

HUMOR AND CONFLICT IN THE DIGITAL AGE

GHENT UNIVERSITY
29-30 NOVEMBER 2023

BIOS + ABSTRACTS!!



[HTTPS://WWW.HACIDA.UGENT.BE/](https://www.hacida.ugent.be/)



P R E S E N T A T I O N A B S T R A C T S

(L I S T E D A L P H A B E T I C A L L Y B Y F I R S T S P E A K E R)

Raúl Acosta (Goethe U)

"'Racism is not a joke': A Mexican scandal on discrimination and humour in social media": "I am not going to apologize for a joke that offends," stated Chumel Torres in an interview in 2020 after a panel to discuss racism in social media was cancelled because he had been invited. Torres is a comedian who often stirs controversy because of his provocative humour. Some call him racist, but he claims to be misunderstood. What the scandal fleshed out was a simmering tension regarding racism in Mexico. At a time when humour in Mexico is growing exponentially, quips reproducing skin-colour stereotypes remain popular. Addressing this trend has not been easy. A government body to tackle discrimination has not achieved much. When the said panel finally took place, the convener avoided a debate and simply included participants who reproduced the mantra "racism is not a joke." In this paper, I analyze the political role that racism and outrage because of it play in a highly polarized context.

Anastasiya Astapova and Maili Pilt (U Tartu)

"The Role of Humor in Combatting Conspiracy Theories: A Case Study of an Estonian Conspiracy-Debunking Group on Facebook": Our presentation focuses on popular understandings of how to use humor to combat conspiracy theories alongside grassroots attempts. Our case study homes in on an Estonian-language Facebook group, "Victory of Light! Continuation," which emerged in the middle of the pandemic. This group exemplifies social media activism, bringing together people dedicated to fighting disinformation by reporting on and trolling those who spread it. Our presentation is based on online fieldwork and an interview with the group's founder and explores how group members have used humor to fight Covid-related misinformation and to debunk fake news about the Ukrainian war.

Dennis Meyhoff Brink (U Copenhagen)

"False affectivity: On affects based on misinterpretations of Charlie Hebdo's cartoons": Since the terrorist attack on the French satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo* in 2015, many of its cartoons have been circulated via social media and misinterpreted by its new global audience. This paper argues that the feelings of offence, outrage and anger triggered by the cartoons can be "false" when they rest on

false interpretations. My presentation proposes the concept of "false affectivity" to describe this phenomenon. While the Marxist concept of "false consciousness" describes a misperception of reality in general, "false affectivity" describes the collective affects that sometimes arise from misinterpretations of specific phenomena such as satirical cartoons.

Anastasiya Fiadotava and Władysław Chłopicki (Jagiellonian U)

"The Belarus-Poland migrant crisis: A view from both sides of the wall": The ongoing migrant crisis on the Polish-Belarusian and Lithuanian-Belarusian borders has led to restrictions on border crossings and the construction of walls separating Poland and Lithuania from Belarus. However, this same crisis has also provoked humorous reactions online. We discuss the targets of these humorous reactions and illustrate how humour spotlights the gap between the Belarusian and Polish authorities' activities and claims and the reality on the ground. We argue that Belarusian humour contextualizes the migrant crisis within the broader Belarusian political crisis rather than within the international political landscape, while Polish humour uses a broader array of local, regional and international political references.

Jeanne Gaillard (U Strasbourg)

"A community of laughers or community laughter?: Islam in French stand-up comedy": The French context is especially interesting for understanding the issue of religious conflict in the public sphere, particularly in relation to humor. Like a magnifying glass, humor can exaggerate the features of a supposed incompatibility between Islam and the Western norm to elicit laughter. Humor's potential for sociability and transgression is here of particular interest. Using the example of Islam as a topic for French comedians, my presentation will show that the current stand-up format creates intimacy and interaction between the comedian and the audience, which can lead to conflict resolution, depending on the legitimacy of the joker who deals with the sacred.

Anke Lion (UGent)

"Are we not allowed to laugh at anything anymore?: A multi-method analysis of humour controversies in Flemish print media from 1995 to 2022": This

P R E S E N T A T I O N A B S T R A C T S

(L I S T E D A L P H A B E T I C A L L Y B Y F I R S T S P E A K E R)

presentation offers a systematic longitudinal overview of "humour controversies" in Flemish print media from 1995 until 2022. The study presents a historical perspective on shifting cultural sensibilities in Flemish society and the changing media coverage of such events. All articles were subjected to quantitative and qualitative content analyses. The quantitative mapping shows how the number of articles and humour controversies increased exponentially. All "outlier" cases (those with high-level coverage) discussed offensive "ethnic humour" targeting ethno-religious groups. The qualitative content analysis showed that, first, the relation between "humour and Islam" is a recurring trope throughout the database and often serves a "culture wars" narrative. Second, debates about "wokennes" (wokeness) are being co-opted by mainstream conservative politics, as illustrated by the Aalst Carnival's anti-Semitism controversies. Finally, print media actively promote the idea of comedy being threatened by "wokeness" through editorial choices and "clickbait" journalism.

Paul Martin (U Bristol)

"On not spotting the difference: conflict and political parody on Twitter": This paper argues that conflict and misinterpretation play a crucial role in the success of online satirical parody accounts. These accounts rely on users recognizing the ironies between levels of signification, but can also be mistaken for real political accounts. Through interviews with account creators and analysis of users' interaction with them, I demonstrate how the tension between conflict and cohesion shapes how satirical parody functions in digital media, as these accounts must both appear to be believable characters and distort or exaggerate honest political discourse for comic effect. Political parody on Twitter walks a tightrope between the possibility of re-enforcing social division and challenging it.

Beer Prakken (U Groningen)

"Mediating Humor in U.S. Politics: How Rival Media Respond to AOC and Trump": Following Trump's election, more U.S. politicians seemingly began to employ humor to strategically deflect criticism of controversial and transgressive remarks. In

this presentation, I will examine the responses of both conservative and liberal media outlets and Twitter influencers to controversial humorous remarks made by politicians, focusing on instances involving Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Donald Trump in May 2019. In analyzing these scandals through pragmatic ambiguity and benign violation theory, I identify three common argumentative strategies: 1) denying the joke's playfulness, 2) ridiculing the joke, and 3) critiquing the joke's morality. Surprisingly, these strategies transcend political leanings, with the third strategy – critiquing the joke – proving the most effective in addressing sensitive topics.

Massih Zekavat (U Groningen)

"When Aporetic Satire Backfires: Chappelle's Transgender Jokes Gone Awry": This presentation analyzes the controversy around Dave Chappelle's transgender jokes in his Netflix specials, *Sticks & Stones* (2019) and *The Closer* (2021). I argue that Chappelle uses aporetic satire, sudden shifts of perspective, and a detached and insensitive persona to undermine the status quo. He aims to confront his audience and manage their responses, foster ambiguity, shock them into engaging with difficult questions, and encourage them to reconsider their prejudices. The backlash the release of these shows produced is testament to his failure, which was largely due to the type of humor Chappelle uses, the ambiguity of his persona's moral stance, and his failure to acknowledge intersectionality in advocating justice.

Dick Zijp (Utrecht U)

"Comic Innocence": 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 is at the same time often (aggressively) defended as innocent and harmless. I propose the notion of 'comic innocence' to make sense of this paradox. I draw from Dutch and American studies of racism, white innocence and racial ignorance, and test my theory through an analysis of responses in both legacy and social media to a serious opinion article on humour, which sparked intense debate in the Summer of 2021.

P R E S E N T E R B I O S

(L I S T E D A L P H A B E T I C A L L Y B Y F I R S T S P E A K E R)

Raúl Acosta is a postdoctoral researcher at Goethe University in Frankfurt am Main for the ERC-funded project "NoJoke: Humour as an Epistemic Practice of the Political Present" (2023-2027). He is an anthropologist whose subproject is entitled "Who's laughing now? Decoloniality, roaring laughter and mutual resentment in Mexican political comedy." He obtained his masters' and doctoral degrees from the University of Oxford, and has extensively researched tensions and collaboration between activists, civil society organizations and governments. He has carried out ethnographic research in Brazil, Spain, Mexico, Peru and Venezuela.

Anastasiya Astapova is an Associate Professor of Folkloristics in the University of Tartu and a member of Estonian Young Academy of Sciences. She has published extensively on humor under authoritarianism, as well as on migration, ethnic integration, and conspiracy theories, including a monograph *Humor and Rumor in the Post-Soviet Authoritarian State* (Rowman and Littlefield 2021), a co-edited *Conspiracy Theories in Eastern Europe: Tropes and Trends* and a co-authored *Conspiracy Theories and the Nordic Countries* (both with Routledge in 2020 and 2021) volumes. Astapova is a PI of the Estonian Science Foundation project "COVID-19 Conspiracy Theories: Contents, Channels, and Target Groups".

Andrew Bricker is an Associate Professor of English Literature in the Department of Literary Studies at Ghent University in Belgium and a Senior Fellow at the Andrew W. Mellon Society of Fellows in Critical Bibliography at the Rare Book School at the University of Virginia. He is the author of *Libel and Lampoon: Satire in the Courts, 1670-1792* (Oxford University Press, 2022). He is a member of the Cartoons in Court research team, which is funded by a Constructive Advanced Thinking Grant from the Network of European Institutes of Advanced Study, and serves as Principal Investigator for HACIDA, a multi-university Scientific Research Network funded by an ENLIGHT RISE Grant.

Dennis Meyhoff Brink is a postdoc at the University of Copenhagen and Frederiksberg Museums in Denmark. He is also the director of the interdisciplinary research group European Cultures of Laughter. His main research area is English, German, French and Scandinavian satire from the Middle Ages to the present day. He has published articles on political and

religious satire, pastoral power, censorship, demonology, enlightenment, modernity, affect theory and post-critical theory.

Chris Chan is a Postdoctoral Research Fellow in the Department of Literary Studies at Ghent University, as well as Grant Writer and Project Manager for HACIDA. Prior to joining UGent, he earned his B.A. in English and chemistry at Rutgers University, and his M.A. and Ph.D. in English at the University of Pennsylvania. His research and teaching center on British poetry, politics, and literary criticism of the long eighteenth century, with articles published and forthcoming in *Eighteenth-Century Studies* and *Eighteenth-Century Life*.

Władysław Chłopicki is Professor of Linguistics and Translation at the Jagiellonian University in Kraków, Poland. His academic interests include interdisciplinary humor research in the context of cognitive linguistics, linguistic pragmatics, narratology, and cultural studies (and, most recently, humor in the public sphere – humorinpublic.eu). He has published extensively on humor-related issues. He is past president of the ISHS, Board member of the journal *Humor*, and a founding editor of *The European Journal of Humour Research* and *Tertium Linguistic Journal*.

Anastasiya Fiadotava is Assistant Professor at the Jagiellonian University in Kraków, Poland, and a research fellow in the Department of Folkloristics at the Estonian Literary Museum in Tartu, Estonia. She earned her Ph.D. in Folkloristics from the University of Tartu. Her fields of interest include the use of humor in family communication, the spread of jokes and memes in social and mainstream media, and the reflections of current political and social issues in humor.

Jeanne Gaillard is a PhD candidate in sociology at the University of Strasbourg in the Laboratory SAGE (Societies, Actors and Government in Europe, UMR 7363). She completed her Master's thesis at the Ecole normale supérieure de Lyon in 2020 on the religiosity of Christian students in Lyon and Berlin. After graduating, she did two research internships on the sociology of Islam. Her dissertation research uses the sociology of Islam to explore humor studies by focusing on Islam as a topic for stand-up comedians in France and Germany.

P R E S E N T E R B I O S

(L I S T E D A L P H A B E T I C A L L Y B Y F I R S T S P E A K E R)

Alberto Godioli is Associate Professor at the University of Groningen and program director of the Netherlands Research for Literary Studies (OSL). His research focuses on humor and free speech jurisprudence from an interdisciplinary perspective. He is principal investigator of an international research project on this topic (Humor in Court, NWO Vidi Grant, 2022-2027), in dialogue with stakeholders such as Columbia Global Freedom of Expression, Cartoon Movement and Cartoonists' Rights Network International. In 2022, together with Prof. Laura Little, he founded *ForHum: Forum for Humor and the Law* – a global platform bringing together lawyers, humor scholars, artists and other key actors interested in humor, freedom of expression and related legal matters. His publications on the subject include "Humor and Free Speech: A Comparative Analysis of Global Case Law" (with Jennifer Young; 2023), "Laughing Matters: Humor, Free Speech and Hate Speech at the European Court of Human Rights" (with Jennifer Young and Matteo Fiori; *International Journal for the Semiotics of Law*, 2022), and the special issue "Humor and the Law: The Difficulty of Judging Jests" (co-edited with Brigitte Adriaensen, Andrew Bricker and Ted Laros, *HUMOR*, 2022).

Anke Lion received her Master's degree in communication sciences from Ghent University, graduating with greatest distinction in 2017. Starting in October 2018, Anke worked as a PhD Fellow of the Research Foundation Flanders (FWO) in the Department of Communication Studies at Ghent University. Her research project "Just kidding? – A qualitative research into the sociocultural role and meanings of mediated humour controversies in Flanders", under the supervision of Prof. Frederik Dhaenens and Prof. Daniel Biltereyst, explores sociocultural tensions over humour and identity in Flanders. Currently, she is a member of the Centre for Cinema and Media Studies (CIMS) and works as an assistant for the Bachelor in Social Sciences (UGent-VUB).

Paul Martin is a lecturer in Classics and Liberal Arts at the University of Bristol. While his background is in satire and comedy in ancient Greek literature, Paul has been expanding his research through interdisciplinary approaches to humour. His main project is a book-length commentary on fragmentary Greek comedians but he also has forthcoming work on the function of humour in

both ancient and modern comedy and he is co-editing a special issue of the journal *Humor* with Nicole Graham.

Maili Pilt is a folklorist finishing her doctorate in the University of Tartu and a member of the Estonian Society for Digital Humanities. Pilt's research focuses on storytelling practices in online communities of women about conception, pregnancy, in vitro fertilization, and childbirth. She is interested in methodological problems of ethnographic research online. She has published about research ethics, reflexivity, and methods for collecting and analyzing digital narratives. She has also been the lecturer of the courses "Internet Folklore" and "Online Ethnography: Data Collection, Research Ethics and Data Analysis" in the University of Tartu.

Beer Prakken is a PhD candidate at the University of Groningen interested in the intersections of play, humor, and politics. He completed his Bachelor's degree in History and Master's degree in Philosophy and History, with a focus on American Southern History and the role of play in Trumpism and the American right. Currently, he is enrolled in an interdisciplinary PhD program. His dissertation aims to analyze the use of humor and play by politicians and the ethics surrounding it. Prakken is particularly interested in studying the concept of dark play and trolling in the American right.

Massih Zekavat is researcher and postdoctoral fellow at the Center for Language and Cognition in the Faculty of Arts at the University of Groningen in the Netherlands. His *Satire, Humor, and Environmental Crises* was published by Routledge in 2023.

Dick Zijp is Assistant Professor in the Department of Media and Cultural Studies at Utrecht University, the Netherlands. He has a background in theatre studies, philosophy and cultural studies, and is specifically interested in (Dutch) cabaret, stand-up comedy, critical humour studies, and the relationship between humour and political ideology. In early 2023, he defended his PhD thesis on the politics and aesthetics of humour in Dutch cabaret (1966-2023). He likes to participate in public debate, and also works as a freelance writer and comedy critic for the progressive weekly magazine *De Groene Amsterdammer*.

KEYNOTE ABSTRACTS + BIOS

(LISTED ALPHABETICALLY BY FIRST SPEAKER)

Chi-Hé Elder is Associate Professor in Linguistics in the School of Politics, Philosophy, Language and Communication Studies at The University of East Anglia (UEA), UK. Her research interests lie in the field of pragmatics with a focus on the negotiation of utterance meaning in social interaction, and is currently working on the topic of misunderstandings and humour.

Eleni Kapogianni is a Lecturer in Linguistics in the School of Cultures and Languages at the University of Kent, UK. Her main research interests lie in the fields of pragmatics and discourse analysis, with a special focus on nonliteral language, especially verbal irony and humour.

"Context, intentions and accountability: The joker in the public eye": What is 'offensive humour'? How far can we claim to be 'only joking' when someone takes offence by a joke? When offensive messages are presented through humour, to what extent can a speaker claim plausible deniability for having intended to cause offence, or indeed for holding disparaging attitudes that their humour may reveal? The mode of delivery - whether face-to-face, via social media, or as a stand-up comedy gig - will afford the joker with different interactional practices and challenges. In this talk, we examine Jimmy Carr's 'holocaust joke' as a case study to examine the whole life cycle of jokes: from their live performance, to entering the public sphere and becoming a subject of controversy, to the negotiation and debate that ensues. We look at issues of the joke-teller's supposed 'intention', while also considering how far the comedian can be held accountable for the offence that a joke can cause. We also look at how the joker's public persona can influence the uptake of offensive jokes, including the degree to which they are offered plausible deniability, or how audience reaction can inform public opinion.

Giselinde Kuipers is a professor in the Centre for Sociological Research at KU Leuven, Belgium and the author of *Good Humor, Bad Taste: A Sociology of the Joke* (Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter, 2006/2015). She is a cultural and comparative sociologist who studies the social shaping of cultural

standards in today's increasingly globalized fields and societies. For instance: what do people find beautiful or ugly, humorous or not funny, morally right or unacceptable? Such standards are socially learnt: they vary strongly from one society or social group to another. At the same time, such standards are often deeply felt. Therefore, such standards have important social consequences, for instance for social inequality, identity, cohesion or conflict.

"Humor Affective Polarization: How Finnish and Dutch humor scandals mark – and possibly widen – societal divides": In this keynote (which builds on research conducted with Dick Zijp, Utrecht U, and Joonas Koivukoski, U Helsinki), we explore the relation between humor and affective polarization, the increasing tendency to see political divides in affective terms, with strong positive feelings towards one's preferred political party or preference, and negative feelings towards the opposing political side. Humor is a mode of communication that may evoke strong positive (laughter, amusement) and negative (indignation, shock) emotions and that can draw sharp boundaries between social groups and categories. Thus, politicians as well as other political actors like activists, commentators and satirists have often used humor to make and 'spice up' political statements and to organize and draw together political publics and 'counterpublics'. Occasionally, political humor leads to 'humor scandals': public controversies about the use of humor that according to some went too far, during which social and political divides become very apparent. In this keynote, we draw on a new database of Dutch and Finnish humor scandals between 1990 and 2023 to analyze how such humor scandals reflect or reinforce affective polarization. We show that humor scandals increase over time in both countries, which we see as a result (among other things) of increasing political polarization due to the rise of populist parties in this period. We then zoom in on two specific humor scandals in the 2010s to assess if, and how, these scandals may reflect and reinforce affective polarization among wider publics. We analyze a Dutch scandal about racist humor targeting the

KEYNOTE ABSTRACT + BIOS

(LISTED ALPHABETICALLY BY FIRST SPEAKER)

Black politician Sylvana Simons in 2016; and a Finnish scandal about politician Juha Mäenpää's controversial speech about asylum seekers in 2019. In addition, this keynote is an opportunity to showcase our new approach to analyzing humor scandals, using a methodology and conceptualization that allows for the comparisons of such scandals across countries and over time.

Raúl Pérez is currently Associate Professor of Sociology at the University of La Verne in Southern California. His first book, *The Souls of White Jokes: How Racist Humor Fuels White Supremacy* (Stanford University Press), received the 2023 Mary Douglas Book Prize from the American Sociological Association, and was a finalist for the 2022 C. Wright Mills Book Award from the Society for the Study of Social Problems. His research also appears in various scholarly journals, such as *American Behavioral Scientist*, *Discourse and Society*, *Ethnicities*, and *Sociological Perspectives*, and has been featured in various media, including *The Washington Post*, *TIME*, and *NBC*.

"Amused Racial Contempt: On the Emotional Power of Humor in Social and Racial Alignment and Alienation, Past and Present": Over the last two centuries, humor has played a central role in reinforcing and mobilizing racist ideology and power under the guise of amusement. Drawing on critical humor studies, affect theory, and the sociology of racialized emotions, this talk will focus on how humor can function as a mechanism that simultaneously produces group identity, pleasure, and solidarity, on the one hand, and social and racial dehumanization, alienation, and even violence, on the other. Historical and contemporary cases in the U.S. will be highlighted, with an eye on global dimensions of this phenomenon, including within entertainment, police culture, politics, and far-right contexts.

ROUNDTABLE PARTICIPANTS

(LISTED ALPHABETICALLY)

Mike Gillis is the head writer for *The Onion*. He's also written for *The New Yorker*, *The Atlantic*, *McSweeney's Internet Tendency*, *Tricycle*, *ClickHole*, and the Supreme Court (in the form of a recent amicus brief in defense of parody and free speech).

Shazia Mirza is an award-winning British stand-up comedian and writer from Birmingham, England. She has been profiled on CBS's *60 Minutes* in the US. Her TV appearances include *The Jonathan Ross Show*, *Would I Lie to You?*, *QI*, *The Late Late Show*, and *Graham Norton Show*, and was the star of *Celebrity The Island--Bear Grylls*. Her latest show, *Coconut*, was nominated for a Channel 4 National Comedy Award. Her previous show, *The Kardashians Made Me Do It*, a satire on ISIS, was a sell-out success all over the UK, US, Sweden, Ireland, and Paris. She has toured all over the world and this year was listed as one of the 50 funniest comedians of the 21st Century by *The Telegraph* newspaper.

Tjeerd Royaards is an award-winning editorial cartoonist from Amsterdam. He has worked as a cartoonist since 2005, ever since getting a master's degree in Political Science at the University of Amsterdam. He has worked for Dutch newspaper *NRC* and currently works for Dutch newspaper *Trouw*. Internationally, his work has been published by the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, *Le Monde* and many others. Tjeerd is Editor-in-Chief of Cartoon Movement, a global platform for editorial cartoons and comics journalism. He is also on the Board of Advisors of Cartoonists Rights Network International and a member of Cartooning for Peace.

Annie Julia Wyman holds a PhD in English literature from Harvard. She is the creator of the Netflix series *The Chair* and wrote two episodes of the five-time Emmy nominated *Welcome To Chippendales*. She is currently a co-executive producer on *A Knight of the Seven Kingdoms: The Hedge Knight*, the first comedy entry in the *Game of Thrones* franchise.