

From mocking pastors to roasting politicians: humour scandals, media dynamics and cultural conflict in the Netherlands, 1963-2021

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Abstract

In this article, I argue that humour scandals are less a product of the changing media landscape of the last thirty years than recent studies seem to suggest. Instead, I point to the structural continuities that can be observed in Dutch humour scandals over the past seventy years. Although stemming from various sociocultural and media contexts, these scandals roughly follow the same ‘script’. I also show that humour scandals are not just mediated events, but markers of cultural conflict as well. Behind every scandal, a substantial moral, cultural, and often also social divide can be recognised, and the study of humour scandals can be used to better understand such divides. I substantiate both of these claims through a qualitative, contextual analysis of two Dutch humour scandals: the mocking of Catholic pastors by comedian Wim Sonneveld in a TV performance from 1963, and the roast of far-right politician Thierry Baudet by comedian Martijn Koning in a popular late night talk show from Spring 2021.

Keywords: humour scandals, public sphere, the Netherlands, cultural conflict, mass media.

1. Introduction

“In order to find something funny, one must be able to imagine someone who would not find it funny,” writes linguistic anthropologist Elise Kramer in her seminal article on rape jokes (2011, p. 163). At first glance, this may sound counterintuitive, but Kramer’s examples prove the point: rape jokes are funny for some people, exactly because other people do not find them funny at all. As such, these jokes, or better said: the arguments about these jokes, almost automatically become part of the process of identity formation: “The kind of person who tells rape jokes (or objects to rape jokes) is a certain kind of citizen and a certain kind of moral subject; (dis)approval of rape jokes is seen as linking up to a constellation of other moral and political stances and behaviors.” (Kramer, 2011, p. 160)

I contend that this observation of Kramer on how the lovers and haters of a certain joke, or a certain type of jokes, presuppose each other, is also very important for understanding humour scandals. A common assumption when talking about such scandals is that something went

wrong. A joke was made, in order to make people laugh or offer them some form of amusement, but people became angry instead. A light-hearted situation thus turns into a sticky one, where comedians are met with public outrage, and sometimes even legal measures or (the threat of) physical violence. However, if we follow Kramer's line of reasoning, humour scandals are both inevitable and necessary, as disagreement is inherent to humour itself: "[T]hose who find a joke funny and those who do not are mutually constitutive groups that cannot exist without each other." (Kramer, 2011, p. 163)

My research on Dutch humour scandals from the last seventy years substantiates this claim. Although the number of scandals varies from time to time, even in periods known for their liberal *zeitgeist* some controversies can be found (Nieuwenhuis, 2023). Combining this result with Kramer's observation I consider the presence of humour scandals in the modern public sphere as a given, despite the fact that they often lead to feelings of unease among journalists, politicians, or humour scholars, for that matter.

Rather than explaining what "went wrong" and why, in this article I set out to disentangle the complex interplay between media dynamics and cultural context that usually determines how a humour scandal unfolds itself. By doing so, I want to contribute to the still emerging field of "humour scandal studies", which finds its basis in Giseline Kuipers' much-cited article on the Mohammed Cartoon Crisis, in which she effectively coined the term "humour scandal" and made a strong argument for its relevance for our understanding of the contemporary public sphere (Kuipers, 2011). At the moment, a large group of scholars from all across Europe is researching humour scandals as part of the *Hu-Sca* project.¹ To their focus on the present and recent past I add a more long-term perspective, grounded in extensive contextual analysis.

Based on historical research that I conducted for a monograph on Dutch humour scandals since the 1950s, I here present two case studies of controversial comedy: the mocking of Catholic pastors by comedian Wim Sonneveld in a TV performance from 1963, and the roast of far-right politician Thierry Baudet by comedian Martijn Koning in a popular late night talk show from Spring 2021. The 'scripts' that these two scandals follow turn out to show some striking similarities, despite the large differences in sociocultural and media context between the two cases. This prompts the hypothesis that humour scandals are not solely, and maybe even not primarily, the product of the changing media landscape that is said to typify the European and Anglo-Saxon public sphere since the 1990s (cf. Allern & Pollack, 2012; Chadwick, 2017; Pollack et al., 2018; Habermas, 2022). They can also be understood as markers of cultural conflict, as Kramer's article already implies. When we witness a humour scandal, we are not only exposed to a mediated event, but also see a society fighting out some of its more fundamental moral and ideological battles.

In what follows, I will further explore this hypothesis. I start by fleshing out my definition of humour scandals, and subsequently relating it to the broader conceptual framework of public sphere theory. Then, I will briefly reflect on my methodology and selection of data. The main part of the article is devoted to a close analysis of the two cases mentioned above, which are discussed from three perspectives: 1) the script they follow; 2) the roles played by the specific media involved; 3) the connection to broader social and political developments taking place at the moment that the scandal occurs.

2. Humour scandals as media phenomena and markers of cultural conflict

In her 2011 article, Kuipers defines humour scandals as "public controversies about transgressive humour" (p. 64). Focusing on the Mohammed Cartoon Crisis of 2005-06, when

¹ The first results of this project can be found elsewhere in this special issue, esp. in Herkman and Koivukoski (this volume).

twelve cartoons in the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* led to heated debates and various outbursts of violence worldwide, Kuipers is primarily interested in what such scandals tell us about geopolitical tensions and the global public sphere. She speaks of “an increasingly transnational public arena”, in which humour plays a dominant role that we have yet to understand. Showing that this role was not so pretty in case of the Danish cartoons is one of the main aims of the article: “Existing power relations were reinforced rather than criticized or inverted, and the humorous nature of the cartoons impeded rather than stimulated open exchange.” (Kuipers, 2011, p. 64)

As illustrative as the Mohammed Cartoon Crisis thus is for the global political and cultural conflicts that were played out in the first decade of the twenty-first century, it is important to stress that this crisis is much less representative for the phenomenon of humour scandals in general. At least until the 1990s, but even today, the majority of those scandals take place on a national level. The main reason for this is that most instances of comedy are (partly) verbal, and hence primarily directed to an audience that shares the linguistic and cultural codes that are necessary to understand and appreciate – or detest – the jokes that are being made. This audience is often, although not exclusively, found within the boundaries of a national community like the United States or the Netherlands.²

In more recent research on humour scandals, the study of political scandals forms another key point of reference.³ The latter type of scandals has already received ample attention by scholars working in the field of media and communication sciences (Thompson, 2000; Tumber & Waisbord, 2004; Allern et al., 2012; Pollack et al., 2018; Zulli, 2021). Although the insights stemming from the empirical work that has been carried out by these scholars are certainly valuable when looking at public controversies about humour, there are also some crucial differences between the two types of scandals that need to be mentioned here. Most importantly, humour scandals lack the dynamic between concealment and disclosure – revealing potentially damaging acts by a politician that were supposed to stay out of sight – that is so crucial in political scandals (cf. Thompson, 2000; Pollack et al. 2018). Hence, the type of public disputes that humour scandals raise do usually not revolve around the issue of trust, but rather focus on matters like the freedom of speech, or the rules about who or what can or cannot be ridiculed in public.

What political scandals and humour scandals do have in common is that they are, by definition, “mediated events” (Thompson, 2000, p. 9). A potentially controversial bit of comedy, or a form of potentially transgressive behaviour by a politician, only becomes a scandal if it is being marked as such in public. With regard to humour, newspapers and talk shows on television turn out to be the most successful performers of this act of marking (Nieuwenhuis, 2023). By publishing angry letters to the editor about a comedian, or by letting an influential columnist give their opinion on a satirical show, these media not only offer a platform to those that are outraged, they also function as a catalyst. More people become actively involved with the scandal, and are invited to develop a strong opinion about the comedy at stake, either positive or negative.

The mediated character of both political and humour scandals sometimes results in the impression that they have been purposefully designed to offer hungry entertainment platforms their daily dose of juicy content. Still, no media outlet is capable of creating a scandal *ex nihilo*. A second important ingredient, then, is cultural conflict. As John B. Thompson states in his seminal study on political scandal, we are dealing here not only with mediated events, but also with “struggles for symbolic power” (Thompson, 2000, p. 9). When a joke or a comedian

² Kuipers herself is actually well aware of this importance of national context, given that her interest in the phenomenon of humour scandals originates in her research on the role of transgression within various national humour styles (Kuipers, 2015).

³ See for example the article of Herkman and Koivukoski elsewhere in this special issue.

becomes controversial, this usually means that there is public disagreement about whether or not the humour at stake is socially or morally acceptable.

Different from the situation with political scandals, which are generally viewed in ethical terms, in the case of humour, this disagreement is often framed as a matter of aesthetics or taste (Kuipers, 2015). Was the joke “actually funny” or not? Is this a talented comedian or a poor one? It seems that, in most, if not all examples of humour scandals, these quarrels over the “quality” of the joke divert the attention from the underlying issue what norms and values are expressed by the comedian or the satirical show that is under scrutiny, and how various persons and groups in society relate to those norms and values.

To fully tackle the latter point, we need to embed the study of humour scandals in the broader framework of public sphere theory. Following the classic model of Jürgen Habermas, this sphere is characterised by rational deliberation: people in democratic societies are publicly exchanging arguments, so as to settle their ideological disagreements (Habermas, 1989). Theorists like Chantal Mouffe have proposed an alternative model, in which there is more room for conflict and emotions (Mouffe, 2005). In their view, the ultimate goal of a healthy public sphere is not to settle conflicts, but to manage them democratically and without bloodshed. This view presupposes the fact that there will always be conflicts of interest between members of a given society, and hence that it is helpful to consider politics and public debate as a game in which the participants look at each other as antagonists, all fighting for a different outcome of the debate, rather than aimed at reaching consensus.

This “agonistic” model of the public sphere (Mouffe, 2013) makes it understandable why controversies about humour keep popping up in this sphere. When we acknowledge that people can have strongly different opinions on how society should be organised, it makes sense that they can also heavily disagree about what kind of humour is socially or morally acceptable. Like with other types of public disagreement about cultural issues, the position that specific actors take in these kind of conflicts over the boundaries of humour depends on their own place in the social hierarchy, and the interests that come with that place (Nieuwenhuis & Zijp, 2022). Both the making of provocative comedy and the protests against it should in this regard be seen as attempts to influence the outcome of an ongoing debate.

3. Analysing humour scandals

That humour can give rise to such debates is by no means something new. There are examples of humour scandals dating back to at least the sixteenth century (Mulder, 2020). Still, they seem to have significantly increased in both number and intensity since the advent of mass media in the mid-twentieth century.

With the introduction of first the radio (in the 1920s) and later television (in the 1940s), it becomes possible to reach millions of spectators at once with the same performance. These spectators do not have to move to a predetermined space like a theatre or a town square to see this performance, but can enjoy it from the intimacy of their homes. Culture, including comedy, becomes more accessible than ever. The other side of the coin is that people are also more easily shocked and put off by the content they are able to experience thanks to the innovative technique of broadcasting. A classic example is the 1938 radio play *War of the Worlds*, in which an invasion of Martians is staged. This performance leads to widespread social panic in the United States, where the play is aired, because dozens of listeners do not understand that the invasion is fictional. That a radio show, aimed at bringing amusement, can have such serious consequences makes the authorities quite wary of this new medium (Cantril, 1940).

Up until the early 1960s, political and broadcasting authorities, who often have close ties, are quite successful in containing the potential for controversy on radio and television via strict

regulations and censorship (Wijffjes, 1988). From the mid-1960s onwards, these censorship policies are quickly loosened. Around the same time, the number of humour scandals rises sharply, at least in the Netherlands. This curve flattens again about eight years later, in the early 1970s, only to rise again after 2010.

These observations regarding the ‘market trends’ of humour scandals are based on a qualitative analysis of Dutch printed and audiovisual sources, mostly stemming from the digitized archive of Dutch newspapers Delpher, and the collection of the Netherlands Institute for Sound & Vision. For my monograph on Dutch humour scandals (Nieuwenhuis, 2023) I extensively browsed these archives, using various relevant keywords. This led to an initial list of about thirty scandals between 1956 and 2021, the year when I started my research. In the end, I selected ten of them for a close contextual analysis. This selection was based both on the amount of media coverage I could find for the scandal, and on the extent to which the scandal could be considered as symptomatic for broader social, cultural or political developments in the Netherlands. The initial list, as well the final selection, were checked by a specialist in the subject matter for obvious mistakes or omissions.

Both in my book and in this article, I have chosen to use a very broad and pragmatic definition of humour scandals, so as to account for the varied and often contingent nature of cultural practices. The only two criteria for an event or situation to count as a humour scandal were that a) a *public fuss* was being made; and b) the primary cause of this fuss was an instance of *publicly uttered humour*. Any form of indignation here counts as a fuss, ranging from slight annoyance to furious anger. The criterion of publicness implies that both the humour and the fuss are expressed in publicly available sources, more in particular newspapers, radio and television broadcasts and online platforms (including, but not limited to, social media).

In the following sections, I will discuss two scandals from the final selection. I already briefly introduced these cases at the beginning of this article. The first, which took place in 1963, is situated relatively early on the timeline that I follow in my book. The second, which took place in 2021, concerns the last scandal I have analysed. As indicated, I will compare these case studies on three grounds:

- 1) the script that is followed;
- 2) the roles played by the specific media involved;
- 3) the connection to broader social and political developments taking place at the moment that the scandal occurs.

The overall method I use is that of *contextual analysis*, whereby empirical observations of the social, political and cultural circumstances under which the scandals took place are combined with close readings of the mediated sources that form the core data in this type of research.

4. Comparing two Dutch humour scandals (1): scripts

4.1. Scandal 1: Wim Sonneveld plays Friar Venantius (1963)

“May I introduce myself to you? I am the singing friar from Limburg.”⁴ With these words, the acclaimed Dutch comedian Wim Sonneveld (1917-1974) presents his comic character Frater Venantius (“Friar Venantius”) to the several million spectators that are gathered in front of their TV screens on the evening of Saturday 12 October 1963 to watch the live broadcast of the Grand Gala du Disque, a prestigious annual musical festival, sponsored by the Dutch record companies. For the occasion, Sonneveld has put on a clerical collar and large glasses, which he takes off to polish them every now and then. He also has an acoustic guitar hanging around his neck, and he

⁴ All Dutch quotes are translated into English by myself. For the original quotes, see Nieuwenhuis, 2023.

speaks with a thick accent that is particularly associated with the southern province of Limburg, where the singing friar claims to live.

Friar Venantius tells his audience some bawdy anecdotes about his life as a Catholic priest, which he intersperses from time to time with a jolly and light-hearted tune that he plays on his guitar: “Say yes to life, yes to life / with an ‘amen’ and a ‘gloria’, hurray. / Say yes to life, yes to life / otherwise, life will say no.” (Sonneveld, 1965) The guests that are present at the venue where the Grand Gala is taking place are laughing frankly at Sonneveld’s performance, which recognisably mocks the recent stream of Catholic priests who, in line with the overall tendency towards a more progressive and open-minded church, replaced their grave hymns and prayers in Latin for popular tunes in the vernacular, whereby they accompanied themselves on the guitar.

Some TV watchers are less enthusiastic. Dozens of people phone the broadcasting company already during the broadcast of the Grand Gala to express their dissatisfaction with Sonneveld’s comic persona (*Het Parool*, 14 October 1963). In the following week, angry letters to the editor start to appear in various Dutch newspapers. The authors, many of them coming from the southern part of the country, which is predominantly Catholic, call the performance of last Saturday “disgusting”, “offensive” and “poor”. Thus, a scandal is born. For about a week, the singing friar from Limburg is all over the news. One paper interviews the comedian himself, who declares that those who took offence at Friar Venantius are narrow-minded people whose opinions “have nothing to do with true religion” (*De Telegraaf*, 16 October 1963). Over the course of the week, the supporters of Sonneveld’s act overshadow the critics, with more and more letters in favour of Friar Venantius, and negative towards the people who felt offended, starting to be published.

In terms of the script that is followed, we can discern three crucial steps:

- 1) a public act of ridicule, performed on television and watched by a mass audience;
- 2) an immediate response of anger and indignation, coming from people who watched this act of ridicule, and taking the form of both private (phone calls) and public (letters to the editor) expressions of the strongly negative feelings prompted by the act;
- 3) a secondary response, critical towards the initial response of anger and indignation, whereby both the performer of the act and regular audience members publicly defend this act.



Figure 1. Wim Sonneveld as Friar Venantius at the Grand Gala du Disque in 1963. Source: still from Youtube.

4.2. Scandal 2: Martijn Koning roasts far-right politician Thierry Baudet (2021)

In the spring of 2021 there are general elections in the Netherlands. One of the most notable participants in this election is far-right politician Thierry Baudet, whose strong anti-migration and anti-“woke” agenda has been recently enriched with various new shades of conspiracy thinking under the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic. The Dutch media love Baudet, because of his outspokenness and flamboyant persona (cf. Kouters, 2017), but the politician is also notorious for his habit to simply break off an interview or media performance when he judges that he is being approached too condescending. This is also what Baudet does when comedian Martijn Koning is delivering a sharply satirical speech to him in a popular talk show of the commercial Dutch TV channel RTL4, anchored by star journalist Eva Jinek.

Both in its form and in its content, this speech has all the characteristics of a roast, but, notably, it is not introduced as such to the audience. Standing behind a rostrum and wearing a gala outfit, Koning declares Baudet’s political party to be completely irrelevant for the coming elections. Even racists and antisemites will not vote for you, the comedian says to Baudet: “They will certainly not fall for the antisemitic remarks of you and your friends, and they also know that your girlfriend is Jewish. Shortly, you will become the father of Menachem or Sara Baudet, and then an antisemitic voter would feel quite pulled by its jackbooted leg.” (GenQ, 2021) The latter refers to the recently announced pregnancy of Baudet’s girlfriend, who is indeed Jewish, a fact that his followers often use to claim that he cannot be an antisemite (cf. Heijmans, 2021). Not long after Koning has uttered these words, Baudet is leaving the talk show table. While Koning continues his mocking speech imperturbably, watchers of the show already start to respond to what just happened on Twitter. Most of them criticise Koning for being “not funny” and “hateful” against Baudet. “This has nothing to do with ‘comedy’,” someone says. “Disgusting television,” another person states. “A shame, this performance by Martijn Koning,” declares a third person. Perhaps somewhat surprisingly, the producers of the talk show turn out to agree with these outrageous comments. The next day, they release a press statement in which they declare:

For both RTL4 [the broadcasting channel], the editorial staff and Eva Jinek freedom of speech is a precious good. Nevertheless, in our view a boundary was crossed here, and we distance ourselves completely from the contents of Martijn Koning’s contribution. During the closing moments of the show, there was not enough room to respond to this properly. Immediately after the show, Eva Jinek contacted Thierry Baudet to apologise. It was a good conversation.

(RTL, 2021)

In the weeks following Koning’s roast, the comedian receives numerous hateful messages, including death threats (Jansen, 2021). There are also people who publicly throw themselves into the breach for Koning (Schimmelpenninck, 2021; Betty Asphalt TV, 2021). All together, they make his performance into a classic humour scandal, in which members of a society clash over an attempt at satire.

The script followed by this scandal is roughly the same as what we saw with Friar Venantius. There is a public act of ridicule, performed on television (1), an immediate response of anger (2), which, thanks to social media, becomes public from the moment people start typing a tweet on their phone; and, finally, a secondary response, critical towards the initial response (3).



Figure 2. Martijn Koning roasts Thierry Baudet, who walks away during the speech. Source: still from Youtube.

5. Comparing two Dutch humour scandals (2): media dynamics

Two media turn out to play a pivotal role in both the controversy surrounding Friar Venantius and the rumour caused by Martijn Koning's roast of Thierry Baudet: television and national newspapers.

I already mentioned the rise of television as a mass medium in the mid-twentieth century as an important factor in the inception of the "modern style" humour scandal. Because so many people can experience the same performance at the same moment, without leaving the intimacy of their homes, it becomes more easy to shock the audience. This is clearly visible in the Sonneveld case. Those who are physically present at the Grand Gala du Disque unequivocally appreciate the comic persona presented by Sonneveld. The cameras register how the audience is laughing out loud when Friar Venantius is making a risqué joke about the prospect that, thanks to the liberal-minded Second Vatican Council that is assembling at that time, clergymen will soon be rid of their vow to compulsory celibacy. The journalists who report about the gala in the Monday newspapers all mention the act of Friar Venantius as a highlight of the evening (*Het Parool*, 14 October 1963; *De Tijd-Maasbode*, 14 October 1963). Yet when this act reaches the living rooms of approximately a million Dutch households, it turns out that the televised image of a famous comedian who is ridiculing both Catholic priests and the inhabitants of the province of Limburg (because of his accent) has a different effect. Many spectators at home also appreciate Friar Venantius, but a significant portion of them is heavily offended.

Likewise, in the Koning case it is an act on television that forms the starting point of a public controversy. What we learn from this is that, despite the fact that the television industry has changed significantly in the years between 1963 and 2021, the medium itself has become far from obsolete. It still matters that something was "on the tele", especially if it concerns a live broadcast. In such a situation, the speed with which a scandal can unfold itself is remarkable. With Friar Venantius, angry watchers start to call the broadcasting company already during the show. In the case of Koning's roast, they go on Twitter. In both instances, the response of anger that is prompted by the performance of a comedian is immediately translated into the deed of sharing this feeling with a wider social circle.

The difference in immediacy between the two scandals is thus not so big. This points to a continuity in the role and position of television as a driving force of public controversy. The way in which television performs this role has of course changed significantly. The broadcast of the Grand Gala du Disque was viewed by a significantly larger percentage of the Dutch

population than the talk show in which Koning did his roast of Thierry Baudet. In this sense, a TV show had more impact sixty years ago than it has today. This lack of impact, however, is compensated by the technological possibilities offered by the internet. Audience members in 1963 can phone the broadcasting company, or send them an angry letter or postcard. Those of 2021 have the opportunity to share their anger with anyone who wishes to read it on a platform like Twitter. They can also relatively easy forward a fragment of the show they just saw to their friends or followers. In this way, the original footage has the potential to reach a much wider audience than only those who sat in front of their TV when Koning was delivering his speech.

Next to television, national newspapers are also crucial in both scandals. They do not simply “pay attention” to the rumour caused by Friar Venantius and Koning’s speech, respectively, but they actively frame these two incidents. On Tuesday 15 October 1963, only three days after Wim Sonneveld did his act as Friar Venantius at the Grand Gala du Disque, the then Catholic newspaper *de Volkskrant* presents a selection of angry letters to the editor about this act. Right under the angry letters, the newspaper publishes two short interviews with actual singing priests, who both are very positive about Sonneveld’s act. Curate De Rooy from the southern Dutch town of Veghel, for example, states: “I happened to find it a beautiful routine and I had good laugh about it. I do not understand why this should not be allowed. I perfectly see the relativity of what I am doing. Whoever loves my songs may listen to them.”

Although, at first glance, *de Volkskrant* here seems to support the indignation caused by Friar Venantius, by offering the angry viewers a platform, upon closer inspection the stance taken by this influential Catholic (!) newspaper is much more in favour of those who actually liked the Venantius routine. The angry letters are published under the headline “Yes or no to life?”, which alludes to the jolly tune that formed the heart of Sonneveld’s performance (“Say yes to life, yes to life / with an ‘amen’ and a ‘gloria’, hurray”). The interviews with the two singing priests have the phrase “Singing priests: yes” as their headline. Both these playful headlines and the fact that the angry responses of ordinary viewers are juxtaposed with two authoritative positive voices, put the people that are offended by Sonneveld’s act in a somewhat ironic light. It is perhaps not so surprising that, when two days later, *de Volkskrant* publishes another round of letters, the majority of these are positive about Friar Venantius, and critical about those who felt offended by this comic character.



Figure 3. “Yes or no to life?” Letters to the editor about Friar Venantius in *de Volkskrant*, 15 October 1963. Source: www.delpher.nl.

In the case of Martijn Koning it is specifically one influential columnist and TV critic who plays an important role in the framing of the incident. Writing for the widely read newspaper *Algemeen Dagblad* and a bunch of regional newspapers, this critic, Angela de Jong, has become an authoritative voice in Dutch public opinion in the years before Koning performed his act (Scheulderman, 2018). The day after his roast, she writes in her column “Angela watches TV”: “Thierry Baudet was completely right, when, last night during Martijn Koning’s rant, he stood up from Eva Jinek’s talk show table, buttoned up his jacket, and walked out of the studio with his head up high.” (De Jong, 2021) About the roast she says: “This was pure hatred that had nothing to do with comedy and humour.”

This outspoken response in a way formalises the overall atmosphere on Twitter during and immediately after the show was broadcast, in which the alleged fact that Koning’s roast does not count as a form of “true” humour or comedy is used to substantiate the claim that he simply “went too far”, and that a ban for this kind of “hate speech” is desirable. Note how here, aesthetic arguments are used to make a point that is basically ethical. Disagreement with the “hateful” message that is distilled from the Koning’s act is immediately translated into a supposed lack of “good” comic performance, whereby the implicit suggestion is that, if Koning would have been a better, more talented comedian, people would not have been bothered by the content of his speech.

Like with the role of television, we can observe how the importance of the medium of the (national) newspaper for the framing of humour scandals remains intact between 1963 and 2021, even when the actual functioning of this medium has (slightly) changed. In 1963, a newspaper like *de Volkskrant* can take a leading role in this framing, for example by making the journalistic choice to find and interview two actual singing priests. In 2021, columnist Angela de Jong seems to align her opinion with a consensus that has already been formed on social media, more in particular on Twitter. She is more a follower, or better said: an amplifier, than a leader, looking at the tenor of her column.

6. Comparing two Dutch humour scandals (3): social and political circumstances

When we zoom in on the media dynamics surrounding humour scandals, the impression may arise that a great deal of those scandals falls under the category “much ado about nothing”. The latter qualification, however, does not do justice to the more fundamental cultural conflicts to which such a controversy can usually be linked. To understand the relationship between humour scandals and such conflicts, we need to look at the broader social and political developments that form both the background and the soil of these mediated events.

Overlooking the past sixty years in the history of Dutch society, we can observe that there are periods with less and with more cultural conflict. The 1960s and 1970s, and the last ten years stand out in particular as times in which the ideological and cultural differences in Dutch society are relatively large. These times are also often qualified as polarised, which refers not only to the stark contrasts between the ideologies or values of, for example, younger and older generations, or the receivers of vocational and higher education, but also to the heated tone of public debates (Boxell et al., 2020). Such periods of polarisation alternate with periods in which there is more consensus.

The number of humour scandals seems to keep pace with this alternation of periods of discord and consensus in society. In the late 1960s and in the past seven years there are many more of those scandals than there were, for example, in the 1980s and 1990s (Nieuwenhuis, 2023). This makes sense if we take into account that for a controversy to arise, it is necessary that various (groups of) people disagree about what can or cannot be said or done in public. In

the 1950s there is a broad consensus that references to sexuality and nudity should be avoided in popular culture and the public sphere. In the 1960s, this consensus starts to break down, and what is often called the sexual revolution takes place (cf. Schuyt & Taverne, 2004). In practice, this means that various groups in society clash over the norms and values regarding sexuality, whether or not these should stay as they were, or develop into a more liberal direction. Once a new, in this case more liberal consensus is established, the number of controversies starts to wane.

The periods from which the two scandals that I compare here stem are thus similar in the extent to which they are dominated by social, political and cultural turbulence. The kind of norms and values that form the main topic of debate, however, are very different, as I already noted at the end of the section on scripts. A closer analysis of the norms and values that are at stake in the two scandals substantiates this point.

In the case of Friar Venantius, we are dealing with the issue how religious authorities should be approached in public. The old norm here is that this approach is, in principle, deferential. Representatives of the church are, in a quite literal sense, sacred. They embody the Christian faith, either in its Catholic or in its Protestant variation. By 1963, this norm is more and more challenged by the view that, in principle, all humans are equal, and thus should be treated equally, which means that even if a person represents a sacred authority like the Church, he – usually not: she – can become the butt of a joke or can be mocked if his behaviour is considered by some as laughable.

The mixed responses to Wim Sonneveld's Friar Venantius routine show how this change from reverence for authorities to "we are all equal" is in progress, and also bound up with societal differences. One spectator from the southern Dutch village of Tegelen speaks of "the disgusting mister Sonneveld" and his "tasteless nonsense about the south and monks" (*de Volkskrant*, 15 October 1963). Yet others, mostly based in the more urbanised and secularised west of the country, respond to this type of criticism with a call to develop a sense of humour. "I am certain that the entire country had a wonderful time", one such person writes apodictic. "All honour to the man who has made laugh so hard after a day of hard work," another one says. A third reader adds:

I advise the folks who have so sharply criticised Wim Sonneveld to daily say the prayer by Saint Thomas More: "Grant me, O Lord, a sense of good humour. Allow me the grace to be able to take a joke to discover in life a bit of joy, and to be able to share it with others."

(*de Volkskrant*, 17 October 1963)

It is quite striking how soon these supportive responses take over the debate. This shows us that, by 1963, the development towards a less reverent way of dealing with authorities is already in full swing. Overlooking the complete set of public responses, the protesters against Friar Venantius turn out to be a minority voice, coming mainly from a section of society, the Catholic south, with a long history of subordination. The rule that anyone should be able to take a joke is imposed on them by those who have more cultural dominance.

In 2021, when Martijn Koning delivers his roast of Thierry Baudet, this rule is again under fire. In the years before, various incidents have taken place in the Netherlands whereby comedians are held accountable for making a certain joke, not so much because this joke implies an irreverent attitude towards a figure of authority, but because it is considered to be at the expense of more vulnerable or marginal groups in society, like trans persons or people of colour. Relatively well-known among Dutch people is the rumour that acclaimed comedian Youp van 't Hek causes when he calls a supposed perpetrator of sexual harassment a "piss queer" in his widely read column in national newspaper *NRC*, and explicitly refuses to apologise for this after various other public figures bring to his attention the potentially hurtful effect the use of this homophobic invective can have (Zijp, 2023, pp. 45-46).

Interesting to see here is how political and social alliances have shifted. In the 1960s and 70s, the production and appreciation of transgressive and irreverent comedy is mainly associated with an upcoming class of media and cultural professionals who align themselves with a progressive political attitude. Already starting in the 1990s, but more in particular after 2000, this type of comedy is being (re)appropriated by right-wing politicians and media, who frequently make transgressive jokes against, for example, Muslim migrants to attack what they term the “political correctness” of their left-wing opponents (Oudenampsen, 2020). As a result, progressively minded people, especially of younger generations, start to question the old consensus, in their own circles and beyond, that transgressive humour and blunt jokes are “good”, regardless of their target.

The backfire caused by Martijn Koning’s roast of Thierry Baudet seems to be a byproduct of this political development. Although his mockery is directed against a figure who can in many ways be considered an authority – someone with a substantial following, who receives ample media attention – the primary response to his speech shows much likeness to how in previous years the makers of jokes against vulnerable or marginal groups were treated. What we learn from this is that, in the slipstream of the raised awareness of the potential harm that humour can do to marginal groups, the overall tolerance for transgressive comedy has decreased. Whereas right-wing commentators are always keen on defending the freedom to make any kind of joke when a comedian receives critical responses to their work, they just as easy fall prey to the temptation to chastise a performer of blunt jokes whenever these jokes make them feel uneasy (cf. Schimmelpenninck, 2021).

What we are dealing with in contemporary Dutch society, then, is not simply an ideological conflict between progressive humour critics and conservative humour fans, but the much more complex tension between the individual freedom to say whatever you like to as many people you like, and the responsibility, or lack thereof, to take into account the potential consequences that the unrestrained use of this freedom can have for other people. This tension is especially felt in a public sphere that becomes more and more dependent on social media platforms that are owned and managed by big tech companies for whom conflict and outrage are a way to make money, a development that prompts the need find a balance between “healthy” political disagreement and damaging personal hostility (cf. Jäger, 2021).

7. Conclusion

To sum up: based on my findings for the Dutch context, the type of “modern style” humour scandal that starts to appear with the rise of mass media in the mid-twentieth century, is strongly dependent on two media in particular: television and national newspapers. Even in the age of social media and streaming services, these “old” media remain of vital importance, a fact that is acknowledged by media scholars (Chadwick, 2013). Next to this, humour scandals are important markers of cultural conflict. Regardless if they concern the mocking of a representative of the Catholic Church or the roast of a popular politician, the scandals that I discussed in this article reveal the presence of some sort of tension or struggle within society.

These results enhance our understanding of the social role of humour in general, and the workings of humour scandals in particular. Regarding the former, my research brings two relevant insights to the fore. First, by focusing on the oft-neglected response of anger, it adds to the growing body of scholarly work that puts the more “negative” aspects and consequences of humour centre stage, a line of research that is also known as critical comedy/humour studies (e.g. Billig, 2005; Ford & Ferguson, 2004; Kuipers, 2011; Lockyer & Pickering, 2005; Pérez, 2022; Weaver, 2011; Zijp 2023). Second, through its focus on the relationship between humour and public debates, it further explores the various ways in which humour can be, and often is,

political, both in the present and in the past. We align ourselves with certain social groups or certain public positions by telling or appreciating a certain type of jokes, and by detesting others. This implies that jokes and comedy are bearers of cultural and moral values, even if they claim to be “just nonsense”, or an attempt at laughter that can purely be judged aesthetically. This inherent “politicality” of humour is more and more acknowledged by humour scholars and in public opinion, but we are only starting to discover the many forms that the politics of humour can take (cf. Nieuwenhuis and Zijp, 2022).

Humour scandals are a promising lens for taking up further explorations on this terrain, so I hope to have shown with this article, not only for our current, digitised age, but also for older periods. Contrary to what most research on political scandals suggests, the mechanisms behind such scandals, both in terms of the scripts they follow and in terms of the role played by specific media, are remarkably stable, at least since the advent of mass media in the mid-twentieth century. Humour scandals from the 1960s and from the 2020s roughly have the same structure.

What has changed is the content of the cultural conflicts that are played out in humour scandals. As society runs its historical course, the topics and issues over which power struggles arise gradually shift, as do the specific symbolic arenas in which these struggles are fought out. In the Netherlands, the provocative potential of jokes about Catholics or the royal family is long gone. Still, it seems more easy than ever to spark controversy by publicly uttering a joke or satirical sketch. A probable explanation for this is that the underlying pattern in which differences in social position and privileges among members of the public sphere team up with strong opinions about what kind of humour is “good” or “bad”, has always remained, and may be more persistent than those who wish to believe in the power of humour to unite us all would like to admit.

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