



**Where does the political comedian fit on the spectrum of societal debate?** Comedy has gained legitimacy in academia in recent decades as a non-serious communication form worth taking seriously. But in the personalized, high-choice hybrid media landscape, what roles do comedians inhabit? This dissertation explores this topic via five studies detailed in articles produced for publication in scientific journals. The articles employ frameworks such as humor functions, role conceptions, media framing, boundary work, non-deliberative media discourse, and moral theory, and utilize qualitative content analysis, quantitative content analysis, and qualitative interviews, to investigate empirical examples collected from Swedish and Finnish contexts. The dissertation also includes an introductory chapter that summarizes and discusses the results of the five studies and presents the empirical and theoretical contributions of the dissertation.



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# Jester, journalist, or just jerk?

THE ROLES OF POLITICAL COMEDIANS IN SOCIETAL DEBATE



**Sara Ödmark**



**Sara Ödmark** has been a lecturer in journalism and photojournalism at Mid Sweden University since 2009. She has a background as a news anchor, reporter, editor and producer in primarily radio and television journalism. She is also a TV critic and extensive comedy consumer.

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# **Jester, journalist, or just jerk? The roles of political comedians in societal debate**

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Faculty of Science, Technology and Media  
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*“I think communication is so firsbern.”*

— *Steve Martin*



# Acknowledgements

During the first lunch I had with one of my supervisors after it had been decided he would be guiding me through writing this dissertation, he leaned forward, pierced me with his gaze and asked: “Sara, for you, what makes things *mean* something?” Several years later, I still ponder that question about once a week. It makes me reevaluate not only my academic work but my whole being, it confuses my sense of self and makes me unknow most things I have learned in favor of existential doubt. What’s the point of it all? Where can I find meaning? Am I even real? Now that’s the sign of a good supervisor.

All kidding aside, I am in the lucky position of considering both of my supervisors not only excellent academic role models and splendid human beings in general, but also my friends. Professor Ingela Wadbring and Associate professor Jonas Harvard have been the best support pillars a PhD candidate could ask for, always encouraging me while not hesitating to challenge and constructively critique my work. Jonas Harvard also co-authored an article with me, and made it a joyful experience.

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What did I answer my supervisor on that lunch a few years ago? Well, I was so stunned I said the first thing that came to mind: "I guess things mean something when they are connected to the people who mean something". The people mentioned above fall into that category, and there are so many more of you. Thank you all.

*Sundsvall 2021-09-06*

*Sara Ödmark*

# Abstract

Where does the political comedian fit on the spectrum of societal debate? Comedy has gained legitimacy in academia in recent decades as a non-serious communication form worth taking seriously. But in the personalized, high-choice hybrid media landscape, what roles do comedians inhabit? This dissertation explores this topic via five studies detailed in articles produced for publication in scientific journals. The articles employ frameworks such as humor functions, role conceptions, media framing, boundary work, non-deliberative media discourse, and moral theory, and utilize qualitative content analysis, quantitative content analysis, and qualitative interviews, to investigate empirical examples collected from Swedish and Finnish contexts. The dissertation also includes an introductory chapter that summarizes and discusses the results of the five studies and presents the empirical and theoretical contributions of the dissertation.

Several roles of political comedians are introduced, based on political intent and their tendency to challenge norms, where the main ones have been established as Unifier, Advocate, Entertainer, Explainer, Provocateur, Questioner, and Eye-opener. The roles should be seen as role performance elements that are somewhat fluid and contextual. In addition, three role clusters, or broad comedic dispositions, are discussed. The first is the jester-type comedian, represented by the Entertainer, the Unifier, and the Advocate. These comedians are practitioners of a more benign, light-hearted form of political comedy, and they focus on creating mirth and social bonding.

The genre of journalistic news satire is defined and explored as the second role cluster, and the genre is represented by the Unifier, who aims to connect people in laughter, the Explainer, who wants to explain complex news issues from a specific point of view, and the Questioner, who audits power and challenges groupthink. Finally, the third role cluster is personified by the troublemaker or jerk, who either enjoys being a Provocateur simply for provocation itself, takes on the role of persistent Questioner, or, if the political intent is stronger, embodies the Eye-opener, aspiring to influence the audience to see things differently.

Contexts, implications, and limitations are discussed.





## **Introduction**

Jester, journalist, or just jerk? The roles of political comedians in societal debate

## **Article I**

Making news funny: Differences in news framing between journalists and comedians

Published in *Journalism*, 2018.

## **Article II**

Producing journalistic news satire: How Nordic satirists negotiate a hybrid genre. Co-written with Joonas Koivukoski.

Published in *Journalism Studies*, 2020.

## **Article III**

De-contextualisation fuels controversy—the double-edged sword of humour in a hybrid media environment

Published in *The European Journal of Humour Research*, 2021.

## **Article IV**

The democratic roles of satirists. Co-written with Jonas Harvard.

Published in *Popular Communication*, 2021.

## **Article V**

Moral transgressors vs. moral entrepreneurs: The curious case of comedy accountability in an era of social platform dependence

Published in *Journal of Media Ethics*, 2021.



# Introduction

“They say in Africa: When a *griot* dies, it’s like a library was burnt down.” When comedian Dave Chappelle accepted the prestigious Mark Twain Prize for American Humor in 2019, he spoke of the West African practice of having a storyteller, a *griot*, in charge of preserving and conveying the knowledge and history of a community through oral tradition. Chappelle said his mother encouraged him from a young age to be a *griot*. She filled his head with stories of black life, letting him understand the context he was being raised in as an African American man. However, instead of going into academia like his mother, or choosing a path as an author, musician or preacher, Chappelle devoted his life to standup comedy. In his acceptance speech, he expressed a passionate love for the art form: “There is something so true about this genre, when done correctly, that I will fight anybody that gets in a true practitioner of this art form’s way. Cause I know you are wrong. This is the truth, and you are obstructing it” (Chappelle, 2019).

Chappelle’s description of his role as a storyteller is marked by responsibility. A village of knowledge rests on his shoulders; the wisdom of the past thrives on his tongue. When a *griot* dies, a library is lost. Combined with his view of the art form of standup having an inherent truth to it, the comedian emerges as a figure with a unique voice: a truth teller, a story weaver, an observer who is illuminating, commenting on and shaping culture. There is also a hint of threat to the role in Chappelle’s speech. He alludes to forces trying to constrict or obstruct the freedom of the comedian, the ability to perform one’s truth on stage. Chappelle possibly refers to the heated debates around offense, free speech, and social responsibility that have engaged the comedy world. But how representative is his view of the role of the comedian? How well does this romanticized notion resonate in society at large? Is there something inherently different about the comedic voice that gives it a unique place in societal deliberation?

Sociologist Rose Coser once wrote: “To laugh, or to occasion laughter through humor and wit, is to invite those present to come close.” (Coser, 1959, p. 172). She expresses a beautiful sentiment, highlighting the social potential of the joke and the possibility of humor as the invisible glue in human connection. But there are also endless examples of when humor hurts, offends, violates, provokes, excludes, shames, and shocks. Humor and comedy can be used as tools in bullying, oppression, and ridicule, and utilized as weapons against both the powerful and the weak. Whether constructive or destructive,

good or bad, humor clearly plays a fundamental role in social life, and as with the knowledge of the griot, comedy can be seen as social information about the cultures in which we live (Carroll, 2014). Comedians are creators and carriers of this social information and often function as mavericks on the sidelines of political debate. Their positions somewhat as outsiders, but at the same time clearly as participants in societal deliberation, and the natural tensions created by the described duality of laughter, are reasons why I have made this particular occupation the focus of my dissertation.

In the following pages, I present the purpose of my dissertation and the associated aims of the five studies within it. After that comes a brief overview of the theoretical foundations and key terms used in the articles, leading to a summary and discussion around the empirical contributions of this dissertation. Thereafter follows a conclusion that presents the theoretical contributions of the dissertation.

Finally, I critically reflect on my scientific theory perspective, methodological approach, and the materials used in the studies. At the end of the introduction, I provide brief summaries of the included articles.

## Purpose and research questions

The purpose of this dissertation is to explore the dynamics of political comedy in a hybrid media landscape and to analyze the roles of professional comedians in societal debate. The purpose is fulfilled via five different studies presented in a series of articles. The aims of the articles are to answer the following overarching questions:

Article I: What are the differences in news framing between comedians and journalists?

Article II: How do news satirists view their aims and work routines in relation to other genres of satire and to traditional journalism?

Article III: How do media context and media framing of comedy controversies relate to the uniting and dividing functions of humor?

Article IV: How do satirists perceive their roles in society and their possible contributions to democratic debate?

Article V: How do comedians perceive their ethical responsibilities, and is there an accountability process present in media commentary of comedy and comedians?

Together, the answers to these questions paint a picture of the roles of political comedians, which will be summarized and discussed later in this introductory chapter. The questions are answered by utilizing qualitative content analysis, quantitative content analysis, and qualitative interviews to investigate empirical examples collected from Swedish and Finnish contexts. The methods were chosen to complement each other and to contribute with different aspects of knowledge, a benefit of a compilation thesis such as this. Quantitative content analysis was used in article I, qualitative content analysis was used in articles III and V, and qualitative interviews were used in articles II, IV and V.

## A humor scholar and a media scholar walk into a bar

What sets comedians apart from other communicators in society is their consistent use of humor as a communicative tool. An important contribution of this dissertation comes from the way it merges two different scholarly realms and creates further insight into the intersection between them. By themselves and together, the articles of this dissertation represent efforts to bring humor into media and communication studies and media and communication into humor studies.

As previously mentioned, humor can serve as a unique key for the understanding of social and cultural processes. Humor studies is a small and interdisciplinary field: Anthropologists have studied folklore humor in different cultural contexts, psychologists have been interested in the therapeutic effects of laughter, and literary scholars have used humor as an indication of zeitgeist (Raskin, 2008). Many have tried to pinpoint what humor really *is*, and the results from the last few generations of scholarship reveal different responses to this question. Three major humor theories emerge from humor origin research: the release or relief theory, the incongruity theory, and the superiority theory. The relief theory claims that people find things funny because of the removal of tension, or release of nervous energy (Berlyne, 1972; Freud, 1905; Morreall, 1983). The common practice of opening a formal public speech with a light-hearted joke is an example.

From the perspective of the incongruity theory, people laugh at the unexpected, surprising, or odd if it is conceived as non-threatening (Berger, 1976; Smuts, 2006). This theory is the most established in academic research. The humorous element lies in the incongruity between what is expected and



what is presented. Many jokes are structured this way, with a set-up and a punchline. The set-up leads the audience in one direction, while the punchline is something completely unforeseen.

The superiority theory, meanwhile, focuses on a sense of triumph that causes people to laugh at others. According to this theory, laughing at someone can come from feeling superior to that person (Feinberg, 1978; Morreall, 1983). A typical form of superiority humor can be found in hidden-camera shows or slapstick humor.

These theories tackle the concept of humor in a broad psychological sense, and the theories often overlap (Lynch, 2002). Furthermore, from a sociologically informed media and communication perspective, what is more interesting than what humor *is* is what it *does*. Looking at humor from a communicative standpoint and adding a media perspective leads you to comedy. Converging the two research fields means exploring comedy as a societal communicative tool in general and investigating the comedian as a media figure in particular.

One way of examining the political comedian in societal debate is to consider him or her an opinion leader. Studies about the role of political opinion leaders were conducted in the US already in the 1940s and the 1950s (Lazarsfeld et al., 1944), where researchers found almost no direct media effects on election voters, but instead saw ideas flow via opinion leaders who function as bridges to less active sections of the population. This mediated flow of communication became a guiding theme for diffusion research, and the model has since been applied to social networks online (Crittenden, 2011; Kaiser et al., 2013). Opinion leaders have also been called opinion brokers, meaning they are not leaders within groups as much as brokers between groups, carrying information across social boundaries (Burt, 1999).

The idea of comedians as opinion leaders should, in the hybrid media landscape, be understood in a broader sense than interpersonal political persuasion. Empirical studies on political comedy have had trouble drawing unequivocal conclusions about effects on direct attitude change (Young, 2018). But if comedians seem to have difficulty changing our minds, they are good at influencing *what* we think about, through processes known as agenda-setting and priming (e.g., Moy et al., 2006; Young, 2006). These functions can be illustrated by then presidential candidate George W. Bush, who in 2000 was asked by American talk show host David Letterman if he was bothered by unpleasant jokes, and replied, “No, I’m glad you’re saying my name” (Tapper, 2000).

Besides agenda-setting and priming, there are other aspects of opinion formation, attitude reinforcement, and political socialization that comedians are part of shaping. Scholars have pointed to the impact of political comedy on political participation and engagement (Anderson & Becker, 2018; Bore & Reid, 2014), political knowledge (Hardy et al., 2014), formation of cultural citizenship (Hermes, 2006), conversation initiation and social sharing (Campo et al., 2013), civic values endorsement (van Zoonen, 2005), political efficacy (Hoffman & Young, 2011), mood management (Becker, 2020), news contextualization (Young, 2013), and taboo reduction (Allen, 2014), to name some angles. The question is no longer whether or not the comedian matters; instead, it is more interesting to triangulate how and where the comedian fits in the spectrum of societal debate. The different spaces, functions, and actions of comedians in political discourse are understudied areas of research, and qualitatively oriented approaches have been scarce.

Hence, this dissertation focuses on the roles of political comedians. The term comedian should be understood as a content creator whose aim is to evoke comic amusement (Carroll, 2014) in an audience. All participants in the material used for the studies of this dissertation are professional in this endeavor, meaning they are paid for their performances and/or their comedic material. They are considered political comedians since they address political topics in their work. Historian Peter K. Andersson claims comedians come in two types, “the gritty realist and the fabling surrealist” (Andersson, 2020, p. 314). One finds inspiration in the tribulations of their own life and the society around them, the other in pure imagination. With that dichotomy, the objects of these studies are members of the former category.

In the articles, the term *satirist* is also used. A satirist has dual aims: one of social critique and one of entertainment (Declercq, 2018). Satire can be seen as a subgenre under the umbrella genre of political comedy (Young, 2018). It should be noted that for the studies of this dissertation, satirist was defined as someone involved in the production of satirical shows, carrying titles such as producer, editor, scriptwriter, researcher, or presenter.

## The roles of comedians

The occupation of comedian is not a profession *per se*: Comedy is an art form, a craft, and a social practice that shares similarities with a profession, but does not require licensing or education. Comedic skills can be acquired and honed, but being funny is also a talent that might be somewhat inherent and

inexplicable. Although many may be employed as comedians, the title is to a large degree self-selected. This aspect of voluntary identification highlights the importance of role conceptions, a concept discussed in article IV of the dissertation. Some claim the rise of social media do not contribute to the cultivation and competition of ideas, but to the cultivation and competition of identities (Bail, 2021), which would further increase the significance of roles in our hybrid media landscape. Role conceptions are individually held but communally shared and become both normative and descriptive for practitioners (von den Driesch & van der Wurff, 2016). The term is part of a framework consisting of four aspects: *role conceptions*, which are individual beliefs of what a role is and should be; *role perceptions*, which are thoughts on what society expects from a role; *role enactments*, meaning how someone acts based on conceptions and perceptions; and *role performances*, which includes the collective results of beliefs, ideas of societal expectations, and one's resultant behavior (Mellado et al., 2016).

In the 1950s, American sociologist Orrin E. Klapp defined three major social roles: heroes, villains, and fools. He claimed that through popular language and culture, these roles can say something about human behavior since they are embedded in rituals of solidarity and norm-affirmation. They also function as social glue in society: "People draw together to applaud a hero, fight a villain or laugh at a fool." (Klapp, 1954, p. 62). This trio of roles complements and challenges one another, functioning as symbolic figures in tradition and helping to perpetuate collective values. With this categorization in mind, is the role of the comedian simply to be laughed at? Does the comedian only contribute comic relief while the hero and the villain fight it out? History tells us it is not quite that simple.

Versions of the comedic storyteller, knowledge-keeper, and mischief-maker are present in all kinds of cultures. Chappelle spoke of the West African *griot*, while one of the interviewees of this dissertation referenced a *heyoka*, the Native American jester known for being contrarian and addressing taboos (John, 2018). The mythical figure of the *trickster* exists in different forms from ancient Greece to Mexico to China (Hyde, 1998). The trickster is known specifically as a boundary-walker and boundary-crosser, a king of pranks that makes us first laugh, then think. Tricksters have been called the creators of culture and "the lords of in-between" (Hyde, 1998), which has interesting implications for the idea of the opinion broker who transcends social boundaries. And then there are clowns, satirists, comics, jokesters, humorists, revue artists, zanies, and standups, to name a few other versions. Although the traditional image of the clown with the funny nose or the fool with the

wacky hat seem far from an investigative figure like British-American satirist John Oliver, they share similar origins, and as comedians, they help shape culture—often as part of counterculture (Nesteroff, 2015).

While a main focus of this dissertation is on role conceptions, role perceptions are also present in articles II, IV, and V, and role enactments are visible in articles I, III, and V, meaning the combined efforts provide ground for a synthesis of role performances. The title of the dissertation is “Jester, journalist, or just jerk? The roles of political comedians in societal debate.” Below, I will address those particular epithets more closely, based on the empirical contributions of the five studies of the dissertation. My results will be presented in conversation with the three humor theories, previous academic research and relevant media debate.

### **The comedian as a jester**

Perhaps the most intuitive role in the view of an audience is the comedian as a jester. Close to Klapp’s (1954) “fool,” the jester is a jack-of-all-trades in a colorful outfit, using any skill available to woo an audience. Traditionally, the jokes, puns, and comedic stories could be accompanied by juggling, music, and magic tricks. The core endeavor for the jester is providing entertainment, and although not completely in line with the historical use, where the term can imply an aspect of subversive truth-telling, it is here employed to describe a comedian with a low interest in challenging norms. In terms of satire, there is an academic distinction between Horatian satire, a lighthearted and benign form, and Juvenalian satire, which is harsher and more biting (O’Connor, 2017). The jester would represent the first kind, if even being considered a satirist at all.

The low level of norm challenge makes the jester more likely to contribute to social bonding and cohesion, and the disposition could be said to fall in line with the relief theory of humor, where comedy serves as a release valve of tension. In the interviews conducted for articles II, IV, and V of this dissertation, the pursuit of mirth and entertainment is heavily emphasized by the interview participants. There were representatives of a more jester-type, socially communal comedy in the selection of interviews made for the articles. Article I shows the comedic framing of news to be more personal and emotional than traditional news coverage, possibly making comedians suitable builders of community agendas in horizontal media forms.

In article IV, which discusses the roles of satirists in deliberative debate, the jester is represented by the role element of Unifier, wanting to build bridges between groups of people in a harsh debate climate. Comedy is seen

as creative playfulness, a cognitive process creating a mind shift that can be beneficial for democratic deliberation.

However, it was common for the interviewees to present the pursuit of amusement with caveats. For many, being “just” an entertainer was not enough. An interesting consequence of the fragmented hybrid media landscape was also revealed in article IV. Comic amusement depends on shared norms and a communal library of references (Carroll, 2014). Comedy needs standards to relate to, shared understandings of right and wrong and of appropriateness and inappropriateness. The current media climate was said to have resulted in a decrease in such shared premises. This led to a new need to cater one’s repertoire and establish common frames of references, instead of just making jokes. One satirist even expressed a desire to leave the genre of comedy to pursue a more direct and serious form of communication in order for the work to seem more meaningful.

The jester is typically an unassuming figure, and the relationship between comedians and political intent seems key in the understanding of their role conceptions. This relationship appears troublesome, since not claiming political importance could be a way of ensuring comedic freedom (Baym, 2005). There are many examples of highly profiled political comedians understating their claims in societal discourse. As an illustration, in an interview with *The New York Times Magazine*, American comedian Stephen Colbert took the opportunity to dismiss political intent when asked about the ideas people project onto him:

That I want to be a political force. That’s the weirdest thing. I said to Jon, back in the day: “You and I are like Frodo and Samwise. We’re trying to throw the damn ring in the volcano. It doesn’t occur to them that we don’t want to use it.” [...] I just want to make jokes. [...] It’s not complicated. (Marchese, 2019)

However, comparing this to other statements of his, one could argue it seems at least a little bit complicated. The “Jon” referenced here is Jon Stewart, a man many point to as the initiator of a new and more substantial form of political comedy. When Chris Smith (2016) chronicles the transformation of the seminal TV show *The Daily Show*, he describes how Stewart started shifting the targets of the jokes to powerful people and institutions, claiming that Stewart changed the tone of the show “from randomly coarse to deliberately barbed” (Smith, 2016, p. 6). In the book, Stewart contradicts Colbert by emphasizing intention, purpose, and political relevance, and mentions

shutting down cheap jokes in order to get to the underlying political issue. Colbert himself talks about how working with Stewart on *The Daily Show* initiated a process of reflection for him, one that helped him find out where he stands, made him cultivate interests in social issues, and gave him practice espousing a political point of view (Smith, 2016).

When it was announced that Stewart would return to TV with a new current affairs show launching in the fall of 2021, it was emphasized that the show would explore “his advocacy work” (Koblin, 2020). It would seem that not wanting to be a political force is a matter of definition—and perhaps something recent political developments have made some comedians re-think. Keeping that in mind, we move from the unassuming disposition of the jester to someone with a different relationship to political intent and challenging norms.

### **The comedian as a journalist**

During the Trump presidency, a debate proceeded in American media around the professional role of journalists versus the late-night comedians. “Comedians have figured out the trick to covering Trump,” stated *Vox*, arguing that the freer, more critical role of comedians actually brought them closer to the truth while journalists were stumped by their ideals of objectivity (Maza, 2017). *The New Yorker’s* Masha Gessen made similar points in 2018 when she called late-night comedy shows “the better news outlets” (Gessen, 2018). To communication scholars, however, this was not a novel argument. Following a changing media landscape, researchers had scrutinized the civic potential of political comedy increasingly during the past decades, focusing on the influence of American shows such as *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report*. While the Jon Stewart era of *The Daily Show* was found to be comparable to traditional news in providing viewers with contextual information (Jones, 2010), the show was more reactive than active in terms of its role in the news cycle. Developing a style described as “essayistic” (Smith, 2016), it had major influence on political and cultural debate, but was still somewhat agenda-following rather than agenda-setting. With the show *Last Week Tonight* in 2014, however, John Oliver embraced a more independent, investigative approach and laid the groundwork for a new subgenre: journalistic news satire.

Journalistic news satire has spread across the world and the genre is defined and explored in the first two articles of this dissertation. Article I investigates the differences in framing between traditional news journalists and satirists. Results show that the comedic framing is more thematic and



more often focused on the societal level, while the journalistic news framing is more episodic and focused on the individual level. The comedic framing is also more focused on issues of political figures and processes, is more negative, more inclusive of different types of societal actors, and dramatically more personal and emotional.

Article II examines the boundaries established by journalistic news satirists in order to distinguish themselves from previous satirists and other media actors, such as news journalists. There, the results show how the satirists embrace some of the traditional values of journalism, while at the same time using humorous tools such as exaggeration and irony. These results complement previous studies that have found satirical news shows to be creative blends of genre conventions in a concept known as discursive integration (Brugman et al., 2020). The way the satirists pursue a personal voice makes them similar to cultural journalists, who have been found to prefer subjective styles over journalistic objectivity (Chong, 2017).

Investigative journalists and satirists also share some common goals. There is an aspect of humor in itself that promotes critical thinking, a factor that was emphasized by the satirists in article IV. On the basis of incongruity theory, comedians look for discrepancies between how things are and how they could be (Morreall, 2005). Satirists are therefore drawn to hypocrisy, and some see exposing hypocrisy as a main objective of their work. In this aspect, they express themselves in a similar manner to the journalists who are concerned with exposing injustices and abuses of power (Danielson, 2016). Sometimes these power-checking goals mean crossing some lines of appropriateness, a tendency that leads us to the third role description in the title of this dissertation: the jerk.

### **The comedian as a jerk**

If the cheerful jester is on the low end of the norm challenge spectrum, on the high end we find the troublemaker or jerk. For many, an early demonstration of the social forces of humor comes via a school bully. Making fun of someone on the schoolyard can enforce power, delineate boundaries, and strengthen the awareness of the *ins* and the *outs*. The jerk ascribes to a view of “fun” rooted in the superiority theory of humor, where the jokes may be an efficient bullying tool but a harming force for the school class as a community. If we look at the dynamics of the public sphere, does that mean ridicule is always destructive?

Interpersonally, mockery can be used as a social corrective (Billig, 2005). “Men have been laughed out of faults which a sermon could not reform,”

stated Francis Hutcheson (1725), in line with Molière's view on the duty of comedy as to correct men's vices with amusement. Societally, a comic genre that holds ridicule at its center is satire, a focal point of this dissertation. In this genre, the mockery is intended as social critique holding the possibility of political reform. Satire is art that casts judgement, as one definition states (Test, 1991). "Jerk" in this context should therefore not be read as a fundamentally derogatory term, but as a description of the teasing, poking, questioning, judging, challenging, taboo-breaking, trying, and yes, sometimes restrictive, oppressive, and hurtful aspects of the comedic role. The trick is to differentiate between the "good" ridicule, promising social progress, and the "bad" ridicule, which divides and destructs. As James E. Caron (2021) puts it, the former creates a comic public sphere and reinforces the communicative rationality, while the latter creates a non-helpful anti-public sphere.

A recent analysis of comedians in Scandinavian culture, exploring a controversial issue such as immigration politics, shows them primarily doing boundary work (Dahl, 2021), meaning they balance the radical and the conservative through the specific tensions inherent in humor. One arena where these tensions and this negotiation of boundaries are being carried out is news media coverage and media debate of comedy controversy. Articles III and V of this dissertation put comedy controversy as their center piece, with a particular interest in media contextualization. Controversy is what happens when the norm challenge of the comedians goes too far, when boundaries are crossed and limits are stretched to their breaking points. Article III chronicles three examples of this, where comedy through media debate is scrutinized, re-contextualized, and amplified in a way that makes original intent and contextualisation get lost. Similar processes can be seen in article V, where the term comedy accountability is investigated through interviews and a case study. There, the case of the specific controversy constituted a brand scandal (Abidin & Ots, 2016) for the comedians involved, where the debate and the value negotiations often resided in a market frame, with defenders of the comedy also using legal-regulatory and professional responsibility arguments while protesters used public responsibility arguments.

## The roles of comedians: Conclusions and discussion

Returning to a question posed in the beginning of the introduction: Is there something inherently different with the comedic voice that gives it a unique place in societal deliberation? All indications suggest that yes, the way

comedians hold hybrid positions as both insiders and outsiders, balancing on the border between the serious and the non-serious, gives them a unique potential to affect discourse of social change (Dahl, 2021; Meier & Schmitt, 2016). It also makes the task of pinpointing their influence or pigeonhole their importance a peculiar one. Returning to Klapp (1954) and the three roles of hero, villain, and fool, particularly alongside the results of the five studies of this dissertation, one might argue that the modern comedian could inhabit all three roles. They can be the hero who debunks myths, unveils truths, and stands up to the corrupt political system, here represented as an idealized version of a journalist, the villain who bullies, mocks, and causes controversy, here bluntly named the jerk, and of course the fool, who provides laughter and relief as the jester. However, few comedians are equipped to—nor do they aspire to—fulfill these roles simultaneously.

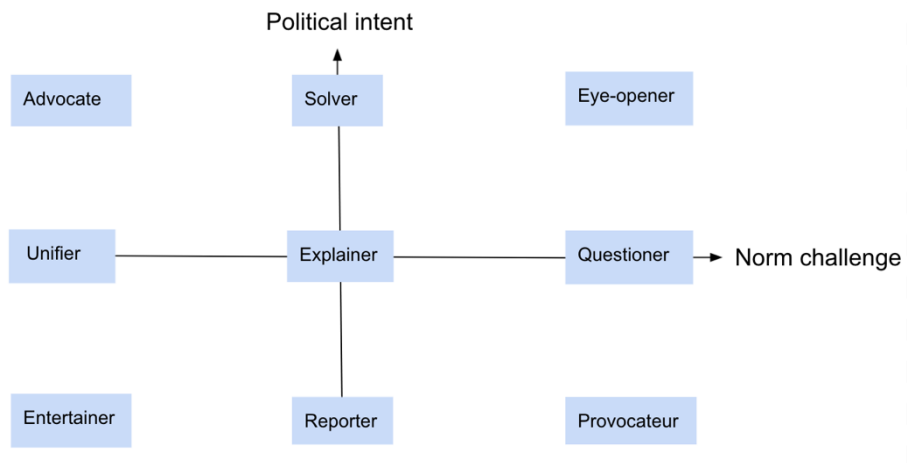
A factor impacting their understanding of their roles is professional socialization, dependent on what form of comedy they have operated in for most of their careers (Lichtenstein et al., 2021). Going back to the separation of a milder Horatian satire versus the harsher Juvenalian kind, a study on persuasion by LaMarre et al. (2014) found that Horatian satire leaves agency in the hands of the recipients, while Juvenalian satire grants agency to the satirists themselves, highlighting again the importance of their role conceptions. So, if they are to function as opinion leaders in debate, what kind of characteristics are important in differentiating between these roles they can inhabit?

Innocenti & Miller (2016) state there are two actions comedians take in order to design persuasive comedy: making their *intent* visible and undertaking obligations to act within specific *norms*. These two acts countervail the audience's tendency to dismiss the humor as "just joking." These dimensions were also salient in the findings of this dissertation. The results of the interview-based studies showed certain conceptions as universal among the comedians, while they differed on others. Communal values included striving to be entertaining and amusing, having a personal voice (in contrast to neutrality or objectivity), and being someone who provides alternative perspectives to societal debate. Regarding the latter, however, the comedians had different emphases. Some had a sense of personal advocacy, where certain topics and political issues were important to them and where they saw an opportunity and an obligation to work towards social change. They had political intent with their presence in the public sphere. Others wanted to see themselves as apolitical, or at least *unpredictably* political, having a sort of unfaithful partisanship that shifts depending on where you

momentarily can find the funny—preferably anti-establishment or anti-whatever consensus is currently prevailing. Both groups can be subversive, but the former has a stronger sense of social responsibility as well as an ideological stability, while the latter can shift loyalties and enjoys provocation and norm challenge in itself.

Political intent, as a personal belief in how one wishes to conduct one's practice, is a role conception. Norm challenge and provocation, on the other hand, is about the relationship to the expectations of society (their role perceptions) and how they act in response (their role enactments). Combining these aspects makes for role performances, and if visualizing the role performances based on the degree of the qualities norm challenge and political intent, we arrive at a grid as shown in Figure 1. On the x-axis is norm challenge, a measurement of agreeableness or urge to foster unity, where the further right you are on the spectrum below, the more divisiveness and subversion you strive for. On the y-axis is political intent, meaning your aims toward influencing issues in specific ways based on personal advocacy.

Summarizing the results of the five articles of the dissertation, and drawing heavily from the theoretical application of article IV, where the role conception framework is merged with Wessler's (2018) take on the democratic contributions of non-deliberative media, I present the first theoretical contribution of the dissertation: nine roles of political comedians (see Fig. 1).



**Figure 1.** Roles of political comedians based on political intent and tendency for challenging norms.

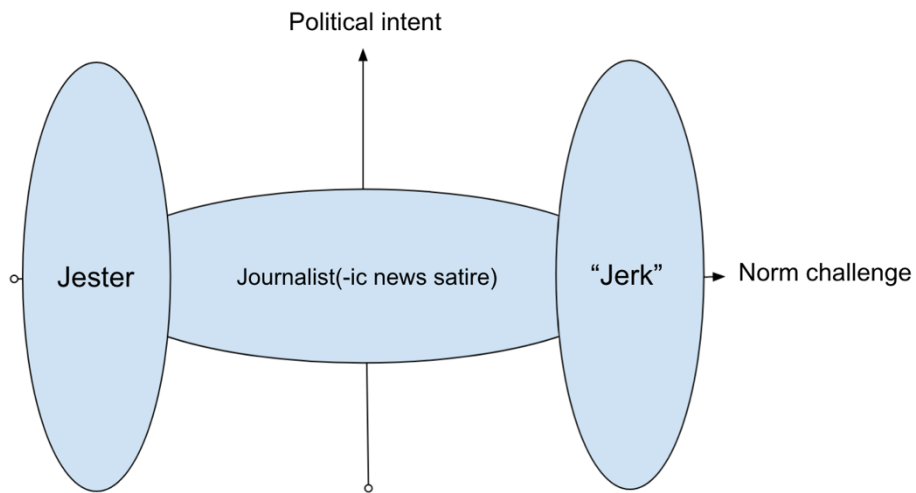
The roles Unifier, Solver, Explainer, Reporter, Eye-opener, and Questioner are directly extracted from the analysis of article IV, and have been placed in the grid based on their levels of political intent and norm challenge. In the article, the role element “Divider” is being discussed as a counterposition to Unifier, but since the divider traits reside on the far right of the norm challenge spectrum while differing in political intent, the title is split into the roles Eye-opener, Questioner, and a new role named Provocateur. I call this role Provocateur since it describes a comedian with low political intent but high tendency for challenging norms, like the comedians at the center of the case study of article V. They aim for entertainment through taboo-breaking and enjoy the instigation of controversy without any explicit purpose of social change.

Diagonally across from the Provocateur, at the top left, we find the Advocate, a comedian with high political intent but no need for norm challenge. This role title was chosen since it corresponds with a wielder of a benign, gentler form of comedy that still aims to raise awareness of, or draw attention to, particular political issues. On the other end of the intent scale is the Entertainer, a comedian with neither interest in challenging norms nor in affecting social change. The Entertainer could hardly claim to be a satirist, and has no other aims but to get laughs.

The broad and somewhat obtuse umbrella roles mentioned in the title of this dissertation can be placed within the grid as role clusters, or three different comedic dispositions (see Fig. 2). The jester, as the term is used here, resides on the left side of the spectrum, with low interest in norm challenge, being represented by the Advocate, the Unifier and the Entertainer. These roles emphasize social bonding and mirth.

Journalistic news satire, as a subgenre of satire, has moderate political intent: Journalistic news satirists are opinionated and can take stands on different political issues, but the partisanship is unpredictable and undefined, and preferably shifts over time across a widespread ideological spectrum. Since the genre is usually a professionalized form of comedy, the norm challenge is also moderate—edgy enough to draw attention and be entertaining, but benign enough so as not to alienate a large audience. Although these comedians cross boundaries on occasion; an example of this is presented in article III, practitioners of the genre tend to move between aiming to connect people in laughter (Unifier), wanting to explain complex news issues from a specific point of view (Explainer), and sharply questioning power and consensus (Questioner).

The “jerk” or the troublemaker resides to the right, utilizing the roles of Eye-opener, Questioner, and Provocateur, regularly causing comedy controversy and negotiations of social, moral, and political boundaries. The Provocateur is, as previously mentioned, interested in the act of provocation in itself. The Questioner has more political intent and wishes to rattle the status quo with poignant inquiries, while the Eye-opener has even stronger political intentions and aims to directly influence the audience to see things differently.



**Figure 2.** Visualization of three comedic role clusters based on political intent and tendency for challenging norms.

Comparing the two figures, you notice how the roles Reporter and Solver are not found to be embedded in any of the three clusters. They do indeed represent more peripheral stances, as comedians rarely emphasize straightforward news reporting and tend to leave the direct political problem solving mostly to others (with some exceptions). While being a Reporter, who increases attention to issues and recaps news developments, is often an included part of for instance satire, it is more seen as a necessary building block for the main objective, which is the comedy. More on the reasoning behind this can be read in article IV.

The ambiguity of comedy makes the roles fluid by design, which is a reason to speak of role performances comedians move in and out of rather



than of fixed and static roles. Members of an audience might view the same comedian in different ways, based on political leanings, aesthetic taste, or psychological disposition (Young, 2019). It is also important to note that the roles should not be viewed as normative. Although some of the titles are gathered from article IV, which specifically asks for benefits and contributions to democratic discourse, the synthesized roles in the grids above are not inherently constructive for societal progress. Political intent is not necessarily a positive force—just as provocation and norm challenge is not inherently destructive. It all depends on what you aspire to achieve, or what you are rebelling against, and who is judging your aspirations or rebellions.

From an opinion leading perspective, the roles high on the norm challenge spectrum can function in societal deliberation as catalysts of issue debates and boundary negotiations. They also contribute with unique and unconventional perspectives, and challenge power and consensus. The roles high on political intent are cognizant participators in debate, with purpose and determination. They can be compared to other societal actors doing political advocacy work, with the difference that they have chosen to use comedy as a communicative tool. Having this more activist inclination does not seem to be a natural position for political comedians, but they do exist, and even apolitical comedians can have particular core issues where they have a more personal investment. Roles lower on the scales of political intent and norm challenge can still impose opinion leading influence through processes such as agenda-setting, priming and framing. They can increase attention to, and interest in, political and social issues, contribute to social bonding, and raise political awareness.

Other theoretical contributions of the dissertation are the proposition and investigation of the genre *journalistic news satire* in article II and the concept *comedy accountability* in article V. Journalistic news satire is a hybrid genre in which satirists adhere to some journalistic ideals such as factuality and topical relevance while simultaneously aiming for opinionated and exaggerated expression. Blending boundaries between entertainment and politics makes them fall in line with, and contribute to, a long tradition of hybridity in counterculture (Young, 2019), and the results of this dissertation clarify how comedians and satirists are similar to, and differ from, journalists. Political comedians *do* inhabit a unique position in society—but this does not give them carte blanche in political discourse. As the results of article V show, there is an ongoing accountability process surrounding comedians where the value of freedom of speech is placed in contrast to, and pitted against, at least four

other values: truth telling, order and cohesion, human dignity and equality, and nonmaleficence.

The merging of the scholarly realms of humor studies and media and communication studies proved to be a fruitful cross-pollination for understanding the role of political comedy in the hybrid media landscape. Article III, for example, explores how the decontextualization and re-contextualization of humor in today's media environment, where traditional media coexist with social platforms, can accelerate comedy controversy and shift humor functions meant for identification with others into differentiation from others.

In sum, these results further our understanding of the potential deliberative benefits and challenges of non-deliberative media forms such as political comedy. They also give insights to the role conceptions of comedians, present several distinct roles of political comedians in societal debate, and provide answers on how they differ from one another. This is how the dissertation fulfills its purpose to explore the dynamics of political comedy in a hybrid media landscape and to analyze the roles of professional comedians in societal debate.

## **If a tree falls in the forest, is it funny? Scientific theory perspective, methods, and material**

If a tree falls in the forest and no one is around to hear it, can it be funny? Humor and laughter have been called "socially specific, and as such cuspated between nature and culture" (Eagleton, 2019, p. 3). If paraphrasing the classic philosophical thought experiment with the falling tree, the vantage point of this dissertation is to view comedy as a form of communication, and as such, socially shaped. In order for a falling tree to be amusing, it needs to be observed. It needs to be perceived by a cognitive mind capable of finding some incongruity or absurdity in the way the tree falls based on previous frames of reference of trees and their surroundings. And if there is anything humor scholars can agree on, it is that a falling tree has endlessly greater possibilities of being funny if the event is shared by several minds in a social setting and not just observed by one mind alone.

In addition, this dissertation is interested in the comedian as a societal role. It is a philosophical assumption of this dissertation that human agency produces and reproduces social structures, and in turn, social structures both admit and confine human agency (Layder, 1993). An investigation of this sort

therefore needs a more holistic approach, utilized here through a mix of methods, materials, and case studies. Since the agency of the comedian is a focal point, the framework of role conceptions is applied, but attention is also given to interactions between comedians and society at large, complemented by some inspection of the comedic content produced. This multi-layered approach is a strength of the design of the dissertation.

While including quantitative elements, the dissertation relies heavily on qualitative methods, which is suitable for this kind of social science (Schutz, 1962) and provides a contribution to previous media and communication research on political comedy that tends to be quantitatively oriented (Young, 2018). Important to acknowledge is that as a native Swedish scholar my work will undoubtedly have a Western perspective. The research field of political comedy has traditionally been dominated by Anglo-American studies, and although this dissertation has drawn inspiration from those researchers, these studies still make for a fresh empirical contribution since the data is gathered from Swedish cases, Swedish media, and Swedish and Finnish interview subjects. Sweden is a small welfare state with a multiparty political system and a media environment with strong public service broadcasters. It is an open society with few legal restrictions for comedy, where humor is more likely to transcend boundaries or mobilize people (Kuipers, 2008), and the results need to be evaluated within this context.

Examining societal roles is an intricate task where, for the purpose of a dissertation, one needs to demarcate and focus on an area of interest. As previously stated, an emphasis of this dissertation is placed on the role conceptions of the comedians themselves. These role conceptions are explored through qualitative interviews, while the response from the audience is represented by the reflection of their reactions through media coverage. Furthermore, the use of comedy controversies as case studies in articles III and V, and the content comparison of article I, create complementary puzzle pieces concerning the comedy production and the audience's reception. Although not all-encompassing, the approach is useful for the purpose at hand.

A limitation of content analysis is that it cannot examine intent, while a limitation of an interview study is that it only investigates the perceptions of the interview subjects as they choose to share them. It should be noted that the interviews conducted for the dissertation are relatively few, as the Swedish and Finnish political comedy scenes are small in comparison to the ones, for instance, in the US or UK. There is also limited exploration of the processes happening in the interplay between the comedian and the audience

or comedians and other actors in the political realm. Those aspects, as well as including a more direct audience perspective, would be commendable topics for future research.

## Formalities

The articles have been produced with respect to their intended publications. Four of them are therefore written in American English, while one is tailored for British English. These intended venues account, as an example, for the different spellings of the word humor/humour in this dissertation.

When Swedish source material is quoted, whether quotes from interviews or excerpts from news media material, I have translated the quotes from Swedish to English.

Two of the five articles are co-written. In the second article, Joonas Koivukoski and I are equal authors. We each conducted half of the interviews of the study and collaborated on the results. In the fourth article, I am first author. I gathered the material and led the analysis with excellent support by my supervisor and co-author Jonas Harvard. The remaining three articles are single-authored.

The articles have been included with permission from the publishers. To read the final, copyedited versions, seek out the journals.

# Article summaries

## Making news funny: Differences in news framing between journalists and comedians

In a media landscape where people find and navigate news and information via a range of digital intermediaries and platform services, the importance of the opinion leader is reinvigorated. When media consumption becomes more fragmented, with each consumer curating their own accumulated news flow based on personal networks, it creates new opportunities for influence. Classic agenda-setting and news framing research tends to focus on traditional media actors: journalists, political figures, and professional communicators. However, the personalization of politics and journalism, as well as the rise of social media, has created spaces for other actors, like comedians. The fact that people in the digital age are capable of selecting a more personalized agenda allowed for the development of an agenda-melding theory, which highlights the importance of social communities. Agenda melding argues that individuals join groups, in a sense, by joining agendas. In the separation of vertical media (media outlets that are still aiming for a wide audience with content of general relevance) and horizontal media (more specific media actors building a community around the content they produce), comedians can be considered actors who help provide the community agenda within horizontal media.

This study compares how comedians in horizontal media frame news and current affairs with how journalists in vertical media frame similar news. The study is performed via a quantitative content analysis of Swedish political comedy material and Swedish news coverage by traditional journalists. The news media material comes from a variety of sources, while the political comedy material is collected from the emerging podcast medium. The results show that the comedic framing is dramatically more personal and emotional. It is also more thematic and more often focused on the societal level, while the journalistic news framing is more episodic and focused on the individual level. The comedic framing is also more focused on issues of political figures and processes, more negative in tone, and more inclusive of different types of societal actors when compared to the news reporting of vertical media.

Comedic news framing can be seen from this study as a blend between hard and soft news, with the news topics, news topic dimensions, and news focus dimensions giving it high political relevance—equal to or higher than the journalistic material in the study. Meanwhile, the news style dimensions assign it low political relevance, according to the traditional distinctions. The emotional and personal approach is consistent with the community-building functions of horizontal media and, considering the agenda-melding theory, this is one reason that comedians are attractive and relatable to their audiences.

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## Producing journalistic news satire: How Nordic satirists negotiate a hybrid genre

Political satire is an elusive hybrid genre that has attracted both media and scholarly interest through its evolution over the past two decades. Inspired by American TV shows like *Last Week Tonight*, a new wave of more substantial political satire has spread across the world. In this study, we investigate how practitioners of this genre interpret their aims and work routines. Previous studies have scrutinized contents and effects of similar satire genres, but the production side has remained largely uncovered. This study applies the concepts of genre and boundary work to analyze how advocates of this satire genre relate themselves to news journalism and previous satire. The analysis is based on in-depth qualitative interviews with 16 key production team members of four topical satire programs, with eight interviewees coming from Sweden and eight interviewees hailing from Finland.

Nordic news satirists operate in different political and media contexts compared to their American counterparts. Both Sweden and Finland are countries with multi-party parliaments, coalition governments, and a strong presence of public service broadcasting. Results show that Finnish and Swedish news satirists are heavily inspired by American role models and share a fairly common understanding of their role. They differentiate their shows from other Nordic satire based on more substantial contextualization. We argue that both Finnish and Swedish satirists embrace some of the traditional values of journalism, although they have a multifaceted relationship to the concept of journalistic objectivity; while they adhere to factuality, topical relevance, and political independence, they also aim for

emotional, opinionated, and exaggerated expression. This clarifies the ways this satire genre is similar to and different from hard and soft news in its aims.

The most prevalent aim for the satirists was to provide factually based critical insights on topical issues in an entertaining and easily understandable manner. The satirists believed this was possible due to a unique mix of professional journalists and comedians working toward the same goal. The work routines included observing the daily news flow of traditional media and subsequently participating in it—or providing alternatives to it—through satire. The teams engaged in journalistic data collection and source criticism, then combined it with different comedy techniques like comparisons, irony, neologisms, and hyperbole. Through these combinations, they attempted to give more thematic contextualization to topical societal issues than was possible in individual news pieces.

It seems that Nordic news satirists embrace the envisioned “neomodern” ethos, meaning they simultaneously affirm some of the modern journalistic ideals such as striving for factuality and monitoring the powerful, but they also embrace some of the postmodern aesthetic features such as irony, play, and constant allusions. Overall, our analysis suggests that the practices of journalism and comedy blend together in news satire, creating a hybrid genre: journalistic news satire.

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## De-contextualisation fuels controversy—the double-edged sword of humour in a hybrid media environment

Humour has a unique way of delineating social boundaries, and comedy can function as a double-edged sword; it can strengthen bonds and bring people together or divide through provocation and the violation of social norms. As a consequence, humour controversies become telling events that contain the possibility of highlighting cultural sensibilities of any given society—even more so in the current political landscape with increasing media fragmentation. Their conflicting qualities make humorous transgressions possible catalysts of larger public debates, and they are therefore helpful for investigating how humour functions in a political setting. This study analysed four humour functions through the theoretical lens of media framing, via three cases of humorous content that caused controversies in the Swedish

news media. These cases included one divisive radio roast of a politician, one TV satire segment that was received as racist, and one audio podcast with young women who challenged a Swedish political consensus climate.

Framing constitutes the power of media to select and highlight certain aspects of issues, and by extension, to shape public opinion. By subjecting the media coverage of these three controversies to a qualitative content analysis, the framing was examined and discussed in the light of four humour functions: identification, clarification, enforcement, and differentiation. Furthermore, the study examined the media context and the role it played in the framing of the controversies.

The results confirmed observations from previous research on how humour controversies can function as catalysts of debates and can be amplified for use as political assets. As in other humour scandals, such as the Danish cartoon crisis, the media dramatization played out social divides of moral and political rifts through the function of differentiation. In these cases, the controversies led to media debates on Chinese violations against human rights, feminism, the role of public service broadcasting media, freedom of speech, conservatism, racism, and the social media debate climate, among other topics. The humour transgressions served as starting points for a broader issue framing in the media, and the connection to humour gave it an emotional aspect where laughter, hurt, and offence were included aspects of the debates. There were frames in which being exposed to jokes at your expense was used as a defence or justification for rash behaviour and subsequent political statements.

The findings also exposed how closely connected the media context was to the controversies. Media fragmentation in general and social media in particular were to a significant degree highlighted as factors in the development of the controversies. Humour being taken out of context was described both from the aspect of media platforms, where the content was being moved from one media form to another, and with an emphasis on audience, where misunderstandings could occur due to fragmentation. The findings revealed that by shifting the media context, the most uniting humour function of identification could be transformed into the most dividing humour function of differentiation.

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## The democratic roles of satirists

In the high-choice media landscape, satire has the potential to help news and politics break through information apathy barriers and reinvigorate democratic debate. Engagement with satire also interacts with other forms of media use, making satirists function as information subsidizers, in particular for younger audiences. Scholarly interest in the political role of humor has so far focused on content analysis and measuring effects, although proving particular effects of political comedy has been challenging. One reason is the Janus-faced nature of humor: Humor in a message increases attention to that message, but it also signals unimportance. However, if the signal of unimportance is counteracted—for instance, if a comedian establishes serious intent—there is still a possibility for the content to have persuasive influence. The possible roles satirists can assume are thus vital. Is the goal simply to amuse and entertain, or do satirists claim to actually have something important to say?

This study asks how satirists see their role in democratic discourse. Using a theory of non-deliberative forms of public discourse and the idea of role conceptions, we present an analysis of interviews with Swedish satirists working in broadcasting media. Results showed that aspiring to roles of Eye-openers and Questioners—meaning, providing alternative perspectives and problematizing societal norms—were the primary contributions of satire according to the satirists. There were differing roles to undertake when it came to social bonding and solidarity: the Unifier, where the aim was to be bridge-building in a polarized debate, and the Divider, where the main focus was to inspire critical thinking and foster independence from consensus. The role elements of Reporter, Explainer, and Solver were also introduced and discussed.

The idea that satire should be eye-opening fits well with newer research on deliberative democracy, which emphasizes the large degree to which democratic deliberation needs to be creative. One reason humor has this creative capacity to be thought-provoking and mind-expanding is that it is considered playful. This shifts the frame for political discourse and expands what types of statements are considered acceptable. In satirical practice, this could mean starting out by presenting a certain case or viewpoint and then, when the audience had accepted the premise, changing direction in order to add an element of surprise meant to set off reflexive processes in the audience. This is similar to the humor function defined by Latta (1999) as providing a “cognitive shift.” In democratic debate, providing such a shift can be just as

important as using the traditional resources of rhetoric and logical reasoning. It also means participating in a discussion of norms and providing examples of breaches of those norms.

A further function in public deliberation is to provide clarification and to contribute to the continuous transformation (and possible improvement) of claims and arguments presented in the debate. In relation to this role, the practice of satirists of providing unexpected and sometimes even absurd reflections on the possible consequences of a particular position was also a method of contributing to clarification of topics.

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## Moral transgressors vs. moral entrepreneurs: The curious case of comedy accountability in an era of social platform dependence

Throughout history, the joker as a character has had a unique opportunity to speak truth to power. But a fool is also quite easily dismissed. This paradox makes the comedian an elusive figure in public debate. Comedians have held political actors accountable for centuries, for instance through satire. But what kind of value negotiation happens around and among comedians? Utilizing an understanding of accountability as a fluid dynamic of interaction between a media actor and the values of their audience, this study explores the concept of comedy accountability by combining case study analysis and qualitative interviews. Comedic performers are still under scrutiny through controversy and outrage captured in the media, which makes news media material a possible source for observing normative functions around comedy. The case studied here is the media coverage of one of the most prominent Swedish comedy controversies in recent years, the Mr. Cool controversy.

Five ethical values central to comedy accountability are proposed: truth telling, freedom of speech, order and cohesion, human dignity and equality, and nonmaleficence. Results show the values to be highly present both in the news media and in the claims of comedians. The negotiation of these values occurs predominantly within the market frame of accountability, with defenders also using legal-regulatory arguments and professional responsibility arguments while protesters use public responsibility arguments. It is apparent that the political comedian or satirist is situated in a

unique borderland between serious and nonserious communication, generating a dynamic public negotiation about the limits and boundaries of comedy. In the current case study, this negotiation was illustrated by the constant tug of war happening between freedom of speech and the other four values examined. Although the specific characteristics of humor were providing the performers with freedom from restriction, there were still ethical transgressions for which the performers were expected to answer. The results showed an emphasis on the value of freedom of speech and nonmaleficence by defenders of the controversial comedy, and an emphasis on human dignity and equality, and nonmaleficence by the protesters. The two sides simply had disparate views on what constitutes nonmaleficence. The protesters claimed the comedy was harmful through the potential for titillation, triggering, and normalization, while the defenders argued that self-censorship, constraints, and not being able to joke about trauma would cause the real societal harm.

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## Svensk sammanfattning

Vilken roll spelar den politiska komikern i samhällsdebatten? Avhandlingen utforskar den frågan genom att sammanföra två akademiska fält: humorforskning och medie- och kommunikationsvetenskap. Genom fem studier undersöks komikern som opinionsledare i det moderna medielandskapet och resultaten presenteras i fem artiklar som blivit publicerade i vetenskapliga tidskrifter.

Artikel I handlar om hur gestaltning av nyheter skiljer sig åt mellan komiker och traditionella journalister. Digitaliseringen och intåget av de sociala medierna har medfört ett nytt sätt att kategorisera medier på, där man skiljer mellan vertikala och horisontella medier. Vertikala medier är traditionella medier som fortfarande riktar sig mot en bred publik med innehåll av generell karaktär, medan horisontella medier är mer specifika medieaktörer som skapar begränsade gemenskaper kring sitt innehåll.

Vertikala medier är fortfarande viktiga informationsbärare och formar den publika nyhetsagendan (Djerf-Pierre & Shehata, 2017), medan horisontella medier bidrar med snävare gemenskaps-agendor. (McCombs et al., 2014; Ninković-Slavnić, 2016). Den komiska nyhetsgestaltningen framstod i resultaten som en blandning av "hård" och "mjuk" nyhetsgestaltning: i flera aspekter var den bättre än traditionell nyhetsjournalistik på kontextualisering och politisk relevans, men med en avsevärt mer personlig och känslomässig presentation. Det senare stärker uppfattningen om komikerna som aktörer i samhörighetsskapande horisontella medier.

I artikel II intervjuas svenska och finska satiriker om sina avsikter och arbetsrutiner. De intervjuade satirikerna arbetar med en genre av nyhetssatir inspirerad av amerikanska förlagor som *Last Week Tonight*, och intervjuerna visar att de strävar efter en underhållande samhällsbevakning med bättre kontextualisering än traditionell nyhetsrapportering. De följer vissa journalistiska ideal, som saklighet, aktualitet och politiskt oberoende, men använder ett mer känslomässigt, subjektivt och kraftfullt uttryck. Resultaten tyder på att de är praktiker av en egen genre i gränslandet mellan journalistik och underhållning: journalistisk nyhetssatir.

I artikel III används tre fall av humorkontroverser i svensk mediebevakning för att utforska fyra humorfunktioner presenterade av Meyer (2000): identifikation, klargörande, upprätthållande och differentiering. Kontroverserna är en uppmärksammas "roast" av en politiker i radio, ett satirinslag i TV som uppfattades som rasistiskt och en podcast som initierade en livlig kulturdebatt om konservatism och svensk konsensuskultur. Studien undersöker också den mediala kontexten för kontroverserna och hur kontexten påverkade debattförloppet. Ett huvudresultat är att den mest enande humorfunktionen: identifikation, kan omformas till den mest delande humorfunktionen: differentiering, via ett skifte i den mediala kontexten. Något som får konsekvenser i vårt moderna medielandskap där fragmentering och av-kontextualisering kan orsaka missförstånd och förstärka konflikter.

Hur satiriker ser på sin egen yrkesroll utvecklas och fördjupas i artikel IV. Utgångspunkten är en förståelse om rollbildning kombinerat med en bearbetning av teorin om icke-deliberativ demokrati av Hartmut Wessler (2018), som resulterar i olika roll-element via vilka satirikern kan bidra till demokratisk överläggning. Genom djupintervjuer med svenska satiriker undersöks hur de förhåller sig till sex olika roll-element där de som framträdde som de mest tongivande var Ögonöppnaren och Ifrågasättaren. Satirikerna vill främst bidra med alternativa perspektiv i samhällsdebatten

och problematisera samhällsnormer. När det kommer till samhörighet och solidaritet finns två olika vägar att följa: att vara den Enande, där målet är att bygga broar mellan polariserade grupper, och den Delande, där fokus i stället ligger på att stimulera kritiskt tänkande och bryta gruppkonformitet. Även roll-elementen Reportern, Förklararen och Problemlösaren presenteras och diskuteras.

Den sista artikeln i serien introducerar och skärskådar konceptet "comedy accountability", en ansvarighetsprocess kring professionella komiker. Genom historien har politiska komiker varit en del av att ifrågasätta och ställa makthavare till svars, exempelvis via satir. Men vilken typ av ansvarsförhandling pågår kring komikerna själva? I den här studien föreslås fem etiska värden som centrala i ansvarighetsprocessen kring komiker: sannings-sägande, yttrandefrihet, ordning och sammanhållning, mänsklig värdighet och jämlikhet, och icke-skadlighet. En fallstudie av mediebevakningen av en av de största svenska humorkontroverserna på senare år: Mr. Cool-drevet, visar hög närvaro av värdena, där yttrandefrihet och icke-skadlighet betonas av försvarare av kontroversiell humor, och mänsklig värdighet och icke-skadlighet betonas av kritiker av kontroversiell humor. De två grupperna har här helt olika uppfattning om humorns icke-skadlighet. Förhandlingen om dessa värden sker ofta inom en marknadskontext i ansvarighetsprocessen, där försvararna av kontroversiell humor också använder lag- och regleringsargument och professionalitetsargument medan kritikerna använder argument om samhälleligt ansvar.

Dessa fem studier ger avhandlingens empiriska bidrag till ämnet medie- och kommunikationsvetenskap i synnerhet, samtidigt som det är en tillgång för den interdisciplinära humorforskningen i allmänhet. Det teoretiska bidraget från avhandlingen består bland annat i framtagandet av de specifika roller för professionella komiker som presenteras och diskuteras i avhandlingens kappa. Dessa roller, eller rollelement, visar hur komiker positionerar sig utefter politisk avsikt och benägenhet att utmana normer.

Andra teoretiska bidrag är genrebekrivningen av journalistisk nyhetssatir i artikel II och introduktionen av begreppet "comedy accountability", ungefär "komikens ansvarighet", som behandlas i artikel V.

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