

Introduction: the state of political comedy

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Introduction: the state of political comedy

KEYWORDS Political comedy; political humour; politics; comedy; humour

Introduction

The articles in this special issue canvas the state of political comedy in the 2020s, with an emphasis on changing political norms and conventions; a shifting media environment and the rise of new media technologies; new forms of aesthetic expression; the function of political humour in different geopolitical contexts; and questions about the efficacy and implication of comedy as a way of doing politics in the current conjuncture. This introduction discusses recent incidents in the USA where comic criticisms have been subject to government interference as indicative of the potential power of political humour in the current conjuncture, and considers how direct conflict with authorities might embolden political comedians. It then argues that the power of political humour has often been theorised in abstract and reductive ways before providing an overview of the contributions to the special issue.

The Stewart restoration

On February 12, 2024, roughly eight and a half years since his initial departure, Jon Stewart returned as the host of *The Daily Show*: an American late-night political talk show that Stewart had previously hosted from 1999 to 2015. During those earlier years, what was formally known as *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* had been among the most celebrated and influential outlets for political comedy in the USA,¹ and arguably in the world (Holm, 2018; Lance Bennett 2007; McClennen and Maisel 2014; Warner 2007). For the first decade and a half of the twenty-first century, *The Daily Show* had served as a centrepiece for American political conversation across both the Bush and Obama administrations (Boler 2006; Harris 2010), spawned a raft of imitators in America and abroad (Baym and Jones 2013; Lipson, Boukes, and Khemkhem 2023), and inspired countless debates regarding the relationship between comic entertainment and serious politics (Baym 2005; Hart and Hartelius 2007; McKain 2005).

So great was the impact of *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* (and to a lesser extent its ironic counterpart, *The Colbert Report*) that, during the show's heyday, to speak of political comedy was to speak of *The Daily Show* (Fox 2023, 99–112). Scholars measured and debated the extent to which Stewart's comedy informed voters, influenced beliefs, and cultivated democracy (Baumgartner and Morris 2006, Hariman 2007, Morris 2009). Articles and chapters considered Stewart as the comic successor to figures like Socrates or Michel Foucault (Barad 2013; Jordan 2008). Indeed, for many, Stewart's

tenure on *The Daily Show* was not simply a notably successful instance of political comedy as a popular phenomenon, but the high mark of a 'golden era' of political comedy: an emblem of the power and inherent progressiveness of comedy as a political force. Stewart's homecoming was therefore not simply received as the return of a popular previous host to revive a flagging entertainment brand, but to its most enthusiastic advocates conveyed an almost talismanic promise: political comedy returning to save the republic and its citizens in their darkest hour (Rosenberg 2024).

However, although Stewart's return was hailed in some quarters—and provided an immense ratings boost for the show—many commentators feared the move would prove little more than a return to the past (Bramescio 2024; Smith 2024). In the many years since Stewart's retirement from *The Daily Show*, times have changed dramatically for politics and comedy alike. On the one hand, the practice and theory of politics alike had been upended by the rise of new forms of global populism, a dramatic decline of American influence, and the ongoing consequences of climate change and the pandemic that have recalibrated the (neo)liberal consensus of previous decades. On the other hand, the cultural and social status of comedy has also undergone a series of major transformations. If it were ever possible to think of comedy as something wholly separate from politics, such a perspective is no longer tenable (except for those most stubbornly committed to policing and reinforcing that boundary, usually for their own ends). Instead, humour is now increasingly embroiled in all manner of social conflicts and subject to new forms of critical attention and scrutiny, even as its media form has been disrupted by new communication technologies that have changed how comedy is produced, distributed, and consumed.

Against the backdrop of these changes, how was the return of Jon Stewart—the 'Stewart restoration' as it were—to be best interpreted? As a glorious return to form: one that would see the resumption of comedy as a uniquely incisive and accessibly political force capable of restoring critical thinking and liberal democracy to a weary populace? Or was *The Daily Show's* re-adoption of its prior host no more than the admission that there are no new ideas in political comedy? That faced with the unheralded disruption of the first presidency of Donald Trump, the return of active war to the European mainland, and the social and political fallout of a global pandemic, the best that comedy could do was smooth the pillow of a dying democratic order? And what might this mean for political comedy more broadly in a new era for both politics and comedy? Can political comedy be a force for democratic good in the world, or has it been revealed as an empty form of amusement, or perhaps something even more sinister: an entertaining diversion that has contributed to the conditions of laughing cynicism that made possible the new political climate of aggression, corruption, and unfettered antagonism? What does political comedy even mean in our current context?

Lèse-majesté

The purpose of this special issue was and is to try and answer some of these questions and take stock of 'The State of Political Comedy' in these rapidly changing times. However, since the initial call-for-papers was first published, the political comic situation has continued to change so rapidly that at times I despaired that this special issue was

in danger of being obsoleted before it could see digital print. It has become a cliché, in the Anglophone world at least, to note the seemingly never-ending torrent of unprecedented and unforeseeable changes to so many aspects of our lives over the last decade. However, repetition does not make this observation any less true, and political comedy has been no exception to this tendency. Consequently, there were moments when I feared that this issue might not be a document of the current situation of political comedy, but the last record of a dying order of political comedy that once was.

At no time was this more apparent than following the announcement of the cancellation of *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert* in mid-2025. On July 17, 2025, the CBS network declared that *The Late Show*—a staple of American comedy television since 1993—would cease production in May 2026. Although announced as ‘purely a financial decision’ (Steinberg 2025a) the cancellation was widely interpreted as a sop to the Trump White House: the show’s host, Stephen Colbert, had not only been a persistent comic critic of the Trump administration (Bradley 2025; Cain 2025), but had ridiculed a recent legal settlement that CBS’s parent company, Paramount, had reached with President Trump against the backdrop of the company seeking executive approval for a high-level corporate merger (Markus 2025). The Writers Guild of America expressed concern that the ‘cancellation is a bribe, sacrificing free speech to curry favour with the Trump Administration as the company looks for merger approval’ (Writers Guild of America (WGA) 2025). Such an assertion is remarkable in that it suggests that a political leader in a historically democratic nation could have directly and openly applied political pressure to silence a perceived opponent who was not a rival politician, or even an inconvenient journalist, but a comedian whose show features regular updates about escaped monkeys.

Nor was this the end of the Trump administration’s aggressive direct interventions in political comedy. Following the announcement of Colbert’s cancellation, in a post on the Truth Social platform, President Trump wrote ‘I absolutely love that Colbert’ [sic] got fired. His talent was even less than his ratings. I hear Jimmy Kimmel is next’ (qtd. in Spangler 2025). In retrospect, this would seem less a prediction than a threat: production of Kimmel’s own late night talk show, *Jimmy Kimmel Live!*, was suspended in September 2025 following remarks Kimmel made in a comic monologue addressing the assassination of far-right activist Charlie Kirk. The conditions for Kimmel’s suspension were, if anything, even more egregious than those surrounding the treatment of Colbert. During an interview on the minor podcast, *The Benny Show*—hosted by documented plagiarist Benny Johnson (Gold and Shutt 2014)—the Trump-appointed chairman of the Federal Communications Commission, Brendan Carr, threatened action against the ABC network that aired Kimmel, and its parent company, Disney: ‘We can do this the easy way or the hard way. These companies can find ways to change conduct and take action, frankly, on Kimmel, or there’s going to be additional work for the FCC ahead’ (qtd. in Johnson 2025). Shortly afterwards, the media companies Sinclair and Nexstar, which broadcast ABC programming in local markets in the USA, announced they would no longer screen *Jimmy Kimmel Live!* on their local channels, leading ABC to announce they were suspending production of the show (Hailu 2025). In response, ABC announced on Wednesday 17 September that the political comedy show would be ‘pre-empted indefinitely’ (Steinberg 2025b).

The public backlash to Kimmel's indefinite pre-emption was swift and furious. Whereas Colbert's cancellation had been conducted behind the barest semblance of economic rationale, the action against Kimmel was openly and proudly political. There was therefore no need to read deeply into the situation to understand it as an example of political suppression of comedy. Publicly, the decision was criticised by comedians, celebrities, civil liberties groups, and politicians, including both conservative senator, Ted Cruz (Chmielewski, Shepardson, and Gorman 2025; Saad 2025; Walsh and Tanyos 2025), and former president Barack Obama, who decried it as an act of 'government coercion' (Walker 2025). Some reports also suggested that in response to the news fans were cancelling visits to Disney theme parks (Bondarenko 2025; Torres 2025) and that subscription rates had dropped significantly for Disney+ and Hulu streaming services (Weprin 2025). Faced with such pressure, Disney reversed their decision. In less than a week, *Jimmy Kimmel Live!* returned to broadcast on Tuesday 22 September.

Although the Kimmel pre-emption ended in a more desirable outcome than the Colbert cancellation, both conflicts reflect a dramatic escalation in the stakes of political comedy. Previously, there had been a current of persistent scepticism regarding the bolder arguments made for the efficacy of political comedy in liberal democratic contexts, on the grounds that many of those claims overestimated the importance of comedy in the wider political context. If comedy were so powerful, so liberatory, a political force—this argument went—then why is it so often not only tolerated but indulged by those in power? If political comedy can change the world, then why is it not more rigorously opposed by those who stand most to benefit from the world the way that it currently is? Indeed, I have advanced a variation of this argument in my own prior work: that advocates of comedy as a radical political force overemphasise its transformative power and underemphasise its alignment with the priorities of authority in a liberal democratic context (Holm 2017, 23–58). The Colbert and Kimmel conflicts challenge this position by providing stark evidence of a situation in which comedy was taken deeply seriously as a political force by a sitting government to the extent that direct action was taken to attempt to silence critical humour. Such a scenario resembles less the norms of recent political culture in democratic contexts—where political figures have embraced humour as a way to cultivate popular public personas—and more that of authoritarian contexts, where governments have been more inclined to stifle critical comedy as a form of dissent. This raises a question of cause-and-effect: is it political comedy that helps keep authoritarian politics at bay, or is a culture of political comedy a symptom of democratic and open government? Unfortunately, the USA might provide a timely case study to help us further explore this question.

Taking off the gloves (and the pants)

Somewhat more optimistically—some might even think irresponsibly—it is also possible to draw a more positive lesson from the recent history of political comedy in the USA. On July 21, in an opening monologue directly responding to the news of *The Late Show's* cancellation, Colbert proclaimed that given that the end of his show was now inevitable: 'the gloves are off' (qtd. in Cain and Michael 2025). Indeed, the

show's premature cancellation left Colbert in a somewhat unique position: holding one of the most coveted podiums in American entertainment, but with precious little in the way of the traditional checks and balances provided by the commercial environment of corporate media.

From a political economic perspective, the limits of mainstream comic critique have been historically circumscribed by the need to cultivate and retain as large and diverse audience as possible—so that those viewers can then be sold on to advertisers as the primary means to fund production costs and profit. In a commercial media environment, failure to attract sufficient audience share risks losing advertising revenue which then puts the future of any media production at risk. Therefore, while there is some possibility to embrace mild political polarisation in political humour, insofar as it might inform market differentiation towards a desired demographic, in practice political comedians like Colbert—especially those who operate in a mainstream legacy media environment like broadcast late night television—need to prioritise not alienating possible viewers. In pursuit of that end they have needed to ensure that any political critique in their comedy is perceived to be either equal opportunity or primarily playful². This economic priority has historically been blamed for the relative *milquetoast* quality of mainstream political comedy: market logic dictating the need for comedians to play to the safe middle ground rather than offer anything potentially controversial or biting critical.

However, following news of his cancellation, such restrictions applied to *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert* to a much lesser extent than ever before. Beyond the bare minimum required by the relatively lenient requirements of US broadcasting standards and slander law, in the final ten months of his show's run, there is no longer a need for *The Late Show* to cultivate an impression of even-handedness, or even basic civility. Freed in this manner from the shackles of corporate-mandated responsibility, the show's comedy during this period has embraced a liberating willingness to entertain pettiness and viciousness: to belabour embarrassing points and scandals; to craft jokes built upon blunt condemnations of the Trump administration, rather than flourishes of clever wit. No longer did such comedy simply take political matters as the raw material from which to craft amusing asides and pithy gybes, but rather was able to hammer away tirelessly upon issues designed to humiliate powerful figures: not least the constant return to the relationship between Trump and convicted child trafficker Jeffrey Epstein. The result was humour that no longer felt like it was in constant danger of falling prey to the cardinal comic sin of smugness. There was instead a sense of urgency and anger: the sense that behind the fun and games there is something vital about political comedy: the sorts of cultural political work that it can do and the sorts of things that it can say.

Such an assessment applies perhaps even more directly to *South Park*: a long-running animated series that was once noted for its iconoclastic taboo-busting, but which also has been historically criticised for its scatter-shot libertarian politics (Ganesh 2017; Yogerst 2025). Like Colbert, *South Park* had been regarded by many as a form of legacy political comedy whose best and most influential days were well behind it. This perspective had only been encouraged by the show's decision to largely shy away from direct engagement with federal politics during the first Trump presidency. However, the show's twenty-seventh and twenty-eighth series (both produced and

released in 2025) functioned as something of a refutation of that position: choosing instead to take up a program of sustained and vicious ridicule of the president and his administration. The first episode, 'Sermon on the Mount',³ of the twenty-seventh season culminates with an ostensible political advertisement in which a deep-fake rendition of Trump stumbles through a desert landscape and removes all his clothes. The video ends with a naked Trump lying in the sand, when his photo-realistically rendered tiny penis adorned with two cartoon eyes appears to formally endorse the ad's message. The White House issued a formal statement in response in which they criticised they show as unpopular, uninspired, and irrelevant (Sharf and Dunn 2025). Escalating the conflict further, the twenty-eighth season developed an extended plot where Trump sought to abort a baby he had conceived with Satan. Acting as an absurdly sombre book end, at the close of the season finale, 'The Crap Out', Trump celebrates after the unborn baby commits suicide⁴: a horrific comic indictment of the moral code of a sitting president that is played for uncomfortable poignancy as much as laughs.

During the first Trump term, a common refrain was that the president and his allies seemed immune to traditional forms of satire and ironic critique (McClennen 2021). Many despaired that the callousness and absurdity of the administration meant that political comedy was no longer an effective form of critique. While certainly not entirely resolving this dilemma, the shift in comic tone seen in *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert* and *South Park* suggests one way that political comedy might adapt to these new circumstances. The shows responded to the Trump administration's aggressive intrusion and departure from political norms by embracing open hostility, unfettered ridicule, and anti-socially dark humour as central aspects of mainstream political comedy. Whereas the dominant emotional registers of political comedy in earlier moments might be characterised in terms of bewilderment, snide dismissal, or haughty disbelief, there is now an increasing sense of anger and contempt that does not fit easily with the inherited norms of political comedy conduct of the previous decades, but instead suggests how comedy might respond to new norms of civic conduct in a fractured public sphere. By employing tactical crudity and blunt mockery, but also courage in the face of the threat of state sanctions, *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert* and *South Park* have shown new ways that political comedy might effectively respond to the challenges of the current conjuncture in order to make itself an important part of the conversation.

Between the assault of laughter and those wonderful Berlin cabarets

The central question in the study of political comedy is whether such comedy can actually do politics and, if so, in what ways. That is, whether the strategic and intentional construction and articulation of humour is capable of influencing how people feel about the world, their society, their fellow human beings and the obligations felt towards them, the values and allegiances they hold, and their sense of what is to be done, and if it can thereby change how those people behave in relation to systems of government but also in relation to systems of power and resource distribution

more broadly. To be somewhat reductive, when seeking to answer this question, scholars have tended to locate their answers somewhere in the intellectual territory sketched out between two historical quotations.

The first quotation is drawn from *The Mysterious Stranger*: an unfinished novella by Mark Twain. In its full version, the quotation runs as follows:

Power, money, persuasion, supplication, persecution—these can lift at a colossal humbug—push it a little—weaken it a little, century by century; but only laughter can blow it to rags and atoms at a blast. Against the assault of laughter nothing can stand. (Twain 1916)

The final sentence of this quotation is probably the most familiar to many: ‘the assault of laughter’ encapsulates a maximalist account of political comedy that imagines humour as a highly effective, near unstoppable, force for achieving one’s ends. This perspective speaks to a model of political comedy as rhetorical dynamite: the ultimate tool of revolutionary thinkers. From this perspective, to do politics through comedy is to do it well: to do it powerfully and vanquish one’s enemies and misguided thought alike through the critical power of humour properly directed.

However, although this remark often directly attributed to the American humorist, Twain, it is more accurately can be assigned to a fictional character who plays a prominent role in *The Mysterious Stranger*. As I have written about at length elsewhere, the character in question is named ‘Satan,’ and although he is at pains to point out in the story that he is not ‘that’ Satan, in a Judeo-Christian context such a name should certainly give us some pause when seeking to interpret the speaker as a reliable theorist of humour (Holm 2018). We should perhaps also be careful about attributing too much power to political comedy: especially, in a world that provides us so many counterexamples of political programs, parties, and policies that have succeeded despite the vast array of jokes lined up against them.

Such caution is captured and heightened in the second oft-repeated quotation, which provides a much more pessimistic account of the power of political comedy. At the opening of his SoHo night club, The Establishment, the pre-eminent British satirist, Peter Cook, is supposed to have declared that he had modelled his new venture on ‘those wonderful Berlin cabarets which do so much to stop the rise of Hitler and prevent the outbreak of the Second World War’ (Wikipedia Contributors 2026). I write ‘supposed’ because it is very difficult to locate any clear original source for this quotation, which appears in multiple variations across multiple sources. Given the diversity of quoted expression, it is likely that Cook expressed this sentiment frequently in a variety of different ways to different people.⁵ Regardless of the exact phrasing, though, the meaning remains the same: the cynical dismissal of the potential of political comedy to achieve anything bolstered through reference to the observation that the rise of the National Socialist party in Germany occurred despite comic opposition. From this perspective, political comedy is a fancy and a fool’s errand: a way to entertain oneself and others, but not a way that anyone should seek to achieve change in the world. It asserts that political comedy can be amusing, but is nothing more. And it intimates that anyone who believes otherwise misunderstands how the world works.

Both of these positions dramatically oversimplify the potential influence of political comedy. One presents humour as an unstoppable political force; the other as an impotent squib. Both positions are pithy but reductive summations of complex processes that overlook both the textual features of specific acts of political comedy and the social, political, economic, and cultural contexts in which they take place. In doing so they grant a boon to the busy researcher, by sparing them the need to attend carefully to actual manifestations of political comedy by assuming in advance either their transformative power or lack thereof.

However, political comedy is not an eternal static truth that will always act in the same way by virtue of its belonging to the abstract category of 'political comedy.' Rather, it is a form of cultural practice that becomes thinkable and possible under certain historical conditions, and the ability of which to influence the world is determined by how it is produced, circulated, received and apprehended in that context. In part, the ability of political comedy to do something is dependent on people believing that it is capable of doing so. This does not mean that its influence is dependent on whether we individually choose to believe in it—that we can will its efficacy into being with an act of personal imagination—but rather that like so many of the determining structures of our world, the shape and potential of political comedy does not exist independent of human thinking and being. Political comedy is therefore capable of exerting an influence the world in some circumstances, but also capable of doing little but provoking laughter, if that, under others. If you confront power with laughter, sometimes it can be possible to induce shame, build an affective coalition of opposition, or even provoke insight. But sometimes, power will just laugh back.

Too often the study of political comedy seems to oscillate between these two poles of Twain's assault and Cook's ineffective cabaret: political comedy as all or nothing. Such position-taking makes sense when seeking to present one's works as a radical intervention against existing scholarly consensus. However, such stances ultimately lead to little more than intellectual whiplash that hinders the development of nuanced understandings that speak to the inconvenient reality that the interface of political, cultural, and social forces is, above all else, complicated. This does not mean that the question of political comedy is unanswerable or that it consists of an unmappable jumble of texts and actors without logic or pattern that can only be addressed individually. Better answers to the question of the efficacy and influence of political comedy necessarily lie somewhere between the single and the infinite: between, on one hand, blanket statements about the power of the concept of political comedy (and the politics of comedy) as if it existed outside of space and time and, on the other, the assertion that it's all simply a complicated mess of different elements.

The question of political comedy instead needs to be answered in context, in terms of structures, tendencies, trends, patterns and the ways that new possibilities open up through the shifting arrangement of technological, economic, industrial, ethical forces. In particular, the question of political comedy needs to be addressed in terms our specific context right now: when received ideas about the political orientation of comedy as an inherently left or liberal project have collapsed; when comedy and comedians are bound up in new debates about values and identities;

when new technologies have changed how comedy is made and circulated; and when the absolute necessity of a diverse global perspectives is irrefutable. That is what the articles gathered in this special issue begin to do.

Political comedy in the current conjuncture

The first set of articles in this special issue explores how the 'late night' political comedy format, discussed extensively above, has responded to political shifts of the twenty-first century in the USA and abroad. As seems almost inevitable, this discussion begins with Donald Trump. Hussein Kobeissi and Guy Redden's article 'Figuring out Trump: the re-politicization of US late night talk shows in a polarized public sphere' investigates the challenge that Trump's mode of political operation and behaviour poses to inherited modes of political comedy premised on truth-telling and appeals to shared values. In a polarised public sphere, Kobeissi and Redden argue, partisan ridicule increasingly appears as a limited form of comic intervention. This situation perhaps then explains the phenomenon noted by Andreas Kraxberger and Beer Prakken in 'Affective shifts in political comedy: the move to seriousness in Late Night television'. Through the lens of an empirical sentiment analysis, Kraxberger and Prakken track how American late-night comedians have increasingly integrated displays of serious emotion, like fear and anger, into their performances in ways that can change how they function as public figures and commentators.

A comparable shift is noted by Patrice Oppliger and Jack Anderson in 'The role of *The Daily show's* interviews in political comedy': a study of Jon Stewart's use of humour in the interview segments of *The Daily Show*. Comparing Stewart's pre-2015 interviews with those after his 2024 return, they find that while Stewart's humour style has remained consistent, the overall tone of the interviews has shifted markedly: a demonstration of how the political work of humour can be understood as a function of context as much as form. In the final article in this first set, Massih Zekavat considers the political potential of satirical critique in a context shaped by both populist extremism and neoliberal economic priorities. His article, 'The paradox of political satire: navigating critique in culture industry and neoliberal media', analyses the Dutch late-night show, *De Avondshow met Arjen Lubach*, to carefully situate claims for satire's critique in terms of its specific conjuncture. Ultimately, Zekavat argues that satire can be most effective when it integrates self-reflexivity or disentangles itself from the ideologies of vested interests.

The second set of articles share a common concern with the growing visibility of explicitly right-wing political humour. For a curiously long time, a persistent belief circulated in both academic and popular contexts that humour was somehow inherently left-wing or progressive. Such a position is clearly no longer tenable. First in this section is Stephen Skalicky's 'Free speech as a unifying punchline for *The Onion* and *The Babylon Bee*'. Skalicky's analysis explores amicus curiae briefs submitted to the United States Supreme Court by two satirical websites associated with different ends of the American political spectrum: *The Onion* on the left and *The Babylon Bee* on the right. Through an incisive close reading of these legal documents, Skalicky documents how the websites prioritise different elements of satire in their definition and defence of the practice, but ultimately share a common commitment to satire as a political form.

Approaching from a different angle, Jody Baumgartner seeks to empirically assess the persuasive effects of explicitly conservative political humour, such as is found in *The Babylon Bee*. His article, 'The empirical effects of viewing right-leaning political humour: a modest first step', explores whether political humour works differently or indeed works at all when employed persuasively in the service of right wing politics. While noting that the results should be treated with caution, Baumgartner suggests there may be grounds to suggest that conservative political humour might be less persuasive than liberal humour, but that there is also a need for further study of the growing body of right-wing satire to better understand its possible effects. Finally, Mattias Ekman and Andreas Widholm investigate the use of humour in negative political campaigning by both left and right-wing parties in Sweden. Demonstrating again that no political position has a monopoly on political humour, in 'Entertaining the electorate? Strategic satire and evolving formats of negative political campaigning', the authors analyse the use of comic techniques derived from 'news satire' by both the Sweden Democrats and the (Swedish) Social Democratic Party, arguing that such humour shifts political discourse 'towards a more polemical, personal, and affective approach' (Ekman and Widholm 2025).

The third set of articles then expands the focus of the special issue further by exploring aesthetic, artistic and performance-based forms of political humour that often target politics in less ways. In his article, 'Satirical allegory and symbolic revenge: humour and speculative fiction in contemporary Brazilian cinema', Diego Hoefel explores the critical function of comic allegory in a new wave of Brazilian film that blends humour and horror. In the context of intense political instability, Hoefel argues that these new forms of political humour reflect a wider social logic of controversy and conflict. In their article, 'Can Dalit laugh? Humour as resistance and politics of Dalit-comedy in India', Ajeet Kumar Pankaj & Mohammad Niyaz Ahmad then explore how comedians from the historically-oppressed Dalit class contest ongoing discrimination through stand-up comedy. As this article illustrates, in recent years, stand-up comedy has emerged in India as an important site for political contestation against the backdrop of rising nationalism. Last in this section, Aikaterini Giampoura explores how satirical song lyrics have become a site of conflict around censorship and freedom of speech in post-memorandum Greece. Her article 'From Aristophanes to TikTok: 'Name and Shame' Satire and the Limits of Free Expression in Post-Memorandum Greece' asks whether debates around the legal limits of satire as a form of protected speech reflect a new political norm in the Greek context.

The fourth set of articles builds on Giampoura's discussion of TikTok by considering how political humour has adapted to new forms of media technology and a shifting media environment. 'Political humour on TikTok: trends, challenges, and opportunities' by Diana Zulli and Meaghan McKasy presents an overview of how the rapid growing TikTok short video platform has been used for political humour. Providing a summary of existing research and emerging trends regarding political humour on TikTok, this article sets the scene for future research in this area. Addressing another area of explosive growth in political humour, Kyle Barrett's article, 'Ullo john! Gotta new podcast? Alexei Sayle, political humour and podcasting', is one of the first piece of published research to address political comedy in podcasts. Taking up the eponymous 'The Alexei Sayle Podcast' as a case study, Barrett argues that the intimacy of the

podcast medium opens up new possibilities in political comedy. The last article in this section is “But I don’t watch television! Keeping late-night comedy and political satire relevant for the audience” by Amy B. Becker. Given the centrality of the television medium to political comedy in recent decades, Becker considers what will become of political comedy when television is no longer the dominant medium. Her article canvases how political comedy is adapting to the shift in media technology and considers how it can remain relevant in the emerging media environment.

The final two articles for the special issue address ‘cancel culture’—one of the most pressing and persistent themes in contemporary political comedy—in different ways. In their article, ‘Cancel culture: the decline of political comedy on British television in the early 2020s’, Hannah Andrews and Gregory Frame consider how the evocation of ‘cancel culture’ might be implicated in the recent decline of political comedy in the UK. Looking at the cancellation of three high-profile political comedy shows, Andrew and Frame argue that the traction of the ‘cancel culture’ claims needs to be understood at the intersection of ‘culture wars’ discourse and industrial changes in the television sector. Finally, Diandra Ships and Madison Trusolino take a very different angle in ‘A labour of love: cancel culture as an accountability practice in the comedy industry’ to consider how ‘cancel culture’ discourse shapes the internal politics of the comedy industry itself. Ships and Trusolino argue that accusations of ‘cancel culture’ are used by powerful subjects to resist taking accountability for violent and discriminatory behaviour. Their article illustrates how the politics of comedy don’t always face outwards, but sometimes reflect back on the practice and form of comedy itself.

Together these articles begin to capture the broad range of developments and disruptions facing political comedy in the 2020s. Addressing questions of technology, discourse, economics, media effects, aesthetics, ideology, and identity, their strength is in the diversity of perspectives and approaches they bring to the subject of political comedy. Too often the study of political comedy has been divided along disciplinary and even geographical lines: I hope that this special issue will go some way to helping build stronger connections and conversations between the different scholarly traditions to better account for what political comedy is and what it means to do in what feel like increasingly turbulent times.

Notes

1. Although the United States is far from the ultimate horizon of either comedy or politics, the initial framing of this special issue did take its cues from ongoing developments in the American context. This emphasis reflects the historical dominance of American productions and perspectives in both political comedy and the study thereof, but should not be taken as an endorsement of an America-first perspective which has distorted the study of political comedy for too long. The focus on American examples in this introduction does little to remedy the problem, but, in my defence, if I had chosen to instead focus on examples from Aotearoa New Zealand, I would be concerned most international readers would not show much interest. Work to provincialize America as a case study rather than a default state is on-going.
2. Historically, the same economic logic would be thought to apply to *Jimmy Kimmel Live!*, but only to a limited extent to *The Daily Show* which theoretically enjoys a much greater degree of political comic freedom due to its relatively much smaller audience on cable television. However, it is unclear to what extent such arguments still

apply in an online-first era. Although such numbers cannot capture the full extent of circulation and exposure, the official *Late Show with Stephen Colbert* has 10.4 million YouTube subscribers, while *The Daily Show* account has 13.4 million. The flexibility of online platforms and the sheer scale of the potential global audience thus suggest that inherited models that assumed a direct relationship between audience size and political timidity no longer hold true in the same way they once did.

3. The “Mount” of the episode title is a pun referring to both a section of the Christian Bible—*South Park*’s representation of Jesus Christ features centrally in this episode and the rest of the two seasons—and Paramount: the parent company that *South Park* shares with *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert*. The episode opens with an extended decrimal of the Trump administration’s shuttering of shows and programs it opposes, and closes with Jesus warning the town folk that they have to toe the line or they’ll “end up like Colbert... shut the fuck up or South Park is over.” This self-aware call to submit to state censorship renders the political comedy of the final scene even more provocative and stark.
4. The circumstances of the baby’s death are a direct reference to those of Epstein, whom popular conspiracy suggests was murdered in his police cell as part of a staged suicide.
5. I thank my colleague Robert Phiddian for this observation.

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