

# Humour Matters: Laughter and Democracy

## International Workshop for PhD students

23–24 April 2026

Tallinn University, Estonia

*Humour Matters: Laughter and Democracy* is an international, interdisciplinary workshop that brings together scholars and practitioners to examine humour as both a democratic resource and a site of conflict. Humour can enable critique, solidarity, and resistance, but it can also foster exclusion, polarization, and harm. The workshop explores these tensions through the lenses of humour theory, legal boundaries, political satire, and civic education. Its central aim is to identify key research questions at the intersection of humour and democracy and to equip students with the conceptual tools and methodological approaches needed to address these questions through future research projects.

### Day 1 – April 23: Foundations & Practices

#### 09:30–11:00 *Introductory Lecture: How and Why We Study Humour*

Anastasiya Fiadotava (Estonian Literature Museum)

Guillem Castañar Rubio (Tallinn University)

#### 11:00–11:30 Coffee break

#### 11:30–13:00 **Lecture: Platforms, Humour, and Harm**

Ariadna Matamoros-Fernández (University College Dublin)

#### 13:00–14:00 Lunch

#### 14:00–15:30 **Workshop: Cartoons as Democratic Critique**

Tjeerd Royaards (Cartoon Movement, The Netherlands)

#### 15:30–17:00 **Guided Walking Tour** in Tallinn Old Town

#### 17:00–18:30 **Informal Dinner:** Pizza and drinks at Heldeke!

#### 18:30–20:00 **Performance & Roundtable:** Voices from the Field – Stand-up Comedy and Democracy (Ana Falcon, Stewart Johnson, Jana Levitina)

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Venue: Heldeke!

## Day 2 – April 24: Challenges & Stakes

### 09:30–11:00. Seminar: Humour Scandals – Conflicts and Boundaries in Democracy

Carmen Maíz Arévalo (Complutense University of Madrid)

### 11:00–11:30 Coffee break

### 11:30–13:00 Lecture: The Proliferation of Satirical Depictions of Muhammad in the Age of Their Prohibition

Dennis Meyhoff Brink (Danish Institute for Study Abroad, Copenhagen)

### 13:00–14:00 Lunch

### 14:00–15:15 Panel: Humour Matters – Perspectives from Ongoing Research Projects

- Democratic Literacy and Humour (DELIAH) – Prof. Andrew Bricker (Ghent University)
- Forum for Humour and the Law (FORHUM) – Prof. Alberto Godioli (University of Groningen)
- Humour Literacy: Reframing Conflict and Controversy in the Public Sphere (HUMLIT) – Prof. Carmen Maíz Arévalo (Universidad Complutense Madrid)
- Larpocracy: Live Action Role-Play and Democratic Participation – Speaker TBC
- Democracy in Action: Participatory Practices, Media, and Civic Engagement – Speaker TBC

Moderated Q&A

### 15:15–15:30 Stretch break

### 15:30–16:30 Breakout Synthesis Sessions (mentored by DELIAH project members)

Themes:

- Humour and democratic resilience
- Humour and polarization
- Humour and platform dynamics
- Humour pedagogy and civic education

Each group prepares a 3-minute pitch.

### 16:30–17:00 Collective Wrap-Up

Group takeaways and shared future research questions.

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# Lecture Abstracts and Recommended Readings

The abstracts and recommended readings below are presented *in the order of the workshop programme*.

## Introductory Lecture: How and Why We Study Humour

Anastasiya Fiadotava · Guillem Castañar Rubio

### Abstract

Humour studies has been an interdisciplinary field since its emergence, engaging scholars from psychology, philosophy, linguistics, folklore, sociology, media and communication studies, and political science. While many disciplinary approaches developed in parallel, the field is also shaped by overarching theories that allow for cross-disciplinary dialogue.

The first part of the lecture introduces the three classical humour theories—superiority, relief, and incongruity—alongside influential contemporary frameworks such as the General Theory of Verbal Humour and Benign Violation Theory. It also outlines analytical concepts widely used in current humanities and social science research, including humour mechanisms, humour in the public sphere, humour tastes, humour scandals, and digital humour (memes and viral content).

The second part adopts a research-oriented perspective, presenting international projects that examine humour in relation to democracy, conflict, resistance, and freedom of expression across Europe. The lecture concludes by introducing humour literacy as an emerging field and its relevance for reframing public controversies and strengthening democratic resilience.

### Recommended Readings

- Attardo, S. (1994). *Linguistic Theories of Humor*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Billig, M. (2005). *Laughter and Ridicule: Towards a Social Critique of Humour*. London: Sage.
- Kuipers, G. (2008). *The sociology of humour*. In Raskin (Ed.), *The Primer of Humor Research*.
- Morreall, J. (2009). *Comic Relief: A Comprehensive Philosophy of Humor*. Wiley-Blackwell.

## Platforms, Humour, and Harm

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*Ariadna Matamoros-Fernández*

### Abstract

Humour is central to social media culture, enabling solidarity, play, and political critique, but it can also be mobilised to silence, marginalise, and harm. Platform moderation systems are often ill-equipped to assess humour, particularly across cultural contexts, leading to the removal of critical humour while harmful humour continues to circulate. This lecture examines the democratic implications of platform governance and content moderation practices in relation to humorous expression.

### Recommended Readings

- Matamoros-Fernández, A., Bartolo, L., & Troynar, L. (2023). *Humour as an online safety issue. Internet Policy Review*, 12(1).
- Matamoros-Fernández, A., Rodriguez, A., & Wikström, P. (2022). *Humor That Harms? Media and Communication*, 10(2).
- Matamoros-Fernández, A., & Jude, N. (2025). *Centering harm in soft moderation. New Media & Society*, 27(4).
- Matamoros-Fernández, A. (2023). *Taking Humor Seriously on TikTok. Social Media + Society*.

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## Workshop: Cartoons as Democratic Critique

*Tjeerd Royaards*

### Abstract

This workshop explores political cartoons as a form of democratic critique that combines humour, visual rhetoric, and political commentary. In the first part, participants are introduced to the role and impact of political satire through contemporary and historical examples, focusing on why cartoonists and satirists often provoke strong reactions from those in power. Particular attention is paid to the use of metaphor, symbolism, composition, timing, and minimal text in visual satire.

In the second, hands-on part of the workshop, participants engage in the creative process of cartoon-making. Guided step by step, they develop their own cartoon ideas by identifying a topic, defining a critical angle, clarifying the intended message, and selecting an appropriate visual language. The workshop encourages participants to reflect on humour as both an artistic practice and a democratic tool.

### Recommended Readings

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- Medhurst, M. J., & DeSousa, M. A. (1981). *Political cartoons as rhetorical form. Communication Monographs*, 48(3).
- Kuipers, G. (2011). *The politics of humour in the public sphere. European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 14(1).
- Diamond, M. (2002). *No laughing matter: Political cartoons in censorship. Journal of Popular Culture*, 35(2).

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## The Proliferation of Satirical Depictions of Muhammad in the Age of Their Prohibition

*Dennis Meyhoff Brink*

### Abstract

This lecture challenges the widespread assumption that violent backlash has successfully suppressed satirical depictions of Muhammad in Western media. Drawing on historical and contemporary material, it documents an unprecedented proliferation of such depictions since 2005. Using Foucault's critique of the "repressive hypothesis," the lecture argues that prohibition has paradoxically stimulated both quantitative expansion and qualitative innovation in satire.

### Recommended Readings

- Foucault, M. (1978). *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1: The Will to Knowledge*. New York: Pantheon.
- Gilbert, N. (2013). *Better Left Unsaid*. Stanford University Press.
- Brink, D. M. (2025). *False affectivity and the manufacture of outrage. European Journal of Humour Studies*, 13(4).

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## Humour Scandals – Conflicts and Boundaries in Democracy

*Carmen Maíz Arévalo*

### Abstract

Humour scandals function as stress tests for democracy, revealing contested boundaries between freedom of expression, offence, and legitimacy. Drawing on Spanish case studies and theoretical frameworks such as the public sphere, carnival, and the moral dimensions of humour, this interactive seminar examines humour as both democratic critique and a driver of

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polarization. Participants engage in practical exercises that make visible the contested lines of acceptability in humour.

### Recommended Readings

- Bakhtin, M. (1968). *Rabelais and His World*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Habermas, J. (1962). *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Butler, N. (2024). *The Trouble with Jokes*. Bristol University Press.
- Kuipers, G., & Zijp, D. (2024). *Humour and the public sphere*. *European Journal of Humour Research*, 12(1).
- Herkman, J., & Koivukoski, J. (2024). *Humour scandals in the Finnish political public sphere*. *European Journal of Humour Research*, 12(1).

## Panel: Humour Matters – Perspectives from Ongoing Research Projects

### Democratic Literacy and Humour (DELIAH)

#### Prof. Andrew Bricker (Ghent University)

DELIAH investigates the role of humour in fostering democratic literacy, with a particular focus on how comedic practices shape citizens' understanding of democratic norms, values, and conflicts. The project examines humour as a form of civic communication that can both strengthen democratic engagement and contribute to exclusion or polarization. Through interdisciplinary methods, DELIAH explores how humour operates across media, education, and public discourse, and how democratic competencies related to humour can be developed and taught.

### Forum for Humour and the Law (FORHUM)

#### Prof. Alberto Godioli (University of Groningen)

FORHUM is an international platform dedicated to exploring the relationship between humour, freedom of expression, and the law. Bringing together legal scholars, humour researchers, practitioners, and artists, the project documents and analyses legal cases involving satire and humour from a comparative perspective. FORHUM aims to improve understanding of how humour is evaluated in legal contexts and to support more nuanced approaches to humour-related disputes in democratic societies.

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## **Humour Literacy: Reframing Conflict and Controversy in the Public Sphere (HUMLIT)**

**Prof. Carmen Maíz Arévalo (Universidad Complutense Madrid)**

HUMLIT focuses on humour literacy as a key civic competence for navigating conflict, controversy, and offence in the public sphere. The project examines how individuals and communities interpret, negotiate, and respond to humour in politically sensitive contexts. By combining discourse analysis, case studies, and pedagogical approaches, HUMLIT aims to develop tools that help citizens critically engage with humour while fostering democratic dialogue and resilience.

## **Larpocracy: Live Action Role-Play and Democratic Participation**

**Speaker TBC**

Larpocracy explores the use of live action role-play (LARP) as an experimental and participatory method for democratic engagement. The project investigates how embodied, playful simulations can help participants experience political decision-making, conflict, and cooperation from multiple perspectives. By blending performance, game design, and political theory, Larpocracy examines the democratic potential of immersive play as a tool for civic education and participation.

## **Democracy in Action: Participatory Practices, Media, and Civic Engagement**

**Speaker TBC**

Democracy in Action examines contemporary forms of participatory democracy, focusing on the role of media, communication practices, and grassroots initiatives in shaping civic engagement. The project analyses how citizens interact with democratic institutions and each other through both traditional and digital media, with attention to inclusion, deliberation, and democratic innovation. It aims to identify practices that strengthen active citizenship and democratic resilience in changing media environments.