

Book review

Ödmark, Sara (2021). *Jester, Journalist, or Just Jerk? The Roles of Political Comedians in Societal Debate*. Mid Sweden University.

Ödmark's dissertation seeks to define the possible roles of political comedians in the hybrid media landscape of modern societies, with a particular focus on the relationship between traditional journalists and comedians working publicly on similar issues. The dissertation, consisting of five articles, bridges humour research and communication and journalism studies.

The notion that humour and joking constitute an important part of public discourse has been present in scientific discussion for over half a century (e.g., Zijderveldt, 1968). For more than twenty years, scholars have also debated whether political satire is taking over – or should take over – certain societal duties traditionally considered to belong to news journalists (e.g., Gans, 2003, p. 106; Feldman, 2007, Jones, 2010). As a humour researcher and a professional news satire screenwriter, I consider such views rather extreme mainly because news satire tends to be commentary on a small selection of events previously described by traditional journalism sources. For example, following news satire shows as one's main news source means missing a lot of news. There is no doubt, however, that satire and political comedians play key roles in many societies as part of public discourse. Hence, it is important to define and understand this role based on scientific data.

Ödmark approaches both data collection and analysis from various viewpoints. The book focuses mainly on the media landscape and cultural context of a single Nordic country, Sweden, with few remarks on neighbouring Finland. As Ödmark points out, this emphasis needs to be taken into account when assessing the book's findings. However, as many forms of political humour, such as television news satire, are widespread, the book also offers interesting insights for societies that differ from the Nordic model.

The dissertation comprises five articles previously published in scientific journals, as well as a conclusion and synthesis of the points made in the articles. This synthesis opens the book, but as it is a result of the articles, I discuss it last in this review.

The first article (Ödmark, 2018) examines differences in *framing* between traditional news and political comedy. The study's quantitative content analysis focuses on Swedish political comedy and traditional Swedish news coverage, while also taking podcasts into account. A key finding is that professionally made political comedy frames news items more negatively and more personally than traditional news. However, this finding is hardly surprising for any comedy writer, as an effective joke needs a butt – preferably a person to laugh at, an enemy of some sort. Satire is, at its very core, criticism, so negativity is innate to political humour, which, in most cases, is a form of satire. Humour cannot be satire without the presence of a negative attitude toward someone or something – and a joke is rarely funny unless it contains a recognisable target.

Even though it is somewhat expected, this finding is thought provoking. The news itself has been criticised repeatedly as being too negative (notably Haagerup, 2014) and too focused on persons. For decades, a recurring finding in studies on news criteria is that known people, conflicts, and tragedies are the essential material of news (e.g., Galtung & Ruge, 1965; Harcup & O'Neill, 2001, 2017). The fact that political comedy endorses negativity and accentuates the

focus on persons could mean that political comedy further feeds unwanted media effects, such as the personalisation of politics and cynical views toward politics.

The second article (Ödmark & Koivukoski, 2020) shifts from the framing of political comedians' products to their work processes and motives. It investigates how different production team members of news satire programmes interpret their own work and work processes. Qualitative interviews with 16 producers, screenwriters, and other key team members of four satire TV and radio programmes shed light on the aims and routines of writing satire. The views of the interviewees are compared to classic journalistic ideals – the journalistic *ethos*. In the study, traditional journalists and satirists seem to share many ideals, with both striving for factuality, relevance, and political independence. However, more interestingly, the study also finds a significant difference between the groups. Whereas the journalistic ideal is to convey provable facts, satirists aim to use emotions, opinions, and exaggerated expressions to make their points.

This finding aligns with the earlier mention that comedians tend to be more focused on the negative rather than the positive and on people rather than on processes. If a programme aims to express critical opinions and provoke feelings, it easily becomes both negative and personified. As a satire show screenwriter, I agree that it is easier to provoke feelings toward people than toward processes and that expressing critical opinions without negativity is a challenging task. Exaggeration – one of the most important tools of comedy writing – tends to make things look worse.

The third article (Ödmark, 2021a) turns attention to the impact of humour on public discourse. Ödmark introduces three cases of humorous speech: one in radio, one on TV, and one in a podcast. All of these led to controversies and wider public discussion. Ödmark analyses 225 news items about these controversies to examine how humour affects the media framing of subjects of public discourse. As Ödmark notes, three cases are not sufficient to draw conclusions about all the possible impacts of humour. They are, however, enough to offer very interesting examples of *some* impacts.

The typical public discussion around humour controversies deals with hurt and offense. However, in the studied cases, the controversies also started wider debates in Sweden about human rights in China, feminism, and the role of public service media. The transgressive nature of humour started conversations capable of enriching public discourse, but it can also have the negative impact of hurting people and alienating them from the discussions. To me, the article highlights that satire is not an alternative to traditional journalism. Even though the transgressive nature of humour may promote discussion and thus complement traditional journalism, this same nature may alienate part of the audience by encouraging aggressive and insulting speech.

The fourth article (Ödmark & Harvard, 2021) continues the theme of the second one. Satirists working in television broadcasting were interviewed regarding how they perceive their role in society. Through in-depth interviews, 14 producers, screenwriters, presenters, and others working in satire shows describe their attitudes toward societal norms and other complicated concepts as well as very concrete processes, such as choosing satire show topics.

The article's results build on the notions found in the articles mentioned above. Satirists see their societal roles primarily as being “questioners” of societal norms and “eye openers,” who provide alternative perspectives. In the article, such roles are set in opposition to the goal of simply amusing and entertaining the audience, which recalls the findings of the third article. As satirists aim to offer new and surprising points of view, it is natural that their work launches new conversations on already known topics, as the third article suggested.

In my opinion, however, it is somewhat problematic to view amusement and entertainment as less valuable than “questioning” or “opening eyes.” In the context of contemporary affairs, amusement and entertainment can also be considered important results of humour. Invigoration

can be an important means of staying active when faced with a threatening world (cf. Lefcourt, 2001). The organisation of the article seems to imply that satire's societal value results from the use of the processes and tools of traditional journalism. After all, traditional journalism *should* also be opening eyes and questioning societal norms. I suggest that other features attributed to humour but not to journalism, such as mirth and enjoyment, might be of equal importance when evaluating what satire should solicit.

The fifth article (Ödmark, 2021b) seeks to outline a sort of ethics of satire, or “comedy accountability,” by drawing on professionals’ and laypeople’s opinions about the rules of comedy. For professional perspectives, 14 prominent Swedish comedians working in Swedish satire shows were interviewed. Laypeople’s views were found in various sources, such as news texts, editorials, and debate articles, concerning a Swedish humour controversy from 2018 that started when comedian Anton Magnusson released a rap song including descriptions of paedophilic abuse. After this, many other works by the same author were publicly deemed misogynist and racist.

In the article, five ethical values are presented through a combination of the professional interviews and a case study analysis of the aforementioned text material collected by Ödmark and concerning the controversy triggered by Magnusson’s rap song. The identified virtues of satire are *truth-telling, freedom of speech, order and cohesion, human dignity and equality, and nonmaleficence*. Interestingly, these virtues seem to be mutually exclusive. Or, at least, members of the public frequently used one of them to undermine others and vice versa. Among those discussing the controversy surrounding Magnusson’s rap song, some highlighted the importance of freedom of speech and others human dignity and equality. Interestingly, both groups emphasised nonmaleficence, but they took differing views on what it entails.

Finally, in the summary section of the book, Ödmark makes very interesting conclusive remarks based on the five articles. She proposes nine possible public roles that political comedians can play based, first, on their intentions to make a political impact and, second, on their willingness to challenge societal norms. These nine roles are divided into three clusters, which also constitute the name of the book: *journalist, jester, and jerk*.

Of these, the “jester” cluster is characterised by a very low intent to challenge societal norms. Jester-type comedians can be “entertainers,” “unifiers,” or “advocates,” depending on the amount of their political intent. The “jerk” cluster places heavy emphasis on challenging norms. Jerk-type comedians can be “provocateurs,” “questioners,” or “eye-openers,” depending again on the amount of their political intent. Comedians in the third cluster, the “journalists,” may have a very high or very low level of intent to challenge norms, but they always have a moderate level of political intent. Thus, journalist-type comedians can be not only unifiers or questioners but also “explainers,” which is the only role reserved solely for journalist comedians. The two other possible roles for political comedians are “solver” (moderate norm challenge, high political intent) and “reporter” (moderate norm challenge, low political intent), but these two types fall outside of the three main clusters.

To me, the role of “political comedian” seems extremely fluid. It might change during a single joke, or the comedian might shift from a complete “jerk” to a high-brow “journalist” and back during a single monologue. Indeed, it seems exceptional that a political comedian would *not* be a jerk *and* a jester during any single monologue, even if they also act as a journalist in the sense Ödmark uses the word. Thus, Ödmark’s “roles” might more appropriately be called “aspects” of a political comedian. Nevertheless, the divide between roles or aspects itself seems very useful and is supported by the data provided in the articles.

In conclusion, Ödmark’s book is an important and interesting contribution to ongoing discussions – both scholarly and popular – about the role of humour and political satire in public discourse. While numerous studies have offered theoretical propositions on the role of comedy

in modern public discourse, databased analyses of the subject are scarcer. This makes Ödmark's book all the more important. It should be read by everyone researching the interconnecting spaces of media and journalism studies and humour studies. Professional writers of political comedy could also benefit from familiarising themselves with Ödmark's findings. Personally, I have found the book's ideas both fascinating and thought provoking.

Some assumptions made in the book are debatable – most notably, the aforementioned idea that traditional journalistic goals are “higher” comedic goals than being “merely” amusing and entertaining. This idea is tied to a wider implication that “good” humour brings people together to solicit progress and “bad” humour divides people and destroys, which in turn seems aligned with the roles of the journalist comedian and the jerk comedian. This assumption, however, can be argued to be purely a question of perspective. To question, or even destroy something, for example, is not good or bad, hurtful or healing, in itself. Debatable elements are not, however, a bad thing when taking part in an ongoing debate, which Ödmark's book certainly is.

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