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Humour and conflict in the digital age

Andrew Benjamin Bricker
Ghent University, Belgium
andrew.bricker@ugent.be

Alberto Godioli
University of Groningen, Netherlands
a.godioli@rug.nl

Abstract

This special issue examines how humour and conflict intersect in the digitally networked public sphere. Building on work that has grown out of various research projects, a 2023 conference, and recent trends in humour studies, the contributions to this special issue explore how a variety of humorous objects and practices—from memes and stand-up comedy to cartoons and other forms—shape and are shaped by the communicative logics of the internet. These contributions study diverse geopolitical contexts, revealing humour's dual capacity to inflame conflict, through misinterpretation, decontextualised circulation, and the strategic use of irony by extremist groups, and to mitigate it, by fostering critique, solidarity, and democratic engagement. The digital age amplifies these dynamics, accelerating the spread of humorous content, intensifying interpretive ambiguity, and transforming local disputes into transnational controversies. By analysing humour's political, legal, and affective affordances, this special issue highlights humour's ambivalent role as both a catalyst of polarisation and a resource for counter-speech, civic participation, and democratic awareness in typically fraught online environments.

Keywords: humour, conflict, internet, memes, digital age.

1. Introduction

This special issue of *The European Journal of Humour Research* grows out of a conference hosted by HACIDA: Humor and Conflict in the Digital Age (2022–2024), a Scientific Research Network which was funded by a Rise Grant from the ENLIGHT university consortium. Over two days in late November 2023, the HACIDA team and various affiliated researchers explored the intersection of two complicated issues: the nature of and interpretive difficulties presented by humour across different media (such as memes, cartoons, and stand-up comedy); and how the "Digital Revolution" (which was HACIDA's flagship area of focus) had exacerbated these

already difficult interpretive issues, often through the decontextualised circulation of humorous images and statements outside of their original national and linguistic borders.

For the HACIDA team, the Digital Revolution had driven at least two forms of conflict. The first was interpretive. By its very nature, humorous speech, which often points towards at least two levels of signification (e.g., the surface and intended meaning of an ironic statement or image), is often fundamentally ambiguous, offering at least two "scripts" that exist in semantic tension (see Raskin, 1985; and Attardo, 2020). Interpretive conflicts over humour have only become more prominent in the digital age, due to a series of inter-related factors, including the widespread circulation of "viral" jokes beyond their original context and, more broadly, the "comic disposition" characterising online communication (i.e., "a fundamental instability between irony and earnestness that informs contemporary conflicts regarding topics, such as fake news, distrust and the pursuit of 'lolz'", Holm, 2024, p. 255). At the same time, fuelled by the polarising dynamics of social media, the digital age has also increased forms of social and societal conflict, with different and relative cultural norms, standards, mores, and sensitivities being directly or accidentally challenged by humorous works, whether the provocative jokes of a stand-up comedian or the repugnant memes produced and disseminated by the far right.

Examples are easy to come by. Readers of and contributors to *EJHR* will immediately think of various so-called "humour scandals" from the last three decades, including, perhaps most memorably, the seemingly never-ending and still ongoing controversy around cartoons representing Mohammed, a topic taken up in this special issue by Dennis Meyhoff Brink (see also the dissertation produced by Anke Lion in 2025, one of our presenters at the 2023 HACIDA conference, who has offered an expert analysis of parallel humour scandals in Flanders). Cartoons directly representing Mohammed violate at least some strands of Islamic aniconism (see Gruber, 2019) and often reinforce hateful Islamophobic tropes, such as the automatic association between Islam and terrorism, alongside troubling and inaccurate stereotypes about supposedly dour and humourless Muslims (an issue taken up by both Jeanne Gaillard in the present special issue and in Lion & Dhaenens, 2023). In this instance, we can see competing notions about what constitutes legitimate (visual) speech, or what the French philosopher Jean-Francois Lyotard (1988) has called the *differend*: that is, when a concept is subject to competing and often incompatible interpretations by different groups. Most notably, the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* and the French satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo* were put into direct conflict with minoritised, racialised, and generally othered domestic Muslim populations in Denmark and France, with some Muslim residents and citizens across Europe, and with Muslim-majority countries the world over. Despite the outrage and controversy that circled these incidents, however, the Mohammed cartoons were also often legally and philosophically permitted not only in their host countries—and were often vociferously defended by both Danish and French artists and politicians—but also across the various countries both inside and outside of Europe that possess robust free-speech protections.

Of course, such conflicts could and did occur before the advent of the internet and the current digital age. Satire, comedy, and humour have long found themselves brushing against the grain of contemporary mores—and jostling, most often of all, with the authorities (Bricker, 2025). Think of Aristophanes's *Lysistrata* (411 BCE), whose heroine convinces the women of the warring Greek city states to engage in a sex strike to end the Peloponnesian War and which was criticised for its bawdy plot and mockery of the Athenian war efforts (Henderson, 1991); or of the English authorities, two millennia later, who sought to repress the Juvenalian satires that had started to emerge during the early modern period (McCabe, 1981; and Jones, 2010). It was more of the same in the eighteenth century, whether Jonathan Swift's *Modest Proposal* (1729), with its shocking comestible conceit, or Voltaire's *Candide* (1759), which was condemned by both church and state for blasphemy and immorality and banned in France and Geneva. Despite the ostensibly steady liberal and so-called Whiggish progression of speech and

press rights in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, later satirists, comedians, and humourists have hardly found themselves the darlings of the city fathers. Bertolt Brecht's *Threepenny Opera* (1928), Charlie Chaplin's *Great Dictator* (1940), George Orwell's *Animal Farm* (1945), Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* (1961), Monty Python's *Life of Brian* (1979)—the list could simply go on and on of the domestic and international conflicts generated by humorous works, all the way up to the stabbing of Salman Rushdie in 2022, presumably in connection to the fatwa issued against him by Ayatollah Khomeini for his satiric *Satanic Verses* (1988).

Nonetheless, the increasing interconnectedness of the world, via the internet, has driven interpretive misunderstanding and especially cultural conflict, extending the reach of humorous works and increasing the spread and even afterlife of such controversies. Digital-born conflicts have been further aggravated by online platforms—Facebook and Instagram each have nearly 3-billion active monthly users; TikTok reported 1.59 billion monthly active users in early 2025; and Netflix has over 300 million paid subscriptions—which tend to transcend national contexts and thus introduce local and often competing understandings of certain hot-button issues. Take the recent controversies over online stand-up specials by Ricky Gervais and Dave Chappelle (Goktas, 2023), both inside and outside of their immediate British and American national contexts, which point to the potential misunderstandings and conflicts around humour that the international nature of the Digital Revolution presupposes. In this instance, discriminatory humour related to the LGBTQI+ community, and specifically against trans people, witnessed very different reactions in the United States and in Great Britain, where so-called "gender ideology" often includes considerable space for the positions of trans-exclusionary radical feminists (or TERFs) (Dickey, 2023). Just a decade or so ago, such stand-up specials might have caused a small stir at home; today, they are evergreen fodder for online debate the world over.

As in other contexts, the internet has also proven a difficult-to-contain publisher of far-right or otherwise extremist and discriminatory content (Fielitz & Thurston, 2018), often occupying the grey areas between "awful but lawful" speech and actual incitement to hostility, discrimination, and violence (Godioli et al., 2025). This type of humour is particularly resistant to and resilient in the face of largely inefficacious online regulations, precisely because humour and irony often provide an in-built interpretive defence: such hate speech is simply "a joke", and any understanding of it as hate speech or incitement is merely the interpretive failure of tin-eared bureaucrats and mirthless cranks who missed the supposed irony (Neiwert, 2017; and May & Feldman, 2018). As a recent European Commission report observes,

> [h]umour has become a central weapon of extremist movements to subvert open societies and to lower the threshold towards violence… As far-right extremists strategically merge with online cultures, their approach changes fundamentally… This predominantly online movement set new standards to rebrand extremist positions in an ironic guise, blurring the lines between mischief and potentially radicalising messaging. The result is a nihilistic form of humour that is directed against ethnic and sexual minorities.
>
> (Fielitz & Ahmed, 2021, p. 4)

Although the HACIDA conference and our many contributors to this special issue have focused on negative conflicts, we also understand humour as a potentially positive force in online speech (something we take up further below). Humour can be a vehicle for cross-cultural or communitarian understanding—that is, a way to bring people together in communal laughter (see Cohen, 1999; and Kuipers, 2017)—and a tool of resistance or a means of challenging power. In this sense, humour can bring about positive conflict as a kind of "counter-speech" (Goodall et al., 2018) that is extended through digital media. One thinks of the so-called Arab Spring (2010-2012) and the uneven and yet central role that the Digital Revolution played. Bassem Youssef (the so-called Jon Stewart of Egypt), for instance, first gained fame through his satiric YouTube videos (Gordon & Arafa, 2014). In China, the ambiguous nature of humour

combined with the difficulty of regulating online speech has led to Winnie the Pooh bans on Sina Weibo (the Twitter-style microblogging site), where references to the cartoon bear have long served as mocking code for their pear-shaped president, Xi Jinping. As we write, even now, humour and the Digital Revolution are playing a massive ideological, informational, and propagandistic role in Ukraine and Russia. The Russo-Ukrainian War is being fought in person and on the ground, of course; but it is also being fought online and internationally, in what *Forbes* has called "the first social media war" (Suciu, 2022).

Almost all of the contributions in this special issue grew out of the HACIDA conference or out of the research already being conducted by the HACIDA team and is therefore a kind of belated capstone to the HACIDA project, which officially concluded in 2024. HACIDA, though, was only a starting point for many of those same researchers. Almost all of the HACIDA team members are now part of DELIAH: Democratic Literacy and Humour (2025-2029), a four-year research project funded by the Horizon Europe Framework Programme for Research and Innovation. This latter team's ambit is even broader than HACIDA's. In particular, DELIAH is studying the role that humour plays, and can play, in artistic forms, cultural spaces, and online and offline fora to promote—or, in some cases, harm—participation in both formal and informal democratic processes. By focusing on the role of humour in civic engagement and political expression, the DELIAH team seeks to enable a fuller understanding of the democratic potential of humour across Europe, particularly at a moment when anti-democratic, populist, and militant forces threaten democratic participation. To this end, DELIAH is studying and proposing various strategies to promote democratic participation at all decision-making levels through an increase in what we call "democratic literacy" among stakeholders and target groups—that is, to help citizens and vulnerable groups to understand and thus avoid the distorting rhetoric of anti-democratic speech; to enable the effective regulation of the production and circulation of humorous content online while still respecting free-speech protections; to mitigate threats posed by the rise of harmful, anti-democratic speech and ideologies; and to document humour's "best practices" to facilitate and promote, rather than undermine, democratic participation.

For the DELIAH team, like the HACIDA team before it, humour is therefore double sided. We are interested both in *mitigating* the harm caused by online and offline anti-democratic forces and in *harnessing* forms of (often humorous) online and offline counter-speech that support and increase democratic participation. In our collective view, such negative and positive effects can be directly linked to forms of anti- and pro-democratic speech, respectively, insofar as such speech either seeks to dissuade citizens from engaging in democratic processes or strives to encourage citizens to participate in both formal and informal democratic processes. To borrow a line of thought from Design Theory, we approach humour as a tool that has a range of (potentially competing or even contradictory) capabilities or "affordances." As the cognitive psychologist and design theorist Donald Norman observes, "[t]he presence of an affordance is jointly determined by the qualities of the object and the abilities of the agent that is interacting" (Norman, 2013, p. 25; see also Gibson, 2014). For example, a pen affords *writing* (i.e., it can be used to write); but a pen also affords *hair tying* (i.e., it can be utilised as a hair pin); or, more troublingly, a pen can afford *stabbing* (i.e., it can be utilised as a weapon). In this regard, humour has various affordances: it can be used to undermine democratic participation, just as it can be used to spread useful information and undermine anti-democratic speech (Koivukoski, 2022).

Where "humour" and "conflict" were guiding terms for HACIDA, "humour" and "democracy" are at the centre of everything that DELIAH studies, and the current special issue offers a snapshot of those two overlapping and intersecting research priorities. For both projects, humour is a vital conduit for cultural and political expression and not merely a form but an agent that has the potential to effect change, both positive and negative, in the world and especially with regard to democratic processes, which we understand, following Robert Dahl (1989), as dynamic and inclusive, citizen-driven, and citizen-informed activities.

Our task, then, is both to harness humour's potential in promoting democratic participation while mitigating its harms to democratic processes. But mitigating does not mean censoring. Civic participation is unthinkable without robust free-speech protections for both verbal and non-verbal "speech," so much so that freedom of expression is generally regarded as a "core principle" of democratic life (Heinze, 2006; Hare & Weinstein, 2009). At the same time, as stated in Article 19 of the United Nations' International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, free speech is not an unconditional right, but "carries with it duties and responsibilities" which are prescribed by law and necessary in a democratic society. This is most notably the case with incitement to discrimination, hostility, and violence, whose potential threats to democracy are already clearly evident in the digital age (Brison & Gelber, 2019). Though the usefulness or desirable reach of restrictions to harmful or "extreme" speech has been widely debated (Mchangama, 2022), it is clear that restricting anti-democratic expression does not automatically foster civic participation, unless combined with systemic efforts to increase what we have termed "democratic literacy," or "political literacy," as Alemanno & Organ (2021) have put it. Our own conception of such literacy builds on Obenchain & Pennington's definition of "critical democratic literacy" as "a type of literacy necessary for comprehending and thinking critically about [one's] civic engagement from an informed stance, with resiliency and the ability to evaluate others' thoughts and views, as well as their own" (2015, p. 19).

Both HACIDA and DELIAH, and this special issue in particular, thus build on broader trends in recent humour scholarship, by foregrounding the multi-faceted relationship between humour, different types of conflict, the role of the internet, and their collective repercussions for democratic participation broadly understood. In doing so, we follow and reinforce several tendencies in humour studies in the twenty-first century, including a growing and (at times) intense scepticism around the endemic innocence of humour (Billig, 2005); an increased recognition of humour's potential political work (Holm, 2017; Kuipers, 2017; Tsakona 2020; Nieuwenhuis & Zijp, 2022; and Adriaensen et al., 2023); and an attention to the role humour has played historically in the propagation of racial and gendered stereotypes and violence (Lockyer & Pickering; 2005; Abedinifard, 2016; Weaver, 2016; Pérez, 2022; and Attardo, 2023).

In particular, two previous special issues published by *The European Journal of Humour Research* in 2024 serve as ideal precedents to the present one. The first, "Humour and the Public Sphere," edited by Giselinde Kuipers, Dick Zijp, Władysław Chłopicki, and Delia Chiaro (Kuipers et al., 2024), focuses on humour's evolving role in contemporary public discourse, placing particular emphasis on its relationship with conflict and its challenge to Jürgen Habermas's rationalist model of the public sphere (see Habermas, 1992; 2022). In their introduction, the authors highlight how humour has become "increasingly central to public discourse" in the twenty-first century, reshaping how political and social issues are debated, often in ways that blur the boundaries between the serious and the comedic (Kuipers & Zijp, 2024, p. 2).

On the whole, Kuipers et al.'s 2024 special issue provides a comprehensive account of humour's fundamental connection with socio-political conflict. Some of the contributions, for instance, focus on "humour scandals"—i.e., public controversies over offensive or transgressive humour—and how they often reveal and amplify profound societal divides (see contributions from Herkman & Koivukoski, 2024; Nieuwenhuis, 2024; and Zijp, 2024). Other contributors explore the multiple functions of political humour, from contesting authoritarian or illiberal power through absurdism and subtlety (see Laineste & Fiadotava, 2024; Hyttinen, 2024) to normalising hate and discrimination (see Basu, 2024; Lobanov, 2024; Tsakona, 2024). Humour's relationship to conflict is, therefore, inherently double-sided: it oscillates between encouraging inclusive democratic debate (along the lines of "agonistic pluralism" as defined by

Mouffe, 1999) and exacerbating polarisation and exclusion (thus becoming a vehicle of a democracy-eroding antagonism).

The second special issue of particular relevance, "Humour and Conflict in the Global South," edited by Diego Hoefel, João Paulo Capelotti, and Rujuta Date (Hoefel et al., 2024), continues this line of enquiry, further exploring the growing "commedification" of the public sphere (Szakolczai, 2013), where humour and theatricality shape political discourse. This special issue also addresses a critical gap in humour studies by centring under-represented perspectives from Africa, Asia, and South America. In this instance, too, the editors highlight how humour is deeply intertwined with conflict, and how its capacity both to challenge and to reinforce power structures makes it a site of both disruption and contestation. As observed by Berlant & Ngai (2017), contemporary comedy often "risks transgression, flirting with displeasure, or just confusing things in a way that both intensifies and impedes the pleasure" (p. 233). This dynamic is particularly pronounced in digital spaces, where humour—especially in its offensive or satirical forms—converges with fake news and conspiracy theories to intensify socio-political tensions. This special issue's contributions exemplify how humour becomes a site of cultural resistance to colonial legacies and authoritarianism (see contributions by Madenga, 2024; and Mkwambeni & Matsilele, 2024); a way to cope with trauma and colonial violence (see Vashisht, 2024); a catalyst for polarisation and populist rhetoric (see Hoefel & Baltar, 2024; and Chagas, 2024); and a site for heated debates about freedom of expression and its limits (see Capelotti, 2024).

As clearly demonstrated by so many earlier scholars and both special issues, humour is not merely a cultural artifact, but a dynamic force that is shaped by—and that shapes—conflict. The same notion lies at the heart of several ongoing and completed research projects conducted by international teams in recent years. Some examples include the HuSca project ("Humour Scandals: A cross-national analysis of humour controversies in Europe," 2022-2024, coordinated by KU Leuven, Una Europa Research Acceleration Fund); HUMLIT ("Developing Humour Literacy: Analysing Production, Content and Reception of Humour to Bring Positive Change in the Public Sphere," 2025-2028, coordinated by the Jagiellonian University in Kraków, Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions [MSCA] Staff Exchanges programme); ForHum: Forum for Humor and the Law (created under the "Humour in Court" project, 2022-2027, University of Groningen, NWO Vidi grant); NoJoke ("Humour as an Epistemic Practice of the Political Present", 2023-2027, ERC grant, Goethe University Frankfurt); the Satire Research Network (2024-2026, Roskilde University and University of Copenhagen); and our own research project DELIAH. In different and complementary ways, these projects attest to the growing interest—including on the part of research funding bodies—in and recognition of humour's potential to reflect, generate, or defuse conflict.

2. Summary of contributions

The present special issue builds on this growing body of scholarship and these extensive (and often overlapping) research networks, while placing emphasis on one aspect in particular: the different ways in which the relationship between humour and conflict is shaped and reshaped by the specific features of the digital age, such as the polarising dynamics of social media, the viral circulation of controversial material beyond its original context, and the pervasive interpretive uncertainty fostered by the "ambivalent internet" (Phillips & Milner, 2017).

The special issue opens with four articles that broadly understand humour as a vehicle of (political) conflict. In "False affectivity and the manufacture of outrage: Rethinking cartoon controversies," Dennis Meyhoff Brink critically examines the role of misinformation and misinterpretation in fuelling public outrage during satirical cartoon controversies. Through case

studies such as the Danish cartoon controversy (2005–2006), the Taubira cartoon affair in France (2013), and the PEN America debate over *Charlie Hebdo* (2015), the article introduces the concept of "false affectivity," an affective parallel to "false consciousness," arguing that social affects are often manipulated rather than spontaneous. Brink highlights the role of intermediaries in escalating controversies through deliberate distortion or ill-informed interpretations and underscores the need for a critical theory of social affect to challenge simplistic narratives of cultural clashes.

Shifting the focus from intermediaries to highly visible public figures, Beer Prakken, in his article "Humorous political rhetoric in the US: Analysing Trump's and Ocasio-Cortez's use of humour," foregrounds the current role of "humorous political rhetoric" (HPR) through a comparative analysis of Donald Trump's and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez's use of humour as a rhetorical tool. Based on empirical data drawn from 498 tweets and three campaign speeches, Prakken argues that HPR primarily functions as an "aggressive, deceptive, and polarising" mechanism, rather than a constructive deliberative tool. The author highlights how HPR often employs "aggressive humour styles" (71.7% for AOC, 92.3% for Trump on Twitter) and serves to deflect responsibility, as evidenced by Trump's and Ocasio-Cortez's strategic use of humour to dismiss criticism. Prakken concludes that HPR worsens political polarisation and undermines democratic discourse and urges further research into its ethical and societal implications.

A third contribution, Raúl Acosta's "Racist humour in Mexico's media: denouncers' inadvertent bolstering of bigotry," also explores the darker side of humour by discussing the paradoxical effects of a 2020 panel organised by the Mexican anti-racism NGO RacismoMX. The event, intended to condemn racist humour—which also featured the stand-up comedian Chumel Torres—unintentionally reinforced the comedian's self-righteousness and polarised public discourse. Acosta argues that such efforts often backfire by entrenching opposing views, with progressives emphasising the harm of racist humour and comedians invoking freedom of expression. The article highlights Mexico's historical racial hierarchies and the role of media in perpetuating discrimination, showing how the controversy encapsulates a specific iteration of polarised views—one that nevertheless offers insights into how such polarisation might be constructively addressed.

Yousef Barahmeh's article, "Laughing right: Jordanian political humour and right-wing ideologies in social media spaces," also takes up the dynamics of polarisation while focusing on the Middle East, analysing the mobilisation of right-wing political humour in Jordanian social media following the 2011 Arab uprisings. The article identifies four key themes: anti-government sentiment, nostalgic appeals to a romanticised past, hyper-loyalist expressions of Transjordanian identity (*Jordanity*), and misogynistic jokes. The study reveals how humour, while constrained by "red lines" (e.g., avoiding criticism of the monarchy), amplifies populist rhetoric and exclusionary nationalism. As Barahmeh notes, this humour "serves as a subversive outlet for expressing public frustration and discontent," encapsulating the complex interplay between ideology, identity, and digital discourse in post-Arab Spring Jordan.

The next three contributions take up the dynamics of conflict and the central role humour can play in the twenty-first century in mitigating—and potentially aggravating—cultural tensions, whether social, political, or ideological. Anastasiya Astapova and Maili Pilt's "Combatting conspiracy theories (also via humour): A case study of an Estonian conspiracy debunking group on Facebook" focuses on the Estonian Facebook group "Victory of Light! Continuation," a grassroots initiative dedicated to fighting disinformation related primarily to the COVID-19 pandemic and the Russo-Ukrainian War. These latter two events have led to an "infodemic," or an (over)abundance of false information, that has fuelled hostility, led to troubling medical advice, and spread misleading narratives. "Victory of Light! Continuation" has employed several strategies to combat this infodemic. Among them, humour has been a central method, which has served an important internal function, by promoting group cohesion

and providing emotional support for debunkers (such as medical professionals), who have faced personal attacks by "alternative thinkers." It has also permitted "prebunking" (that is, preventing the spread of conspiracy theories), by creating and reposting memes and jokes in reaction to flat-earthers, anti-vaxxers, and the Russo-Ukrainian War.

However, Astapova and Pilt also note the limits of such an approach. Although "Victory of Light! Continuation" attempts to discourage the spread of conspiracy theories through laughter, the group also inflamed conflict and promoted exclusion through its ridicule, with aggressive mockery counterproductively reinforcing and potentially even deepening antagonism between debunkers and those spreading conspiracies. Ultimately, Astapova and Pilt suggest that a more effective approach to mitigating such conflict might be "interbunking" (rather than prebunking or debunking), a dialogic process where humour, rather than being a tool of ridicule, acts as a "subtle form of comic complicity" to lower defensive barriers.

In "On power and prejudice: Islam in French stand-up comedy," Jeanne Gaillard returns in part to this question of humour as a means of debunking false theories. In this instance, she examines how French stand-up comedians from Muslim backgrounds use humour to navigate the social and political conflicts surrounding Islam in the French public sphere, where restrictive visions of *laïcité* clash sharply with stereotypes extending from a so-called "Muslim problem." For Gaillard, stand-up—which permits comedians, and especially those from subaltern groups, to express their personal circumstances and interact with dominant French society—is a particularly adept setting for taking up sensitive intercultural issues and transforming social conflicts. In such instances, humour can challenge existing power dynamics and dominant narratives, and comedians from Muslim backgrounds frequently use self-deprecating humour to address political issues, debunk prejudices, and promote anti-racism. Once again, however, humour in these contentious spaces involves significant risk, where identifying as a Muslim comedian can shape both one's career and audience expectations. This is especially true for female Muslim comedians, who face heightened scrutiny and who must sometimes balance conflicting community and audience expectations.

Balance stands at the heart of the third and final contribution to this cluster of articles. Władysław Chłopicki and Anastasiya Fiadotava's "The Belarus-Poland migrant crisis: Views from both sides of the wall" analyses the online humour produced in response to the 2021 migrant crisis on the Polish-Belarusian border. Their article studies the targets of these humorous reactions and shows how humour exposed the gap between the activities and claims of Belarusian and Polish authorities and the reality on the ground. Chłopicki and Fiadotava classify this humour politically, covering both conservative (pro-government) and liberal (anti-government) humour. As they go on to show, Belarusian humour tended to frame the migrant crisis as an aspect of a broader domestic turmoil. In contrast, Polish humour tended to focus on memes about Polish politics, public figures, and institutions. Migrants themselves were more frequently the subject of Polish jokes and memes than Belarusian ones—though only within conservative humour. They ultimately demonstrate how political actors use humour to advance their agendas while opening avenues for future research on liberal and conservative humour. Taken together, all three of these contributions illustrate a central finding: humour is both an ambivalent mechanism for group cohesion *and* a powerful though sometimes counterproductive weapon in mediating conflict.

Our final grouping brings together three articles that focus more directly on the interpretive conflicts generated by particularly controversial forms of humour and which often entail broader reflections on freedom of expression. In "Laughing on the edge: interpreting dark humour in court," Alberto Godioli examines the complex challenges posed by dark humour within free speech jurisprudence. Godioli introduces an indicative typology of dark humour, distinguishing between "disparaging" (mocking victims of distressing events), "sarcastic" (ridiculing the wrongdoers), and "taboo-breaking" interpretations (playing with the taboo status of a dark topic,

often for transgressive amusement or coping). These are not meant as objective or mutually exclusive categories, but serve as a framework to encourage a more rigorous analysis of the diverse readings a contested joke may evoke. Through case studies from the European Court of Human Rights and domestic courts in Spain, Italy, Belgium, Scotland, and Canada, Godioli illustrates how courts frequently overlook these distinctions, resulting in inconsistent or oversimplified rulings. Godioli argues that "a closer dialogue between humour research and judicial practice is highly desirable" to better navigate the grey areas between controversial (but lawful) humour and actual incitement to discrimination, hostility, or violence.

In "The harmful side of humour: the case of humourist Anónimo García against the Spanish judicial system (and against common sense, too)", Carmelo Moreno further explores the tension between controversial humour, public sensitivities, and free-speech jurisprudence. Humour scholars in recent years have increasingly returned to the legal adjudication of satire in democratic contexts, where freedom of expression (including provocative humour) might clash with other fundamental rights. Because it is difficult to unequivocally assess the impact of satire, however, a comedian's ethics of responsibility ought to play a crucial role in relation to the specific circumstances of a given instance. According to Moreno, the case of Spanish satirist Anónimo García illustrates the ethical responsibility we might expect from comedians in liberal democracies. Moreno discusses the legal case and backlash triggered by the pseudonymous Anónimo García, who created a satirical website in 2018 titled *El Tour de la Manada* (The Wolf Group Tour). The website offered a tour of the places in Pamplona where five men (known as *La Manada* [The Wolf Group]) had raped a young woman and recorded a series of videos that were later circulated on social media. Anónimo García claimed that the website aimed to satirize the morbid sensationalism of mainstream media reporting on the case; however, the victim filed a criminal lawsuit against its creators for "humiliating treatment." Moreno analyses the tensions generated by the "Manada Tour" within two intersecting spheres that, nonetheless, operate under different principles: the Spanish judicial system and public debate. In the author's view, only by combining these two levels is it possible to effectively tackle the challenges inherent in balancing freedom of expression with democratic values aimed at minimising harm.

Finally, in "The degenerative aesthetics of the dankest meme lords: far-right satire in the twenty-first century," Andrew Benjamin Bricker draws on historical and theoretical accounts that treat satire as a mobile mode rather than a fixed genre, arguing after numerous scholars that satire's political orientation cannot be predetermined. Instead, satire habitually oscillates between restraint and license, by enforcing norms and often, simultaneously, violating them. Reframing satire in modal terms, Bricker claims, brings into view a neglected yet consequential contemporary practice: far-right memes. In overturning "liberal-essentialist" narratives about satire, he develops a modal framework suited to satire's cross-media circulation. He examines far-right memes that exploit the ambiguity of "lulz" to create plausible deniability. Such memes serve as affective engines that forge "communities of amusement" for insiders while also strategically provoking and alienating perceived opponents. Most importantly, Bricker conceptualises the right's visual and rhetorical programme, or its "degenerative aesthetics" as he puts it, which is marked by pixel bleed, clashing fonts, crude cropping, typos, and conspicuous traces of copy-and-paste. Far from mere amateurism, these formal choices enact a studied unseriousness that complements ironic distancing: their manifest shoddiness functions as a shield against accountability even as it facilitates and normalises the circulation of exclusionary or extremist claims. Such an analysis of affect and form clarifies how far-right satire recruits, polices boundaries, and coordinates attention, pushing scholars away from underproductive debates about what counts as satire to focus more insistently on what satire does under contemporary technological conditions.

Taken together, the contributions to this special issue demonstrate that humour's entanglements with conflict are neither incidental nor uniform but structurally shaped by the

communicative, affective, and technological conditions of the twenty-first century. Whether weaponised by political actors, mobilised by grassroots communities seeking to resist misinformation, deployed by comedians negotiating the fraught terrains of identity and power, or scrutinised in courts and public controversies, humour emerges as a volatile and deeply ambivalent force. Across these diverse contexts, the Digital Revolution has only intensified these effects, by accelerating circulation, amplifying polarisation, multiplying interpretive uncertainty, and transforming local disputes into transnational talking points. At the same time, our contributors reveal humour's capacity to expose abuses of power, build solidarity, and challenge dominant narratives, while also underscoring the ease with which these same mechanisms can entrench antagonism or serve exclusion. By foregrounding this duality between humour and conflict, our special issue invites a nuanced understanding of humour as a central arena in which contemporary conflicts are articulated, negotiated, and, at times, exacerbated.

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