

Comic innocence¹

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Abstract

In recent years, humour has re-entered the public sphere as a serious and potentially explosive topic of debate, giving rise to social conflicts and controversies. Paradoxically, however, humour has at the same time been passionately (and often aggressively) defended as innocent and harmless. I propose the notion of ‘comic innocence’ to make sense of this paradox. I take Dutch and American studies of racism, white innocence and racial ignorance as a starting point to construct a theory of comic innocence, which is tested through the analysis of responses in both legacy and social media to a serious opinion article on humour (written by the author of this paper), which sparked a scandal in the summer of 2021. I analyse 265 tweets and a small number of related newspaper articles and blog posts to demonstrate the respondents’ “humour ideologies”. I argue that, in the context of the “re-politicisation of humour”, those who defend humour as innocent mobilise and re-articulate three older ideas on humour. First, they emphasise the overall positive psychological, social and political functions and effects of humour. Second, they believe that humour should be protected against a ‘woke’ culture of high sensitivity and censorship. Third, they argue that humour research is a joke, and humour scholars lack a sense of humour. The humour scholar appears in this debate as the most important source of danger: a humourless, left-wing scientist keen on curtailing and censoring humorous expression.

Keywords: humour, innocence, ideology, woke, racism.

1. Introduction

Humour has lost its innocence, or so it seems. While humour has long been considered trivial, frivolous and non-serious – and thus antithetical to the solemn notion of the public sphere (Habermas, 2022 [1962]) – in recent years, social attitudes towards humour have changed quite a bit. In the past decades, humour has taken centre stage in wider social and political debates around issues of identity, social justice, and freedom of speech. We have witnessed the rise of both national and transnational “humour scandals” (Kuipers, 2011), which are often fuelled by and play out on social media. Humour scandals are “public controversies about

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transgressive humour” (Kuipers, 2011, p. 64) and are important indicators of what Ivo Nieuwenhuis and I have called the “repoliticisation of humour” (Nieuwenhuis and Zijp, 2022, p. 343) or the return of humour as a central and potentially explosive topic of debate in the public sphere. This new situation demonstrates that humour is no longer being seen as merely playful and without social consequences. Indeed, the oft-quoted statement by anthropologist and humour scholar Christie Davies that humour works as a “thermometer” rather than a “thermostat” (Davies, 2011, p. 248) – which would merely reflect but not seriously impact the society in which it has been produced – would probably no longer be acknowledged in the current climate.

Yet, the idea that humour is somehow innocent still holds sway. In recent public debates, humour has been articulated as a positive, even holy, social and political force which needs to be protected against dangerous outsiders, most notably Muslim immigrants and the ‘woke’ left (Kuipers, 2011; Nieuwenhuis and Zijp, 2022; Zijp, 2023). Paradoxically, humour is framed within these debates as on the one hand innocent and harmless, and on the other hand very powerful and heavily politicised. In this paper, I propose the notion of ‘comic innocence’ to make sense of this paradox. I will draw from the work of Dutch and American critical race theorists on “white innocence” (Essed & Hoving, 2014; Wekker, 2016) and “racial ignorance” (Mueller, 2020). Both race and humour are politicised topics in the contemporary Netherlands and both are heavily debated as part of the ongoing ‘culture wars’. Dutch critical race theorists have pointed to the cherished Dutch self-image of being a small, innocent and colour-blind nation – an image which, paradoxically, goes together with the passionate and aggressive denial of racism and xenophobia. This paradoxical coexistence of racism and racial ignorance shows parallels with the sometimes aggressive defence of humour against presumed attacks of the ‘woke’ left and thus presents a fruitful starting point for an analysis of the relationship between innocence and humour.

To demonstrate how humour has been constructed as innocent within recent public debates, I will take as my case study a small media storm around an opinion article on humour. This is an unusual case, in which I, as a humour scholar, became the middle of a scandal. The article was published in a Dutch national newspaper in the summer of 2021, and went viral shortly after publication (Zijp, 2021). I will present an analysis of 265 tweets that were posted in response to this opinion piece. Additionally, I will analyse a small sample of other responses in both legacy and new media, such as newspaper articles and blog posts.

The analysis carried out here is informed by “critical humour studies” (Lockyer & Pickering, 2005; Weaver, 2011, p. 8), in particular by analyses of how social actors reflect on and make sense of humour as a form of communication. Humour is socially shared and negotiated, and permeates almost all aspects of modern life (Berlant & Ngai, 2017; Kuipers, 2015). Hence, analysing both professional and lay reflections on humour provides insight into common ways of thinking about humour. I will refer to these common ideas as “humour ideologies” (Kramer, 2011), or the culturally shared, but potentially conflicting, ideological frames used to make sense of humour as a form of expression (Pérez & Greene, 2016). Humour scandals in particular present an interesting opportunity to learn about socially shared definitions and ideas of humour, as acknowledged by the growing body of research on this topic (e.g., Dahl, 2021; Ervine, 2019; Herkman and Koivukoski, this issue; Kuipers, 2011; Laineste, 2011; Nieuwenhuis, 2023; Pérez & Greene, 2016). As Liisi Laineste puts it: “Looking more closely at instances where humour is not unanimously accepted brings us closer to definitions of humour by its users, as well as to the cultural and political presuppositions of such definitions” (Laineste, 2011, p. 237). In other words, at the moment that users disagree about the appropriateness of a particular instance of humour, they will be more inclined to make their views on humour explicit.

This paper contributes to existing humour scholarship in two ways. First, it furthers our understanding of the role played by humour, as well as by speech *about* humour, in the public sphere. While Habermas (2022) [1962] conceived of the public sphere as a space for rational and polite deliberation between equals, in which personal interests and power relationships need to be temporarily bracketed, the twenty-first century (social) mediascape in which the present case is situated, does not conform to this image. What showed up in my corpus was not a polite exchange of ideas, but an explosion of transgressive jokes, trolling comments and personal attacks. These types of online spaces thereby function, as Elise Kramer puts it, as “a ritual site where identities and beliefs are performed and naturalized under the guise of a debate” (Kramer, 2011, p. 163). But even though we are not dealing here with polite argument, these online spaces still offer the opportunity to analyse how such identities and beliefs are enacted, and how they relate to broader humour ideologies.

Second, this paper demonstrates how popular discourses on humour and the freedom of speech have become entangled with anti-scientific discourses (for a more detailed account of recent distrust in science, see: Houtman, Aupers & Laermans, 2021). The present case is not, strictly speaking, a humour scandal. Rather, we could refer to it as a ‘meta-humour scandal’, which forms the mirror image of a ‘normal’ humour scandal. While humour scandals are typically triggered by transgressive humour, and thus by situations in which the serious is treated humorously, the scandal discussed in this paper was triggered by a serious opinion article on humour, and thus by a situation in which the humorous was treated seriously. Both are about the transgression of the border between the humorous and the serious, but go in different directions. As we will see, the scandal centered precisely around this act of border-crossing, because taking humour (too) seriously was read as the sign of a ‘humourless’ and ‘woke’ cancel culture.

2. From white innocence to comic innocence

Innocence is an undertheorised term, yet has played an important role in Dutch intellectual debates on migration, ethnicity and race (Prins, 2004; Vuijsje, 1986; Wekker, 2016). In recent decades, we have witnessed the surge of critical cultural studies of Dutch racism. These studies point to the paradoxical co-existence of everyday and institutionalised racism on the one hand, and the passionate and aggressive denial of racism and xenophobia on the other hand. Scholars have used notions of “white innocence” (Wekker, 2016) and “smug ignorance” (Essed & Hoving, 2014; van der Pijl & Goulordava, 2014) to make sense of this paradox, pointing to the dominant Dutch self-image of being a progressive, tolerant and colour-blind nation, in which racism and xenophobia would simply not exist, or only as the exception that confirms the rule (Essed & Hoving, 2014; Wekker, 2016).

Current scholarship on Dutch racism presents a good starting point for a theory of comic innocence. Both race and humour are deeply contested and politicised topics in the contemporary Netherlands, which call up strong emotions and are surrounded by debates that follow similar patterns of engagement and response. The clearest point of connection between Dutch discourses on race and humour is presented by Black Pete, a clownesque blackface character that has long been part of the annual Dutch Saint Nicholas celebrations. In the past fifteen years, anti-racist activists, artists and opinion makers have resisted Black Pete for being an outdated racist caricature. This has led to angry and violent responses, including the recirculation of more blatantly racist images and death threats (van der Pijl & Goulordava, 2014; Wekker, 2016).

Defenders of Black Pete have typically pointed to the playful and comical aspects of this blackface character, emphasising Saint Nicholas as an “innocent” children’s party (Hilhorst &

Hermes, 2016). The case of Black Pete thereby reveals the close connection between discourses on humour and race in terms of how both invest their objects with innocence, as well as how claims to humour (it's "just a joke") can be used strategically to defend white innocence. Moreover, as Black Pete became increasingly representative of Dutch culture as inherently innocent, defenders of Black Pete often blamed anti-racist critics for intruding upon and destroying this state of innocence. In so doing, white innocence has been articulated both as a present state ("we have always been innocent") and a past condition that we need to return to ("we have lost / they have taken away our innocence"). As I will demonstrate, comic innocence can be understood as a similar, deeply nostalgic response to current debates on the limits and serious consequences of humour.

The concept of comic innocence can be further articulated and solidified by drawing from critical race theory (Mills, 2022 [1997]; Mueller, 2020), and from critical humour and comedy studies (Lockyer and Pickering, 2005; Nieuwenhuis and Zijp, 2022; Pérez, 2022; Weaver, 2011). White innocence – including the nostalgia for a more innocent past – is not an exclusively Dutch phenomenon (Essed & Hoving, 2014, p. 21), and recent studies of Dutch white innocence have been inspired by, and are in line with, the work of American critical race theorists. In the most cited study of Dutch white innocence, Gloria Wekker (2016) argues that innocence is not just about "not knowing", but also about "not wanting to know" (Wekker, 2016, p. 17). In critical race theory, this psychological condition of self-deceit and denial has often been claimed as central to white supremacy as well, or to what Charles Mills famously described as a "racial contract" based on an "epistemology of [white] ignorance" (Mills, 2022, p. 18). Or, as Jennifer Mueller succinctly put it: "*ignorance is the foundation of white thinking*" (Mueller, 2020, p. 143, emphasis in original).

Whereas Wekker's "psychoanalytic terminology of repressed memory" (Andeweg, 2022, p. 235) may seem to suggest that white innocence is irrational and difficult to grasp because of its suppressed nature, Mueller helpfully explains that racial ignorance, from the perspective of white supremacy, is perfectly rational, because it helps to achieve "racially biased ends" (Mueller, 2020, p. 158). Racial cognition, then, can be conceptualised as "a process in which white thinkers resist racial knowing to construct a distorted reality so they can perform, abide by, and enjoy the spoils of racism without being racist" (Mueller, 2020, p. 158). By creating social and material structures that help to deny and suppress knowledge of racism, white people can enjoy "the spoils of racism" without "being racist", in the sense of having directly racist intentions.

While being closely related categories, I prefer the notion of "innocence" to that of "ignorance", because the former term better captures the feelings of pleasure and joy that are central to both racism and humour. Here, recent scholarship in the field of critical humour studies is helpful. While racism is typically associated with serious and negative affective states such as anger and hate, comedy scholars such as Simon Weaver (2011) and Raúl Pérez (2022) have argued that humour plays a central role in the reproduction of both everyday forms of racism and white supremacist ideologies, finding expression in "amused racial contempt" (Pérez, 2022, p. 8). Humour is more obviously connected to feelings of pleasure and joy. However, even in situations where humour does not create positive experiences (or at least not for everyone), this rarely leads to a revision of our ideas on humour. Humour, in this sense, functions as a "happy object" (Ahmed, 2010, Chapter 1), an object that is invested with the promise of bringing joy and pleasure, even before any specific encounter with a humorous object or situation has taken place. Humour is thus construed as innocent, and intrinsically so.

Drawing from the work of Elise Kramer (2011) and Raúl Pérez & Viveca Greene (2016), I argue that comic innocence is best understood as referring to a particular "humour ideology" (Kramer, 2011). In the following, I present an analysis of the dominant "ideological frames" (Pérez & Greene, 2016) that were being used during a public discussion on the serious nature

of humour, in order to both understand and contest the framing of humour as intrinsically innocent. My own participation in this discussion can act as a helpful reminder that humour scholars play an important role in the reproduction and contestation of particular humour ideologies. As Villy Tsakona remarks, humour scholars “may rely on their lay perceptions [of humour] more than they would be willing to admit” (Tsakona, 2020, p. 30). While in the past, important and oft-cited humour scholars such as Christie Davies have defended humour as ‘just a joke’ (Pérez, 2022, p. 33-37), I argue that a joke is never ‘just’ a joke, even though we may want to believe so.

3. Data collection

The opinion piece that worked as the trigger of the scandal was most widely discussed on Twitter. Hence, my corpus mainly consists of tweets. To collect data, I used the Twitter API and searched for ‘Dick Zijp’ within the time frame of 12 July to 23 July 2021. Because I shared the piece via my personal Twitter account on its day of publication, and most respondents either directly replied to this tweet or tagged/mentioned me in their responses, my own name turned out to be the most reliable search term. On 12 July 2021, I composed a Twitter thread which formed the basis of the opinion article that was published a day later. Both went viral on the day of posting/publishing, and were therefore included in the corpus. In the course of the following week, the scandal died out, even though it resurged a couple of times when new responses were published (e.g., Teeuwen, 2021; van Amerongen, 2021).

My initial search yielded 606 tweets. First, I removed retweets as well as cited tweets that did not add anything substantial to the discussion, but just repeated some lines from the shared content. Repetitive and off-topic discussions were removed from the dataset as well. As will be further demonstrated below, since many users considered the piece a symptom of a ‘woke cancel culture’, the discussion often quickly spiralled away from humour towards broader considerations of left-wing activism, critical race theory and other related subjects. For instance, without making an exact comparison, my piece reminded one Twitter user of Gloria Wekker’s work, and hence this user decided to explain, in a couple of tweets, why her work is misguided. Finally, some tweets were unintelligible because they were composed as responses to tweets that had been deleted at the moment of writing. When I could not read these tweets in context, I removed them from the dataset.

Following these criteria, I was able to reduce the number of tweets to 265. Next, I coded the remaining tweets, using a method of “open coding” by constructing categories that corresponded to the central ideas emerging from the dataset (Straus & Corbin, 1990). Consequently, I looked into some further responses, mostly pieces from legacy media or online blogs that were widely discussed or became a point of reference in the Twitter debate. I added six responses in total: a newspaper column in *De Volkskrant* (Jadib, 2021); a column in the monthly magazine *HP De Tijd* (van Amerongen, 2021); a blog post by the notorious right-wing weblog *GeenStijl* (@brussen, 2021); another blog post on the website *The Post Online* (van Raak, 2021); and, finally, a YouTube video by the famous Dutch comedian Hans Teeuwen, in which he mocked me for having a “genderneutral shitface²” (Teeuwen, 2021; cf. Zijp, 2022). I did not include a radio debate between me and comedian Arthur Umbgrove, aired a day after publication of the article. For reasons of privacy, I did also not include the (semi-public) responses to the piece on Facebook. For similar reasons, I anonymised all tweets cited throughout the paper, except for those posted by celebrities.

² The original Dutch quotes - which were translated by the author - can be found in the appendix to this paper.

4. Results

I will now turn to the results, and discuss the three central ideas that emerged from my corpus, which denote three distinct, but connected, ways in which humour is constructed as innocent. First, there is the idea that humour is a positive social force, which does not reinforce, but subvert and attack the status quo, or otherwise offers a utopian escape from social hierarchies and relationships of power. The second idea is that humour needs to be protected against the ‘woke’ left and its culture of high sensitivity and censorship. The third is that humour research is a joke, and humour scholars lack a sense of humour. Before demonstrating how these ideas have become entangled and re-articulated in the present context of the repoliticisation of humour, I will first discuss the opinion piece with which it all began.

4.1. The trigger

The opinion piece that worked as the trigger of the debate was itself a response to an interview with the well-known Dutch female comedian Ilse Warringa in the same newspaper, *De Volkskrant*. *De Volkskrant* is a Dutch quality newspaper with a progressive reputation. Warringa has a long-standing career as a comedian and an actress in experimental theatre productions. She experienced her breakthrough with the comic character of the petty primary school teacher Ank or “juf Ank”, [schoolmistress Ank], in the widely celebrated and awarded sitcom series *De Luizenmoeder* (2018-2019), which she created and co-authored. The title of the series literally translates as ‘The Lice Mother’, a Dutch expression referring to mothers who check children at primary school for lice. *De Luizenmoeder* belongs to the genre of cringe comedy, and mocks both the teachers and parents at a Dutch primary school.

In the summer of 2021, just before the premiere of the eponymous movie picture based on the sitcom, *De Volkskrant* featured a long interview with the comedian in its weekly glossy magazine, which was widely shared on social media (Huigslout, 2021). The chosen headline stirred the ensuing social media debate in a particular direction by highlighting Warringa’s views on humour, even though many other topics were discussed during the interview as well. The headline reads: “The moment you are no longer allowed to put things in perspective with humour, we all come to a standstill” (Huigslout, 2021).³ The quote conveys a sense of urgency, which is matched by the interview, in which Warringa shares a personal anecdote about a friend of hers, an actor who received critique from fellow actors for putting on a presumably offensive Spanish accent as part of his comic act. According to Warringa, such criticism of comic stereotypes is increasingly popular and poses a threat to the work of professional comedians. She goes on to voice her own ideas about humour, which I will briefly summarise here to situate the opinion piece and establish the context in which the ensuing (social) media debate developed. Many ideas voiced by Warringa returned in the responses to my opinion article, and will thus be discussed in more detail in the following sections.

First, Warringa emphasises the positive psychological and social functions and effects of humour. She argues that transgressive humour is a means to blow off steam, not just on a personal level, but also on a wider, social level: “And stigmatising, especially stigmatising in a boorish way, has a function as well. It’s a way of magnifying things, so that we laugh at ourselves, with all our prejudices and our forced tendency to pretend we don’t have any. That gives a lot more air than if you handle everything with velvet gloves. Just name it.”

Warringa goes on to explain that to make a joke about (minoritised) people is to take them seriously: “When people make jokes about me, I feel like I’m being taken seriously, that’s the

³ All quotes from Dutch sources were translated by the author. The original Dutch quotes can be found in the Appendix.

whole point. When you joke about someone, it means you are treating the other equally.” She adds that “above all, we have to keep showing that we find the other person worth joking about”. Yet Warringa personally feels that some jokes are ‘off limits’. In response to a question about a white Dutch television presenter pretending to have slit-eyes in a serious talk show item on China, she remarks: “I wouldn’t make the slit-eye gesture myself because I know it’s a sensitive issue, but I want to be able to make a sketch about it.”

Second, Warringa believes that these positive functions of humour are being less and less acknowledged in the current climate of ‘woke’ sensitivity. She argues that people tend to take themselves too seriously nowadays, and that the ‘woke’ left in particular is opposed to humour and jokes: “Humour and woke just don’t go together. Humour often revolves around playing with prejudices and stereotypes, and that is exactly what the woke movement is fighting against.” Warringa witnesses this ‘woke’ tendency to question and even censor particular forms of humour in the television industry, both in the Netherlands and in the UK. Referring to her own experiences ‘behind the scenes’, she argues that ironic forms of humour are increasingly being questioned in favour of less ambiguous and more straightforward messages, which are easier to contain. She also refers to recent examples of ‘censorship’ in the UK: “The fact that in the UK they took an episode of *Little Britain* and an episode of *Monty Python* offline because of scenes that could potentially be construed as racist in this day and age, I find that so immensely short-sighted.” Warringa ends on a personal note, by explaining that she experienced the positive effects of humour at an early age (“We used to take each other to task at home, we were always putting each other in the proper perspective”), and that, more recently, sick jokes helped Warringa and her sister to blow off steam after the latter had lost a child.

A few days after publication of the interview, I responded to Warringa’s claims about humour in an opinion piece that I sent to *De Volkskrant* (Zijp, 2021). The central claim of the piece was that Warringa’s statements are symptomatic of a broader ‘moral panic’ around humour within the media and cultural industries, while in actual fact, a ‘woke cancel culture’ does not exist. What we are experiencing, I suggested, is a growing social awareness of the serious consequences of humour, which does lead to debate but not to censorship or ‘cancelling’. Moreover, I argued, having such a debate is fair, especially given the growing consensus in humour studies that both in everyday humour and in comedy, ‘punching down’ is just as widespread as ‘punching up’, and humour does thus not necessarily attack, but may also reinforce social hierarchies and relationships of power (Lockyer and Pickering, 2005).⁴ In particular, I presented a critique of Warringa’s claim that making jokes at the expense of others is a way of abolishing social hierarchies and power imbalances, because ‘joking back’ can be difficult from a marginalised position (Kuipers, 2011). I will include an extensive quote from the piece to make sure that the arguments are fairly represented:

In her plea, Warringa uses a classic fallacy about humour, namely that minorities are only integrated into society when we joke about them. After all, humour brings people together. We find this utopian dream of a society without power differences, where we can laugh together at our shortcomings, among many humorists. What they underestimate in their naivety is that humour may also strengthen and reinforce existing power relations and hierarchies.

Cultural sociologist Giseline Kuipers calls this the ‘liberal humour regime.’ Within Western liberal democracies like ours, the unwritten rule is that you have to be able to take a joke. But humour is always linked to power and power is unevenly distributed. The most appropriate response to a joke at your expense is to laugh along or, better still, to joke back. However, that, Kuipers argues, requires quite a bit of cultural capital.

⁴ See Sienkiewicz and Marx (2022) for a critique of the left-wing bias in thinking about humour and comedy.

[...] We know from research that humour often follows social hierarchies: we laugh harder at the boss's jokes than at the cleaner's or intern's, and we are more likely to joke about our inferiors than our superiors. Those with less power are thus hit harder, and can punch back less easily. Humour certainly has the power to put things in perspective and bring people together, but does not necessarily do so. (Zijp, 2021)

Within hours after writing these words, my Twitter timeline exploded.

4.2. Positive humour

The first – and arguably the oldest – idea that emerged from my corpus is the idea that humour fulfils overall positive psychological, social and political functions. Many respondents argued that humour puts things in perspective, promotes personal and social well-being, and is opposed to any form of power or hierarchy. In particular, the notion of 'power' used throughout my analysis seems to have triggered many negative responses. Respondents typically argued that humour has nothing to do with power, necessarily challenges and subverts the authorities, or offers a utopian escape from power relationships. Because most Twitter respondents used personal attacks rather than articulating their alternative views on humour directly (see the next two sections), positive views on humour were found, in explicit form, in only 16 tweets and in most of the opinion articles, while almost no explicitly negative characterisations of humour were found. Most of these tweets emphasised that humour does not reinforce, but challenges power relationships and social hierarchies:

Gosh, Dick confuses bullying and condescension with humour. By the way, condescension goes up just as fast in hierarchical relationships as it goes down.

The humorists who I know actually put all existing relationships to the test. I wonder what humour in your view confirms power.

What Dick Zijp underestimates in his ignorance is that this humour often does not poke fun at the minority, but rather mocks the thinking patterns of the majority.

For humour, you need a sense of perspective, which is often lacking in those in power, and, unfortunately, in many more people.

There is also sheer nonsense in there [the opinion piece], e.g., that humour 'strengthens and reinforces existing power relationships'. Making jokes about power is often the only weapon of the oppressed, in the Soviet Union etc.

(Witteman, 2021)

Humour is able, as no other means, to mock social conventions and power relations.

(van Raak, 2021)

Many authors present the idea that humour is opposed to power as an established truth which does not require further demonstration, thereby confirming Kramer's observation that we typically use 'objectivist' language to talk about humour (Kramer, 2011). Some authors, however, give examples or substantiate their position with further arguments. For instance, the writer Sylvia Witteman, who has a weekly column in *De Volkskrant*, argues that the subversive power of humour is best demonstrated by the important function of humour in totalitarian regimes, with the Soviet Union as a classic example (for a criticism of this idea, see: Davies, 2007). Another author argues that humour and bullying should be clearly distinguished, a recurring trope in discussions on humour which is paralleled in humour

research by distinctions between ‘good’ and ‘bad’, ‘true’ and ‘false’ humour (e.g., Critchley, 2004; Zupančič, 2008; cf. Berlant and Ngai, 2017; Billig, 2005; Nieuwenhuis and Zijp, 2022). Finally, some authors ascribe further positive qualities to humour. For instance, in the fourth example, it is argued that humour and power do not go together because those in power lack the ability to put things in perspective.

A second, and more complicated, idea concerning the relationship between humour and power is that binary distinctions between the powerful and the powerless miss the point because humour offers a more fundamental escape from power. Humour, in this view, is not a weapon of the weak, but offers the possibility to construct one’s identity as a sovereign individual unaffected by power relationships. For instance, in a newspaper column, Ibtihal Jadib argues that: “Humour is not about relationships between the powerful and the powerless, it is an escape from all that. Regardless of who you are and where you stand: when you are able to laugh at yourself or make a joke about someone else, you leave the hierarchical relationships.” (Jadib, 2021). She adds: “In humour, people find recognition and see a personality that refuses to be defined by social structures.” (Jadib, 2021). For Jadib, then, humour does important identity work, because it enables people to escape their minoritised position and demonstrate that they are not passive victims of oppressive social hierarchies. This is in line with the main point of critique articulated in her column, which is that I reinforce the marginalised position of minorities by suggesting that they lack the cultural capital to joke back.

Jadib’s column thereby reiterates some of the points made by Warringa in the above-quoted interview. Both suggest that humour is ‘innocent’ in the sense that it is not polluted by everyday social relations, but offers a utopian escape from social hierarchies. They thereby subscribe to a “carnavalesque model” of humour (Holm, 2017, p. 49; cf. Bakhtin, 1984 [1965]) according to which humour is not compromised by everyday relationships of power, but instead constitutes an entirely different world. They thereby also suggest that there are no meaningful differences between social actors in terms of the access they have to cultural resources regarding what counts as ‘good’ humour or an ‘appropriate’ response under a particular “humour regime” (Kuipers, 2011, p. 64), that is, the social regime regulating humorous discourse and stipulating who is allowed to joke about what in a particular (sub)culture or society. The idea that humour is not affected by social relations and inequalities is most succinctly phrased by a Twitter user who simply stated: “Humour is an egalitarian instrument. Everyone can make a joke.”

The argument that humour fulfils mainly positive psychological, social and political functions works to construct humour as innocent and to hide the less agreeable and “dark” sides of humour from view (Kuipers, 2008, p. 382).⁵ Michael Billig has used the notion of “ideological positivism” (Billig, 2005, p. 32) to refer to this ideological character of positive thinking on humour. By articulating such positive ideas on humour, the respondents quoted above draw from a longer tradition of ideological positivism. As Michael Billig, and others, have pointed out, ‘humour’ as a modern notion is intimately bound up with such positive ideologies. Dating back to shifting social attitudes in eighteenth and nineteenth-century Europe, positive humour ideologies have, in the late twentieth century, been elevated to the status of a cultural dominant (Billig, 2005; Condren, 2021; Lewis, 2006). Nevertheless, such positive views of humour are shared by both humour scholars and lay people and can thus not be unmasked as mere ‘folk’ beliefs (Billig, 2005; Lewis, 2006).

⁵ The point here is to question uncritical celebrations of the positive effects of humour, not, of course, to deny that such effects exist.

4.3. The defence of humour

While positive humour ideologies may seem innocent at first inspection, in the past years, humour has lost its innocence. In the current climate of repoliticisation, humour has re-entered the public domain as a deeply contested topic of debate. The collected tweets reflect this social climate. When articulating positive views on humour, respondents to some extent seemed to articulate a form of common sense. At the same time, however, the idea that humour is joyful and agreeable and promotes social and personal well-being was undercut by the often adversarial tone of these tweets. To explain this paradox, it helps to trace the process through which arguments about the positive social and political effects of humour have become entangled with a second line of argument, which holds that humour has been put under pressure by a presumed ‘woke’ culture of censorship and ‘cancelling’.

While the notion of humour as in need of being protected against a dangerous, political left has arguably functioned for a longer period of time as the darker undercurrent of the idea that humour is an innocent and positive social force, it has become more prominent in recent debates on humour. While the argument can be traced back to the American ‘culture wars’ of the 1980s and 1990s (Dufort, 2018; Lewis, 2006), in the Netherlands, it emerged more recently, over the past fifteen years, but has followed a similar trajectory. Initially, the term ‘political correctness’ was used to refer to what some believed to be radical left-wing attacks on humour. For Dutch journalists and writers, ‘political correctness’ still held the association with the American culture wars, though (e.g., Althuisius, 2015). In recent years, ‘political correctness’ has been largely replaced by the term ‘woke’, and the latter acquired stronger resonances in the Dutch context than the former. The notion of ‘woke’ seems to refer to a radicalised group of left-wing thinkers and activists who would not accept forms of speech with which they disagree, including humour and comedy, and thereby pose a threat to the freedom of speech.⁶

In 41 of the collected tweets, Twitter users suggested that my opinion piece was a manifestation of such a dangerous, ‘woke’ ideology. What we clearly see here is that the two central ideas discussed so far – humour is positive, and humour is under attack – strengthen and reinforce each other. Some authors defended humour against presumable attacks by referring to its positive social functions: “Humour encourages critical thinking and that is absolutely necessary in this time of ‘wokies’ who are only cancelling.” In other tweets, the positive functions of humour remained more implicit, but were still present, e.g., in a tweet in which the author suggested that the ‘woke’ left seeks to protect “those who lack self-confidence, self-mockery and mature assertiveness,” thereby implying that such protection is wrong, because developing a sense of self-mockery and “mature assertiveness” is a necessary social quality which makes a person stronger and less dependent on the protection of others.

Conversely, the construction of a dangerous enemy, who would use far-reaching and unconventional means such as censorship to oppress humorous speech, provides the so-called ‘protectors’ of humour with the opportunity to strengthen and re-articulate the idea that humour is positive and innocent. Hence, the argument that humour is under attack by the ‘woke’ left is not just a ‘natural’ response to a climate of activism in which marginalised groups speak out against presumably sexist, racist, homophobic, transphobic or ableist forms of humour. The argument also helps critics of ‘woke’ activism to emphasise the innocence of humour. Many respondents linked the positive functions of humour to the dangerous habit of the ‘woke’ left to censor or cancel comedians and their work:

⁶ The term ‘woke’ was first used by African Americans in the 1930s, and later by the civil rights movement, to refer to the need to stay alert to racial oppression (Davies & MacRae, 2023, p. 2-3).

In an open, free society, humour cannot be regulated or punished, [because] it disregards (leftist) sacred cows, puts things into perspective and has the immense power to reflect. Totalitarian, far-left, power-hungry people cannot stand that, so it [sic] must be cancelled.

Humour is defeated. While forced inclusivity is a real threat to a healthy society, [being] touchy is rewarded.

So let's see, if I understand your thread correctly, you're advocating censorship (of certain expressions or uses of) humour? Or not?

Woke activists do not want to discuss things at all, they just want to cancel.

These tweets are representative of a broader corpus in which terms such as censorship and cancelling are used to paint a contrast between 'woke' oppressors of humour and moderate protectors like themselves, who argue that an "open, free society" is a society in which humour is not in any way regulated or limited. The radical freedom of humorous expression is thus claimed as the important sign of a "healthy" democratic society. Moreover, criticism and debate are often read as a cover-up for the oppression of humour by other means. Or, as the last tweet suggests: "Woke activists do not want to discuss things at all, they just want to cancel."

The defence of humour as innocent and under attack is sometimes steeped in quasi-religious language. This becomes most clear in a blog post by the infamous, right-wing weblog *GeenStijl*, which typically uses boorish language, transgressive humour and personal attacks to mock left-wing opponents. The author of this blog post, referring to me as "Suck my Dick Zijp" (@brussen, 2021) – a nickname eagerly adopted by both comedian Hans Teeuwen (Teeuwen, 2021) and many (anonymous) Twitter users – argues that my opinion piece presents "yet another sick ass WOKE attack on anything even remotely fun, like our God-given right to humour" (@brussen, 2021). While the use of such religious language is clearly ironic, as the worldview articulated by *GeenStijl* is nihilist rather than devout (Oudenampsen, 2020), it nevertheless works as a metaphor to emphasise the divine or sacred status of humour, which is in need of being protected against possible transgressors.

Another recurring rhetorical mechanism is the appeal to nostalgia, and the suggestion that we should restore humour's lost innocence. The desire to return to more innocent times is an important trope in cultural discourses on white innocence in the Netherlands (Vuijsje, 1986; Prins, 2000). As we have seen, this desire is reflected in debates about the figure of Black Pete, in which Saint Nicholas is typically defended as an 'innocent' children's party. Debates on Dutch humour are, in a similar way, infused with references to memories of an innocent childhood (Zijp, 2023). Responses in both legacy and social media appealed to such childhood memories of humour and comedy. For instance, one Twitter user referred to canonical examples of both Dutch and UK television comedy from the 1970s to the 2000s to defend humour against the 'humourless woke': "I grew up with Sjef van Oekel, Koot & Bie, Monty Python, Tommy Cooper, Little Britain and Curb your Enthusiasm. In which case you look a little differently at that cramped, intensely humourless 'should not hurt' of this poor and unsavoury era."

A similar contrast between a humorous past and a humourless present is drawn by Arthur van Amerongen in a column for the monthly magazine *HP/De Tijd* (van Amerongen, 2021). Van Amerongen's ambiguous, ironic style is reminiscent of *GeenStijl*. The author opens his piece with a somewhat mockingly nostalgic picture of the past, a time when society was presumably united in laughter, and even the crime rates would plummet when particular comedians appeared on television:

How much laughter there used to be in the Netherlands! I grew up with Snip & Snap, Dorus, Wim Kan, Toon Hermans, Paul van Vliet, Max Tilleur, Henk Elsink, Jan Blaaser and Fons Jansen, and the whole country would burst into laughter whenever these comedians were on the television or radio. Then the streets were quiet. Then the crime rates fell, which, incidentally, did not amount to much back then.

(van Amerongen, 2021)

Van Amerongen refers here to several Dutch comedians, who all reached the peak of their careers in the previous century. He continues with an account of his childhood, praising his father for having a great sense of humour, discussing the comedians he himself admired, and giving a hint to a presumably personal experience of almost-sexual harassment by a famous Dutch comedian. At the end of the piece, this account of a humorous past is contrasted with the oppression of humour in the present, epitomised by my opinion piece. Van Amerongen refers to me as “BIJ1’s humour Gestapo” (van Amerongen, 2021), a nickname referring to the socialist, anti-racist and openly activist political party BIJ1, which was elected to Parliament in 2021. By adopting an ironically nostalgic, but affectionate and light-hearted tone, and opposing the humorous past to the humourless present, van Amerongen seems to suggest that transgressive humour – and, in a broader sense, loose sexual morals and other forms of transgression – have come under attack by the ‘woke’ left, and that we need to return to more innocent times.

4.4. The ‘humourless’ humour scholar

The ironic tone of van Amerongen’s column is shared by many of the tweets, blog posts and columns that were written in response to my opinion piece. We encounter it, for instance, in *GeenStijl*’s blog post and in *Jadib*’s newspaper column, in which the author refers to me as a “clown scientist” (Jadib, 2021) and makes a pastiche of the serious academic discourse on humour. After reading my piece, she “burst into tears... Of happiness, of course, because the human being who is confronted with pure truth knows that he need never wander again” (Jadib, 2021). This ironic style is typical of both Twitter’s culture of trolling and a tradition of Dutch literary writing and opinion making (Oudenampsen, 2020), while also fulfilling an important rhetorical function in the meta-debate on humour. By adopting a mocking tone, these authors demonstrate that they have a sense of humour, as opposed to the ‘humourless’ humour scholar. Moreover, this style helps these authors to unmask serious, academic discourse on humour as itself a joke.

The idea that humour scholars lack a sense of humour may not be as old as the idea that humour is positive and needs to be protected against the radical left, but it does appeal to the sentiment that talking about humour kills the joke. The idea that serious talk about humour is boring and not funny is expressed, for example, within the somewhat overused quotation of E. B. White, which suggests that analysing humour is like dissecting a frog: “the thing dies in the process and the innards are discouraging to any but the pure scientific mind” (White, 1977, p. 243). In the context of the repoliticisation of humour, the paradox of doing serious research on humour has, however, been adopted by right-wing critics to condemn humour research as an example of ‘woke’ science. In the Netherlands alone, several humour researchers have been criticised by right-wing media for doing stupid, dangerous and unfunny research, e.g. *Madelijn Strick* by *GeenStijl* (@brusselmans, 2009) and *Alberto Godioli* by the conservative Dutch newspaper *De Telegraaf* (Veelo, 2021).

In 118 of the selected tweets (almost 50%), the idea that humour research is ridiculous and humour scholars are humourless was articulated. Like the longer responses cited above, these tweets typically adopt an ironic, transgressive and/or ridiculing tone, often repeating the most slandering terms used on the internet to refer to me, such as *Hans Teeuwen*’s comment

that I have a “genderneutral shitface” and GeenStijl’s nickname “Suck my Dick Zijp”. Some tweets made the connection between humourlessness and ‘woke’ explicit:

That bunch of politically correct, humourless bureaucrats who want to put leftist hobbies like gender, inclusiveness, diversity, guilt and penance before artistic and creative talent. #wokeiskilling.

Once a month, a Twitter thread appears in which a humourless wokey [sic] confirms the point of nice people who are worried about humourlessness and hypersensitivity.

(Schimmelpenninck, 2021)

Other tweets simply suggest that humour scholars lack a sense of humour, without further qualification:

dick_zijp does not have a sense of humour.

Dick Zijp is a humourless and featureless dipshit.

I think this Dick Zijp is a huge humourless prick. I don’t know him, but that’s what I think. And I also think I’m right about that. Really.

To claim that someone lacks a sense of humour is a particularly strong insult in the current social climate, in which having a sense of humour is considered a desirable and even necessary social skill (Billig, 2005; Lockyer and Pickering, 2005). Moreover, it is almost impossible to respond to such charges in an elegant way (Kuipers, 2011). This makes the argument well-suited for an attack on the ‘woke’ left. By suggesting that humour scholars are both humourless and ‘woke’, it becomes possible to call up the image of left-wing scientists keen on censoring humour.

In this way, cultural discourses on humour and political correctness have become entangled with recent, anti-scientific discourses. This is demonstrated by the large number of tweets in which humour research is unmasked as itself a joke. These Twitter users comically exploit the incongruity of having an earnest discussion about a non-serious form of communication:

Humour expert or something. [That’s] [h]umour in itself.....

Humour researcher, and you are paid for that with taxpayer’s money, well that’s humour!

A humour professor is just as weird as the pope giving sexual advice. No experience but a big mouth.

Isn’t ‘humour researcher’ a profession invented by Nieuwspaal?

Humour researcher, that’s not of this world, is it?

Most of these tweets adopt a mocking tone. For instance, the fourth tweet states that humour research must have been invented by Nieuwspaal, a satirical news website after the fashion of The Onion. At the same time, these Twitter users are making a serious point, and can be said to express a form of “science-related populism” (Mede and Schäfer, 2020), in which a presumed gap between a powerful scientific elite and ‘the people’ is used as an argument against science. For instance, by claiming that humour research is ridiculous yet paid for with “taxpayer’s money”, the second tweet highlights the absurdity of a situation in which

‘normal’ people pay for ‘elitist’ scientific projects. In the third tweet, humour researchers are compared to religious authorities, and thereby again constructed as part of a powerful elite. Here, an old joke format is used as the basis for a new joke: just as the pope should not make the rules for a game he does not play (because the pope is celibatary and therefore would not have sexual experience), the humour scholar lacks experience with humour and should thus not try to make the rules of the comedy game. In the final tweet, humour research is claimed to be other-worldly, and thus far removed from the business of ‘normal’ people.

By calling humour scholars humourless and their research a joke, these Twitter users make the overall point that we should not have a serious debate about humour, and, in making that argument, construct humour as innocent. They suggest that humour should be protected against the desecrating activities of humour scholars, who cross the boundary between serious and non-serious speech and thereby kill the joke.

5. Conclusion, or the repoliticisation of the dying frog

In the midst of the Twitter storm, my doctoral supervisor Giseline Kuipers tweeted, in response to someone warning that discussions about humour can turn pretty gloomy: “Oh, I thought [that] humour [was] that thing that is so fun and enjoyable [and] that everybody loves so much” (Kuipers, 2021). This somewhat ironic tweet points to the central paradox discussed in this paper: while humour is often considered to be merely pleasurable and innocent, it has at the same time become a deeply contested topic. I have proposed the notion of ‘comic innocence’ to explain this paradoxical coexistence of the innocence and politicisation of humour. I have argued that older ideas about the innocence of humour are still alive, but have been linked in new and explosive ways. In particular, in response to ongoing debates about the serious consequences and the limits of humour in both humour scholarship and society at large, self-proclaimed ‘protectors’ of humorous speech have mobilised older ideas about the positive social and political functions of humour as part of their broader criticism of a ‘humourless’ culture of ‘woke’ sensitivity and censorship. Humour has thus indeed lost its innocence, but while some consider this a good thing – as it makes us more critically aware of the ‘darker’ sides of humour – others believe that we should return to a time when humour was still innocent and not yet politicised by the ‘woke’ left.

The debate analysed in this paper seems to necessitate a rethinking of Habermas’s notion of the public sphere, as aimed for in the collection of articles brought together in this special issue. While a more thorough discussion of public sphere theory falls outside the scope of this paper, this paper points to the central role played by both humour and meta-humorous speech in the current climate of the re-politicisation of humour. Indeed, as the examples cited above demonstrate, the tone of this debate was not serious, moderate and polite, but playful, emotional, and transgressive. With this shift of tone and style in today’s public sphere, new forms of literacy and cultural knowledge are required to be able to follow and make sense of public discussions, including an understanding of the workings of both humour and meta-humorous speech to wage ideological battles and to perform social and political identities.

There have been earlier clashes between humour scholars and citizens, and these have not always followed the same scripts. Humour scholars have, for instance, also been reproached for spreading transgressive jokes (e.g., Paans, 1998). However, clashes between humour scholars and citizens may become more frequent as well as more explosive when scholarly accounts of humour become more critical. In recent years, humour scholars have increasingly pointed to the serious social consequences and the potential limits of humour (Tsakona, 2020, p. 61). While Villy Tsakona has emphasised the continuities between academic and lay perceptions of humour, this paper has demonstrated how humour scholars who enter public

debates to point to the serious consequences and/or advocate the limits of humour may experience pushback. In particular, this paper has shown how, in the case study presented, anti-science discourses have become entangled with anti-political correctness or anti-‘woke’ discourses on humour, thereby leading to the repoliticisation of White’s dying frog. The ‘humourless’ humour scholar is killing humour and thereby not just spoils a laugh, but is believed to pose a more serious threat to the freedom of humorous speech. To regulate humour, so goes the idea, is to kill the frog and, thereby, an open and free society.

Appendix

3. Data collection

“genderneutrale kutkop.”

4.1. The trigger

“Op het moment dat je niks meer mag relativieren met humor, staan we met zijn allen stil.”

“En stigmatiseren, vooral lomp stigmatiseren, heeft ook een functie. Daardoor vergroot je dingen uit, gaan we om onszelf lachen, met al onze vooroordelen en onze krampachtige neiging om te doen alsof we die niet hebben. Dat geeft veel meer lucht dan wanneer je alles met fluwelen handschoentjes aanpakt. Benoem het gewoon.”

“Als mensen grappen over mij maken, voel ik me juist serieus genomen. Als je grappen over iemand maakt betekent het dat je de ander gelijkwaardig behandelt.”

“we moeten vooral blijven tonen dat je de ander de moeite waard vindt om grappen over te maken.”

“Ik zou zelf het spleetooigebaar niet maken, omdat ik weet hoe gevoelig het ligt, maar ik wil er wel een scène over kunnen maken.”

“Humor en woke gaan gewoon niet samen. Humor gaat vaak om spelen met vooroordelen en stereotyperingen, en dat is precies waar de wokebeweging tegen strijdt.”

“Dat ze in Engeland een aflevering van Little Britain en van Monty Python offline hebben gehaald vanwege scènes die in deze tijd mogelijk racistisch kunnen worden opgevat, vind ik zo enorm kortzichtig.”

“Wij namen elkaar vroeger thuis altijd de maat, waren elkaar altijd aan het relativieren.”

“Warringa gebruikt in haar pleidooi een klassieke drogreden over humor, namelijk dat minderheden er pas bij horen als we grappen over ze maken. Humor werkt immers verbindend. Deze utopische wensdroom van een samenleving zonder machtsverschillen, waarin we gezamenlijk kunnen lachen om onze tekortkomingen, vinden we bij veel humoristen. Wat zij in hun naïviteit onderschatten, is dat humor ook bestaande machtsverhoudingen en hiërarchieën kan versterken en bevestigen.

Cultuursocioloog Giseline Kuipers noemt dit het ‘liberale humorregime’. Binnen westerse liberale democratieën als de onze is de ongeschreven regel dat je tegen een grapje moet kunnen. Maar humor is altijd verbonden met macht en die is ongelijk verdeeld. De meest gepaste reactie op een grap ten koste van jou is meelachen of, beter nog, zelf een grapje terug maken. Dat, stelt Kuipers, vereist echter behoorlijk wat cultureel kapitaal.

[...] Uit onderzoek weten we dat humor vaak de sociale hiërarchieën volgt: we lachen harder om de grappes van de baas dan om grappes van de schoonmaker of de stagiair, en we maken eerder grappen over onze minderen dan onze meerderen. Degenen met minder macht krijgen dus hardere klappen, en kunnen ook minder gemakkelijk terugslaan. Humor kan zeker relativerend en verbindend werken, maar doet dat niet vanzelfsprekend.”

4.2. Positive humour

“Gut, Dick verwacht pestgedrag en laatlach met humor. Laatlach gaat overigens net zo hard in hiërarchische verhoudingen omhoog als omlaag.” “De humoristen die ik ken stellen juist alle bestaande verhoudingen op de proef. Ik ben benieuwd welke humor volgens u de macht bevestigt.”

“Wat Dick Zijp in zijn onkunde onderschat is dat die humor vaak niet de minderheid op de hak neemt, maar juist spot met de denkpatronen van de meerderheid.”

“Voor humor heb je relativiseringsvermogen nodig en dat ontbreekt vaak bij machthebbers en helaas bij veel meer mensen.”

“Ook staat er klinkklare onzin in, b.v. dat humor ‘bestaande machtsverhoudingen versterkt en bevestigt’. Grappen maken over de macht is juist vaak het enige wapen van de onderdrukten, in de Sovjetunie, e.d.”

“Humor kan als geen ander middel de sociale conventies en de machtsverhoudingen op de korrel nemen.”

“Humor gaat niet over verhoudingen tussen machthebbers en machtelozen, het is juist een bevrijding daarvan. Los van wie je bent en waar je staat: wanneer je om jezelf kunt lachen of over een ander een grap kunt maken, verlaat je de hiërarchische verhoudingen.”

“In humor vinden mensen herkenning en zien zij een persoonlijkheid die zich niet laat definiëren door sociale structuren.”

“Humor is een egalitair instrument. Iedereen kan een grap maken.”

4.3. The defence of humour

“Humor spoort aan tot kritisch denken en dat is zeker nodig in deze tijd van ‘wokies’ die alleen maar cancellen.”

“[hen] met een gebrek aan zelfvertrouwen, zelfrelativering en een volwassen assertiviteit...”

“Humor is in een open, vrije samenleving oncontroleerbaar, niet strafbaar, houdt geen rekening met (linkse) heilige huisjes, relativeert en reflecteert als een malle. Totalitaire, extreemlinkse machtswellustelingen kunnen daar niet tegen, dus moet het gecancelled worden.”

“Humor delft de [sic] onderspit. Terwijl gedwongen inclusiviteit een echte dreiging is voor een gezonde maatschappij. Lange tenen worden beloont [sic].”

“Dus even kijken, als ik jouw thread goed begrijp, dan pleit je voor censuur (op bepaalde uitingen of toepassingen van) humor? Of niet?”

“Woke activisten die willen helemaal niet discussiëren, die willen alleen maar cancelen.”

“deze zoveelste sick ass WOKE aanval op alles wat nog een béétje leuk is, zoals het ons door God gegeven recht op humor.”

“Ik ben opgegroeid met Sjef van Oekel, Koot&Bie, Monty Python, Tommy Cooper, Little Britain en Curb your Enthusiasm. Dan kijk je toch iets anders aan tegen dat verkrampde, intens humorloze ‘niet mogen kwetsen’ van dit armzalige en onzalige tijdvak.”

“Wat werd er vroeger toch veel gelachen in Nederland! Ik ben opgegroeid met Snip & Snap, Dorus, Wim Kan, Toon Hermans, Paul van Vliet, Max Tilleur, Henk Elsink, Jan Blaaser en Fons Jansen en gans het land brulde zich te barsten als deze humoristen op de televisie of de radio waren. Dan was het stil op straat hoor. Dan daalden de misdaadcijfers, die toen overigens niks voorstelden.”

“de humorgestapo van BIJ1.”

4.4. The ‘humourless’ humour scholar

“lolbroekwetenschapper.”

“barstte in tranen uit. Van geluk uiteraard, want de mens die geconfronteerd wordt met een zuivere waarheid weet dat hij nimmer meer hoeft te dwalen.”

“Dat stelletje politiek correcte, humorloze bureaucraten, die linkse hobbies als gender, inclusiviteit, diversiteit, schuld en boetedoening boven artistiek en creatief talent willen stellen. #wokeiskilling.”

“Zo eens in de maand verschijnt er een twitterdraadje van een humorloze wokerd die precies het punt van leuke mensen die zich zorgen maken over humorloosheid en overgevoeligheid onderstreept.”

“dick_zijp heeft geen gevoel voor humor.”

“Dick Zijp is een humorloze en karakterloze flapdrol.”

“Ik denk dat die Dick Zijp een enorme humorloze lul is. Ik ken hem niet, maar dat denk ik. En ik denk ook dat ik daarin gelijk heb. Echt.”

“Humordeskundige of zoiets. Op zich al humor...”

“Humoronderzoeker, en daar wordt [sic] je ook nog voor betaald door de belastingbetaler, dat is pas humor!”

“Een professor in de humor is net zo vreemd als de paus die sexuele [sic] adviezen geeft. Geen enkele ervaring, wel een grote bek.”

“Is het beroep ‘humoronderzoeker’ niet bedacht door Nieuwspaal?”

“Humoronderzoeker, dat is toch niet van deze wereld?”

3. Conclusion, or the repoliticisation of the dying frog

“Oh, ik dacht humor dat ding dat zo leuk en gezellig is waar iedereen zo dol op is.”

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