

Faculty of Social Sciences
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POLITICAL HUMOR IN THE HYBRID MEDIA ENVIRONMENT

STUDIES ON JOURNALISTIC SATIRE AND AMUSING
ADVOCACY

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DOCTORAL DISSERTATION

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ABSTRACT

This article-based dissertation investigates the relationship between politics and humor in the contemporary media environment. Previous research has characterized the contemporary media environment as a hybrid: a mixture of old and new media technologies and logics and a combination of informative and entertaining styles and genres. This thesis explores how politics and humor intertwine in this hybrid media environment. The aim is to synthesize the previous literature from different disciplines and to clarify how the political aspects of humor can be analyzed in this changing media landscape. The thesis also scrutinizes how mediated political humor poses threats and opportunities to the functioning of liberal democracies.

The dissertation consists of four sub-studies and a theoretical introduction. The sub-studies investigate political humor by different types of actors in various fields of society. Two of the sub-studies examine the hybrids and hybridization between satire and journalism, and the other two study the entanglement of humor and political advocacy on new media platforms. The satire-related articles investigate Nordic news satire and North American and Finnish gonzo journalism. The articles related to amusing online advocacy, in turn, examine political blogging by a Finnish populist leader, Timo Soini, and humorous performances by a Finnish activist group, Loldiers of Odin, which parodies the anti-immigration group, Soldiers of Odin.

The contributions of this dissertation are twofold. The individual sub-studies contribute to particular theoretical and empirical research topics, whereas this introductory essay provides more general theoretical approaches to the study of mediated political humor. The sub-study on popular news satire illuminates producers' perspectives, which is an understudied dimension of research. The sub-study on gonzo journalism, in turn, contributes to the literature on the satire-journalism relationship by clarifying the role of satirical style in Hunter S. Thompson's original gonzo and contemporary examples of Finnish gonzo. The sub-study on the entanglement of populist and humorist communication illustrates how humor can be a consistent communication strategy for a populist leader, amplifying populist antagonisms in changing political contexts. Finally, the sub-study on parody performances by "Loldiers" contributes to the research on contemporary political activism by examining both the rhetoric and online commentary of humorous political stunts.

The theoretical introduction of this dissertation contributes to the existing literature by proposing two frameworks for analyzing mediated political humor. The first framework takes a bird's-eye view of mediated political humor, describing how humor and politics are intertwined on the "levels" of content, practices, identities, and the public sphere. This framework introduces key concepts and studies, providing a descriptive account of

contemporary mediated political humor. This framework helps to focus on future empirical research and provides a contextualization of the research program, which is furthered in the following chapters.

The second framework combines established and new approaches to evaluating the key political aspects of humor in the hybrid media environment. The framework suggests that content, style, identity, and circulation are essential points of departure in the analysis of mediated political humor. Thus far, studies assessing the political aspects of humor in the hybrid media environment have been scattered across different disciplines. The framework thus combines these insights and offers resources for examining how the political aspects cohere in particular cases and data and whether any of them stand out more than others. With guiding questions and examples related to sub-aspects of political humor—such as advocacy, focus, polysemy, tone, representation, popularity, and participation—the framework provides an analytical toolkit or a “checklist” for analyzing mediated political humor.

Finally, this dissertation argues that prior to normative assessments of political humor in liberal democracy, we first need to carefully study the types of humor we are assessing. This is because the content and the practices of production, dissemination, and consumption of mediated political humor are so diverse and thus may serve various functions and have different consequences. This thesis applies its own theoretical framework to analyze how journalistic satire and amusing online advocacy may enhance or hinder the functioning of liberal democracy.

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LIST OF ORIGINAL PUBLICATIONS

This thesis is based on the following publications:

- I Koivukoski J., S., Ödmark. (2020). Producing Journalistic News Satire: How Nordic Satirists Negotiate a Hybrid Genre. *Journalism Studies*, 21(6), 731–747.
- II Koivukoski J., J., Zareff. (2018). Scatological Anecdotes, Heavy Drinking, and Backpacker Culture: Gonzo Humor and Edgework in Contemporary Finnish Journalism. In Alexander, R. & Isager, C., (eds.), *Fear and Loathing Worldwide: Gonzo Journalism Beyond Hunter S. Thompson*, 225–242. Bloomsbury Academic.
- III Koivukoski J. (in review). From Moloch’s Mouth to Bike Communists: Humor Techniques in the Populist Communication of Timo Soini. *European Journal of Cultural and Political Sociology*.
- IV Laaksonen, S., Koivukoski, J., M. Porttikivi. (2021). Clowingin Around a Polarized Issue: Rhetorical Strategies and Communicative Outcomes of a Political Parody Performance by Loldiers of Odin. *new media & society*. 24(8), 1912–1931.

The publications are referred to in the text by their roman numerals.

ABBREVIATIONS

TDS	<i>The Daily Show</i> (Comedy Central, 1996–)
TCR	<i>The Colbert Report</i> (Comedy Central, 2005–2014)
LWT	<i>Last Week Tonight</i> (HBO, 2014–)
FF	<i>Full Frontal</i> (TBS, 2016–2022)

Heaven has given human beings three things to balance the odds of life: Hope, sleep and laughter. (Immanuel Kant, in Walter et al., 2018)

Charlie in Sunderland consumed much of his election news through memes on lad humor Facebook pages, spending more time looking at posts of Boris Johnson using the word “boobies” than reading traditional news stories. (Waterson, 2019)

1 INTRODUCTION

Laughing matters. This pun is repeated in numerous academic titles on humor, underscoring humor's importance to the human condition. Yet it is pertinent to ask how humor matters in today's excessive hybrid media environment, where multiple genres and voices collide between various platforms. As Andrew Chadwick (2013/2017: 207) points out, in the current hybrid media environment, power is "executed by those who are successfully able to create, tap, or steer information flows in ways that suit their goals in ways that modify, enable, or disable others' agency, across and between a range of older and newer media settings." How, then, does humor contribute to this creation, tapping, and steering of information for personal benefit or for the common good? In other words, how does political humor function in a hybrid media environment? In this compiling introduction, I synthesize theoretical and empirical research in search of answers to these questions.

Political humor is an umbrella term for humorous texts and performances that deal with political topics, events, or people (Becker & Waisanen, 2013; Young, 2017). In my dissertation, I approach political humor as political communication, which is understood here broadly as containing both traditional elite-driven communication and grassroots activism, as well as forms of popular culture. Humor, in turn, refers to the communication of incongruities: people's sayings and doings with the aim of amusing others (Martin & Ford, 2018; Warren & McGraw, 2016). Political actors use humor to clarify political ideas, criticize opponents, activate like-minded people, and monitor the powerful. In other words, along with being sheer amusement, humor is applied in professional and banal political communication that is entangled with the formation of public opinion and political identities.

This dissertation consists of four sub-studies and a theoretical introduction. The sub-studies examine hybrids and hybridization between satire and journalism (Articles I and II), and the entanglement of humor and political advocacy on new media platforms (Articles III and IV). Specifically, the studies investigate the production of Nordic news satire (Article I), North American and Finnish gonzo journalism (Article II), political blogging by a Finnish populist leader (Article III), and humorous performances by a Finnish activist group, Loldiers of Odin, that parodies an anti-immigration group Soldiers of Odin (Article IV). Thus, the studies analyzed how modern political humor functions in different contexts and fields in a liberal democracy.

In this compiling introduction, I propose two theoretical frameworks for analyzing mediated political humor. In Chapter 2, I develop a multidimensional approach to hybridity between mediated humor and politics that describes how humor and politics are intertwined on the "levels" of content, practices, identities, and the public sphere. In Chapter 3, I propose a framework that enables the analysis of some of the key political aspects of

mediated humor by arguing that content, style, identity, and circulation are essential points of departure in analysis of political humor in the hybrid media environment. Chapter 4 introduces the sub-studies of this dissertation, and Chapter 5 concludes my arguments, revising the sub-studies about the theoretical framework proposed here and suggesting new paths for future research.

1.1 RESEACH PROBLEM

From state-sponsored information operations to mundane memeing, humor is embedded in modern political information cycles and democratic power struggles in multiple ways. In this dissertation, I focus on journalistic satire and humorous advocacy on new media platforms. Both phenomena have sparked public and scholarly debates on their functions in civic life in the twenty-first century. *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* (1999–2015) popularized a new form of substantial television satire, whereas Occupy Wall Street, Arab Spring, and the alt-right mainstreamed memes as a form of political advocacy. In between, citizens, politicians, and journalists have become accustomed to interactive social media platforms, where sarcastic musings, absurd memes, and silly witticisms are the lingua franca. As Ryan Milner (2016, p. 1) stated, “it’s hard to imagine a major pop cultural or political moment that doesn’t inspire its own constellation of mediated remix, play, and commentary.” How, then, do these new forms of political humor threaten or strengthen our democracies? How do they relate to broader developments in the public sphere?

Researchers, including myself, are having a hard time keeping up with the diversifying content and contexts of political humor. First, studies on political humor are still heavily concentrated on the usual suspects, namely, on North American mainstream TV comedy and satire. While the North American research forms the bulk of modern political humor scholarship (Becker, 2020; Becker & Waisanen, 2013; Young, 2017), other national and systemic contexts are also important (Baym & Jones, 2012; Mina, 2019; Tsakona & Popa, 2011). The sub-studies of this dissertation investigate a few prominent cases in Finland over the last two decades, thus adding an understanding of how political humor functions in Finnish media publicity (Kivistö & Riikonen, 2012; Kolehmainen, 2015; Valaskivi, 2002; Ylönen, 2001; Zareff, 2020). Articles I and II analyze how satiric aims, practices, and modes of display are mixed with more traditional journalistic reporting. In particular, these two studies compare the US paragons of news satire (Article I) and gonzo journalism (Article II) to their Finnish and, in the latter case, to Finnish and Swedish adaptations.

The Finnish media system is a combination of strong public service media and a few large commercial media companies. Journalistic self-regulation and

education are also well established. Finland is thus a mix of “Liberal” and “Democratic Corporatist” models in Hallin and Mancini’s (2004) famous classification of political and media systems (Strandberg & Carlson, 2021). Political humor, in this broader regional and systemic context, bears many similarities to the US system. For example, in both countries, the commercialization of media markets from the 1980s onwards has diversified televisual political humor, including more openly critical and substantial forms of satire (Baym, 2010; Gray et al., 2009; Jones, 2010; Valaskivi, 2002; Young, 2020; Zareff, 2020).

Still, the Finnish context differs from that of the US in many ways, which also affects the dynamics of political humor. The media markets in the US are substantially larger than in Finland, enabling larger budgets for political humor programming and experiments in style, as niche audiences are sizable enough to make a profit (Gray et al., 2009). Also, the education level and trust in public institutions and media are higher among citizens in Nordic countries than in the US. Therefore, political satire audiences in countries such as Finland are already quite informed about politics on average, and thus might not experience the “gateway hypothesis” (Xenos et al., 2018). The gateway hypothesis posits that infotainment consumption, including news satire, leads to superficial knowledge acquisition and the future consumption of political information (Baum, 2002). Still, as some of the interviewed satire producers suggested, based on audience feedback, *young people* could become interested in political affairs through viewing news satire (Article I). These examples highlight the need to broaden the geographical scope of political humor scholarship from the liberal model (e.g., the US, the UK) to other political and media systems (Baym & Jones, 2012; Mina, 2019).

In addition to the emphasis on the US context, the current research focuses on televisual political humor genres and neglects political humor in other genres and contexts in which politics and humor intertwine. For example, Holbert and Young (2012) argued that expanding the scope of the studied genres is crucial to the overall understanding of how political entertainment functions in today’s media environment. The sub-studies on gonzo journalism (Article II), populist political blogging (Article III), and activists’ online performances (Article IV) advance this task concerning political humor. The investigation of emerging genres and practices should be further explored in the future. For example, while the analysis of political humor on Twitter, Facebook, and digital discussion boards, such as 4chan and Overboard (*Ylilauta* in Finnish), has increased (e.g., Phillips and Milner, 2017; Hakoköngäs et al., 2020; Ylä-Anttila et al., 2020), studies on employing political humor on Instagram, Snapchat, YouTube, TikTok, and online gaming are scarce.

Qualitative political humor research has focused on textual analysis (Becker & Waisanen, 2013). While this is an important ongoing contribution, producers’ (Article I) and citizens’ (Article IV) interpretations of the content also matter. First, an analysis of production can increase our understanding of

the aims and practices of professionally produced political humor (Article I). Second, multi-actor and multi-platform analysis can illuminate how humorous communication is used in a bottom-up manner by citizens and activists to participate in political information cycles (Baym & Shah, 2011; Davis et al., 2018; Ross & Rivers, 2017). Article IV studies how, in the midst of the so-called European refugee crisis, progressive political activists employed humorous street and online performances to undermine anti-immigration framings, mobilize like-minded people, and reach for mainstream publicity.

While scholars have acknowledged the trans-ideological nature of humor, there is still relatively little research on conservative or far-right political humor compared to the study of liberal-leaning satire (e.g., Baym, 2005; Jones, 2010) and progressive activist humor (e.g., Chattoo & Feldman, 2020; Day, 2011; Sørensen, 2016). This is understandable in light of the popularity of *The Daily Show* type of news satire and scripted social issues comedy (e.g., *Black-ish* and *Insecure*), and the recurrent use of humor by progressive activists and social movements. However, conservative and far-right political actors are increasingly utilizing humor. Right-wing populist leaders and online activist groups across the world often ridicule their opponents, like the “naïve liberals,” corrupt elites, mainstream media and/or minorities. So far, studies have focused on humor in far-right online forums and communities (e.g., Hakoköngäs et al., 2020; Phillips, 2015), but studies on the uses of humor by prominent right-wing populist leaders (Gonawela et al., 2018) and media personalities (Jutel, 2018) are scarce. Article III thus contributes to our understanding of the interlinks between populist and humorous communication by leading politicians and pundits.

Finally, the expansion and diversification of mediated political humor has stimulated discussions about whether it is a threat or a corrective for liberal democracy. Some have warned that the constant negative portrayal of elites in news satire may lead to passive cynicism among citizens (Baumgartner & Morris, 2006; Hart & Hartelius, 2007), or that the critique in mainstream satire can be hindered by commercial pressures from the owners (Waisanen, 2018b). Recent concerns include the role of humor in the rise of the far right (Phillips, 2015; Schwarzenegger & Wagner, 2018; Zannettou et al., 2018) and in the polarization of public discourse (Nagel, 2017; Young, 2020). Others, in turn, have embraced a more optimistic approach, arguing for the civic potential of political humor (Baym, 2010; Chattoo & Feldman, 2020; Day, 2011; Jones, 2010), often along the lines of one stream in cultural studies that emphasizes the critical and active dimensions of consuming popular culture (e.g., Fiske, 1987; Van Zoonen, 2005). In this thesis, I propose a framework that helps analyze diverse forms of contemporary political humor prior to normative assessments.

1.2 RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND SUB-STUDIES

This dissertation investigates recent forms of political humor and examines the ways in which they function in the hybrid media environment. The research questions of this thesis are as follows:

- 1) How are politics and humor intertwined in the hybrid media environment?
- 2) How can the political aspects of humor in the hybrid media environment be analyzed?
- 3) How does mediated political humor relate to liberal democracy?

These questions are addressed in the sub-studies by different empirical research designs (Table 1), whereas this introductory article takes a more theoretical approach to these issues. Articles I and II study hybrids of satire and journalism. Article I focuses on the aims and work practices within the production of journalistic news satire. The study contributes to the research on popular news satire by illuminating producers' perspectives, which is an under-studied dimension in this line of research. Article II examines the mixing of satirical and journalistic styles in gonzo journalism. Through an analysis of the original gonzo and three cases of Finnish gonzo, this study contributes to the literature by applying the incongruity theory of humor and the pragmatist understanding of a journalistic genre.

Article III examines the entanglement of populist and humorist communication in blog posts by the former leader of the Finns Party, Timo Soini. This study builds on an integrated approach to populist communication and argues that populist antagonism can be supported by various humor techniques in changing political contexts. Finally, Article IV investigates the rhetoric and reception of humorous performances by an activist group called Loldiers of Odin. This study builds on and contributes to research on hybrid activist communication and humorous political performances by examining the actual online commentary of citizens instead of only metrics.

Table 1. *Sub-studies of the Dissertation.*

	Theory and Methodology	Empirical Material	Contributions
Article I	Practice and discourse theory approaches to genre and hybridity. Qualitative content analysis.	Semi-structured interviews of 16 Finnish and Swedish news satirists.	Examines how news satirists interpret a hybrid genre. Analyses aims and practices in producing journalistic satire.
Article II	Incongruity theory and practice theory to analyze gonzo humor. Ethics, practices, and styles in journalism. Qualitative textual analysis.	Gonzo texts by Hunter S. Thompson, three cases of contemporary Finnish gonzo.	Studies how gonzo humor is constructed and how it is or is not journalistic. Analyses why gonzo becomes controversial.
Article III	Integrating humor and populism theory to study the mixings of humorous and populist communication. Qualitative textual analysis.	377 blog posts by the former leader of the Finns Party, Timo Soini.	Investigates how humor can be a tool in populist communication. Analyses how humor can amplify populism.
Article IV	Theories of connective action and humorous political stunts to study parodic protesting and its online interpretations. Rhetorical analysis.	138 Facebook posts by Loldiers of Odin and about 1000 comments.	Investigates activists' humorous performances and citizens' reactions to them.

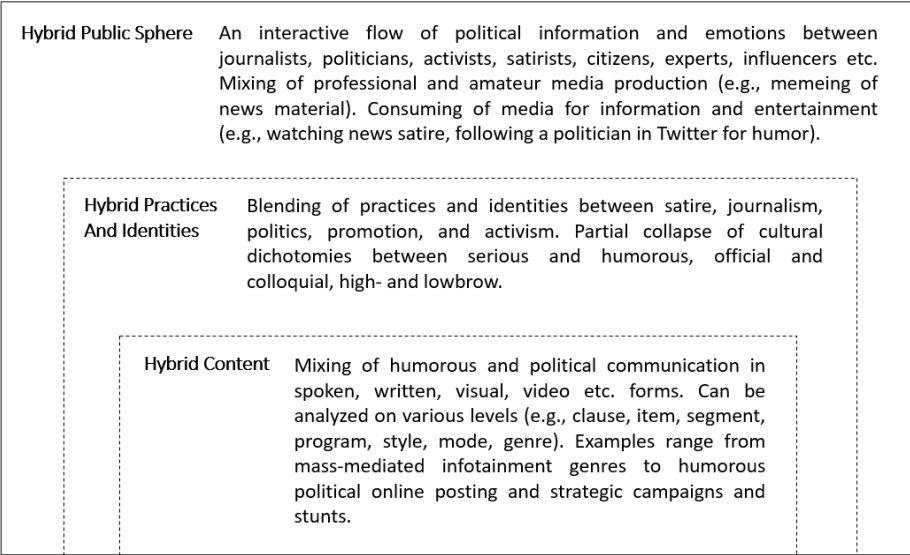
Ultimately, this thesis asks how new forms of political humor can be a threat and corrective to liberal democracy. This theme is rarely addressed beyond the scope of a particular empirical study (Holbert, 2013). In Chapter 3, I address this issue by compiling the key political aspects of mediated humor. I suggest that this framework enables us to better grasp the diversity of mediated political humor by combining insights from empirical research on various fields of political communication, including mass-mediated political humor (e.g., Holbert, 2013; Young, 2020), online political humor (Shifman, 2014; Phillips & Milner, 2017), and activist humor (Chattoo & Feldman, 2020; Day, 2011; Sørensen, 2016). This enables a more precise normative assessment of how different forms of humor can contribute to and hinder liberal democracy. However, before digging more deeply into the politics of humor, we need to explore the various dimensions of hybridity between mediated politics and humor, as the political media environment has changed profoundly over the past two decades.

2 POLITICAL HUMOR IN THE HYBRID MEDIA ENVIRONMENT

Politics and humor have intertwined throughout the centuries in political rhetoric and arts in myriad ways. This dissertation focuses on prominent contemporary forms of mediated political humor and argues that the concept of a *hybrid media environment* provides a useful framework for analyzing the interlinks between mediated politics and humor in the twenty-first century. In this chapter, I build on previous work on the evolving media sphere and suggest that hybridity between politics and humor can be analyzed in the dimensions of content, practices, identities, and the public sphere. I argue that this kind of multidimensional approach to the hybrid media environment is useful, as it provides a larger picture of contemporary political humor and helps focus our empirical analysis.

Hybridity has become an increasingly used notion in both academic and public discussions to describe various phenomena in which institutions, practices, and content are mixed in new ways. Examples range from hybrid warfare and cars to hybrid regimes and organizational structures. In media and communication studies, scholars have tracked the hybridization between entertainment and news media genres (Baym, 2010; Otto et al., 2017; Williams & Delli Carpini, 2011), old, and new media (Chadwick, 2013/2017; Jenkins et al., 2013), and the blurring of practices and identities of political communicators (Davis, 2013; Day, 2011; Ödmark, 2021). All of these dimensions are important for understanding how politics and humor are intertwined in the current media environment. Indeed, I argue that humor is utilized in new ways by both elites and bottom-up actors in this transforming media environment.

Figure 1 summarizes how mediated humorous and political communication mix in the different dimensions. The figure is inspired by Otto, Gloger, and Boukes' (2017) multidimensional and multilevel analysis of the "softening of political journalism." The logic of the figure is that, based on previous studies, we can identify various dimensions of hybridity from micro and concrete to more macro and abstract levels (cf. a matryoshka doll): from hybrid content to hybrid identities and practices, and to hybrid media publicity. Importantly, the lines between these dimensions are not as clear in praxis as in this abstraction. As practice and discourse theories suggest (e.g., Hermann, 2016; Reckwitz, 2002), human behavior—including mediated humorous political communication—is embedded in broader cultural and material structures, and we can only analytically "slice" parts of it from a particular study.



Graphic 1 Political Humor in the Hybrid Media Environment.

To be clear, I do not suggest that the hybridity between mediated political communication and humor is something new. Rather, a multidimensional approach combines some of the ways in which this hybridity occurs in today’s media environment. Thus, this framework aims to provide an overview of the key dimensions of contemporary mediated political humor. The framework aims to help to focus empirical analyses of political humor by introducing key concepts and studies on a particular level of abstraction. Finally, the framework forms the basis for a research agenda focusing on the role of humor in today’s mediated power struggles, which is further examined in the following chapters.

2.1 HYBRID CONTENT

Political humor is, by definition, a hybrid of political and humorous communication. Political humor occurs most often in genres devoted to it: news satire, late-night comedy, fictional scripted comedy, political cartoons, and so on. The study of political humor has focused on the features and effects of these genres (see Becker, 2020; Becker & Waisanen, 2013; Young, 2020). Humorous and political communication further mixes in genres and contexts in which political topics are the main subject, and humor is used as a rhetorical device (e.g., in parliamentary speech, TV debates, political advertisements, and protests). Moreover, since the rise of the internet and social media, citizens, and activists have developed new humor genres and practices—such

as memeing (Knobel & Lankshear, 2007; Shifman, 2013) and trolling (Phillips, 2015)—that also blend politics and humor in novel ways.

The content of political humor mixes humorous and political semiotic elements (words, sentences, pictures, performances, and sound) that construct larger and more abstract units, such as chapters, cartoons, news items, memes, social media posts, TV shows, styles, and genres. According to the most established theory tradition in humor scholarship, humorous communication refers to intentionally produced *incongruities* (Martin & Ford, 2018). Incongruity, however, can mean many things—including surprise, juxtaposition, atypicality, and violation (Veatch, 1998; Warren & McGraw, 2015). Thus, Warren and McGraw (2015) suggest understanding humor as an appraisal of *benign violations* that relate to a person's physical health, identity, or social, cultural, and logical rules.

Due to human creativity, the ways of constructing these benign violations are arguably unlimited (i.e., humor). Common humor techniques include metaphor, hyperbole, irony, wordplay, absurd humor, slapstick, parody, and anthropomorphism. Researchers have identified various humor typologies (e.g., Berger, 1993; Buijzen & Valkenburg, 2004; Dynel, 2009) that are, while always limited, useful for recognizing salient techniques and their hybrids in empirical political humor research. For instance, all the sub-studies of this thesis analyze how certain humor techniques are applied in particular contexts.

In addition to humorous stimuli, political humor consists of political communication. Political communication can be understood as communication *by* political actors, *to* them, or *about* them (McNair, 2011). Political topics with humorous communication can be measured both quantitatively (Reinemann et al., 2012; Ödmark, 2019) and analyzed qualitatively (Baym, 2005; Jones, 2010). Political topics can be operationalized, for example, as mentions of a) one or more societal actors, b) mentions of a planned or realized decision, measure, or program, and c) mentions of people or groups concerned about planned or realized decisions, measures, or programs (Reinemann et al., 2012). Moreover, when politics is understood more broadly, political topics also include social justice issues, such as how minorities are represented in popular sitcoms (Chattoo & Feldman, 2020; Williams & Delli Carpini, 2011).

The consistent mixing of humorous and political communication leads to the development of genres, styles, and practices. Genres are constantly defined and redefined through communication by producers, critics, scholars, marketing professionals, and audiences (Altman, 1999). A hybrid genre mixes the characteristics of two or more genres, producing an ambiguous genre status that may lead to the development of a new genre (Mäntynen & Shore, 2014). For example, journalistic TV news satire is a genre that evolved during the 2000s from a traditional entertaining talk show to a more substantial and critical form of political satire, which has been characterized as journalistic by some researchers (Baym, 2005; Faina, 2013; Fox, 2018). The representatives

of this journalistic news satire genre, such as *The Daily Show*, *Full Frontal*, or *Last Week Tonight*, consist of different segments, including opening monologues, main story/stories, parodies of journalistic reporting, and/or guest interviews. These segments, in turn, consist of a relatively stable set of humor techniques (Baym, 2005; Droog et al., 2020; Waisanen, 2009). The same matryoshka doll logic applies to other genres that employ political humor.

Satire is an umbrella term for a centuries-old discursive practice that combines the critique and humor of politics or human vices in various ways (Condren, 2012; Griffin, 1994). While some genres are devoted to political satire, satire can “take over” or be implemented into any genre. Therefore, satire is sometimes described as parasitic or “pre-generic” (Knight, 2004).

Infotainment genres are a prominent topic in political humor research. Infotainment can be understood as an umbrella term for various professionally produced hybrid genres that combine political information and entertainment in different ways (Boukes, 2019b; Valaskivi, 2002; Williams & Delli Carpini, 2011). These genres are formed when news genres integrate entertaining features, and entertainment genres take on political topics (Otto et al., 2017; Reinemann et al., 2012). Historical mappings indicate how the infotainment genres began to expand from the 1990s onwards (Baym, 2010; Gray et al., 2009; Jones, 2010; Zareff, 2020). Commercial logic partially explains the formation of these genres. For one thing, the increased competition of audiences and advertising revenues have pressured news formats to adapt more sensationalist modes of presentation (Baym, 2010; Boukes, 2019b). At the same time, since the late 1980s, the deregulation of media markets has created niche markets for openly political humor (Gray et al., 2009; Zareff, 2020).

Researchers have classified infotainment genres in various ways. Chattoo and Feldman (2020) identified five prominent genres of “mediated socially critical comedy”: satirical news, scripted episodic TV, mediated stand-up, sketch comedy, and mockumentary. Boukes (2019b) divides infotainment into five subgenres: soft news, opinionated news, political satire, entertainment talk shows, and political fiction. In these typologies, political fiction and scripted episodic TV have the same meaning, and so do satirical news and political satire. Thus, combining these typologies, we have eight prominent genres of professionally produced mass-mediated infotainment: soft news, opinionated news, scripted fictional political comedy, news satire, political sketch comedy, entertainment talk shows, mediated political stand-up, and political mockumentaries. This listing is not exhaustive, however, as the mapping emphasizes televisual genres. Still, political humor research has mostly investigated how these genres—especially news satires and talk shows—have evolved from the 1960s onward, and how they differ internally and externally in their content features and effects (see Becker & Waisanen, 2013; Young, 2017).

In addition to professionally produced political humor, researchers have investigated amateur, user-generated political humor on different digital platforms. For example, studies have examined the humorous political tweeting of journalists (Holton & Lewis, 2011), politicians (Avidar, 2012; Gonawela et al., 2018), and citizens (Davis et al., 2018; Ross & Rivers, 2017). Furthermore, research has investigated the memeing of political activists on Facebook (Gal, 2019; Hakoköngäs et al., 2020) and image boards (Phillips & Milner, 2017; Ylä-Anttila et al., 2020). Within these platforms, users apply traditional techniques of verbal humor, such as irony, hyperbole, metaphor, and wordplay. Yet, online political humor is also often based on the multimodal interplay between text, pictures, sound, and/or video (Hakoköngäs et al., 2020; Shifman, 2013; Phillips & Milner, 2017). Another dimension of hybridization between media content is the *convergence* of older and newer media types within the same platform (Jenkins, Ford, & Green, 2013). Researchers have noted how online “humor hubs” and social media sites are an amalgam of not only different styles and topics, but also types of older and new media that are remixed with each other, enabling new types of humor (Knobel & Lankshear, 2007; Shifman, 2007) and political humor to emerge (Phillips & Millner, 2017; Shifman, 2014; Wiggins, 2019).

However, previous studies have not identified taxonomies of political humor genres in digital media, such as in the study of mass-mediated political humor. Nevertheless, most studies have focused on the practice of political memeing (e.g., Milner, 2016; Ross & Rivers, 2017; Shifman, 2014; Wiggins, 2019). Internet memeing is a practice that consists of the mimicry and remixing of existing material, such as image macros or puns (Knobel & Lankshear, 2007; Shifman, 2013). Internet memes can be understood as collectively produced complications of visuals, text, voice, and/or video. Shifman (2011: p. 190) distinguished between viral and memetic media: virals are content that gains popularity rapidly across digital platforms *without being altered*. For example, a clip of *Last Week Tonight* that originally aired on HBO is later uploaded to YouTube, from which it is shared by numerous users on different platforms, creating a viral hit. Memetic media, in turn, includes the imitation and remixing of content, for example, by employing a meme template with a new text. However, the distinction between the two is not that clear, as viral media are also altered in the process of sharing, which always includes some recontextualization (Varis & Blommaert, 2015; Wiggins, 2019).

2.2 HYBRID PRACTICES AND IDENTITIES

Hybridity in political communication also manifests as the blurring of practices and identities between political communicators. Researchers have argued that, roughly from the 1980s onward, the fields of journalism,

entertainment, promotion, and politics, and their respective aims, strategies, and modes of display have become increasingly hybridized (Baym, 2010; Davis, 2013; Esser, 2013; Williams & Delli Carpini, 2011). At this analytical level, the focus shifts to practices and people who perform political communication. As Chadwick (2017) posited, the question is how journalists, campaign officials, activists, and politicians “make sense of their daily practices as actors in the hybrid media system” (159–160). As for political humor research, hybridization on this analytical level means investigating how the practices and identities of satire and comedy mix with those of politics, journalism, activism, and promotion.

The variance in the hybridization of practices and identities between political communicators is broad. On the one hand, in some cases, the identities of professional comedians and political communicators are tightly intertwined. For instance, in the case of journalistic TV news satire, production team members perform the roles of journalism and political satire simultaneously (Fox, 2018; Ödmark, 2021). Humorous stunts, in turn, are a *modus operandi* for activist groups such as Adbusters and Yes Men (Day, 2011; Sørensen, 2016). On the other hand, some political communicators—arguably the majority—occasionally apply humor as a rhetorical device in their public communication. Finally, in the “middle section,” there are politicians, journalists, and activists whose public image is partly based on witty banter, irony, absurdism, and/or ridicule. These actors are not professional comedians but embrace humor as a consistent part of their public delivery and style. For example, in a classic study, Meyer (1990) analyzed how Presidential Candidate Ronald Reagan often applied humor to lighten the mood or make his points more persuasive.

Modern politicians are required to have various communicative competences to successfully navigate across different genres and contexts, such as TV debates, press interviews, and social media discussions in the hybrid media environment (e.g., Gray, 2009; Hokkanen et al., 2021). Whereas earlier, a formal style would be sufficient, now public communicators need to adapt to conversational discourse types that also include wit and humor (Kantola, 2014: 41; Tolson, 2006: 93). New infotainment genres create both challenges and opportunities for politicians to manage their public image, as satirical interaction can make them seem either “cool” or ridiculous (Baym, 2007; Gray, 2009; Hamo et al. 2010). According to politicians themselves, infotainment programs and social media platforms provide opportunities for self-marketing and disseminating political ideas in a more informal way while showing the “human side” of themselves (Coleman et al., 2009; Frame & Brachotte, 2015; Herkman, 2010).

A few contemporary political leaders embody the dual identity of politician–comedian wholeheartedly. Since 2016, Volodymyr Zelensky in Ukraine, Marjan Šarec in Slovenia, and Jimmy Morales in Guatemala have become heads of state in their respective countries, and all three have a background in comedy. Furthermore, in Italy, the Five Star Movement was

established by the former stand-up comedian Beppe Grillo in 2009, and in Iceland, Jon Gnarr, a former comedian, served as the mayor of Reykjavik between 2010 and 2014 (Boyer, 2013). However, there is little research on whether and how these politicians have made use of their backgrounds while in office. In addition to these comedian-turned politicians, many prominent political leaders employ aggressive humor on social media. For example, populist leaders such as Geert Wilders, Jussi Halla-aho, Nigel Farage, Donald Trump, and Narendra Modi repeatedly ridicule their opponents through wordplay, figurative nicknames, and sarcastic remarks (Ekström et al., 2018; Gonawela et al., 2018; Nikunen, 2015). Still, systematic research on the use of humor by political leaders across social media is surprisingly scarce. Platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube entail slightly different—and changing—affordances, users, and cultural practices that arguably invite and reward different kinds of humor styles that populist leaders, and other political actors, can harness in their impression management efforts.

The identities and practices of journalism and satire also blur in the hybrid media environment (Baym, 2005; Ödmark, 2021). Satirical and journalistic aims often converge in the production of hybrid genres that meld political opinions and humor, including columns, caricatures, and news satire (Peifer & Lee, 2019; Zareff, 2012). The genre of journalistic TV news satire is perhaps the most notable example of this kind of blending: the production team members consist of both journalists and satirists, and some have backgrounds in both professions (Hersey, 2013). Our interview study with Finnish and Swedish producers indicated that both groups learned from each other, increasing the hybridization between professional identities.

Journalists also apply humor and irony to social media. Journalists often publish and share ironic observations of politics that they cannot include in more serious genres, such as the news (Holton and Lewis, 2011; Molyneux, 2015). Journalists also generally aim to present themselves as smart and funny; for example, some reporters use funny self-deprecating anecdotes as a means of softening self-marketing, while others practice witty and satirical commentary, even though some audiences might misinterpret it or find it offensive (Paaso, 2021). Indeed, for some journalists, a satirical style is a trademark, and some of these prominent journalists-satirists function as opinion leaders, serving multiple societal roles simultaneously (Ödmark, 2021). This kind of professional identity blending is connected to a broader trajectory within journalists' self-understandings. According to surveys and interviews, younger generations of Finnish journalists are more willing to include entertaining features in their work to make their serious reporting more interesting (Paaso, 2021; Pöyhtäri et al., 2016). Packing information in a funny format is seen as a way to reach and serve the demanding citizens/customers in the attention economy.

The identities and practices of activism and satire converge in the hybrid media environment. Satirists/activists often apply humor to criticize cultural

practices, political opponents, and the power elites. A few notable progressive protest groups, such as Adbusters and Billionaires for Bush, and individual artist-activists like Sacha Baron Cohen or The Yes Men, have made humorous stunts their trademark (Day, 2011; Sørensen, 2016). Furthermore, since the early 2010s, new social movements have increasingly implemented satirical practices, such as political memeing, as part of their public communications (Shifman, 2014; Phillips & Milner, 2017). Activists employ a satirical delivery, both in their internal communications, to boost morale and consolidate their identity by ridiculing the political other and in external communications, to catch the attention of the press and to activate like-minded people, potentially attracting new supporters (Day, 2011; Sørensen, 2016). Also, popular comedians like Issa Rae, Hasan Minhaj, W. Kamau Bell, and Franchesca Ramsey deal actively with social justice issues in their humor, paving the way for change (Chattoo & Feldman, 2020: 141–151).

Finally, the use of humor is blended with the practices of professional marketing, branding, and PR. Humor is a common tool in marketing (Weinberger & Gulas, 2019), and communications professionals across the society are becoming more aware of humor's potential for PR purposes on social media (Rasmussen, 2017). More generally, promotional practices have gradually expanded their influence to other fields of society, including politics (Davis, 2013; Esser, 2013). Scholars have noted that public life is driven by the logic of attention and self-promotion (e.g., Davis, 2013; Van Dijck & Poell, 2013). The use of humor in public communication utilizes, and partly contributes to, this “attention economy.” When communications professionals in political organizations implement humor into the practices of customer tracking, targeted messaging, and manufacturing of personality brands, humor becomes more firmly entangled with the strategic “battle for hearts and minds” in the modern public sphere. Indeed, a review of humor in advertising suggests that campaigns employing humor on political issues are increasing (Weinberger & Gulas, 2019).

2.3 HYBRID PUBLIC SPHERE

The hybridity of the public sphere refers to political information cycles that consist of interdependent commentary on current affairs by elite and non-elite actors on journalistic news media and social media platforms (Chadwick, 2017; Jenkins et al., 2013; Williams & Delli Carpini, 2011). This hybrid public sphere brings together both the rational deliberative function of the public sphere (Habermas, 1989/1962) and the affective and cultural dimensions of democratic engagement and power struggles (e.g., Mouffe, 2005; van Zoonen, 2005). Mediated humor participates both in the deliberative formation of public opinion (Burgers et al., 2016) *and* the affectual construction of political identities (Nikunen, 2015; Sakki and Martikainen, 2021).

Many have criticized Habermas's (1989) historic and normative descriptions of the deliberative, rational, and open public sphere for not taking account of power relations, plurality of publics, and emotions in the context of democratic opinion-forming and decision-making. First, while the public sphere is never an egalitarian space, it mirrors and partly constitutes the power relations prevailing in society (Fraser, 1992; Mouffe, 2005). Second, there are, in fact, many public spheres in modern societies, including the parliament, the mainstream media and various "counterpublics," in which groups of citizens and activist groups form their own agendas and identities, often challenging the elites' hegemonic perceptions and framings (Fraser, 1992; Hariman, 2008). Third, opinion formation and debate within and between these public spheres do not occur purely in rational and factual terms; emotions also play an important role (e.g., Fenton, 2018; Mouffe, 2005). Building on this critique, the notion of the hybrid public sphere is developed as an analytical concept to refer to the constellation of various public spheres and their interactions. The question at this level of analysis is: What functions does humor fulfill in this hybrid media publicity?

Studies investigate, for instance, how political humor contributes to setting a public agenda (Boukes, 2019a; Hardy et al., 2014), disseminating societal information (Baym, 2007; Becker & Bode, 2018; Feldman, 2013), and facilitating public debate and opinion formation (Davis et al., 2018; Ross & Rivers, 2017). Other relevant questions ask how mediated humor participates in the formation of political identities (Gal, 2019; Meyer, 2000) and critical evaluation of elites (Baym, 2005; Jones, 2007) and political opponents (Gonawela et al., 2018; Meyer, 1990), or alternatively, whether humor promotes equality (Day, 2011; Chattoo & Feldman, 2020) or maintains and/or reinforces harmful stereotypes (Schwarzenegger & Wagner, 2018; Vidmar & Rokeach, 1974). Traditionally, these questions have been examined about mass media political humor, but from the early 2010s onwards, they have also increasingly been examined concerning social media and its interconnectedness with mass media.

Until roughly the 2000s, media publicity consisted mainly of print, radio, and television, which disseminated information to citizens largely in a top-down manner (e.g., Blumler & Kavanagh, 1999). Throughout the twentieth century, political humor was a part of this media sphere, for example, in the form of political cartoons, columns, satirical magazines, and TV news parodies. Gradually, over recent decades, digital media has "converged" or "hybridized" with older media forms and practices, producing a more open, multi-voiced, fast-paced, and interdependent media publicity that also entails bottom-up political communication (Chadwick, 2017; Jenkins et al., 2013). Simultaneously, politicians, citizens, activists, and other interest groups have also become active producers of mediated public humor, and the production and consumption of political humor has also become more interactive and networked. This evolution has fostered ever-increasing scholarly attention, ranging from techno-optimism to dystopian imaginaries (Lomborg, 2017).

Here, I follow an approach that sees this change as processes of adjustment and co-evolution between older and newer media rather than as a total revolution (Baym and Shah 2011; Chadwick, 2017; Williams & Delli Carpini, 2011).

Chadwick (2017) described how traditional news cycles that were previously mostly orchestrated by mass media organizations and logic (e.g., Altheide & Snow, 1979) are now transformed into *political information cycles* in which old elite, new elite, and non-elite participants co-create and debate the meaning of topical issues across different platforms. Chadwick's argument is that old elites (i.e., journalists, major political parties, and leading politicians) still dominate political information cycles, but they need to adapt to fast-paced, interactive, and emotional media publicity. Crucially, old elites are increasingly challenged by new voices and emerging elites. My argument is that humor is utilized in new ways by both elites and bottom-up actors in this transforming media environment. Political elites utilize the openness of digital platforms that bypass journalistic gatekeeping and use humor to promote themselves and their ideas, and to delegitimize opponents. However, this openness also works for the emerging elites and non-elites, such as activists and citizens, who can satirize the powerful and/or competing political groups (Davis et al., 2018; Ross & Rivers, 2017; Shifman, 2013; Sørensen, 2016). The interactive nature of political information cycles means that political humor research should investigate not only the content of political humor, but also its circulation across media and platforms.

The expansion of digital media has also resulted in the blurring of boundaries between professional and amateur media production. While audience researchers have long argued about how citizens and fans actively interpret and re-use mass media (e.g., Ang, 1985; Fiske, 1987), the emergence of digital media has made these practices easier and more public and popular (Baym, 1995; Jenkins, 2006). The humorous online remixing of popular culture and political affairs has been at the forefront of this hybridization (Nagle, 2017; Phillips & Milner, 2017). Studies have analyzed, for example, how citizens employ digital platforms to comment on topical political news humorously (Davis et al., 2018; Ross & Rivers, 2017) or how mass-mediated humor is harnessed to advance one's political goals in social media (Baym & Shah, 2011). In a pioneering study, Baym and Shah (2011) investigated how environmental activists made use of TV news satire clips in their social media communications to amplify their agendas.

The early 2010s marked a new phase in the political uses of humor, as new prominent social movements, such as the Egypt uprising of 2011, Occupy Wall Street, and the Spanish 15-M, began systematically utilizing the participatory affordances of social media (Phillips & Milner, 2017; Shifman, 2013). Humorous memes have been used to criticize political opponents, attract press coverage, foster solidarity, and activate like-minded individuals (Shifman, 2014; Phillips & Milner, 2017). The Hong Kong protests, #MeToo, and Black Lives Matter movements are more recent examples of this kind of hybrid

protesting that also utilizes the dissemination and co-creation of murky but also humorous memes (Dynel & Poppi, 2021; Sunden & Paasonen, 2020). Similarly, new far-right movements have utilized the funny internet: memes are a means for mainstreaming their political ideas and luring new people into their fight (Nagel, 2017; Phillips & Milner, 2017; Wagner & Schwarzenegger, 2020).

Professional politicians have also made use of hybrid media production. Campaign communications experts have increasingly relied on both professionally produced campaign materials *and* grassroots online media content (Chadwick, 2017; Eranti & Lindman, 2014; Heikkilä, 2017). Governor Howard Dean's run in the 2004 Democratic primaries and Barack Obama's presidential campaigns (2008, 2012) are pioneering examples of this kind of co-creative campaigning. In Finland, the 2012 presidential elections are one of the earliest examples of the impactful use of social media in campaigning. Candidate Pekka Haavisto and his communication team were able to co-create a hype around Haavisto, gathering an unprecedented amount of campaign content produced by artists and citizens—from memes and cartoons to concerts and flash mob performances—that was harnessed during the official campaign (Eranti & Lindman, 2014). Ultimately, President Donald Trump's campaign was a culmination that brought political memeing to the forefront of global attention (Heikkilä, 2017; Nagel, 2017; Phillips & Milner, 2017). The campaign's entanglement with the alt-right subculture fed each other, echoing and amplifying subversive and racist messages (Heikkilä, 2017). An inclination to ridicule the alleged moral earnestness of the liberal establishment and progressive activists was able to unify a loose network of teenage gamers, conspiracy theorists, white nationalists, techno-libertarians, men's rights activists, and anti-immigration advocates (Nagel, 2017; Tuters & Hagen, 2020).

The entanglement of information and humor in political information cycles is also reflected in citizens' consumption routines. Studies indicate that while some audiences consume news satire mainly for its amusing qualities, others screen these programs to learn about politics and contextualize the news more deeply (Doona, 2016; Edgerly, 2017; Young, 2013). Many users also expect humor from politicians that they follow on social media (Parmelee & Roman, 2019). Humor is thus integrated into the mundane information consumption routines of many citizens, especially young people (Baumgartner & Morris, 2012). A recent analysis of the latest Finnish Parliamentary Elections concluded that the internet and social media are on the verge of becoming the most important arena for campaigning (Strandberg & Carlson, 2021), and as many users crave amusing political content in the digital sphere, online political humor presumably will continue to play a role in future elections and day-to-day political interactions.

3 POLITICAL ASPECTS OF MEDIATED HUMOR

This chapter brings together established and emerging ways of assessing the political aspects of humor in the hybrid media environment. So far, these kinds of studies are scattered across different disciplines, and thus the proposed framework aims to synthesize and clarify the state-of-the-art in political humor research. I suggest that we can analyze the political nature of selected humor instances in the hybrid media environment through four aspects—content, style, identity, and circulation—which are further divided into more specific sub-aspects and questions.

This framework, summarized in Table 2, is based broadly on a multifunctional approach to semiotics developed by Michael Halliday and colleagues (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). Multifunctionality means that semantic clauses have ideational, interpersonal, and textual functions that work simultaneously (Fairclough, 1995): the ideational function produces representations about reality (Content); the interpersonal function articulates the identities and relations of identity groups (Identity); and the textual function produces clauses and their relations in particular ways (Style). This social semiotic or discursive approach has since been expanded to the study of mediated politics (e.g., Fairclough, 1995; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2020) and also applied in political humor research (Hakoköngäs et al., 2020; Nikunen, 2015; Ross & Rivers, 2017). I use this approach as a base for my framework and implement other important aspects (Circulation) and sub-aspects to it that have been identified in political humor research.

The point of this framework is to provide tools for analyzing how the political aspects of humor come together in selected data and whether some of them are more prominent. A single study can arguably never consider all of the aspects thoroughly; thus, this framework serves more as a heuristic mapping or a checklist rather than a precise methodological toolkit. To be sure, the framework does not aim to provide the final word for analyzing political humor. In fact, all of the aspects proposed here are immensely complex and intertwined, and thus the framework is inevitably far from all encompassing. Nevertheless, I argue that the framework addresses some of the fundamental questions about the modern mediated politics of humor.

Table 2. *Political Aspects of Mediated Humor.*

Questions	
Content: Advocacy	Does the analyzed humor include political statements? Does the humor show a leaning toward a political position (e.g., to a party or to an ideology)? Is some political person, party, or ideology constantly targeted? Is the humor persuasive, to whom, and under what conditions?
Content: Focus	Is the analyzed humor person-centered, substantial, or mixed? What types of information does the humor include? Can audiences separate factual information from fiction, opinion, and dis/misinformation?
Style: Polysemy	Is the humor clear or ambiguous in its political statements? Does the humor rely on irony, parody, multi-voiced narrative, absurdities, self-deprecation, or intertextuality? Are there irony cues? Is ambiguous humor used strategically to gain attention and provide justification for provocation?
Style: Tone	What is the general attitude of the humor toward the target(s)? Is the attitude toward the targets of humor mainly positive, negative, or mixed? Is the attitude toward political change optimistic or cynical? Is an aggressive tone within the legal and/or moral limits of liberal democracy?
Identity: Boundaries	How does humor contribute to the construction of political cleavages? Is aggressive and/or ironic humor used to ridicule other political groups? Is a particular humor style an important feature of the studied political (sub)group?
Identity: Representatio n	How are identity groups and politicians represented in the humor? Does the humor maintain and reinforce harmful stereotypes, or does it challenge them by providing positive and/or more complex storylines and characters? Do politicians visits in satirical shows enable public engagement, self-marketing, or both? What are the risks of the visits?
Circulation: Popularity	Is the humor popular? Is the source a notable actor (e.g., a politician, public persona, or popular TV program)? What are the ratings, viral success, and/or critical acclaim? Has the humor sparked a public controversy or a scandal? Is the humor temporary or a long-term phenomenon?
Circulation: Participation	Is the humor consumed mainly passively or by actively participating in its co-creation? Has the humor lured people to become politically active, for example, through participating in a protest, signing petitions, contacting politicians, creating memes, or discussing civic matters on/offline?

Next, I illustrate how the aspects of this framework can be applied by drawing on examples from previous studies on televisual and online political humor, including my sub-studies. I refer heavily to US-based television satire, as it is the most investigated topic in political humor research (Becker, 2020), and can thus illuminate how the different political aspects play out in empirical research. I particularly review studies on *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* (TDS), *The Colbert Report* (TCR), and *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver* (LWT).

3.1 CONTENT: ADVOCACY AND FOCUS

The content aspect analyzes what humor is about and whether it aims to persuade its audience to support a certain political stand. The content aspect is divided into the sub-aspects of advocacy and focus. The advocacy aspect examines whether the studied political humor shows a stance or a leaning toward a political position, for example, to a policy stand, a party, an ideology, or a political leader. The focus aspect, in turn, asks whether the studied political humor deals with the predominantly personal characters of political persons, substantial policy issues, or both. It also analyzes what types of information political humor consists of.

Advocacy

The advocacy aspect examines whether and how mediated political humor shows a stance or leaning toward a political position, party, or ideology. Advocative humor includes political statements and/or calls for political action (Bode & Becker, 2018; Davis et al., 2018; Waisanen, 2018a). For instance, funny figurative language or memes can work as rhetorical devices supporting or dismissing a political candidate or position (Burgers et al., 2016; Meyer, 1990; Ross & Rivers, 2017). The consistency of advocacy humor can, of course, vary, for example, between political actors, platforms, genres, and timeframes.

The advocacy aspect is important because research can analyze how humor is entangled with ideological practices, revealing patterns of how humor is used to advance certain viewpoints (Hakoköngäs et al., 2020; Nikunen, 2015). Both rhetorical–discursive analyses and experiments have investigated whether humor is an effective form of persuasion and, if so, under what conditions. While rhetorical and discourse analyses have focused on identifying and examining how certain humor techniques work in certain contexts (e.g., Meyer, 1990; Innocenti & Miller, 2016; Waisanen, 2009), effects studies have investigated how humor can persuade audiences (i.e., have an impact on attitudes, knowledge, intentions, and/or behavior) in comparison to non-humorous advocacy (e.g., Boukes et al., 2015; Nabi et al., 2007; Walter et al., 2018).

Advocacy humor is often predictable in its aims and targets, focusing on advancing one's own political goals and de-legitimizing the obvious political opponents and their ideas (Ross & Rivers, 2017; Young, 2020). For instance, in Finland in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, prior to the Finnish Civil War of 1917–1918, satirical magazines of the working class and the bourgeois mocked each other's ideas and leading figures mercilessly (Kivistö & Riikonen, 2012; Ylönen, 2001). A century later, aggressive humor is yet again a tool in the online “culture wars” between progressive liberals and far-right actors, both in Finland (e.g., Hakoköngäs et al., 2020) and in the US (e.g., Nagel, 2017).

Mainstream political humor, however, traditionally less often endorses any political parties or policy stands. Topical satires and entertaining talk shows typically poke political leaders across the ideological spectrum, focusing on sitting presidents and governments (Niven, Lichter, & Amundson, 2003; Zareff, 2020). For instance, popular late-night hosts, such as Johnny Carson, Jay Leno, David Letterman, and Conan O'Brien, have seldom taken sides, mocking representatives of both parties without accusations of partisanship (Lichter & Fransworth, 2018). Still, a historical content analysis shows that late-night comedies in the US from 1992 to 2016 have targeted Republican candidates, especially Donald Trump, more often than Democrats during election periods (Lichter & Fransworth, 2018). Also, many news satire shows, such as TDS, TCR, LWT, FF, and *Patriotic Act*, are liberal-leaning (Kilby, 2018; Young, 2020), and conservative right-wing pundits, although not framed as entertainment, repeatedly mock progressives and liberals (Jutel, 2018). Young (2020) underlines that leftish news satires and conservative "outrage programming" (e.g., Fox News pundits like Sean Hannity) have fueled polarization in the US. In Finland, despite brief periods in the late 1960s and early 1970s, when the public broadcaster was accused of being politically biased, political TV satire mostly remained outside of partisan clashes (Valaskivi, 2002; Zareff, 2020).

In the multivoiced, multiplatform hybrid media environment, the meaning of advocative messages embedded in humor can be blurred when humor develops and travels to different platforms and audiences (Tuters & Hagen, 2020). The evolution of the Pepe the Frog meme from a cartoon character to a far-right mascot is an example of this kind of development (see also Polyphony). Furthermore, advocative humor is often challenged and debunked by competing interest groups in open digital spheres like Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, and public Facebook pages. Still, even ephemeral and anonymous sites like 4chan or the Finnish equivalent Overboard (Ylilauta) can develop somewhat consistent ideological profiles through an irreverent ironic style that mocks "normies," "social justice warriors," and the mainstream media (Nagel, 2017; Philips & Millner, 2017; Tuters & Hagen, 2020; Ylä-Anttila et al. 2020). Thus, the jokes and memes on far-right online platforms that repeatedly represent outgroups as immoral and irrational should be seen as consistent advocacy for racist ideas, even though this material is sometimes framed as unserious (Billig, 2001; Hakoköngäs, et al., 2020; Schwarzenegger & Wagner, 2018).

While advocative humor is often reactive, commenting on issues that are already topical and salient in the public sphere (e.g., Davis et al., 2018), sometimes humor is employed more for independent agenda building, changing policies, or persuading citizens to do something (Bode & Becker, 2018; Boukes, 2019a; Feldman & Chattoo, 2019). This is evident in political marketing and election campaigns that apply humor (Weinberger & Gulas, 2019). However, this type of humor is becoming more common on popular TV satires (Bode & Becker, 2018; Feldman & Chattoo, 2019; Waisanen, 2018a). At

times, mainstream news satire programs have managed to politicize allegedly boring yet critical issues, such as the complexity of election funding in the US (Hardy et al., 2014) and the EU–US trade agreement (TTIP) in the Netherlands (Boukes, 2019a). Moreover, sometimes the voice of a satirist can play an important role in individual policy issues. For example, *The Daily Show* host Jon Stewart’s advocacy was decisive in passing the bill to help 9/11 emergency workers (Hill & Holbert, 2017).

Focus

The focus investigates whether mediated political humor deals with predominantly the personal characters of political figures, substantial policy issues, or both. Also, it studies what types of information are co-present with the humor. The focus aspect is important because it explores how political humor informs, or mis/disinforms, audiences about societal issues. According to surveys from the US, about a fourth of citizens and over 50% of younger adults say that they have learned something from political humor programs like TDS and *Saturday Night Live* (Baumgartner & Morris, 2012).

Journalistic TV news satire is an example of topical political humor that includes an unprecedented amount of substantial and factual contextualization for its main stories (Baym, 2005; Fox, 2018). News satires, unlike regular news, present information in everyday language using colloquial vocabulary and connections to personal matters (Faina, 2013; Jones, 2010). Content analyses indicate that journalistic news satires contain about the same amount of political substance information in their main stories as regular news on the same topic (Fox et al., 2007; Jones, 2007). Also, experiments suggest that audiences learn about the same (Xenos & Becker, 2009) or even more (Becker & Bode, 2018; Chattoo & Feldman, 2017) from these programs compared to news programs or documentaries.

Political humor can also be more person-centric, focusing predominantly on the personal characteristics of leading political figures with little to no reference to substance (e.g., policy stands or decision-making procedures). Internet memes that focus on Donald Trump’s hair are an example of this kind of humor (Nissenbaum & Shifman, 2020). Politicians’ guest appearances on entertainment talk shows (e.g., *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno*, *Jimmy Kimmel Live!*) are another notable practice involving person-centric political humor. These visits are typically non-critical, and positive chats treat matters of substance relatively superficially (Baym, 2013). Also, the comedic monologues by the hosts in these entertainment talk shows mostly target well-known politicians’ personal characteristics—President G.W. Bush as stupid and President Bill Clinton as a womanizer—but contain very few issue-related jokes (Niven, Lichter, & Amundson, 2003). Similarly, the sketch comedy revue *Saturday Night Live* (SNL, 1976–, NBC) has mostly consisted of “nonpolitical” humor based on funny political characterizations and impersonations (Day & Thompson, 2012; Peifer, 2013). At times, however, the predominantly

lighthearted, person-centered political comedy programs, such as SNL, have deviated to more critical political commentary (Jones, 2010; Peifer, 2013), of which Trump's presidential term was a prime example (Lichter & Fransworth, 2018). This points out the important theme of intra-genre and intra-program variation, which is rarely explored in political humor scholarship in comparison to inter-genre variation (Baym, 2013; Droog, Burgers, & Steen, 2020).

Like realistic formats, fictional humor can affect how people perceive political and civic issues (Chattoo & Feldman, 2020; William & Delli Carpini, 2011). Political humor thus also occurs in fictional narratives that deal with parliamentary (e.g., *Veep*) and identity politics (e.g., *Dear White People*). Furthermore, some forms of political humor engage an interplay of fictional characters and "real" people, as in the interviews with Stephen Colbert on TCR (Baym, 2007; Gray, 2009). Moreover, comedy programs that are not explicitly political may have political implications. Cultivation (Gerber et al., 2002) and social cognitive theories (Bandura, 2001) suggest that popular media communicate social attitudes and cultural scripts of which consumption over the long term can guide people's understandings and behaviors of what is normal and desirable and what is not. For example, a study found a correlation between increased viewing of *Will and Grace*—the first American popular sitcom with a gay couple—and lowered levels of sexual prejudice, especially among those with the fewest contacts with gay people (Schiappa et al., 2006). Thus, comedy programs can challenge the status quo through complex and/or more positive storylines and characters (Chattoo & Feldman, 2020). Conversely, however, humorous popular culture can maintain simplistic negative stereotypes by making them repetitively more salient, allowing audiences identify with characters that hold racist views (Vidmar & Rokeach, 1974).

Finally, humor can also be enmeshed with information operations, disinformation, and conspiracy theories. Zannettou et al. (2019; 2020) found that state-sponsored Russian trolls disseminated memes with misinformation during the 2016 US elections. Tuters and Hagen (2020), in turn, showed how users of 4chan's /pol/ board consistently spread memes consisting of antisemitic conspiracy theories. Similarly, in Finland, Hakoköngäs et al. (2020) indicated how far-right actors employ humor and selectively choose facts from Finnish history, distorting them to serve their messages. Tuters and Hagen (2020) conclude that while this kind of humor is rather marginal, it should be considered an innovative mode of extreme political speech that may resonate with more mainstream anti-liberal nationalist populist actors, and thus should be taken seriously. Zannettou et al. (2018) demonstrated how fringe communities from Gab and 4chan have successfully mainstreamed racist memes to more popular platforms like Twitter.

3.2 STYLE: POLYSEMY AND TONE

The style aspect analyzes how a selected example of political humor is performed or expressed. As discussed in the previous chapter, humor research has identified numerous techniques for constructing amusing material. Here, I focus on two general stylistic aspects of political humor: polysemy and tone. Polysemy investigates how clear or ambiguous the selected political humor is, whereas tone inquires how gentle or harsh the selected humor is.

Polysemy

Polysemy is the quality of a text or performance to be open to many interpretations. The polysemy aspect analyzes how clear or ambiguous the meaning of mediated political humor is. Polysemy can be a textual quality, meaning that texts enable a certain range of possible interpretations but also audiences' differing interpretations of a humorous text (Boxman-Shabtai & Shifman, 2014). Political humor is often polysemic, allowing for different interpretations of what it actually means. For example, research indicates that irony and parody, multivoiced narratives, intertextuality, and self-deprecation can enhance the ambiguity of humorous communication (Boxman-Shabtai & Shifman, 2014; Gray, 2006; LaMarre et al., 2009).

Polysemy is an important aspect of humor, as many humor techniques are based on an appreciation of ambiguity. Polysemy is also politically relevant as it can be used strategically to blur one's intended meaning. Ambiguous humor provides a way for political communicators to please their core supporters who understand the ironic, critical intention, while also enabling withdrawal by framing one's sayings or doings as not serious. For example, radical right activists from the Ku Klux Klan to the alt-right have applied humor to mainstream their racist ideas (Billig, 2001; Hakoköngäs et al., 2020; Nagel, 2017; Phillips & Miller, 2017). This kind of provocative polysemic humor can foster media attention and provide a backdoor to frame one's assertions as just joking and those who protest as too serious. Phillips and Milner (2017: 194–198) describe how prominent alt-right activists have proclaimed that racist online humor is ironic and not to be taken seriously, while in reality mainstreaming racist ideas is actually their aim. Thus, polysemic humor can function as a form of “calculated ambivalence” (Wodak, 2016) or “faux irony” (Nagel, 2017), providing a way to rebuff accusations of racism or sexism as “just a joke.”

Irony and parody are prominent techniques of polysemic humor. Verbal irony refers to utterances that mean the opposite of what is communicated literally (e.g., Dynel, 2013). Parody, in turn, is a humor technique based on the imitation of people and/or cultural practices, often used in satire for critical purposes (e.g., Bakhtin, 1984a; Gray et al., 2009). Humorous irony and parody that deal with political matters include both the literal message/representation and the implicit critical ironic message (Phillips &

Milner, 2017; Sørensen, 2016). North American TV news satires, for example, use irony to ridicule contradictions in politicians' sayings and doings, or employ parody to mock hyper-partisan reporting (e.g., Baym, 2005; Waisanen, 2009).

A polyphonic narrative is another feature that can increase the ambiguity of political humor. Polyphonic narratives are storylines that include multiple positions on political topics, of which no single one is clearly dominant. Mikhail Bakhtin (1984a; 1984b) theorized about polyphonic humor in his analyses of novels by Francoise Rabelais and Fyodor Dostoyevsky. Bakhtin suggested that most novels present a monological perspective to the world "as it is." Seriocomic genres, in turn, such as Socratic dialog, Menippean satire, and Rabelais's writings from the sixteenth century, evoke a spirit of carnivalesque, which is inherently polyphonic. Polyphony, thus, means that a text presents various viewpoints of the world through different characters without determining which perspective is the right one (e.g., as in Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*). This perspective has been applied to contemporary political humor. For instance, social satires such as *The Simpsons* (Gray, 2006), *South Park* (Thompson, 2009), and Finnish *Ihmisten Puolue* (Zareff, 2012) represent exaggerated caricatures of various popular ideological viewpoints of which none is clearly dominant.

Polyphonic narratives enable audiences to interpret parody according to their existing political beliefs. Researchers studying the popular sitcom *All in the Family* (1971–1979, CBS) found that audiences with racist attitudes *laughed with* Archie Bunker (the bigoted character), even though the writer-producer Norman Lear meant audiences to *laugh at* Bunker and his views (Vidmar & Rokeach, 1974). More recently, similar results have been reported concerning the satirical parody of US rightwing TV punditry in *The Colbert Report* (LaMarre et al., 2009): conservatives and liberals both found Colbert funny, but many conservatives saw him as a genuine supporter of patriotic conservatism, whereas liberals interpreted the program as a parody of these ideas and styles. Thus, multi-voiced political parody may enhance political polarization, as it enforces previously held political positions while making the political outgroup look ridiculous.

Absurdity can also be a source of ambiguity in political humor. Purely absurd humor does not "resolve" the incongruity as in puns, irony, or punchline-based canned jokes when people "get" the double meaning but rather is based on the enjoyment of incongruity or absurdity as such (Ruch & Hehl, 2007). For example, after the inauguration of President Joe Biden in January 2021, an image of Senator Bernie Sanders sitting on a chair wearing mittens and a winter coat went viral and was used in numerous memetic remixes in which Bernie was cropped, sitting in different locations across the world. Another example is a collage of memetic material: a video of a Cat Vibing to Street Musician's Ievan Polkka in which the street musician is replaced with Joe Biden on bongo drums, and Donald Trump dancing (do watch it on YouTube!). These kinds of absurd political humor do not seem to

claim anything except perhaps “look at how absurd the world and/or the internet is.” Nevertheless, as our study (Article IV) and others (Nagel, 2017; Phillips & Milner, 2017) have indicated, absurdist humor is used as *one* stylistic element in political performances and memeing that is clearly ironic—at least to most audiences.

To avoid ambivalence, humor is often accompanied by humor and irony markers, which indicate that a message is intended to be humorous and/or ironic (e.g., Gal et al., 2020). Humor and irony markers can be more or less evident. For example, an inclusion of #irony or quotation marks are clear cues, while a deadpan tone requires trusting that audiences can understand the ironic intention from contextual cues, such as the reputation of the sender. Still, some political humor is deliberately polysemic and is meant to be understood only by insiders. Those audiences who “get” the irony also enjoy acknowledging that some audiences do not get it, acknowledging this fact is part of the thrill of appreciating complex humor (Gal, 2019; Friedman & Kuipers, 2013; Phillips & Milner, 2017). For example, hoaxing is a practice in which the humorous and/or ironic intention is first concealed and only later exposed to wider audiences. Activist-artists, such as Sacha Baron Cohen and the Yes Men are famous for these ironic and absurd hoaxing performances (Day, 2011), yet online trolls also strive to trick “normies,” namely, other people and the media (Nagel, 2017; Phillips, 2015). Sometimes, these humorous stunts are not commented on at all by the performers, leaving the humor intentionally open to various interpretations (Boyer, 2013).

Tone

The tone aspect analyzes the general attitude of the mediated humor toward the targets and the possibility of change. For example, the targets of humor can be treated positively, negatively, or mixed, and the attitude toward change can be hopeful and optimistic or fatalistic and pessimistic. Here, I build on research that suggests understanding the tone of political humor as a continuum from gentle to harsh (LaMarre et al., 2014; Milner, 2016; Tuters & Hagen, 2020). In humor, an aggressive tone is important because the ways in which political groups communicate their rivalry and disagreements publicly can lead both to deliberative debate and competition for ideas, but also to the ostracizing of some identity groups (Phillips, 2018). I also follow work that applies narratology to political communication to investigate different tonal combinations in public stories about politics (Jacobs & Smith, 1996; Kuusisto, 2018; Reunanen, 2003). This strand argues that a “healthy” liberal democratic public culture requires a balance between tragic, comedic, romantic, and ironic tones (Jacobs & Smith, 1996; Reunanen, 2003).

Political humor can be assessed based on the tone of aggressiveness toward a target. Researchers of both television satire (Holbert et al., 2011; LaMarre et al., 2014) and online humor (Phillips & Millner, 2017; Tuters & Hagen, 2020) have tried to differentiate between gentle and more aggressive forms of humor.

Building on literature studies of satire, Holbert et al. (2011) distinguished between two types of satire after the Roman satirists Horace and Juvenal. Accordingly, the gentler and more optimistic satire is called Horatian (e.g., *The Simpsons*) and the more aggressive and pessimistic satire is Juvenalian (e.g., Stephen Colbert's roast of George W. Bush during the 2006 White House Correspondents' Dinner). Horatian satire imitates the literary genre of comedy, whereas Juvenalian satire is closer to tragedy. Importantly, LaMarre et al. (2014) understand these forms of satire as a continuum.

Aggressive political humor can be further divided into agonistic (between adversaries) and antagonistic humor (between enemies). This distinction is based on Mouffe's (2005) theorization of liberal democracy. Mouffe understands society and politics as a sphere of inescapable conflicts between various interest groups, arguing that liberal political theory, such as that of John Rawls, is unable to deal with conflicts. To Mouffe, the emerging consensus from the late 1980s and early 1990s onward between major right and left parties in many Western democracies has left numerous citizens with a sense of no real alternatives. Thus, Mouffe suggested that political theory and practice should make societal conflicts and inequalities more salient. However, crucially, Mouffe suggested that liberal democratic processes should not allow these conflicts to escalate to hatred and violence. Instead, the democratic process should transform political antagonisms into *agonisms*—that is, a tough but mutually respectful rivalry between competing groups.

Milner (2016) and Tuters and Hagen (2020) applied Mouffe's line of thinking to humorous political communication. In their view, agonist political humor is humor that is based on building us versus them adversaries, whereas antagonistic political humor is a more violent version of this same dividing discursive logic. In other words, whereas agonistic discourse is about disputes between political groups, antagonistic discourse questions the legitimacy of other political groups from the beginning. While most forms of mediated political humor are arguably at least somewhat aggressive and thus agonistic, Tuters and Hagen (2020) underline how antagonistic forms of political humor have become popular on internet discussion boards. One of the most prominent examples of antagonistic humor is the systemic racist and sexist memeing that is common in fringe web communities, such as 4chan's /pol/ Politically Incorrect, The_Donald subreddit, and Gab (Phillips, 2015; 2018; Milner, 2016; Zannettou et al., 2018). As will be discussed below, these communities also aim to spread these antagonisms to mainstream platforms.

Aggressive and provocative political humor, such as the aforementioned fringe web communities or Charlie Hebdo magazine, repeatedly tests the moral boundaries of liberal democracies. Sometimes, this kind of provocation leads to humor controversies or "humor scandals" in which the boundaries of acceptable public discourse are (re)negotiated (Basu, 2014; Dahl, 2021; Kuipers, 2011). Humor controversies have become more frequent in the past three decades in tandem with the opening of media markets from the late 1980s onwards and with the spread of the internet and social media from the

mid-2000s onwards. First, new forms of more polemical TV satire have sparked national discussions on the boundaries of ridicule toward politicians and minority groups (Dahl, 2021; Gray et al., 2009; Zareff, 2020). Second, the growth of digital media has enabled political actors to publish their witticisms directly, bypassing journalistic gatekeepers. The openness of digital media also enables citizens and activists to question or “call out” the humor and slurs that they find inappropriate and/or illegal. Together, these affordances produce more public spats related to humorous expression. Indeed, both “internet culture” and platform algorithms seem to reward sensational and controversial content that stirs reactions, fertilizing fertile ground for the aggressive mockery of political opponents (Gonawela et al., 2018; Milner, 2016; Nagel, 2017). Moreover, due to digitalization and increased globalization, transgressive memes and humor easily cross national borders (Kuipers 2011; Nissenbaum & Shifman 2020), stirring international conflicts like the Muhammed cartoon scandal in 2005.

From a slightly different perspective, researchers have analyzed how narrative tones about politics matter. On the evidence, variance in comedic, romantic, tragic, and ironic tones can help maintain the “healthy balance” needed for the functioning of a democratic public sphere (Jacobs & Smith, 1996; Reunanen, 2003). Jacobs and Smith (1996) argue that a democratic political culture should foster the formation of a national identity, but also self-critical and tolerant tones. To Jacobs and Smith, balancing romantic and ironic genres can help promote these ends. Reunanen (2003) extended this approach, arguing that the study of political narratives should also include tragic and comedic tones. Based on his content analysis of Finnish and Swedish budget journalism, Reunanen (2003) posits that comedic (optimistic and alleviative) and romantic (stories of defending values) tones foster trust among citizens, whereas tragic (pessimistic and antagonistic) and ironic (stories of the shattering of illusions) tones make conflicts and power relations more visible. Reunanen (2003: 428-430) suggested that while the overall variance of tones in his corpus was fairly balanced, *comical satires* could make public discourse even more balanced. Comical satires combine ironic and critical tones with the optimism of comedy in a way that could counterbalance other tonal attitudes. Similarly, in the context of international relations, Kuusisto (2018) argued that *mildly hopeful comedies* could avoid the despair of tragedies, unwarranted romantic optimism, and cynicism of pessimistic satires. While this strand provides a promising approach to political humor research, more empirical studies are needed to indicate its feasibility under different conditions.

3.3 IDENTITY: BOUNDARIES AND REPRESENTATION

The identity aspect examines how humor contributes to the construction of political cleavages. This aspect is divided into sub-aspects of symbolic boundaries and the politics of representation. Symbolic boundaries analyze how aggressive humor and taste-based distinctions contribute to the construction of political identities. Representation, in turn, investigates how social identity groups and politicians are portrayed in humor.

Boundaries

The boundaries aspect investigates how mediated humor relates to the construction of political identities. Identities are formed and reformed through communicative processes in which an actor claims membership in an in-group and/or differentiation from an out-group (Fairclough, 1995; Halliday, 1978). Politicians, parties, and protest groups reconstruct political identities by articulating a common cause and opponent (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985). In addition, performing a shared taste and style is an important part of this identity construction (Moffitt, 2016; Peck, 2019; Pels, 2003).

Ironic and advocative humor are often closely intertwined with the construction of political identities (Gal, 2019; Meyer, 2000). This kind of humor enhances in-group solidarity among those who “get” the joke and laugh at the target(s), while simultaneously constructing a boundary between the in-group and the out-group who are ridiculed (Gal, 2019; Meyer, 2000). For instance, studies have noted that repetitive mockery of outgroups (e.g., immigrants, mainstream media, progressives) on far-right discussion forums and social media sites are examples of this kind of symbolic boundary drawing (e.g., Nikunen, 2015; Hakoköngäs et al., 2020). A study by Gonawela et al. (2018) also found that populist leaders Donald Trump, Narendra Modi, Nigel Farage, and Geert Wilders consistently ridiculed their political opponents through sarcasm, wordplay, and labeling over Twitter during an election period.

Indeed, researchers have emphasized that aggressive humor is an effective means for producing populist antagonisms because ridicule of the out-group produces a feeling of *jouissance*: an enjoyment of fulfilling one’s identity through a transgressive us versus them dichotomy (Herkman, 2022; Jutel, 2018). In Article III, I aim to clarify this process by suggesting that the enjoyment of populist humor consists of at least three interrelated mechanisms: incongruity appraisal, identity affirmation, and *schadenfreude*. To be clear, the ridicule of powerful elites and political opponents is also practiced by progressive activists (Day, 2011; Gal, 2019; Sørensen, 2016). The difference is that progressives usually do not attack disadvantaged groups as many far-right actors do.

Taste-based distinctions between groups of people are another important aspect of the study of political humor (Gal, 2019; Kuipers, 2015). The taste

aspect analyzes how particular humor styles are used as identity markers to distinguish between different political cleavages. As Pierre Bourdieu (1984/1987) has demonstrated, socioeconomic groups develop, mostly tacitly, certain taste cultures that are constructed through stylistic and moral distinctions. Survey and interview studies point out that people from different socioeconomic backgrounds also prefer different kinds of humor and differentiate themselves from people who like different kinds of humor (Friedman & Kuipers, 2013). Political communicators can therefore employ distinct styles of humor that resonate and identify with a group of people in a particular historical context. For example, in September 2016, Donald Trump Jr. shared the meme “The Deplorables” on Instagram, portraying his father in a photoshopped movie poster of *The Expendables* that included various prominent conservatives, conspiracy theorists, and Pepe the Frog. This performative/stylistic aspect of identity construction is often overlooked in traditional political science research (Moffitt, 2016; Pels, 2003) but should be scrutinized in the future as political leaders increasingly practice amusing and satirical forms of political performances on social media platforms (Gonawela et al., 2018; Mendonça & Caetano, 2021).

The formation of a humor style is, of course, not only a top-down process. Specific humor styles and related group identities are also constructed within fan and online communities (Ang, 1985; Baym, 1995; Nikunen, 2015). For instance, Baym (1995) analyzed how television soap opera fans formed an online community around ironic commentary on recent plot twists. Milner (2016) argues that gradually, from the mid-2000s to the mid-2010s, humor and irony became essential forms of communication within the broader internet culture that is largely based on memetic remixing and identity play. Of course, “internet culture” consists of different cultures with different behavioral norms and aesthetics. For instance, alt-right humor is filled with constantly changing memetic material and aggressive irony that often requires much background information and socialization to decode it as the sender intended—if that is even possible (Nagle, 2017; Phillips & Milner, 2017; Tuters & Hagen, 2020). Similarly, Nikunen (2015) and Ylä-Anttila et al. (2020) pointed out how the ironic ridicule of political opponents is a unifying discursive practice within Finnish online discussion boards associated with far-right activism.

Representation

The representation aspect investigates how politicians and various identity groups are represented in mediated political humor. Representation refers to the symbolic signification processes of reality. For example, a cartoon of a politician or a caricature of a member of an ethnic group is a particular kind of representation of its target. In politics, representation means that political actors (MPs, party leaders, heads of state, etc.) represent citizens by

advocating, deciding, and symbolizing on their behalf. In political humor research, representation has been analyzed from both of these dimensions. First, researchers have studied how minority and disadvantaged groups are represented in popular humor outlets (Chattoo & Feldman, 2020; Haggins, 2009; Schiappa et al., 2006) and how provocative satire on identity groups stirs public controversies (Basu, 2014; Dahl, 2021; Kuipers, 2011). Second, studies have investigated the representation of politicians in entertainment talk shows and whether these visits enforce or hinder the representational bond between politicians and citizens (Baym, 2007, 2013; Coleman et al., 2009; Gray, 2009; Hamo et al., 2010; Higgie, 2017).

The way identity groups are portrayed in popular comedy matters because repetitive negative representations can maintain and reinforce harmful stereotypes or, alternatively, challenge them by more positive or complex characters and storylines (Chattoo & Feldman, 2020). Here, political humor also refers to popular humor programs that are not framed as political, including many sitcoms, sketch comedies, animations, and mediated stand-up. Both qualitative analysis (e.g., Haggins, 2009) and effects studies (e.g., Schiappa et al., 2006) have been applied to investigate how the politics of representation plays out in programs such as *Chappelle's Show* and *Will and Grace*. In addition to the question of how, the politics of representation also deals with *who* is visible in mainstream comedy. Despite a few exceptions, mainstream political humor has traditionally been dominated by white men. Only in recent decades have women and people of color made it to mainstream comedy outlets (Chattoo & Feldman, 2020; Dahl, 2021). Thus, comedians like Trevor Noah, Samantha Bee, and W. Kamau Bell provide representative visibility to diverse identity groups—in addition to viewing social justice issues through a satirical/comedic and progressive lens.

Humor controversies and scandals are another studied issue related to the representation of identity groups. A humor controversy is a public spat about transgressive humor that often targets ethnic, religious, or sexual minorities (Basu, 2014; Dahl, 2021; Kuipers, 2011). As discussed above, satirical provocations on minorities sometimes stir transnational humor scandals, as in the infamous case of the Muhammed cartoons published by the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* in 2005, or in the case of French satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo* in 2015. Yet, provocative-mediated humor may also generate minor national or local-level controversies, such as #poopgate (Article II) or Loldiers of Odin (Article IV) did. Humor controversies highlight the moral and legal boundaries of a society, opening a debate on what acceptable forms of public discourse are and what exactly the particular ambiguous provocative humor means.

The online sphere is another form of media publicity in which identity groups are dealt with in a humorous manner. Philips and Milner (2017) argued that the bulk of online political humor is often based on ironic identity play, in which clear boundaries between political identities are deliberately blurred (also Nagle, 2017; Sunden & Paasonen, 2021). However, sometimes the

cleavages are rather clear. For instance, studies on the use of humor by far-right activists expose how irony and ridicule can reflect and promote racist attitudes toward minority groups. Michael Billig (2001) examined online jokes by the Ku Klux Klan and argued that humor was used to conceal racist statements. More recent studies have analyzed the memetic humor of far-right actors, reaching similar conclusions while adding that humor is used to popularize radical ideas and recruit new members (Hakoköngäs, et al., 2020; Schwarzenegger & Wagner, 2018; Tuters & Hagen, 2020; Zannettou et al., 2018). Still, Ylä-Anttila et al. (2020) emphasized that image boards, such as 4chan, associated with radicalism remain open and polyvocal, and include posts that debunk and resist racist representations.

Parody of the stereotypes of disadvantaged groups remains a particularly contested mode of humor. An enduring question is whether the parody of racists and sexist stereotypes leads to their dismantling, maintenance, and/or reinforcement. It seems that parody can accomplish all these simultaneously, as different audience groups can interpret parody according to their political affiliations (LaMarre et al., 2009; Vidmar & Rokeach, 1974). Thus, while parody can be a highly popular form of humor, as it entertains diverse political groups, it is not necessarily the most effective form of social critiquing, as some audiences take it as a normalization or celebration of the criticized values or practices. Of course, satirists can underline their intention by including ironic cues or stating their stands openly, but as discussed above, ambiguity is a defining feature of many humor techniques and practices, leaving the humorous performance open to competing interpretations.

Finally, another strand has focused on the representation of politicians' interactions with real and fictional characters in satirical talk shows, such as TDS and TCR (Baym, 2007, 2013; Coleman et al., 2009; Gray, 2009; Hamo et al., 2010; Jones, 2010). Jones (2010/2006) and Baym (2007) argued that satirical talk shows, such as TDS and TCR, can bring politics and politicians closer to the people who otherwise have a detached relationship with formal policy processes. Building on James Carey's work on the ritual dimensions of communication, Jones (2010) emphasized how infotainment shows can promote positive attitudes toward politics and politicians. Furthermore, as Baym (2007) observed, the interviews by Colbert in TCS with local politicians provided factual information about politicians and their constituencies and policy stances while eliciting pleasure and play in the form of witty banter and absurdist parody. Thus, these talk shows, Baym argued (2007), performed the rational-normative and aesthetic-affective functions of the public sphere envisioned by Habermas. Finally, for politicians, these satirical shows provide a platform to reach news audiences while developing more personal and emotional ties to voters than through more formal forms of political communication—with the risk of being laughed at (Baym, 2007; Coleman et al., 2009; Gray, 2009; Herkman, 2010; Higgie, 2017).

3.4 CIRCULATION: POPULARITY AND PARTICIPATION

The circulation aspect analyzes the popularity and circulation of mediated political humor. It is divided into two sub-aspects: the popularity sub-aspect inquires how popular the humor is and among who, whereas the participation sub-aspect studies how mediated humor is reacted to across different media platforms, and if and how ordinary citizens participate in its co-production and circulation.

Popularity

The popularity aspect investigates the prominence of mediated political humor. Assessing and constructing popularity is one of the founding logics of both mass and social media (Van Dick and Powell, 2013). The reputation of the producer, ratings, reactions, and critical acclaim provide implications for humor's popularity and its potential influence. Key questions include what kinds of humor are popular in certain contexts, to whom they particularly appeal, to whom they do not, and why. While popularity indicates a potential influence, marginal political humor can also be vital for a certain social group. Furthermore, once a niche, mediated humor can gradually become popular through critical acclaim and continuous mainstreaming efforts. A related question is whether the analyzed humor is a short-term event, like *The Rally to Restore Sanity and/or Fear* organized by TV-satirists Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert, or a more enduring endeavor, like the programs that these satirists hosted (TDS, TCR).

Popularity is an important aspect of mediated humor, as visibility can aid political actors in accomplishing their aims. As agenda-setting theory suggests, citizens learn about issues that are salient in the media, making them more memorable and thus perceivably important (McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Sheafer & Weimann, 2005). Studies have examined how mainstream news satire programs have been able to set the agenda among the public and politicians and within the news media (Boukes, 2019a; Hardy et al., 2014; Hill & Holbert, 2017). For example, through a string of studies, Boukes (2019a) demonstrated that citizens' consumption of Dutch news satire on a complex topic (TTIP) increased their learning and perceived understanding of the topic, while also accelerating Google searches about the topic. Still, overall, the effects of mediated political humor are arguably more gradual and slower than fast and straightforward, and more longitudinal research is needed to understand the long-term effects of mediated political humor (Holbert, 2013).

Researchers have also investigated how political activists aim to popularize their ideas by using humor. Humor is applied in public communication efforts to mobilize political support, catch the attention of the mainstream media, and lure new people to the movement. Interviews with activists (Chattoo & Feldman, 2020; Sørensen, 2016) and analysis of activists' internal (Hakoköngäs et al., 2020; Schwarzenegger & Wagner, 2018) and public

communication (Day, 2011; Dynel & Poppi, 2020; Shifman, 2014) indicate how humor is used to mobilize political support, catch the attention of the mainstream media, and attract new people to the movement.

Humor that is perceived as funny often leads to viral, memetic, and commercial popularity. Shifman's (2014: 65–98) synthesis of viral and memetic success indicates that humor is a very common feature in spreadable media. Of course, what constitutes enough views, likes, shares, subscriptions, ad revenues, or critical acclaim to call something popular is relative. Still, much of clearly popular media content—such as YouTube videos (Shifman, 2012), advertisements (Golan & Zaidner, 2008), tweets (Gonawela et al., 2018), and memes (Knobel & Lankshear, 2006)—contain various forms of humor. Feldman and Chattoo (2019) further argued that audiences' perceived entertainment value is crucial to its persuasive effects. A recent experimental study found that young people will more likely remember political information and share it online when it is delivered in a humorous manner in comparison to non-humorous manner (Coronel et al. 2021). Perceived funniness may thus predict humor's popularity and political effects. What is, then, humorous, to whom, and why, and in which circumstances, remain crucial questions as the practices and genres of humorous communication continue to evolve in the changing media landscape.

Finally, a less studied yet important topic related to circulation is how mainstream and online political humor are reported and evaluated in journalistic media. These reactions are important because journalistic media publicity provides visibility and legitimacy to the grievances expressed in humorous advocacy (Day, 2011; Shifman, 2014; Sørensen, 2016). New emerging forms of political humor also encourage journalists to reflect on the boundaries of their own professions (Tenenboim-Weinblatt, 2009; Phillips, 2018). For example, while the emergence of journalistic news satire has made reporters ponder their relation to entertainment (Tenenboim-Weinblatt, 2009), amusing online advocacy, especially that of far-right activists, has pressed journalists to critically evaluate their role in the amplification of fringe humor practices that now partly threaten liberal democracy (Phillips, 2018).

Participation

The participation aspect analyzes how audiences and users participate in the production and reception of mediated humor. This aspect inquires whether and how the analyzed mediated humor enables and encourages audiences not only to consume and share the content but also to engage in other related activities. Furthermore, it studies how audiences actually consume and react to mediated humor, regardless of any guidance from the “original” source.

Participation in civic life is important because liberal democracy is based on active citizenship, and mediated political humor can raise citizens' awareness of political issues and induce them to participate in democratic

debates and power struggles (Hariman, 2008; Jones, 2010). As Becker and Baumgartner (2018) emphasized, the influence of political humor content is equally dependent on its reception and uses. Also, providing an opportunity to participate can enhance the popularity of a political message or a campaign (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013), as the examples of new social movements employing co-creative humor indicate (Shifman, 2014; Mina, 2019).

Carpentier (2011: 68–69) proposed an “archetypical model” of minimalist and maximalist media participation. In minimalist forms of participation, media professionals have strong control over production and content, confounding participation with access and interaction. In maximalist forms of participation, professional control and popular participation are more balanced, aiming to maximize participation. While political humor in the “old” mass media formats has traditionally followed the minimalist model with a predominantly one-directional delivery, the internet and social media have provided new and easily accessible collaborative ways to create both political humor and comment on topical political issues humorously (Knobel & Lankshear, 2007; Milner, 2016; Shifman, 2013). Moreover, nowadays mass-mediated television satires and political cartoons are also published, shared, and commented on online, blurring the line between “mass” and “social” media.

Indeed, professional presenters of political humor sometimes explicitly invite audiences to participate politically. For instance, journalistic satire hosts John Oliver and Samantha Bee often make various kinds of calls for action, such as making invitations to a boycott, contacting decision-making authorities, signing a petition, and voting (Bode & Becker, 2018; Feldman & Chattoo, 2019; Kilby, 2018; Waisanen, 2018a). Importantly, these shows ridicule and criticize their liberal audiences for their political self-righteousness, cynicism, and superficial views on activism, encouraging their audience to participate in more realistic and practical forms of political activism (Kilby, 2018).

Still, the formation of most online political humor—witty bantering over Twitter, subversive YouTube video mash-ups, and absurd memeing on Instagram—is inherently more collaborative, interactive, and multi-voiced than professionally produced mass-mediated humor. Memeing current affairs is based on participatory logics that include remixing and sharing (Milner, 2016; Shifman, 2013). Activist groups and new social movements have made use of the participatory potential of digital humor. For instance, activists can summon users to share humorous posts, create issue-related personalized memes, or engage in banter over societal issues (Shifman, 2014; Young et al., 2014).

4 RESEARCH DESIGNS OF THE SUB-STUDIES

In this dissertation, I investigate political humor in a hybrid media environment from different angles. The thesis is based on four studies that were published (Articles I, II, and IV) or submitted (III) as individual articles. All the sub-studies have different research designs and original research materials that have been gathered to analyze specific research questions. Table 3 summarizes the research questions, data, and methods of each sub-study. Next, I will describe them in more detail.

Table 3. *Research Designs of the Sub-studies.*

	Research Questions	Empirical Datasets	Methodology
1. News Satire	How do Nordic satirists describe their aims and work routines in relation to news journalism? How do Nordic satirists view news satire as a genre in relation to journalism and other forms of satire?	Transcribed interviews with 16 producers of Finnish and Swedish news satire.	Semi-structured interviews and qualitative content analysis.
2. Gonzo Journalism	How does edgework contribute to the construction of incongruities in gonzo humor? How do journalistic and satirical modes mix in gonzo journalism?	Gonzo texts by Hunter S. Thompson, three cases of Finnish gonzo: <i>Ylioppilaslehti</i> , <i>Madventures</i> , <i>Sylvi</i>	Qualitative textual analysis.
3. Populist Humor	How are various verbal humor techniques combined with populist antagonisms in the blog posts of Timo Soini during different contexts from January 2007 to June 2019?	Blog posts (377) by the former leader of the Finns Party (2007–2019).	Qualitative textual analysis.
4. Activist Stunts	What kinds of aims and styles did Loldiers of Odin employ in their digital parody performances? What kinds of online responses did these performances elicit?	138 Facebook posts by Loldiers of Odin and 1044 comments in seven of the most commented threads.	Rhetorical and qualitative textual analysis.

4.1 EMPIRICAL DATASETS

Article I studied the aims and work routines of Nordic news satirists and how they compared their work to news journalism and other forms of satire. To answer these questions, we conducted 16 semi-structured interviews with producers, presenters, journalists, and/or comedians working in four different programs, two Finnish and two Swedish ones. Three of these were TV satire shows, and one was an audio podcast. These shows were modeled, with some modifications, after the US-based programs, *The Daily Show* and *Last Week*

Tonight. The programs were selected to represent different production prerequisites—public service versus commercial, larger resources versus smaller resources—but with the similar aim of providing satirical commentary on news, politics, and current affairs with journalistic contextualization. The Finnish public service broadcasting TV show was *Noin viikon uutiset* (2014–2017), and the Swedish show was *Svenska Nyheter* (2018–). The Finnish commercial program *Uutisraportti* (2014–2017) was published online through the online TV component of *Helsingin Sanomat* (the largest newspaper in circulation in Finland), and the Swedish commercial show *Lilla Drevet* (2013–2018) was a podcast associated with the large Swedish newspaper *Aftonbladet*. Semi-structured interviews, recorded, and transcribed, were conducted in person or over the phone, lasting from about one hour to three hours. While the interviewees were allowed to reflect freely on the selected themes, questions prepared from a previous study (Koivukoski, 2019) were used to structure the discussion.

Article II examined how humorous incongruities are constructed in gonzo journalism and how satirical and journalistic aims, strategies, and modes of display intersect in gonzo journalism. These questions were probed through an analysis of Hunter S. Thompson’s work and three Finnish gonzo cases. Of Thompson’s work, we included the two globally known series of articles published in *Rolling Stone* in the early 1970s that were later compiled as books: *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* (FLLV) and *Fear and Loathing: On the Campaign Trail ‘72* (FLCT). Both FLLV and FLCT represent Thompson gonzo journalism “in its purest form” (Whannel, 2015). The three Finnish cases of gonzo were, in turn, the cover story of *Ylioppilaslehti* (a famous student magazine), the ten-pints interview format from *Sylvi* (an online women’s magazine), and *Madventures* (a traveling TV program). As our study is the first exploration of gonzo humor beyond Hunter S. Thompson, we selected a variety of different examples of Finnish gonzo journalism from the twenty-first century. We included a one-time stunt (*Ylioppilaslehti*), a section in a niche online magazine (*Sylvi*), and a popular TV program (*Madventures*).

Article III investigated how verbal humor intersected with populist communication in the blog posts of Timo Soini over a period of twelve and a half years. The data selected for a close analysis consisted of every fourth blog post between January 2007 and June 2019, giving a sample of 377 posts in total. January 2007 is the month when Soini began blogging, and June 2019 is the month when Soini ended his career as a politician. The analyzed posts represent Soini’s blogging in changing socio-political contexts. The blog posts varied in length, from a few sentences to several paragraphs and pages. The posts included descriptions and commentary on current events and Soini’s actions. The blogging functions as a form of impression management through which Soini portrays himself and the Finns Party in a positive light while attacking opponents and sharing selective intimate issues about his life.

Article IV studies both the online rhetorical strategies of a parody group called Loldiers of Odin and the communicative outcomes of their

performances. The data included all the posts and comments published during 2016 on the Loldiers Facebook page. The material was extracted using the Netvizz app, and it included 138 posts, with 14,212 users liking, commenting, or reacting to the posts (a total of 54,996 times). The primary dataset represents the activity within the Loldiers' Facebook page during its high point. In the analysis of rhetorical strategies, we focused on 138 posts, which consisted of shared videos, pictures, and links with textual framings. In the analysis of the comments, we ordered all the posts according to the number of received comments and focused on the threads that garnered the most comments until the number of comments exceeded 1,000. This resulted in a dataset of seven threads and 1,044 comments, which varied from short emoji responses to longer reflective texts and debates. These threads were published during the first month the group was active.

4.2 QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS

The research of political humor is a multidisciplinary enterprise that can be crudely divided into the study of features and effects, of which the former is often based on qualitative research and the latter on quantitative research (e.g., Becker & Waisanen, 2013; Young & Gray, 2013). Accordingly, qualitative research on political humor applies methods such as ethnography, interviews, and textual/discourse analysis, whereas effects research is based on quantifiable setups such as surveys, experiments, aggregate data analysis, and content analysis. However, the divide is not clear-cut. Figurative frames such as metaphor, hyperbole, and irony, which are often used humor techniques and are traditionally studied in rhetoric, speech communication, and literature studies, are also investigated with quantitative setups (e.g., Burgers et al., 2016; Holbert et al., 2011). Also, a few political humor studies combine quantitative and qualitative methods (e.g., Baym & Shia, 2011; Waisanen, 2011; Ylä-Anttila et al., 2020). In essence, both approaches investigate the same topic with different tools, enriching collective understanding. Thus, qualitative and quantitative political humor research should be understood as mutually supportive (Delli Carpini, 2013; Jones, 2013).

In the sub-studies of this dissertation, we applied a qualitative content analysis to study humorous mediated political communication in various contexts in Finland, and to some extent in Sweden and the US. The textual analysis in each sub-study did not follow any predetermined methodological framework (e.g., CDA, grounded theory, etc.) but was conducted abductively in relation to relevant theoretical work and analytical concepts. Conducting an abductive analysis means taking a “middle ground” approach between deductive and inductive designs: a researcher moves back and forth from theory to empirical material to produce theoretically guided yet empirically grounded interpretations that contribute to the discussion about those theories and concepts (Tavory & Timmermans, 2014). All of our analyses went

through a similar iterative procedure (Kuckartz, 2014; Tavory & Timmermans, 2014). First, we familiarized ourselves with the data by reading it while making notes and marking patterns, repetition, and meaningful differences. Next, we coded the data with general thematic and inductive codes informed by the selected literature and our research questions. After that, we regrouped and combined the numerous codes, and again compared the codes and data with existing concepts, typologies, and operationalizations, looking for similarities and differences. Through this cyclical process, we achieved the final coding procedure and analysis.

Article I investigated how Nordic news satirists describe their aims and work practices and how they compare them to traditional news journalism and other forms of satire. The 16 transcribed semi-structured interviews were analyzed by qualitative content analysis. We first coded the material with tentative codes, such as aims, work routines, relation to journalism, relation to satire, objectivity, targets of satire, and possible effects. After this, we translated the key sections from Finnish and Swedish into English and discussed the findings, including repetitive opinions and reflections, and commonalities and differences. We then summarized our interpretation into two themes: news satire as a hybrid genre and aims and work routines. Next, we compared these themes to our theoretical framework on hybridity and boundary work related to journalistic news satire. Accordingly, we looked for descriptions of ideals, aims, and work practices that are essential in producing journalistic news satire. Moreover, we analyzed how producers' conceptions of their work were similar and different from soft and hard news. Finally, we scrutinized how the interviewees made conceptual identifications and distinctions (i.e., "boundary work") about traditional news journalism and other forms of satire.

Article II studied how journalistic and satirical styles are mixed in North American and Finnish gonzo journalistic content. We investigated how edgework (voluntary risk-taking) contributes to the construction of incongruities in gonzo humor. We probed these questions through a qualitative content analysis of gonzo journalism by Hunter S. Thompson and through three cases of Finnish gonzo from the twenty-first century. First, we read Thompson's key works and compared them to the three classical theories of humor. This enabled us to identify the aggressive and relief dimensions of gonzo humor. Next, we focused on analyzing how the construction of humorous incongruities occurred within Thompson's gonzo work at the epistemic, strategic, and stylistic levels. We then read through the material again and marked the differences between traditional news reporting and gonzo reporting within the epistemic, strategic, and stylistic levels of Thompson's output, paying particular attention to edgework, which is identified as an essential element in Thompson's work. We compared the epistemic and stylistic elements of various journalistic genres, including Finnish and North American literary journalism. As we could not directly access Thompson's epistemic ideals and work strategies through content

analysis, we relied on Thompson's and other researchers' descriptions of these dimensions. Next, we analyzed how this kind of reporting and humor manifested in the three cases of Finnish gonzo. We took notes, marked similarities and differences, and extracted the most representative aspects for a close analysis.

Article III investigated how populist communication mixes with humor in the blog posts by Timo Soini over a period of twelve and a half years. To analyze the blog posts, I applied an integrative approach to populist communication. The integrative approach addresses both the ideological and stylistic dimensions of populist communication. Thus, I investigated how the blog posts communicated key populist messages, focusing on how populist antagonisms were combined with various humor techniques in certain contexts. Based on a literature review, I named the two primary codes populist communication and humorous communication. I coded a text piece as populist communication if it included populist antagonisms (e.g., people-centrism, anti-elitism, and/or exclusion of an out-group). I coded a text piece as humorous communication if it included commonly used humor techniques or rhetorical figures that were applied to entertain the reader. After two rounds coding and modifications, I discovered that populist and humorist communication was combined mostly in aggressive forms of figurative language that ridiculed various elites and political opponents. To identify how populist communication is practiced in a certain context, I created codes for recurring targets (the EU, other parties, the media, and experts) and topics of humor (e.g., sovereignty, overspending, European Debt Crisis, media bias, climate change, populism). At times, Soini was also self-reflective of his rhetoric and the use of humor, so I created a code, 'self-reflection,' to mark and assess the humor's intentionality. During the third round, I applied the new codes to the material, leading to the final phase of my analysis.

Article IV studied both the rhetorical strategies of Soldiers of Odin and the online reception of performances by Loldiers. In the first phase, we read the 138 posts published on the Facebook page and employed rhetorical analysis to identify repetitive textual styles and patterns in the material. Building on literature that studies figurative language and tropes as a form of persuasion and public discourse, we marked how the tropes of metaphor, metonym, distortion, hyperbole, and lexemes were used in the Facebook posts. In the second phase, we studied the communicative aims of a digital performance. The first author (Laaksonen) analyzed and coded the 138 posts through an inductive qualitative analysis guided by the social movement and political humor literature reviewed in the article. Here, the aim was to identify the main communicative aim, the target of parody, and potential calls for action. The first round of coding produced 26 different codes. Next, these codes were regrouped and combined in two rounds, of which the latter was done by the first and second authors together (Laaksonen & Koivukoski). This analysis resulted in a typology of five communicative aims: parody of Soldiers of Odin, distortion of far-right discourse, mobilization of like-minded people,

promoting humanitarian ideology, and affirmation by the media. Finally, we compared how Loldiers' overall aims and rhetorical strategies related to the types of humorous stunts proposed by Sørensen (2016).

Second, we were interested in the reception of the Loldiers' performances. We read all 1,044 comments in the seven most commented threads, taking notes simultaneously and looking for patterns and representative ideal types. After comparing our notes to previous studies on citizens' political uses of humor on social media, we identified three types of communicative action in the data: support and legitimization, problematization, and political contextualization. Next, we coded the first 100 comments and held a briefing session in which we agreed on how to use the codes. Accordingly, messages were to be coded as legitimization, if they expressed support and/or gave a rationale for the actions of Loldiers; as problematization, if they stated that the protest was performed in an ineffective, incorrect, or detrimental manner; and as political contextualization, if they included references to a party or political ideology or connection to the political action of societal power structures, or social/political dichotomies. After this, each author was responsible for coding one of these codes throughout the 1,044 comments.

4.3 SUMMARIES OF THE FINDINGS

Article I: Producing Journalistic News Satire: How Nordic Satirists Negotiate a Hybrid Genre

Article I investigates the aims, work practices, and self-understandings of Nordic news satirists through an analysis of 16 semi-structured interviews. According to our analysis, the producers (presenters, journalists, and comedians) worked together to provide insights that were simultaneously humorous, well-contextualized and fact-based. Older and more traditional satire was seen as funny entertainment with its own merit, but lacking the journalistic competence to provide a substantial critique of current affairs. Still, many rejected the labelling of their work as "news journalism" due to the primary role of humor and the inclusion of exaggerated opinion. Thus, they saw their work as a hybrid comparable to culture journalism or opinion journalism, such as editorials or columns with satirical insights.

A central aim, according to the producers, was to come up with a point or insight on the main topic of a particular show. An insight could relate to exposing hypocrisy, irrationality, and/or criticizing the framings of political actors. This point was then embedded in an ironic narrative or humorous argumentation. Like *The Daily Show*, the ironic narrative meant a dramaturgy in which the host pretended to be unaware that some event or theme had been handled in an immoral or irrational manner, and then acted surprised when this was revealed through the news clips. Arguing with humor, in turn, was a

narrative mode and strategy in which the host stated directly that something was factually, morally, or logically wrong, and then made this case by constantly applying humor (e.g., hyperbole, comparisons, allusions, sarcasm, and wordplay).

During the production process, both journalistic and comedic expertise were utilized equally. While the journalists did most of the contextualization via gathering news clips and fact checking, and the comedians focused on producing relevant humor, the staff regularly interacted with each other to implement these dimensions as a meaningful whole. Over the long term, work processes led to mutual learning in which the journalists became more skilled in spotting satirical opportunities and comedians more adept with a journalistic grounding. Impartiality, however, is not believed to be possible in this kind of format. Maintaining a balance in targets was nevertheless a goal over the long run, especially in the two public sector productions. If the satirists had not critiqued some political parties for a while, they would start looking for some issues.

Article II: Scatological Anecdotes, Heavy Drinking, and Backpacker Culture: Gonzo Humor and Edgework in Contemporary Finnish Journalism

Article II examines the prominent features of gonzo humor. Based on a qualitative content analysis of Hunter S. Thompson's gonzo journalism and three cases of Finnish gonzo, we characterize gonzo journalism as a mix of participatory and literary styles of immersive reporting that include dramatic irony, figurative ridicule, and hoaxing. Humor in gonzo arises from a mixture of satirical delivery and journalistic reporting. We argue that the practice of edgework—the contesting of societal and journalistic norms—combined with the satirical style of reporting produces an experience of incongruity, which is the source of humor for some audiences. In Thompson's gonzo, this “rebel” approach is manifested on the epistemic, strategic, and stylistic levels.

The three analyzed Finnish cases resemble Thompson's gonzo in various ways. First, the cover story of *Ylioppilaslehti* (YL), from its centennial edition entitled “YL Report: We Shat Our Pants on a Bus to Turku,” consists of a descriptive first-person narrative of two female reporters who take a bus from Helsinki to Turku and defecate in their pants along the road. The story provides no explanation or metaphoric cues for their actions. Instead, the authors describe in detail their feelings and practical worries about their actions. This style is like Thompson's in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, in which the author and his companion decide to casually ingest great amounts of drugs without an apparent reason. Again, the main logic of humor in the YL Report is the incongruity that arises from the discrepancy between outrageous deeds and the neutral yet vivid description of these actions. Moreover, as in

some of Thompson's gonzo work, we can only guess whether the reported actions actually ever happened or occurred as described. This, of course, undermines the epistemic transparency ideal of journalism: the reader should be able to distinguish between truth and fiction. In gonzo journalism, this distinction is sometimes left blurry, arguably intentionally.

The second Finnish case is about the ten-pint interview format published in *Sylvi*. Here, humorous incongruity arises from the friction between a formal reporting style and the loss of control due to excessive drinking. The number of pints is documented carefully at the beginning of the story, but as in Thompson's gonzo, the representation of drunkenness becomes hazier as the story and the night unfold. Finally, the third case study was about *Madventures*, the most well-known gonzo pastiche in Finland. In the program, reporter Riku Rantala and director–videographer Tuomas Milonoff travel around the world, exploring it from the perspective of a backpacker. Like Thompson's, this style is a mix of first-person immersive reporting, factual information, and character play. Based on our analyses, we posit that the more reified and generally accepted the cultural practice that gonzo journalism transgresses, and the more casually it is represented, the more intense the perceived incongruity. Following this logic, the reception of gonzo can be, depending on the audience, outrage, or amusement.

Article III: From Moloch's Mouth to Bike Communists: Humor as a Velvet Weapon in the Populist Toolkit of Timo Soini

Article III investigates the interlinks between populist communication and verbal humor. Through an analysis of blog posts by the former leader of the Finns Party, Timo Soini, between 2007 and 2019, I indicate how populist communication and verbal humor are consistently combined in colorful ridicule that attacks “the elites.” I describe Soini's style as *aphoristic antagonism*, a concise expressive style that includes the use of metaphors, wordplay, hyperbole, ironic remarks, and their combination to color his aggressive criticism of various elites.

Soini applies aphoristic antagonisms in changing contexts. Finland's membership in the European Union is a prominent target of ridicule. The EU is the heart of darkness, which is devouring people's money like Moloch's mouth, but will eventually collapse like the Tower of Babel. From 2008 onward, the European Debt Crisis and bailout packages to Greece, Portugal, and Cyprus attract ample ridicule. In domestic politics, among Soini's main targets of ridicule are the “old parties”. These “Goliath parties” form a power cartel that allows discussions only internally and are allied with the media. The media and experts are also frequent targets of populist humor as biased toward the old parties, the EU, and the red–green bloc. The media produces content, which Soini sarcastically refers to as “news” that cover only the old parties. Finally, another prominent target of ridicule is the Red–Green Bloc, or “the

bike communists”, that represents progressive values and lifestyles. Soini equates expert power with the Green Party, claiming that its representatives are arrogant elitist turncoats corrupted by power.

Overall, the analysis illustrates how humor can be used consistently and intentionally to amplify populist antagonisms in changing contexts. Soini repeatedly employs aggressive humor to criticize Finnish and transnational elites about topics such as sovereignty, bureaucracy, corruption, bias, bail-out packages, and lifestyle choices. The study concludes that humor techniques should be considered rhetorical–performative tools that can amplify the core content of populist communication, especially anti-elitism. Thus, this paper expands the current literature on the role of humor in populist communication, which focuses on grassroots movements, and invites future analysis to investigate the use of humor by populist leaders in different national contexts and media.

Article IV: Clowning Around a Polarized Issue: Rhetorical Strategies and Communicative Outcomes of a Political Parody Performance by Loldiers of Odin

Article IV studies the rhetorical strategies and online reception by a performance group called Loldiers of Odin. Our analysis of Loldiers’ Facebook posts shows how Loldiers aimed to parody the Soldiers of Odin and distort far-right discourse but also to mobilize like-minded citizens, promote solidarity, and affirm their cause by re-posting the press coverage. Their communicative aims were employed through a rhetorical strategy based on ironic figurative language and colorful visuals that included a mixture of metaphors, distortions, hyperbole, and neologisms.

Through an analysis of the most prominent threads, we indicated how the performance provided a means for citizens to engage discursively in the immigration question. For those supporting the cause of solidarity, Loldiers’ page provided a platform for affirmation and activation, which manifested in supporting emojis and comments. Furthermore, some of the supporting commentators legitimized the means of this kind of humorous protest through lengthy clarifying posts. A few commentators also constructed a boundary between us—the more educated, who can understand the ironic protest—and them—the right-wingers, who fail to grasp the irony or are taking the protest too seriously. The parody performance also generated problematizing and delegitimizing commentary. While there were some bluntly negative comments, others expressed agreement with the cause of Loldiers, but deemed the humoristic absurd clownery as unacceptable or illegitimate. Some discussants, for example, criticized Loldiers for being disrespectful toward the police or the media. The main criticism was that the parody and humor sidetracked the actual message of solidarity.

Overall, our findings highlight the risky and ambivalent nature of humor in facilitating online political protests. We argue that while humor offered a compelling way for citizens to engage discursively in the immigration question, the polysemic nature of absurd parody, combined with the practice of never stepping out of character, fostered a great deal of metatalk, both legitimation and problematization, of the protest and its style. This, in turn, generated a more polarized discourse and enforced already existing political cleavages.

5 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This dissertation set out to study some of the ways humor and politics mix in the hybrid media environment, and how exactly mediated humor is, or becomes, political. The current public sphere can be understood as a fast-paced, multi-voiced, fragmented yet interconnected flow of serious and entertaining political communication by elites and grassroots actors between old and new media platforms (Baym, 2010; Chadwick, 2013/2017; Williams & Delli Carpini, 2011). I have explored how mediated political humor is an integral part of these information cycles and power struggles.

The four sub-studies of this dissertation examined hybrids of satire and journalism and humorous political advocacy on new media platforms. The sub-studies focused on the production of Nordic news satire, the content of North American and Finnish gonzo journalism, humorous blogging by the Finnish populist politician Timo Soini, and humorous stunts by a Finnish activist group called Loldiers of Odin. In this theoretical introduction, I have explored how the hybridity between mediated politics and humor manifests in different yet intertwined dimensions of content, practices, identities, and the public sphere. I have also proposed a theoretical framework for analyzing some of the important political aspects of public-mediated humor.

In this final chapter, I will first illustrate how the proposed theoretical framework can be applied by using my sub-studies as an example. Second, I will assess the threats and potentials of political humor for liberal democracy in relation to the sub-studies of this dissertation. Third, I will review the limitations of my thesis and envision paths for future research. Finally, I conclude by summarizing key points regarding the power of humor in the hybrid media environment.

5.1 POLITICAL HUMOR IN LIBERAL DEMOCRACY

The argument in this dissertation has been that political humor in the current hybrid media environment comes in many forms, and its potential to enhance and hinder liberal democracy is manifold. Therefore, before normative evaluations, we should carefully explain what kind(s) of political humor we are assessing and clarify what kinds of democratic ideals we are comparing humor to (Holbert, 2013). Here, I address both sides of the analysis in relation to our sub-studies.

Political Aspects in Journalistic Satire and Amusing Advocacy

In the previous chapters, I have described various prominent forms of contemporary mediated political humor. In Chapter 3, I propose a theoretical framework for studying some of the key political aspects of mediated humor. I argue that mediated humor can be analyzed from four interrelated aspects: content, style, identity, and circulation. Here, I will illustrate how the proposed theoretical framework can be applied by using our sub-studies as examples, after which I will review some of the roles that journalistic satire and amusing online advocacy can perform in a liberal democracy.

Table 4 summarizes and illustrates how these aspects can be analyzed in practice. To be clear, the review presented below is not based on novel empirical research, but on sub-studies and other research about similar phenomena. Thus, the analysis should be read as an illustration rather than as an empirically grounded statement. In the review of sub-studies 1 and 2, I focus on the main stories of journalistic news satire and on a specific example of gonzo journalism (*Madventures*). This is because the segments of journalistic news satire and manifestations of gonzo are so different that they arguably have different political implications (Baym, 2013; Droog et al., 2020).

The main stories of journalistic news satire contain humorous criticisms of the sayings and doings of various power elites, including leading politicians, the media, and decision-making and cultural authorities (Baym, 2005; Jones, 2007; Waisanen, 2009). Due to the unprecedented factual contextualization and grounded critique of political current affairs, *The Daily Show* and *Last Week Tonight* type of satire has been characterized as a new form of journalism (Baym, 2005; Faina, 2013; Fox, 2018; Hersey, 2013), or at least, a *journalistic* genre.

So far, there has been one systematic content analysis of Nordic journalistic news satire focusing on the Swedish podcast *Lilla Drevet* (Ödmark, 2018). However, according to our interviews with the producers and Ödmark's (2018) content analysis, the main stories of journalistic Nordic news satire focus on current affairs, political figures, and processes. The topics are framed thematically, societally, and critically. While the main stories stylistically employ irony, parody, intertextual references, and multiple voices from different sources, the main statements are usually clear, unlike TV satires like *The Colbert Report*, which rely mostly on parody and are thus more ambiguous (see LaMarre et al., 2009). The tone of the main stories is more personal and emotional than in regular news. The tone also varies between episodes and topics. For example, while the treatment of an autocratic leader may be harsh, mundane domestic political maneuvers are often treated more gently. Also, different Nordic news satire shows emphasize journalistic work and output (*Uutisraportti*), while others are more entertainment oriented (*Noin viikon uutiset*). Still, overall, and despite the critical lens, the tone is

optimistic rather than cynical, demonstrating a belief in the possibility of political change.

The hosts identify with the point of view of ordinary citizens and sometimes offer a form of self-criticism targeting the beliefs and behavior of Finns or Swedes. While producers generally support liberal values and democratic ideals, they mock all political parties and actors if they think that they deserve it. Still, the producers try to maintain a balance in targets over the long term. Also, the producers sometimes disagree with political issues, while they have to present a single voice or perspective in the show's main story, excluding *Lilla Drevet*, which is based on a dialog between the hosts. The shows seldom criticize disadvantaged groups, following the doctrine of not "punching downwards." Three of the four investigated shows aired for four to seven years between 2013 and 2019 (*Uutisraportti*, 2014–2017; *Noin viikon uutiset*, 2014–2017; *Lilla Drevet*, 2013–2019), while *Svenska Nyheter* (2018–) is still being broadcast weekly. All the shows have won national awards, some of which are prizes in "journalism," highlighting the hybrid nature of the shows.

Gonzo journalism has no clear definition. This can mean eccentric journalism in general and Hunter S. Thompson's writings and style in particular. At any rate, gonzo journalism is more style-bound than focusing on a certain topic. One of our case studies was *Madventures*, a TV program focusing on traveling from a backpacker's point of view (i.e., self-organized low budgets and long journeys). The show contains a blend of first-person reporting and factual contextualization of the locations. The two travelers/reporters criticize mass tourism for its decadence and endorse open-minded attitudes toward different cultures and customs, encouraging people to explore the globe. The program is based on the interaction and friendly rivalry between two friends with slightly different characters, a hippie and a guerilla captain, enabling the viewer to identify with either or both personas. The style of delivery is intimate and playful, filled with colorful expressions and ridicule of each other, mass tourists, and Finns, who are back home freezing and grinding in nine-to-five jobs. Overall, the tone is optimistic, while occasionally, the narration engages in a moralistic critique.

Madventures aired on Subtv (2002–2009). Its first two seasons were in Finnish (2002–2007), after which the program was bought by National Geographic Adventure, which spread the program to the US and the UK. The program has won several awards, including the Finnish State's Award for Advancing Knowledge. According to the jury, Rantala, and Milonoff (the producer–presenters) have promoted knowledge about the world with their original and opinionated approach, which is especially appealing to youth. The program gave rise to various other publications, including seven books and a discussion program, *Docventures*. While *Madventures* was based on the mass media logic of rather passive viewership, the more recent formats were more activating, including social media interaction and local "film clubs."

Table 4. *Political Aspects in Journalistic Satire and Amusing Advocacy.*

	Journalistic News Satire: Main Stories of Nordic News Satire	Gonzo Journalism: Madventures	Populist Humor: Blog posts of Timo Soini	Amusing Activism: Loldiers of Odin
Content: Advocacy	Ridiculing statements on power elites, including politicians, public officials, the media, and other authorities.	Some political statements against mass tourism and for backpacker culture, including celebration of multiculturalism.	For conservative values and national sovereignty. Ridicules the EU, other parties, the media, and experts.	Ridicules far-right politics, especially Soldiers of Odin. Promotes solidarity toward asylum seekers.
Content: Focus	Focuses on current affairs, political persons, and processes. This includes much factual contextualization. Facts, fiction, and opinions are clearly separated.	Focuses on the personal experiences of the reporters and contextualization of the locations. Facts and fiction are clearly separated, unlike in some forms of gonzo.	Opinionated commentary on current affairs, and some personal matters. Facts and opinions are mostly clearly separated.	Focuses on mocking anti-immigration vocabulary, symbols, and leaders. Facts and fiction are intentionally blurred through naivety and absurdism.
Style: Polysemy	Main statements are usually clear, but the use of irony, multi-voiced narrative, and intertextuality can hinder clarity.	Some polysemy through a multi-voiced narrative between the two protagonists: the "guerilla captain" and the "hippie."	Includes irony, sarcasm, and some self-deprecating humor, but the political statements are clear.	Relies on irony and parody. The ironic critique is clear to much of the audience, yet some are confused about the target(s).
Style: Tone	A mix of optimistic carnivalism, humorous insights, and aggressive substantial critique.	Colorful first-person reporting and character play, balancing between optimism and moralism.	Aggressive and aphoristic humor targeting "the elites." Balancing between cynicism and optimism.	A mix of naive optimism and aggressive ridicule.
Identity: Boundaries	Identifies with the "ordinary citizen." Tries to maintain a balance over the long term by ridiculing all political parties.	Identifies with the "backpacker ethos." Differentiates from mass tourism, consumption culture, and cultural prejudice.	Identifies with the people literally and stylistically. Ridicules the elites and their representatives.	Identifies with Finnish progressives and artistic activism. Differentiates from the far right and the police.
Identity: Representati on	Rarely criticizes disadvantaged groups. Aims to mock all political actors "as they deserve."	Showcases diverse national and local cultures, embracing tolerance and multiculturalism.	A nationalist ethos, but does not ridicule minority groups unlike some others in the party or around it.	Aims to hinder anti-immigration sentiment and to foster solidarity toward asylum-seekers.
Circulation: Popularity	Aired on public service companies' TV channels and private newspapers' webpages. Won a few national awards.	Aired on Subtv and later on National Geographic Adventure. Won several awards and spawned notable spinoffs.	Soini led the Finns Party for two decades and has been blogging since 2007. User data are not public.	Street and online performances in 2016. Was reported in the media in Finland and abroad for a short period.
Circulation: Participation	Consumption is based on viewing, but includes some social media interaction and activation campaigns.	Mostly viewing, but included some activation. One episode caused a public controversy about animal rights.	Mostly one-directional, does not allow comments. The blog has been a news source and its style has been parodied by other political actors.	Stimulated a vivid online discussion. Social media communication included some calls for action.

Timo Soini led the Finns Party for two decades, from 1997 to 2017. According to my analysis of Soini's blogging from 2007 to 2019, humor is a consistent strategy. Soini's populist communication ridicules the EU, the "old parties," the red-green bloc, and the media and experts while defending conservative values, national sovereignty, and center-left economic policies. Soini's blogging consisted of opinionated commentary on current affairs and his doings and sayings. Soini's style includes the use of colorful language and short declarative sentences that contain metaphors, wordplay, hyperbole, irony, and their combinations. However, despite the use of irony, his criticisms and targets are most often very clear from the context and from his use of evident ironic cues. Unlike some more radical right populist actors, Soini does not mock minorities or spread misinformation. Still, he strongly defends conservative positions, such as banning abortion and same-sex marriage, and he bashes his opponents aggressively. Nevertheless, his aggressive ridicule of "the elites" has stayed within the legal boundaries of liberal democracy.

Loldiers of Odin was a series of parody performances targeting the Finnish far-right activist group Soldiers of Odin. The content of Loldiers' performance is built upon mockery of Finnish anti-immigration vocabulary, symbols, and leaders. Loldiers intentionally blur the distinction between "real" and "performance" by constantly staying in their role as clowns, even when interviewed by a morning television discussion program. Despite naivety and absurd features, Loldiers' critical message is clear to many audiences, whereas some audiences disagree on who the actual target(s) of the attack are: The Soldiers, the police, the media, the clowns themselves, or all. Loldiers' performances were a counter-reaction to the rising anti-immigration activism in Finland caused by the so-called European Refugee Crisis of 2015–2016. Like Soldiers of Odin, Loldiers' performance attracted national and international press coverage. However, attention was relatively short-lived, peaking in the early months of 2016. Active social media communications by Loldiers expanded the protest beyond the streets and established a platform to discuss the immigration issue, as well as to debate the meaning of the performance itself. The communication included a few calls for action, such as participating in street patrolling or making clown outfits.

Journalistic Satire and Amusing Advocacy in Liberal Democracy

How, then, does professionally produced journalistic satire and amusing online advocacy by politicians and activists relate to liberal democracy? Theorizations on the role of mediated discourse in liberal democracy are vast (Althaus, 2012; Christians et al., 2009), and, as many have argued, the role of mediated humor should be a part of these discussions (e.g., Dahl, 2021; Hariman, 2008; Holbert, 2013; Kuipers, 2011; Jones, 2010; Phillips & Milner, 2017). The normative analysis presented here and summarized in Table 5 is based on the idea of liberal democracy as a deliberative, pluralist,

participatory, and legal system, embodying the core principle that power is rooted in the people and that the government is accountable to the people (Althaus, 2012; Christians et al., 2009). In this integrated approach, the potential roles of mediated political humor include disseminating information and opinions, fostering public debate and political activation, and promoting equality (Chattoo & Feldman, 2020; Young, 2020). Conversely, mediated political humor can hinder liberal democratic practices and ideals, for example, by disseminating disinformation and ostracizing minorities.

A growing body of research has explored the potential outcomes of journalistic TV news satire programming, suggesting that it could have beneficial effects on liberal democracy. In addition to informing the citizens (Becker & Bode, 2018; Feldman, 2013) and critically scrutinizing the powerful (Baym, 2005; Jones, 2007; Waisanen, 2009), the consumption of news satire seems to enhance viewers' feelings of being able to understand and affect politics (Becker, 2011; Hoffman & Young, 2011; Holbert et al., 2007) and foster post-view activity, such as discussing political issues (Cao & Brewer, 2008; Lee & Jang, 2017). Moreover, if this type of satire includes calls for action, as *Last Week Tonight* or *Full Frontal* often do (Kilby, 2018), it can lead to political activation (Bode & Becker, 2018). Scholars have also suggested that due to the constant critical examination of political spin and journalism, this type of satire could enhance media literacy (Peters, 2016) and function as an antidote to news amnesia in our information abundance (Basu, 2018). Sometimes journalistic satire may even offer a more pertinent critique of political affairs than the news does, including criticism of the press itself on issues such as partisan bias, the Iraq War, or the Great Recession (Chattoo & Feldman, 2020; Jones, 2010).

However, a few researchers have warned that the repetitive critique of the ruling elite and media in journalistic satire may elicit cynicism and distrust among citizens (Baumgartner & Morris, 2006; Hart & Hartelius, 2007). Also, as Waisanen (2018b) pointed out, commercial ownership can prevent news satire's criticism of topics that conflict with the owner's interests. Furthermore, like most political humor (Waisanen, 2013), journalistic satire simplifies and distorts complex political realities. Simplification—for example, through hyperbole and colloquial language—can, however, contribute to public discourse by clarifying the policy processes or political stands of politicians who use obscure language (Faina, 2013; Hariman, 2008; Jones, 2010). Indeed, the art of satire includes sensing when public discourse needs simplification and when satire can complicate things that appear too simple (Zareff, 2020). Still, exaggerations in the form of strawman arguments or selective quoting remain potential problems for journalistic satire. For example, Waisanen (2013) notes how the five-minute interviews shown in *The Colbert Report* are cut together from interviews that can last up to 90 minutes, and the shown bits are chosen for their entertainment value rather than accurately representing the interview (Baym, 2007). Finally, as journalistic satire often relies on irony, parody, and character play, its core message may

be ambiguous to some audiences; namely, some audiences miss the critical intent of the producers (LaMarre et al., 2009). Still, despite these threats, journalistic news satire has so far the most well-documented positive potential for enhancing liberal democracy—without, of course, offering a silver bullet for a healthy polity.

Table 5. *Journalistic Satire and Amusing Advocacy in Liberal Democracy*

	Journalistic Satire	Amusing Advocacy
Potentials	Informs citizens about current affairs and cultural issues, and can expose the hypocrisy and spin of power elites. Humor can clarify and popularize complex political processes. Consumption seems to increase political self-efficacy and foster political talk. May activate citizens politically.	Can bring up alternative political ideas in an accessible manner. Successful humor brings social media visibility and mainstream media attention, which may aid in politicizing problematic issues. Aggressive humor enhances in-group cohesion in a political group by constructing a common adversary.
Threats	Hyperbole and selective citation can oversimplify complex issues. Irony, parody, and the mixing of fictional characters and real people may blur the meaning of political critique. Constant critiquing of politicians and the media may foster cynicism toward democratic governance. The broadly liberal outlook in many mainstream satire outlets may alienate conservatives.	Humorous advocacy can be entangled with disinformation, harassment, and trolling. Strawman arguments, selective citation, and other fallacies can distort reality. Agonistic competition between adversaries can regress to antagonisms between enemies, including ostracizing minorities. The constant ridicule of other political groups can hinder future collaboration.

There are no studies on the effects of gonzo journalism. However, we can assume that to the degree that gonzo journalism is informative, it can teach citizens about societal issues, as journalistic news satire does. Like news satire, gonzo arguably elicits public and private discussions on civic matters, as it is often delivered in a personal, humorous, weird, and even disturbing manner. The problem with some gonzo journalism is that audiences cannot distinguish between facts and fiction. Also, by flaunting a hyperbolic and subjective style, gonzo may regress to egocentric blasting. Nevertheless, gonzo’s boundary-crossing ethos in topic selection, journalistic methods, and styles has the potential to produce original societal insights and engagement from audiences. In conclusion, journalistic satire *can* perform the informant and watchdog roles typically ascribed to news and investigative journalism. However, as journalistic satire is not bound by similar codes of conduct as journalism, its commitment to factuality and transparency depends upon the good will of producers.

How, then, does journalistic satire function in the Finnish version of liberal democracy? One of the defining features of journalistic TV satire in the U.S. has been its criticism of “image politics,” which favors impression over

substance and calls out the mainstream media for abandoning their role of serving as watchdogs of the powerful (e.g., Baym, 2010; Kilby, 2018). Criticism of everyday political maneuvers and the media has also been a recurring theme in Finnish journalistic TV news satire, though not to the same degree as in the U.S. The Nordic news satirists we interviewed were not dissatisfied with politicians or mainstream media on a systemic level (Article I). Instead, their satire transformed the work of reporters into factually contextualized humorous and ironic commentary on current affairs, while occasionally pointing out blind spots in the news discourse. In other words, whereas American journalistic satire has sometimes been able to set agendas, influence policy change, or break news (Chattoo and Feldman, 2020; Jones, 2007), Finnish journalistic satire mostly refrained from straightforward advocacy and focused on commenting on current affairs with entertaining critiques of politics and media. To be clear, this is a meaningful contribution to Finnish public culture, as previous mainstream political satires have been inclined toward fictional character play and person-centric caricatures (Kolehmainen, 2016; Zareff, 2020). Indeed, we can assume that some of the positive effects highlighted by research in the U.S. context (see above) would hold true for Finnish journalistic TV satire. Finnish gonzo journalism, in turn, has been able to shed light on unexplored themes and lifestyles in an entertaining manner, while also poking fun at mainstream journalism. Thus, gonzo can, at its best, enrich democratic culture, although this is not inevitable.

Like journalistic satire, humorous online advocacy can both serve and hinder liberal democratic practices and ideals. The hybrid media environment has provided new means for activists and politicians to take part in public discourse and form social communities (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013; Chadwick, 2017). As discussed throughout this thesis, humorous communication has often been a part of these processes (Davis et al., 2018; Shifman, 2014; Ross & Rivers, 2017; Phillips & Milner, 2017). While some have questioned the actual impact of online advocacy, mockingly calling it clicktivism or slacktivism, others have emphasized how the online sphere provides platforms for political actors to express statements more openly, connecting people emotionally and personally (Fenton, 2018). Indeed, amusing online advocacy may foster mainstream media publicity, increasing citizens' familiarity with the issue, and legitimizing the demands of protesters (Shifman, 2014; Sorensen, 2016). While advocative humor is often "preaching to the converted," it is an effective way to activate the like-minded (Day, 2011) and, in some cases, is also a means for changing people's attitudes (Feldman & Chattoo, 2018; Innocenti & Miller, 2016).

Unlike mainstream satire, the production of online humorous advocacy is often more open and interactive. Of course, one can actively react to mainstream satire and participate in its activation campaigns or, conversely, just passively follow the memetic online commentary on political affairs—as most social media users do. Still, the logic of social media platforms is fundamentally built on participation (Van Dijck & Poell, 2013), allowing new

political movements to arise “organically” and form viable counter publics (Milner, 2016; Nikunen, 2015; Shifman, 2014). Activists of all ideological stripes have applied humor in their inner and public communications. To the extent that these actors respect the values and rules of liberal democracy, humorous political advocacy may vitalize public discourse (Hariman, 2008). Aggressive online humor toward elites or political opponents fosters in-group solidarity through the construction of a common enemy, consolidating the identity of the political group by differentiating it from others (Hakoköngäs et al., 2020; Gal, 2019). Humorous advocacy can thus make political persuasion and participation emotionally appealing, potentially activating more people than non-humorous advocacy.

Nevertheless, amusing advocacy does not necessarily enhance liberal democracy. Humorous advocacy can be one-directional propaganda with no intent to debate issues or learn from other participants. Witticism can be also used to distract the conversation. Further, humor can be blended with mis- and disinformation and include the ostracism of minorities. A growing body of literature dissects the interlinks between the rise of radical right and online humor, indicating how consistent memeing promotes xenophobia and sexism (Hakoköngäs et al., 2020; Phillips, 2015; Schwarzenegger & Wagner, 2018; Tuters & Hagen, 2020; Zannettou et al., 2018). While there are cases of overt racist online humor (Billig, 2001), some of the alt-right and alt-light actors deliberately blur the line between genuine hate, irony, and pranking (Nagle, 2017; Phillips & Milner, 2017).

Aggressive humor can also be used to unjustifiably delegitimize democratic leaders, public officials, journalists, and experts, potentially undermining democratic governance, which is largely based on trust and expert knowledge (Zareff, 2020). For instance, Fox News pundits—who ridicule the mainstream media and progressives (Jutel, 2018)—adhere to an alternative epistemology that includes valorizing “common sense” and the inclusion of alternative experts (Peck, 2019). Far-right online counter publics have also embraced these “counter knowledge” practices (Ylä-Anttila, 2018). As this study (Article III) indicates, populist leaders can also consistently employ humor to undermine mainstream media and experts. Again, the lines between justified and unjustified humorous critiques should be carefully scrutinized.

In addition, as democratic decision-making processes often require compromise, the repetitive ridicule of competing political ideologies and their representatives may hinder future cooperation. Agonistic banter between political adversaries may regress to antagonistic scorn between enemies. According to recent survey and interview studies, politicians themselves have highlighted that the rise of social media has coarsened the language of politics (Hokkanen et al., 2021; Reunanen & Kunelius, 2021). Indeed, a pressing issue is to dissect how the ridicule of political opponents in the media affects the polarization of public discourse, political opinions, and emotions toward opponents (Phillips, 2018; Sakki and Martikainen, 2021; Young, 2020).

In Finland, political actors across the ideological spectrum have applied humor in their online advocacy efforts. Existing studies have focused on the role of humor in anti-immigrant discourse on discussion forums, blogs, YouTube videos, and Facebook pages (Hakoköngäs et al., 2020; Nikunen, 2015, 2018; Sakki & Martikainen, 2021; Ylä-Anttila et al., 2021). Some of these studies scrutinize the internal and external communication of supporters and members of the Finns Party (Nikunen, 2015; Sakki & Martikainen, 2021). Together, these studies illustrate how humor is repeatedly used to mock political opponents and the mainstream media, both by far-right fringe actors and leading figures of the Finns Party, including the former party leaders Timo Soini and Jussi Halla-aho (see also Article III). The targets and tone of aggressive humor vary from Soini's colorful mockery of various elites and the red-green bloc that promotes social conservatism and national sovereignty (Article III) to harsher ridicule of immigrants and people who are seen as supportive of multicultural policies (Nikunen, 2018; Ylä-Anttila et al., 2021). As Nikunen (2018) underlines, national and transnational online sites associated with far-right and subversive irony (e.g., Ylilauta, 4chan, Reddit) form a network that can effectively reframe issues like immigration as a threat, paving the way to the normalization of anti-liberal attitudes.

Finnish leftist and progressive activists have also applied humor to amplify their criticism of topics like inequality, consumerism, and fossil capitalism, but only a few empirical studies on the topic have been conducted (Junka-Aikio, 2018; Särnä, 2016). Often, the humor is enacted through various humorous street and/or online performances (Article IV; Sørensen, 2016), or through a practice called "culture jamming," which means creative distortions of existing material, like witty alternations of advertisements. Future studies could investigate progressive activists' use of memes to address issues such as mental health problems, climate crisis, and racism on platforms like Instagram and TikTok, which are especially popular among young people. Moreover, the role of humor in power struggles across digital space should be extended to cover mainstream Finnish political actors and various seemingly non-partisan advocates, such as parody accounts, influencers, and experts. This could clarify the role of aggressive humor in political polarization, including its "healthy" agonistic and harmful antagonistic forms.

To conclude, on a societal level, new forms of mediated political humor have great potential to enrich democratic engagement among diverse audience groups. A vibrant liberal democratic public culture needs a plurality of voices and styles, and comedic and satirical tones and narratives can help deliver it. As Boukes (2019b: 3) writes, "Infotainment may positively contribute to democracy by attracting an audience otherwise not following the news; additionally, it may facilitate citizens' understanding of political affairs by making it more accessible in terms of language, presentation, or framing." Yet, at the same time, political humor may contribute to the fragmentation of public discourse through mutual ridicule between political groups. This is not necessarily always a bad thing if the banter remains mutually respectful.

Conversely, humor may clarify the differences between the values and policy ideas of competing political interest groups. Of course, this means that antidemocratic actors also harness humor, as discussed throughout the dissertation. This “darker side” of humor deserves more attention in the future.

5.2 LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE STUDIES

This dissertation is based on four empirical qualitative studies that investigated cases of mediated political humor in Finland, the US, and Sweden in the 2000s and 2010s. The focus poses some obvious limitations. First, I have explored the historical development of mediated political humor in these countries rather shallowly. While there have been historical analyses of television and print satire in the US (e.g., Baym, 2010; Gray et al., 2009; Jones, 2010) and Finland (Kivistö & Riikonen, 2012; Ylönen, 2001; Zareff, 2020), analyses on the evolution of political humor in radio and social media are still rare. Future studies should thus continue the historical mapping of political humor in radio (Saurette & Gunster, 2011) and online discourse (Milner, 2016; Nagel, 2017; Phillips, 2015).

Second, Finland, Sweden, and the US are liberal democracies with free press and fair elections, although the US is currently struggling with the latter. In authoritarian systems, such as in China, Russia, Hungary, India, Iran, or Turkey, political humor arguably has similar but also slightly different functions. In these contexts, political opponents are similarly criticized through aggressive-mediated humor, but ridicule of the ruling elite, especially autocrats, may be strictly banned (Mina, 2019). However, disguised humorous criticism, for example, in the form of irony or parody, and communication on the basic values of democracy through satire may help maintain democratic resistance in these contexts despite governmental surveillance (Mina, 2019; Waisanen, 2018a). So far, little comparative research has been done on political humor between liberal democratic and authoritarian societies (Baym & Jones, 2012). Future studies should also probe the dynamics between globalization and localization of memes (Nissenbaum & Shifman, 2020), and other humor-laden online practices (Ylä-Anttila et al., 2020). One way to advance the comparative understanding of TV satire formats is to employ structured cross-national interviews, as we did in the study of Nordic news satire production (Article I).

Third, in the sub-studies, we did not investigate individual-level effects related to consuming political humor. Rather, the focus has been on content features, the aims of the producers, and citizen/consumers’ reactions to humor. Both qualitative and quantitative research is needed in the future to understand the contents and functions of political humor in the changing media landscape (Young and Gray, 2013). Moreover, various mixed-method and interdisciplinary designs are a promising way to capture the complexity of

political humor. For example, combining computational data scraping with qualitative close-analysis (Davis et al., 2018; Ylä-Anttila et al., 2020) seems feasible setups to capture the circulation aspect of political humor (Chapter 3.4). Indeed, as Becker and Baumgartner (2018) pointed out, reactions to particular examples of political humor are as important as the original content. On one hand, the ways in which professionally produced political humor is reacted to and appropriated are an important dimension of their influence (Baym & Shah, 2011). On the other hand, studying user-generated humor contributes to understanding how political information cycles are constructed in a bottom-up manner (Davis et al., 2018; Ross & Rivers, 2017; Mina, 2019). Our research setup provides an example of the latter by investigating both activists' humorous performances and audience engagement simultaneously (Article IV).

Fourth, despite a growing interest in audience studies (e.g., Doona, 2016; Jones, 2010), we know little about why different citizens like different types of political humor. Thus, the study of humor audiences and active amateur co-creators of online political humor should be advanced in the future. At least two approaches seem feasible. First, we can address the question of how and why certain segments tap into certain forms of political humor, or alternatively, avoid certain types of humor altogether (Becker & Baumgartner, 2018) by conducting a Bourdieu-inspired sociological analysis of humor tastes (Kuipers & Friedman, 2013; Kuipers, 2015). Previous studies are limited to country-specific analyses (the Netherlands, the UK, and the US) and are arguably outdated. As Chattoo and Feldman (2020) underline, research on "the YouTube-socialized youngest audience cohort" is particularly scarce. Second, a practice theory approach, which is theoretically similar to Bourdieu's taste analysis, seems a likely approach for investigating concrete media practices of consuming political humor, as it concentrates on identifying collective habits and routines (Reckwitz, 2002). We applied a practice theory approach to identify work routines in producing journalistic satire (Article I). Future studies could expand this approach to other production and consumption practices related to political humor. In this regard, a combination of surveys, interviews, user tracking, and digital ethnography would provide valuable insights. The uses of political humor on platforms such as Instagram, Snapchat, TikTok, and YouTube are particularly understudied.

5.3 SEVEN THESES ON HUMOR AND POWER IN THE HYBRID MEDIA ENVIRONMENT

After all, what are the core functions of political humor in the hybrid media environment? Foremost, successful humor captures people's attention in today's information overload. A satirical rant by John Oliver on climate change (Brewer & McKnight, 2017), a string of memes on Donald Trump's hair (Nissenbaum & Shifman, 2020), or a slashing ridicule of Hillary Clinton's alleged arrogance (Davis et al., 2018) attracts shares and reactions, potentially receiving more visibility through journalistic reports. Yet, what exactly does mediated humor do beyond seduction, and how are these functions politically relevant? Based on my theoretical and empirical research, and those of others reviewed above, I propose the following seven theses on humor's power in the hybrid media environment.

I) Humor is embedded in modern political information cycles.

Humor informs, or misinforms, citizens and persuades them to feel and think in certain ways about political matters. Humor is used to set agendas, frame issues, and legitimize or delegitimize political ideas and people. Popular humor techniques include irony, parody, hyperbole, metaphor, wordplay, anthropomorphism, and absurdism. With the rise of social media, humor has become an increasingly common tool of strategic communication for politicians, journalists, activists, and PR professionals alike.

II) Humor participates in the communicative construction of identities. Humor helps to build solidarity among a political in-group, but aggressive humor also constructs boundaries between socio-political cleavages. Specific humor tastes can contribute to the formation of political identities, as in the case of the alt-right's irreverent humor.

III) Ambiguous humor can blur the distinction between the serious and the humorous/ironic. Ambiguous humor can be used strategically to provoke attention while providing a back door for racism, sexism, or other accusations ("It was just a joke!"). The parody of stereotypes can be interpreted both as the normalization and critique of them by different audiences. The inclusion of irony markers can help others "get" the critical intention, but overt use of them can hinder the enjoyment of detecting irony while knowing others might not.

IV) Mediated humor sometimes creates scandals or smaller public controversies. Open digital media platforms have enabled the distribution of provocative and aggressive forms of humor that bypass journalistic gatekeepers. Populist politicians and activists have used controversial humor, intentionally, and accidentally, in their online communication, stirring controversies and spats on racism, sexism, and freedom of speech.

V) Like most media content, the potential effects of political humor are hard to detect and are often gradual rather than instant.

One instance of mediated political humor rarely leads to profound change, although this can also happen. Rather, humor can maintain, at times even change, attitudes, stir political debates, and encourage people to become involved politically.

VI) The bulk of mediated political humor is arguably preaching to the converted, but this is an important form of activation for like-minded people, which also serves as a coping strategy in the strenuous processes of political activism. Sometimes, political humor can also attract new people, especially young adults, to become politically active.

VII) To citizens, the consumption and production of mediated political humor provides opportunities for entertainment and learning, but also for community building and political participation. Political participation through mediated humor can be collaborative content creation, debating an issue, liking, and sharing amusing content, or protesting through creative means.

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