

Book review

Koivukoski, Joonas (2022) *Political Humour in the Hybrid Media environment: Studies on Journalistic Satire and Amusing Advocacy*. Publications of the Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Helsinki.

Koivukoski's work on the entanglement of politics and humour in hybrid media environments seeks to offer a viable model of analysis and interpretation of the manners in which mediated humour affects the formation of political opinion and identities, and affects the public sphere in liberal democracies at large. The interplay of humour and politics has been studied for some time, but the rise of the digital media and hybridisation of genres makes the need even more pressing and challenging.

Koivukoski's unique contribution to the subject develops on several levels. Conceptually, Koivukoski creates a systematic approach by drawing on four key political aspects of mediated humour that inform his analysis, including: *content*, *style*, *identity* and *circulation*. This conception allows Koivukoski to pay attention both to the contents of humour and to its producers and consumers. Empirically, Koivukoski offers an analysis of novel material, both in terms of genre and national context: Nordic journalist satire, Finish gonzo journalism, populist humour and humorous political advocacy. Koivukoski's attempt to construct a model of analysis of the interplay between politics and humour is organised into nine chapters. Koivukoski's PhD dissertation is the basis for the first five chapters complemented with four (co)authored articles published in internationally renowned journals.

The introductory chapter briefs the research subject and the key questions, outlines the organisation of the book and provides pithy summaries of the four articles that materialise the suggested model.

Relying on Otto et al.'s (2017) multidimensional and multilevel analysis of the "softening of political journalism", chapter 2 provides an account of the hybridity between humour and politics in the media environment. It explains how humour and politics are intertwined on the "levels" of content, practices, identities, and the public sphere. Building on this concept of hybridity, chapter 3 outlines an analytical approach that underpins the study of the political aspects of mediated humour based on four key political aspects of political humour in hybrid media environment: content, style, identity and circulation, each one further subdivided into two sub-aspects. Within the category of content, Koivukoski discusses the advocative role humour, its persuasive power and focus (Bode and Becker, 2018) and the extent to which political humour is informative (Chattoo and Feldman, 2017; Becker and Bode, 2018). The category of style is further divided into the subcategories of humorous polysemy, ambiguity (LaMarre et al., 2009), and tone (i.e. the attitude of humour towards its targets and the possibility of social change).

The identity aspect of political humour concerns questions of how political humour contributes to the construction of political identities and how it symbolically represents different social religious, ethnic, sexual collective identities. Circulation encompasses questions concerning the popularity of political humour, its potential to act as means of popularisation of

political ideas (Sørensen, 2016) and as a tool that mobilises participation (Sørensen 2016; Bode and Becker, 2018; Feldman and Chattoo, 2019).

A digression here is in order, to raise the awareness, that these categories, neatly discussed by Koivukoski are not clear-cut. The category of representation, for example, within the larger category of identity, overlaps/intersects with those of tone (i.e. the disparaging manner in which different groups are represented) and content (i.e. who is represented and how). The instrument Koivukoski proposes should be taken as a heuristic guideline rather than as a ready-to-go analytical framework. Something the author, by no doubt, is aware of.

Based on the model elaborated, chapter 4 presents the research designs of the four articles that inform the empirical section of the book. This chapter first summarises and then details the research subjects, the datasets and the methodological procedures undertaken in each article. After which, somewhat unexpectedly and unconventionally, the chapter summarises the key findings of each article, before offering the articles for readers' pleasure, inspection and judgement. The summaries of the findings do disrupt the "narrative" of Koivukoski's sound effort, but do not deny the merit and the pleasure of reading. For those readers that do not appreciate spoilers or prefer to make judgements on their own, I would simply suggest to skip this chapter and go straight to the Articles.

Koivukoski's opens the last chapter of the dissertation with a brief demonstration of how the framework constructed in chapter 3 can be applied to the sub-studies, and continues with a discussion of the manners in which political humour is both a contributor and a threat to liberal democratic values and practices. In so doing, the author confirms the existent research findings regarding the effects and threats of political humour including, but not limited to, the dissemination of information and opinions, the fostering of public debate and political activation (Bode and Becker, 2018; Chattoo and Feldman, 2020; Young, 2020), but also the dissemination of disinformation, creating distrust among citizens (Baumgartner & Morris, 2006) and the distorting of complex political realities (LaMarre et al., 2009).

Continuing with the same balanced approach, Koivukoski briefly outlines the socially beneficial effects of humorous political advocacy such as its ability to make political persuasion and participation emotionally appealing and potentially mobilising. At the same time, humorous political advocacy can become an one-directional propaganda with no intent to debate issues, but, more importantly, can blend with mis- and disinformation and unjustifiably delegitimise political figures, hinder cooperation, and normalise anti-liberal attitudes.

Based on the findings, Koivukoski outlines seven theses on humour and power in a hybrid media environment. First, humour is *embedded in political information cycles, and participates in the communicative construction of identities*. However, it can *blur the distinction between the serious and the humorous because of this ambiguous nature, while at the same time it can create scandals or smaller public controversies*. Personally, I find the fifth and the sixth thesis most thought provoking. In this regard, Koivukoski rightly observes that the "potential effects of political humour are hard to detect and are often gradual rather than instant" (p. 69). In consequence, political humour rarely leads to profound social change, although this can happen. Rather, Koivukoski admits, it can change attitudes, albeit it is difficult to find empirical proof, since political humour preaches to the likeminded, and is disregarded and criticised by the differently opinionated as Koivukoski's Article IV (i.e. a case study of the Finish protest group Loldiers of Odin; see below) shows. It seems that Koivukoski's findings echo the assumption that political humour is not the vehicle of change but a very subtle and important addition to the already existing and permissive/non-inhibiting political opportunities.

In continuation, I will offer a pithy summaries of the Articles (sub-studies) that round up the manuscript.

Article I titled “Producing journalistic news satire: How Nordic satirists negotiate a hybrid genre”, co-authored with Sara Ödmark, engages in an analysis of an understudied subject, that is, the perceptions of news satire producers (presenters, journalists, and comedians) concerning their work aims and practices and their relation to traditional news journalism. To explain the practical engagement of the 16 key production team members of four topical satire programmes, Koivukoski uses the concepts of genre and boundary work. Based on the interviewees’ reflections, he concludes that both Finnish and Swedish news satirists see their work as a blend of humour, strong interpretation, and a position on an issue. The news satirists conceive of their work as a mix of substance (i.e. factual information, coverage of main stories, substantial contextualisation and critical insights) and nonsense (i.e. carnivalisation of news, and the use of personal, more emotional, opinionated, and exaggerated expression by means of humour).

Article II titled “Scatological anecdotes, heavy drinking, and backpacker culture: Gonzo humour and edgework in contemporary Finnish journalism”, co-authored with Joonas Alekski, examines the distinctive nature of gonzo journalistic humour. The article relies on the analysis of Hunter S. Thompson’s gonzo journalism and three cases of Finnish gonzo. Based on the material analysed the authors conclude that the defining feature of gonzo journalism is the practice of *edgework*, namely a style of reporting that challenges and carnivalises societal and journalistic norms and authorities by combining participatory and self-reflective literary styles of immersive reporting. This Mennipean nature of American gonzo journalism is, according to the authors, slightly different from that of Finnish Gonzo journalism which is nearer the Finnish literary journalism than its American predecessor is.

Article III titled “From Moloch mouth to bike communists: Verbal humour techniques in the populist communication of Timo Soini” analyses the interlink between populist and humorous communication in blog posts by the former leader of the Finns Party, Timo Soini. The article demonstrates the manners in which Soini has deployed a style of aggressive humour built on metaphors, wordplay, hyperbole and irony to amplify populists’ antagonisms and to criticise international (EU) and national elites and opponents (i.e. Finish old parties, media and experts, and the Finland’s green bloc) about topics such as sovereignty, bureaucracy, corruption, bias, bail-out packages, and lifestyle choices.

Article IV on “Clowning around a polarised issue: Rhetorical strategies and communicative outcomes of a political parody performance by Loldiers of Odin”, co-authored with Merja Porttikivi, investigates the rhetorical strategies and online reception of humorous performances by a clown disguising activist group called Loldiers of Odin, who employed humorous street performances to undermine and subvert the anti-immigration protests by a far right group named Soldiers of Odin. In so doing, the Loldiers have distorted far-right discourse, mobilised like-minded people, promoted solidarity and gain mainstream publicity. To achieve these ends, the group has deployed a rhetorical strategy based on ironic figurative language and colourful visuals that included a mixture of absurd and parody metaphors, distortions, hyperbole, and neologisms. The study further evidences the popular reception of the group’s actions including support and legitimisation, but also criticism and delegitimation, evidencing the inherently ambiguous nature of humour. Expectedly, the conclusion highlights this duality. On one hand, the humour and parody deployed have attracted media attention, reached like-minded digital audiences, and evoked discussions about immigration politics but, on the other, they have merely amplified audience members’ political stands and existing alliances, thus bolstering the existing polarisation of respective online discussions.

Koivukoski’s study is a highly systematic attempt to study the interplay of politics and humour in mediated hybrid environments, drawing on cutting edge, relevant literature. Often the literature discussions are very condensed and intensely informative, at times leaving the impression that they are not elaborately contextualised, but to an inquisitive reader this

overabundance of information is a joy rather than challenge. After all, that is what makes Koivukoski's effort so systematic and informative. Empirically, the manuscript has a large scope. Instead of focusing on one particular genre, and offering a monographic view, Koivukoski offers a panoramic view of the complexity of the interplay between politics and humour. Personally, I missed a more elaborate discussion of how the workings and the effects of the genres under consideration (i.e. news satire, gonzo journalism, populist communication and humorous advocacy) relate one to another and join forces as modern means of political deliberation and political activism, but this could be seen as Koivukoski's gift to the readership as motivation for future research. Similarly, the attempt to study gonzo journalism on European soil and the humour of populist leaders is a novelty that pleads for further investigation by humour and media scholars, social and political scientists, but also media practitioners and the civil society.

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