Parody, Popular Culture and the Politics of Statecraft: Analysing the Intersection of International Relations and Parodic Humour

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Kurzfassung zur Dissertation mit dem Thema "Parody, Popular Culture and the Politics of Statecraft: Analysing the Intersection of International Relations and Parodic Humour", vorgelegt von Daniel Beck

Executive Summary

This dissertation studies professionally produced political humour in world politics and its effects on politics. It shows that humorous communication related to popular culture is a viable part of state actors´ public communication and, thereby, of International Relations. The results of the study indicate that parody as a specific humour style is among the most popular forms of humour used by state actors. It will likely be applied at times when it intuitively seems to be least appropriate: during high crisis and uncertainty or to deal with personal weaknesses of policymakers. It is surprising that play and fun on such high levels of politics are employed and observable in addressing even sensitive topics. The dissertation analyses popular culture that provides the main sources and reference points for parody. Therefore, it is a central pillar for the theoretical understanding of the shift towards humour in public diplomacy.

My research interest is motivated by this tension among powerful state actors in the serious environment of crisis-ridden international politics versus the seemingly unserious use of parodic humour and its supposedly unpredictable consequences. The project is about what strategic humour as a form of communication does to politics and political communication. Furthermore, there is an interest in how state actors use a type of communication that can easily lead to misunderstandings or might not be taken seriously. Of further interest are state actors´ strategies regarding specific styles and content of humorous products and questions about the producers of state actors´ humorous public diplomacy campaigns.

Throughout the project, the use of humour by state actors is seen as a strategic element in the spheres of world politics. This means using conscious planning of humorous texts to exercise political power. The aim is to find out how this is executed.

The central contributions are bringing the insights about what humour does politically a step further and explaining how it is designed and how state actors are employing it in their communication. The dissertation shows how humour is used every day and in online communication, a setting in which professional and context sensitive humour deals with provocative aspects in the form of parody. This type of strategic political humour is about imitating famous narratives and stories from popular culture.

Following poststructuralist understandings of causality, the dissertation contributes four main political effects of strategic humour to the research on humour in political science and specifically International Relations (IR). In the poststructuralist logic, there are no causal effects existent, as there is only a discursive realm and no objective reality that exists independently of language and discourse. The dissertations´ findings about the use of parody are the possible effects of these eloquent, funny performances. Among the uncovered effects are a distraction from sensitive political issues as well as the camouflage of certain topics. This staging of politics as a permanent entertaining spectacle has led to problematic indifferences of the audience towards serious political issues.
The four main effects are the following:

- Humour being used very strategically shows its centrality as an integral part of modern politics. This use of humour is not a completely new dimension of politics but is increasingly perceived as a trend in political communication and public diplomacy. Humour is thereby expanding the language of politics and is bringing entertainment and play into the serious realm of politics. There is a humour-immanent logic of expansion that is observable and visible in language. The expanded language of politics enables a broader sphere of legitimate political communication. Taboos can be circumvented, and political responsibilities can be shifted.

- Today's political state humour is proficiently produced and characterised by a high degree of professionality and an exactly calculated degree of provocation for specific political means. Parody´s suitability for provocation ensures enormous amounts of attention. The recent professionalism in audio-visual and official state sponsored humour is new. Strange analogies and provocative references can be combined with strategies for defence. The humour aspect makes it harder to criticise messages that ambiguously move between threat and joke.

- Humour camouflages certain issues, like violence, and proves to be a distraction from political conflicts by strategically leading attention away from central topics towards side topics and performances. This is a further understudied effect of its professionalisation. Parody´s distraction of attention from relevant issues has problematic sides effects, such as a reduced interest in political issues and a

preference for entertainment. The contradiction of image, sound and text supports this camouflaging of certain aspects of the communication.

- Humour protects and isolates political actors from the critique of adversaries. State actors take advantage of an adequate deployment of humour because they are perceived as authentic and very approachable through a feeling of closeness, and they can easily defend themselves. Political actors can achieve a sort of isolation against critique through less critical consumers and a degree of levity. Humour often provides a way out of difficult situations.

All of the exploratory cases that are used are concerned with the use of parodic humour in European democratic societies at different levels of world politics. In accordance with poststructuralist principles, the differentiation between the domestic and the international is seen as a social construct. Consequentially, the dissertation analyses governments/heads of state, state institutions and individual people in political leadership positions, and it thereby makes significant contributions to the field of humour studies in IR by dealing with core issues and debates in the discipline. All of these are related to popular culture, like strategies of legitimation, public diplomacy, (ontological) security and populist communication. These are part of public relations and public diplomacy in which humour plays a strategic role. To understand the recent shift towards humour in public diplomacy, this dissertation critically examines British and Swedish humorous military recruitment videos, the German government´s humorous COVID-19 crisis communication as well as conservative and populist forms of humour in political communication.

In particular, my focus in this dissertation presents new findings on the intertextual qualities of parody. Parody is increasingly perceived as entertaining communication with a high recognition factor that honours the original text it is imitating. The recently changing spirit and character of parody enables amusement and attention instead of critique. Actors establish connections to everyday life and thereby appear as reasonable instead of political through parodic humour. Often, parodic humour enables state actors to be part of popular culture through the imitation of well-known narratives. Highly professional humour enables defending political actors and their actions to be viewed as legitimate.

As part of public diplomacy, parodic humour helps to influence different and new audiences via social media. Through parody and its memetic and, thereby, participatory structure, strategic humour can help make political content a part of people´s social lives. Adding to the research on anxiety management and ontological security, the dissertation finds that professionally planned and produced humorous campaigns contribute to the normalisation of security practices. As a strategy in anxiety management, parody strengthens stable self-identities and enables ontological security, a stable form of self-identity. The enjoyability of humour is connected to a feeling of security, for example, to temporal distance or well-known narratives.

The noticeable connections between populist communication and humour are highlighted. Parodic humour raises the attractiveness of the mainstream, and actors can present themselves as part of the people and the mainstream. Through imitation, both parody and populist communication deal with the already known. Suitably, the perception of power structures can be affected through humorous communication that matters for populism. Political humour has the potential to contribute to strategies of legitimation through eye-level communication and its use of everyday culture as part of politics.

Additionally, there is a methodological development of discourse analytical approaches, specifically through advancing narrative analysis for dealing with humorous narratives and to design a modified version of the Discourse Historical Approach (DHA). The DHA suggests an easily adjustable approach for the study of humour and, specifically, parody. The benefits of this approach compared to other research strategies are highlighted and meaningful possibilities for connecting narrative analysis and the DHA are explained.

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List of original publications

This dissertation is based on the following publications:

1.

Beck, Daniel; Spencer, Alexander (2021) Just a bit of fun: the camouflaging and defending functions of humour in recruitment videos of the British and Swedish armed forces, *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 34:1, 65-84, https://doi.org/10.1080/09557571.2020.1719039.

2.

Beck, Daniel (2022) 'Our Sofa was the Front'- Ontological Insecurity and the German Government's Humorous Heroification of Couch Potatoes During COVID-19, *German Politics*, https://doi.org/10.1080/09644008.2022.2093858 (First published online July 04, 2022).

3.

Beck, Daniel (2023) Humorous Parodies of Popular Culture as Strategy in Boris Johnson´s Populist Communication, *British Journal of Politics and International Relations,* https://doi.org/10.1177/13691481231174165 (First published online May 13, 2023).

The publications are referred to in the text according to the standard reference style and highlighted in blue to make them easily visible, e.g. (Beck 2022).

"Something has gone a bit wrong in the relationship between our famous British sense of humour and our politics. They have become too entangled and our politics has become unserious"
Jonathan Coe (Mesure 2022)

1. Introduction

1.1 The changing landscapes of humour as research problem

Humour is omnipresent, positively assessed and favoured in today´s societies (Billig 2005; Lockyer and Pickering 2008). Humour is also increasingly present in contemporary public and political communication (Brassett 2021). The trend and desired quality of being funny has spilled over into official state communication. Even official institutional communication in the sphere of international politics by means of official channels and platforms, also known as public diplomacy, has recently been more and more characterised by humour.

Politics, and especially International Relations (IR), are for most people not actually connected to fun and amusement, especially when considering the developments around anxiety, multiple crises, populism and authoritarianism in the last years. At the same time, we find examples of state actors and institutions making use of humour in their public communication and in their self-representation, such as the European Union (Brassett et al 2021a), actors in the Brexit campaign (Weaver 2022) or the Ukrainian president Zelensky during Russia´s invasion (Malmvig 2022, 1). The thesis finds that the use of humour sometimes has mixed results and consequences but generates enormous amounts of attention. On the side of politics, the landscape is changing, as there is an ever-growing use of humour for political means (Brasset and Browning 2018; Chernobrov 2021, 277), and one of the findings that will be presented is an increasing degree of professionalisation in the production of such humour (Beck 2022). The described developments have been called a rise of humour in mediated politics, a "commedification" of politics (Brassett, Browning, and O'Dwyer 2021, 2) or, by the author of this dissertation, a "shift in public and national diplomacy" (Beck 2022, 2). It is remarkable how powerful state actors connect themselves to play and fun in situations of crisis or questions of life and death. A central tension exists between state actors´ power and responsibility and their use of humour, which is normally disqualified as unserious discourse (Weaver 2010).

This dissertation specifically sheds light on the transformation towards parodic humour in official communication and on new cases of mostly parodic humour that has not previously received scientific attention from IR as a discipline. Unique to parodic humour is its comic style, which is based on the imitation and spoofing of original texts.

In terms of theory, the dissertation is built on poststructuralist understandings of discourse, security, identity and popular culture, among others. This research project identifies the possible effects of strategic humour on politics that are enabled by the shift towards humour in public –diplomacy. Humour is assumed to serve strategic purposes, such as legitimation and distraction, implying deliberate textual planning. The term "effects" is not employed in a positivist political science understanding in which effects are the result of causal analysis and an empiricist regime of knowledge because the "refusal of [a] causal epistemology" (Hansen 2006, 17) is central for poststructuralist approaches. Hence, it is impossible to make assumptions regarding the (relative) explanatory capacity of language in contrast to material explanations. It is more that the relation between humour and dominant discourses enables the opening of discursive spaces and the closing of other options. When relying on poststructuralist approaches, effects cannot be identified as objective facts but as possible results of a dynamic interplay of linguistic elements and state–actor-specific relations of discursive power. The implication is to uncover how these effects became possible (Doty 1993).

What is of further interest are the ramifications and the long-term consequences of state actors increasingly being in on the joke. There is a suitable, emerging research interest in IR in what is known as "strategic humour" (Chernobrov 2021). This research encompasses this dissertation, and it shows a need for further investigation of the use of humour and parody by state actors to exercise subtle influence, that is, the spreading of self-deprecating messages. Humour still reflects and creates power structures (Brassett et al 2021b), which is crucial for (state) actors and their uses of humour for strategies of legitimation, the main strategy behind political humour and a central part of IR (Crilley and Chatterje-Doody 2021). Thereby, it becomes clear that humour is of central interest in political science (Tsakona and Popa 2011) because it is a form of discursive power, as the impact of jokes shows (Kuipers 2011).

While many strategies and fields of application related to humour are well documented (Kuusisto 2018; Meyer 1990; Payne 2016; Ringmar 2006), the use of humorous communication by state actors, populist leaders and state institutions has not been extensively studied, despite that plenty of humour in various political groups and different levels of international politics, (Brassett et al 2021b), like populist political movements, can be observed (Beck 2023). Scholars interested in discursive aspects of politics realised some years ago that the study of humorous narratives in IR, such as parody, satire and comedy,

might be of the same importance and relevance as the study of the predominant romantic narratives (Spencer 2016, 185). This has so far not been sufficiently researched, even though there is a growing scientific field of scholars interested in humour´s intersection with diplomacy (Adler-Nissen and Tsinovoi 2019; Manor 2021); anxiety and ontological security (Brassett et al 2021a); populism (Weaver 2022); and journalism (Chernobrov 2021) whose work constitutes an urgently needed start on research in this direction.

1.2 Research questions and sub-studies

The overarching goal is to advance the research on parodic narratives and humour in IR by delving into their complex dynamics and uncovering novel findings and implications that can inform future scholarship. The core finding of this dissertation is to uncover motives and the strategic staging by means of humour. To this end, intended effects of humour on audiences are applied to the case studies to investigate strategic patterns. This enables us to understand the markedly increased use of humour in official public communication (Brasset and Browning 2018). The writings assembled in this dissertation can be summarised in the question of: "What can humour do politically?" The purpose of this framework paper is to show the connections and contributions to current research as well as to theoretical and methodological considerations. It is meant to mount the thesis and its parts as one cohesive effort, as this framework paper aims at bringing together all insights and connections that were revealed across the dissertation project and published in three international journal articles.

By uncovering the effects of humorous political communication, such as camouflaging and defending against critique, and thereby creating a feeling of proximity, the study presents important findings on how political actors engage in this rather uncommon and new behaviour and what they can expect to intentionally gain.

Research finds that the use of political humour in communication is much funnier and more diverse than previously assumed. Especially in research subjects of IR scholarship on populist communication, militarisation and identity—which are influential bodies of work for the discipline—humour is often present. During the research process, it became clear that this project is at the junction of IR, Critical Humour Studies (Lockyer and Pickering 2008; Weaver et al 2016) and Visual Global Politics (Bleiker 2018a; Schlag and Heck 2020). Relevant for all these disciplines is the way in which humour is used in international politics for productive means and not for the formerly predominant interest in humour for subversion and critique. The term "productive means" refers to elements in which strategic humour as

an everyday product is part of global politics (Beck 2023), and thus, it can contribute to wide circulation of (political) content and important dynamics like ontological security management (Beck 2022) instead of humour for protest or offensive and derogatory aims. A further characteristic is its possible usage to disarm potential criticism (Brassett et al 2021b, 3).

The research is about illuminating the puzzle of how state actors who are interested in power, authority and legitimacy are using humorous forms, such as parody, in their communication. To be more precise, the dissertation deals with the following research question:

What possible effects does strategic humour as a form of communication have on politics and political communication?

The sub-questions for this dissertation that are supportive in answering the main research question are:
How is political humour deployed by state actors and institutions in their official political communication?
What are state actors´ strategies regarding specific styles and content of humorous products?
Who is producing political humour for today's public diplomacy campaigns by state actors?

This framework paper answers those questions by presenting a panoramic view of the subject matter based on the observation of humour at various levels of communication in international politics. The levels are contingent with the sub-studies; they are governmental structures (Beck 2022), state institutions (Beck and Spencer 2021) and individuals or comedy politicians in powerful positions (Beck 2023), all of which are of interest for poststructuralist IR research (Hansen 2006; Weldes and Rowley 2015). To be more specific, it looks at British and Swedish humorous military recruitment videos, at the German government´s humorous crisis communication during COVID-19 and at the role of humour in Boris Johnson´s populist styles of communication in election campaign videos and general public communication. As such, the sub-studies focus on classical state institutions, on the top executive level of states and on the leader of a government, which are all elements that are classically in the focus of IR and here, especially, their communicative elements are of interest.

The research questions are addressed in the sub-studies, which are for a better understanding of the following briefly summarised and are visible in table 1.

The first article (Beck and Spencer 2021) examines recruitment videos of the Swedish and British Armed Forces. The study contributes to the research on political humour by transferring insights from research on advertisement (Blackford et al 2011) and comedy theory (Kuusisto 2018). Based on narrative understanding and its use as an analytical method, it illustrates how humour camouflages certain content and connects the military to the everyday life and desires of normal people, thereby contributing to militarisation.

The second article (Beck 2022) studies parody as an effective tool for anxiety management and state communication in times of crisis. Through an analysis of the German government´s special hero campaign, the role of humour in anxiety management and the connections between humour and security are studied; in addition, ontological security is introduced. The spoofing mechanism uncovered in the campaign videos illustrates the professional, as well as provocative, communication strategies of professional producers that enabled the memetic effects.

Finally, the third article (Beck 2023) investigates the use of humour for conservative forms of politics and populist communication. It provides a deeper understanding of the possible effects and uses of parody by focusing on discursive power aspects and taking Boris Johnson as an illustrative case. It shows the linkages between humour and populist communication, which share several similarities.

The overall design is influenced by the structural elements of scholarly journal articles and by the rise of political humour in the Western World. All the cases employed are based in a Central- and Northern European context and are influenced by discourses in and around popular culture with national particularities. As a result, the dissertation is very specific to recently published material. The analysed cases can be seen as illustrative indicators for the wider trend and shift of professional parodic humour produced by state actors. Besides the product, which is the focus of the first article (Beck and Spencer 2021), the role of creators, production and the audience are considered (Beck 2022, 2023; Rose 2016) to answer the question regarding likely effects, which is part of all the articles and the dissertation in general.

Table 1: Sub-studies of the Dissertation

	Theory and Methodology	Empirical material	Contributions
Beck and Spencer 2021	The first article shows how narrative analysis is a useful analytical approach for dealing with humorous audio-visual content; it provides a first touch on strategies of legitimation.	The article focuses on several official recruitment videos of the Swedish and British Armed Forces; and the reactions to the videos to show how intertextual material as well as the original texts serve as reference material.	The article's focus on satirical and comedic narratives enables a contribution to the growing literature regarding humour in IR. It deals with the effects of camouflage and isolation against critique. It uncovers how humour obscures and supports "a process of militarization of everyday life whilst making criticism of the videos' political messages more difficult" (Beck and Spencer 2021, 65).
Beck 2022	Theoretically, the article deals with the connection between humour and (ontological) security as well as anxiety. The article adjusts the Discourse Historical Approach. Its focus on context in combination with the three elements of content, strategies and linguistic means of realisation are a perfect fit for analysing parodic humour.	The article examines three videos from the Twitter profile of the German government's spokesperson, along with English subtitles; media coverage, original texts and videos imitating the original videos; material on the German and the general context during COVID-19.	The article advances insights into the role of humour in official institutional communication; It illustrates how professional parodic humour can be a tool for state actors to deal with sensitive topics and anxieties. It furthermore demonstrates that parodies can stimulate users to produce their own parodies by spoofing the original content.

	Theory and Methodology	Empirical material	Contributions
Beck 2023	Starts with the research gap of how conservative politicians and populist parties are increasingly using hilarious allusions to media and entertainment in their political messaging. Deals with populist communication and its play with power and how it can be perceived.	Public communication and videos, mainly part of Boris Johnson´s 2019 election campaign. Reactions to the content and the original texts which were used by the parodies. Material on the general context in 2019.	The piece demonstrates how sophisticated humour can dominate conversations, attract loads of media coverage to certain aspects, and divert focus away from other main political concerns; provides much needed insight into the methods by which populist communication strategies employ parodic humour.

1.3 Four possible effects of strategic humour on politics

The four main effects of humour on politics are: (1) an expanded language for politics through entertainment; (2) provocation through professional content; (3) camouflage and distraction; and (4) isolation against critique and claims of legitimacy.

In more detail, the four main possible effects, which are shown in this dissertation, are the following:

- By using humour, the language of politics expands as politics is more and more perceived as entertainment and play. The very strategic use of humour shows it to be an integral part of modern politics. This is not a completely new dimension of politics but is increasingly perceived as an ubiquity in politics.
- Political state humour has recently been produced in a way that it includes provocation for specific political means. This political humour is very proficiently planned and is characterised by a high degree of professionality leading to an exactly calculated degree of provocation.
- As a consequence of the professionalisation, humour contributes to diverting the central attention of the audience to side topics. The attention is then more on the humorous performances, which can cause the camouflage of certain issues, such as violence and distraction from political conflicts.

- Humour inoculates political state actors because they are perceived as authentic and very approachable, while at the same time, humour protects them against critique from adversaries.

Outline for the Dissertation

The further plan for this framework paper is now briefly outlined. The first part of the dissertation focusses on the state of the art in research on political humour in international politics, and specifically, its use for productive means by state actors. Productive means refers to communication strategies and resources that help to achieve desired outcomes in a positive atmosphere. An IR-related basis is provided by situating the research within strategies of legitimation, public diplomacy, ontological security, and populist styles of communication along with their memetic qualities.

In a further step, this dissertation introduces the theoretical framework for this research, which is based on humour theories, poststructuralist theories of power and discourse as well as visual politics and aesthetic approaches to politics. Building on that, the exploratory research design and the discourse analytical methodological framework are briefly laid out, followed by a discussion of four possible main effects of state actors´ professional political humour. Finally, a conclusion is drawn. The main incentive is to bring new theoretical insights concerning humour and, specifically, parody into IR and to strengthen new advances in discursive approaches that take humour in world politics seriously. The full journal articles will be attached at the end.

2. State of the Art: Humour in IR

In the following section, a concise state of the art is provided. After briefly situating humour within popular culture and summarising trends in research on political humour, the main debates and conversations about humour in IR are introduced. These IR debates are strategies of legitimation, public diplomacy, anxiety management and ontological security as well as populist communication. In each section will be highlighted, how this dissertation connects to and contributes to the state of the art.

2.1 Political humour as popular culture

By analysing humour, this dissertation explores the contemporary utilisation of popular culture by state actors by building on the insights of Weldes and Rowley (Weldes and Rowley 2015, 13) among others. Since political humour is available online for a broad mass

of people as a means of entertainment (Storey 2021), it can be seen as part of popular culture. This makes it an easily accessible form of communication, which leads to huge audiences and a new scope of communication. At the same time, the boundaries separating politics, entertainment and popular culture are blurring and dissolving more and more, making satire and comedy immanent in IR (Brassett 2021). The latest focus on the intersection of humour and political communication finds indications for the argument that politics and popular culture are increasingly difficult to differentiate from one another and are more like a continuum (Grayson et al 2009). This continuum between popular culture and world politics is of special interest in the recent professionalisation in the production of political humour.

Popular culture was not always accepted as a serious subject to study because it "is ostensibly everything that world politics isn't: fiction, entertainment, amusement, illusion, distraction" (Rowley 2009, 309). However, many IR-scholars are now working on aesthetic material, for example, pop-cultural artefacts and everyday items like cinema, literature, art and music, as part of international politics (Bleiker 2011, 510), and the contributions of this research fit here as well. Exploring popular culture has a profound impact on the discipline of IR. Summarising these developments, the study of popular culture over the last two decades has been established as a subfield (Hamilton and Shepherd 2016). In order to establish "new referents and highlight new dynamics of power" (Caso and Hamilton 2015, 2), IR has experienced a shift away from stale macro-political models that emphasise structural relations between nations (Caso and Hamilton 2015, 2). Studying popular culture in IR means "shifting from a narrow focus on supra-/trans-/international state relations and practices, […] to increasingly seeing the subnational/regional and hyper-local – the everyday, in fact – as globally and politically implicated" (Weldes and Rowley 2015, 24). The subfield deals with some of the core themes in world politics, like governance, identity and anxiety, complemented by their relation to parodic humour. This is quite obvious as "cultural texts and images are seen as storage places for meaning in a particular society" (Nexon and Neumann 2006). They are of central interest in IR as advances in "digital communication through new media technologies changes our encounters with the world" (Hamilton and Shepherd 2016).

The currently increasing attention on everyday culture contributes to the domestic–international continuum that is based on Poststructuralist assumptions. Poststructuralist approaches enable someone to understand how "the national and the international are […] not simply two different political spheres but are constructed as each other´s opposites, as each other´s constitutive Other" (Hansen 2006, 34). The debates analysed in this dissertation all significantly influence the interaction and dynamics among nations by looking beneath

the surface of the state and following poststructuralist understandings in which states are no black box. Furthermore, domestic referendums and decisions like the Brexit can influence international security and economy which is an object of study in IR.

2.2 Research on political humour

In this second section, the framework paper portrays recent trends and changes in the landscape of political humour and humour research, showing its ambiguity.

The general view of humour "as an intrinsically positive dimension of social life" (Lockyer and Pickering 2008, 814) is increasingly problematised as the role of political humour in IR is still being too unambiguously assessed (Malmvig 2022). The impacts and effects were not publicly recognised, which is due to its connection to entertainment (Nieuwenhuis and Zijp 2022, 343).

Thereby, many times "[r]ather than provoking social and political change, political humour conveys criticism against the political status quo and recycles and reinforces dominant values and views on politics" (Tsakona and Popa 2011, 1). This is due to the fact that most humour is consumed through some kind of public media, which is generally not supporting any subversive tendencies or political changes since, in contrast, the media´s "role in maintaining and reinforcing mainstream dominant values is crucial" (Tsakona and Popa 2011, 7). The power of humour is thereby often one of reaffirmation and solidification in regards to a social status quo.

Humour was only seen as entertainment without recognising its contribution to and use for political discourse (Lockyer and Pickering 2008) as there was a distinction between serious and unserious discourse. Despite the fact that humour is for many connected to laughter, it is now taken more and more seriously because "it offers a unique channel for establishing political statements" (Ridanpää 2014a, 703) and has shown its potential for resistance.

From today´s perspective, the early 2000s showed how humour includes the ability to question dominant discourses like hegemonic narratives (Ridanpää 2014a, 704). Humour can provide alternative methods of discussing certain issues and is often associated with resistance (Greene and Gournelos 2011). This positive role and perception of humour is visible in and connected to the framing of social protests (Hart 2007). Before the shift in public diplomacy, the use of humour in politics was predominantly for subversive means, critique or protest. In totalitarian societies, humour can serve as an alternative means of communication when traditional channels are controlled by the regime due to this ambiguity

(Sørensen 2008). Activists benefit from the agility that humour enables: If authorities act repressively, protesters can claim that they were just joking, but the criticism is still voiced (Sørensen 2017, 149). The ability to critique governments and other institutions through media, such as movies and television, has grown significantly through entertaining visual content (Momen 2019, XVIII).

Scholars see a big potential for jokes to act as both emancipatory phenomena and coping mechanisms (Beck and Spencer 2021, 67; Ridanpää 2014b, 453). Pranks and stunts are, for example, effective tools for activists to use humour as humour contains the potential to reframe events (Dodds and Kirby 2013, 57).

Research also considers humour as a powerful boundary-making tool because it supports the construction of different group identities (Dodds and Kirby 2013, 55) as humour is a product of specific social groups and their preferences. The main topics of such studies not only include social marginalisation and group cohesion and their use for political satire but also their use as a political tool that refers to humour as a strategy and a method to advance individual political interests (Beck and Spencer 2021, 67; Ridanpää 2014a).

Especially after 9/11, political humour became a prominent way of challenging the dominant narrative of good versus evil and the expanded powers of the state (Greene and Gournelos 2011, XI). The role of political humour in public life became vibrant. The subversive potential became visible in prominent counternarratives against the dominant representations of the "War on Terror", and humour as a voice of dissent received more scientific attention (Greene and Gournelos 2011, 11). Many argue that the range of influence of political humour produced by journalists, TV shows and activists increased (Momen 2019, XVIII).

Research shows how humour as popular culture reinforces and reflects the dominant order (Billig 2005; Tsakona and Popa 2011). However, the main issue is the role of humour in power structures: Humour is always embedded into social hierarchies (Billig 2005). It reflects and influences power structures. Furthermore, there is the aspect of exercising power through inclusion/exclusion and the question of who gets to joke, about what and whom (Brassett et al 2021b, 2).

Constitutive for political humour is its embeddedness in the distribution of power as well as its role in the construction of identities (Nieuwenhuis and Zijp 2022, 343). The power of humour should be problematised because many strategies to exercise political power through humour hold the potential to ridicule and discredit opponents. Scholars like Michael Billig

criticise the predominantly positive view on humour held by scientists. In *Laughter and Ridicule: Towards a Social Critique of Humour* (Billig 2005), the revolutionary potential and subversiveness of humour are questioned.

Forms of humour, such as ridicule and satire, received more and more attention from media theorists and political scientists, which increased their recognition as serious political communication (Kulkarni 2004). For Billig (2005), ridicule is specifically one of the negative aspects of humour. The fear of becoming a target of ridicule leads to behaviour that meets society's expectations. Therefore, ridicule ensures and provides stability through a protection of practices. It can preserve the social order, which makes humour an adequate tool for the powerful (Kuipers 2011) as ridicule can have stabilizing effects for political regimes. It helps to preserve the status quo instead of stimulating change. Ridicule can be part of a repetitive use of seemingly innocent and funny stereotypes, as is the case in racism or antisemitism. Further examples are gender humour and racist, anti-Muslim and antisemitic jokes, as they are all ensuring the stability of social inclusion/exclusion. Critical scholars, therefore, see humour as “counter-revolutionary” (Romanos and Ungureanu 2019) in the public sphere and as a “recycling of stereotypes” (Tsakona and Popa 2011).

Politicians like Trump or Johnson even made ridicule an immanent feature of their persona. They even embody the central elements of ridicule and possess “many of ridicule’s central characteristics including exaggeration, irony and stupidity” (Kilby et al 2020). This arguably also had the effect that they themselves were immune against ridicule by others. Therefore, it gets more and more difficult for satirists, as satire is losing its effects when “nothing, it seems, is more ridiculous than the man himself” (Kilby et al 2020).

Generally, humour “allows politicians and/or media people to promote specific standpoints and values and to persuade the audience of the ‘reasonableness’ of political acts” (Tsakona and Popa 2011, 7). It seems logical that humour is used in a professional way by the powerful following the decade long tradition of humour written, for example, into United States President’s speeches across the political spectrum and time (Meyer 2000).

Humour research as a subdiscipline of IR

While many strategies and fields of application are well documented, the use of humorous communication by state institutions has only recently become a topic of research (Adler-Nissen and Tsinovoi 2019; Beck 2022; Brassett et al 2021b). It was not until the 2020s that political scientists and, specifically, the discipline of IR turned their attention more towards

the use of humour for productive means. The general interest of IR scholars in humour began to some degree with the Danish Muhammad Cartoon controversy in 2006 (Kuipers 2011, 64) in which questions of identity, anxiety, norms and security became visible to others. In this so-called "first international humour scandal" (Hansen 2011), Muslims felt ridiculed by Danish Muhammad cartoons, which sparked an international scandal. The observable tension between unserious modes of communication and serious aims and consequences is the reason for making humour so interesting and the linkages to visuality become quite clear. These scandals around the cartoons showed an orientation towards conflict (Nieuwenhuis and Zijp 2022) and "how humour functions as a 'tool' giving impetus to various forms of geopolitical processes and discussions in a range of contextual circumstances and at different spatial levels, resulting in both politically affirmative and destructive effects" (Ridanpää 2009, 729).
The Special Issue "Humour and Global Politics" in the journal *Global Society* by Brasset, Browning and Wedderburn (2021) can be seen as the first milestone for research on the use of humour on an international level of politics. As already argued in 2018 by Brasset and Browning in a blogpost dealing with the rise of humour, a growing use of humour is applied by politicians in contemporary public communication to make content attractive as well as deceptive (Brasset and Browning 2018). Only recently, the Special Issue "The politics and aesthetics of humour in an age of comic controversy" by Nieuwenhuis and Zijp (2022) observed a "re-politicisation of humour" in the 21st century.

Therefore, research on current forms of state communication is highly relevant (Beck and Spencer 2021; Chernobrov 2021). As mentioned earlier, there are successful examples of state actors and institutions using strategic humour in their public communication for the purposes of legitimation and authentic self-representation (Beck and Spencer 2021; Chernobrov 2021), for "cooler identities" (Malmvig 2022, 5) or for "multilayered messages" of "constructive ambiguity" (Kopper 2021). Amongst the objectives of the thesis is to convey insights from humour studies into IR and political science, thereby following the work of Ringmar (2006) and Kuusisto (2018).

Many attempts by politicians to use humour in anxiety management have led to unsatisfying outcomes, like the backfiring of humour in Brexit diplomacy (Brassett et al 2021a). As this dissertation points out, the employment of humour is increasingly becoming professionalised to avoid the potential backfiring of humour (Beck 2022) and thereby avoid negative consequences for state actors themselves (Beck 2022, 2023). However, the backfiring of humour cannot be generalised for certain humorous content, and failed humour

is not always a problem as it is very target-group specific and dependent on personal preferences. The failure of humour is in many cases not common sense as its reception depends very much on the specific audience. This exemplifies the thin line between appropriate and inappropriate use of humour in political communication (Beck 2023).

One often-studied object in this context is parody and late-night humour in the United States, particularly in relation to how Republican and Democratic voters perceive it. According to Becker (Becker 2014, 147), individuals who favoured Obama tended to have a higher inclination towards appreciating humour aimed at Republicans. However, these same individuals were less inclined to appreciate humour directed at Democrats (Becker 2014, 147). This emphasises the fact that specific audiences and their taste for humour matter for parody, which is clearly visible in all three articles that are specifically designed for young audiences.

Generally, politicians instrumentalise humour "to reduce the harshness of bad news, to defuse criticisms made against them, and to make opponents seem foolish" (Beck and Spencer 2021, 66; Morreall 2005, 74), such as in the COVID-19 example in Beck (2022) where extended solidarity was declared as meaningful heroism.

Through these questions of security and identity in the form of discursive elements, there is a clear relation to IR, which generally deals with the interaction of the domestic and the international as well as their overlap. For instance, there are always reactions from the national community to international security problems, like diseases or pandemics (Booth 1991), because "they pose a threat to the national Self" (Hansen 2006, 35–36).

Such attempts by politicians to utilise humour as a means of avoiding criticism either of their conduct or their policies are only effective when their evasive intentions are not obvious (Beck and Spencer 2021, 67).

Next will be an outline of how the research project links to and contributes to the existing debates in research on humour in IR, like public diplomacy, as well as forms of populist communication.

2.3 Strategies of legitimation

The affinity of humour to IR topics is also visible in legitimation strategies, which are the main aim of strategic humour. Political actors in the sphere of IR are in a specific situation as there are no universal criteria, but there is a high level of competition between various actors as well as different cultural and political norms.

Humour is increasingly used by state actors to enhance attention and legitimacy (Brassett et al 2021b, 3). In current legitimation processes, humour and comedy can play a crucial role in the way that certain identities and acts are claimed as legitimate and in the way that they are rejected, challenged and contested (Crilley and Chatterje-Doody 2021, 273).

Practices of legitimation are part of the everyday business of political actors because they require legitimacy for their self-hood or their favoured institutions, among other things (Reus-Smit 2007, 159). In the end, legitimacy is what matters most in the connection between those in power and those under their control (Tallberg and Zürn 2019, 586). Max Weber wrote about that legitimacy is the precondition of authority (Weber 2007). "Legitimacy thus refers to an entitlement to control, which generally means an entitlement to issue authoritative commands that require compliance from those subject to them" (Reus-Smit 2007, 158). The normative nature of such practices should be mentioned, as it is for justifying actors´ "identities, interests, practices, or institutional designs. These justifications constitute legitimacy claims" (Reus-Smit 2007, 159).

There has recently been a turn in studies of legitimation to an increased focus on discursive aspects and a procedural perspective that looks on "the process of legitimation rather than the attribute of legitimacy" (Hurrelmann et al 2007, 8). The approaches in this dissertation examine these discursive phenomena (Crilley and Chatterje-Doody 2021, 2).
Legitimacy can be obtained in various ways in the illustrative cases. Theories of legitimation are essential for political humour studies (Crilley and Chatterje-Doody 2021). There is a clear link between humour and legitimacy as actors often raise legitimacy claims by using "the everyday language of comedy to shape and direct the interest, attention and concern of their (media literate) publics" (Brassett et al 2021b, 3). Humour and legitimacy are interconnected because humour helps someone to appear human and approachable and to show weaknesses and personal flaws. Popular culture is a crucial site for strategies of legitimation as here "power, ideology and identity are constituted, produced and/or materialised" (Grayson et al 2009, 155–156) in front of a global audience.

The aim of achieving legitimacy is explicitly connected to authenticity, which supports the legitimacy of state actors´ performances (Lacatus and Meibauer 2022). It is not about testing if claims are perceived as legitimate but about the intention. This "means focusing on the discursive authenticity claims that politicians make" and "analysing how they portray themselves as legitimate" (Lacatus and Meibauer 2022, 5). Therefore, the analysed examples for legitimacy are all connected to the everyday life and popular culture. In the case studies, legitimacy is required during rough times, for example, for the military that needs to create

legitimacy through recruitment to achieve legitimating support in a broad sense (Beck and Spencer 2021).

Professionally produced content and public communication are a key requirement for strategies of legitimation. In all three articles, humour is used by state actors to appear legitimate and to not be criticised. The articles show how humour is mobilised for the sake of defending the legitimacy of political actors as well as their actions (Crilley and Chatterje-Doody 2021, 273). This is visible in the military recruitment videos, in which connections to the everyday life are made and the videos are part of the normal life of people by being visible on social media (Beck and Spencer 2021). The campaigns claim to do something important and not something action-movie like and they are thereby making a real difference in the Swedish video "Our Reality" (Beck and Spencer 2021, 74). The military in the examples presents itself as reasonable because it needs to be there so that everything can stay as it currently is (Beck and Spencer 2021). Everyday qualifications like the stamina of video gamers or the desire for self-improvement and adventure are visible in the British video "Become a better you" or the Swedish video "Cake" (Beck and Spencer 2021, 74–77).

Irony helps in the COVID-campaign by letting the special heroes message appear as legitimate because it is presented as part of the everyday life and is not political anymore (Beck 2022, 15). Thereby, absurdities like the behaviour during COVID-19 in combination with humour are more easily accepted (Beck 2022, 8), which is a strategy of legitimation (Beck 2022, 16).

Boris Johnson encountered another challenging scenario amidst the Brexit process when elections had to be held (Beck 2023). His legitimation strategy is visible in the Conservative's campaign, which used "the power that comes from using some of the most emotive associations of popular culture" (Nicol 2019). Johnson makes use of well-known narratives that portray him in a likable and understandable light in an effort to attract media attention (12 Questions). Politicians can leverage a story's success to further their own personal brand, and many see this in Johnson's parody of Love Actually (Beck 2023). This helps "to sweep up even negative perceptions of Johnson into a portrait of someone who could be relied on" (Nicol 2019). As the article specifically shows, parody and satire "can be used by state actors to frame themselves as 'punching up', when in fact they are powerful actors themselves" (Crilley and Chatterje-Doody 2021, 274). In the next section will be shown how legitimation strategies are very much linked to public diplomacy, as state actors use public statements for their legitimation.

2.4 Public diplomacy

Another conversation in IR is about the use of humour in public diplomacy (Manor 2021) or new diplomacy (Brassett et al 2021b), in which humour is used to influence mainly foreign but also domestic audiences (Manor 2023). Often the phenomenon is also called *New Diplomacy* or simply *Public Relations*.

Public diplomacy is a new form of public relations and a way to influence people, often in foreign countries, and is often compared to "propaganda" (Crilley and Chatterje-Doody 2021, 16). Social media makes it much easier for actors using public diplomacy to produce their own content and reach a huge amount of people without a filter or gatekeeper (Lambach 2021, 114; Shim and Stengel 2017). The conventions and regularity with which these images and slogans are disseminated to enormous numbers of people contributes to removing their very subjective way of representation (Bleiker 2001, 525). Public diplomacy is about public relations with a wide outreach, due as well to the direct communication with the public (Chernobrov 2021). Often cultural references are used as a means of interaction.

Public diplomacy is not exclusively for foreign policy, as the same phenomenon can also be observed for domestic audiences, and there is simply a "digital blurring of the foreign and the domestic" (Bjola et al 2019, 89). In online communication, it is hard to prevent domestic audiences from consuming the message; separating "public affairs (aimed at domestic audiences) from public diplomacy (dealing with overseas target groups) is increasingly at odds with the 'interconnected' realities of global relationships" (Melissen 2005, 13). As mentioned earlier, the boundaries between the domestic and the international are not as clear as is often assumed.

Given the fact that, for example, the author of this dissertation observed the content of the case studies in his everyday life and some material was discussed in other countries (Beck 2022), one can say that the empirical material is part of transnational communication. The audience of political humour can thus not be selected, and a mix of domestic and international audiences has to be assumed and can be observed.

A prominent example of humour in public diplomacy is the Russian state that often expresses legitimation claims "through a blurring of news reporting and comedy" by means of its state sponsored RT (formerly known as Russia Today) (Crilley and Chatterje-Doody 2021). RT uses humour to spread false information to audiences inside and outside of Russia while aiming to create a positive view of Russia. It engages with international audiences, as its content is available in different languages.

Another interesting case study on the international level is Israel, where recognition was the aim of a campaign. The campaign 'Presenting Israel' in 2010 used parodying video clips and thereby "mobilised ordinary Israeli citizens to engage in peer-to-peer public diplomacy when travelling abroad" (Adler-Nissen and Tsinovoi 2019, 3).

Public diplomacy can be observed in all the empirical examples of this dissertation (Beck 2022, 2023; Beck and Spencer 2021) whenever humour is used to reach out to young, new and broad audiences via social media. Done with the right degree of professionality, it can enable cementing messages through parodic communication and its inherent functions.
Further possibilities are an influence in private spaces, as the second article demonstrates. Its purpose is to draw attention to the ways in which humour is used politically to transmit COVID-19-based constraints and how humour is used politically to influence people's private lives by advising them to stay at home (Beck 2022, 2). The memetic structure following the governmental campaign was key to its broad public attention. The message was transmitted through repetition in the form of parody by public figures, such as politicians, intellectuals and members of the media (Beck 2022, 13). Numerous parody videos featuring both public and private performers were produced in response to the debate over the suitability and appropriateness of the particularly hilarious message, and they might be seen as a kind of support for the unique hero narrative. The structure of parodies, as previously indicated, makes it exceedingly difficult to convey new ideas; it mostly emphasises the original message (Beck 2022, 13), which is clearly illustrated by Johnson´s campaign and the reactions to it (Beck 2023).

2.5 Anxiety management and (ontological) security

Being omnipresent in public diplomacy, humour can play a role in providing a sense of levity and comfort in uncertain or stressful situations. It can also help individuals to cope with feelings of insecurity and anxiety and can promote social bonding and a sense of shared experience. This can contribute to a sense of stability and security in your own sense of self and the world around you (Giddens 1991; Gülseven 2020). A stable self-identity does not automatically exist, but "has to be routinely created and sustained in the reflexive activities of the individual" (Giddens 1991, 52). The indicated stable self-identity is called ontological security.
Over the last decade, ontological security became a really prominent concept in IR (Browning and Joenniemi 2017; Steele 2008) and is based on Antony Gidden´s work

"Modernity and Self-Identity" (Beck 2022; Giddens 1991). The idea of a discursively constructed security is supported by various researchers (Edenborg 2017; Rossdale 2015; Subotić 2015) and is applied on the state level as well as on the individual level (Gustafsson and Krickel-Choi 2020). Narratives on which ontological security are based are "able to provide a common sense upon which we can rely and yet [are] also open to change and challenge" (Steele 2005, 526, cited in Rossdale 2015).

In crisis-ridden times, stable narratives are needed to provide relief for states and citizens. Humour makes this task much easier. Research has dealt with various strategies of anxiety management and possible linkages to humour. Actors often try to provide ontological security by constructing autobiographical narratives of a shared past, present and future of the community (Beck 2022; Subotić 2015). However, in this context, many political attempts to use humour for anxiety management in European politics have led to unsatisfying outcomes (Brassett et al 2021a).

In the first article about military recruitment, anxiety is used as a legitimation strategy and thereby contributes to a normality of militarisation (Beck and Spencer 2021). The Swedish campaigns present the military as something that needs to be there so that everyone can live the life they want, which makes the military into something that is part of the everyday (Strand and Kehl 2019). Practices of security are thereby normalised.

How narratives can sometimes have the side effect of contributing to ontological security was demonstrated through the ironic special heroes narrative in Germany (Beck 2022). The second article specifically deals with narrative strategies in anxiety management. It uncovers the theoretical level of how humour is experienced. COVID-19 posed a great threat to multiple sorts of state securities (physical, social and ontological). The article argues that the parodic communication served the growing need for new ways of meaning making and new routines when the self-identity of people got lost during the COVID-19 lockdowns (Beck 2022).

This also demonstrates how humour is more generally related to aspects of security. Particularly when humour results from incongruity, a reasonable sort of security is required for one to be able to enjoy humour. "One way to achieve this security, and so make disengagement and humor possible, is to think about something far away that does not affect us" (Morreall 2009b, 255). This leads to the assumption that tragedy seen from temporal distance can be considered as comedy (Beck 2022; Morreall 2009b, 255). In this way, humour can have effects on the perceived level of anxiety. A temporal distance generates

distance in identification and in involvement, as the COVID-19 example illustrates (Beck 2022).

Therefore, situations at a far distance may ease the anxiety of viewers by being situated in the past, a time when less emotional attachment exists; this also rings true for the example of Brexit when Johnson´s populist campaign dealt with “the known” (Beck 2023, 5), which supposedly leads to less anxiety than prognosis and consequences for the future.

In the third article, the nostalgic Britishness in Johnson’s election campaign was used as an instrumentalisation of feelings of security taken from *Love Actually* or the parody of the British *The Office* (Beck 2023, 8). The anxiety about what might come after Brexit was dismissed by narratives familiar to the British public or was just belittled (“Most Searched Questions”; (Beck 2023, 9). Ontological security was provided here by stable narratives taken from popular culture.

2.6 Populist communication

Scholars like Simon Weaver see a general “interaction between populism, incongruity and other humour and comedy tropes” (Weaver 2022, 12). Humour and also parody have this structural connection to populism because of problems inherent to the logic of populism: “Populisms are frequently incongruous in structure and thus in need of rhetoric, and humorous rhetoric, as a method for negating the ambiguities, ambivalences and uncertainties that they produce” (Beck 2023, 3; Weaver 2022, 11).

For right wing actors and populists, memetic structures in humorous content and memes have become over the years a popular way to convince people on social media through funny text–image combinations (Brock 2018, 289). Brantner, Pfurtscheller and Lobinger (2019b) “show in detail how humor is instrumentalized and functionalized for political persuasion in the context of right-wing populism”. For populists, humour works to “amplify the reach, potential impact, and attention” (Wagner and Schwarzenegger 2020). Digital culture is based on a logic of entertainment and humour “that favours distanced irony and critique” (Wagner and Schwarzenegger 2020, 318). The political and the banal can easily coexist (Wagner and Schwarzenegger 2020, 318). Various forms of humour connect populism with Internet culture and make memes prominent examples of populist humour (Wagner and Schwarzenegger 2020).

Among the four main approaches to populism is the approach of seeing populism as a discursive style suitable for integrating humour. Other main approaches in research are populism as ideology, discourse or as an approach to do politics (Jeffery 2021). When populism is understood as a style that actors can easily slip in and out of, it is not about a general classification of a politician but about selective moments (Moffitt and Tormey 2014, 382). Therefore, an examination or evaluation of whether or not politicians or performers are populists is not required; since populism is viewed as a style rather than a characteristic of the communicator, it is possible to selectively observe particular actions and statements as belonging to the style (Vreese et al 2018, 426).

Carnival, clowns and circus metaphors are seen as further theoretical elements that are helpful when thinking about humour and populism together in populism studies (MacMillan 2020). Populists´ humorous rhetoric can be situated in the theoretical concept of carnival by Mikhail Bakhtin. In Bakhtin's understanding of carnival, humour forms a ritualised and alternative sphere to the official, serious everyday world by putting structures upside down (Bakhtin 1984). The carnivalesque has much in common with populists as it "seeks to overturn the hierarchies of the status quo through humorous attacks on elites, breaking down barriers, norms, prohibitions and etiquette, and by creating an atmosphere in which all demand equal dialogic status" (MacMillan 2020, 59). In Mikhail Bakhtin's understanding, the medieval carnival "was a temporary suspension of the entire official system with all its prohibitions and hierarchic barriers" (Bakhtin 1984, 89). Because of the suspension of hierarchies, a social space separate from official life is established without inequalities (Bakhtin 1984), which is related to incongruity. Incongruity theory in particular is useful for explaining the suitability of humour for populism and populist communication because humour arises not from power imbalances but because incongruity makes people feel like they are on the same level in an everyday talk (Kopper 2021). Therefore, incongruous humour is related to carnival as it enables a feeling of closeness and communication on the same level (Beck 2023, 3). Populists make use of these feelings as their typical strategy.

These effects of incongruous humour are seen in the three articles.

As the articles show, the described "commedification of the global public sphere" (Beck 2023, 5; Brassett et al 2021a; Brassett 2021) is especially attractive for populism because populist actors can thereby increase their target audience. While populism is normally specifically attractive for certain parts of society, which makes it a question of class, the discursive approach and the use of popular culture show that populist communication can be affective to broad parts of society (Beck 2023, 14). Since few people would consider British

Prime Minister Boris Johnson to be a typical populist given his philosophy and the comparatively moderate political agenda he follows (Mounk 2019), he is a good example of the function of humour in populism as a style (Beck 2023).

Populism as a style with its focus on communications explains why Johnson can be seen as a populist. Parodic communication enables presenting someone from the political elite as part of the people, which is a wider trend. Typical for populists is a self-ironic and self-satirising communication style (Beck 2023). The Hulk parody, for example, helps to invert hierarchies and attempts to create a political space for "the people" while criticizing the elite, of whom Johnson is undoubtedly a member (Beck 2023, 10). Johnson camouflages his elite background and presents himself as one of the people. Parody shows a further common ground between humour and the populist logic: "Parody suits the logic of populist communication by dealing with the known instead of providing anything fundamentally new, or providing simple answers to complex problems" (Beck 2023, 5).

It has been demonstrated in the third article how powerful and appealing parodic humour can be in Johnson's populist communication as "larger parts of the population are susceptible to Johnson's variant of populism" (Mounk 2019). Among others, personification is used as a general element of politics, and in discursive populism approaches, it is specifically a mobilisation strategy (Jeffery 2021), which is visible in the third article (2023).

However, there are different opinions and judgements on Johnson being a populist or not. Many of his analysed communication qualifies for the concept of populism as style, which does not judge Johnson as a person. Judgements about a whole actor are more complex and not part of this research project.

3. Theoretical perspectives on humour

3.1 Poststructuralism and discourse theoretical basics

The theoretical core of this project is influenced by the linguistic turn (White 1973) and the visual turn (Bleiker 2018b) as the linkage to popular culture and visuality in IR (Callahan 2020; Schlag and Heck 2020) has shown earlier. In modern forms of humour, visuality is the predominant mode of communication and the strongest component in the perception of the audience. The growing interest in the role of representations and popular culture in (international) politics leads to an increased examination of forms of visual material (Beck and Spencer 2021, 67).

Hence, the main theoretical concepts for this project rely on and are built on Poststructuralist approaches and perspectives. Poststructuralists are convinced that it is impossible to find the real causes of events, and therefore, they are more interested in the political consequences of deciding on a certain form of representation (Campbell 2010, 230). They are interested in how certain political developments and outcomes became possible (Doty 1993, 298; Edkins 2002, 256) and how they were normalised (Doty 1996). This fits the research questions of how political humour is used and the potential effects it has on politics, although effects here do not include causality, as already mentioned. It can be said that Poststructuralism has a significant influence on humour studies by offering alternative perspectives on language, power dynamics and the construction of meaning and is thus a basic requirement for critical studies on humour (Lockyer and Pickering 2008). In general, post structural perspectives help to make sense of ambiguities and hidden meanings in intertextual references. This can be seen in the emphasis on the importance of context in understanding meaning (Burke 2013, 78), a key part of humour research (Beck 2022, 5). Humour in politics is known as a site where power relations are negotiated, challenged or reinforced through actors´ language and narratives (Brassett et al 2021b). The aforementioned is applied in discourse analysis, intertextual perspectives on parody and an immanent deconstructive perspective on the research. While the intertextual perspective is crucial for the analysis of parodic humour (see 3.5), the deconstructive approach can be seen in the interest regarding strategies and the effects of the humorous content. Overall, the described theoretic fundament is suitable for the research interest based on disentangling political humour, and therefore, it is one of the cornerstones of this dissertation.

Poststructuralism also brought a new perspective on security into IR. Poststructuralist thinkers argue that security is not an objective reality but a construct that is shaped by language and discourse (Åhäll 2016). It highlights the strong discursive component of security because it links security to the construction of identity (Hansen 2006, 18). Security is seen as a form of discourse, as “for poststructuralism there is no extra-discursive realm from which material, objective facts assert themselves” (Hansen 2006, 33). Therefore, it is not feasible to understand the connection between foreign policy and identity “in terms of causal effects” (Hansen 2006, 17) as there is only discourse. “Security can be seen as historically formed discourse centred on the nation state and as a particularly radical from of identity construction” (Hansen 2006, 18). The meaning of security is not fixed but constantly negotiated and contested through different discourses and power relations (Laclau and Mouffe 2001). Therefore, one has to understand the “discursive and historic specificity”

(Hansen 2006, 34) of security. In other words, it can be said that "security is enabled by particular kinds of language" (Burke 2013, 77), showing a clear relation to humour.

Ontological security is within the discursive forms of security, and it is currently the most prominent form in which the associated questions of identity are of utmost interest (Beck 2022; Steele 2008, 65). This again links explicitly to humour research in IR, as from a discursive perspective, humour can be connected to strategies of anxiety management (Brassett, Browning, and O'Dwyer 2020, 1)

3.2 Aesthetic perspectives

Aesthetic perspectives are relevant for humour in IR research and are grounded in Poststructuralism as well. Generally, humour and aesthetic products are locations of meaning making and distribution for political messages (Holm 2017, 190). The curiosity into political humour in IR is closely linked to aesthetic representations (Beck and Spencer 2021, 67), which constitute discourses and provide a vivid example of the nature of the political aspect.

Aesthetic perspectives see representations as interpretations of the represented, influenced by the subjectivity of the creator and also by the background of the observer (Shepherd 2016, 35). "[A]esthetic insight recognizes that the inevitable difference between the represented and its representation is the very location of politics" (Bleiker 2001, 510). The mimetic perspective sees instances of representation as presenting their chosen material in an authentic and realistic manner, desiring to show them as they are. Aesthetic perspectives, by contrast, assume the existence of a distinction between signifier and signified, between representation and the thing represented (Beck and Spencer 2021, 68).

Following these understandings, professional political humour never displays a direct representation of reality. The violation of expectations as described by incongruity theory (see 3.3) is a central mechanism of humour, and precise decisions by the creators are necessary regarding how to represent something so that it appears funny to the viewers. This is taken into account through a differentiation between representations and the represented. According to Bleiker´s (2001) understanding of the aesthetic approach, when analysing visual and audio-visual content, the theoretical distinction between mimetic and aesthetic forms of representation in international politics becomes important for our understanding of the subject matter (Beck and Spencer 2021, 68; Bleiker 2001) because it helps us understand how different forms of representation and expression can evoke meaning and significance

in various ways. Humour enables creative self-representations (Beck 2023; Beck and Spencer 2021) and appealing forms of storytelling. Poststructuralist critical approaches are meant to deconstruct these stories and strategies (Edkins 2007, 90) to uncover and understand the political effects of humour.

Bleiker´s understanding of the aesthetic approach is highly relevant for research on popular culture. Studying popular culture enables an understanding of the many means of influence and its effects on the normalisation of certain issues (Hamilton and Shepherd 2016, x). Therefore, visuality and popular culture matter for our perception of IR as it consists of "emergent forms of politics that result from the rescaling or internationalization of popular culture" (Hamilton and Shepherd 2016). The examination of the role of popular culture in daily life acknowledges the importance and the influence of popular culture as political force.

As in chapter 2.1, humour has to be situated within popular culture and IR. Fittingly, when people expect to be entertained by popular culture, they are less sceptical about the represented than they are while watching or reading the news or the official messages of a government (Beck and Spencer 2021, 78; Martin 2010, 52). This power of meaning making is often hidden in popular culture as it is about an unobserved determination of the sense of events (Brummett 2018, 31) and shows the relevance of differentiating between mimetic and aesthetic approaches.

3.3 Humour theories

Besides Poststructuralist approaches, a basic theoretical understanding of humour is needed because many disciplines theorise humour and, therefore, many varying understandings of the concept co-exist. The term *humour* is known in several languages but is inconsistently used. It "is associated with, and differentiated from, other terms, such as the comic, irony, satire, ridicule, parody, mockery, scorn, funny, ludicrous, etc." (Tsakona and Popa 2011, 3). The word *humour* is often used as an umbrella term that covers all the related phenomena (Tsakona and Popa 2011, 3).[1] Humour will be defined here based on a broad conceptualisation as "everything that causes amusement, from a joke, story, play, skit, movie or book to a way of acting or a slogan in a demonstration" (Sørensen 2008, 170).

[1] As a differentiation, laughter does not automatically mean humour. There is a difference between laughter and humour: laughter can be a "muscular phenomenon" that at times "has no clear basis on humour" (Dodds and Kirby 2013, 51).

Subsequently, political humour "is an umbrella term that encompasses any humorous text dealing with political issues, people, events, processes, or institutions" (Kenski et al 2014). Political humour is usually connected to parody and satire because of its moral aspects. Political humour in the form of satire is often based on an idealised view of politics (Beck and Spencer 2022; Tsakona and Popa 2011, 6).

Beginning in the 18th century, it has been recognised that humour is not a property of objects but an attribution that can depend on various contextual conditions (Kindt 2017, 4). What someone might see and interpret as funny is experienced differently by others. Since humour results from an action, it is individually made or discovered (Gernhardt 1988, 10). In other words, humour is not a characteristic of a text and is dependent on many forms of context, as the section on the methodological approach (4.1) will explain.

To understand basic considerations about the role of humour in politics, the three main humour theories, which are *superiority theory, relief theory and incongruity theory*, are beneficial. Naturally, no scientific article about humour seems to get on without introducing the three main humour theories. These are suitable for a first understanding of humour but do not always have much value going beyond this, as it is hard to apply them in a research article and they only cover specific forms of humour. Some scholars raise the question of whether one really needs the theories to conduct humour studies or if other theories might be more helpful and more general, as suggested by Kuipers (2008). Each of these theories has flaws and falls short of explaining what humour is, the reason we chuckle or what makes something funny (Dahl 2021). Therefore, a fourth theory, phenomenological theory, is mentioned here as well to further show possibilities and because of its consideration of power.

Superiority theory, relief theory and incongruity theory are the three most widely acknowledged theories for explaining humour (Morreall 2009b), and with a long tradition in other mainly philosophical sciences, their different explanations for the emergence of humour are needed to introduce humour studies to IR. A common thread among most versions of these theories is to assume a sudden and rapid cognitive change resulting from incongruity or relief, also seen as a cognitive shift, that is enjoyable and thereby causes humour (Morreall 2009b, 251). Incongruity theory was helpful and stimulating for the research project.

Relief theory

Relief theory goes back to Sigmund Freud, and it describes humour as a way to physically release nervous tension (Buijzen and Valkenburg 2004, 147). Relief theory deals with physical and psychological aspects. However, this theory does not really play a role in the interpretative and illustrative approaches of this dissertation, and it was not taken up by any of the articles as it does not fit the viewpoints used here. Nevertheless, there is the possibility that the examples may lead to a release of tension by the viewers. Pure relief theorists "cannot be found anymore in humor scholarship these days" (Kuipers 2008, 362).

Superiority theory

The most obvious theory for explaining humour in political science is the superiority theory, which brings a manifest power component into the explanation of humour. In superiority theory, laughter and humour are seen as an articulation of supremacy (Kuipers 2008, 367). People can feel triumphant because they are superior to others, which results in humour (Buijzen and Valkenburg 2004, 148). For the means of professional humour, superiority theory does not seem sophisticated enough because it is about humour that kicks down and a feeling of supremacy.

The long tradition of the explanation through superiority originates from Thomas Hobbes´ Leviathan. Laughter is there seen as the result of a feeling of "sudden glory" (Hobbes 1651, 36). In other words, superiority means to withhold empathy, which can be compared to a "momentary anaesthesia of the heart" (Bergson 1914). Thus, it has a strong connection to ridicule.

Incongruity theory

Incongruity theory is the dominant humour theory in the literature as it covers a major degree of humour (Billig 2005, 57; Morreall 2009a, 12; Holm 2011; Kuipers 2008), and many different versions and specifications of incongruity theory exist (Morreall 2014).

Incongruity theory deals with cognitive and affective reasons for humour (Morreall 2009b, 248). It covers the typical and more general occurrences of humour (Kuipers 2008, 369). Perceived incongruity leads to surprise, a feeling which provokes amusement. This matters because according to incongruity, humour plays with significations (Zijderveld 1983, 6), often suggesting the opposite of what is meant.

Instead of fulfilling certain patterns, humour has a surprising component and works on a cognitive level because people are amused by the deviation as a result of the violation of expectations (Buijzen and Valkenburg 2004, 148; Meyer 2000, 314; Morreall 2009a, 248,

2009b, 248). It is the disturbance of the "expected pattern that provokes humour in the mind of the receiver" (Buijzen and Valkenburg 2004, 148).

Its understanding of funniness is based on the frames´ content, their coherence and the diversion between them. Humour is seen as an "aesthetic mode that calls upon the audience to entertain at least two conflicting frames simultaneously" (Holm 2017, 192). Without an adequate level of inter-frame coherence, the incongruity will be too large, meaning the humour will not be registered and the "joke" will slide instead into the realm of the strange, the absurd (Holm 2017, 192). This indicates that incongruity has certain limits. Therefore, the understanding of the context upon which humorous statements are based matters greatly and is reflected in the methodological approach.

In all three articles, incongruity can be observed on various levels that are not only at the micro-level of the content but also due to the context and structure of the humorous communication (Beck and Spencer 2022). In the cases analysed in this dissertation, there is an essential incongruity between the unexpectedly humorous nature of the medium and the serious nature of the issue that viewers recognise in narratives told by state actors. There is also the incongruity of humour in general, which means something is very funny because it is so much expected, desired and ritualised and sometimes something is funny because it is unexpected, as in the official political communication in the analysed cases (Beck 2023).

Phenomenological theory/carnival theory

While not mentioned in the journal articles, there are many more humour theories. The sociologist Giselinde Kuipers, among others, has suggested a fourth theory of humour, namely phenomenological theory or carnival theory, and is interested in explaining social functions of humour that are, for example, social control and social cohesion (Kuipers 2008). It is often seen as a "humorous outlook of the world" (Kuipers 2008, 376). It describes humour as a unique form of communication that significantly diverges from conventional modes of expression.

This phenomenological approach with a focus on social functions (Kuipers 2008) is further linked to Bakhtin´s carnival (see 2.6) and, therefore, to aspects of power, which makes it interesting for political science.

3.4 Parody perspective

The examination of political humour should be an elementary part of political science because of its relation to power. The specific focus for the analysis of this dissertation is on parody, which is part of the discursive field of political humour and is seen as essential for public culture (Hariman 2008, 248), much like late night shows (Nieuwenhuis 2018; Petry 2020). Furthermore, it is highly popular in politics and political formats (Nieuwenhuis 2018; Petry 2020), which highlights the interconnection between parody and politics (Hariman 2008). Such popularity and success can be explained by discursive approaches dealing with intertextuality and intertextual narratability (Kruck and Spencer 2013).

Parody is commonly seen as a very vibrant form of political humour that is vital for political discussions. This generally positive characterisation of parody makes the public sphere more accessible (Nieuwenhuis 2018, 4), as can be seen in all three articles that are connected through the aspect of parody. The importance of parody for current public discourses can be made plausible through the influence of popular culture like news parodies. News parodies fulfil a crucial function in political discourses, and the imitation of news is well justified since news has some natural kind of authority and power. Different research shows the importance of news parodies which are often preferred to conventional news by younger generations and engage their viewers (Baym and Jones 2012; Leicht 2023). They are well liked because of formats like the newspaper *The Onion*, which is well known and often positively associated (Holland and Levy 2018). Other formats, such as *The Daily Show*, are so popular that it might be difficult to understand politics in America in the 21st century without them, since they generate a huge audience and highlight big political issues (Baym and Jones 2012, 10).

Consequentially, the producers of today's professional political humour are humour experts, like production companies who usually do late night shows and entertainment (Beck 2022, 11) and professional PR companies (Beck and Spencer 2021) as well as meme-makers (Beck 2023, 12). These producers create entertainment, social media and PR that are all aimed at young people and are inspired by and are a part of popular culture.

The spoofing and imitation practices described in the articles are all connected to the broader sphere of parody. One can explain parody "as the comic refunctioning of performed linguistic or artistic material" (Rose 2000, 52) because "parodic imitation works by turning an organic movement into something mechanical, and so reveals the mechanization underlying the original communicative act" (Hariman 2008, 250). Parody is inspired by an "original text" which gets imitated by a "parodying text" (Chatman 2001, 28). This makes parody's intersection with intertextuality obvious. Parodies imitate the style of a well-known

text by using exaggeration making certain aspects more evident. However, exaggeration in various degrees is needed for stimulating reflection about the intertextual meaning of a parody. "[O]therwise, parody simply becomes plagiarism or a reinforcement of the surface narrative" (Kulkarni 2004).

Parody and pastiche are terms that are often used as synonyms. Often, they are not differentiated to any degree as it is hard to find the unique aspects of each. There are huge similarities between the two, but also some differences. In its pure sense, pastiche is an artistic work that imitates the style of another work or artist (Hutcheon 2000, 38). To facilitate the argument, less emphasis was placed on distinguishing between examples that lean towards pastiche and those that verge slightly more on parody. In the papers this differentiation does not have any consequences for the argument and parody and pastiche are hard to distinguish but what they have in common is what matters for politics: The general characteristics of imitation and fun.

The most important thing that becomes clear is that part of the shift in public political communication towards humour (Beck 2022, 2) is a change in the way that different forms of humour like parody are perceived and used. Linda Hutcheon´s "A Theory of Parody" (1985/2000) provides a reflection on the ethos of parody that can be seen as the character or spirit of parody. Ethos "is an inferred intended reaction motivated by the text" (Hutcheon 2000, 55). While it is often assumed that parodies are motivated by ridicule, Hutcheon writes that "many parodies today do not ridicule the background texts" (Hutcheon 2000, 57), and Chatman argues that "parody concurrently pays homage to […] the original" (Chatman 2001, 33) "[…] whereas satire aims only at ridiculing its target" (Chatman 2001, 33). This is what becomes visible in the sub-studies; this is when the dissertation brings forth a main contribution to the theoretical understanding of parody. Especially contemporary parody has a much broader ethos and "should be labelled as unmarked, with a number of marking possibilities. Its range is broad and spreads from comedy through neutrality to seriousness" (Kostka 2016, 68). The wide "range of parodic ethos allows for everything from playful amusement […] to love and respect" (Hutcheon 2000, 67). As a consequence, the ethos can be "closer to the respectful ethos of parody or even to the Renaissance practice of imitation" (Hutcheon 2000, 65), which is the case in many of the cases here.

3.5 Intertextual perspectives

Contemporary parodic humour contributes to legitimising and creating more dominant political narratives due to its high degree of intertextuality. The success of parodic narratives is dependent on intertextuality. Intertextuality means "the ways in which texts are interrelated and meanings that arise out of this. The term intertextuality refers to the relationships or links that may be found among different books or texts" (Collins 2023). Intertextuality is a structure of relations that connect texts through shared principles of meaning and similar principles of arrangement.

The parody-typical imitation is one reason for the success of intertextual narratives, which means that "texts build their arguments and authority through references to other texts: by making direct quotes or by adopting key concepts and catchphrases" (Hansen 2006: 8). Humour is a phenomenon that by the very nature of the mechanics by which it functions is dependent upon intertextuality (Tsakona and Chovanec 2020). Humour seldom exists in isolation, but rather, it always relates to other pre-existing narratives (Beck and Spencer 2022). To gain influence and acceptance, intertextuality is an easy way for (humorous) narratives to connect to something that is already partly known (Spencer 2016, 8). Especially on social media, intertextuality is substantial for meaning making and in enabling the extensive reach of political narratives. Intertextuality is typical for postmodern humour (Tsakona and Chovanec 2020, 2), and this dissertation argues that the references to certain established narratives in popular culture through parodic humour have led to a reduced potential for criticism of political humour (Beck 2022, 2023). A sense of shared cultural knowledge creates the feeling of being in-the-joke (Kuipers 2008, 381).

Parody as a sub-type of humour particularly relies on existent narratives. Funniness is often a result of being taken out of context, also known as recontextualisation. Normally, intertextuality involves some recontextualisation of social practices. Recontextualisation means "the ways in which a text recontextualises material social practises and activities from the social world known to television viewers or website users. In each case, the initial practice in the social world is inserted into, and recontextualised by, another set of practices" (Baldry and Thibault 2010, 213). Every modern-day discourse draws on social practices that are taken from other discourses (Feng and Wignell 2011, 568). The initial social practices are transformed by recontextualisation in conformity with the aims and values that political strategists want them to have (Baldry and Thibault 2010, 213).

Parody has its own motivation and reason in all the analysed examples: Subtle forms of communication for exercising discursive political power. In each empirical article, parodic humour is used to transfer the attention from pop cultural texts to issues and actors in (international) politics. In this way, the boundaries between popular culture and politics are blurred. The Swedish and British Armed Forces present themselves as a civil institution where qualifications from the civil life are needed (Beck and Spencer 2021). The German government presents young people staying at home like heroes in war movies who are lazy during COVID-19 (Beck 2022), and in populist communication, Johnson´s strategy of being perceived as one of the people instead of an elite is enabled through his parodies of simple forms of pop-cultural narratives (Beck 2023).
The imitation of popular culture for political means is the result of a professionalisation in the production of political humour which aims at being popular. Scholars call this the "Popification of Politics", that is, when politics is basically imitating the popular (Schiller 2022). Professionally done, parodies can become part of the political mainstream, as shown by the empirical examples used here (Beck 2022, 2023).

As the COVID-19 example (Beck 2022) and Boris Johnson´s election campaign videos (Beck 2023) show, parody can be specifically successful in politics if it has a somewhat viral character, which is demonstrated in the second article (Beck 2022, 1): Parodies can be parodied again, and hence, they contain sort of a memetic quality that refers to the meme-typical replication, spreading their impact on culture and to the mainstream. Due to their repetition, in the best-case scenario, they can cement political messages, as was shown by the special hero campaign with the stay at home message (Beck 2022). Memes artfully blend "popular culture and politics in entertaining and incisive fashion" (Howley 2016, 158). They constitute sort of a "visual argument" (Hahner 2013) and are "not 'just funny' anymore: they had become a tool to influence voters" (Klein 2018). Thereby, memes are more and more instrumentalised and they become part of everyday politics (Beck 2022).

4. Research design and methodological framework

4.1 Design of the exploratory approach

The sampling for the sub-studies was done by following an exploratory logic, specifically considering the salience of humorous communication around current political events. Therefore, the decisions about which content was to be analysed have a subjective character,

but as certain conversations in IR are prominent in humour research, they were a guideline for the selection of the empirical material.

Following the exploratory research design for the empirical work, there was a strong interpretative character, and the aim was to focus on a micro level of the product within the analysis. As the motivation is to show and understand what is behind the parodies, no detailed reception studies were done. It was more about understanding and making plausible the most likely effects.

The central contribution of this dissertation consists in showing how parodic humour is not only an effective but also an ambiguous element in between incentivising elements and problematic consequences in world politics. More specifically, topics in the centre of IR-research, such as anxiety, ontological security, military security, populist communication and crisis communication are the centrepiece. These topics potentially influence the behaviour of states on an international level. For example, memetic structures stimulated through professional parodic communication were uncovered and analysed through the context focus of the DHA and the selected analytical categories.

Visual content is commonly analysed by examining three sites of image meaning, as suggested by Gillian Rose (Rose 2016): Production, product and reception by audiences are all important sites for meaning making. This is commonly used as a basic analytical structure for visual products, complimented by an emphasis on the background of specific instances of humour, such as national specifics, key topics, creators and the audience. The product can still be more prominently put in the centre of attention. Based on striking examples of the use of parodic humour by state actors, the context, the product, some information on the production and a basic check regarding the reception of the product were examined in each sub-study.

Some considerations were also decisive for the methodological approaches. Narrative analysis is an easy way to structure discourses and to specifically analyse meaning making, and it is broadly used within discursive approaches in IR (Gadinger et al 2014; Oppermann and Spencer 2016). The DHA provides the structure for the research design by its centrality of different levels of context. This new analytical design is based on one of the most widely-used approaches, and thereby broadly justifies and makes the reason plausible why the method is useful for analysing humour.

4.2 Framework for the analysis of humour

Scholars working with popular culture are encouraged to and used to create their own methodological approaches and to take what they need from other disciplines. The same is done in this project, which is about understanding on a micro level how political humour in the form of parody works. The employed research strategy attempts to understand the effects of political humour and explicitly does not deliver a full-scale analysis of all possible impacts and, therefore, no reception analysis was done. A basic analytical structure with a theoretically sound basis will be preferred to a simple critical reading or a full-scale fine analysis.

This research is shaped by a broad understanding of the term "text" so that visuality and the combination of different modes of representation as factors of linguistic realisation can be included. Because of the described context and methodological reflections, the research project is situated in a tradition of critical discourse analysis (CDA) that consists of various approaches. To study this empirical reality with a suitable methodological approach, besides narrative analysis (Frye 2000; Spencer 2016; White 1973), the adjusted Discourse Historical Approach (DHA) (Wodak 2015) has been chosen as a basis for two sub-studies. They are suitable to deal with audio-visual humorous content, which is a significant contribution of the dissertation, especially enabled trough the analysis of narrative emplotment and the consideration of argumentation strategies and a focus on linguistic realisations of the DHA. In the second and third sub-study, when the project gets more specific in its focus and interest (Beck 2022, 2023), parody as a subgenre of satire is even more in the focus due to its suitability for political means. At this point, the DHA-inspired approach is of advantage.

There are various approaches in the small interdisciplinary field of humour studies, and there are different ideas of how to structure analytical output and what the key criteria for an analysis of (political) humour should be. For example, research on humour has been done so far by using:

- Metaphor analysis (Brantner et al 2019a; Charteris-Black 2019)
- Multimodal discourse analysis (Brantner et al 2019b)
- A simple critical reading (Nieuwenhuis and Zijp 2022, 348)
- A "framework suggesting that content, style, identity and circulation are essential points of departure in the analysis of mediated political humor" (Koivukoski 2022)
- "textual-historical view of opinion formation" (Dahl 2021)
- Comedy as a method of reflexivity (Lockyer and Weaver 2022)

- Further approaches are using humour as a research method, for example, in anthropology (Göpfert 2022)

Although the dissertation does not directly address methodological discussions, it acknowledges and incorporates relevant methodological considerations within the context of German visual IR, which is where the author of this dissertation situates himself. German visual IR is still interested in the question of visual methods in IR and the debate brought food for thought (Heck and Schlag 2015). The discussion is about how detailed and complex should a visual method be in political science and whether a critical reading is sufficient. The chosen methodological approach results from a reflection about the gains and advantages of specifically using visual approaches from other disciplines, like film analysis, as suggested in German IR (Heck and Schlag 2015) and how this can still be doable.
The three sub-studies are all about visual products and have a strong audio-visual emphasis. However, it is getting "enormously difficult" (Bleiker 2015, 877) using conventional methods like content analysis to deal with moving images. Because of this ever-growing complexity in the eyes of political scientists, the project deals with multimodal products but avoids complex and discipline-specific theoretical assumptions like intersemioticity, iconicity or issues around transcription as well as different functions of signs (Jewitt et al 2016). These methodological handlings are not seen as enriching in a manageable way for political science and IR. Therefore, this project has a limited direct connection to the role of multimodality and is focused on narrative genres and key criteria from the DHA instead. This can be justified by a cost-benefit calculation and an understanding of a method being a transparent structure for making an analysis plausible.

Narrative Analysis

Starting with narrative analysis, the project deals with recent political humour that is not only text based anymore but always a combination of text, image and often sound. Narrative analysis is a particular research design used here and is composed of setting, characterization and emplotment (Beck and Spencer 2021; Spencer 2016). The possibility of emplotting the same event through four different narrative genres shows the advantages and the analytical value of aesthetic approaches. In the beginning of the research project (Beck and Spencer 2021), comedy and satire/irony were comprehensively defined as narrative genres (Beck and Spencer 2021, 69–70) and then the videos were analysed with the help of narrative analysis.

For political science, the ways of meaning making through parodic humour are of specific interest, as humour can be seen as a particular emplotment of political narratives in narrative genres (Beck and Spencer 2021). A focus on narrative genres ensures an understanding of how meaning arises via romance, tragedy, comedy and irony/satire, which is basically through (modes of) emplotment and genres that are predominantly observable in the first article (Beck and Spencer 2021). Parody is a part of the narrative genre of satire/irony (Chatman 2001), which qualifies parody for the specific type of narrative analysis.
The focus on narrative genres "recognises the centrality of the narrative form for social life" (Forchtner 2021, 314). Its core strength is the detailed analysis of meaning making that is possible in the various versions of narrative analysis (Forchtner 2021).

DHA

The DHA is one of the major approaches in discourse studies besides the Systemic-Functional Approaches (Dialectical-Relational Approach (Fairclough 2013), the Multimodal Approach (van Leeuwen 2021) and Socio-Cognitive Approaches (van Dijk 2009).
It can be easily adjusted for specific purposes, as can be seen in this research project. There are many suitable features within the DHA for studying humour and the consideration of its context. To consider this importance of context and background knowledge for the understanding, interpretation and also creation of humour, the dissertation suggests taking suitable components from one of the major approaches in critical discourse studies (Wodak 2020). These selected categories are particularly constituted through context, strategies and linguistic realisation (Wodak and Meyer 2007). All three categories are relevant when one wants to understand the construction of professional humour, as the context influences what can be said and what will be popular. While the second article uses content and topoi of a discourse as an analytical category (Beck 2022, 6), these have not been considered in the third article due to a missing added value and a description of the content in the context section (Beck 2023, 7) .
Further valuable main points of the DHA are its aim in analysing "the ways in which linguistic forms are used in various expressions and manipulations of power" (Wodak 2007, 11). Various levels of context were considered, among them the immediate, the intertextual and interdiscursive relationship and the broader socio-political and historical contexts (Reisigl 2017, 53). The difference identified in relation to other approaches is its suitability to study multiple genres and multiple public spaces as well as to investigate intertextual and

interdiscursive relationships and to discover recontextualisations that aim at specific historical contexts (Reisigl 2017).

As it is the most explicitly historically oriented approach, the DHA is suitable for parody (Beck 2023) as well as for humour in general due to considering the re-emergence of discourses throughout time from an intertextual perspective. “Discourses are always connected to other discourses which were produced earlier, as well as to those which are produced synchronically or subsequently” (Fairclough and Wodak 1997, 276). This matters for context as discourses re-emerge rather than emerge and show the recontextualisation as a central process. Discourse is historical, which means that the DHA focuses on dynamics of discourse and its diffusion across time and space like recontextualisation (Krzyżanowski 2020, 511). Furthermore, populism and its communicative strategies are well known in research using the DHA (Krzyżanowski 2020)

The dissertation shows by applying narrative analysis and the adjusted DHA that different approaches are possible when analysing political humour and that a combination would be the optimum. While reflections about emplotment and narrative genre are always helpful and the DHA-inspired approach deals with the relevant categories, it can be further argued that narrative analysis can be integrated into the DHA (Forchtner 2021). The suggested combination of narrative analysis and the DHA enables a fine-grained understanding of meaning making, structure of the discourse and a focus on production, product and its consequences (Beck 2022). This “supports a greater appreciation of the narrative form and, thus, meaning making can be analysed more comprehensibly” (Forchtner 2021, 315)

This combination has been done rather unconsciously and partially because the second and third article are an advancement of the first one, and there is always wider analytical thinking about meaning making and the production involved and not only applying the three analytical parts of a narrative genre (Beck and Spencer 2021).

5. Political effects of strategic humour

Several effects of strategic humour were uncovered by using the described research design and methodological framework. Each of the three journal articles shows clearly main scientific contributions of this dissertation, which can be summarised through four main

effects of humour on politics. These possible effects and the ambiguity of what humour does politically are discussed here in more detail.

5.1 Expanding the language of politics

State actors realised the political potential of comedy and humour as a central instrument in politics (Holm 2017), which is illustrated in all three articles. The research reveals that humour makes it possible to express messages and to talk about issues like war or a pandemic in a way that would not be possible without humour. Humour is meanwhile central to the interaction between groups and individuals. It is seen as legitimate and is always present in social life because the ambiguity resulting from the subjective discovering "makes it well-suited to negotiations and manipulations of selves and relationships" (Kuipers 2008, 377).

The analysis of the cases shows how humour enables producers and state actors to present certain things in a legitimate way by using entertainment and performances instead of dry and official political communication. Related to the broader trend of play and fun is the use of humour as professional spectacle in which popular culture is through its content and location a key element of political processes. Online communication enables connections to civilian life (Beck 2022, 15) and other texts like popular culture (Beck 2023, 4). The increased success of narratives referring to popular culture along with an increased visibility are leading to a higher degree of attention to political communication. Humour can work as a political strategy against taboos and to expand the limits of legitimate communication. Parody as expanded language of politics is used by political actors to appear as popular. Parodic humor facilitates a form of mainstreaming for political actors.

The commedification of politics and the general operation of incongruous humour can furthermore be ambiguous since the need to always provide something new to achieve funniness enlarges the boundaries of discourses and expands the language of politics. As mentioned in section 3.3, according to incongruity theory, people laugh about the discrepancy of two frames that do not fit together. However, when repeating it again and again, it does not seem incompatible anymore and is more accepted. To achieve humour again, the absurdity has to be exaggerated even further, the limits have to be enlarged (Holm 2017, 198). This "expansion of postmodern humor" (Holm 2017, 198) can have drastic consequences like "a need to colonise new cultural and social ground as a function of its internal logic" (Holm 2017, 198–199). Examples like the militarisation of the everyday (Beck and Spencer 2021) are already visible in the sub-studies. These tendencies are evident

in military recruitment and the drawing of more and more analogies between war and every day life.

The COVID-19 example is problematic as well, as COVID-19 is shown through a neoliberal logic instead of a social crisis or a health crisis. The victims of the pandemic were turned into heroes (Beck 2022). Through the described strategic use of humour, a new option for political communication was enabled, and thereby, the responsibility was shifted towards the people instead of providing political solutions (Beck 2022). Lastly, the analogies through humour stimulated debates about heroes instead of debates about political responsibilities as described in the second article (Beck 2022, 8).

The expanded language of politics brings tendencies like commedification and making fun about serious issues into politics (Beck 2022, 2023; Brassett et al 2021a; Brassett 2021). These problematics become visible in Johnson´s variant of populism through a distraction of attention from political issues (Beck 2023) (see 5.3).

5.2 Provocation through professionality

A further contribution to the political effects of humour is calculated provocation that is enabled through the professionality of recent political humour. It has been shown how politicians use humour to attack adversaries (Meyer 2000, 322) and to present themselves in election campaigns in a sympathetic manner through the use of self-deprecating humour (Meyer 2000, 318). The well-planned and constructed recent parodies always include sort of a provocation through the various possibilities of interpreting parodies and, thereby, guarantee an enormous amount of attention. On all three levels of product, production and reception are observable signs of professionalism. This often provides incentives for an easy scandalisation but defence is easily possible. The professionality of the product in military recruitment campaigns (Beck and Spencer 2021) and the provocative potential become visible in the analogies between military and civil spheres, like reacting quickly and helping others (Beck and Spencer 2021, 76).

A further characteristic of the professionality is the style of spoofing home videos or action movies by the Swedish Armed Forces (Beck and Spencer 2021, 80) which enables situating politics in the everyday through professional parallels. This is enabled by many characteristics of the videos: Their "entertainment qualities, the parallels with other pop-culture products and also the connections made to civil practices which let the military appear to be natural and good" (Beck and Spencer 2021, 80). There is also neoliberal self-

improvement and enterprise as the main topics (Beck and Spencer 2021, 80; Strand and Berndtsson 2015, 245). The army is sold as a job like any other job but more entertaining with a certain extra something (Beck and Spencer 2021).

The precise preparation for and planning of the COVID-19 campaign becomes apparent in content and style (Beck 2022). The point of time was well chosen during the second COVID-19 wave in Germany, which allowed the use of humour in the relatively calm German context, specifically considering the context of low death rates. The style was provocative and initiated discussions about heroes, war analogies and Nazis (Beck 2022).

The parodic videos often provided strategies for defence, as in the COVID-19 example, where a specific text was spoofed, but much wider associations are possible. Further examples for the professionality are the discussion and defence through the governmental spokesperson, who said: “These are not videos as a serious guide to life” (Theile 2020). Humour broadens the parameters of acceptable communication for the government, making it much harder to criticise the message when it was not supposed to be taken seriously in the first place (Beck 2022, 15). Critique is even more difficult, for instance, when the American perspective of the clips is not realised since the ad is itself a parody (Beck 2022, 15–16).

In Boris Johnson´s populist communication (Beck 2023), the sophistication is illustrated through Johnson´s use of parodies in his 2019 campaign and also in 2020 in which he has drawn attention away from political problems when negotiating the Brexit deal and also from his adversaries and competitors. Furthermore, he made use of and played with his public image as a clown. Some of his parodic communication moves were between threat and joke (Kopper 2021), as shown in the Love Actually parody in which he blames Parliament for the current state of affairs, saying “with any luck, by next year, Brexit will be done if Parliament doesn’t block it again. But for now let me say, Your vote has never been more important” (Beck 2023, 9).

5.3 Camouflage and distraction

Camouflage and distraction are the third likely effect that was demonstrated in the articles. Humour is instrumentalised by state actors for camouflage because “the audience is usually distracted from the important issues discussed” (Tsakona and Popa 2011, 7). Even if political humour exposes problems, “it humanizes it and makes it palatable” (Momen 2019, 36). The meaning making through humour enables to live in unpleasant conditions as it is entertainment instead of critique.

Image, sound and language are often contradicting each other, which is a possible application of incongruity theory. Often the focus is on the visual component, which is dominant in the perception, but the argument can be defended by referring to the other resources. The emotional message and side-tracking of ongoing conversations are some of the effects through spoofed visual styles.
Thereby, parody can be used to distract attention and transport political messages in new scales because of the intertextual knowledge of the audience and can motivate other actors and platforms to replicate and share the memetic content. In the best case, people share and spoof the political messages after the publication of content and thereby cement the intended political message, even if it is meant as critique because the original text is always most prominently recognisable (Beck 2022). This is called “side-tracking of ongoing conversations” (Laaksonen et al 2021) and can be used strategically (Beck 2022, 2023).

The sanitising of problematic topics through humour is also part of the camouflage argument (Momen 2019), and it exists in all the articles. “Humour reduces the strain experienced by the audience when viewing exciting scenes. It can also help the audience to dismiss otherwise unsavoury aspects of a given production (Blackford et al 2011, 123). Humour “has the potential to desensitize viewers to violent acts and add to the likability of advertisements” (Blackford et al 2011, 127). Critical issues are normalised by making things “laughable” (Momen 2019).

Humour eases the transition for political actors into the everyday because violent content is, for example, covered with humour in what can be called “camouflage“ (Potter and Warren 1998, 43) like in military recruitment videos (Beck and Spencer 2021). Humour often endures absurdities, and people are not getting stressed up or upset anymore (Momen 2019, 35). The extensive use of humour and parody can, in general, become a problem for democracies since laughter can sanitise problematic political issues.
Armed forces are appropriating culture by presenting military content as apolitical and wholly ordinary on social media platforms like YouTube and, in particular, by participating in comedic output on those platforms (Beck and Spencer 2021, 77). Humour assists in disguising the effects and obfuscating the unfavourable features of the information that is being delivered (Beck and Spencer 2021, 80).

The effect of distraction is, for example, enabled through strange analogies and ironic comparisons that made the absurdities during COVID-19 laughable (Beck 2022, 15). The

audience´s attention can be distracted from the responsibility of the government, and the unsatisfying political management or political incapacity were covered (Beck 2022, 2023). German historians saw the stereotypical parallels to war as "strange" and "embarrassing" (Piatov 2020). They objected to the comparisons and analogies made between the pandemic and World War II, which helped to increase awareness of the videos (Beck 2022, 12). Here, the intricacy of the well-chosen provocations is made clear. By emphasising the observable war rhetoric and analogies, the clips skilfully parodied the public heroification of soldiers (Beck 2022, 12–13). By utilising the ambiguity of touchy subjects like war, it demonstrates how humour in the form of parody can be advantageous when professionally done (Beck 2022, 1). By magnifying the observable war language and metaphors, the commercials expertly satirise the popular heroification. This was paired with parodies of popular movies, stories and figures from the target demographic, much like late-night humour does (Beck 2022, 13).

A similar tendency is visible in populist communication using the fact that humorous popular culture is well received in all social classes, enabling the broadest public attention (Beck 2023). Through the Hulk comparison, Johnson depicts himself as a liberating hero "leading the people out of the supposedly crushing monologic totalitarianism represented by the EU and the political opposition" (MacMillan 2020, 69). At the same time, the Hulk example illustrates how the public arguments focused more on the traits and characteristics of the well-known people and how they compared to the original, parody material (Beck 2023, 15). This distracted attention from the core issues.

5.4 Isolation against critique

The fourth political effect of humour is isolation against critique through a perceived closeness. The affective and cognitive effects behind humour (Beck 2022, 4; Beck and Spencer 2021) are central to incongruity theory. These affective effects of humour, like its enjoyment and emotional responses, can lead to "a form of play" (Morreall 2009a, 253) that has consequences because of the mechanism of suspension of "practical and noetic concern to simply enjoy what they are doing in a nonserious way", called playing (Morreall 2009a, 253). Due to allowing messages to enter another's mind and removing cognitive obstacles (Kayam et al 2014, 7), humorous messages achieve a persuasion that is not possible with more traditional ways of political messaging. The cognitive effect of the detection of humour can further interrupt the critical processing of arguments by the audience (Cline and Kellaris

1999), making critique much more difficult. These effects are highly relevant for humour in political communication (Beck 2022; Beck and Spencer 2021).

In addition, humour has the immanent mechanism of always providing an escape out of inconvenient situations, since both sides can call the serious meaning or content "a joke" (Beck and Spencer 2021, 79; Kuipers 2008, 378). The shift in the use of humour in public politics also leads to a shift in what is seen as legitimate. Therefore, it is suitable for gaining the support of the general public for ideas, actors and initiatives (Purcell et al 2010, 374) as well as for military recruitment or for election campaigns. This basic functions of humour in the illustrative examples are defending against critique because self-irony creates proximity which is visible when "Armed forces try, through humour and self-depreciation, to shape their identity and to attempt to create proximity to the audience and potential recruits" (Beck and Spencer 2021, 80). Humour enables the communication of new ideas "being framed with a degree of levity" (Beck and Spencer 2021, 80). The serious impact and content can be neglected because the "cognitive disengagement" of the audiences (Morreall 2005) through amusement supports this effect. This is also illustrated in the title of the first article, which defends critique through "Just a bit of fun" (Beck and Spencer 2021).

Humorous statements are typically difficult to criticise, and the German government's rhetoric can be interpreted as a defence mechanism against criticism (Beck 2022, 15). "The message being used by the government – that people should stay at home – was not criticised" (Beck 2022, 17), but the style and the humour were. This is accomplished by comparing war to COVID-19, namely World War II as seen from the American perspective, intentionally avoiding the problematic German view of heroes in favour of the American view of Europe's liberation (Beck 2022).

Boris Johnson made use of self-irony for similar reasons, which is illustrative for how politics is often not serious anymore. He wants to be perceived as one of the people due to different standards and a show is expected from Johnson. His performance camouflages his elite origin and contributes to an ironic closeness. However, he is not merely doing clownish humour; rather, he is fusing his aura, which he has been cultivating for a year, with self-satirical humour made by expert PR strategists and expert meme makers (Beck 2023, 14).

6. Conclusion

The dissertation made significant contributions to the research on strategic political humour and parodic communication. This conclusion summarises how the research questions were

answered, in what ways specific parts enriched the project, and how the thesis came together as a whole. As has been shown, professional political humour is increasingly used strategically by state actors for their aims, especially as part of public diplomacy. After a concise state of the art on humour research in IR and a description of the research gap concerning state actors, the central humour-related IR debates were described and linked to the case studies. After outlining further theoretical assumptions and the development of a methodological approach, four effects of strategic humour were presented as findings and discussed. These effects are: 1) an expanded language for politics through entertainment; (2) provocation through professional content; (3) camouflage and distraction; and (4) isolation against critique and claims of legitimacy. Overall, the central output can be summarised in the following way: Strategic political humour means using parody for an extended language of politics, provocation, distraction and isolation against critique for the means of legitimation. Due to strategic humour´s camouflaging and distracting effects, it is also likely to be applied in contexts in which it intuitively seems least appropriate.

Regarding the research question about content and strategies of humorous communication, the answer can be found in professional parodic humour. Following the analysis here, parodic humour can be seen as part of the strategy of state actors. Especially the insights on parody as a humour style with particular effects and its use in political communication add valuable insights to humour studies in IR and visual global politics. The analysed state actors adapted new and creative ways of communication through parody, which enables distraction through an ambiguous mix of play and attack (Beck 2022, 2023; Beck and Spencer 2021). Parody provides a convincing and likeable style of communication, makes easy points for criticism impossible and shifts the focus directly onto the parodic performances (Beck 2022, 2023), away from political issues. Critique is specifically complicated through parody as the original text is not always clear and the media and critics fall into the trap (Beck 2022, 12–13) or focus on minor details. The changing ethos and spirit of parody, which are presented in detail, are not critical anymore and are not aiming at ridicule. Instead, the proper use of parody leads to a new deployment of amusement about or respect for the original text.

Parodies can achieve the widest possible audiences through funny imitations of popular culture used for the creation of political spectacles. Additionally, parody is aiming at the provocation and stimulation of reactions from an intended audience. This enables long-term effects as memetic structures and the parody-typical homages to the text are re-created, imitated and shared by critics and supporters. Parodic humor often challenges established

power structures and narratives, offering an actor specific perspective on power imbalances. Through this lens, it cultivates a sense of closeness and shared understanding. Political power can be reinforced by manipulating diverse perceptions, such as engaging in the tradition of carnival-style critique of those in higher positions, as demonstrated by Johnson (Beck 2022, 13). This became visible in manifold ways and has often been overlooked by not taking humour seriously.

Therefore, parody provides strategy wise the perfect basis for a successful and impactful political communication that attracts the attention of new audiences. This is relevant as humour supports the creation of legitimacy and a sanitation of political problems as well as a crossing of boundaries between IR spheres and civilian everyday life. Often, seemingly easy solutions are made plausible through humorous meaning making and contribute to formations of identity and narratives of self-identity that can all be seen as everyday dimensions of IR.

Coming to the question regarding the deployment of political humour, it has been shown that it is comparatively easy for state actors to deploy humour in their official communication. The aforementioned shift in public diplomacy and communication in international politics towards humour would not have been possible without certain developments in technology and forms of communication. Online media enables an extended range and potential for dissemination that was only possible before for powerful media actors and now enables new ways for state actors to exercise power. Visuality as a main element of the study of popular culture in IR is well liked in online communication and has brought the circulation of humorous narratives in the form of images, videos and memes into new dimensions. This supported humour´s shift and change from counterculture towards everyday mainstream media and being a widely-used tool for the means of public diplomacy in (international) politics. All the described issues are enabled through state actors being their own producers, as is possible through social media. Suitable for strategies of legitimation is direct communication in popular spheres through communication on an eye-level which is enabled by humour.

Responsible for the communication on an eye-level are the producers of parody for political means. These are professional companies with an understanding of communication on social media or companies who produce humorous entertainment like late night shows. Some started as normal social media users who created their own memes and later professionalised.

Certain mechanisms for managing anxiety and security, such as suspension of critical thinking and fun, are immanent to humour. They are possible to achieve through parodic performances, using spectacle, emotional content, directly addressed audiences, levity and play to signal transparency regarding an individual's weaknesses, which is included in the paradox concept of authenticity.

These effects are quite ambiguous as there are problematic tendencies that are connected to humour, camouflage and visibility. The impact of this new professionality in political humour can be visible in the trivialisation and simplification of politics. Attractive and popular humour often leads to one-sided power dynamics in discourses in advantage of powerful state actors. The invisibility of outsiders of jokes or victims can be quite obvious in parodic narratives when certain groups are excluded from official governmental communication or others are just declared as heroes (Beck 2022). Furthermore, certain political actors can become almost invisible in discourses and the public, which is due to the leadership-oriented communication like happened to British politicians in 2019 (Beck 2023, 8).

Implications of sophisticated parodic humour are that the reactions are more and more foreseeable for the state actors due to the specific planning and platforms for publication, target audiences and strategies for references and provocation. The results are laughter and less critical viewers. The utilization of parodic humor can wield significant influence, potentially fostering a sense of indifference toward politics. This effect arises because the serious repercussions of political events—such as those following Brexit, the COVID-19 pandemic, or war— are often hidden and camouflaged by humour. Politics is made to be an entertaining part of the everyday. Prolonged consequences can be seen in a depoliticisation of the public and a growing need and demand for spectacle within politics.

Besides the answers to the research questions, this project adds new advances in methodological approaches, like the use of narrative analysis for studying parody and forms of humour in general. Moreover, it provides an advancement of the DHA in which the main contribution is providing a theoretically solid analytical structure for humour research in political science. The adjusted version of the DHA is highly suitable for dealing with parody as the category's context, strategies and linguistic realisation are tailored to the characteristics of parody in politics. When dealing with linguistic realisation, the purpose of the analyses is to find example forms of imitation, often visual elements.

The dissertation has some unavoidable limitations as well. It could have used systematically collected reactions from different levels for doing a full reception analysis. However, it was about understanding what is behind the phenomenon and not about causality. In addition, non-democratic actors and their use of humour would have been interesting as well, as current research demonstrates. Lastly, it is worth noting that the generalisability of the effects could be enhanced by including other contextual elements or points of view to minimise the personalised subjective interpretations of the humorous content.

This finally leads to a short outlook. For the future, there are definitely new challenges in IR-based research on political humour as a practice of communication and as a style of politics. A closer look on the combination of different semiotic resources for the professional production of humour could be beneficial. Changes will be observable regarding the target audience through content and platforms, as well as humour forms like memes or TikTok-specific content. They will become even more widely spread and more invasive into any debate. Furthermore, the use of humour in authoritarian systems or the rise of humour and (un)funniness against all odds seem to provide further interesting objects of study, as the crises and democratic backsliding are going on. A last observation in this context is that the failure of humour might be less problematic than often assumed, as the aim can still be fulfilled because it is seen as humour. It does not need to work for everyone but being perceived as funny by certain audiences can be enough.

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Article 1

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Just a bit of fun: the camouflaging and defending functions of humour in recruitment videos of the British and Swedish armed forces

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Abstract *This article contributes to the growing literature regarding humor in international politics, focusing on satirical and comedic narratives in the recruitment videos of the British and Swedish armed forces. Although these official recruitment videos – published on each militaries' respective YouTube channel – are, perhaps surprisingly, often funny and entertaining, there is little research on the roles, functions and employment of humour by actors involved in international affairs. We argue that the methodological apparatus provided by narrative analysis can provide valuable insight, and is a helpful tool for analyzing humourous audio-visual content. We show that the use of humour by the armed forces functions both to camouflage and to insulate, simultaneously obscuring and supporting a process of militarization of everyday life whilst making criticism of the videos' political messages more difficult.*

Introduction

The role of humour has only recently gained attention in International Relations (IR) (Kuusisto 2009; Kuipers 2011; Hall 2014; Payne 2017; Adler-Nissen and Tsinovoi 2019). We hope to add to this growing literature by showing what can be learnt by incorporating insights from humour studies into International Relations (IR). In particular, the focus will be on the multidimensional use of humour by the British and Swedish armed forces.

This case is interesting as militaries - occasional gaffs irrespective - are not generally perceived to be hotbeds of fun and laughter; rather, they are widely considered to be composed of serious, tight-lipped actors concerned with questions of life and death, those most pressing and dangerous of political considerations. Yet, as our paper will show, the two militaries under study defy popular expectations by consciously employing humour in their communications with the general public. This observation supports an often made assertion in the literature, positing an 'intersection between humour and political communication' (Davis, Love, and Killen 2018, 3898). Such a phenomenon is considered explicable by reference to the ability of humour, as a rhetorical mechanism, to achieve significantly higher amounts of public attention than stoic communication. Drawing on the insights of Hayden White, we will examine the dominant narratives found in four recruitment videos published by the British and Swedish armed forces, analyzing their two central narrative genres: comedy and satire. Specifically, the article will employ a method of narrative

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analysis which focuses primarily on three narrative elements - setting, characterization and emplotment.

The article focuses on two research questions: 1.) How is humour deployed by British and Swedish armed forces in recruitment videos? 2.) What political consequences does the use of humour by armed forces have?

This article hopes to prove both that militaries employ humorous narrative genres – primarily comedy and satire which will later be explained in detail - and that this employment of humour has both a camouflaging and defensive effect: 1.) The use of humour is a means of camouflaging militarism by aiding the diffusion of the 'military' sphere into the everyday lives of normal civilians. 2.) The use of humour works to insulate political actors from criticism, as the arguments made can be defended as 'only a bit of fun'.

In demonstrating the accuracy of this thesis, the article will be structured as follows. Part one will give an overview of the existing literature on the role of humour in IR, while part two will go on to outline the central ideas underpinning the genres of comedy and satire whilst elaborating on the narrative analysis method. Part three will then apply this methodological and generic framework to four widely viewed military recruitment videos – two British and two Swedish – each available on YouTube. Part four will outline the relevance of the analysis by elucidating the camouflaging and defending function of humour in these videos, and in politics in general.

Humour studies in international relations

Scholars of critical geopolitics have recently begun to focus on the importance of humour in their field. They see the potential for jokes to act as both emancipatory phenomena and coping mechanisms, (Ridanpää 2014b, 453) and consider humour a powerful boundary tool because it supports the construction of different group-identities. (Dodds and Kirby 2013, 55). According to Juha Ridanpää, the main topics of such studies include the role of humour when dealing with topics like social marginalization, group cohesion and its use for political satire but also as a political tool (Ridanpää 2014a). As Morreall recognizes, politicians instrumentalize humour 'to reduce the harshness of bad news, to defuse criticisms made against them, and to make opponents seem foolish' (Morreall 2005, 74). Such attempts by politicians to utilize humour as a means of avoiding criticism either of their conduct or policies are effective only when their evasive intentions are not obvious: an example of a failed attempt to instrumentalize humour in this way might be seen in George W. Bush's attempted trivialization of questions regarding weapons of mass destruction in Iraq (Ibid. 75-76).[1]

Studies of this topical area in the field of IR have focused predominantly on the combination of oral and visual elements of humour, with particular emphasis on the latter. The interest in humour in IR is therefore closely linked to the aesthetic turn – a growing interest in the role of representations and popular culture in politics as most research does not focus on traditional

[1] "Standing in his office, Bush looked under his desk and behind a chair. With a smirk, he quipped that he had looked everywhere but hadn't been able to find weapons of mass destruction" (Morreall 2005, 76).

verbal 'knock knock' jokes but rather examines some form of visual material. When analysing visual and audio-visual content, the theoretical distinction between mimetic and aesthetic forms of representation in international politics becomes important for our understanding of the subject-matter (Bleiker 2001). The mimetic approach sees instances of representation as presenting their chosen material in an authentic and realistic manner, desiring to show them as they are. The aesthetic approach, by contrast, assumes the existence of a distinction between signifier and signified, between representation and the thing represented. For Roland Bleiker, the field of representation 'is the very location of politics' (Bleiker 2001, 510): it might be seen as 'an important site where power, ideology and identity are constituted, produced and/or materialized' (Grayson et al 2009, 156).

Humour is an important form of political aesthetics in liberal societies 'insofar as […] [it] enact[s] logics of incessant question and challenge, while also working to exceed and unsettle the boundaries of liberal politics' (Holm 2017, 200).Holm in particular understands political aesthetics as 'the aesthetic aspect of a text—its form, style, palette, rhythm, narrative, structure and form—can do political work, by which I mean it can it intercede in the negotiation, contestation and distribution of power' (Ibid: 12). Generally, humour and [other] aesthetic products serve to empower political messages by acting as catalysts both for their internal processes of meaning making and for their external distribution (Ibid: 190).

The sociologist Anton Zijderveld sees humour as 'playing with meanings' (Zijderveld 1983, 6). For him, to joke is to play with meanings in different spheres of social life (ibid. 7). Humour - particularly satirical humour - plays with these significations, often suggesting the opposite of what is meant, leading to surprise upon this perceived incongruity, a feeling which provokes amusement. Holm sees humour as an 'aesthetic mode that calls upon the audience to entertain at least two conflicting frames simultaneously' (Holm 2017, 192). Humour, therefore, is a phenomenon which, by the very nature of the mechanics by which it functions, is dependent upon intertextuality. Humour does not exist in isolation, but rather always relates to (if not occupying a component part of) other pre-existing narratives (Bakhtin 1986; Kristeva 1980). As Lene Hansen (2006, 55) points out, 'the inimitability of every individual text [including humour] is always located within a shared textual space; all texts make reference, explicitly or implicitly, to previous ones, and in doing so they both establish their own reading and become mediations on the meaning and status of others'. In other words, humour is based on expectations. The understanding of funniness is based on the frames' content, their coherence and the diversion between them. Without an adequate level of inter-frame coherence, the incongruity will be too large, meaning the humour will not be registered and the 'joke' will slide instead into the realm of the strange, the absurd (ibid. 192). Even Morreall, however, who is for many the father of incongruity theory, sees the function of incongruity as a mechanism for producing amusement as being insufficient to properly explain amusement as a phenomenon (Morreall 2009, 249).

We want to focus on a different kind of incongruity, one which is observable not only at the micro-level of the content. In the case of humorous military recruitment videos, there is an essential incongruity between the

unexpectedly humorous nature of the medium and the serious nature the underlying message - composed as it is of questions of life and death (Morreall 1999, 16) - which viewers recognize in narratives told by military actors. The following section will focus on humour in narratives, with a particular focus on the two genres of comedy and satire, both of which employ humour on different levels and in different ways.

Narrative analysis and genre

The concept of narrative as a general category is well established in IR (Miskimmon et al 2013; Spencer 2016). A number of scholars have engaged with the concept in analyses of such highly disparate phenomena as national identity (Campbell 1998), security (Hansen 2006; Krebs 2015), foreign policy (Ringmar 1996; Browning 2008; Oppermann and Spencer 2016), violent non-state actors (Kruck and Spencer 2013; Spencer 2019) and public opinion (De Graaf et al 2015). Although a consensus on the precise component-parts that constitute a 'narrative' is lacking both in the field of IR and in wider academia, some argue (citing the insights of narratology and scholars such as Hayden White (1973)) that narratives are made up of specific elements including a *setting*, a form of *characterization* and, as mentioned above, some idea of *emplotment* (Oppermann and Spencer 2016; 2018; Spencer 2016, 2). Setting describes where the story takes place, including time, social surrounding and mood (Toolan 2001, 41). Characterization refers to the description of the participating actors. It consists of a portrayal of the protagonist's physical appearance – their clothes, their style, and so on - but also involves gestures, such as facial expression and direct articulation (Fludernik 2009, 46; Herman and Vervaeck 2007, 227). Emplotment stands for 'the way setting, characters and events are (temporally and causally) connected to each other' (Spencer 2016, 2). Without emplotment, there would be no reason for any given characterization or behaviour (Somers 1994, 617; Ewick and Silbey 1995, 200; Patterson and Renwick Monroe 1998, 316). These are interdependent categories whose overlapping nature means that they are often difficult to differentiate. Setting and characterization, for example, can provide the reason for a certain type of emplotment as they give reasons for the progression of a story: similarly, characterization sets the stage for emplotment, just as a specific setting is a precondition for certain emplotments.

According to Hayden White's analysis of 19th century historiography, there are certain specific mechanisms by which an author can instil meaning into stories. A chronological and neutral listing of events is not seen as sufficient by the audience. One way in which meaning can be added, *inter alia*, is through the 'Mode of Emplotment' (White 1973, 29), a mechanism which is specific to the creation of narrative meaning (Martínez and Scheffel 2012, 173). White takes four modes of emplotment from a typology by the literature scientist Northrop Frye: romance, tragedy, comedy and satire (White 1973, 7-11). These archetypical schemes or genres can be used to give different meaning to the same historical events. Even if mixed forms and combinations are possible, there are only the four main types (Ringmar 2006, 404). A story can be understandable because it follows a certain scheme (Martínez and Scheffel 2012, 167).

Modes of emplotment or narrative genres make it easier to anticipate the development of stories and thereby create a tie between the presented events and the audience. Narrative genres remove the unfamiliarity and mystery of represented events by focusing on well-known patterns in a general and recognizable way (White 1978, 86). Such genres are very common, and inherent to everyday life and communication: they constitute a way in which people both make sense of their life and understand the feeling and intentions of one another. Genre can be understood as a story-telling convention or narrative style. As Baumann (1999, 84) holds, a genre is 'a constellation of systematically related, co-occurrent formal features and structures that serves as a conventionalized orienting framework for the production and reception of a particular kind of text'. In other words, it is a framework, code or set of expectations dictating perceptions of the direction a story is seen as likely to be to be going in (Chandler 1997, 1-15). Such an understanding of genre is based on the assumption that audiences of narratives within a given genre are already familiar with the basic elements of the genre from previous encounters with other texts. Genre therefore is 'an intertextual concept': (Wales 1989, 259) it can be considered 'a practical device for helping any mass medium to produce consistently and efficiently and to relate its production to the expectations of its customers' (McQuail 1987, 200) from their previous readings. Narrative analysis and narrative genre are also present in film studies, and the importance of including narratology in film studies is emphasized by scholars such as Monika Fludernik (2008, 355-357).

Comedy

For Morreall, comedy is in opposition to tragedy - and while tragedy stands for militarism, comedy stands for antimilitarism and pacifism (Morreall 1999, 34). Comedies are composed of a series of difficulties and hurdles, which are followed by a final resolution. Often there is humour generated by incongruence or misunderstanding during this process. Metaphorically, in a comedic narrative there is the travel from a restricted world to a world which enables characters to fulfil their aspirations (Forchtner 2016, 34). Comedy is not known for being hostile, absolute or uncompromising; it is more reconciliatory than satire (Kuusisto 2018, 173), often containing the removal of hostile characters (Frye 2000, 165). Comedy is about the renewal of antiquated social units through reformist protagonists who change reactionary characters (Stern 1995, 168). Said differently, comedy has a modernizing and progressive nature.

On the level of setting, comedy is grounded in the tasks, problems and issues we face in everyday reality. This does not mean that a comedy cannot be set in a fictional world, but that the humours elements in many instances revolve around things the audience is familiar with (family life, for example - everyday household tasks or personal relationships). Comedy also tends to involve a process of integrating the protagonist in the society he belongs naturally to (Frye 2000, 44). There are various possible characterizations in comedy: it might be about ordinary people in a broad social context (Payne 2013, 9) or rather focus on 'someone with a good deal of social prestige and power' (Frye 2000, 169). The protagonist can be an average person, which enlarges the illustrative potential (Payne 2013, 9). In the end, the problems and errors are

resolved: (Ringmar 2006, 406) comedies are generally emplotted to include a happy ending, which also entails a didactic moral judgement, since it is seen by the audience as the state in which things should be (Frye 2000, 167). Comedies usually end in reconciliation between antagonistic parties, a moment which is presented as a triumph in which the characters standing for the new order are successful (Luhman 2005, 18; Stern 1995, 167). In the end there is an affirmative transformation for the society and the characters are mentally stronger, (Luhman 2005, 17) which coheres with Morrealls assertions regarding the pacifistic nature of comedic vision (Morreall 1999, 34).

Satire

Satire, one of the observed narrative types, is often misleadingly used synonymously with irony. These two categories, however, are emphatically differentiated: '[i]ronýs key characteristic is an attitude of detachment, a feeling of distance […]. Irony is not a distinct narrative genre but makes a parody of, first and foremost, romance/melodrama and their attitudes of certainty' (Forchtner 2016, 33). Satire, on the other hand, is defined by Frye as an attack using humour - without humour, such an attack is merely denunciation (Frye 2000, 224).

Satire presents the discrepancy between ideals and real life in entertaining ways. The observer's reaction to satire is generally less emphatic, entailing appreciative smiling as opposed to loud laughter (Zijderveld 1983, 19). Satire can use humour for moralistic effects, attempting 'to balance the fictional and the real in order to amuse and to educate in more or less equal measure' (Hall 2014, 222). The setting, therefore, does not have to be in the world we live in, but some kind of connection or relation has to be there. A kind of frontier crossing in a broad sense is needed, since the humour is based on something grotesque or absurd, or on fantasy in relation to the real world (Frye 2000, 224).

With respect to characterization, satire 'uses techniques of exaggeration, caricature, and ridicule to create humour in a situation' (Thorogood 2016, 3). As Kuusisto (2018, 163) points out, '[i]ronic and satiric stories portray incoherent characters and incomprehensible events, violent clashes and total havoc'. In irony there is a difference between the obvious meaning and the hidden meaning (ibid. 167). Satire often uses irony when claiming something contrary to what the viewers know to be reality as a means of highlighting the variance between two phenomena (Hall 2014, 222). Through its emplotment, satire functions both to amuse and to upset; it wants the audience to register its comedic appreciation, even if only by a grin. Satire is not only entertainment, it is also a moralistic reinforcement of moral codes (ibid. 229). Satire criticizes low moral standards through its ability to shock, enrage and amuse its audience (ibid. 227). 'The basic strategy is to turn other plot structures inside-out, upside-down, or to deconstruct and reassemble them in unrecognizable patterns' (Ringmar 2006, 406).

Humour in British and Swedish recruitment videos

Social media is omnipresent and has effects not only on such wide-ranging phenomena as thinking, acting and living on the individual level (Pötzsch

2015, 80), but is also of great importance when considering military recruitment. Social media makes it much easier to produce individual content and reach a large amount of people at a low cost (Shim and Stengel 2017, 2). Social media has enabled the military to recruit in ways which were not possible before, (Davies and Philpott 2012, 45) as the military can get in touch with young potential recruits without the need for face to face contact.

Most of the militaries in Western and non-Western countries are active on social media such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube (Crilley 2016, 51). Military social media pages are very popular and through likes, shares and comments the military can reach larger audiences than via classical media and without its filtering (Crilley 2016, 52). In particular, YouTube - through its structure and mode of operation - has contributed to a new the relationship between the military and public.

It is for this reason that the following sections of this article will focus on four of the most viewed YouTube videos produced by the British and Swedish military respectively. In order to highlight the political effects of humour in the videos examined here, we will conduct a narrative analysis of military recruitment videos. We consider these commercials to be short and complete stories: they can 'be counted as examples of narrative texts' (Fludernik 2009, 58). The analysis of the videos shows the commonness of satire and comedy and how these genres theoretically contribute to camouflaging the spread of militarism and defending militaries against criticism. The videos were chosen from the official YouTube channels of the British Army (ARMYjobs) and the Swedish Armed Forces (Försvarsmakten). The analysis was carried out by focusing on analytical narrative categories of setting, characterization and emplotment. The aim was to choose influential videos in terms of absolute number of views, but also to provide an overview in terms of the different styles of satire and comedy. As mentioned earlier, humour leads to a significantly higher amount of attention and even if the viewers do not understand the joke, the campaigns get attention (Davis, Love, and Killen 2018). Therefore we have chosen two of the most successful humorous British commercials and two of the most successful humorous Swedish commercials.

ARMY TV AD 2016: Become a better you (2016)

This British video is part of the 'Become a better you' campaign and has a duration of 40 seconds. The basic idea of the campaign is inspired by a survey among 16-24 year-olds which showed open-minded and unselfish trends and the wish to do something that makes a difference in life.[2] The videos involve some reverse psychology, using messages such as 'dont become a better you' and 'dont join the army' and play such techniques by relating them to young peoplés desire for self-improvement. By early 2019, the commercial had more than 828.000 views on YouTube.

In the commercial, three girls are walking in a park and are talking about their plans for the future. Two of the girls are talking, while the other (positioned on the right) is silent, only laughing occasionally. The dialogue opens

[2] https://www.campaignlive.co.uk/article/army-dont-become-better-you-karmarama/1380239.

with a question: ‘What about us, then?’ ‘Don't join the army’, the girl in the middle replies confidently, while the companion on her left answers with negative suggestions: ‘don't learn something new, something that matters’, she advises, and ‘don't leave here’. This latter girl, when the disagreement is at its peak, suggests that the group ‘don't prove them all wrong’. After a moment of silence, she continues: ‘basically, don't become a better me’, a sentence she follows with the suggestion ‘let's get some food’. This final proposition is answered, in turn, by a joking response from the middle girl: ‘is that an order?’ At this the three girls break into laughter, before the one on the left replies ‘you are funny’, pointing to the middle girl, whose gesture and smile indicate consent concerning the stance towards the army and seeing it as an exciting job. In the end, the girls walk away from the camera as on-screen script fades in: ‘DONT JOIN THE ARMY’. After a moment, the ‘DONT’ disappears.

This commercial can be considered a comedy. As noted, the commercial is set in a park, and the dialect of the girls makes clear that they are in London or in one of the suburbs. The exchange, in short, is clearly happening in the recognizable, everyday world with which the viewership is familiar. This relatable quality suggests that we should categorize the sketch as a comedy, cohering as it does with Frye's (2000, 44) cited example of a comedic setting (walking down the street chatting to friends). The houses in the background are low and old-fashioned, a quintessential feature of everyday British urban life. The characterization of the three girls casts two of them as antagonistic, while the other one is only a spectator. The girl in the middle has a clear opinion about the army, and cannot understand why the girl on the left wants to join the army. The girl on the left is genuinely convinced that the army can bring benefits and sees it as a great chance for her future. The emplotment results in a constructive and feel-good happy ending. There is a compromise between the two girls and the comedy typical progressive view is dominant, even if the army-supporting girl has to tolerate the joke about the duty and discipline, which comes in the form of the quip (‘is that an order?’) that follows her suggestion to get food. This joke about discipline - which the middle girl connects to the desire to eat - contains incongruity, which results in humour (Buijzen and Valkenburg 2004, 148).

Both main characters are ordinary girls, and their opinions appear to be representative of widely-held societal viewpoints about the military. The girl on the left is presented as a progressive character tasked with overcoming an obstacle, represented by the anti-army stance of the girl in the middle. The prior girl's victory - which removes an obstacles by changing the viewpoint of a reactionary character – is an archetypally reforming element, one which is typical of comedy (Stern 1995, 168). The wider gendered composition of the commercial – which sees an exclusively female group talking about the military, an institution often associated with masculinity - might also be seen as a comedy-typical modernization.

The girls reach a shared understanding, and the army stands for something ‘that matters’, where the consequences of discipline are connected to getting food in a humorous way rather than contemplating the ‘real’ consequences and dangers of jointing the army. Discipline and orders are seen as analogous to the suggestion of getting food, which is an incongruous dynamic. The joke

helps the girl to escape the discussion and to remove critical expressions (Adorno 1997, 64, quoted in Holm 2017, 184). As is consistent with Morreall, the comedic narrative here is pacifistic. The incongruity is presented in a way which people can live with and are pleasured by, (Morreall 1999, 5) a feature which displays the intentionality of humour. Throughout the happy ending there are positive feelings and laughter which override the conflict about the army. In addition, the commercial as a whole provides an example of incongruity on a meta level: it entails the military (a traditionally masculine institution) producing a commercial presenting itself as the architect of young girls′ future perspectives.

Your army needs you, and your stamina (2019)

This video is part of the 2019 campaign which targets Millennials, or 'Snowflakes'. Here a teenager is shown playing a games console. His father complains that he 'can't get him off that thing. Up all night, he is'. Through a time lapse there is a connection to soldiers on a truck in a war zone, the commercial's second setting. 'Stamina. Don't underestimate it!', exclaims one of them, while the truck is driving through the night in dessert-like scenery. Meanwhile, having failed his previous game, the boy starts a new one in a state of visibly heightened concentration. Again in a war zone, a soldier shouts 'dedication', before a female soldier carrying a stretcher adds: 'That's what we need'. The boy in front of his console lifts his gaze, himself now resembling a soldier in the war zone, and then is with his console again. Then script is faded in: 'Your Army needs you'.

There are three different settings of the video. The first one is the house in which the boy plays his console, the second setting is the dessert-like war zone, and the animated scenery of the video game might be seen as a third setting. According to the soldiers′ voices, the boy is characterized by 'stamina' and 'dedication', characteristics which are apparently incongruous with his characterization as a gamer. He has a focused gaze, and after receiving a 'game over' message he immediately starts a new game, refusing to give up. The emplotment transmutes the story of a video gamer into the story of a teenager who displays praiseworthy compassion and dedication, making him an ideal candidate for the army. As such, the commercial appears satirical, and humour is elicited through the incongruity of the two worlds. The stark difference between the commercial's settings, the frustration of expected plot structures and the playing with stereotypes about video gamers qualify the video as a satire. Stamina while playing computer games becomes a positive characteristic, despite video gamers' commonly being perceived as 'unpopular, overweight, and socially inept' (Kowert, Festl, Quandt 2014, 141). This represents an incongruity between expectation and the presented narrative.

The connection between the video gamer, his stamina and the action-filled war zone give the impression that the situations are similar. The oft criticised gaming habits of teenagers are here presented as a strength which qualify them for the army and which fulfil a desperate need on the part of the military. It can be assumed that many teenagers feel that this incongruous message addresses them directly, and that the controversial meaning thus creates attention for the British Armed Forces. The two frames of a console gamer and

soldiers in a war zone are ruled incongruent since it is suggested that the gamer has exactly the qualifications which are needed to fight in a war or to function in a military setting during a situation of crisis. The characteristics which rule the young man worthy of such a role, in short, are exactly the qualities which his father complains about. The military reinterprets and recontextualizes the social practice of video gaming in order to suit its own purpose. Humour is deployed here to connect the different spheres and to remove criticism against video game players by highlighting their suitability for dangerous jobs. It is used to show some ironic self-awareness, thereby insulating against possible criticism, since the military is not taking itself seriously. Such self-effacing levity makes the message more difficult to criticize.

Swedish armed forces commercial 1: "welcome to our reality" (2011)

The Swedish commercial 'Welcome to our reality' from 2011 is part of a campaign for Basic Military Training.[3] As the title of the 'Our Reality' campaign suggests, the commercial is meant to showcase the differences between other Armed Forces and the specific realities of the Swedish military.

The commercial is divided into two parts: the first part is about what the Swedish Armed Forces cannot offer, and the second part is about the Swedish Armed Forces. In general, there is almost nothing shown about the Swedish Armed Forces, with the vast majority of the material focussing on non-Swedish militaries. There are soldiers in action shown doing their duty as marines, flying helicopters or emerging from the water with rifles in their hands. Later a group of soldiers leave their boat and, whilst running at a pace, fight their way through a snowy forest landscape beset by fire, explosions and shooting. Along with these scenes, the narrator voice addresses the viewer in English, his voice laden with irony, by listing what the Swedish Armed Forces cannot offer to their recruits, contradicting the visual image with which we are presented:

> We can't offer you an epic opening scene in which models pose like marines. We can't offer you the opportunity to suddenly rise out of the water, holding some weird futuristic weapon. We can't offer you top secret hit and run missions in unknown territories. We can't offer you ridiculously dramatic music playing in the background, or even my cool American voice (0:02-0:33).

Then comes a transition. The soldier in the focus starts screaming, runs and jumps over a wall, as the sound of explosions is overlaid. He lands in the snow and is now a friendly Swedish soldier who tells the viewer in Swedish while breathing and running with his comrades: 'But we can offer you our reality. An education which qualifies you for the job where you can make a difference, properly'. This presents the Swedish military as an educational institution while criticizing the glorification of militarism in cinema.

The commercial, therefore, essentially consists of two main settings. The first consists of vessels at the sea, followed by a snowy and forested landscape.

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[3] https://www.forsvarsmakten.se/sv/aktuellt/press/kampanjer/valkommen-till-var-verklighet-2011/.

The atmosphere is very dark and grey; the soldiers and vehicles can often only be seen as silhouettes. There is dramatic music and the sound of shooting. The setting of the Swedish reality appears completely different. It is still a snowy landscape and there is a lot of light, with colours appearing as they would in reality. This second scene, in contrast to the opening setting, is tranquil, without any sounds whose source is not visible on screen.

The visual characterization of the protagonists in the first part shows almost no faces or emotions. In the second part, by contrast, the soldiers and especially their faces are clearly visible and they are presented as likeable. The initial emplotment appears closer to the genre of romance, given the profusion of violent action occurring in seemingly foreign places and in the name of a presumably noble cause (see Spencer 2016, 39-43). The expectation of a romance, however, is disrupted through the deconstruction of the plot which elicits satire and criticises the romance-typical elements in the narrative (Ringmar 2006, 406). The narrator's voice mocks the visual image and sound used in the first part. There is a stark contrast between the stereotypical Hollywood-like warfare world and the Swedish reality. In general the stereotypical pictures are the object of attack, and the narrator makes fun of seemingly familiar situations (Buijzen and Valkenburg 2004, 162).

The stereotypical pop-cultural images and sounds of the first part, which are commonplace within cinematic renderings of warfare, are recontextualized through the ironic narratorial voice. Instead of the action-filled emplotment ruling the commercial a romance, the narrative instead morphs into a satire. This shift is emphasized by the tension between the visuals and the voice of the narrator.

The way the commercial is emplotted is entertaining, but also shows the Swedish world as an anti-war zone. The narratorial voice presents the Swedish Armed Forces as morally superior by joking about the stereotypes inherent in the parodic representation of war (Hall 2014, 227). This provides a good basis for a contrast with the peaceful and quiet Swedish scenery where people 'can make a difference'.

The Swedish Armed Forces are distanced from preceding images of combat through the deployment of humour: humour thus makes it possible here to show images of combat in a recruitment campaign. The visual content would be impossible without humour, since it is against all the pacifistic beliefs and the peacekeeping identity of Swedish citizens. The viewer has the feeling of being safe and morally superior when the Swedish Armed Forces are distinguished from a warrior-like presentation. The combination of violence and humour undermines the severity of the presented content (Blackford et al 2011, 131). Through the amusement of the viewer and the criticism of warfare, humour is deployed as a means of creating a positive image of the Swedish Armed Forces through demarcation from other countries´ militaries.

Swedish armed forces commercial 'cake'

The commercial 'Cake', in Swedish 'Tårtan', is the most successful commercial on the Swedish Armed Forces´ YouTube channel with over 321.000 views.[4] The

[4] 15.01.2019.

video is shot in such a way as to appear to have been filmed by a smartphone in portrait.

People are singing a Swedish birthday song and encourage the person celebrating his anniversary to blow out the candles on the cake in front of him. He leans too close to the candles, however, and in the process his hair catches fire. He lifts his head and looks around for a second, in the midst of horrified screams from those around him. A girl on the left is holding the birthday cake during the scene and throws it in his face to extinguish the burning hair. Then the picture freezes, video game music begins to play in the background and script is faded in: 'Are you an officer without knowing it?'. This question is immediately followed by another, again in on-screen text: 'Now we are looking for someone like you, who is good in making quick decisions under stress' and a blue screen with: 'Apply as an officer at forsvarsmakten.se'.

The commercial is set in what appears to be an everyday living room. Discounting both the singing and the screaming which ensues when the protagonist's hair is set alight, there is no comprehensible communication. The birthday boy seems to be very satisfied, but also exceedingly slow to react to his burning hair.

The emplotment appears first to utilize slapstick humour, but the tone changes quickly when the script appears and re-frames the video in a satirical context. The military is using a simple joke to show that everyone possesses qualities that suit the military. The commercial can be seen as a satirical narrative, since the girl's skill is revealed in an everyday situation before being related to the armed forces, which can be seen as two separate spheres (Frye 2000, 224). This incongruous dynamic thus stands in contrast to expectations. The introduction of the video game music upon the freezing of the picture injects a playful tone but also an air of the retro computer gaming reminiscent of childhood gaming experience, reinforcing that this is satiric emplotment. Only the inertia of the male enables the girl on the left to become the hero by reacting quickly and without showing any emotion.

The 'pie in the face' gag has a long comedic tradition, and its effect is well-established. Here, however, the action is recontextualized, since the cake is used to extinguish a fire. The intertextual element of the pie-throwing thus only initially appears to be slapstick (Gallix 2011). What initially appears a recognizable and easily classifiable action is recontextualised by the military as a means of meaning-making, in a story-arc which displays that mockery of a well-known situation which is so typical of satiric content (Buijzen and Valkenburg 2004, 162).

Again humour is used to stage self-depreciation. The script, in deeming that the girl's actions are sufficient to indicate her possession of those qualities required for officerhood, heightens the simplistic action of throwing a cake. The birthday party is connected to the world of the military, a professional sphere which requires a particular set of skills – skills which are, of course, generally seen as antithetical to those required by the commercial's social setting. This explains the clip's successful garnering of humour by way of incongruity, an amusing feature which is only established by the late addition of the script ('Are you an officer without knowing?') The music, on the other hand, mitigates the seriousness of the comparison by emploting it as satire, as well as joking about the incongruity created through the cake-throwing for

extinguishing fire. Here humour is deployed to connect the commercial to other well-known narratives, and also to associate the military with comedy. Humour brings the world of the military closer to everyday reality by stressing that the military is neither unexceptional nor far removed from the generic experience of normal people. Humour functions here in a self-depreciating way, which makes the task of criticizing the commercial a difficult one.

Functions of humour in IR: camouflaging and defending militarism

Scholars have pointed out that the British and Swedish armed forces are both 'using post-materialistic and market-driven arguments, values, and promises' (Strand and Berndtsson 2015, 245) to attract recruits, who often enlist due to the promise of personal and professional advancement. In both countries, the respective armed forces promote themselves as something approaching an educational institution. The risks and dangers of the real job as a member of the armed forces are hidden by a 'hegemonic and unchallenged quest for self-fulfilment and self-enterprise among individuals in neoliberal societies of the global North' (ibid.). The young person's universal desire for self-fulfilment, in short, meets the logic of the neo-liberal state (ibid. 245). Beyond this, they use humour in military recruitment videos to achieve two distinct functions: firstly, as a means of masking a process of militarisation of society and, secondly, in hopes of immunizing militaries from criticism.

Camouflaging militarism

James Der Derian, in his book 'Virtuous War' (Der Derian 2009), argues that it is impossible to define the border between military power and power of other kinds. He introduced the term 'Military-Industrial-Media-Entertainment-Network', (Stavrianakis and Selby 2012, 65) which describes the power of the media and the entertainment industry as working together with armed forces to the benefit of these military institutions and the other way round. This observation is particularly true in the case of the US; there are close connections between the Pentagon and the entertainment industry (Stahl 2010, 3). The development of social media - which had not reached its present level of popular usage when Der Derian wrote his book – has ruled the 'virtuous' representation of war to be near ubiquitous.

Armed forces are seizing culture by using social media channels such as YouTube - and in particular by engaging in a humorous output on said mediums - in order to present military content as apolitical and completely ordinary. 'Consequently, to understand what militarization does, we must analyse the political efforts that go into the construction of common sense' (Åhäll 2015, 64). Åhäll thinks 'of militarization as forming part of the not-so-obvious practices, relationships and politics of militarism in the everyday' (ibid.). Militarism is here understood as a 'belief in those relationships directly linked to military institutions, soldiering and practices of warfare' (ibid: 68). For Åhäll, militarization is an elaborated mechanism by which a militaristic society is normalized, while militarism is a public demonstration of militaristic ideology. Analysing militarization means uncovering first how a military character

is established, and then how such a trait comes to proliferate society as an unquestioned norm (ibid. 68). According to Jackson, militarization consists of two main assumptions: 'national security is best achieved via military security' and 'the military is good, natural and necessary' (Jackson 2016, 70). Militarization is about the adoption and acceptance of military values in everyday life, as well as about acknowledging their demands as normal and beneficial (ibid. 68). 'As a process of bringing military values into civilian life, militarization often relies on everyday items to shift these values into the everyday' (Jackson 2017, 2). Susan Jackson shows that the digital artefacts of popular culture can contribute to a normalization of the military in everyday life (Jackson 2016, 69). '[T]hrough the content they convey and the location where they are found' (Jackson 2017, 16) such artefacts are 'a key element of militarization' (Jackson 2017, 2). We hold that the use of humour eases the transition of the military into the everyday, as it creates a closer bond of sympathy between the articulator and recipient: the average person likes people who are funny.

When the content which is produced by the military appears on YouTube or Facebook – appearing alongside entertaining videos or photos of family and friends - then the military has succeeded in becoming a part of the private life of citizens, which would be impossible without social media (Shepherd 2017, 3). The videos 'have the potential to normalize military values in civilian life' (Jackson 2017, 2). They contribute to the generation of violence by erasing otherwise 'contested areas of social life from democratic engagement' (Davies and Philpott 2012, 42). Humour here is a tool which pushes the boundaries of what can be said, and constitutes an important means of communication which takes attention away from certain content.

Through the use of social media and the employment of humorous content, the military becomes a part of everyday life. Humour reduces the strain experienced by the audience when viewing exciting scenes. It can also help the audience to dismiss otherwise unsavoury aspects of a given production (Blackford et al 2011, 123). The covering of violent content with humour is called 'camouflage' (Potter and Warren 1998, 43). Humour 'has the potential to desensitize viewers to violent acts and add to the likability of advertisements' (Blackford et al 2011, 127). The combination of violence and humour reduces the severity of the presented material, and there is thus a greater chance that violent portrayals will be favoured if mitigated by humour (ibid. 131). The consequences of 'postmodern humor' (Ibid. 198) make it possible to present issues in a manner which would not otherwise be possible with certain topics.

Defending against critique

In a manner which is closely much related to the aforementioned mechanisms by which militarism is camouflaged, the use of humour creates for the viewer a feeling of being close to the subject matter, which makes it more difficult to criticize. When people expect to be entertained by aesthetics, they are less sceptical about that which is being represented than they are when watching or reading the news or the official messages of a government (Martin and Steuter 2010, 52). Whilst videos and films are, of course, not a direct representation of reality, in the case of the military it is difficult to get information

from anywhere else, since only a few viewers have personal experiences and observations. The majority of the consumers are compelled to trust the narratives which are presented to them (Kuusisto 2009, 602).

During interactions between groups and individuals, humour is often central. It provides an ever-present exit out of awkward situations, as either conversing party can neglect the serious impacts or contents of a humorous message by playing with its meaning (ibid. 378). This dynamic, however, can also be seen as a danger. Adorno, for example, views humour as an annihilator of critical expressions, since it is used for amusement instead of taking contemporary grievances seriously. For him, humour helps us to tolerate unpleasant conditions (Adorno 1997, quoted in Holm 2017, 183). According to Davies' and Philpott's (2012, 54) reading of Adrono and Horkheimer 'popular culture promoted consumerism, the pursuit of entertainment and the satisfaction of individual desires', an effect which is antithetical to critical thinking. Humour can be used both as a means of resistance against hegemonic power but also as a tool by which to defend the status quo against critique (Kuipers 2008, 372). Since opposition through jokes and satire is only temporarily useful and eases situations where conflict is likely, the function to control is more essential (ibid. 373).

Humour is a tool by which topics which might be difficult to broach if approached stoically – violence, for instance – can be presented in a more palatable manner through the injection of levity. (Blackford et al 2011). Since humour is constituted, in essential terms, by a feeling of amusement about a given object, it involves both practical and 'cognitive disengagement' (Morreall 2005, 68). For Morreall, humour and emotion are antithetical categories: humour, by his argument, fails to qualify as an emotion due to its eschewal of the 'survival instinct' associated with other emotions. Humour, following this logic, can be said to block emotions, a mechanism which can be used to lessen peoples' fear, to calm them when angry, or to motivate them (Morreall 1983, 302). There is, however, no fixed scientific definition delineating what exactly can be classified as an emotion, and this laxity of definition enables a central criticism of Morreall's theory (Dadlez 2011, 1). Some researchers see amusement as an emotion (ibid), where others conclude that the word emotion 'has no generally accepted definition' (Izard 2010: 370). One solution can be to see humour as 'a form of play. When a group of people suspends practical and noetic concern to simply enjoy what they are doing in a nonserious way, they are playing' (Morreall 2009, 253).

When people are in the humorous mode of play 'the rules of logic, the expectations of common sense, the laws of science and demands of propriety are all potentially in abeyance' (Mulkay 1988, 37, in: Kuipers 2008, 381). One consequence of this phenomenon is that people do not analyse information with the same critical attitude as they do when approaching data with a serious eye. As such, viewers could see violence as adequate and pleasant when it is presented with a humorous connotation (Blackford et al 2011, 131). In the analysed examples, humour is always deployed with the intention of creating incongruity not only by means of the commercials' explicit content, but also - on a meta-level - by shaping the comedic narrative since comedy is normally linked to pacifism.

Conclusion

The central themes of the commercials analysed above – which also constitute the militaries' main arguments for joining the army - are as follows: an adventure which can be pursued by those with normal civilian qualifications, self-improvement, escaping the civilian life, becoming sufficiently qualified to start a desirable career and making a substantive difference. These ideas are also used to change dominant cultural perceptions of the military, and to present the members of the armed forces as friendly and likeable people. Armed forces try, through humour and self-depreciation, to shape their identity and to attempt to create proximity to the audience and potential recruits (Milkowska-Samul 2013, 43-48). Humour enables the communication of new ideas, which would be difficult to impart without their being framed with a degree of levity.

Scenes from everyday life are exploited through intertextuality and recontextualization. This enables connections to be made between the image of the military presented by the commercials and civilian life or social practices, alongside other famous films and texts, a set of links which support the telling of the narratives (Spencer 2016, 37-39). Intertextuality is present in all the videos and facilitates that process which is so central to making the commercial feel close to peoples' lives: the integration of social practices. It is also intended to camouflage the severity of a topic and its consequences while still delivering the message.

The videos create connections and analogies between common civil situations and the military. These linkages are made by means of joking about stereotypes and addressing their own values. The practice of reinterpreting everyday activities can be observed here. In the analysed videos, armed forces use narrative types to be humorous or to present the job as an adventure which can be done by those with normal civilian qualifications. This leads to an incapacitation of the viewer's ability to reflect critically, as is seen in 'Welcome to our reality'. Humour helps to hide the consequences and camouflage the negative aspects of the presented information. The incongruity theory seems to explain most dimensions of humour, though limitations can be seen in the vagueness of explanations regarding when incongruity leads to amusement and when not. The multidimensionality of humour is clearly an area which requires further research – a fact which is unsurprising, given humour's relative infancy as a topic in the sphere of IR. There are many important dimensions of humour beyond its aforementioned abilities to garner increased attention, play with meaning and insulate against criticism. Further study, with particular reference to specific case studies, is also required to elucidate the importance of humour in expanding the boundaries of what can be acceptably said.

Armed forces take pains to connect the military roles they are advertising to typical situations of civilian life. They achieve this in part by playing with meaning through humour and building connections through intertextuality, neither of which methods are meant to be taken too seriously. However, it might be argued that there are many factors which contribute to militarization: the location of the videos, their entertainment qualities, the parallels with other pop-culture products and also the connections made to civil practices which let the military appear to be natural and good. In all of the commercials

analyzed above, humour works to expand the boundaries of what can be said: after all, it is 'just a bit of fun'.

Videos

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Article 2

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'Our Sofa was the Front'- Ontological Insecurity and the German Government's Humourous Heroification of Couch Potatoes During COVID-19

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ABSTRACT
This article contributes to an understanding of humour in political communication, particularly in official institutional communication. Specifically, it analyses the 'special heroes' campaign, which the German government published on its social media channels in November 2020. The campaign spoofed the COVID-19-specific heroification of certain groups of society by creating a humorous 'special hero' discourse of the ongoing pandemic. This humour is highly political, as it tries to influence the personal life and behaviour of citizens. Furthermore, it makes citizens responsible, and turns those affected by the pandemic into heroes. This article will adopt a method inspired by the Discourse Historical Approach which, along with context, focuses on the three elements of content, strategies, and linguistic means of realisation. It shows how humour in the form of parody can be favourable when done professionally by using the ambiguity of sensitive topics like war. It also shows how parodic forms can motivate users to create further parodies of the original content, thereby cementing the message of the government.

Introduction

During the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, the heroification of certain parts of society, often called 'system relevant workers', was quite common. This was as true in Germany as it was elsewhere (Halberg, Jensen, and Larsen 2021; Koch 2021). It might, then, come as something of a surprise that in November 2020 the German government published videos which apparently ridiculed the hero description. The campaign, which was released during the so-called second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic appears quite uncommon as a form of institutional communication and can be considered as remarkable, as the huge media response suggests. The three advertising spots contain the message that people should stay at home to fight the pandemic and become heroes by 'lazing around' (Bundesregierung 2020a). The German government posted these commercials on its spokesperson's Twitter-account using the hashtag #besonderehelden (#special heroes), which was among the most popular hashtags on Twitter over the weekend of its publication (Theile 2020). The videos attracted

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millions of viewers during the days after release, and they even gained international popularity after a Twitter user added English subtitles[1] because he saw the videos as having a 'universal message' (Antoni 2020). In essence, the campaign was a novel approach to the omnipresent term of 'everyday heroes' in the media, and Social Media users who created videos parodying the campaign also became part of the special heroes discourse. The idea was shared widely, as the governmental campaign already consists of parodies itself.

Such a campaign is unusual because public administrations and public agencies in their communication normally use an earnest way of articulation, since they want to appear legitimate and serious. In recent public diplomacy, however, the use of humorous political communication has been observable (Beck and Spencer 2021; Brassett, Browning, and O'Dwyer 2020; Chernobrov 2021; Manor 2021). One could even speak of a shift in public and national diplomacy. There are convincing reasons for this: in order to have a greater impact and to appear more relevant to citizens, political institutions are dependent on public relation campaigns that include different forms of social media communication (Deverell et al. 2015). Communication on social media brings a wider outreach when using humour, as recent studies have shown (Sørensen 2017, 149).

This article is interested in the logic and the consequences of political humour as a strategy for state actors and institutions. Its aim is to highlight how humour is used as a political tool to communicate COVID-19-based restrictions where humour is a political strategy to influence people's private lives by telling them to stay at home. Furthermore, this article argues that institutions intentionally use humour to make their messages more visible and less criticisable. It also underscores how humour is a way of creating meaning, while the specific parodic humour is a highly professional and effective way for the distribution of controversial political messages. Furthermore, the author holds that the specific humorous advertising spots focusing on the hero topos had effects on a kind of insecurity - ontological insecurity - by understanding humour as a coping tool to give citizens the feeling of significance and agency in a paradox situation.

In pursuit of this aim, the article will be structured as follows: first, there will be an overview on the recently notable concept of ontological (in)security in relation to COVID-19, which will come before the theoretical background on political humour and its relations to political outreach and to security is introduced. Then, the heroification during the pandemic in Germany and the absurdity of the situation as context for the case study will be problematised, which is crucial for an understanding of the ironic special heroes videos. This is shown through an analytical framework which combines analytical categories from the Discourse-Historical-Approach (DHA), as well as insights from literary studies on parodic

narratives. Such an approach allows for the illustration of the specific connection of parody videos to discourses of heroism during and prior to COVID-19. In the following section, the consequences and effects of the uncommon form of political communication are discussed, for example, its use in creating media attention, its exercising of political power, and its effects on anxiety through showing the absurdity of the situation in humorous narratives. At the same time, humour is shown to insulate against critique and transfer responsibility. The ethical consequences might be in conflict to other values, which is an aspect considered by security studies in general.

Ontological Insecurity during COVID-19

Political scientists not only agree that COVID-19 poses a massive threat to multiple securities, including physical and social, but also ontological (Kirke 2020; Gülseven 2020; Wright, Haastrup, and Guerrina 2021; Mamzer 2020). Ontological security is an 'intensified search for one stable identity' (Kinnvall 2004, 749). It is built on trust in the steadiness of the environment, a persistent self-identity, and the soundness of everyday habitual activities and their stability (Gülseven 2020). For Anthony Giddens, it means 'to possess […] "answers" to fundamental existential questions which all human life in some way addresses' (Giddens 1991, 37). He claims it is the 'maintaining of habits and routines is a crucial bulwark against threatening anxieties' (Giddens 1991, 37).

This stable self-identity exists not automatically, but 'has to be routinely created and sustained in the reflexive activities of the individual' (Giddens 1991, 52). Maintaining it became more difficult during the pandemic because COVID-19 challenges 'our sense of self, identity, and the way we act "within-the-world"' (Kirke 2020). Ontological insecurity is the persistent uncontrollable feeling of anxiety (Wright, Haastrup, and Guerrina 2021, 2). The ontology can be questioned in times of crisis because usual daily activities, work, and habits that are a barrier against frightening anxieties, and are significant for giving substance to peoples' lives, had diminished (Kirke 2020). Social distancing and the closing of places for social interaction reduces the possibilities to meet others, and this causes acute uncertainties for many individuals 'by swiftly rupturing their daily routines, trust relations and liberties' (Gülseven 2020). Under these circumstances, people cannot participate in the activities which define them. They are no longer perceived by others in the way they see themselves, which leads to ontological insecurity. Therefore, COVID-19 can be seen as a threat to ontological security.

State actors try to achieve ontological security for citizens by constructing autobiographical narratives of a shared past, present, and future of the community (Steele 2008). Even if it can be assumed that the German campaign

did not directly aim at creating ontological security, specifically German chancellor Angela Merkel set the tone in her first televised address in 15 years: she referred to the German re-unification and called COVID-19 'the biggest challenge since World War II' (Merkel 2020).

Political humour and its effects on security

In contemporary public communication, political humour is omnipresent. Political humour 'is an umbrella term that encompasses any humorous text dealing with political issues, people, events, processes, or institutions' (Kenski, Jamieson, and Young 2014). It can be instrumentalised by politicians in their communication 'to reduce the harshness of bad news, to defuse criticism made against them, and to make opponents seem foolish' (Morreall 2005, 74).

There are three major humour theories that are commonly agreed upon: incongruity theory, superiority theory, and release theory. In superiority theory, laughter and humour are seen as an articulation of superiority (Kuipers 2008, 367). In contrast, relief theory deals with physical and psychological aspects and the relief of tensions. Incongruity theory looks on cognitive and affective reasons for humour, and here, the basic assumption is 'that humorous amusement is a reaction to something that violates our mental patterns and normal expectations' (Morreall 2009, 248). Incongruity is basically the breaking of expectations. This article focusses on incongruity theory, which is dominant in research and covers the typical and more general occurrences of humour (Kuipers 2008, 369). It is also most useful because many different versions and specifications of incongruity theory exist.

Most versions of these theories assume a sudden and rapid cognitive change resulting from incongruity or relief, also seen as a cognitive shift that is enjoyable and thereby causes humour (Morreall 2009, 251). However, incongruity has certain limits. Without an adequate level of coherence and division, incongruity will be too large, the intended humour will not be understood, and the message appears strange (Holm 2017, 192). Therefore, the understanding of the context on which humorous statements are based upon matters greatly.

Humour creates an open atmosphere that is instrumental in facilitating social outreach and mobilising people, and is even essential in enabling dialogue with opponents (Sørensen 2017, 138–142). While many strategies and fields of application are well documented, the use of humorous communication by state institutions only recently became a topic of research. It is nevertheless highly relevant for current forms of communication (Chernobrov 2021). There are successful examples of state actors and institutions using humour in their public communication and for their self-

representation, like Armed Forces (Beck and Spencer 2021) or the Russian embassy in the UK (Kopper 2020). However, many attempts by politicians to use humour in anxiety management for example, also led to unsatisfying outcomes, like the backfiring of humour in Brexit diplomacy (Brassett, Browning, and O'Dwyer 2020).

Humour is furthermore related to aspects of security; particularly when it results from incongruity, a reasonable sort of security is required for one to be able to enjoy humour. 'One way to achieve this security, and so make disengagement and humour possible, is to think about something far away that does not affect us' (Morreall 2009, 255) meaning that temporal distance generates distance in identification and in involvement. Therefore, the videos may ease the viewers by being situated in the past, where less emotional attachment exists. This leads to the assumption that tragedy seen from temporal distance can be considered as comedy (Morreall 2009). In this way, humour can have effects on the perceived level of anxiety.

The specific focus for the analysis in this paper will be on parody, which is part of the discursive field of political humour and is seen as essential for public culture (Hariman 2008, 248) like in late night shows (Petry 2020; Nieuwenhuis 2018). Parody requires an 'original text' which is spoofed, mimicked and ridiculed by a 'parodying text' (Chatman 2001, 28). Therefore, parody can be described most basically 'as the comic refunctioning of performed linguistic or artistic material' (Rose 2000, 52). As a result, parody always includes some aspect of analysis, since 'parodic imitation works by turning an organic movement into something mechanical, and so reveals the mechanisation underlying the original communicative act' (Hariman 2008, 250). Each parody is strongly connected to the original text, as it 'pays homage to, or in [...] [other] term[s], "authorizes", the original.' (Chatman 2001, 33). Consequently, using a broad understanding of 'text', the original text is always in the centre of viewers' attention and not the planned new messages. 'The parody replicates some prior form [of the text] and thereby makes that form an object of one's attention rather than a transparent vehicle for some other message' (Hariman 2008, 253).

The Discourse Historical Approach

Parody can be seen as part of narrative genre of satire and irony (Chatman 2001, 28) which is typical for political humour. It can thus be analysed by using the Discourse Historical Approach (DHA), a discourse analytical approach which focusses particularly on context, argumentation, strategies, and linguistic realisation (Forchtner 2021). This fits perfectly with political humour, which is often used strategically, and where context is needed to understand its meaning. The DHA approach fulfils two aims: first, to see the humorous recontextualisation of certain topos and, second, to analyse

the strategies behind parodies. Both the DHA and parodic humour primarily focus upon history and historical recontextualisations of texts. The framework is used to make visible the connections to heroes and war that are being drawn in the advertising spots.

The DHA understands the term 'discourse' as the total of all meaningful events with a content-related relationship to a particular topos (Wodak 2020, 889). In essence, the DHA consists of a focus on context and three analytical dimensions: the content and topoi of a discourse, the discursive strategies, which include argumentation strategies, and the linguistic means of realisation (Wodak 2020, 890). Strategies are understood as conscious or unconscious text planning, and the most important strategies concerning humour include: referential nomination, predication, argumentation, perspectivation, and intensification. For example, referential nomination creates in-groups and out-groups, predication labels actors positively or negatively, argumentation supports justifications of actors, perspectivation shows the personal standpoint and involvement of a speaker, and intensification makes statements more forceful (Wodak 2020, 891).

Analysis

In all three advertising spots, an elderly person is depicted at some point in the future. as a 'time witness', relating their experiences during 2020 when young people were in the focus of the 'fight' against COVID-19. The willingness of younger generations to stay at home is portrayed as an important contribution to overcoming the pandemic. They thus became heroes, because 'special times required special heroes' (Bundesregierung 2020b).

In the first two videos, the fictional characters Anton and Luise Lehman describe their general situation of being young people in their twenties in 2020. They highlight the specific situation of young people: 'It was the winter of 2020 when all eyes of the country were on us.' (Bundesregierung 2020a). Luise Lehmann, Anton's wife, tells her story while focusing on plans and dreams and looking at a photo album (Bundesregierung 2020b). According to her, they wanted 'to party, to study, to get to know new people and all that. Going for drinks with friends' (Bundesregierung 2020a). However, Anton is seen to have remained home during the pandemic and states, 'this is how we became heroes. Back then, during that Corona Winter of 2020,' before script is faded onto the screen: 'You too can become a hero by staying at home. Together against Corona.'

The third commercial carries the special hero ascription to the extremes. The lifestyle of Tobi Schneider as a young, stereotypical gamer in 2020 is depicted, but he is not affected by the ongoing pandemic because he always stays at home (Bundesregierung 2020c). Therefore, he receives a

medal for being a role model, despite never changing anything in his everyday life.

Broader Context

This analysis emphasises how each spot produced by the German government spoofs several well-known stories and social practices and thereby uses certain strategies, which will be a focus here. A second step entails evaluating the consequences, and parodies which tried to criticise the videos of the German government are introduced for illustrative reasons. It will be shown how the professionality of the governmental videos renders it difficult for critical parodies to be effectively critical. The professionality of humour can be seen in calculated references to heroic behaviour and war rhetoric in the videos which will be emphasised to show the strategies and ambiguities.

Especially for decisive events like the COVID-19 pandemic, political elites often utilise certain well-known narratives to tie in with their communication (Subotić 2015, 616), The political value of narratives like these is that they boost the shared attitude and intensify social cohesion instead of othering (Kirke 2020). Therefore, narratives are in focus when ontological (in)security is concerned, and so politicians around the world used war metaphors when talking about their measures and plans against COVID-19 (Benziman 2020). Even if war metaphors are often criticised, they are not entirely unsuitable, since a war can be won, and this gives people hope and a more pragmatic outlook.

Narratives in general have a normative component because they convey expectations concerning social order and policies (Subotić 2015). Narratives don't need to be true - only their function matters. People perceive them as a streamlined world, or a 'form of cognitive schemata' (ibid.) that represent reality through an affective perspective. This simple construction makes them understandable and ordinary to most people (Kirke 2020). Themes like heroism are suitable because they are widely known and shared in public culture. COVID-19 heroes are integrated in our existing knowledge on heroes (Koch 2021, 70) because films, for example, bring glorified stories and ideals about heroes into everyday life.

Quite early during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, the media and politicians - not only in Germany, but worldwide - started to call frontline medical professionals 'heroes' (Koch 2021, 68). Later, employees at supermarkets and many other *system relevant jobs* were added to the hero ascription (Wagener 2020). The term hero is connected to war and to a certain kind of risk, and it is assumed that heroes 'are contributing to overcoming the crisis with their self-sacrificing commitment' (Koch 2021, 67). Generally, heroes are subjects which have their own agency and are seen

as exceptional (Heinkelmann-Wild, Beck, and Spencer 2019, 9), which is noticeable in Merkel's message to not passively accept the spread of the virus (Merkel 2020). This is an interesting example for the trend of 'little security nothing[s]' (Huysmans 2011, 371) where political speech acts use banal things for security practices.

However, the heroification of certain groups of society during the pandemic is problematic for several reasons: employees in the medical sector often said they only did their duty, or rather, that they signed up for helping others in difficult situations. They did not see themselves as exceptional (Halberg, Jensen, and Larsen 2021). Often, the ascription of being a hero was rejected by medical workers and other employees (Bota 2020). Others criticised the neoliberal logic of turning victims of the pandemic into heroes, which can be seen as a glorification of unavoidable fatalities and a way to prevent the 'economic recognition of low-wage (necessary) workers' (Wagener 2020). The heroification was applied very selectively and hierarchically, and especially in the cultural sector, employees were not seen as integral as workers in the medical sector (Wagener 2020).

The wide rejection of heroism enabled the government to start a successful humorous campaign and use the term 'hero' ironically. By defining heroes in a way that reaches most people, the heroification was used ambiguously between calculated war metaphors and unserious laziness, which will be shown by the analysis. The idealistic imagination of being a hero is difficult to achieve, but in the #specialhero case, it is easy because of the ironic use of 'special'.

Specific Context

Commentators and journalists internationally saw the clips as very refreshing and convincing, especially compared to campaigns in other countries (McNicoll 2020). When knowing the broader context and the issues around heroification during the COVID-19 pandemic, the strategy of the ironic special heroes campaign is more easily understood, since real heroes are rejected.

At the time of publication in mid-November 2020, it became clear that there would be a *Second Wave* of COVID-19 infections and an ongoing pandemic situation that would last through the winter. In Germany, the numbers of infected were still lower than in other European countries.[2] The COVID-19 situation was also accompanied by a stable economic situation, coupled with strong public support for the government's measures due to its smooth and convincing management during the *First Wave*. However, at various occasions, the behaviour of young people was criticised because of so-called 'Corona Parties', referring to gatherings of young people which violated restrictions (Mayer 2020). Therefore, the style of

communication was aiming to address young people who might not have felt appealed to before. On the other hand, the campaign is problematic because of its stigmatisation of young people. While the economy could go on as before, young people had to accept significant limitations and were still blamed for being the spreaders of the pandemic. Furthermore, the campaign mainly addresses young people who can afford to be lazy and at home while others are not included in the heroification.

Topoi of the Discourse

The main topos in the advertising spots is war, which links to the subtopoi heroes and COVID-19. The basic punchline plays with expectations concerning war, resulting in humour because of the incongruity. This is done through war metaphors, contrasted with inactivity, television show binge-watching, and couch-potato-behaviour. The protagonists as 'time witnesses' connect war and heroes to COVID-19 as follows.

The first subtopos is COVID-19 as war. Luise depicts it as a threat: 'This invisible danger that not only threatened our country but the whole world' (Bundesregierung 2020b). Additionally, war is related to remembrance when Luise opens the photo album, in which she kept a face mask as memorabilia. She laughs and ironically confirms the hero narrative: 'Maybe it was right when people said special times required special heroes. And yes, we were. We were special heroes' (Bundesregierung 2020b). Overall, these realisations suggest that the circumstances of the pandemic are difficult, but not in relation to what earlier generations went through during the Second World War (Pantelouris 2020), which can be seen as an appeal to their stamina.

The hero topos is associated to braveness, which is one of the absurd central plot-twists leading to humour since inactivity, rather than the expected trait of courage, is emphasised: 'Asking me today how we young people endured this back then and how we could laze around at home with such bravery?' and 'We plucked up all our courage and did … nothing,' (Bundesregierung 2020b) says Luise, who joins her boyfriend eating fast food on the bed. This laziness violates expectations and leads to humour: 'We lazed around at home, met as few people as possible and with that stopped the spread of COVID-19' (Bundesregierung 2020b). However, there is no change involved but stability. Special heroes are staying the same because being a hero 'was our fate' (Bundesregierung 2020a), even if 'nobody would have expected that of me' (Bundesregierung 2020c).

Discursive Strategies

The most obvious strategy of the campaign is nomination by calling to extended solidarity and thereby offering a meaningful way of being inactive.

The described discourse of heroification is mitigated by using incongruity to ironically mock expectations on 'time witness' interviews and their glorious stories. The ironic heroification is supported by the protagonists and is told as a story of success, since COVID-19 has already been overcome in the video. The clip even assumes that the young people were responsible for stopping the spread of COVID-19.

The setting in the future uses perspectivation through an involvement of the protagonists in a way that can have effects on the perceived security. The move between the future and the present, which is visible in the two time-settings of the commercial, supports the creation of hope, since the narrative takes place in the future. This then gives meaning to the restrictions in force, which helped to overcome the COVID-19 pandemic. Surprisingly, the future looks like today: the protagonists as 'time witnesses' look quite wealthy, confident, and seem to be likeable, both in 2020 and in the future.

In addition, the strategy of perspectivation can be seen in underlining the personal involvement of the special heroes. Humour is elicited through the unexpected role model behaviour of the protagonist, who became a hero by being 'the same lazy slacker as before' and not changing his behaviour or lifestyle. Humour transfers the story of a stereotypical video gamer into the story of a role model, qualifying him as a special hero of COVID-19.

In regard to the hero topos, incongruity is created through the predication of the actors. They are stereotypically labelled as lazy: 'So we mustered all our courage and did what was expected of us. The only right thing. We did … nothing. Absolutely nothing.' (Bundesregierung 2020a). The heroification is a strategy to give meaning to the changes in everyday life caused by the pandemic and to give meaning to basically doing nothing. By depicting inactivity and containing the pandemic as heroism, the spots try to give a paradox agency of actively being inactive to people who feel highly restricted. This shows the absurdity of the situation as a 'collective inaction problem'.

The heroification of 'lazy slackers' is overall intensified through the provocative style, but also through acknowledgement, because each video spoofs at least one well-known text. The first spot is underlaid by music reminiscent of 'Band of Brothers',[3] a TV miniseries about comradeship in World War II. Furthermore, the optic and style resemble the interviews with the soldiers of the Easy Company who are depicted in 'Band of Brothers'. By spoofing 'Band of Brothers', the campaign explicitly compares the contribution of young people to contain the pandemic with the liberation of Europe by the U.S.A. after the Second World War. The third video has strong intertextual analogies to gaming and YouTuber communities. MontanaBlack himself, the most successful gaming live streamer in Germany, pointed out in one of his videos that the professionally equipped gaming-room of Tobi Schneider is very similar to his own gaming-room (Richtiger Kevin 2020). He felt inadequately represented because of the cap, the gold

bracelet, the way Tobi is wearing his headset, and the depiction as a lazy gamer which is a purposeful provocation to get MontanaBlack's attention.

There is also the question of how specific the humour is to Germany. The young German generation is familiar with American humour and satire, which is readily available on YouTube and online (Nieuwenhuis 2018, 11). In humorous television shows produced by international media networks, nationhood plays a less central role because the shows and their content are less specific, and thus transferable to other countries (Nieuwenhuis 2018). Additionally, 'Late Night Shows have become part of the media pop culture that works like an autopoietic self-referential system on a global level' (Petry 2020, 232). In general, a lot of the famous late night humour is based on parodies and references to popular culture. (Petry 2020). Florida Entertainment who produced the campaign is active in the late-night business with shows like Circus HalliGalli and Late Night Berlin[4] and this influence is visible in the videos and the content they are spoofing.

In contemporary German humour anything goes, but four dominant discourses can be observed that have been the foundation for most German humour since German reunification: 'postwall German identity (re)construction, *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, New German Popular Literature, and the contributions of several generations of immigrants' (Twark 2011, 7).In particular, typical German allusions through Vergangenheitsbewältigung are obvious in the campaign.

Florida Entertainment is convinced that they have to shake things up to get their message across to the young target audience, but 'with humour you create an eye level and a closeness to people that otherwise does not exist' (Herrmann 2020). The campaign creates proximity and speaks more the 'language of the people', instead of a dry official language. This aspect of language and style leads to the third point: linguistics which include persuasive language, visual design, music and sound.

Linguistic Means of Realisation

The linguistic realisation of the topoi is interested in how people and groups are depicted by semiotic resources (Wodak 2020, 891). All the spots refer ironically to heroic war tropes and language which take up the heroification discourse. The protagonists appear visually like war veterans in a documentary while sitting in an old-fashioned, upper-class living room. This is supported by a kind of music that suggests glorification.

A further attempt at relating to young people is the combination of youth slang and war themes. Anton is shown in a time-lapse, spending days on his sofa, and a highly provocative statement is made: 'Being as lazy as raccoons. Days and nights, we kept our asses at home and fought against the spread of the virus. Our sofa was the front and our patience our weapon'

(Bundesregierung 2020a). Tobi's personal conclusion is that 'laziness could save lives and I was the master of that. They were special times back then during the winter of 2020'. They were 'special, difficult times. But it was easy to be a hero' (Bundesregierung 2020c).

Exaggerated wording leads to incongruity, like the violated expectations of 'being brave' and 'lazing around' where a cognitive shift leads to humour. Another example is the ominous language when saying, 'yet fate had different plans for us' and, 'an invisible danger threatened everything we believed in. Suddenly the fate of our country was in our hands' (Bundesregierung 2020a).

Furthermore, visuality and gestures connected to war are both integrated into the spots. Anton in 2020 is shown smiling mischievously when his girlfriend enters the room and brings pizza. They both salute, which imitates militaristic behaviour and makes delivery servicepeople into the heroes of COVID-19, not soldiers (Bundesregierung 2020a). The ironic tension is visually supported by a reflection of fire in Anton's glasses in 2020 when watching TV, while the protagonist appears to be fascinated.

Consequences

Media Outreach Through Humour and Parody

In the spots, it can be seen how humour uses ambiguity and surprise to draw the attention of the media. The commercials fit to the Zeitgeist of prevailing online humour in the form of parody, and the campaign uses a positive and entertaining style of communication on a topos that was, before, mostly connected to questions of life and death in political rhetoric. This positive form of communication fits to the Social Media algorithms and contributed to it being liked and shared so widely. Along with numerous private users, media companies and newspapers – like the popular German tabloid *BILD* – also posted the videos on their accounts. Additionally, they were also picked up by many popular YouTube channels (Richtiger Kevin 2020). Overall, the clips were shared 11.5 million times on the official website, 7.6 million times on YouTube, and they were seen by millions more on TV (RND 2021).

That Vergangenheitsbewältigung still matters and is among the most prominent discourses (Twark 2011) was illustrated by the reactions of German war historians. By humorously referring to war and heroes, for instance through the 'Band of Brothers'-like American veterans of World War II, and by calling the sofa 'the front', war historians joined into the media discourse. They criticised the analogies and comparisons between the pandemic and World War II (Piatov 2020), an act that drew further attention to the videos. The historian Sönke Neitzel, for example, saw the deliberately

drawn parallels to war as 'strange', while the spots for Michael Wolffsohn were 'embarrassing' because of their stereotypical and martial language of the army (Piatov 2020). Andreas Rödder criticised that only people working in public service could come up with equating a lockdown with inactivity (Piatov 2020). Here, the sophistication of the calculated provocations becomes visible. The spots professionally spoofed the public heroification by exaggerating the observable war rhetoric and analogies. This was combined with parodies of films, stories, and people who are well known in the target group like late night humour does.

The discussion about the adequacy of the specific humorous communication led to numerous parody videos by private and public actors which can be regarded as a form of reinforcement of the special hero narrative. As mentioned before, the structure of parodies makes it very difficult to transport new ideas, but it mainly accentuates the original message (Hariman 2008, 253). So-called 'narrative entrepreneurs' (Subotić 2015, 615) like public persons, politicians, and intellectuals – as well as the media and entertaining formats of public culture - spread the message through their repetition in the form of parody. The significance was thereby underscored, and the possibility to contest the original content was restricted. Some of the parodies, which were published within a month after the original spots and contained the hashtag #besonderehelden, are included here for illustrative reasons. One parody by the German satirist Jan Böhmermann, achieved more than 500,000 views by the end of January 2021 (ZDF MAGAZIN ROYALE 2020). Böhmermann's video, 'Special Heroes. Being inactive together', ridiculed the #specialheroes campaign by presenting examples of where society was, according to Böhmermann's 'time witness', 'successful' in applying inactivity to other social problems, like showing indifference to drowned refugees in the Mediterranean Sea. This illustrated the analytical aspect of parody because the structure of the spots was copied. Furthermore, aesthetically, it also resembled the original spots and was widely picked up by the media (Ehrenberg 2020). In Böhmermann's spots, there is also a general critique of the political management of the pandemic and its implications on routines, domestic violence, and other broader problems, which then can be seen as a critique of the government and how it ignores its responsibilities.

Furthermore, this discussion was stimulated through critique by *system relevant workers* who felt they were not getting enough recognition, and had previously complained about being invisible in this new government narrative (Theile 2020). Even groups like the Identitarian Movement spoofed the 'time-witness-in-the-future-tells-about-2020' structure for criticising strategies of European migration politics (Identitäre Bewegung Deutschland 2020). Further illustrative examples are unpolitical parodies by a sports shop, stating that people have different choices on how to

become a hero in isolation, like training at home while still halting the spread of the pandemic (Intersport Deutschland 2020).

The relevant aspect here is that the parodies refer to the campaign through spoofing the structure, content, and style. The parodies were sometimes critical or humorous, but still contributed to the spread of the original message and stimulated a discussion about adequate and solidary behaviour during a pandemic, as Böhmermann illustrates.

The Effects of Humour on Ontological Insecurity and Anxiety

Through a funny and ironic way of storytelling, the government can convey to young citizens that it is 'easy to be a hero' (Bundesregierung 2020c) without the risk of being ridiculed or criticised, since the message is told in a humorous way. The commercial shows how even outsiders contribute to overcoming COVID-19; Even if the spots were intended only for reaching out to young people and telling them to stay at home, the spots also have effects on ontological insecurity. As stated above, the spots can be ascribed to a positive effect on the general anxiety caused by COVID-19. From a discursive perspective, humour can be connected to strategies of anxiety management (Brassett, Browning, and O'Dwyer 2020, 1) and is a coping mechanism in difficult times. As the advertising campaign shows, elites can activate political narratives to deal with situations of crisis (Kirke 2020).

Through ironically representing passivity as heroism and thereby exercising discursive power, the videos have the potential to provide hope and therefore can have effects on ontological security and a feeling of significance for individuals. By including everyone in the heroification, the feeling of being significant could be reclaimed, and the routinised practice of lazing around is shown as easily accessible heroic practice.

The specific meaning-making of the campaign highlights possibilities for achieving agency and significance to the people in a situation where they, as citizens, seem to be incapable of acting autonomously or in a meaningful way due to their restrictions.

The impact of humour can be supported through the structure of each single clip, playing out in the future. The specific kind of humour and the structure of the spots, taking place in two different settings in time, can help people to relax in an emotional sense, since the 'time witnesses' tell their stories from the future. The spots can contribute to the management of anxiety by showing 'time witnesses' who survived the pandemic and whose self-understanding was not affected by the pandemic, which can give hope to like-minded people as well. Their future does not appear differently compared to a normal life before the pandemic, suggesting continuity in times of ontological insecurity.

This disengagement 'from practical and noetic concerns and simply play [ing] with cognitive shifts is a luxury, to be enjoyed only when […] [people] are reasonably secure' (Morreall 2009, 255). The strategy of making disturbing and threatening events more enjoyable by putting them in the past where they are not immediately affecting the viewers anymore is implemented by the campaign in an exemplary manner. According to the producer, the commercials are about giving hope in a time where it is unclear how the pandemic situation will end. Therefore, they created the story that the pandemic will be over at some point, and that young people will have contributed to ensuring its end by avoiding unnecessary contacts (Herrmann 2020).

Furthermore, comedy helps individuals to endure uncomfortable conditions and to live with them (Holm 2017, 183), and this emphasises the stabilising effect of humour. It is a way of dealing with and managing anxiety. Especially in the circulation of satirical and parodic material, it can 'reflect an attempt to manage the present' (Silvestri 2018, 3998).

Isolation Against Critique

The ironic heroification can help to legitimise and normalise the special hero message which does not seem political anymore, as part of everyday life. Humour can be normalising by rendering things laughable and making absurdities more easily acceptable. Especially on social media, where they were widely shared, the advertising spots appear as a part of everyday life because they are embedded between family, friends and entertainment, which normally is quite complicated for governmental messages to achieve.

The government intentionally used humour as a means of making this message more acceptable to the general public due to the humour-typical, less critical reflection. The cognitive effect of humour, and its detection, can further interrupt the critical processing of arguments by the audience (Cline and Kellaris 1999). This is also described as the *humorous mode* that occurs when viewers are not applying critical thinking to serious information. Expectations concerning logic, common sense, scientific basic knowledge, and laws are 'all potentially in abeyance' (Kuipers 2008, 381). This means that any form of critique of the spots becomes more difficult.

It is generally hard to criticise humorous messages, and the rhetoric used by the German government can be seen as a protection strategy against critique. This is done by using war as an analogy to COVID-19, and particularly to World War II from the American perspective. This is intentional and avoids the problematic German perspective on heroes in favour of the American perspective on the liberation of Europe. This strategy is evidenced by a response from Steffen Seibert after he was criticised for the content: 'These are not videos as a serious guide to life' (Theile 2020). Here, humour is a

typical defence strategy by calling humorous content just a joke. Humour expands the limits of legitimate communication for the government and criticism against the message becomes far more difficult when the original message was not meant seriously in the first place. Especially since the campaign is itself a parody, critique is even more difficult, for example when the American perspective is not realised. Critique thus includes the risk of failing to meet the original text as the BILD-critique illustrates (Piatov 2020).

Conclusion

Through an analysis of the context, content, and strategies of the advertising campaign and the reactions which followed, this paper has shed light on the strategy of humorous communication by the German government at the beginning of the *second wave* of the Covid-19 pandemic. Furthermore, it has broadened the knowledge concerning planned and calculated humorous communication and the role of humour as a modern and significant tool for politics. Compared to the campaigns and communication in other European countries, the methods Germany used were quite remarkable. However, it should be considered whether it would still have been possible to employ humour in a more severe situation of crisis. Internationally, the reactions were positive, and the advertising spots were seen as carrying a universal message. Unlike other examples of political humour, this campaign can be seen as a success in political communication due in part to the attention paid to context during its creation.

When looking at the content of the videos, they appear to be short versions of Merkel's televised speech in March, but this time using a different form of communication and catering to a different audience. By telling people to stay at home, the campaign was using the incongruous heroification, which brings together passivity and significance, as well as agency, and in this case, created unity by referring to war and calling for extended solidarity. The humour in these governmental messages had effects on ontological security through their incongruity and a future setting, leading to a feeling of security. From a perspective of ontological security in a situation of anxiety, like the pandemic, the strategic creation of 'special heroes' seems thoughtful, but the use of humour for public agency communication is still a young field of research and worth exploring further. Despite the success, there were many critiques resulting from aspects about appropriateness in times of crisis. These were easily dispelled by the government's spokesperson and attempts to scandalise the spots were not successful. As various research shows, humour is a political tool in the recent shift in public diplomacy because it is often a welcome change and provides an element of the unexpected.

In terms of numbers, the attention, discussion, and outreach of the campaign were highly successful. Additionally, further parodies and critiques referring to the original commercials show the advantages of a humorous communication. This in turn, insulates against criticism and refers to the original text, which has already been linked to familiar narratives. Through selecting a certain structure and well-known narratives, and in addition to considering context, the German government was successful in creating an influential message of the couch potato as a special hero by using the structures of social media. When humour is funny and provokes different target groups to a certain degree - like powerful media actors - it can be a beneficial means of political communication.

The message being used by the government – that people should stay at home – was not criticised. The campaign deflected responsibility because, in case the management of the pandemic went poorly, the government could claim innocence, as they told people to stay at home. In the spots, the applied humour is specific and professional, but they only work because relatively wealthy protagonists are shown. Staying at home in a humorous way is, for many victims of the pandemic, impossible. However, even wealthy young people are shown that they have to make sacrifices. Through this narrative, the German government labels the victims of the pandemic as heroes who self-sacrificingly take risks. Compared to other forms of communication used in controversial times, there are relatively small direct negative consequences or problems for the government.

Even though the spots were not intended to manage ontological security they had effects on ontological insecurity nonetheless and it is very likely that they had an impact which went above short-term effects, as the parodies show.

Notes

1. These subtitles are used in this paper.
2. https://de.statista.com/statistik/daten/studie/1105052/umfrage/taegliche-fallzahlen-des-coronavirus-covid-19-in-ausgewaehlten-laendern/
3. 'A fascinating tale of comradeship that is, in the end, a tale of ordinary men who did extraordinary things' https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0185906/
4. https://www.dwdl.de/interviews/74972/wir_wollen_die_marke_florida_auf_andere_genres_uebertragen/

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Humorous parodies of popular culture as strategy in Boris Johnson's populist communication

Daniel Beck

Abstract

This article examines the role of parodic humour in Boris Johnson's populist communication. Populist parties and conservative politicians have increasingly drawn humorous connections to films and entertainment in their political communication. But, despite the increasing research on populism, the role of humour in political communication is not yet at the centre of populism research. The article shows how professionally designed humour can dominate discourses and bring immense amounts of media attention to specific details while distracting attention from other political issues. The argument of the article is illustrated by analysing humorous communication of the former British PM Boris Johnson in 2019 and 2020. Among others, Johnson compared himself to Marvel's Hulk, a parody that echoed through the news media. The article provides a very specific and new insight into the means by which populist strategies make use of parodic humorous elements in their communication.

Keywords

Boris Johnson, humour, parody, populist communication, populist style

Introduction

Often, the style of populist communication is described as a 'simple and even vulgar language' (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017: 64) or seen as 'flaunting the low' (Ostiguy et al., 2021), but this is only one part of their style. Populists try to present themselves as close to the people, and they use certain communicative strategies and techniques to achieve this goal. Contemporary populist leaders also increasingly draw on elaborated and professional strategies of communication, like using humour. The understanding of populism as a style focusses on communication which did not get enough

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consideration in Political Science so far (Sengul, 2019: 1; Vreese et al., 2018: 426). Many populism scholars insist on a stronger focus on aspects of communication and on communicative appeal (Jagers and Walgrave, 2007; Kefford et al., 2022; Vreese et al., 2018) and see 'populism as a particular mode of political communication' (Kefford et al., 2022), which particularly considers 'non-verbal, stylistic and aesthetic aspects of the phenomenon' (Kefford et al., 2022). This approach is applied in the article and can be summarised as a 'discursive–performative approach' (Moffit, 2020). It includes the key characteristics of mediated performance which are 'comprised of an appeal to "the people" versus "the elite" and includes "bad manners" as well as the performance of crisis, breakdown or threat' (Kefford et al., 2022).

Populist leaders, parties and movements have a certain image which leads to seeing them as angry clowns, primarily due to populist leaders like former US President Trump who used spontaneous and offensive humour. In contrast, Boris Johnson's communication was quite different from low, clownish standards of communication as it was professionally done while still using an uncomplicated, yet heartfelt, manner of expression in which popular culture played a major role. Parodic humour will be the focus of this article because conservative politicians make frequent use of it in their populist communication and for representing themselves as the popular. This is illustrated by the former British Prime Minister Boris Johnson, who relied on imitation, spoofing and parodic references in 2019 and 2020. His public appearances have been described as an unpolitical spectacle dominated by 'gesture, form, personality and humour' (Brassett and Sutton, 2017: 246). This article shows that the humour employed by Johnson is not simply clownish humour, but is a highly professional performance regarding its creators and content strategies. Therefore, it is emotional, yet still easily understandable, which makes him a specifically interesting politician in the British context, where humour is part of politics and is used by conservative politicians like Farage and others. During Brexit, humour reached a new peak in British politics (Brassett, 2021).

This article is interested in how parodic humour is deployed by populist state actors like Johnson in political communication. Of central interest is how Johnson used humour to be both dismissed as a populist clown and simultaneously taken seriously to be as successful as he was in 2019 and 2020 during the time of the Brexit negotiations and British elections. Furthermore, the political effects and the impact of a well-planned and professional use of parodic humour on the British society with its specific relation humour are relevant.

As a first step, the article introduces the role of humour in politics, and especially the role of parody, in populist communication. As a second step, the article summarises the basics of populism as a style of communication and integrates humour into its characteristics. By applying elements of the Discourse Historical Approach (DHA), several humorous performances by Boris Johnson from 2019 to 2020 are analysed for illustrative reasons. The article 'Britain will break free' as well as the videos 'LoFi Boriswave' (Conservatives, 2019c), '12 Questions to Boris Johnson' (Conservatives, 2019b), 'Love Actually' (Conservatives, 2019a) and 'Most Searched Questions' (Conservatives, 2020) are parodies and will be used to illustrate the impact and effects of his parodies. In a last step, the role of Johnson's parodic humour in populist communication and its effects will be examined, which is mainly connected to professional performance, emotional content and simplicity in the examples used in the study. Not only was extensive media attention created for Johnson, but also stimulation of the discourse and a specific form of distraction which shifted public attention away from the central political issues and competitors.

When intertextual humour in the form of parody is used, the original text and its emotional components as transported via popular culture are often the primary focus of emotional debates rather than current affairs which were in this specific case the issues around the Brexit negotiations. Finally, the conclusion summarises the role of parodic humour in Johnson's populist communication and the more general effects on politics.

Humour and politics

Humour is used by communicators to enhance audiences' participation in politics as it can be applied to make content attractive and deceptive. In fact, humour is often seen 'as an intrinsically positive dimension of social life' (Billig, 2010). Humour applied by politicians in contemporary public communication allows 'to promote specific standpoints and values and to persuade the audience on the "reasonableness" of political acts' (Tsakona and Popa, 2011: 7).

While many strategies and fields of application related to humour are well documented (Sørensen, 2008), the use of humorous communication by state actors, populist leaders and institutions has not been extensively studied. This communication is nevertheless highly relevant to the current forms of state communication that are often summarised as 'public diplomacy', in which humour plays a strategic role (Chernobrov, 2022). State actors and institutions, such as armed forces (Beck and Spencer, 2021) or the Russian embassy in the United Kingdom (Kopper, 2021) are making successful use of humour in their public communication and self-representation. As this article will point out, the employment of humour is becoming increasingly professionalised Beck (2022), while many attempts to use humour by politicians, for example, for anxiety management, have led to unsatisfying outcomes (Brassett et al., 2020).

There are three main humour theories which have long traditions and provide different explanations for the emergence of humour. Relief theory explains humour as a way to physically release nervous tension (Buijzen and Valkenburg, 2004: 147). The superiority theory brings a power component into the explanation of humour. People can feel triumphant because they are superior to others which results in humour (Buijzen and Valkenburg, 2004: 148). Incongruity theory is the most widely used theory and explains humour as a result of the violation of expectations. Instead of fulfilling certain patterns, humour has a surprising component and works on a cognitive level because people are amused by the deviation. Incongruity theory in particular is useful for explaining the suitability of humour for populism because humour arises not from power imbalances but because incongruity makes people feel like they are on the same level in an everyday conversation (Kopper, 2021). This is useful for campaigns and political communication in general and for gaining attention via non-traditional media.

It is a specifically British phenomenon that humour and politics are very much connected (Brassett, 2021). It is common for British politicians to use humour in their communication, but the style of Johnson's humour is due to its parodic and emotional characteristic unique. Research sees a general 'interaction between populism, incongruity and other humour and comedy tropes' (Weaver, 2022: 12). Humour and parody have a structural connection to populism because of problems inherent to populism: 'Populisms are frequently incongruous in structure and thus in need of rhetoric, and humorous rhetoric, as a method for negating the ambiguities, ambivalences and uncertainties that they produce' (Weaver, 2022: 11).

Humour in populist communication

Scholars have observed that humour in the last years 'has been put at the service of a global wave of populism' in countries like Great Britain, Austria and Switzerland (Brantner et al., 2019).[1] Johnson knows how to use the laughter he causes (Coe, 2013). His humour is specifically outstanding because of its professionality and attention-grabbing nature, accomplished through connections to popular culture. It is not the typical offensive online humour which is often ascribed to right-wing populists (Wagner and Schwarzenegger, 2020) but is very well planned. This new way of performances by conservative politicians received much attention (Grobe, 2020). Johnson is media-savvy due to his participation in various formats and is therefore 'able to play the role of the nasty Tory politician for laughs' (Brassett, 2021: 124). The spoofing and mocking in his use of humour do not lead to outrage, but to discussion, and they also operate to distract attention, like a diversionary tactic.

The characteristics of parodic humour match with the understanding of populism as style. Humorous parodies have been the object of studies on populism, and very recently, questions have been raised around populists' self-representation (Brantner et al., 2019; MacMillan, 2017; Mendonça and Caetano, 2021) but not much is known about the role of visuals for 'the construction of public meanings relevant to popular understandings of populist leaders' as studies about the former Brazilian President Bolsonaro show (Mendonça and Caetano, 2021). For populism studies there is definitely a need to enlarge the focus and look at 'the role of satire and political entertainment more broadly' (Vreese et al., 2018: 433).

As is typical for populists, 'political humour conveys criticism against the political status quo and recycles and reinforces dominant values and views on politics' (Tsakona and Popa, 2011: 1). The language of populists is described as 'a direct, unvarnished, often hearty, but also witty, quick witted way of talking' (Priester, 2008: 30).[2] In their communication populists often alternate quickly between game and fight (Gadinger and Simon, 2019) and employ a typical calculated ambivalence in their statements. Humour is used to 'present ideological views in "innocent" ways, or to increase engagement with and shareability of content in social media' (Brantner et al., 2019: 3). These aspects make humour attractive for the populist logic and explain why humour and populism are connected: humour enables trivialising important issues and facilitates speaking about politics in everyday language (Morreall, 2005: 76, 78). Therefore, it might seem for voters that humorous politicians 'speak the language of common people' and are 'one of them' (Tsakona and Popa, 2011: 7). The open atmosphere created by humour is ideal for facilitating social outreach, and parodic humorous actions are often covered by the media (Sørensen, 2017: 138–142).

Parodic humour is popular in populist communication because of its connection to everyday artefacts, which are already familiar to people and thereby suitable as a contribution to entertainment becomes possible. Popular culture is the component of the parodic text with which a majority of people are familiar. Suitably, 'populism-as-style clearly assumes a role for popular culture' (Nærland, 2020: 300) because artefacts of popular culture matter as a context and background for the communication as well as the staging of politicians and their popularity. Popular culture matters in general for politics because it is 'an important site where power, ideology and identity are constituted, produced and/or materialised. There are a range of signifying and lived practices such as poetry, film, sculpture, music, television, leisure activities and fashion' (Grayson et al., 2009: 155) and

Johnson himself as 'comedy politician' (Brassett, 2021) is part of popular culture. This is highly suitable for populist performances as they are focussed on personalities. Schiller calls these strategies a 'popification of politics through populism' (Schiller, 2022: 23) and suggests that populism is (also) the *popular* (Schiller, 2022: 23).

The specific spotlight then is on parodic humour which imitates other well-known texts. A parody stands out through its spoofing of an original text (Chatman, 2001: 28). Parody is part of the discursive field of political humour and is seen as essential for public culture (Hariman, 2008: 248). In general, 'a parody entails at least two voices – the speaker and another speaker refracted through the parody' (Sinclair, 2020: 64). Parody is often described 'as the comic refunctioning of performed linguistic or artistic material' (Rose, 2000: 52). It thereby copies the structure and aesthetic elements to transport a message by paying homage to the original text (Chatman, 2001: 33). Parody can be defined as the imitation of a communication style or genre (Buijzen and Valkenburg, 2004: 154). Parodies are the most widespread genre of humour in online communication and require 'knowledge of the particular media styles or genres that are parodied' (Buijzen and Valkenburg, 2004: 162). Parody often deals with famous elements of popular culture such as films, comics and music. In comparison to satire, it is not attacking or criticising the original text but uses it more as a way of raising attention than 'a transparent vehicle for some other message' (Hariman, 2008: 253). People can usually identify the original text, which then becomes more prominent in the viewers' minds than the new message.

Parody suits the logic of populist communication by dealing with the known instead of providing anything fundamentally new, or providing simple answers to complex problems. 'Comedy politicians' make use of 'the absence of trust in politicians' through laughter and self-irony, which enables them – 'to take ownership of the problem' (Brassett, 2021: 125). Furthermore, humour helps to deal with the incongruities inherent in populist principles (Weaver, 2022).

Populism as a discursive style

Populism as style can be seen as one of the four main understandings of populism. Furthermore, main approaches understand populism as ideology, discourse or an approach to do politics (Jeffery, 2021). An implication of style is that it frees populism from the puzzle of appearing across the political spectrum because 'populism does not need to be understood as an ideology to examine it as a political style' (Moffitt and Tormey, 2014: 389). Populism as a discursive style 'has no political colour; it is colourless and can be of the left and of the right' (Jagers and Walgrave, 2007: 323).

The specific expression of populism is here a distinctive collection of representational components regarding style (Vreese et al., 2018: 425), and it 'allows to consider how politicians can slip in and out of the populist style' (Moffitt and Tormey, 2014: 382). Therefore, no discussions or evaluations are necessary to assess if politicians or actors are populist or not. Populism as a style can be selectively observed in certain actions and utterances because it is seen as an attribute and not as an aspect of the person who communicates (Vreese et al., 2018: 426).

As the understanding is that populism 'is performed and "done"' (Moffit, 2016: 64) the focus is on the performative elements to establish political connections (Moffitt and Tormey, 2014: 387), which can also include rhetorical features. The general assumption and credo is that images and performances mean more to the (mediatised) public than do actual policies (Moffitt and Tormey, 2014: 388). This brings forms of representation

and an aesthetic perspective to the centre in discussions of populism (Moffitt and Tormey, 2014: 387). There are still blind spots and unexplored issues concerning popular culture as a specific part of political campaigns and the communication of populists (Nærland, 2020: 303). Therefore, this article aims to uncover how popular culture in combination with professional parodic humour enables successful communication in political campaigns.

The British Prime Minister Boris Johnson is a suitable case for illustrating the role of humour in populism as style because not many would see him as a typical populist concerning his ideology as well as the relatively temperate political agenda he pursues (Mounk, 2019). Johnson profits from his collaborative relationship with humour (Brassett and Sutton, 2017: 246) as he crafts 'an "anti-establishment", renegade, bumbling image of himself that both performs and subverts the Etonian elite stereotype of a Tory' (Brassett, 2021: 125)

Johnson is a performer which helps him to use his 'clown like persona[s] to disguise the reality of their (neoliberal and/or racist) politics' (Brassett, 2021: 123) often by using popular culture and a very personalised style of humour.

There are three main characteristics which identify populism as a style: (1) the appeal to people, (2) an emphasis on crisis, breakdown and threat and (3) bad manners (Moffitt and Tormey, 2014: 391–392). Johnson's overemphasised leadership and single person focus are part of populist appeals and dominated the Brexit process. Concerning the appeal to the people, the style stands out through the championing of common sense, denial of expert knowledge and claims of being 'distinct from the elite' (Moffitt and Tormey, 2014: 391). Furthermore, it is 'based on simple and accessible narrative figures that are emotionally overloaded (for example, the myth of the saviour)' (Ungureanu and Popartan, 2020: 41) and a 'logic of intensification of antagonistic emotions' (Ungureanu and Popartan, 2020: 42). For crisis, breakdown and threat, the 'tendency towards simple and direct language' (Moffitt and Tormey, 2014: 391), the favouring of 'short term and swift action rather than the slow politics' (Moffitt and Tormey, 2014: 392) and the 'demand to act decisively and immediately' (Moffitt and Tormey, 2014: 391) are distinctive. Regarding bad manners, the 'use of slang, swearing, political incorrectness and being overly demonstrative and colourful' and 'forms of expression that involve appeal to emotions, colloquialism and intimacy' (Mendonça and Caetano, 2021: 5) are typical, as is a 'disregard for appropriate ways of acting in the political realm' (Moffitt and Tormey, 2014: 392).

Discourse Historical Approach

Political humour in the form of parody is part of the narrative genre of satire and irony (Chatman, 2001: 28) that is prevalent in online humour. The analysis of humour will use selected parts of the Discourse Historical Approach (DHA), an approach of critical discourse analysis which focusses on various forms of context and communication strategies. This is in highly skilled political humour of special interest because knowledge about the context is needed to understand its meaning, and the creators of the humour need to strategically plan and construct it according to populist goals.

The DHA has a long history in research on populism (Wodak and Meyer, 2007) and sees the terminus *discourse* as the entireness of all substantial actions related on a content level to the specific topic (Wodak, 2020: 889). The topics in the parodic text were analysed by screening their recontextualisations from the original text in reaction to the parodies as well as in further parodies.

Both the DHA and parodic humour primarily focus on recontextualisations of texts. The framework is used to highlight specific references to emotional artefacts in popular culture and uncover their implicit significations. Here, the DHA focusses on context and two analytical dimensions: the discursive strategies, which include argumentation strategies, and the linguistic and audio-visual means of realisation of the strategies (Wodak, 2020: 890). Strategies can be seen as the 'style of presentations' (A'Beckett, 2013: 134) or 'means of persuasion' (A'Beckett, 2013: 134) and are defined as text planning in conscious or unconscious ways. The most important strategies concerning humour include referential nomination, predication, argumentation, perspectivation and intensification (Wodak and Meyer, 2007: 73). Referential nomination aims at membership categorisations through the creation of in groups and out groups, while predication uses stereotypes and predicates for positive and negative labelling. Argumentation justifies inclusion and exclusion, perspectivation is an expression of entanglements and of speaker's complicity and intensification increases or mitigates the forcefulness of statements (Wodak, 2020: 891). In the section on linguistic elements, the focus will be on the spoofing of text, sound and visualisation of the original text, which often relies on metaphorical communication and figurative language (Laaksonen et al., 2022: 1915).

Contextualisation of the parodies

The selected illustrative material is based on the time period most important for Johnson's career as Prime Minister, which was characterised by Johnson winning with an absolute majority at the British elections and achieving a Brexit deal in January 2020. The analysed cases are the Hulk comparison (15 September 2019), '12 Questions to Boris Johnson' (12 November 2019), 'LoFi Boriswave', (25 November 2019), 'Love Actually' (9 December 2019) and 'Most Searched Questions' (28 January 2020). The overall context is thus the same for all analysed cases.

The Brexit negotiations in 2019 were shaped by obstacles like debates about a backstop, which would tie the United Kingdom or Northern Ireland to European Union (EU) rules. Boris Johnson said that in case of a 'no deal', he would never ask for a Brexit extension, while a Scottish court declared Johnson's suspension of the parliament illegal.

For more specific context of Johnson's parodies and his style, knowledge about the original texts and Johnson as a figure is needed, and it can be assumed that this knowledge was sufficiently present in British society.

Hulk comparison

In an interview with the English tabloid *Mail on Sunday* on 15 September 2019, Boris Johnson compared himself to Marvel's green Hulk when referring to the ongoing Brexit negotiations: '[. . .] the Prime Minister says that if negotiations break down, he will ignore the Commons vote ordering him to delay the UK's departure'; he then added, 'The madder Hulk gets, the stronger Hulk gets' (Owen, 2019). Johnson went on: 'Banner[3] might be bound in manacles, but when provoked, he would explode out of them'; he then concluded, 'Hulk always escaped, no matter how tightly bound in he seemed to be – and that is the case for this country. We will come out on October 31 and we will get it done' (Owen, 2019).

The title page of the *Mail on Sunday* was illustrated with a big headline: 'PM's extraordinary rallying cry. We will break free from the EU like the incredible Hulk' combined with an image illustration of the green Hulk (Owen, 2019).

Hulk is one of the most iconic characters in popular culture, and he first appeared in 1962. In the comics and films, the scientist Bruce Banner turns into a 'green-skinned, hulking and muscular humanoid possessing a vast degree of physical strength' (Wordisk, 2022). The core characteristic is becoming stronger when he gets angry. He generally works in a team with many supporting characters. The actor Mark Ruffalo performed as Hulk in several films from 2015 onwards (Wordisk, 2022).

'lo fi boriswave beats to relax/get brexit done to'

The parodic clip entitled 'lo fi boriswave beats to relax/get brexit done to' (Conservatives, 2019c) was published on 25 November 2019. The self-ironic clip contained scraps of speeches by Johnson, underlined by soft hip-hop beats. The video is about 72-minute long and consists of electronic music with soft beats and images of Johnson on a train with the landscape passing by. Repetitive parts of his speeches can be heard, such as his central message, 'We gonna get Brexit done' and 'than we can get on with all the things I think the people of this country really want to focus on' (Conservatives, 2019c).

The beats are a very popular genre within the last decade, especially for young people. In 2019, there were at least 31 million Lofi beat videos available on YouTube (Stokel-Walker, 2019). As a consequence, the self-ironic imitation of a typical LoFi-video attracted a disproportionately high number of 18- to 24-year-olds and quickly achieved hundreds of thousands of views (almost 1.3 million up to today (February 2023)) (Conservatives, 2019c). With this clip, Johnson was successful in reaching out to young people by presenting political content in virtual spaces which are quite difficult to reach for political parties (Heinrich, 2021).

The ironic video was a new and effective way to be in the spotlight due to its special aesthetic and form which moves between self-ironic spoofing of the sound and image of typical LoFi-videos and seriousness. The strategy works when the parody spoofs a well-known person who usually polarises. The original structure was copied but the video had a different aim and therefore, appears incongruous. This technique uses humour to surprise the viewers and to spread political content. The feedback by the audience seems to be quite positive as shown by the comments on YouTube (Heinrich, 2021).

'Boris Johnson's hilarious election advert| 12 Questions to Boris Johnson'

The video 'Boris Johnson's hilarious election advert| 12 Questions to Boris Johnson' was published on 12 November 2019 and mimics the *73 Questions*-format of *The Vogue*. In the Vogue-format, celebrities are visited at home and interviews are filmed in a single shot from a subjective camera angle.

People also associated the clip, along with the *73 Questions*-format, with the famous British mockumentary *The Office*, because Johnson walks through a similarly styled office while answering the questions. The main character in the sitcom is David Brent. Brent overestimates his leadership-qualities and comicality as entertainer. Some see high similarities to Brent's communication in the self-satisfied style of Johnson's gregarious communication in the video (Lyons, 2019) because of controversial or offensive remarks. One can think that Johnson embraces being compared to Brent, which was not a new idea, even if Johnson's humour is much more professional. The parody shows the ambiguity of Johnson: only celebrities get interviewed in *The Vogue*-format, while Johnson uses a mix of personal preferences and political questions to appear like a man of the people which brings some incongruous tension.

Furthermore, it is an example for Johnson's inevitable connection to British humour and popular entertainment in a relatively subtle way. By saying 'fish and chips on a cold night at the beach, you can't beat it' or complaining about not being allowed to get a Thai Curry delivered to his residence, Johnson plays with popular assumptions and provides a hilarious performance of how he imagines the British everyman.

'Love Actually'

A bit more than 2 weeks before Christmas, the Conservatives YouTube account published another parodic clip, titled 'Boris Johnson's funny Love Actually parody| Our final election broadcast' (Conservatives, 2019a). The clip is a parody of the highly successful British romantic comedy Love Actually (2003).[4]

Johnson spoofs the scene in which the character of Mark visits Juliet to tell her that he loves her by holding up written statements on cards in front of her house, which her husband does not see (Nicol, 2019). Johnson imitates the scene and inserts his campaign messages on the cards: Johnson criticises Parliament by blaming it for the current situation, stating 'with any luck, by next year, Brexit will be done if Parliament doesn't block it again. But for now let me say, Your vote has never been more important' (Conservatives, 2019a). Then Johnson walks away and says 'Enough, let's get this done' (Conservatives, 2019a). The parody stands out because of its direct address and ambiguous language. Humour was used to escape the situation by showing his leadership and simple solutions with a mischievous smile and the spoofing of the original text.

'Boris Johnson Answers the Web's Most Searched Questions'

A further example for humour through imitation is 'Boris Johnson Answers the Web's Most Searched Questions', published on YouTube in January 2020. Here Johnson pretends to answer the Web's most googled questions which mimics the *Wired Magazine's* 'Autocomplete Interview' series. *Wired* made numerous videos where celebrities are asked the most googled questions about themselves. The videos receive millions of views and are supposed to give a humorous look into how people view celebrities.

Instead of only answering questions about himself, Johnson also answers questions about Brexit. He adjusted the most searched questions for his means and only three real questions made it into his clip (Chaplain, 2020). Johnson seems to be approachable as he pretends to answer some critical questions which are of high interest for the public. The format enables him to belittle the worries of the British population and to joke about their fears, like 'Does Brexit effect my holidays' or 'does it happen on a Friday?'.

The video was published after the Brexit deal and is visually a clear imitation of *Wired's* interviews, evident due to the mockery of a Google search on a printed poster.

Discursive strategies

The parodies provoked reactions and recontextualisations by working with discursive strategies that are uncovered through the DHA and are often used by populists (Wodak, 2020: 891). The first strategy was the referential strategy, also called nomination, and it is visible through linguistic elements like 'metaphors and metonymies and synecdoches' (Wodak and Meyer, 2007: 27) which can be identified in the spoofing of the original pop cultural texts like films and video interview formats. Especially for media appearances,

populist politicians use the typical strategy of drawing ‘upon features of popular culture, such as film, music or wrestling’ (Nærland, 2020: 300). This shows the close linkage between politics, entertainment and the fictional when addressing voters (Nærland, 2020: 293) by referring ironically to the style.

Second, predication, which classifies actors positively or negatively, is visible as a strategy (Wodak and Meyer, 2007). Johnson wants to get media attention by referring to popular narratives which characterise himself in an easily understandable and likeable way (’12 Questions’). Politicians can use the popularity of certain stories to positively label their own personal brand, and some observe in Johnson’s ‘Love Actually’ parody a willingness ‘to sweep up even negative perceptions of Johnson into a portrait of someone who could be relied on’ (Nicol, 2019).

Johnson seems like a normal person who is approachable and honest about his weaknesses and, thereby, uses ambiguous humour and appears self-ironic. By comparing himself to Hulk, he induces humour through the violation of expectations and thereby creates incongruity. He presents himself positively as a superhero who is suppressed by the EU and thus gets angry. He also constructs himself as an outsider against his opponents, the anti-Brexit politicians.

The two interview-examples show the ‘self-centred populist approach’ (Bonnet, 2020: 5) which has been typical for the Brexit. At the same time, populists try to present themselves as one of the people by pretending to like fish and chips. Instead of complex problems and political ideas, people consume the simple and humorous content that is focussed on a single personality (Bonnet, 2020: 5) which ‘reinforced the government of the people versus Parliament approach’ (Bonnet, 2020: 6).

Johnson wants to convince viewers of certain perspectives on the situation and his behaviour. Therefore, another visible strategy is argumentation which is used to support justifications of actors and their actions (Wodak and Meyer, 2007). For example, the Hulk parody contributes to an inversion of hierarchies and tries to provide a political space for ‘the people’ while being critical towards the elite of which Johnson himself definitely is part of (Brassett, 2021: 125). Through the Hulk comparison, Johnson depicts himself as a liberating hero ‘leading the people out of the supposedly crushing monologic totalitarianism represented by the EU and the political opposition’ (MacMillan, 2020: 69). In ‘Love Actually’, he is the personification of Britishness which he connects to the decision on Brexit. In the ‘lo fi boriswave’ video, he appears very controlled and focussed, as if people can just trust him and relax. It has an unagitated touch and could be seen as an ironic strategy to describe Johnson ‘as a relaxed figure, though his public clowning already tries to do this’ (Stokel-Walker, 2019).

Furthermore, the strategy of intensification makes statements more forceful (Wodak and Meyer, 2007) and the cases draw on a very intense and emotional type of communication. The Conservative’s campaign used ‘the power that comes from using some of the most emotive associations of popular culture’ (Nicol, 2019). The ‘Love Actually’ case, for example, plays with love as the strongest emotion and relates it to the election and Brexit context. In the interview with the *Mail on Sunday*, Johnson used emotional expressions and carnivalesque attacks on the dominant political elite.

Linguistic realisations

Linguistic realisations enable people to finally recognise the parodies because of a characteristic linguistic, iconic visual appearance or just spoken words or sounds which are imitated. These include visual, performative and aesthetic elements that are essential for

populism as a certain communicative style and performance. The particular elements matter greatly for the extension of affection and passion in populism (Moffitt and Tormey, 2014: 386).

Johnson's typical visual and humorous parody works in the Hulk case as a shortcut: it simplifies a complex matter and contributes to a trivialisation of politics (Howley, 2016) through transferring Hulk's situation onto his own political problems. This combines humour and simplification, and this style of simple solutions is visible in all the cases as a strategy behind the humour. The same is the case with the 'Most Searched Questions', where Johnson answers complex questions with yes or no.

A linguistic examination shows how the Hulk comparisons were realised and carried by the media. Johnson's wording, the headline and the general rhetoric are especially of interest. The form of communication can be seen as a parody because Johnson repeats the original text from the Hulk and refers directly to him. The described visual argument by Johnson was due to the memetic quality which blended popular culture and politics in an entertaining way picked up by the Mail on Sunday and other actors (Howley, 2016).

The 'lo fi' video is recognisable as parody because of the incongruous spoofing of the popular music style and its specific aesthetic which many young people use to relax and concentrate. The video tries to balance Johnson's message as being between earnest and ironic. The repetition and the echo work which is in an (self-)ironic way resemble 'almost a meditative mantra' (Stokel-Walker, 2019). The bright colours of the landscape appear as if they were 'drawn from anime or Japanese RPGs, which have characteristically emotive aesthetics' (Stokel-Walker, 2019).

In 'Love Actually', Johnson visually copied the original text and almost paid homage to Britain in the times of Tony Blair. This is evident because the film is typical of the nostalgia for the Tony Blair times. Johnson also plays with being compared to David Brent by paying visual homage to *The Office* which is famous for British humour and is internationally popular.

Political Effects

As major consequences, all the parodies were widely regarded and this led to a positive reception, enormous attention and a distraction from daily political business. The number of views was extraordinary for the Conservatives' new manner of circulating their content to new audiences. Some criticism was voiced against Johnson's comparisons and analogies, but these did not last long. In the end, Johnson achieved a majority at the elections and made a Brexit deal before being forced to resign in September 2022.

Overall, the key characteristics of the populist style are immediacy ('Love Actually'. '12 Questions'), emotional states like anger and love ('Hulk') and relaxation ('lo fi'), all of which are clearly visible in the parodies. All the identified effects are connected to populism as a style: media attention is related to populism because the media enables the success of populism; ambiguity is part of populists' general wording between fun and fight; and the emotional expressions in the parodies are core characteristics of the style. Distraction from the inherent problems of the populist logic is essential (Weaver, 2022).

Stimulation

Johnson employed well-known narratives and self-ironic stereotypes in his parodies and used interactions with popular culture within his populist style of communication. The

reinforcement of dominant mainstream values and narratives (Tsakona and Popa, 2011), such as the popularity of superheroes and, specifically, British texts make parody for both the media and populist politics very convenient and suitable for stimulating a debate. The recontextualisation of Hulk into the Brexit debate, and thereby into various different media genres, inflamed the media, political commentators, politicians and diplomats alike, and it brought up ‘a variety of fictionalised and mythologised historical references against the backdrop of Brexit’ (Schmid, 2019). The parody connected the intertextual knowledge of the audience about Hulkor David Brent, with Johnson as a character.

Topham & Guerin, who were responsible for the Conservatives’ video parodies, started their PR-careers as meme makers. Producing humorous viral content had previously been a successful strategy for the PR duo in an Australian election campaign (Elsom, 2019) and in other prior campaigns. Therefore, they knew that they would reach people outside the Conservative’s demographic through using iconic texts of popular culture, which would reach out to the broadest possible audience in all social classes. This was made possible because their specific content circulates, through its provocative nature, beyond the intended audiences. The content was so well designed that its success was able to be anticipated. Even if Johnson’s opponents would never support him, they ensured that more attention would be given to him by criticising him on social media (Lyons, 2019), which kept his content at the centre of attention for longer. Already in 2016, tendencies like these had been visible when Dominic Cummings was responsible as strategist.

Parodies are likely to be parodied again (Elsom, 2019) because they are easy to recognise by their structure and easy to replicate, as the ‘lo fi boriswave’ and ‘12 Questions’ showed. The ‘Love Actually’ parody works because it spoofs one of the most iconic scenes of the film. The scene has been imitated and very often referenced. Johnson was after Gordon Brown and David Cameron already the third PM who had referred to the scene in the film about UK/US relations when stressing the British significance in relation to other countries (Nicol, 2019).

In general, there was no explicit and fundamental critique of Johnson’s political performance but only comparisons to Hulk, the dubious historical background of ‘lo fi Boriswave’ originating from Vaporwave (Ritchie, 2022) and questions as to the reason there is different text on the cards in ‘Love Actually’ and why he is lying on Christmas or changing the interview questions. Because of their roles in the original movies, Mark Ruffalo and Hugh Grant, criticised minor details of the parodies but not the spoofing or Johnson in general. Thereby they further stimulated the debates due to their discursive power. This was crucial to dynamise the discourse, and leading to international attention.

Shift and distraction of (media) attention

The humour in Johnson’s parodies is also a good illustration of how ’by chuckling at him, we are not likely to be thinking too hard about his doggedly neoliberal [agenda]’ (Coe, 2013). while doing nothing against it. The ways in which parodies can side track and thereby influence ongoing conversations (Laaksonen et al., 2022: 1925) become visible in Johnson’s parodies, which undermined a serious discourse about the developments and political strategies in the Brexit negotiations by instead stimulating a discussion about the original texts and making the politics of it into a joke. Most of the recontextualisations only referred to the headline of the texts, not to the interview content or political situation. The debate was not about the political content, but instead about the performance and side issues like Johnson’s similarity to pop cultural figures (’12 Questions’).

Only a very limited number of reactions, such as the cartoon 'Stalled by Party Vote' by Zapiro (2019) referred to Johnson's problematic political situation while he had to negotiate a deal. Interestingly, discussions were often about the suitability of Johnson's comparison of himself to Hulk. Mark Ruffalo, who portrayed Hulk in the most recent films, complained and criticised Johnson's analogy to the Hulk character for having focussed only on selected parts of Hulk's characterisation (Rufallo, 2019).

Other commentators compared the situation of Hulk waking up with post-Brexit and recognised similarities because of Johnson and Hulk being 'naked, cold, confused and not really sure what happened, while hoping no one died' (Hawkes, 2019). The Brexit Coordinator of the EU accused Johnson of being 'infantile' (Verhofstadt, 2019).

Furthermore, the simple, memetic and humorous communication took attention away from the Labour party and other politicians. The Conservatives focussed on Facebook and YouTube as platforms which each have different audiences and combined this with their tactic 'to produce viral content which would suck the oxygen of publicity from Jeremy Corbyn's burgeoning social media presence' (Elsom, 2019).

Ambiguity

It has been said that parodic humour combines characteristics, so that it is like wrapping politicians' 'statements in layers of ambiguity, irony and playfulness' (Mendonça and Caetano, 2021: 8). The playfulness is highly appreciated by the British public and has, according to Jonathan Coe, problematic effects: 'Something has gone a bit wrong in the relationship between our famous British sense of humour and our politics. They have become too entangled and our politics has become unserious' (Mesure, 2022). Johnson and his clownish aura differ from the general expectations of politicians, but, his specific populist communication is hardly leading to any scandalisation, as humour and comedy are meanwhile an integrated part of British politics (Brassett, 2021).

Humour in political communication can even be employed as a strategy of 'calculated ambivalence' (Engel and Wodak, 2009). The ambiguity basically provides the speaker with the possibility of calling his or her message 'just a bit of fun'. It also provides the ability 'to express multi-layered messages – to combine, for example, threats with teasing and friendly ribbing' (Kopper, 2021: 2) in a constructive and diplomatic way. The humour in the Hulk example provided a perfect ambiguity: it could be perceived as a mix of threat and a chance for dialogue because of its humorous connotation (Kopper, 2021: 320). Furthermore, it included a way of defending against critique due to the ambiguity of Hulk and his very opposite characteristics of anger and reason.

The 'Love Actually' parody playfully referred to Johnson's dishonesty by blaming Parliament: 'It subtly referred to his reputation as a man who is not necessarily as good as his word' (Nicol, 2019). It shows how populists can use humour to camouflage the incongruities in their politics and characters (Weaver, 2022).

Emotional aspects

As a further effect, humour is connected to emotional communication in many ways because populist messaging is often 'simple, emotive and repetitive and barely let the focus slip from the personality of their leader' (Nicol, 2019). All five parodies deal with emotional issues. This trend of pop cultural emotional references goes together with the fictionalisation of politics because it blurs boundaries in politics (Brantner et al., 2019: 4).

Research also suggests that entertainment and humour are lowering the degree of care in checking the plausibility of arguments (Brantner et al., 2019: 3).

The emotional reference to 'Love Actually' 'affirms that love is the force uniting people in the UK, both as human beings and as British people' (Nicol, 2019). Johnson was able to use 'the film's overall connotations of warm, humorous, reasonable Britishness. It was an association which lent itself to promoting an approach to Brexit' (Nicol, 2019). Johnson suggests that a choice about Brexit has to be made from the heart. 'Love Actually' 'signifies Britishness, or at least one particular variety of Britishness' (Nicol, 2019). The same can be said about Johnson's references in the interviews where he talks about fish and chips and spoofs the typically British mockumentary *The Office* ('12 Questions'), which all use humour that resonates well with conservative thinking.

Conclusion

Populism as a style of communication is, in the case of Johnson, much more than 'flaunting the low' (Ostiguy et al., 2021). As has been shown, it is remarkable how effective and attractive parodic humour in the populist communication style of Johnson can be, since already 'larger parts of the population are susceptible to Johnson's variant of populism' (Mounk, 2019) and to humour of conservative politicians as well. Even if the political agenda of Johnson is from an ideological perspective not typically populist, the style of his communication is populist and can lead to a deeper realisation of the logic of populists in an environment in which political communication is increasingly exercised on social media. The provocative nature kept the content at the centre of attention for longer.

Parodies are insightful for Johnson's strategic use of humorous communication and they emphasise the populist style in a new way. All cases have in common to show simple solutions, to directly address the viewers in a chummy and rude way while using an emotional style of speaking.

The examples illustrated an integration of humour into politics and the use of emotions and calculated ambivalence, which often lead to the plausibility of easy solutions, perceivably close to the people and focussed on the leader who is a comedy politician in the centre of a crisis. As the analysis and the theoretical sections have demonstrated, popular culture is a useful component of style and performance. The parodies were successful in terms of challenging established structures of power and presenting Johnson's closeness to the people. Johnson, on one hand, the relaxed manager in the ironic 'lo fi' video seemed to be, on the other hand, angry against the political elite who acted against him as the one who has to get Brexit done for the people. As a populist leader, Johnson is part of the elite but appears to be complaining about the elite, pretending to be one of the common people, like in '12 Questions'.

The observations concerning his performance in the parodies do not fit with the rude humour of other populists, but instead are well-planned performances to reach out to new audiences. He still uses the clownish aura as a basis for his performance, something to which people are accustomed. However, he is not just doing clownish humour, but combining his yearlong cultivated aura with self-satirising humour created by professional PR strategists and professional meme-creators.

Parodies can distract and camouflage current political problems. The most influential effect of the humorous parodies was a shift and distraction of the public attention towards the performances and unimportant emotional details and other topics outside of political competition. The central issues of Johnson were, at the time, to get a Brexit deal which

ended up outside the public focus. Instead, the complex political conflict was simplified. After the Hulk comparison, for example, there was a broad debate, but it was not as focussed the current politics of Brexit. Even on an international level, the parodic communication of Johnson led to high resonance due to its use of popular culture.

The public debates which followed the parodies were more about qualities and characterisations of the prominent figures compared with the original text, which had been spoofed. This shows how humorous politicians are problematic for society through distracted attention from the core issues.

Finally, spoofing other texts can only be successful for a certain time period because no real personal (political) motivation becomes visible, as evidenced by the end of Johnson's career in September 2022. Similar to David Brent, his motto could be 'rather popular than stirring the ship in the right direction', which Brent says when he loses his job in *The Office*. For Brent and Johnson, laughter is the most important, and they prefer having a show instead of doing their work.

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Notes

1. https://www.academia.edu/39701451/When_the_clown_becomes_king_the_politics_of_humour_and_emotions_in_the_age_of_populism_Interdisciplinary_workshop_-_Barcelona_12_December_2019_
2. Own translation.
3. The scientist who turns into Hulk.
4. Starring Hugh Grant as the British Prime Minister who is seen as idol for Johnson (Coe, 2013).

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Ehrenerklärung

Ich versichere hiermit, dass ich die vorliegende Arbeit ohne unzulässige Hilfe Dritter und ohne Benutzung anderer als der angegebenen Hilfsmittel angefertigt habe.

Verwendete fremde und eigene Quellen sind als solche kenntlich gemacht.

Ich habe nicht die Hilfe eines kommerziellen Promotionsberaters in Anspruch genommen. Ich habe insbesondere nicht wissentlich:

- Ergebnisse erfunden oder widersprüchliche Ergebnisse verschwiegen
- statistische Verfahren absichtlich missbraucht, um Daten in wissenschaftlich ungerechtfertigter Weise zu interpretieren
- fremde Ergebnisse oder Veröffentlichungen plagiiert
- fremde Forschungsergebnisse verzerrt wiedergegeben.

Mir ist bekannt, dass Verstöße gegen das Urheberrecht Unterlassungs- und Schadensersatzansprüche des Urhebers sowie eine strafrechtliche Ahndung durch die Strafverfolgungsbehörden begründen können.

Die Arbeit wurde bisher weder im Inland noch im Ausland in gleicher oder ähnlicher Form als Dissertation eingereicht und ist als Ganzes auch noch nicht veröffentlicht.

Ich erkläre mich damit einverstanden, dass die Dissertation ggf. mit Mitteln der elektronischen Datenverarbeitung auf Plagiate überprüft werden kann.

Magdeburg, 13.12.2023

Daniel Beck