show’s comedic intention. For example, one

Dutch radio reporter described *ZML* as “not a clown, but a factor of importance” (Kunststof Radio, 2018). A similar line of reasoning is observed during another radio interview in which the anchor challenges Lubach’s recurrent rhetoric on the show’s explicitly comedic intentions: “Maybe your intention is not journalistic, but maybe the effect is journalistic, has a journalistic impact” (Perstribune, 2018).

Such exchanges illustrate how journalism and humour are often still perceived in binary contrast to each other by journalists themselves, despite *ZML*’s acknowledged status of a hybrid comedic news show. These assumptions are tacit and subtle, or as Schultz (2007) has described, related to a journalistic “gut feeling.” The journalistic ethos that undergirds these assumptions is well-delineated around journalistic values, such as factuality, a watchdog role (Karlsson & Clerwall, 2019), or the idea that journalism should, before anything else, serve the interests of civic engagement (Faina, 2012). However, these journalistic identity markers are negotiated within the discourse (Ahva, 2012; Hanitzsch & Vos, 2017). Hence, *ZML*’s media appearances reveal an increasingly mutual discursive agreement with the interviewers about the consolidation of comedic intention and journalistic accountability:

INTERVIEWER: You are clearly in a position where you do want to take up responsibility for non-fiction.

LUBACH: Well, yes. By now I am.

INTERVIEWER: And is that something you had in mind? To be a signal jammer in (...) the media landscape and the public debate?

LUBACH: Not directly. I do think a satirist should strive to be a signal jammer, as it is one of the circles of power with a watchdog function. Ridiculing the ruling power is always a healthy element of democracy (...) but my heart for comedy is too big to always be occupied with wanting to change the world.

(De Wereld Vandaag, Radio 1, 2020)

As the show keeps garnering attention and its audience grows, its editorial staff is

expanded and discursive distinctions are made between writers and researchers, implying an awareness and acknowledgment of *ZML*'s investigative journalistic characteristics. From 2018 onward, Lubach and his staff have become increasingly open about the journalistic practices at the heart of the show's creation. Any disagreement between interviewers and *ZML* crystallises in a reciprocally acknowledged discursive authority of *ZML* as a critical voice in the media landscape, explicitly in relation to its implementation of specific journalistic practices. For example, it has been acknowledged how *ZML* draws on investigative practices, such as fact-checking and thorough investigative research, underlining how such journalistic qualities are associated with—if not imposed on—*ZML* by its audiences:

INTERVIEWER: I am surprised you say it's not journalism what you do, but (...) every show again I see investigative reporting reappear. There's a name for it which is 'investigative comedy' (...) You work together with Follow The Money⁵, so you build on other investigative journalists. Can you tell me something about how that works?

ABBRING (EDITOR-IN-CHIEF): Well, those names appear clearly, that's because we find source referencing very important. I don't want to create the illusion that we have scoops (...) That's something other people dug up, and Follow The Money is a good example of that, an important journalistic platform. [People should] get that we reframe their news work and make jokes about that (...) It's not that we make new news, or dig even deeper and call around, or make follow-ups. (...) The moment we claim to be a journalistic show, it becomes a different thing entirely.

(Uitgelicht, 2020)

News satire's strength lies in addressing broadcast news' rarely acknowledged constructed nature (Day, 2011; Tally, 2011). By openly addressing the editorial workings of the show, *ZML* reveals the occupational practices that make up "proper" journalism (Anderson, 2019, Bennett, 1996, Tuchman, 1972), and simultaneously redefines it to fit its own expan-

5 Follow The Money is a Dutch digital independent journalistic platform which strives to hold power accountable by "following financial flows, addressing societal problems and malpractices, reveal complex connections and offer solutions" (<http://www.ftm.nl/over-ftm>).

ded definition of journalistic storytelling. The infusion of journalistic practices with humour gradually becomes a discursive staple for the show's production, and is viewed by outsiders as a legitimate ingredient for news coverage.

Blending journalistic practice with humour, thus, interrogates the perceived binary between "serious" communication and "humoristic" banter as it is discursively disconnected from its perceived status of being the opposite of conventional detached journalistic coverage. Rather, as a "humoralist" (Kunststof, 2018), Lubach expands tacitly ascribed labels of journalistic practice and ultimately resists dichotomous classifications, such as authentic versus parodic or serious versus funny.

By denouncing the label of journalist but identifying with some of journalism's widely recognisable functions, *ZML* is seen as a quasi-insider to the journalistic field: They are comedians working under journalistic licence (Borden & Tew, 2007), drawing freely from conventional and recognisable journalistic standards and practices. This quasi-insider identity is imperative to its goal. By sustaining an image of comedic and journalistic hybridity, *ZML* is ascribed the role of investigative comedy by journalists—aligning with what was already claimed by the *ZML* host himself in 2015.

This investigative comedy role is grounded in a bifold critique to journalism's assumed roles and practices. On the one hand, its external critique addresses the perceived limitations of journalism's watchdog role: Through the practice of investigative comedy, the show's mission is described as an inherently progressive one, embedded in "imagining a world which does not exist yet, that is [our] job, to create something which doesn't exist yet (...) by those that want to move forward" (Volkskrant, 2018). As a form of internal critique, on the other hand, the show puts News satire's strength lies in addressing broadcast news' rarely acknowledged constructed nature (Day, 2011; Tally, 2011). By openly addressing the editorial workings of the show, *ZML* reveals the occupational practices that make up "proper" journalism (Anderson, 2019, Bennett, 1996, Tuchman, 1972), and simultaneously redefines it to fit its own expanded definition of journalistic storytelling. The infusion of journalistic practices with humour gradually becomes a discursive staple for the show's production, and is viewed by outsiders as a legitimate ingredient for news coverage.

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Conclusion and discussion

Despite the ongoing proliferation of the television news satire genre, political comedy newcomers such as *ZML* can still function as what Feldman (2007, p. 409) termed “critical incident[s] in journalism.” Existing on the boundaries of comedic and journalistic discourses, *ZML* elicited questions on the epistemic authority of broadcast news, journalism, and novel

incantations of journalistic storytelling. Consequently, it can be difficult for audiences and journalistic practitioners to delineate such shows and assess their place on the (political) comedy/journalism continuum.

Our analysis of the metajournalistic discourse surrounding *ZML*'s reception and circulation reveals a shift from an initial identification of the show as a comedic outsider towards the role of a quasi-insider within the journalistic community. This quasi-insider position runs parallel to the increasing acknowledgment and legitimation of *ZML*'s investigative journalistic practices and ideals. It underscores that identifying *ZML* as merely satire, political comedy, or even journalism does not fully cover its singular and complex relationship to journalism's societal function.

Rather, under the label of "investigative comedy", *ZML* has been ascribed elements of different journalistic paradigms and was praised for its practices, which at times echoed roles conventionally ascribed to investigative journalism. Both journalistic interviewers and *ZML*'s host and staff acknowledged the openly subjective storytelling of the show and explicitly tentative nature of its news coverage. As such, in line with more opinionated strands of journalism, *ZML* was appreciated as a contrast to the ideal of objectivity and positivist epistemology of conventional journalistic reporting (Steensen, 2017). The show was, moreover, legitimated for its solution- and public-oriented dimensions corresponding to elements of the constructive journalism movement (Hermans & Drok, 2018).

The journalistic realisation of *ZML* in terms of investigative work was linked to its infusion of news coverage with humorous subjectivity, which was legitimated for creating new perspectives to existing news discourses in the public interest (Abdenour, 2018) and highlighting transgressions of actors in positions of power (Stetka & Örnebring, 2013). Throughout the years, the role of humour shifted from being applied as a discursive defence against journalistic accountability—a self-ascribed comedic licence—to being framed as a constituent for *ZML*'s expanded notion of journalistic truth-telling. Ultimately, as "humoralists" or investigative comedians, *ZML* contributed to the expansion of definitional assumptions of journalism's agenda-setting and watchdog role beyond conventional journalistic ideals of objectivity and impartiality.

However, the notion of investigative comedy is not a complete break away from the television news satire genre as it is known but—and this is arguably more relevant—allows to aptly distinguish between different satirical subgenres, contributing to the expansion of existing scholarship that aims to shed definitional light on the murky waters of the news satire format (e.g., Boukes, 2019; Holbert, 2013; Waisanen, 2018). The notion of investigative comedy ties in with recent descriptions of similar, more overtly “journalistic” forms of news satire. It overlaps with Koivkuski and Ödmark’s (2020) notion of “journalistic news satire” in the sense that media professionals praised *ZML* for its well-contextualised coverage of political topics and its adherence to factuality. As a result, our findings contribute to the increasing body of scholarly literature that views journalism as a discursively and relationally constructed continuum, away from the study of journalism in the singular, to that of *journalisms* in the plural (Harrington, 2012).

Similarly, political comedy exists on a continuum ranging from the predominantly comedic and humoristic to the more overtly journalistic. Arguably then, fictional sketch programmes as *Saturday Night Live* could be located on one end, while programmes as *ZML* or *Last Week Tonight* can be positioned on the other end. This article additionally contributes to the limited body of literature on the reception of satire within the journalistic community by focussing on a case outside of the Anglo-Saxon academic canon (see also Koivukoski & Ödmark, 2020; Lichtenstein et al., 2021). Our study shows that, similar to *The Daily Show* in the United States (Feldman, 2007; Tenenboim-Weinblatt, 2007), *ZML* underwent a number of discursive transitions as it functioned as a site for discussion among journalistic practitioners on the distinctions between news and entertainment. In contrast with earlier findings, the analysis of *ZML*’s reception reveals how satirists also occasionally abandon their argument of being comedians exclusively and increasingly accept ascriptions pertaining to journalistic practice. As such, our analysis of the metajournalistic discourse surrounding *ZML* resulted in a clear view of this “drawing and redrawing of journalistic lines” (Berkowitz & Gutsche, 2012, p. 653) through discursive exchanges between host, staff, media professionals, and members of the journalistic community.

One critique could be that the framework of metajournalistic discourse entails a journalism-centred approach by assessing a non-journalistic phenomenon through the normative lens of professional journalism. Earlier empirical work on metajournalistic discourse often zooms

in on discourse *by* journalists (Hanitzsch & Vos, 2017; Vos & Thomas, 2019) *on* journalism (Johnson et al., 2020; Perreault & Vos, 2019). However, our study joins Ferruci (2018) in that “journalism studies scholars should not limit their definition of metajournalistic discourse to journalists (...) or actual journalism” (p. 4821). Aside from studies on metajournalistic discourse, scholars by now also expanded their scope of journalism well beyond conventional journalistic practice to include, for example, political fiction shows (Peters, 2013) or art (Postema & Deuze, 2020). As such, popular culture phenomena such as investigative comedy are indicative for the rise of oppositional news discourses outside the dominant journalistic mode of communication. Ultimately, these views supports the idea that metajournalistic discourse highlights “shared understandings of journalism [that] arise through discursive processes that are then manifested in practice” (Carlson, 2016, p. 361).

Future research could further the focus on journalistic outliers to alternative dimensions of the way that political satire facilitates professional journalistic reflexivity. Also, despite efforts to embed the investigative comedy concept in existing literature on both political comedy and journalism, the current study of one case calls for more finetuning of its interpretation and position, ideally in different national contexts. Finally, as reception and circulation are just two of the many dimensions of the role that television news satire plays in our contemporary mediascape, future studies can analyse how investigative comedy opens up the space for alternative perspectives of existing news discourses by including content or discourse analytical studies to this expanding body of scholarly work. For example, an analysis of *ZML*'s coverage of specific topics could allow to compare the notion of investigative comedy to related studies on “satirical journalism” (Fox, 2018) and aptly identify how such shows balance comedy and journalism in practice.

CHAPTER 3

Catchier Than COVID:
An Analysis of Pandemic Coverage
by Dutch News Satire Show
Zondag met Lubach

Nicolai, J. & Maesele, P. (under review).

Catchier Than COVID:
An Analysis of Pandemic Coverage
by Dutch News Satire Show
Zondag met Lubach.



Abstract

The Covid-19 pandemic brought about difficulties for science communication in the form of declining trust in science journalism or political instrumentalisation of scientific discourse. News satire has been hailed as a valid alternative to conventional forms of science communication by blending comedic and experiential modes of learning. Therefore, this article investigates the COVID-19 coverage of Dutch news satire show *Zondag met Lubach*. It presents an analysis of 30 segments aired between February 2020 and April 2021, and reveals how the show critiqued news media and politics through the discursive lens of an infodemic in which media, political elites, and the political right are perceived as detrimental to a healthy deliberative flow of information. Furthermore, the findings show how *Zondag met Lubach* expanded conventional notions of satirical critique to engage in didactical dissemination of scientific topics. This paper contributes to the understanding of political satire's role in crisis contexts, and comedy as a medium for science communication.

Introduction

The SARS-CoV-2 outbreak in 2020 caught the world by storm, upsetting social and political structures worldwide. The pandemic was still in its early stages when the World Health Organisation (WHO) released a situation report in February 2020 stating that “[T]he 2019-nCoV outbreak and response has been accompanied by a massive ‘infodemic’—an over-abundance of information—that makes it hard for people to find trustworthy sources and reliable guidance when they need it” (WHO, 2020, para. 1). In the Netherlands, this resulted in confusion among news audiences as some increasingly turned to news media to make sense of the crisis situation, while others chose to avoid the news (De Bruin, De Haan, Vliegenthart, Kruikemeier, & Boukes, 2021). Furthermore, political distrust intensified as, especially among young adults, political representatives became a perceived source of misinformation (Newman et al., 2021). In the context of a global pandemic, the unhindered flow of health communication becomes ever more essential, attributing an important role to news media and political representatives as the “face[s] of crisis management” (Wodak, 2021, p. 332).

In times of crisis, news satire is known to take up a vital role in the public debate by interrogating media practices or calling out political leaders (Nitsch & Lichtenstein, 2019). It has been shown to positively engage audiences in scientific debate pertaining to such crises (Bore & Reid, 2014; Brewer & McKnight, 2015). In the Netherlands, one actor taking up this role during the COVID-19 pandemic was Dutch news satire show *Zondag met Lubach* (ZML). By weaving together existing news media footage with the host’s comedic storytelling, such shows have the potential to simultaneously inform audiences and critique dominant media narratives (Becker & Bode, 2018).

However, news satire operates in a broader socio-political context which today is characterised by a proliferation of critical discourses (Nieuwenhuis & Zijp, 2022). Such a context amplifies progressive social justice movements such as #MeToo or Black Lives Matter, but equally capacitates antivax protest movements or other forms of anti-establishment commentary. As critique seemingly becomes a staple to public discourse, some have called for a reimagining of the nature of satirical critique (Holm, 2018; Kilby, 2018). Where conventional views re-

flect the modernist assumption that comedy should strive to subvert the political order (Brasset, 2016), it is argued that “interrogating the supposed political work of critical humour requires us to disentangle the assumed correspondence between humour as a form of critique and humour as a form of resistance” (Holm, 2018, pp. 31–32). In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic especially, the identification of comedic critique as either progressive or reactionary has become increasingly difficult, as is exemplified by uses of critical humour that fluctuate between promoting public health measures (Zekavat, 2021) or facilitating antidemocratic discourse (Sakki & Castrén, 2022). This underscores the urgency to unpack the critical dimensions of news satire in greater depth, and look beyond interpretations of satirical critique as ridicule or subversion. Therefore, the aim of this paper is to investigate how *ZML* covered the COVID-19 pandemic, by tracing the show’s interactions with pandemic-related discourse and actors, and evaluating its role in terms of critical engagement with scientific topics. It presents the textual analysis of 30 COVID-19-related segments aired from March 2020 until April 2021.

Our analytical framework draws on two distinct theoretical bodies. The first places *ZML* within the context of the ongoing COVID-19 infodemic, which refers to the general overabundance of information and the detrimental effects of misinformation (Simon & Camargo, 2021). Implicit to the notion of the infodemic is the agreement that the successful management of a global health crisis depends upon a largely unimpeded flow of clear and truthful information (McKay & Tenove, 2021). Such an idea reiterates assumptions of a deliberative view of democracy. We incorporate literature on deliberative democracy to interpret the dimensions of critique in *ZML* in as far as they discuss the disruption of COVID-19-related flows of information. A second body of literature concerns news satire’s potential informational role. Here, we incorporate literature on science communication and humour to assess the way in which *ZML* engages with scientific discourse within and beyond its satirical critique. In doing so, we highlight the inherent polysemic nature of news satire and its ambivalent socio-cultural impact in times of crisis. We conclude by reflecting on the importance of news satire’s interweaving of critique and science communication to create alternative paths to knowing in crisis contexts.

The infodemic and satirical deliberation

In June, 2020, the 1st WHO Infodemiology Conference (WHO, 2020) called attention to the potentially harmful effects of COVID-19 mis- and disinformation on public health. Whether intentional (disinformation) or unintentional (misinformation), untruthful information on COVID-19-related issues can impede dissemination of scientific information among citizens, and hinder clear implementations of preventive pandemic measures. Such a view reflects normative assumptions inherent to theories of deliberative democracy which centralise rational communicative exchange in regard to public decision making (Chambers, 2017). Healthy deliberative media systems engage in political discussions that result in the production of ideas which promote epistemic quality, moral respect, and democratic inclusion (Mansbridge et al., 2012). An unhealthy deliberative system, meanwhile, “distorts facts (...) and encourages citizens to adopt ways of thinking and acting that are good neither for them nor for the larger polity” (Mansbridge, 1999, as cited in McKay & Tenove, 2021, p. 705).

The context of an infodemic thus disrupts the flow of information upholding a healthy deliberative environment necessary to manage the COVID-19 crisis. Although we do not aim to uncritically reproduce paradigmatic assumptions of deliberative democracy, we contend that the critique underlying the idea of an infodemic is inherently entrenched in at least some of its core ideas e.g., that healthy media pose a conduit between the different forums and institutions in that system. Correspondingly, when Dutch Minister of Interior Ollongren approved additional measures against disinformation in 2020, a governmental press release explicitly framed it as necessary in function of assisting voters to assess information on elections critically (Rijksoverheid, 2020).

Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic has to be placed in a broader context of what has been called an “epistemic cacophony” (Dahlgren, 2018, p. 25) in which the very foundations of rational-scientific thinking are under attack. In the Netherlands, the many faces of science scepticism have contributed to a rise in vaccine hesitancy and low levels of trust in scientific institutes in general (Rutjens & van der Lee, 2020). One meaningful example has been ongoing debates surrounding the necessity and effectiveness of mass vaccination, which were unremit-

tingly fraught with counterclaims ranging from the anti-scientific to the deranged conspiratorial. In this “post-truth” context, the pandemic has brought about a transformation in the public exchange of health information between scientific experts, government, journalism, and citizens (Van Dijck & Alinejad, 2020). Where conventional models of science dissemination hinge on a linear exchange between experts and non-experts, with policy makers or media institutions as mediating entities, the pandemic serves as an example of how non-expert voices can have an exacerbated impact on public debate.

One such voice is that of news satire. Shows such as *The Daily Show* (Smitberg & Winstead, 1996–2023) have been praised for “[reviving] a journalism of critical inquiry and [advancing] a model of deliberative democracy” (Baym, 2005, p. 259). At first sight, this could seem to oppose conventional theories of deliberative democracy that assume deliberative discourse to be incongruous with popular culture or entertainment media (Weinmann & Vorderer, 2018). Some studies corroborate this view by associating news satire with higher message discounting (Nabi, Moyer-Gusé, & Byrne, 2007) and reduced argument scrutiny (LaMarre, Landreville, Young, & Gilkerson, 2014). Deliberation indeed hinges on the ability to produce a coherent argumentative logic which the presence of humour is then thought to obscure. However, by now multiple studies have revealed the merits of satirical humour as a conduit for deliberative discourse. For example, satire is found to mobilise political participation through emotional provocation of its audiences (Chen, Gan, & Sun, 2017). More recently, it has been shown that that satirical content elicits more user interaction and discussion than conventional news content—both prerequisites for deliberative communication (Boukes et al., 2022). Furthermore, deliberation involves the exchange of diverse ideas (Wessler, 2008). In this regard, news satire can interweave humour with a reasoned deconstruction of social issues in order to potentially highlight perspectives outside of the conventional media spotlight (Waisanen, 2018). Such findings gear understanding of deliberative discourse toward the inclusion of news satire and political entertainment as a valid route for public deliberation.

News satire and science communication

Public discourse and policy increasingly involves scientific topics. As a result, science communication's importance has been emphasised over the last years (Davies, 2021). On the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic and its infodemic nature, research reflects an acute necessity for insights into what constitutes effective science communication (Massarani, Murphy, & Lamberts, 2020). The recent Horizon 2020 project QUEST found that quality science communication is relatable to the everyday lives of laypeople, aimed at generating changes in society and contains a “readiness (...) to address controversial topics or wrongdoings” (Olesk et al., 2021, p. 18). Viewed as such, science communication interlinks with deliberative views on democracy which put forward an informed citizenry and the rational deliberative debate prefacing it as a goal worth pursuing.

Conventionally, however, science communication is attributed almost exclusively to professional science journalists or scientific institutions, hindering access to scientific topics for laypeople (Bucchi & Trench, 2008). Today, science communication has also widely penetrated popular culture. The prevalence and popularity of initiatives like TED/TEDx conferences (Mattiello, 2017), scientific podcasts (Barrios-O'Neill, 2018), or science-based videogames (Curtis, 2014), have opened the doors for science communication to breach its traditional mould and overcome the hurdles of paywalls or specialist jargon. News satire is no exception to this list. Comedy infused with scientific issues has proliferated over the last years and gained mainstream cultural legitimacy as a site for societal and political discourse. A recent overview by Kaltenbacher and Drews (2020) confirmed that the use of humour in climate communication can raise awareness (Davis, Glantz, & Novak, 2016), facilitate learning (Boykoff & Osnes, 2019), and mobilise audiences to change individual climate-related behaviour (Skurka, Niederdeppe, & Nabi, 2019). Additionally, Osnes, Boykoff, and Chandler (2019) revealed how comedy on environmental topics can regulate negative emotions associated with climate anxiety. Such studies almost unilaterally imply a positive view of comedy—a progressive kind of humour at the service of science dissemination, aimed at facilitating constructive changes among its audiences. For instance, Osnes et al. (2019) go as far as make the distinction between “good-natured comedy” and “negative (mean-spirited) humour” (p. 226).

But this underexposes certain key features of political satire which reveal additional dimensions of science engagement. News satire, specifically, has been praised for its potential to hold power accountable through ridicule and comedic juxtaposition (Baym, 2005) and showcases how “mean-spirited” comedy is not necessarily in opposition with constructive forms of public discourse. In the context of climate coverage specifically, satire can strengthen belief in the scientific consensus of global warming (Brewer & McKnight, 2017) or function as a gateway to traditional forms of news (Young & Tisinger, 2006). The core idea underbuilding these findings is that “piggybacking” scientific information on comedic content enhances audiences’ attention to scientific issues. In this sense, television news satire functions as an “attention equaliser” (Feldman, Leiserowitz, & Maibach, 2011) by bridging the gap between laypeople and “elite” scientific audiences.

Zondag met Lubach

In 2014, *ZML* debuted on the Dutch public broadcaster VPRO. Quickly after its release, it acquired increasing popularity among broad audiences. Deviating from Dutch traditions of cabaret comedy, *ZML* managed to gather critical acclaim and win numerous television awards for being a “unique and successful combination of entertainment and investigative journalism” (Nipkowschijf, 2016, para. 3). Its blend of satirical comedy and news places *ZML* in a wider tradition of satirical late-night comedy, hallmarked by well-known forerunner *The Daily Show* with Jon Stewart (Smithberg & Winstead, 1996–2023). Nonetheless, it draws on long-form “deep dives” more akin to *Last Week Tonight* (Carvell, 2014–2023). By constructing well-researched comedic narratives, *ZML* offers audiences a weekly deconstruction of topics outside of the current news cycle (Davisson & Donovan, 2019). In doing so, it manages to weigh in on political discussions resulting in what some have called the “Lubach-effect” (den Hollander, 2021).

This type of satire is known to incorporate scientific issues and, resultingly, plays a central role in translating science to broader publics (Feldman, 2017). For example, with a segment titled *The Online Trap of Tales* (De Wit et al., 2020a), *ZML* broke its own viewing record by attracting over two million viewers. In it, host Arjen Lubach tackled the link between rampant conspiracy theories and the algorithmic user engagement logic of social media platforms.

During 24 minutes, the segment argues that tech companies play a significant part in fuelling misinformation by facilitating algorithmic conspiracy rabbit holes for their users. At the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, topics like vaccine scepticism, the fear of microchip implants, or the denial of SARS-CoV-2 altogether were addressed in ZML's trademark fashion. Halfway through the segment, Lubach invited audiences to experience how the "Trap of Tales" works:

LUBACH: I did a little test. I removed all my cookies, installed a new browser and opened a new YouTube account. I'll start with a neutral search term like "PCR test reliable." This is the test to detect a virus. My top hit is 'Invalidity of PCR test explained in five minutes'. I'll click on it. In my suggested videos, "Does SARS-CoV-2 exist? Where is the evidence?" appears. Of course, I click on this. Meanwhile I see "Lange Frans⁶ and Adèle van der Plas about paedos within the judiciary." What? You got me hooked! I'm watching, and then in the suggested videos "Lange Frans en Sjors van Houts about 9/11" appears. Wow! Within three clicks I went from corona tests to conspiracy theories about the attacks on the Twin Towers, via a video about paedophile networks.

(De Wit et al., 2020a, 11:48)

This segment is exemplary for how ZML's form of "investigative comedy" (Nicolai, Maesele, & Boukes, 2022) succeeds in expanding the importance of social topics in the public debate (Boukes, 2019). Secondly, it reflects ZML's tendency to draw heavily on scientific discourse, often referring to governmental reports, scientific expert opinions, or peer-reviewed articles. For example, a 2017 segment on alternative medicine draws at length from a peer-reviewed systematic review study to debunk claims on alleged beneficial effects of acupuncture and reincarnation therapy, while a 2019 segment on the tobacco industry features a leading scientist working for the Dutch National Institute for Public Health and the Environment. This connects ZML to the broader acknowledgment that political satire plays an increasingly important role in the dissemination of scientific discourse within popular culture (Feldman et al., 2011).

6 A Dutch rapper known for his podcast which circulates conspiracy theories and anti-establishment narratives.

Method

We conducted a qualitative discourse analysis of 30 COVID-19-related segments—aired between March 2020 and April 2021—with a focus on the show’s use of humour and its subjects in the context of COVID-19 discourse. Segments, here, refer to individual pieces of coverage on one specific topic. A full episode of *ZML* conventionally consists of one shorter segment (approximately five minutes) and one longer segment (approximately 15 minutes). These segments were viewed online on the show’s official YouTube channel, where they are uploaded as stand-alone items. We apply the term discourse in a broad sense, approaching similarities to the notion of public debate. Nonetheless, we implicitly embed it in critical traditions which acknowledge its dimensions of identity construction, contestation, and the drawing of discursive boundaries.

Our analysis is multimodal and takes into account textual dimensions of the show’s script, visual and stylistic elements such as host strategies (e.g., body language, emotional reactions) and formatting choices (e.g., interaction with third-party source material, in-studio events). As such, our approach is embedded in the notion of political aesthetics (Holm, 2017) which emphasises that comedy’s political function is performed simultaneously through its overt content and more covert form.

We present our findings in two stages. The first stage (sections 1–3) focusses on critical dimensions of *ZML*’s segments, discussing which subjects it targets and why. From this critique, however, arises the additional construction of a discourse which upholds scientific insights and, as a result, educates audiences on COVID-19-related topics. A subsequent stage (section 4) therefore presents the ways in which *ZML* interacts with scientific discourse in relation to governmentally issued COVID-19 measures.

ANALYSIS

Live from the infodemic!

Similar to *The Daily Show* (Smithberg & Winstead, 1996–2023) and *Last Week Tonight* (Carvell, 2014–2023), *ZML* embodies elements of broadcast news in appearance and content (Fox, 2018). However, rather than creating own news content, it uses existing news segments as building blocks for a broader metanarrative. These commentaries express a distinct view on the role of media during the COVID-19 pandemic. In line with its predecessors, *ZML*'s media critique harnesses a classically modernist interpretation of news media as a site for “neutral and current factual information that is important and valuable for citizens in democracy” (Ekström, 2002, p. 247). But in the context of the pandemic, where Dutch citizens increasingly turned to broadcast news for public health updates (De Bruin et al., 2021), its critiques of news media magnify the media's democratic role.

A first critique posits that, under ever-accelerating commercial logics, news media have surpassed their informational function (Johnston & Forde, 2017). In the first episode dedicated to the pandemic, titled “COVID-19” (De Wit et al., 2020b), *ZML* addresses this by showing an overview of the different ways in which media outlets tackle questions surrounding the at the time still mystifying SARS-CoV-2 virus:

LUBACH: The NOS⁷ was not the only one who answered questions. This is Limburg L1⁸: “Five corona virus questions in Limburg.” RTL⁹ thought, we can top that: “The 6 most important questions about the coronavirus.” Then AD¹⁰ let us count: “Are quarantines not over the top? And six other questions.” So six plus one is seven. Then Het Parool¹¹: “What exactly is up with the corona virus? Everything you need to know in 15

7 NOS is one of two Dutch public broadcasters legally ascribed with the task of independent news dissemination.

8 L1 is a regional Dutch broadcaster

9 RTL is a Dutch commercial broadcaster.

10 AD is a Dutch daily newspaper.

11 Het Parool is a Dutch daily newspaper.

questions.” So that’s 15 plus one, but that was already 15? So 15. But the winner is Hart van Nederland¹²: “Hart van Nederland answers all questions about the corona virus!”

(De Wit et al., 2020b, 3:23)

Through the comedic juxtaposition of different news articles, Lubach argues that news media’s informational function suffers under the urge to outbid each other in “breaking” the news. This is even more explicit in the segment “Communication on COVID”: “Clear communication starts with the transmitter, in this case the government, but also the press plays a part,” Lubach states (De Wit et al., 2020c, 9:05). The segment continues with a number of clips of reporters at press conferences being cut off prematurely by in-studio news anchors, while governmental officials continue their address in the background. Lubach then gets riled up at the media’s short attention span, working his way toward the claim that there communication could be clearer, only to get cut off by his sidekick Tex De Wit. In parodic reference to the earlier news clips, Lubach mimics and exaggerates the news using its (faulty) logic against itself. Similarly, in the segment “Curfew”, Lubach explains how the curfew has been revoked by the supreme court even before it was implemented: “If that sounds confusing, wait until you hear [NOS news correspondent] Rob Trip’s summary!” (De Wit et al., 2021a, 0:28). Following a clip with a fumbling Trip on the revoked measure, a bewildered Lubach invites sidekick Tex De Wit a second time to deconstruct the news anchor’s grammatical confusion.

Critiques aimed at the media’s inability to inform citizens culminate in a segment on the “Corona-app” (De Wit et al., 2020d). The segment kicks off by reviewing how broadcast news covered citizens’ willingness to install a contact tracing app on their smartphones. Later on, it unearths how governmental officials are inspired by these news polls in adjusting crisis policies: “The problem is just that these polls are taken before we knew anything about this app” (De Wit et al., 2020d, 1:46) Lubach then describes how the government’s decision to launch the app is the result of a self-fulfilling circle starting with the Minister of Health mentioning the app on Tuesday, after which news media poll the willingness to download it on Wednesday, followed

12 Hart van Nederland is a Dutch commercial tabloid news program that focuses on regional and local lifestyle news.

by the government's decision based on these polls a few days later. The skit lays bare a plea in *ZML*'s discourse for a slower journalism, in contrast with the fast-paced "churnalism" (Johnston & Forde, 2017) of vox pop polls. Ultimately, it promotes slower forms of policy making which weigh public decisions and advocate for expert opinions over the ad hoc implementing and revoking of COVID-measures.

When *ZML* satirically interrogates news media for not upholding modernist journalistic ideals—i.e., facilitating an informed body of citizens in function of rational decision-making—its arrows are predominantly pointed in the direction of television news broadcasts. Perhaps broadcast news' enduring authoritative status as a reliable source of news in the Netherlands (Van Dijck & Alinejad, 2020) makes it an easy target for satirical attacks. Nonetheless, critiques aimed at the media's inability to correctly inform citizens are not dismissive of news media as a whole. More than a judgement, they are a diagnostic call to news media to do better in times of crisis, and uphold an image of news media as an indispensable ingredient for successful pandemic coverage (Hameleers, van der Meer, & Brosius, 2020).

In mitigating the infodemic and its interconnectedness with citizens and policy, *ZML* also engages in facilitating media literacy for its audiences. In the segment "Rutte doesn't understand COVID" (De Wit et al., 2021b) *ZML* urges the Prime Minister to strive for a highly diverse media diet as a cure for informational confusion:

And often, rewatch your own press conferences once? Silly.

(De Wit et al., 2021b, 6:29)

LAUGHING IN THE FACES OF CRISIS MANAGEMENT

In times of crisis, political leaders are called upon to guide citizens in emergency matters and become the "face of crisis management" (Wodak, 2021, p. 332). During such critical moments, effective political leadership consists of aptly recognising threats, mobilising efforts to overcome

them, and successfully managing their impact (Boin, Hart, McConnell, & Preston, 2010). The specific epidemiological context of the COVID-19 pandemic additionally problematised politicians' governing role, as cooperation with scientific experts became central to identifying relevant measures and correctly relaying them to citizens. Furthermore, politicians were assumed to possess scientific insights in the SARS-COV-2 virus and the logics of preventive measures in order to encourage collaborative action (Forester & McKibbin, 2020).

Already early on during the pandemic, *ZML* dedicated segments to the role of political communication in crisis management, reflecting an inclination to target the government's role in managing the pandemic. In doing so, *ZML*'s coverage articulates an alignment with normative assumptions of political leadership in crisis management. In the Netherlands, the frequent governmental COVID-19 briefings—which became a go-to for pandemic measure updates—made that Prime Minister Mark Rutte and First Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Health Hugo de Jonge quickly became the faces of Dutch crisis management. These two politicians especially became the recurrent targets of *ZML*'s satirical attacks on the role of politics in pandemic management.

A first dimension of critique concerns *ZML*'s provocation of Rutte and de Jonge for their failure to take up responsibility as political leaders. The segment "Third wave" (De Wit et al., 2020e) discusses the prevention of a third wave of COVID-19 infections, and critiques Rutte's views on leadership by deconstructing his media appearances:

LUBACH: In the Netherlands, we also have a boss and that's Mark Rutte. And I for one, don't mind this. But he does.

RUTTE [IN A SEGMENT OF A TELEVISION INTERVIEW]: In public it often happens that parents see me and tell their kids "That's our boss!" And to that, my answer is always 'No, [your parents] are boss.'"

LUBACH: Yes, and then that child thinks "My parents are boss? But then why does daddy cry all the time? And why did those people come to collect the furniture?"

(De Wit et al., 2020e, 3:49)

Lubach continues by explaining that this was Rutte's view before the pandemic, but that it is common for political leaders to take up a strongman role during crises. The segment then explains how Rutte's lack of leadership, however, has resulted in conflicting messages among cabinet members, scientific experts, and media outlets on mask mandate policies, resulting in confusion among citizens. As such, Lubach's critiques echo ideas on a crisis of representative democracy (Tormey, 2014) characterised by an increasing scepticism among citizens toward their elected officials. Bereft of sarcasm or irony, they highlight the explicit importance *ZML* attributes to the principle of democratically elected leaders. In this regard, Lubach ascribes himself the role of the host as citizen-surrogate (Day, 2011) who comedically interrogates what the role of Prime Minister during a global pandemic should entail.

Similar critiques are visible in *ZML*'s coverage of the cabinet's lack of factual insight into COVID-19-related issues. Here, de Jonge's authority as Minister of Health is interrogated on account of his ignorance on pandemic matters. When introducing an interview with the Dutch director of Pfizer, Lubach jokes how "even de Jonge can be wrong [on vaccination targets], but in this case it's not just de Jonge saying it, but also people who actually have expertise on the matter" (De Wit et al., 2021c, 2:06). Between the lines of this ironic quip at overly optimistic vaccination goals lies a discursive attempt to delegitimise de Jonge as a policy maker. Similarly, a segment bearing the less suggestive title "Rutte doesn't understand COVID" (De Wit et al., 2021b) is dedicated entirely to ridiculing the Prime Minister's lack of knowledge on COVID-19. It opens with a collection of clips of Rutte neglecting COVID-19 measures (e.g., shaking colleagues' hands) or fumbling when asked for explanations on mask mandate exceptions. Such *ad hominem* puns, targeting Rutte's inadequate exemplary role as a political leader through imitation and ridicule, trivialise the Prime Minister's power as a politician. Later on in the segment, a clip is shown with Rutte claiming there is no sense in testing for COVID-19 as long as one has no symptoms:

RUTTE [VOICE OVER FROM A NEWSPAPER INTERVIEW]: I never got tested. You only do so when you have symptoms, or if you're part of a presymptomatic group.

LUBACH: (...) But presymptomatic means that you've been infected, and have no symptoms yet. And you only know this afterwards. You can't know that you're part of a

presymptomatic group if you've never been tested! I'm just trying to think along here. So he picked up a fancy word from Uncle Jack, which he just doesn't really understand?

(De Wit et al., 2021b, 7:59)

This exchange is exemplary for *ZML*'s stance vis-à-vis politicians' deficit of pandemic knowledge. It follows earlier findings which show that television news satire focusses predominantly on public figures when discussing public policy (Nitsch & Lichtenstein, 2019). But rather than resorting to mere personal attacks exclusively, it also contains an extended critique of feigned expertise altogether. By ridiculing the rhetorical authority of those at the wheel of the pandemic, *ZML* calls out politicians to abandon their elitist lexicon and address their constituents in a clear voice. As such, *ZML* strives to level out political discourse, as it favours layperson registers over fabricated "expert speak." Finally, *ZML* does not only aim to critique cabinet members for their inadequate pandemic management, but also invites audiences to evaluate inconsistencies and absurdities in their rhetoric. By engaging in an ironic dialogue with politicians, Lubach comedically highlights their shortcomings and creates space for collective reflection on alternative ways of governance in pandemic times. In this sense, *ZML*'s critique of policy makers is corrective, rather than exclusionist, and dialogical, rather than indicting. It contains an evaluation of a specific normative idea of political leadership, one that is well-informed, conscientious, and willing to govern.

The political right and COVID-19

Aside from targeting cabinet members, a large part of *ZML*'s pandemic coverage interrogates oppositional parties. Explicit attention is given to right-wing populist parties Party for Freedom (PVV) and Forum for Democracy (FvD). Given the prominence of media coverage in the Netherlands on issues pertaining to immigration and national identity (de Jonge, 2021), both parties have received extensive media attention during the pandemic. However, *ZML* does not reproduce dominant media perspectives when incorporating these parties into its segments. Rather, where cabinet members leadership qualities were satirically called into question, right-wing views are excluded from the debate altogether. In the episode "Opposition in COVID

times” (De Wit et al., 2020f), a segment on FvD’s party leader Thierry Baudet details how the party is behind in the polls despite being among the first to have publicly addressed the impeding COVID-19 pandemic:

LUBACH: [IMITATING BAUDET]: “Fuck it. Then I say something that cannot be interpreted as racist, and again it’s not right!” So Baudet goes back to his roots, and again he does the things that made him famous. For one, bluffing with bullshit.

BAUDET [IN AN INTERVIEW]: We know that when the weather gets better, especially with sea wind, that the virus disappears. It dies.

LUBACH: No, a virus doesn’t die, and especially not from a sea breeze! Imagine Baudet being your doctor: “Madam, the bone is sticking out of your leg, but it’s rain season and there’s a nice trade wind out so if I were you, I’d go for a nice walk.”

(De Wit et al., 2020f, 6:51)

As with Rutte and de Jonge, *ZML* critiques right-wing populist parties for playing their part in perpetuating the COVID-19 infodemic. However, rather than evaluating their false claims in the light of their presumed political functions, right-wing politicians’ misinformation claims are placed in a broader discursive context of anti-democratic politics. When later in the episode Baudet is shown floating the idea to bribe other nation states into selling excess test kits to the Netherlands, Lubach continues:

BAUDET [IN AN INTERVIEW]: What I would do is send a private plane with some bribe money all across the world to get some test kits. That’s what you do when you’re head of a country, no?

LUBACH: And name the capital after yourself? And erect a giant statue of yourself on a square, and right in front of it build a palace and masturbate while looking out of your window? No?

(De Wit et al., 2020f, 8:15)

Not only is Baudet called out for perpetuating falsehoods, but his contribution to the infodemic is framed as a viable threat to democratic discourse. Through comedic exaggeration, Lubach equates Baudet's claim with the caricatural image of a narcissistic dictator, demarcating Baudet's rhetorical style as bad political form. Similarly, when FvD politician Wybren van Haga is discussed on *ZML*, it is for his appearance on a podcast by rapper and television personality Lange Frans, known for spreading misinformation and conspiracy theories. Van Haga's criticism of PCR tests render him, according to Lubach, "fully on board the conspiracy train" (De Wit et al., 2020a, 19:47). Furthermore, *ZML* calls out van Haga for retweeting a message claiming PCR tests, HIV and COVID-19 altogether are hoax. Through such discursive interventions, *ZML* unambiguously delegitimises Haga on account of his ties with anti-democratic conspiracy views. This is most clear in the segment "Vaccination passport" (De Wit et al., 2021d): On its face value, the segment discusses different political views regarding the question of how much more freedom a vaccine can offer citizens. However, the episode quickly becomes a systemic delegitimation of any political actors questioning vaccine efficiency. According to Lubach, "there's people who get their opinion from Antivax 13, verse 7 (...) and then there's the conspiracy argument" (De Wit et al., 2021d, 2:29) Of the latter, Lubach then states that "not all conspiracy thinkers vote for FvD, but most of them like the party nonetheless" (De Wit et al., 2021d, 3:51) The quote follows a clip showing a member of the religious extremist party Jesus Lives clumsily attempting to validate the claim that vaccines contain foetal material, while another member distractedly devours a cheese sandwich in the background. Despite their comedic appeal, such sections are bereft of strategic ambiguity commonly related to satire, and reflect a clear association of right-wing politics with antivax logics and religious fanaticism. In other words, their rhetoric is discounted as unorganised, unhinged, and thus anti-deliberative, and the antithesis of rational, scientific discourse favoured by *ZML* in effective pandemic management.

Pandemic measures and the surpassing of critique

So far, we have focused on how *ZML* critiques news media and political actors for perpetuating the COVID-19 infodemic, hindering the dissemination of truthful information and implementation of preventive measures. This interpretation of the state of public discourse is not ideologi-

cally neutral. Where some have warned for the excessive use of the term infodemic and rebutted the “moral panics” it could facilitate, (Simon & Camargo, 2021), others approach it as an all too real threat to public health in need of information literacy solutions (Zaracostas, 2020). *ZML*’s critical interventions enforce the latter view, and can be seen as a legitimization of pandemic measures and the rational-scientific discourse underbuilding them.

COVID-19 measures have rapidly become highly politicised, dividing politics, communities, and citizens on grounds of whether or not to follow them. *ZML* employs different strategies to legitimate measures and counters such divisiveness. For example, the segment “Measures coronavirus” (De Wit et al., 2020g) bridges the distance between citizens’ experiences and the pandemic’s severity by including audiences in the host’s thought process and his search for clarity in the debate. As such, by incorporating the use of plural first-person pronouns (“we”), segments often promote a sense of inclusion and potentially reinforce group solidarity among its audiences:

LUBACH: It seems that everyone either wants to stock up on all the rice in Western Europe, or they are chill and say it’s just a hoax and quickly still lick Danny De Munk¹³ as a joke. But most people are luckily in between [extremes]. Not shaking hands, working from home, limiting bed partners, is something we don’t do because we think the world is going down, but because we get that it’s the only way to save a bunch of lives, and that’s how it works in a pandemic.

(De Wit et al., 2020g, 10:47)

By including audiences in a universal “we,” Lubach directs a collective understanding of how to behave during a pandemic and implies that everyone is affected by the pandemic equally. Therefore, *ZML* naturalises pandemic measures as the only logical policy, rendering them irrefutable on moral grounds. As a result, individuals not following measures are framed as an obstacle to overcoming the shared pandemic threat. In one segment, Lubach describes vaccine sceptics as “damaging public health” (De Wit et al., 2021d). By delegitimizing vaccine

13 Danny De Munk is a Dutch singer and musical actor who drew attention to himself during the pandemic for his critical stance to the severity of the SARS-CoV-2 virus.

hesitancy, *ZML* positions itself as pro-vaccination, hinting that anti-vaccination opinions are not legitimate and have to be bypassed, even if by illicit means:

LUBACH: People that do not want the vaccine can show their preference by wearing this pin [visual of a pin reading “I do not want the vaccine”]. This pin can be collected at your local health worker. You will barely feel anything!

(De Wit et al., 2020h, 6:39)

Here, humour is used as a form of othering and serves to distance audience members from the butt of the joke i.e., vaccine scepticism (Archakis & Tsakona, 2005). But despite their highly politicised nature in the Dutch public debate (Martinescu, Dores, Etienne, & Krouwel, 2022), *ZML* does not in any way critique COVID-19 measures. As such, on the one hand it engages in what Colpean and Tully (2019) call ‘weak reflexivity’: Jokes that seem reflexive in their acknowledgment of their own ideological positionings at the same time dismiss and reproduce other dominant ideologies. However, *ZML* seems aware of such pitfalls as it also applies discursive strategies to explicate its own Ideological positions. The show does this by framing measures in the light of an unprecedented crisis, which safeguards them from critical evaluation. When Minister of Health de Jonge refers to the “nice and refined system of small labs which we also need after the crisis” as sufficient for covering the Dutch vaccination needs, Lubach replies: “Nice and refined? It’s crisis! We don’t need nice and refined, we need to make sure there will still be an after the crisis.”

In defence of the pandemic measures, *ZML* also supersedes its satirical-critical function to perform an informational role. Out of the idea that media and politicians fail to take up their role as clear communicators originates the self-ascribed mandate to educate audiences on COVID-19-related issues. As a discursive practice, satire always exists in relation to a target (Simpson, 2003). Throughout its pandemic coverage, however, *ZML* also discusses COVID-19-related issues without clearly defined satirical targets. On a formative level, for example, we note a difference between *ZML*’s longer and shorter segments. In the latter, topical developments in pandemic measures are covered (e.g., closing hours for the catering sector, the implementation

of a curfew) which offer audiences brief comedic yet informational overviews more in line with objectives conventionally ascribed to broadcast news (Montgomery, 2007). Additionally, in the segment “China and WHO” (De Wit et al., 2020i) Lubach is seen to moderate his comedic persona and take up a more serious, pedagogical tone:

LUBACH: Where did the virus outbreak come from? Well, it started on animals, and jumped to humans. This is called zoonosis. And you know something’s wrong when there’s “oh, no” in a word. Think of Bono, monogamy, and of course, child pono¹⁴. Many well-known viruses are zoonosis. For example, HIV jumped from a monkey to a human. And Ebola jumps, via bats, to other animals and to humans. MERS was thought to jump from a bat to a dromedary to a human. In terms of infection risk, bats are nature’s cleaning wipes. Scientists discovered that there are a hundred more viruses in bats, waiting to jump to humans.

(De Wit et al., 2020i, 1:34)

During this bit, the over-the-shoulder visuals reflect the instructive character of Lubach’s argument. First, only the word “Zoonosis” is projected, on a neutral grey background. The only other visuals accompanying Lubach’s argument are a model of animal-to-human virus transmission, and a screenshot of the scientific source material used to make his claims. Here, *ZML* refers to an academic article retrieved via ResearchGate, visually highlighting the article’s findings that bats prove to be rich reservoirs for emerging viruses. In such cases, the humour in *ZML* is not so much satirical but rather a form of comic relief aimed at increasing audience awareness. This comedic and evidence-based argumentation can be seen as a form of “scaling” which facilitates accessibility to complex multi-level issues (Boykoff & Osnes, 2019). Throughout the pandemic, *ZML* uses similar argumentative techniques to break down the effect of pandemic measures on health care capacity, the effectiveness of vaccines, or the link between bio-industry and future epidemiological risks.

¹⁴ A deliberate mispronunciation of porno, the Dutch word for pornography.

Conclusion and discussion

A Reuters poll taken during the COVID-19 pandemic found that the Dutch media landscape is characterised by increasing concerns among citizens regarding the presence and effects of misinformation—increasing from 30% in 2018 and 2019 to 40% in 2021 (Reuters, 2021). As a result, researchers have formulated the concrete advice—for citizens as well as public health officials—that it is beneficial to consume less news, rather than more, and even turn to entertainment programming as a way to counter news fatigue (De Bruin et al., 2021). In this context, the aim of this study was to analyse the way news satire show *ZML* covered the COVID-19 pandemic in the Netherlands.

The findings show how *ZML* critiqued news media and politicians of the incumbent Rutte cabinet for contributing to the infodemic during the COVID-19 pandemic, and ousted right-wing populist parties as illegitimate for their anti-democratic rhetoric. First, *ZML*'s critiques reflect the idea that news media surpassed their democratic function by overloading citizens with news, making it increasingly harder for citizens to manoeuvre through the overabundance of pandemic news. In doing so, it enacted a form of “self-policing” of its media peers (Mansbridge et al., 2012) for their perceived epistemic shortcomings. Second, by comedically interrogating policy makers' statements and actions, *ZML* diagnosed as well as countered the “top-down misinformation” from politicians and other prominent social actors, which has been found to account for 20% of the general infodemic flow (Nielsen, Fletcher, Newman, & Howard, 2020). These critiques are in line with previous studies on news satire which reflect its broader tendency to function as “a journalism of critical inquiry and (...) model of deliberative democracy” (Baym, 2005, p. 259). Central to the theory of deliberative democracy expressed in *ZML*'s pandemic coverage, is the idea that news media and elected politicians should fulfil the civic roles of respectively societal watchdogs and leaders by example.

In answer to its diagnosis of a distorted informational context, *ZML* also expanded its conventional satirical function to take up an informational role for its audiences by covering and endorsing pandemic measures. At the same time, it needs to be emphasised that *ZML* uncritically affirmed the pandemic measures, potentially impairing the inclusion of multip-

le perspectives in the public debate. This follows earlier findings on science coverage in *The Daily Show* (Brewer, 2013) and *Last Week Tonight* (Brewer & McKnight, 2017), which perhaps point toward a vehement opposition to science-scepticism and adherence to science-based logic in news satire. For example, a recent study by Nieuwenhuis (2022) concluded that *ZML* engages in a technocratic and thus depoliticising interaction with its topics, ultimately defending rather than interrogating the status quo. However, we contend it is important to take into account the pandemic context: *ZML*'s legitimisation of pandemic measures and naturalisation of scientific reasoning as a normative good is then not automatically problematic when the issues at hand concern the implementation of health measures aimed at mitigating a global pandemic, even if they are governmentally issued. Rather, this places *ZML* in the emerging tradition of satire as a form of advocacy journalism (Kilby, 2018, Waisanen, 2018) where in the absence of pandemic leadership, its host Arjen Lubach takes up the role of "wise leader" for its audiences (Zekavat, 2021). In order to address this evolution more fully, future research should therefore focus on specific argumentative techniques that lie at the basis of these changing dimensions of satirical critique.

Finally, in defining news satire's merit as a form of cultural politics, we must not lose sight of the distinction between humour as a form of critique or humour as a site of resistance (Holm, 2018). The absence of explicit critique on pandemic measures in *ZML*'s coverage then does not overwrite its progressive character. Rather, the political contributions of news satire are shaped by the context in which they exist. On the background of the COVID-19 pandemic and the rise of anti-democratic discourses, upholding normative standards of science communication, political leadership, and public debate thus effectively instils broader emancipatory and ultimately democratic forms of commentary.

CHAPTER 4

Stand-up in the age of outrage:
How comedians negotiate the repoliticisation of humour

Nicolaï, J. & Maesele, P. (under review).

Stand-up in the age of outrage: How comedians
negotiate the repoliticisation of humour



Abstract

In the context of an expanding societal awareness of social injustice, and inequality, stand-up comedy is frequently caught in the crosshairs of discourses on free speech and political correctness. This study examines the evolving relationship between comedic critique and contemporary discourses on the boundaries of humour. Drawing on the thesis of the repoliticisation of humour, we analyse stand-up comedy's reflexivity towards "wokeness" and "cancel culture" through the case of Flemish stand-up comedian Michael Van Peel. Our findings suggest that the complexity of the current political climate leaves Van Peel and his contemporaries disoriented in their attempts to surpass the boundaries of comedic critique. As a result, we argue for a reimagining of comedy's political potential beyond traditional interpretations as subversive critique, towards a view of stand-up comedy as a site of democratic resistance. Expanding views on the public role of comedians in response to contemporary socio-political issues can enhance the understanding of complex sociocultural dynamics and enable critical engagement with discourses on social justice and comedic free speech.

Introduction

Stand-up comedy has long been praised for advocating free speech, but in today's political climate the role of comedic critique is undergoing a profound transformation. When Dave Chappelle hosted *Saturday Night Live* in November of 2022, he closed his intro-monologue by stating “It shouldn't be this scary to talk. About anything. It's making my job incredibly difficult” (*Saturday Night Live*, 2022). Such claims reflect the growing animosity towards the assumed redrawing of comedy's boundaries in the public sphere today. Similarly, American comedian Chris Rock and the Iranian-British Shaparak Khorsandi have voiced concerns that political correctness might be stifling comedians' creativity (Khorsandi, 2021; Velasquez, 2021), and comedy luminary John Cleese has emerged as an “anti-woke” spokesperson over the last years (Gillespie, 2023).

What this underlines is that humour reflects the sensitivities of a given socio-political moment. Where in the past, public debates on humour centred, among other, on intercultural religious differences—evident in the Danish cartoon controversy (Kuipers, 2011) or the Charlie Hebdo terrorist attack (Dawes, 2015)—or on assaults on common decency (Kuipers, 2015), in the current socio-political climate it seems that “wokeness” has been declared the new threat to comedic free speech. In other words, today more than some are under the impression that “cancel culture is killing comedy” (Aroesti, 2021). Despite limited evidence for these claims (Norris, 2023), it is not entirely surprising that comedians feel threatened by discourses on “wokeness,” given that perceptions on the existence of “cancel culture” are more prominent with social groups holding contrarian views (Norris, 2023, p. 148). As stand-up comedy's core business is often to challenge societal mores by navigating the boundaries of free speech, this indeed renders them contrarians in essence.

Stand-up comedy's history is marked by a tradition of social critique. Lenny Bruce, for example, garnered the status as true advocate of free speech when including his court cases over obscenity charges in his comedic routines in the early 1960's (Bingham & Hernandez, 2009). George Carlin's landmark “seven dirty words” routine on government censorship resulted in a supreme court case against New York radio station WBAI for airing it in 1973 (Meyers, 2008). However, contemporary debates on comedy reflect the broader societal shift from a post-politi-

cal zeitgeist (Wilson & Swingedouw, 2014) to what Anton Jäger (2022a, 2022b) recently termed the condition of hyperpolitics: A political context where “the mood of contemporary politics is one of incessant yet diffuse excitation” (Jäger, 2023, para. 5). As a result, comedic critique—often drawing on provocation and the interrogation of social boundaries through humour—has become the topic of much heated debate in the broader public sphere. As the ontological markers of politics change, so too do the contours of critique. Therefore, this study contributes to ongoing debates on the evolving relationship between comedic critique on the one hand and contemporary discourses on the boundaries of humour on the other. What does it mean to be a comedian in an era of hyperpolitics? And how has this changed comedians’ perceptions on the supposed critical function of their work?

To answer these questions, we analyse stand-up comedy’s reflexivity towards discourses of “wokeness” and “cancel culture” through the case of Flemish stand-up comedian Michael Van Peel. Such an investigation into the role of comedy is relevant for multiple reasons. First, discourses on “wokeness” invite new perspectives on stand-up comedians’ essential roles as “boundary crossers” and their perceptions on free speech. Second, the context of hyperpolitics entails an inflation of critical discourses exemplified by, for example, the rise of right-wing populist parties (e.g. Mouffe, 2019) or hyperpartisan media actors (e.g. Rae, 2021). In turn, this has fostered debate on the limits of comedic critique (see Holm, 2018; Kilby, 2019) as it challenges comedy’s previously privileged role as one of few institutes with the “licence” to interrogate social conventions and status quos. Additionally, studies on comedians’ roles are scarce and focus predominantly on celebrated television news satire shows (e.g., Borden & Tew, 2007; Fox, 2018), and only a small part of this body of research focuses on the experience of comedians themselves by, for example, incorporating interviews (e.g. Koivukoski & Ödmark, 2021; Ödmark & Harvard, 2021).

Our study combines a multi-modal qualitative analysis of a diverse corpus of data concerning Michael Van Peel and Western stand-up comedy. It draws on a semi-structured in-depth interview with Van Peel, secondary interviews in Flemish media, Van Peel’s columns in Flemish upmarket newspaper *De Standaard*, and his latest show *Welcome to the Rebellion!* Additionally, in order to enhance the contextual understanding of our findings, we incorporate international discussions on stand-up comedy and free speech.

Following a theoretical paragraph on the repoliticisation of comedic critique (Nieuwenhuis & Zijp, 2022), we discuss different views on the criticality of humour and comedy. In our analysis, we trace the way Van Peel identifies and negotiates the changing political climate in which discourses on “wokeness” intersect with comedic freedom of speech. A second analytical paragraph explores different conceptions of comedic critique which Van Peel and others have begun to formulate as an answer to the alleged predicaments stand-up comedy faces. Our discussion formulates suggestions for novel ways of envisioning stand-up comedy as a site of democratic resistance.

The repoliticisation of comedic critique

Comedy has been a prominent aspect of Western culture for centuries (Kawalec, 2020). Initially, philosophy, linguistics, and psychology dominated humour theory, resulting in several oft-cited humour theories that aim to universalise its function (Weaver et al., 2016). However, as the twentieth and twenty-first century spawned an unprecedented variety of comedic genres, attempts at capturing their essence proved all the more futile. As a result, over the last two decades the field of critical humour studies emerged, which takes a step away from aiming to define comedy and brings together different critical perspectives concerned with the way humour and comedy intersect with broader notions of power and contestation (Lockyer and Pickering 2008; Weaver, 2011). This understanding acknowledges that humour does not exist in a separate discursive realm free from real-world ramifications (Carrol, 2014, p. 87), and can play a significant role in cultural politics. What connects these studies—and in extension ours—is that they speak of a specific kind of mediated comedy which operates *in* the public sphere, explicitly relating to the political in the sense of its interactions with issues of power, the latter’s contestation, and its social contingencies.

The critical turn in humour studies coincides with a broader societal shift in views about the confluence of humour and politics. This can be described by what Nieuwenhuis & Zijp (2022) recently termed the repoliticisation of humour, which sets out to capture how “humour and comedy increasingly take part in the power struggle over who is included and excluded” in society (Nieuwenhuis & Zijp, 2022, p. 343). This idea comprises the observation

that more apolitical views on humour have been “replaced by the acknowledgement that humour can be used as a political weapon” (Nieuwenhuis & Zijp, 2022, p. 344). Additionally, it refers to the increasing extent in which this political dimension of humour is explicitly debated in the public sphere. As such, it echoes observations that Western society is characterised by a conceptual triumph of comedy over tragedy (Kawalec, 2020, p. 3), or that we are “living in the age of the comedian” (Willett & Willett, 2019, p. 140).

The significance of these views—the acknowledgment of humour as politics and its subsequent prominence in public discourse—is epitomised in what Kuipers (2011) termed “humour scandals” (p. 64): Public controversies concerning humour which disrupt the public sphere and spark socio-political tensions. For example, In July, 2022, the summer lull in Belgian news media was disturbed when Flemish 90’s sitcom *FC De Kampioenen* set off a nationwide controversy, despite being one of the longest running and best viewed sitcoms ever on Belgian television. The show—centring a local soccer club, the antics between players, their wives, and occasional clientele of the club canteen—draws heavily on frivolous caricature, light-hearted banter, and farce. Nonetheless, when an internal commission of Flemish public broadcaster VRT held some of the show’s older episodes up to the light, the reruns of nineteen episodes including racial slurs, sexist scripts, and the performance of blackface were withheld. Not unforeseeable, the decision sparked public controversy in which reactionary critics, journalists, politicians, and academics weighed in on questions concerning the boundaries of humour, even crossing the often-impenetrable language border in Belgian media (e.g. Belga, 2022).

Humour has always interacted with social hierarchies or dimensions of power. But, as Nieuwenhuis and Zijp (2022) assert, “the extent to which the political nature of humour is acknowledged and debated, depends on its historical and cultural context” (p. 343). Today, this context is predicated on the recent shift from a post-political zeitgeist to a condition of hyper-politics (Jäger, 2022a, 2022b, 2023). “Post-politics” was theorised as a critique on Fukuyama’s (1992) echoing assertion that, following the fall of the Soviet Empire, history had come to an end. This idea suggested that the convergence of free market capitalism and liberal democracy has solidified, becoming the sole incontestable societal model. It was criticised for signifying a “disappearance of the political” (Wilson & Swingedouw, 2014, p. 5) which referred to a persistent disabling of political contestation. Where “nothing was political “in a mode of post-politics,

“everything is political, and fervently so” in a state of hyperpolitics (Jäger, 2022, para. 8).

But this return of the political is not without complications. It entails political dimensions which are no longer bound to the conventional dynamics of politics as we knew it, away from established mass politics of representative democracy. Rather, it is marked by “hysteria, confusion, and atomisation” (Hochuli, p. 418), and “its specific focus on interpersonal and personal mores, its incessant moralism and incapacity to think through collective dimensions to struggle” (2022, para. 21). As a result, hyperpolitics represents a new form of politics “present on the football pitch, in the most popular Netflix shows, in the ways people describe themselves on their social media pages” (Jäger, 2022b, p. 412). In relation to public debate, it has brought about an unprecedented proliferation of critical discourses, hyperbolised by social media, and subverting the conventional distribution of critique in society. Hyperpolitics, then, is what gives prominence to the rise of contemporary social justice sentiments such as those existing in debates on #MeToo or Black Lives Matter. But equally, it capacitates voices on pandemic scepticism or any other form of anti-establishment or anti-government commentary.

In a hyperpolitical context, societal critique has thus, it would seem, become a staple to public discourse. As Hochuli (2022) contends, today “everyone is a claimsmaker and not just on social media. More people are doing politics, but in a diffuse, unstructured manner” (p. 418). Taken together, this repoliticisation of humour and the hyperpolitical climate have altered perceptions on the concession of comedic critique in the public sphere. Conventionally, the practice of critique has been attributed to a limited number of social institutions, and together with, for example, journalism or literature, comedy has traditionally been one of few privileged forms of discourse granted the licence to interrogate societal conventions with relative impunity. In a societal moment in which critique has become overly commonplace, however, comedy itself has been caught in the crosshairs of political discourse, forcing it to critically interrogate its own public role. These discussions are most visible today in broader discourses on societal awareness and discrimination related to questions of race or gender, often discussed under the catch-all term of “wokeness.”

Since its origins in 1940s African American labour unions (Mirazei, 2019), “wokeness” was recently adopted by social justice movements like Black Lives Matter and #MeToo to denote

a progressive stance towards social rights issues. As a result, these discussions have found their way to different corners of public debate, from politics to popular culture, giving critics the idea that “the woke mob is everywhere” (Koberg, 2021). Furthermore, discourses on “wokeness” are especially prevalent in digital environments, where a “politics of visibility” (Sobande et al., 2022) exaggerates their political impact and drives polarisation: Because “wokeness” has come to mean a number of different things today, the term is highly volatile and often surrounded by hyperbolic or inflammatory rhetoric, with some viewing it as a lens through which to address systemic injustice, while others perceive it as an unwarranted restriction of free speech (Zavatarro & Bearfield, 2022).

In relation to comedy, “wokeness” is often associated with questions of semantic policing, censorship or self-censorship. An oft-cited idea in conservative circles is that “the woke can’t take a joke” (Mann, 2021), or that “the straitjacket of sensitivity isn’t conducive to good comedy” (Roberts, 2019). Such critical voices assume that “wokeness” sets out to curtail comedy which does not adhere to assumed liberal agendas. Ironically enough however, comedians who openly oppose social justice sensibilities often thrive professionally because of it. In the SNL monologue discussed above, Dave Chappelle elaborates on the public controversy involving musician Ye’s (the artist formerly known as Kanye West) antisemitic remarks. He seemingly playfully dismisses Ye’s claims, yet subtle endorsements are equally met with applause. Additionally, the segment was viewed almost ten million times on YouTube in four days. Such discrepancies between comedians’ cancellation fears and their unimpeded fame have led critics to retort that “the idea that cancel culture is killing comedy is a nonsense slogan—an absurdist joke in itself” (Aroesti, 2021, para. 15). It follows that among comedians themselves, different views exist on how to navigate these changing views on comedic critique. The following paragraph therefore looks beyond the notion of comedic critique and discusses interpretations of comedy as a discourse of resistance.

Comedy as critique or resistance?

The nature of comedic critique is a topic of longstanding discussion, and theoretical perspectives on comedic critique have undergone different conceptual incantations over the last decades. Billig's (2005) seminal work on humour, for example, asserted that it was "the darker, less easily admired practice of ridicule (...) that lies at the core of social life" (p. 2). Despite Billig's (2005) proposed distinction between disciplinary (punching up) and contesting (punching down) types of ridicule, an exclusive focus on disparaging humour is limited as it emphasises the subversive dimensions of comedy (Mylonas & Kompatsiaris, 2019). According to Brassett (2016), such views on humour reflect the modernist assumption that critical comedy should strive first and foremost to subvert the political order. In this sense, comedic critique is seen as a form of assault, one that "[tears] down systems and structures as a political goal in itself" (Holm, 2018, p. 42). But, as Holm (2018) asserts, "interrogating the supposed political work of critical humour requires us to disentangle the assumed correspondence between humour as a form of critique and humour as a form of resistance" (p. 31-32).

Going beyond conventional interpretations of comedy as ridicule or subversion reflects more fundamental distinctions between progressive and reactionary dimensions of critique today. Additionally, it highlights the obscured definitional relationship between critique and criticism (Phelan, 2021). This is particularly pressing today, as critique increasingly emerges from unconventional sources and often diverges from its traditional focus on challenging social struggles or promoting democratic ideals of equality. Critique as such entails a profound "hermeneutics of suspicion" (Felski, 2015) aimed at interrogating the self-evidence of societal discourses. Criticism, on the other hand, arises from subjective discontent rather than an intention to deconstruct the deeper structural contingencies of a given social order. Put otherwise, whether stand-up comedy is found to be "critical" or not, says little about the ideological dispositions—progressive or reactionary—present in its message, and the position it subsequently takes up in the public debate.

Furthermore, comedy that predominantly depends on disparagement or ridicule is increasingly viewed as problematic (e.g. Ford, 2015). Engaging in disparaging humour can reflect a comedian's stance towards social issues at the heart of such discourse. In this sense, ridiculing

“wokeness” can be seen as a form of critique that reads “against the grain” (Bewes, 2010, p. 12). Such a form of critique is hinged on a symptomatic reading of its subject. It arises out of disagreement, rather than curiosity, and maintains a critical distance between the critic and the topic of his critique. It abandons the humility of the comedic underdog, and punches down at those in subordinate social positions.

But to abstain from engaging in the debate would arguably not overcome the pitfalls of comedic critique either. Rather, comedically engaging with discourses on “wokeness” can reveal new perspectives without resorting to adversarial ridicule. Last Week Tonight host John Oliver, for example, recently concluded an episode on tensions surrounding critical race theory: “[T]hese debates are both very loud and very dumb, but unfortunately it is important to engage with them (...) or honest discussions on race will be shut out” (*Last Week Tonight* with John Oliver, 2022). In this light, stand-up comedians are faced with the challenging task of reconfiguring what it means to laugh in the face of adversity. As British comedian Omid Djalili has put it, “if a comedian is clever, they can navigate [cancel culture] (...) but I have never done more set-up [in my material] (...) you need to kind of explain yourself more” (Omid Djalili, 2022). This hints at a need to reconceptualise critique into an updated form more in tune with today’s political ontologies. But what then can we envision as a viable answer to this perceived stalemate for comedic critique? What critical licence is still accorded to stand-up comedy today?

Contrary to critique “against the grain”, critique “with the grain” assumes a critical reading “that suspends judgement, which commits itself, rather, to the most generous reading possible” (Bewes, 2010, p. 4) and “begins by historicising its own positionality with respect to the text” (Bewes, 2010, p. 27). Some scholars have problematised this inherent subjectivity in comedy. Kawalec (2020), for example, asserts that stand-up comedy predominantly reflects Western neoliberal ideologies—centred around instrumental individualism—often at the cost of contempt for more inclusive humanistic values (p. 10). Others, however, underline that stand-up comedy’s performative power is derived from its relatively immediate interaction between comic and audience, and its focus on the theatrical authenticity and subjective truth-telling (Sturges, 2015). This fits with what Krefting (2014) called “charged humour”, referring to a form of stand-up comedy that aims to understand social justice issues, embodying the distinct subjectivity of the comedian performing it. In relation to comedy as

a mode of social interrogation, Bingham and Hernandez (2009) and Smith (2015, 2018) have offered readings of stand-up comedy as a form of “comedic sociology” which “brings to light inadequate, everyday conceptions of the social and demonstrates our partial, limited understanding we may hold about other people” (Smith, 2015, p. 565). Similarly, Koziski (1984) and Timler (2012) draw parallels between stand-up and anthropology, as it “uses humour forged from the seemingly banal within their own cultures to highlight the Otherness found within their cultures” (Timler, 2012, p. 50).

What such interpretations of stand-up comedy have in common is that they do not set out to critique through ridicule or comedic subversion. Rather, through forms of comedic resistance, the stand-up comedian can cast new light on existing social issues, understanding them from a distance. Comedy as resistance, then, rephrases instead of destroys, and facilitates learning in opposition of those aspects of a given social order deemed undesirable. In the light of contemporary debates on social injustice, it does not set out to attack “wokeness” as a threat to the comedic profession but can serve as a form of interrogation that encourages understanding.

Michael Van Peel and stand-up in Flanders

Although the public debate on the role of comedy is especially prolific in Anglophonic contexts, it has by now expanded globally in the public sphere (e.g., Aroesti, 2021; Whelan, 2022) as well as in scholarship (e.g., Popović, 2018; Zhou, 2022). In Belgium, one figure at the forefront of this debate is Flemish stand-up comedian and columnist Michael Van Peel. Van Peel started his stand-up career in 2005 yet rose to prominence only a few years later when he won the Dutch Culture Comedy Award in 2007, and the oldest Flemish cabaret festival *Humorologie* in 2009 (Van Peel, 2023). Shortly thereafter, Van Peel garnered nationwide attention through his “years-end conferences” *Van Peel Survives* (2009 – 2018)—a lowlands tradition in which comedians offer an overview of the year’s noteworthy events—airing January 1st on the Flemish public broadcaster. Critics have dubbed him the “best current affairs comedian in Belgium” (Van Loy, 2022). And for his latest show, Van Peel has been praised as a “true court jester of comedy” who „holds up a mirror to the people and challenges current affairs and the current zeitgeist“ (Michiels, 2022).

Van Peel represents an interesting case for the analysis of the changing role of comedic critique for several reasons. First, Van Peel overtly self-identifies as a type of comedian who sets out to “question the norm” (Van Peel, 2020b), and he has acknowledged that his shows have acquired a more contemplative character over the years (Michiels, 2018). This connects Van Peel to a longstanding tradition of stand-up comedy known for deliberately engaging with social issues. Furthermore, Van Peel has expanded his role as social commentator through the frequent publication of op-eds in Flemish upmarket newspaper *De Standaard*. Where comedians themselves conventionally minimise their role as social commentators (e.g. Koivukoski & Ödmark, 2020), Van Peel is an example of a body of comedians who have begun to increasingly defend their right to weigh in on political discourse. This allows him to produce material which is “dead serious in message, yet soaked in humour and self-reflection” (Michiels, 2022), rendering the analysis of his work and public persona a valuable site for insights on the changing perceptions on comedic critique. Finally, Van Peel’s work is an interesting example of stand-up comedy’s potential to offer a localised „critique of culture at home“ (Timler, 2012), while simultaneously interpreting and presenting transnational topics and social issues to its audiences. Notwithstanding that his work is in Dutch exclusively, it engages with wide-ranging social issues such as international politics or geopolitical conflict (Michiels, 2015). Because his comedic practice is geared more towards employing irony, sarcasm and comedic hyperbole to deconstruct complex topics, the translation of his work from Dutch to English does not detract from the critical message of his work.

The Flemish stand-up comedy scene is primarily characterised by its intimate, live performances in comedy bars and clubs. Unlike the United States, for example, where streaming platforms and popular social media channels dominate the industry, Flemish comedians have established themselves as local celebrities through their accessibility to audiences and media. This close relationship between comedians and their fans fosters a concentrated discussion on the role of stand-up comedy in Flanders. Nonetheless, broader debates on the boundaries of free speech have increasingly found their way to the Flemish public sphere, with proponents on both sides of the ideological aisle. Antagonists to the perceived threats of “cancel culture,” for example, have recently stated that “fortunately, [Flanders is] far from the American delusion, but woke is creeping into universities” (Elbers & Neels, 2022).

Despite the lack of any evidence for claims that political correctness is stifling academia, “anti-woke” sentiments recently culminated in the creation of a hotline for “woke-activism” incidents aimed at “stopping cancel culture at the University of Antwerp” (*Academici richten meldpunt op*, 2023). In the world of stand-up comedy specifically, Flemish stand-up comedians have similarly taken stances on the perceived prominence of debates on political correctness. Some have reiterated the feeling that “woke” is pressuring their profession. Prominent stand-up comedian Alex Agnew, for example, has termed “woke” a “pseudo-religious ideology under the pretence of progressiveness” (Smeets, 2022). Upcoming stand-up comedienne Jade Mintjens contrastingly defended her recent show by stating “it’s better to be woke, than to be an indifferent, unfriendly prick” (Bellwinkel, 2022). Despite its scale, the Flemish context thus functions as a microcosm of broader societal perceptions on comedic critique today.

ANALYSIS

The disoriented stand-up comedian

Van Peel’s work is found to thematically incorporate concepts related to the repoliticisation of humour, i.e. the proliferation of critical discourse and its effect on the role of comedy. In his latest show, *Welcome to the Rebellion!* (2022), he frames his views as follows:

Everyone is against something. You’re not for freedom or human rights, you’re against covid measures. You’re not for diversity, you’re against white males. You’re not for freedom of speech, you’re against woke. Everyone is united against something. And all those groups see themselves as rebels nowadays. Everyone is a rebel, from climate activists, wokers, antivaxxers, Trump-supporters, to even politicians. Rebellion has turned fucking mainstream.

(Van Peel, 2022)

Here, Van Peel witnesses “an inflation of metaphors bereft of nuance” (Van Peel, 2022) and interrogates the subsequent tensions surrounding general interpretations

and capacities for societal critique. In an interview with Flemish newspaper *Gazet Van Antwerpen*, Van Peel describes how comedians feel “robbed of their own rebellion” as we are living in an “Age of Outrage in which everyone is disgruntled” (Vincent, 2022). In doing so, he voices a concern that a profusion of critique simultaneously corresponds with its debilitation, or in Van Peel’s words, “if everyone is rebelling, then what are we rebelling against?” (M. Van Peel, interview, May 9th, 2022).

In one column, he ironically advocates a “complaint tax” (of fifty euros n.b.) aimed at “preventing justified critique from dissolving in the oblivion of pettiness” (Van Peel, 2019). In a similar vein, in his recent Netflix special Chris Rock described debates on “cancel culture” as hypocritical and called out people voicing critique via Twitter “on a phone made by child[ren]” (Silverman, 2023). As such, stand-up comedy is often found to function as a site for reflexive examination of the changing nature of critical discourse—both in definition and in practice.

In his work, Van Peel illuminates these concerns in the light of the problematisation of the role of comedy today. The resulting discussions are often synonymous with debates on the boundaries of free speech and mirror the problematised role of the comedian as an interrogator of social boundaries. Following his contemporaries, Van Peel has taken an explicit stance in favour of freedom of speech (Van Peel, 2020). According to the comedian, “freedom of speech is punk” and being one of comedy’s core values, must be upheld at all costs. Similarly to other comedians such as Chris Rock (Khorsandi, 2021) and Ricky Gervais (Ricky Gervais defends, taboo, 2022), Van Peel links the need to defend free speech to the rise of social justice movements, which are allegedly emboldened by “adding the dynamite stick of [social media] algorithms in the mix” (M. Van Peel, interview, May 9th, 2022). However, what is designated is a specific kind of free speech: One which implies a right to offend, on the one hand, but presupposes the need for “a critical and intellectual maturity of citizens” on the other (M. Van Peel, interview, May 9th, 2022). If censored, the absence of free speech would then problematise the role of the comedian as interrogator of those in power. But as Mello (2017) has shown, interpretations of free speech are contingent on conceptions of what constitutes “the powerful” at a given time.

As our political climate is characterised by an increasing awareness to social injustice and inequality, and subsequently, a heightened sensitivity to the crossing of normative boundaries, Van Peel voices concerns regarding shifting balances of power and their effect on his role as a comedian. Drawing on academic theory ranging from Pew Research Center reports to philosophical literature, Van Peel strives to overtly make sense of the changing political context, and his role as a comedian within it:

Tinneke Beeckman, the philosopher, advised to use the terms (...) majority thinking and minority thinking (...) Minority thinkers always assume that you have to question the norm: “Is it really?” (...) And that’s the reflex that comedians in general have, isn’t it. That’s usually what a comedian does, looking at everyday life, that could be male-female relationships or politics or whatever. And say “Isn’t that a bit weird? Isn’t that a bit strange that all of us, when we’re in the elevator, don’t say anything to each other, when that’s the consensus?”

(M. Van Peel, interview, May 9th, 2022)

What Fox (2018) termed *humitas*—a conflation of humour and gravitas—relates to the interplay between humorousness and seriousness facilitated in comedic discourse, resulting in a “more complex, multiple discourse which counters the univocal nature of much media and political discourse” (Fox, 2018, p. 96). As a result, stand-up comedy is increasingly used as a site for the dissemination of socio-political topics (e.g., Riesch, 2015). However, Van Peel’s comedy cannot strictly be termed a vessel for political communication. Rather, it incorporates scholarly discussions in his material to navigate changing perceptions on the public role of a comedian.

But when referring to perceived “extreme forms of woke,” Van Peel also sympathises with why his international colleagues are intrinsically at odds with it. One reason for this relates to existing power dynamics and the comedic mandate of interrogating them:

There’s a censoring aspect to these debates: “You can’t say those words.” Which is a power dynamic, call it as it is. And that’s what comedians have
(M. Van Peel, interview, May 9th, 2022)

difficulty with, with authority. “Why not? Because I say so!” (...) There’s no sense of agreement, there’s no debate (...) That’s authoritarian censorship talking.

Such a view relates to the inherent assumption that comedy hinges on the interrogation of boundaries. Where in our current political climate certain sensitivities are commended, the licence to disrupt these boundaries is often expanded for comedians: As “boundary crossers” (Weaver & Mora, 2016), comedians subvert the socially or politically self-evident by “speak[ing] to the centre from the periphery” (p. 481). However, by grafting an argument for comedic free speech on the grounds of comedy’s alleged intrinsic role to interrogate boundaries, Van Peel also legitimises the unequal power relations at the basis of these boundaries. But as Pickering and Lockyer (2009) pointed out, “paradoxically, making offensive jokes about others with total impunity would mean that there are no boundaries to push at anymore [as] humour is only possible because certain boundaries, rules and taboos exist in the first place” (p. 16). According to this principle, the current political climate with its heightened awareness of social injustice ideally functions as a mirror, not a muzzle for comedians: It can inspire them to go beyond adding insult to injury and elicit reflection on the principles that guide comedic professionalism. But where then does the stand-up comedian point his arrows? And when to sharpen them, or when to blunt their tips with preamble? For Van Peel, this boils down to one central question which guides his current work:

Minority groups are less repressed than, say, twenty years ago, which leads to a power shift. Not a reversal, not that we live in an LGBTQ tyranny. Obviously. Not at all. But there’s been a shift in power, where I ask myself the question, “when is one powerful enough to be ridiculed again?”

(M. Van Peel, interview, May 9th, 2022)

With this inquiry, Van Peel reiterates that comedy’s role is to challenge those in power. But what is often left undefined is what constitutes power in the alleged “power shift” that comedians set out to scrutinise. In the current socio-political climate, critical reflections on “woke” often reproduce the idea that power has tilted in favour of progressive discourses and once-repressed minorities. Summarised, the idea would run as follows: Social groups in mino-

rity positions have their rights and voices disproportionately amplified in today's (digital) public sphere and, as a result, they are found to "impose" restricting social mores on comedy's previously allegedly unassailable licence to mock. Such a view of humour as a social corrective is, however, exclusively aimed at identity dimensions of power i.e., dimensions of "wokeness" affecting comedic free speech.

Despite aiming to understand the changes at the heart of Van Peel's profession, supposing a true "power shift" would have to entail broader conceptions of critique, including the position of comedians themselves. It follows that what some comedians consider progressive critique may however represent a critique of a different order: One which is reactionary rather than progressive and confirms the status quo rather than subverts it. As a result, the current political moment leaves Van Peel and his contemporaries disoriented. If the critical stand-up comedian wants to be a thorn in the side of those in power, Van Peel asks aloud: "Do I aim my arrows then at groups I sympathise with? Of which I am an ally as well? But what if there's also assholes among them? What if I don't like what some of them are doing?" (M. Van Peel, interview, May 9th, 2022). In other words, is interrogating "woke" punching *up*, or punching *down*? What remains of the comedian's underdog position when he formulates critique on discourses which set out to critique social injustice as such? With these questions in mind, the following paragraph investigates stand-up comedy's attempts at formulating new forms of comedic critique in a so-called Age of Outrage.

Beyond comedy as critique

The abundance of critique marks our present conjuncture as one in which critique is no longer marginalised but welcomed and even culturally encouraged. In Van Peel's words:

I thought the [pandemic] curfew was a far-reaching breach of civil rights, but then on the right there's these nutcases with their Star of David, screaming "The vaccine certificate is like the Holocaust!" No, man, I'm not in your team either! And on the left, some crazy with a tinfoil hat claims Bill Gates will inject us with 5G (...) We're surrounded!

(...) So I stopped critiquing altogether, which is self-censorship, sure, but I just couldn't figure it out.

(Van Peel, 2022)

By engaging in length with critiques on “woke,” stand-up comedians run the risk of invoking associations with contemporary discourses of, for example, alt-right or conservative leaders who often rhetorically exploit the myth of an “unchecked culture war.” The difficulty then becomes that any formulation of critique in a highly politicised public sphere can immediately be identified along partisan lines or become “hijacked” by political extremes. But to stop engaging with the debate altogether, as Van Peel asserts, does not resolve the problem of comedic critique either. According to Van Peel, it is the act of raising questions and “avoiding the dangers of trying to formulate answers” (M. Van Peel, interview, May 9th, 2022) which allow him to understand the changing boundaries of his profession today.

Such attempts at reformulating the critical nature of stand-up comedy have been present in the work of other comedians as well. Performances such as Hannah Gadsby's *Nanette* (2017) and Dave Chappelle's 8:46 (2020) stand-up comedy have demonstrated how seriousness and explicit social commentary can be worked in comedy routines to advocate progressive social movements such as #MeToo and Black Lives Matter (Webber et al., 2021). Although such shows have deviated from conventional humorous expectations significantly, laughter is arguably still a key component to their identification as a novel kind of comedy for their audiences. But a resistant type of stand-up comedy can then be what Ulrich Beck (Beck in Sturges, 2015) has termed “Mitlachen”—to laugh *with*, implying togetherness—where mutual understanding between comedian and his audiences is attempted through the act of “self-estrangement” (Speck, 2019, p. 245), not by punching down in ridicule. In the context of debates on woke-ness, this kind of comedy is presumably more inclusive and assumes a humility and awareness towards the sensitivities of all potential audiences, not just those loudest in the public sphere.

To illustrate, when Ricky Gervais released his special SuperNature in 2022, it received instant backlash for its abundant transphobic content (Earl, 2022). In Gervais' own words, the show's title refers to the fact that “nature is super enough” (*The Late Show*,

2022). Together with the content of the show—four minutes into the show a graphic routine associates transwomen with sexual assault—it can be said that Gervais voices a critique of woke discourse and “trans-ideology” running rampant, altering what he perceives to be a self-evident natural order. In public interviews, Gervais has recurrently fallen back on the oft-cited trope that “these are just jokes” (BBC, 2022). Gervais’ comedic discussion of “wokeness” can be seen as a form of critique that reads “against the grain” (Bewes, 2010, p. 12). It emphasises maintaining a critical distance between the critic and the topic being criticised. Rather than adopting the humility of the comedic underdog, such critique can be seen as punching down, under the guise “getting us over taboo subjects” (BBC, 2022).

Like Gervais’ show, Van Peel’s special *Welcome to the Rebellion!* also deals with questions surrounding wokeness and free speech. Nonetheless, Van Peel’s title summons imagery of a different interpretation of comedic critique. By interrogating the rise of societal rebelliousness, at the same time Van Peel interrogates what is left of the rebellious comedian and acknowledges his own role in the broader debate on social injustice and discrimination. Although he is critical of certain perceived extremes of “wokeness,” contrary to Gervais, Van Peel elaborates on the historical context of these debates to engage in explicit dialogue with himself and his audience, often at the cost of a punchline:

What annoys me about extreme forms of wokeness is that I notice that all around me average people are dropping out. I hear people saying things like “What’s with all this woke nonsense? I’m sure discrimination is not that bad.” No! Those two are completely independent of one another. One is people seeking attention, and the other is a real societal issue. But I get how people get angry by such extremism, but I think the solution lies not with getting riled up, the solution lies within ourselves.

(Van Peel, 2022)

On its face value, such a claim could be interpreted as a delegitimisation of certain dimensions of “wokeness” as irrational. Nonetheless, by distinguishing between what he terms “real problems of discrimination” and “[an ideology] fuelled by the algorithms of social media, in which (...) extremes emerge” (Van Peel, 2022), Van Peel can be found to strive for nuance in

the debate. Although perhaps he does not succeed entirely in casting off the cloak of comedic ridicule, his work invites reflection on the “stand-up-comedian-as-ethnographer” (Timler, 2012, p. 50): By contextualising broader socio-political issues in everyday experiential terms, his work invites audiences to view discourses on “wokeness” not solely from a distance, but to near the topic and acknowledge its otherness. For Van Peel, this includes sympathising with “average people” who perhaps do not entirely understand the finer political intricacies behind “woke” discourses, without therefore immediately identifying as a social justice adversary.

Unlike comedians who avoid such debates or “appear woke” on stage, Van Peel acknowledges that this discourse is a complicated one, but that merely ridiculing it is not warranted. In this sense, his work reflects the positionality of Van Peel himself, reflecting both “woke” and “woke-critical” perspectives, both understanding and lack thereof. In one segment, for example, Van Peel critiques the alleged “extreme woke” stance of condemning the accidental act of deadnaming a Flemish trans person on public television, while simultaneously normalising his gender identity and commending him for tolerating the unintentional misgendering: “He didn’t care about that at all. Of course not. He’s a man, with more balls than twenty of those Twittering idiots combined” (Van Peel, 2022). It confirms perhaps that comedic free speech, although not entirely dead, comes with social and democratic responsibility (Peifer, 2012): If there were such a thing as a “right to offend,” it is imperative that resistant humour still punches up, not down, and sets out to target those in positions of power (Pickering & Littlewood, 1998, 295).

Conclusion and discussion

This study has examined the evolving relationship between comedic critique and contemporary discourses on the boundaries of humour through the case of Flemish stand-up comedian Michael Van Peel. What does it mean to be a comedian in an era of hyperpolitics? And how has this changed comedians’ perceptions on the supposed critical function of their work? To answer these questions, we have conceptualised what some stand-up comedians today perceive to be an ideologically confusing landscape that ultimately problematises the nature of comedic critique. Drawing on the thesis of the repoliticisation of humour (Nieuwenhuis & Zijp, 2022) and the notion of comedy as a site for re-

sistance, we analysed Van Peel's stance and reflexivity towards discourses of "wokeness."

Our analysis has shown that stand-up comedians have increasingly and more explicitly begun to incorporate discussions on the role of comedy within their work, while at the same time conceiving the current political moment as a hurdle for comedic practice. Van Peel's work reflects an explicit awareness of the challenges stand-up comedy in general faces as a form of critical discourse: In the so-called 'Age of Outrage', criticism has become abundant, and critique—in the sense of a progressive interrogation of societal issues—has become harder to formulate. On the other hand, we have empirically explored what a resistant kind of stand-up comedy looks like, i.e. one that ideally functions as a conduit for a better understanding of broader political tensions. Here, our analysis revealed that Van Peel's work perhaps is not conclusively resistant but explores the possibility of "[moving] beyond the aggressive criticism that informs the assault of laughter" (Holm, 2018, p. 40). But a resistant form of stand-up comedy does not cast aside its critical potential entirely. Rather, it reimagines critique as "a road map of ideological debate and a negotiation of identity—individual, communal, and national—that reveals much about who we have been in the past, who we are now, and who we might become" (Webber et al., p. 433). As such, it strives to surpass forms of humour as ridicule or disparagement and is adapted to a contemporary political context which is hyperpoliticised and hyperdiverse in terms of ideological perspectives.

One potential shortcoming of this study therefore relates to the distinct social positionality of Van Peel as a stand-up comedian: As a white cisgender male, Van Peel arguably runs the risk of engaging in forms of "weak reflexivity" (Colpean & Tully, 2019) by joking about social injustices in a way that dismantles certain ideologies, yet reproduces others. As it is predominantly the social categories of whiteness and masculinity that are challenged in discourses on "wokeness," comedians such as Van Peel perhaps overestimate and misrepresent these discourses and their impact on stand-up comedy.

With its focus on the inherent subjectivity of its creators, comedy remains a highly politicised lens on society. As a result, the world of stand-up comedy will remain an engaging barometer for broader public debates on topics related to social justice and free speech. By now, distinct types of comedy are emerging which redefine conventional comedic formulas that are

so often publicly scrutinised, opening up new venues for such subjective interrogations of social issues. For example, the term “post-comedy” was recently coined to refer to a kind of comedy that “uses the elements of comedy (be it stand-up, sitcom, or film) but without the goal of creating the traditional comedic result—laughter—instead focusing on tone, emotional impact, storytelling, and formal experimentation” (Fox, 2018, para. 3). What Waisanen (2018) termed “advocacy satire” is another example of a discursively hybrid blend of comedy which draws on humour to facilitate political action. Such novel forms of comedy deserve attention in future research as they allow us to look beyond specific one-dimensional interpretations of critical comedy, in form as well as content.

Although the field of comedy studies is expanding rapidly, studies which place comedy within their contingent socio-political framework remain scarce. Future studies can highlight different dimensions in which the repoliticisation of humour affects comedy, focusing on comedians’ perspectives—e.g. How do comedians navigate the changing perspectives on comedic critique—audience reception—e.g. How do audiences reevaluate the role of comedy in the public sphere—or critical discourse analyses of comedic content—e.g. What is the role of seriousness in comedy vis-à-vis political discourse? Finally, it is largely a matter of conjecture to forecast how comedy will develop from here. As our social mores and boundaries change, so too do our attempts to make sense of them, to navigate them. Comedians’ roles will undoubtedly also change because of this.

CONCLUSION



This dissertation was driven by the motivation to better understand what I termed the changing faces of political satire in Flanders and the Netherlands. In doing so, it set out the following two aims. The first inquiry of this dissertation examined how the roles of satirists in Flanders and the Netherlands are subject to change, in terms of, on the one hand, the production of satirical content and, on the other, the reception of political satire in public debate. A second aim set out to interrogate how these changes have influenced the transformation of satirical critique on the backdrop of shifting socio-political contexts, and a growing public awareness and reflexivity towards satirical discourse.

In this concluding chapter, I integrate the insights derived from the four studies that make up this dissertation. This need for an integrated overview of our findings is particularly essential due to the inherently elusive nature of political satire, a trait that has become increasingly apparent over this four-year research journey. Following Petrovic (2018), our research is shaped by the observation that it is in “its ambiguity, elusiveness, resistance to clear-cut interpretations and unpredictability of its effects” that we can locate the “actual loci of [satire’s] political relevance” (p. 203). This elusiveness has continually informed and reshaped this dissertation’s trajectory. In other words, to immerse oneself in the changing faces of political satire presupposes the challenge of simultaneously capturing its current form as well as its evolving nature.

The remainder of this chapter discusses the limitations of our research and offers recommendations for future studies. I end this dissertation with a reflection on the broader implications of the findings and offer recommendations for academic and non-academic audiences alike related to the societal impact of political satire in the 21st century.

Key findings

The four studies presented in this dissertation interlink in a narrative that sets out to capture the dynamic nature of political satire in Flanders and the Netherlands. This investigation underscores that satire is a form of public discourse and a site for contestation and, as such, operates as a lens which refracts the way we look at the world. As society transformed throughout the course

of this dissertation, satire and the satirists at the wheel have adapted accordingly, engaging in a constant dialogue with their surroundings.

In this dissertation, I have guided this satirical lens to aim predominantly at itself and the increasing reflexivity present in discourses on and in political satire. This reflexivity is understood on different levels. On an **identitary level**, it comes to the fore in the ways satirists contribute to the discursive contestation of professional roles pertaining to public discourse. These roles overlap with but are not exclusively connected to professional journalism. According to Ahva (2012), occupational professionalism can be seen as a lens through which these roles, the practices that define them, and the self-understanding of their practitioners can be understood (p. 790). Roles, however, are contextual and contingent, shaped by various external and internal factors. Political satire fosters the self-reflexivity of identities by negotiating the boundaries between the journalistic and non-journalistic, popular culture and public affairs, and as such embodies the tightrope between news and entertainment. As professional journalistic identities are often tacit and routinised (Gravengaard, 2012), their interaction with political satire—holding up a mirror to journalism—can foster the recognition of a diversity of journalistic identities, or the conflicting roles and ideals existing in their practices (Kunelius & Ruusunoksa, 2008).

Additionally, there has been an increasing tendency to historicise and contextualise the social role of political satire, and its substituents comedy and humour. The analysis of political satire's role conceptions in this dissertation thus also functions to better understand, not just their journalistic qualities or their affordances in terms of public discourse, but also how they contribute to public perceptions of the satirical, the comedic, or the humorous in general. In this sense, I view the professional satirist as an embodiment of hybridity, actively interrogating how the practice of satire manages to harmonise inherent similarities and disparities. Similar to journalists, political satirists can thus be identified as members of an interpretative community who constitute meanings of their profession through shared discourse and collective interpretations (Koivukoski & Ödmark, 2021; Zelizer, 1993).

On the **epistemic level**, this reflexivity teaches us how political satire operates on the background of a “return to a more subjective paradigm” (Broersma, 2010, p. 32) that guides

public discourse away from adherence to a regime of objectivity and allows for a more mediated and interpretative approach to truth claims. Such a paradigmatic shift has, as many scholars have by now observed, overruled “divisions between news and entertainment, public affairs and popular culture, affective consumption and democratic discourse” (e.g., Baym, 2007, p. 361; Delli Carpini & Williams, Van Zoonen, 2005). The result of this has been the proliferation of different forms of political satire which blend comedic and political discursive modes to engage in a hybrid practice of alternative public discourse.

Television news satire—our topic of interest in Chapters 1, 2 and 3—is widely recognised for its ability to critically deconstruct the possibilities of political journalism. By blending the coverage of social issues with humour and comedy, news satire can challenge the privileged epistemic legitimacy and authority of journalism as an institute for political discourse. In this sense, my research has been guided by the assumption that political satire can function as an alternative form of reflective journalism (Broersma, 2010, Harbers, 2016) that brings together an adherence to factuality with an openly subjective and participatory search for truth. In the case of stand-up comedy—discussed in Chapter 4—the increasing scrutiny towards issues of social relevance in comedians’ material today allows us to identify how the highly subjective, autobiographical and humorous interventions of the comedian are epistemically not in direct opposition with “conventional” forms of journalistic commentary. In terms of meaning-making, political satire thus ideally functions as a “critical incident” (Feldman, 2007, p. 410) that problematises the journalistic from the outside, by redefining professional journalism’ occupational norms and reassessing their significance in today’s media environment. As such, the forms of political satire discussed here can be seen as self-reflexive “double-voiced discourse[s]” (Druick, 2009, p. 301), which subvert epistemic expectations associated with journalism, operating both as a critique and an alternative form of journalism (Faina, 2012).

Chapter 1 addressed the question of self-reflexivity through the analysis of the production process of the Flemish news satire show *De Ideale Wereld*. An approach to the reflexive dimensions of political satire implies a step away from definitional views of satire as genre and a focus on its affordances in terms of contribution to public debate. Nonetheless, this study has deliberately taken genre as a conceptual starting point as it offers insights into how satirical practitioners negotiate their roles in relation to their hybrid identity as comedians and

news workers. In this sense, this first study functioned as a necessary outset for the further understanding of satire in practice analysed throughout this dissertation.

The situated analysis of interviews with the show's hosts and staff, and observations in *De Ideale Wereld's* "satirical newsroom" revealed how the show's inherent genre hybridity resulted in an ongoing negotiation of its creators' role conceptions. In contrast with predominant assumptions of satire's journalistic qualities, the findings show how *De Ideale Wereld* is characterised by a diversity of intentions located on different ends of the spectrum between comedic absurdity and critical commentary. What this study has thought us, is that genres and the norms, values and practices they are associated with, can be seen as enacted practices. Furthermore, it shows that the blurring of boundaries between the comedic and the journalistic is not always self-evident. Despite the existence of alternative interpretations of journalism which incorporate intimate (Steensen, 2017), emotional (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2020) or joyful (Parks, 2021) forms of journalistic storytelling, satirists themselves are not immune to still dogmatic modernist interpretations of a supposedly detached and neutral journalism.

Chapter 2 elaborated on these findings by assessing the changing perceptions of the Dutch news satire show *Zondag met Lubach*. Our aim here was to interrogate how television news satire's hybridity informs public discussion on satire's role in public debate, and potentially expands normative interpretations of what constitutes the journalistic. Through the analysis of media appearances by the host and staff of *Zondag met Lubach*, this study unpacked the impact that satire's presence in the public debate has in terms of professional reflexivity. This reflexivity was multifaceted and points in different directions. On the one hand, the findings showed how *Zondag met Lubach* inspired professional journalists and news media to critically question their own roles. Discussions surrounding the show's comedic deconstruction of current affairs resulted in "journalistic realisation" (Eldridge, 2018) of the show, legitimising the combination of comedy and news as a valid way of understanding reality. On the other hand, the findings revealed how *Zondag met Lubach* itself has, over time, come to terms with facilitating reflection on the epistemic authority of novel incantations of journalistic storytelling. *Zondag met Lubach* thus shows us that new contesters to journalism's perceived epistemic authority have long since arrived, but that public perceptions perhaps needed some time to get accustomed.

However, this study's findings do not necessarily challenge the findings in Chapter 1 vis-à-vis perceptions of irreconcilable genre traits in comedy and journalism. Rather, it teaches us that political satire exists on a spectrum, ranging from the predominantly comedic in intention to the more overtly journalistic. The format that *Zondag met Lubach* has perfected over the years has become a recognisable one known for its distinct “deep-dives” into single current affairs topics similar to *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver* in the United States (Dejarnette, 2016). To do so, *Zondag met Lubach* has openly acknowledged the professional background in journalism some of its staff members have. The production of *De Ideale Wereld*, in contrast, is the result of staff members with a background in predominantly stand-up comedy and commercial entertainment television. It shows us that political satire's unmistakable proliferation does not warrant the assumption that all satire is created equal, as it risks overlooking the necessity of a congruent understanding by its creators of the hybrid roles satire can embody.

The notion of investigative comedy then—as operationalized in Chapter 2—can be seen as a successful crystallisation of a coherent self-understanding in terms of the potential overlap between comedic and journalistic discourses within political satire. Investigative comedy proves that humour and critical journalistic inquiry can coexist in practice and in its public reception. But not all satire is successfully inquisitive, and neither is all journalism necessarily investigative. Ultimately, investigative comedy is thus a relevant concept in light of ongoing experiments with new forms of journalism, but even more so in light of a better understanding of the maturation of the news satire genre itself.

Taken together, Chapter 1 and 2 grounded our understanding of the different perceptions of political satire, and the ways in which it is enacted differently by its creators, or received differently within its particular media environment. Following the assessment of satirists' identities, Chapter 3 and 4 can then be understood as an investigation of political satire in practice and context. The overarching question posed here was how—assuming the increasing reflexivity towards and acknowledgement of political satire's societal role—this informed the critical potential that political satire holds. As such, these studies answered “the need to contextualise satire as a culturally specific discourse that is entrenched within a sociohistorical context of power relations informed by the politics of cultural

geography” (Tinic, 2009, p. 148).

These studies complement a growing body of research that has researched how political satire interacts with broader cultural contexts (e.g. Harrington, 2012, Filani, 2020; Kilby, 2019). Filani (2020), for example, concludes that humour in the form of stand-up comedy can be utilised to foster a positive sense of national identity. However, others have recently pointed in the direction of a darker side to satire’s interventions with its cultural context and noted how disparaging humour can also normalise problematic configurations of cultural and social identities. Aitaki (2019) has posited that “popular distinction between laughing at and with someone (...) reveal[s] a significant difference between a position of detachment and critique (...) and a position of convergence and acceptance” (Aitaki, 2019, p. 71). Similarly, Zijp (2022) has argued that overcoming the traditional hierarchies imposed by conventional notions of critique requires an acknowledgement of “the audiences’ participation in shared networks of meaning and sense” (Zijp, 2022, p. 434).

Chapter 3 explores this line of thought by unpacking political satire’s critical affordances in the context of public and political crises. To this end, this study analyses the way political satire has engaged with political and scientific discourse during the global COVID-19 pandemic. As the pandemic raged on, political satirists around the world were scrambling to redefine themselves in the absence of live audiences and under the monotonous barrage of pandemic-related news. Being forced to record from home, satirical talk shows such as *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert* normatively encouraged audiences to comply with health and safety regulations (Zekavat, 2021). As such, the pandemic created a space for reimagining satire’s conventional role of deconstructing social issues and critiquing political or social mores.

In line with satire’s tendency to function as “a journalism of critical inquiry and (...) model of deliberative democracy” (Baym, 2005, p. 259), the analysis revealed how *Zondag met Lubach* on the one hand adhered to its conventional critical stance towards policy-makers and shortcomings in news media practices. On the other hand, however, this analysis showed how the show engaged in a normatively guided didactical and informative dissemination of the governmental pandemic measures. In doing so, *Zondag met Lubach* engaged in the discursive construction of an “infodemic” media climate in which the healthy flow of information

necessary to overcome a health crisis was obscured by faulty governmental policies, news media negligence, and right-wing pandemic scepticism.

What these findings show is that political satire's critical role is indeed informed by the specific historic moment in which it operates. On the one hand, I inferred that the pandemic context has altered the notion of critique in terms of *Zondag met Lubach's* targets: Where certain individual political actors are critiqued, pandemic measures as a whole are legitimised and naturalised on account of their impact in the mitigation of a global health crisis. On the other hand, the pandemic context also allowed *Zondag met Lubach* to reimagine its inclination towards satirical critique and expand its public role to a form of science disseminator and public advocate for pandemic measures.

Chapter 4 further explored this notion of a reimagined role for political satire in public debate. Our goal here was to bring together the earlier findings on political satire's self-reflexivity in terms of identity, and the changing nature of satirical critique on the aforementioned epistemic level. To address the notion of satirical critique in the broadest sense, this study deviated from the previous studies in expanding its scope to stand-up comedy as another widely popular form of political satire.

Drawing on the thesis of the repoliticisation of humour (Nieuwenhuis & Zijp, 2023), I analysed stand-up comedy's reflexivity towards prominent discourses on "wokeness" and "cancel culture." Through the case of Flemish stand-up comedian Michael Van Peel, I assessed more explicitly how discussions on the boundaries of humour contextualise and influence the public role of the comedian. Our findings empirically anchor Holm's (2018) call for "mov[ing] beyond the model of humour as abstract critique that dominates the contemporary theorisation of humour" (Holm, 2018, p. 37). What this means is that conventional views of humour as inherently liminal and critical, fail to recognise the way in which it operates in a specific sociocultural context. At times, this context has been (and arguably in some corners of social life remains) one which seems to ascribe to comedy the unchecked mandate to critique and ridicule under the guise of functioning as a form of progressive politics that challenges those in power.

This echoes timeworn assumptions of political satire that assert that “the boundary is where [it] will be found—sometimes drawing the line, sometimes crossing it, sometimes erasing or moving it, but always there, the god of the threshold in all its forms” (Hyde, 1998, p. 7). This idea of the satirist as “trickster” emphasises how “anti-structure and boundary crossing are essential to the activity of activism and social life” (Weaver & Mora, p. 484), or constitute “jokers as ‘masters’ of discourse (...) in controlling possession of full human subjectivity” (Purdie, 1993, p. 5). Chapter 4 challenged such ideas by asserting that in the context of increasing awareness of social injustice—in the form of discourses on “wokeness” and “cancel culture”—satirical critique serves public debate best by reimagining itself as a form of resistance: A kind of inquiry that works on behalf of social justice and inclusive public discourse through the exertion of its power to educate and shape audiences’ beliefs and perceptions (Webber et al., 2021, p. 436).

Limitations and future research

This dissertation brings together the results of four empirical qualitative case studies on political satire in Flanders and the Netherlands. Our research was predominantly normative in that it assumed political satire to ideally contribute to public debate and in extension facilitate democratic discourse. Furthermore, our research goals were grounded in a culturalist interpretation of humour, resulting in an analytical focus on political satire’s intersections with dimensions of power and contestation, which necessitates an in-situ contextual scope of analysis. Such a scope of research poses a number of benefits as well as limitations.

A first potential point of critique for this dissertation relates to its incorporation of multiple cases covering different national contexts as well as textual natures. As mentioned above, the course of this dissertation took shape along the way and was influenced by the context of the COVID-19 pandemic in terms of data gathering. These contextual limitations made that this dissertation makes claims of political satire as a whole through the analysis of television news satire and stand-up comedy. This could arguably seem haphazard and undermine the generalisability of our claims as political satire comes in many guises each with its own structural, textual and discursive implications. Nonetheless, our findings reveal that each of our cases shares in their identity make-up the common denominators of humour and

critical inquiry, which form the focal points of our four studies in different ways. Our search was then foremost aimed at getting closer to interpreting the structures of meaning that characterise the changing faces of political satire. To this end, I conclude that the changing nature of satire is ultimately related to its proliferation and that to make claims of satire's role in the public debate requires casting a wide net. Returning to Baym and Jones' (2013) overview of political satire in international contexts, this dissertation resonates with their claim that, to understand political satire as such, it is not necessary "to categorise at the micro-level the varying types of programming that formalists might want to identify as say, satire or parody, social or political satire, and "fake news" or humorous discussions of the news" (Baym & Jones, 2013, p. 3).

Second, the culturalist approach taken in this dissertation implies a step away from oft-requested claims of political satire's tangible impact. Often such assertions relate to satire's effects as a source of news and information (e.g., Chattoo & Feldman, 2018; Feldman & Young, 2008) or its informing of policy (e.g., Boukes, 2019). Although the questions I have answered can to some extent be reformulated as asking what political satire does, it does not address, for example, dimensions of audience impact (e.g., how audiences interpret political satire as a source for civic engagement) or its impact on public debate (e.g., how does political satire's coverage of politics influence the democratic process). These remain relevant questions that have been answered to some extent in the United States (e.g., Young & Tisinger, 2006) and in the case of *Zondag met Lubach* (Boukes, 2019) but are at the time of writing not yet addressed in the Flemish context. Therefore, future studies could pick up this unanswered thread and continue investigating political satire in terms of its political and societal influence within the geographic scope of this dissertation.

A third limitation of our research relates to our analytical focus on, on the one hand, satirists' role conceptions and, on the other hand, the possibilities for satirical critique. These analytical choices could perhaps be seen as overly focusing on the analytical concepts of practice—analysed via interviews and observational research—and discourse—analysed via qualitative content analyses. A point of critique could be that drawing on these two concepts in order to answer the question of the changing nature of political satire falsely imply that I suggest a causal relationship between both, or that one can "in some way or other "access" practice directly, without its mediation through the [discursive] frames of practitioners" (Griggs

& Howarth, 2011, p. 2018). Nonetheless, I have aimed to capture satire in practice through interview studies and observational research.

The benefits of these methods are that they allow us to go beyond preconceived interpretations of political satire and a priori conceptions of its meaning, and move towards an evaluation of political satire in practice. On the other hand, one drawback is that our observations may be influenced by the mental constructs of myself as a researcher aside from the overt admission to normativity (Gray, 2022). Additionally, although I extensively make use of discourse as a concept, I have deliberately avoided overly conceptual discussions of the ontological nature of discourse and its paradigmatic background as discussed in discourse theory (e.g., Carpentier, 2017, Potter et al., 1990). Nonetheless, I am informed by practice theory and discursive accounts of qualitative research to the extent that it allows us to draw conclusions that offer insight into how satirists see themselves (practice) and how political satire operated in the context of debates on “wokeness” and COVID-19 (discourse). To this end, I view the relationship between both as Nicolini (2017) has formulated:

Human activity is fundamentally an open event. At the point of action, although agents find themselves in a world that is already made intelligible for them, conduct is never fully determined and therefore, is impossible to predict. Every present is potentially the site of something new (Nicolini, 2017, p. 3).

To cover the full spectrum of political satire in practice, future studies could further unpack the role of humour on a textual level and incorporate research questions that address humour as a discursive strategy. For example, studies could further theorise how certain forms of comedy ‘open’ public debate while others ‘close’ it (Maesele en Raeijmaekers, 2020).

Returning to the title of this dissertation, a final remark is that the analysis of the changing faces of political satire is in theory a never-ending endeavour. The starting point and geographical context of our study are therefore limited in that it only covers two regions and a limited variety of political satire formats. Although I concretely included a longitudinal perspective in Chapter 2—which addresses the changing perceptions of *Zondag met Lubach* in the Dutch media landscape—the satirical landscape in Flanders and the Netherlands

requires research to continue where this dissertation ended.

At the time of writing this conclusive chapter, the Flemish and Dutch news satire landscape has already undergone a number of changes since I embarked on my research journey. For one, *Zondag met Lubach* aired its last episode on March 28, 2021. Its host and his team have started a new programme, *De Avondshow met Arjen Lubach*, which blends *Zondag met Lubach*'s critical inquiries into current affairs with a flashier late-night appeal in the style of Stephen Colbert's incantation of *The Late Show*. *De Ideale Wereld* remains to date the only example in its genre on Flemish television but has changed hosts for a third time since August 2022. Although ideally, I would have addressed these changes in more detail in our analyses, they underline the changing faces of news satire. But to conclude with Arjen Lubach's own words: "There is benefit in someone who doubts and remains searching for truth, even if that means that they are eternally searching" (Lubach, 2020, p. 241).

Implications

To conclude this dissertation, I want to reflect on the broader implications that our studies hold beyond the scope of political satire. The question I want to conclude with here is how political satire produces a way of looking at the world that we can extrapolate to other scholarly fields or societal phenomena.

A first point worth mentioning is that the ways in which we have analysed political satire reflect a broader project for the understanding of popular culture in general. Although political satire originates and resides in popular culture, I have operationalised it predominantly in relation to news, journalism and humour. Nonetheless, as Beer and Burrows (2010) described, our current media landscape is defined as "a context in which the sociological imagination is becoming a defining characteristic of contemporary popular culture" (Beer & Burrows, 2010, p. 36). What this means is that popular culture has become increasingly reflexive and socially self-aware, and incorporates authentic deconstructions of social issues or politics. Television fiction show *The Wire* (2002–2008), for example, has received numerous accolades for its realistic social commentary on institutional dysfunction (Jameson, 2010).

The hybridity that characterises the modes of political satire that I have analysed then also poses as a guide for research beyond the satirical. As such, most if not all of popular culture benefits from a multidisciplinary approach such as the one we have laid out in this dissertation. This is especially true in light of the increasing convergence of our media landscape in terms of modality, genres, and discursive registers. By now, what were unimaginable hybrid media products before have penetrated the mainstream of popular culture. A show such as comedian Duncan Trussel and animator Pendelton Ward's *The Midnight Gospel* (Netflix, 2020), for example, highlights this hyperconvergence of communication media by blending an absurdist near-psychedelic cartoon style with podcast audio that covers topics as diverse as personal experiences with mental illness, death positivity or drug use.

An analysis of the intersections of popular culture with the "sociological imagination" is not limited to the question of politics. Indeed, dimensions of the political can be unearthed in each of them when viewed through a culturalist lens as this dissertation has set out to do. In this sense, my study of political satire has revealed a discursive atmosphere that encourages society to reflect on certain taken-for-granted assumptions regarding the role(s) of popular culture.

Second, this dissertation has strived to produce insight into the nature of storytelling as an epistemic practice. In a study on the movie industry in the United States, literary critic John Cawelti (2003) related the evolution of cinematic genres to "the tendency of genres to exhaust themselves, to our growing historical awareness of modern popular culture, and finally, to the decline of the underlying mythology on which traditional genres have been based" (Cawelti, 2003, p. 260). We challenge this assertion with the claim that political satire has not been symptomatic of the exhaustion of news genres per se. Although political satire can successfully interrogate the founding mythology of certain dimensions of professional journalism's ideological underpinnings (i.e., objectivity, neutrality, the inverted pyramid structure of news coverage), rather than exhaust news, the political work that satire does holds up a mirror to journalism.

This mirror, as this dissertation has shown, is more of an invitation than a death sentence. As such, political satire reintroduces comedic storytelling as a valid framework for engaging in political discourse. An audience study by Karlson and Clerwall (2019) revealed that in the eyes of audiences, journalism is ideally presented in such a way that encourages them

to engage with its content and incorporates humour and other narrative techniques to spark and maintain interest and curiosity (Karlson & Clerwall, 2019. 1196). Our analysis of political satire has shown that such forms of discourse have proliferated and are ever-expanding. As such, this dissertation has underscored the significance of storytelling in popular culture and journalism, emphasising its indelible role as a powerful lens through which we gain critical insights, navigate the complexities, and foster a deeper understanding of the world around us.

This dissertation has foremost analysed political satire within the specific socio-political context of today. Our culturalist and discursive approach to political satire has underlined that to understand instances of popular culture, it is important to avoid a media-centric approach which takes existing socio-political contexts as a given. Rather, a society-centric approach builds upon an informed understanding of the socio-political and paradigmatic embeddedness of media, which ultimately points towards the necessity of the analysis of issues of power and contestation (Raeijmaekers, 2018).

This contributes to discussions on the moral dimensions of satire in general, and still-perseverant assumptions of the amorality of humour more specifically. As Ödmark and Harvard (2020) have described, the combination of entertainment purposes and the moral purpose to make truthful interventions creates an inherent tension in political satire. As Rosen (2012) questioned, “Where is there a space for truth-telling and moral seriousness when the satirist always has an eye on making the audience laugh?” (Rosen, 2012, p. 4). In other words, what to make of satire’s role as a discourse of “moral seriousness” (Condren, 2012) when humour is equally associated with higher message discounting (Nabi, Moyer-Gusé, & Byrne, 2007) and reduced argument scrutiny (e.g., LaMarre, Landreville, Young, & Gilkerson, 2014)?

What this dissertation has shown is that this perceived paradox does not steer away from political satire’s intent to operate under the mandate of exposing moral wrongs. On the contrary, the very name of *De Ideale Wereld* refers to the literal ambition to, through irony and self-referential wit, contribute to a bettering of the world around us. Similarly, *Zondag met Lubach*’s project has openly been acknowledged to enact the role of “humoralist”, which reconciles potential ambiguities of humour with moral inquiry.

In this light, as Holbert (2013) concluded a decade ago, “The greatest potential normative value for political satire exists under a more elitist democratic system. Within a pluralistic democratic framework, however, political satire in its purest form (...) may retain relatively little normative value.” (Holbert, p. 317). However, the claim that in an ideal state of pluralist democracy, satirical discourse is redundant also overlooks the normative work that satire can undertake beyond their function of *laus et vituperatio* or praise and blame, towards a view of the satirical as a double-sided mirror that mostly entertains, occasionally reveals, and always strives to better understand.

Finally, what this dissertation has highlighted, then, is that the democratic cornerstones that constitute our current Western media environment are arguably not as self-evident as they have seemed in the past. Discussions on humour and free speech and the diplomatic and political crises they incite, reflect growing political tensions inherent to a democratic system. In our field of interest here, such tensions will arguably only increase as humour and satire take up the baton as platforms for political (and thus potentially *politicising*) discourse. To end with the words of stand-up comedian Bill Hicks, “When two or more people agree, I form on the other side.” Hopefully, as long as there are other sides to things, there will be a satirist getting comfortable there and telling us what’s what.

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Chapter 1: Satire between the lines

Jonas Nicolaï (first author): conception of the study, setup of the method, data analyses, drafting and revising of the manuscript.

Prof. dr. Pieter Maesele (co-author/supervisor): critical feedback on method, data, and manuscript.

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Chapter 2: The “humoralist” as journalistic jammer

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Chapter 3: Catchier Than COVID

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Chapter 4: Stand-up in the age of outrage

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