

Humour scandals in the Finnish political public sphere in 1990–2020

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Abstract

Humour is a part of contemporary mediated political struggles. At times, humour itself becomes politicised, turning into public controversies or humour scandals. This study explores how humour scandals have become intertwined with the Finnish political public sphere during the last three decades. Quantitative mapping, based on journalistic articles retrieved from two nationwide media, reveals that between 1990 and 2020, 26 national humour scandals in Finland were reported in the national public sphere for at least five days. The number of scandals increased exponentially, from just two such scandals in the 1990s to 15 in the 2010s. Our qualitative analysis of three humour scandals from different decades demonstrates how humour controversies relate to the changes in political and media environments and moral order. While in the 1990s and early 2000s humour scandals often dealt with clashes between popular TV satires and leading politicians, from the 2010s onwards the topics of humour scandals diversified, including issues related to political campaigning, artistic performances, and racism.

Keywords: humour scandal, politics, satire, populism.

1. Introduction

Humour is an integral part of modern mediated political power struggles, which can be seen, for example, in memes, politicians' humorous Instagram updates, and sarcastic television satires. Political humour is used, among other things, to attract attention, criticise opponents, and activate citizens (see Chattoo & Feldman, 2020; Koivukoski, 2022; Young, 2020). From time to time, even humour itself can be politicised when it becomes the subject of public controversies. In this case, we can talk about humour controversies or humour scandals. Such scandals have been studied to some extent (e.g., Dahl, 2021; Kuipers, 2011), but the analyses focus either on one case (Kuipers, 2011) or on one theme, such as immigration (Dahl, 2021) or

religion (Basu, 2014). In this study, we broaden the perspective and investigate how humour scandals have contributed to national political publicity in the last three decades in Finland. We conceptualise national humour scandals as public controversies about humour (Kuipers, 2011, pp. 68–69) that have been reported in two nationwide media organisations for at least five days (Allern et al., 2012, p. 31).

Humour scandals can be understood as a type of political or social conflict. Politics is not only about decision-making and negotiation on policy issues and social order, but also about conflict between various social interests, identities and demands that are manifested in public discursive struggles (see Fenton, 2016; Laclau & Mouffe, 1985). One aspect of discursive struggles concerns the conflict and legitimation efforts over what is considered normal and acceptable in a given time and place (Foucault, 1980; Van Leeuwen, 2007). Thus, various interest groups compete over whose definition of normal, acceptable and unacceptable prevails, and this manifests in framing struggles over particular political issues. Humour scandals are often about these types of public discursive struggles: different actors and interest groups, such as political parties, activists, and minority groups, disagree about what is appropriate to say and do in the name of humour or satire in a given context (Kuipers, 2015).

In this article, we do not seek to determine whether the respective scandalous acts or norm transgressions are actually “humour” in the light of influential humour theories such as incongruity theory (see Martin & Ford, 2018). Instead, we are interested in scandals in which the norm transgression is framed as humour, satire or irony, at least by some of the key actors involved. A widespread view is that norm transgression and moral conflict are at stake in public scandals (Thompson, 2000; Lull & Hinerman, 1997). This is why we believe that humour scandals can reveal contemporary ruptures in the moral order that constitute the “social imaginaries” that unite people in nation-states (see Taylor, 2003). By studying humour scandals and controversies, we may approach the underlying tendencies in the moral environment and outline the cultural conflicts behind the larger societal transformations.

In this article, the role of humour in Finnish political scandals is studied by exploring the kind of topics and actors that humour scandals have been related to in Finland during the last three decades. Since both scandals and humour draw a line between different norms and moral codes, we believe that our study will also provide a glimpse into changes in the Finnish moral climate in a way that is connected to the relationship between the media landscape and society. We concentrate in particular on humour scandals at the national level that gain widespread public attention in at least two nationwide media outlets for at least five days (see Allern et al., 2012, p. 31). In this way, we ensure a reliable comparison between the decades and differentiate our data from minor humour sensations that commonly erupt on social media or in some other more restricted area of the public sphere. Specifically, the three research questions we aim to address are:

1. What kind of humour scandals occurred in Finland between 1990 and 2020?
2. How have humour scandals been connected to the Finnish political public sphere?
3. What do humour scandals reveal about societal and moral transformations?

First, we examine the concept of a humour scandal with the help of a theory related to political scandals and humour, after which we present a quantitative mapping of all types of humour scandals that came to national attention in Finland between 1990 and 2020. Based on the quantitative mapping, we have selected three scandals for qualitative analysis, each of which illustrates a typical humour scandal of that decade and also reflects the moral struggles of the time. In our qualitative case analyses, we focus in particular on humour scandals related to politics because of the considerable social importance attached to them. Accordingly, we believe

that political humour scandals in particular highlight the societal and moral order transformations we are looking for.

2. Humour scandals

The study of political scandals has become a research area in its own right, referred to as "scandology" (Brenton, 2013, p. 863). Scandals always involve discussions about what is acceptable or right and wrong according to norms, and hence can be considered a kind of indicator of the prevailing moral codes in society (see Thompson, 2000). This is also the case when it comes to humour scandals (Kuipers, 2011).

Humour-related controversies can be encountered almost daily on social media platforms, but they rarely reach the public at large nationwide. In this study, we focus on national-level humour scandals (Allern et al., 2012, p. 31). This millennium has also seen some international scandals (Kuipers, 2011) in which the uproar related to humour has achieved almost global proportions, such as the riots that broke out due to the Muhammad caricatures published in the Danish newspaper *Jyllands Posten* in 2005, or the terrorist attack on the Parisian satirical newspaper *Charlie Hebdo* in 2015. International humour scandals are also scandals at the national level in those countries where they are reported intensely – as was the case in Finland with the Muhammad cartoons and the Charlie Hebdo attack.

The Nordic countries were long considered a "scandal-free zone", but by the 1990s at the latest, political scandals were a feature in the Nordics as well (Allern et al., 2012, p. 29). In the 2000s, the number of scandals exploded in the media (Pollack et al. 2018). The obvious reason for the change concerned Nordic media becoming more market-driven than before, entailing the intensifying of news competition and the increasing tension between politics and the media. At the same time, politics "opened up" alongside market liberalism. In Finland in particular, some national political scandals had already appeared in the 1970s and 1980s, but the frequency increased, especially at the beginning of this millennium (Kantola & Vesa, 2011, p. 43).

Scandals have usually involved the abuse of political power, misuse of funds, or sexual misbehaviour (Thomson, 2000, pp. 120–123). Yet comparative studies revealed that scandals linked to inappropriate speech and behaviour increased in the 2010s (Allern & Pollack, 2016, p. 157). Such scandals were primarily connected to right-wing populist parties that were very successful in the Nordic countries at that time. Comments by their representatives insulting immigrants or other minorities, or flirting with neo-Nazism, aroused widespread public condemnation (Herkman, 2018).

Populists often use humour in their political communication (Sakki & Martikainen, 2021; Wagner & Schwarzenegger, 2020). For example, UKIP leader Nigel Farage was notorious for his taunting of the EU leadership while pushing for Brexit, and Donald Trump mocked his opponents in ways that his supporters found amusing. Some populist leaders, such as Giuseppe "Beppe" Grillo, the founding figure of the Five Star Movement in Italy, and Jón Gnarr, the former mayor of Reykjavík, even gained electoral success with a background as comedians. In Finland, the long-term leader of the populist radical right Finns Party, Timo Soini, became known for his humorous quips, called "Soinisms" (see Koivukoski, 2022), and his successor, Jussi Halla-aho, used irony and sarcasm to attract supporters (Nikunen, 2015). The Finns Party has also utilised biting humour in its election advertising (Sakki & Martikainen, 2021), and its particular brand of humour has been involved in several scandals (see Herkman, 2016; 2018).

In the current hybrid media environment, social media plays an important role in the creation and progression of scandals (Zulli, 2021). However, it can be argued that to become national, the scandal still needs the active role of the journalistic media because journalism connects the event to social institutions. In Finland, the news media are also still trusted much

more than social media (e.g. Matikainen et al., 2020), which emphasises their role in public scandals.

Commercialization of the media and journalistic competition for scoops made public scandals commonplace in the second half of the last millennium (Lull & Hinerman, 1997). Political scandals are mediated events where the media expose a norm transgression that causes great public disapproval (Thompson, 2000). Often the target denies the violation, but the media releases additional evidence. This "second-order norm transgression" is often even more significant for the scandal than the original violation because it makes the target out to be a liar and even more suspicious morally (Ekström & Johansson, 2008, p. 71). Central to a scandal is the struggle over trusting the person who is the subject of the scandal (Thompson, 2000, pp. 245–255).

Loss of reputation is the most immediate consequence of a scandal, but depending on the case, a scandal can lead to loss of position or even criminal sanctions. On the other hand, some political actors thrive on scandals. For example, the political careers of Silvio Berlusconi and Donald Trump have been beset by scandals occasionally accompanied by humour – either as a result of the politicians' own jokes or satire directed at them (Molé, 2013).

Humour scandals largely follow the general pattern of a scandal. However, they also have specific characteristics that distinguish them from traditional scandals. First, a humour scandal does not necessarily originate in journalistic revelation because the humour is usually presented in the media from the beginning. Second, the norm transgression is related to the humour itself or its use in a questionable context – not to traditional scandal topics such as abuse of power, misuse of funds, or sexual affairs. Sociologist Giseline Kuipers (2011) defines humour scandals as public controversies in which stakeholders and citizens struggle with what is acceptable in the name of humour or satire and what is not.

In humour scandals, therefore, the debate is primarily about cultural – and sometimes also legal – norms. Social groups, from religious denominations to political parties and online communities, have always laughed at other groups. However, the harshness of the mockery varies with time and place, and social and political context affects how easily aggressive humour creates a public controversy (Koivukoski, 2022, pp. 37–39, 42–43). Humour scandals often deal with topics that are already politicised or sensitive in society, such as immigration, religion, gender, and sexuality (Basu, 2014; Dahl, 2021; Kuipers, 2011). In addition, the key parties in humour scandals are often well-known persons, such as politicians, artists, journalists, or social media influencers.

The role of humour in scandals varies. In some cases, the transgressive content is clearly framed as humour, satire, or irony beforehand. This is the case, for example, in scandals related to popular TV satires, mockumentaries, or stand-up comedians crossing the boundaries of good taste and/or morality. The Muhammad cartoon scandal of 2005–2006 is a case in point. In some humour scandals, however, scandalised content is only later defended as "humour". In these cases, it is not always clear whether the use of humour is a deliberate provocation or whether it becomes a scandal by accident. Moreover, in some scandals, humour and irony have been intentionally covered up in such a way that only some of the recipients can interpret them as humour in the first place (see Koivukoski, 2022, p. 37). Analytically, it is important to try to separate humour scandals from other topical humour because almost every significant news event today is joked about and turned into humorous memes on social media.

3. Material and methods

We investigated humour scandals using both quantitative mapping and qualitative in-depth analysis. We started the research by finding out how many and what kind of humour scandals

emerged in Finland between the 1990s and 2020s. An archive search was conducted in *Helsingin Sanomat* (the leading daily) and *Ilta-Sanomat* (the leading tabloid) with word searches containing synonyms related to humour and scandals. First, we looked at media coverage of well-known humour scandals in the 1990s and 2000s, based on which we identified words that are usually used in connection with scandals (e.g. controversy, sensation, fuss, scandal). After that, we carried out archive searches with different search word combinations (such as "humour*", "joke", "satire*" AND "controversy" OR "scandal" OR "sensation" OR "fuss"). If necessary, the search was supplemented with word searches in the archives of Yle, the public service media company. The material consists of news items, editorials, columns, and opinion pieces related to humour scandals discovered in this way. For qualitative in-depth analysis, we also sought material from other Finnish media.

We operationalized a national-level humour scandal as a humour-related public controversy (Kuipers, 2011, pp. 68–69) that has been reported in two national media outlets for at least five days (Allern et al., 2012, p. 31). This type of media event is also often explicitly discussed as a scandal, sensation, conflict, or in related terms. Our operationalization thus excludes smaller humour-related spats and sensations that were reported for just a few days or discussed only in regional news outlets. However, the five-day coverage need not be continuous, as humour scandals, like other scandals (Thompson, 2000), tend to have different stages, sometimes including quiet phases in reporting. Transnational humour controversies, in turn, were counted as national humour scandals if they met the criteria described above, as was the case with the *Charlie Hebdo* shooting in early 2015, for example.

Some of the cases were explicitly international scandals, such as the uproar caused by the Danish Muhammad cartoons in 2005–2006 or the *Charlie Hebdo* incident mentioned above. Others were long-term national scandals, such as the trials in Finland in 2008–2012 linked to Finns Party member and previous party leader Jussi Halla-aho's sarcastic blog posts. Other humour sensations were clearly more minor, based on coverage of a day or two, and hence they did not meet the criteria for a national scandal. However, most of the national humour scandals were outbursts lasting about a week or two, subsiding after culminating in public reprimands, or an apology from or resignation of the person who was the subject of the scandal.

A total of 26 national-level humour scandals as defined above were found. Of these, 17 were directly linked to well-known politicians or the political system. The remainder were related, for example, to artists, entertainment productions, or international cases such as those mentioned above. Humour controversies with no clear link to the Finnish political system included cases such as debates about humour connected to the Roma people in the TV sketch series *Manne-TV* in 2007, the kidnapping of the Ronald McDonald clown figure by performance artist Jani Leinonen in 2011, or German comedian Jan Böhmermann's mockery of Turkish President Erdoğan in 2016 (for all cases, see Appendix). However, in our detailed analysis, we focus primarily on scandals that have a direct connection to Finnish party politics because such scandals usually have immediate social significance.

We prepared a codebook for the classification of humour scandals to adopt a systematic approach. The codebook categorises the key actors, events, consequences, themes, and the role of humour in each scandal. Specifically, we classified a) what the main events were, b) who was accused (professional comedian, politician, journalist, celebrity, other) and of what (defamation, racism, blasphemy, sexism, other), c) who or what was the target (politician/party, ethnicity, religion, gender, sexuality, other, unclear), d) who the key parties were in the public handling of the scandal (condemners and defenders of the accused), e) what the consequences were for the accused (note, warning, dismissal, apology, nothing, unclear), f) what part humour played in the scandal (was the controversial act clearly framed as humour, as in the case of TV satire or political cartoons, or was it framed post hoc as mere humour or irony, as in the case of politicians justifying their slurs).

The codebook was designed by the research team and tested with actual scandals to ensure the validity of the coding. However, the coding itself was carried out by a single coder who was familiar with the whole corpus, since our approach as a whole was more qualitative, even if there was a strong quantitative dimension to the mapping of the scandals. In addition to coding, we took notes on how the scandal was framed and analysed in the media.

In conjunction with the quantitative mapping, we selected three scandals for a more detailed qualitative examination, which, based on the mapping, serve as typical examples of a national humour scandal in each decade. The first case is related to the popular political TV satire *Italypsy* (Yle TV1), broadcast between 1993 and 2001, whose parody of President Martti Ahtisaari and his wife Eeva Ahtisaari provoked outrage in 1999. The second scandal started with a parliamentary election TV commercial released by the Central Organisation of Finnish Trade Unions, SAK, in 2007. The third case originated from a Nazi salute given as a "joke" by a guest of Finns Party MP James Hirvisaari in the Finnish parliament in 2013.

4. Humour scandals in Finland 1990–2020

Previous scandal research has shown that in the 1970s, Finland witnessed only four national scandals linked to the economy or politics, but in the 1980s, a national scandal occurred almost every year, and in the 1990s, there were two per year (Allern et al., 2012, p. 35; Kantola & Vesa, 2011, p. 43). Indeed, the 1980s have been regarded as the decade in which the rather solid relations between politicians and journalists began to crumble in Finland, and journalism began to serve as a political watchdog more eagerly than before (Aula, 1991). A few satirists also began to poke fun at the personal matters of Finnish politicians in an unprecedented way in the early 1980s, causing a public uproar (Zareff, 2020, pp. 84–85).

However, we started the systematic mapping of national humour scandals from the 1990s, when the media environment in Finland clearly became more market-driven than before, and scandals, in general, became more common: two national commercial TV channels started operating at that time and the entertainment press actively worked alongside them (see Herkman, 2005). Consequently, the number of humour scandals also ostensibly started to increase in the 1990s.

Our mapping shows an increase in the number of national humour scandals from the 1990s to the 2020s similar to the general increase in political scandals in Finland (see Table 1). Yet in the 1990s there were only two distinct national-level humour scandals: the widespread sensation caused by the so-called "willy card" at the very beginning of the decade, and the offending treatment of President Martti Ahtisaari and his wife Eeva Ahtisaari in the *Italypsy* TV satire (Yle, the public broadcast company) at the end of the decade. The 1990s saw a couple of other TV-related scandals too, but they were neither explicitly humour scandals nor ones that expanded to the national level.

Table 1. National humour scandals in Finland 1990–2020

	Humour scandals	Target of humour is a politician or party	Target of humour relates to ethnicity, gender, sexuality, religion	Target of humour is something else or unclear	Humour is used as an explanation post hoc
1990s	2	1	1	-	1
2000s	9	5	4	-	2
2010s	15	1	9	5	7
Total	26	7	14	5	10

The most significant humour scandal of the 1990s, and possibly a watershed moment for humour scandals in general, was the 1990 "Willy Card Case". It started when it turned out that male trade union leaders had sent Marianne Laxén, a researcher in the parliament's advisory committee on equality issues, an obscene card under the pseudonym the Tupolev Brothers. The card depicted a woman descending with a bra parachute and her legs spread out over a sea of erect penises (see Figure 1). The French text on the card celebrated men ("Vive les hommes"). A citizen petition with more than 4,000 signatures demanded the resignation of the senders of the card, but former chairman of the Finnish Confederation of Professionals, STTK, and then national conciliator Jorma Reini was the only member of the "Brothers" to issue a public apology on television.

During the 1990s, the use of the internet at home intensified in Finland, but the decade was the era of television dominance (Herkman, 2005). New types of political satire programmes found their way onto national TV channels (see Kolehmainen, 2015; Zareff, 2020), and in the 1990s and early 2000s, humour scandals were often connected to these programmes. TV satires often applied a postmodern style, where irony and interactions between real people and fictional characters were combined (Kallioniemi & Hantula, 2021).

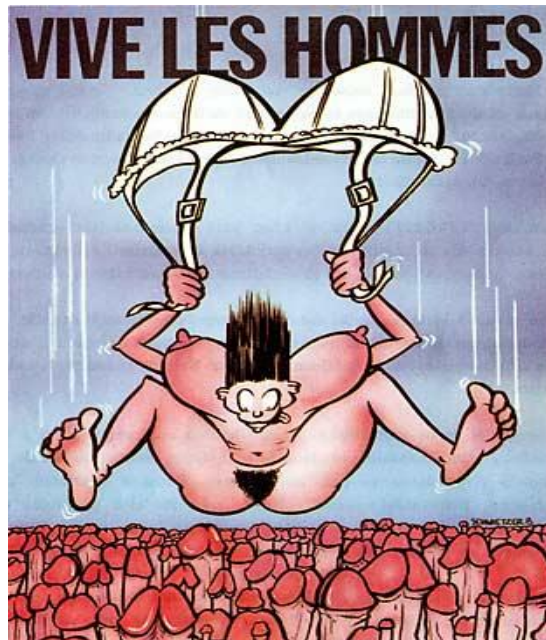


Figure 1. "The Willy Card" caused a national scandal in Finland in the early 1990s. Picture: Création Imago.

On the one hand, politicians benefit from TV satires because their public image softens in the eyes of citizens (Coleman, Kuik & Van Zoonen, 2009; Gray, 2009; Herkman, 2010). Being an object of national satire might also show that the politician has achieved a significant position. On the other hand, being the target of public ridicule can also be difficult for politicians. In this regard, the most salient case in Finland was perhaps seen in 2004 when Ville Itälä accused the political satire *Itse Valtiaat* (Yle TV1, 2001–2008) of tarnishing his reputation after resigning as leader of the National Coalition party (Kolehmainen, 2015, p. 116). According to Itälä, the programme destroyed his credibility because he was portrayed as a naive little boy (IS 4.3.2004).

Television was visibly involved in other humour scandals of the 2000s, such as in the case of the sketch series *Manne-TV* (later *Romano-TV*, Yle TV1, 2007), whose putative racism was debated even by the Supreme Administrative Court. However, the most visible humour-related scandal of the decade concerned the international conflict in 2005–2006, triggered by the Muhammad cartoons published in the Danish newspaper *Jyllands Posten* (see Eide, Kunelius & Phillips, 2008; Kuipers, 2011). In Finland, cartoonist Ville Ranta took a stand on the events with his own cartoon and caused a national scandal in 2006 as a result (Ridanpää, 2009). Another transnational humour scandal emerged in July 2003 when Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi suggested that German MEP Martin Schulz would be a perfect fit as a concentration camp guard in an upcoming Italian film.

Perhaps the most apparent national humour scandal of the decade was caused in 2007 by the Central Organisation of Finnish Trade Unions SAK's TV commercial, which aimed to encourage workers to vote in the parliamentary election. In the commercial, an exploitative capitalist portrayed by actor Oiva Lohtander was shown feasting at a sumptuous banquet table and ironically celebrating the fact that "luckily, the workers do not vote". The employers' camp and the bourgeois parties condemned the commercial as bad taste, and it was duly removed from circulation amid an uproar.

At the end of the 2000s, however, the emphasis on humour started to change in the wake of the rise of nationalist populism and the spread of social media. One of the most central humour scandals at the turn of the decade was related to the representative of the radical right Finns Party, Jussi Halla-aho. Halla-aho was charged with inciting racial hatred in his sarcastic blog posts in which he mocked Somalis, Muslims, and their Finnish defenders in 2008. The case continued at different court levels until Halla-aho was convicted in the Supreme Court of ethnic agitation and breach of the sanctity of religion in 2012 (see Herkman, 2016). In 2011, Halla-aho was again at the centre of a scandal when he "jokingly" suggested on Facebook, during the euro crisis, that a military junta should be established in Greece to discipline the strikers.

The Finns Party dominated national humour scandals after the 2011 parliamentary election when the party won a surprising victory with 19.1% of the votes. The party's MP Teuvo Hakkarainen "joked" in 2011 that gays and Somalis should be sent to an island. Helena Eronen, political assistant to MP James Hirvisaari, caused a public scandal in 2012 with her blog post in which she satirically proposed armbands for immigrants. Hirvisaari, for his part, caused a scandal the following year when his guest, neo-Nazi Seppo Lehto, gave a Nazi salute in parliament. Although Hirvisaari regarded the act as humour, he was expelled from the Finns Party in October 2013. The party's election programme also provoked public disapproval in 2011. According to the programme, the state should not support "postmodern contemporary art". Later, party leader Timo Soini revealed that the statements were only a "provocation" and an election gimmick (HS 17.12.2011).

Some humour scandals were also related to other parties, such as a sexist joke by MP Mauri Pekkarinen (Centre Party) at the Municipal Association seminar in 2011 but, as a rule, humour scandals related to politicians in 2011–2013 were linked to the Finns Party. Subsequently, the humour scandals connected to the party almost disappeared from the public eye for five years. For a while, the focus of humour scandals shifted to transnational conflicts, such as the terrorist

attack on the French satirical newspaper *Charlie Hebdo* in 2015, and the international scandal caused by a humorous poem performed by German TV satirist Jan Böhmermann about Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in 2016.

However, the humour scandals linked to the Finns Party seemed to resurface again in 2019–2020, due in part to the active campaigning for the parliamentary and EU elections in spring 2019, as well as to changes in the party when Jussi Halla-aho and his supporters had risen to the party leadership at the 2017 party conference. For example, MP Juha Mäenpää equated immigration with harmful invasive species in his parliamentary speech in the summer of 2019. The speech caused a long-term public scandal, even though the Finns Party tried to play it down as humour, and Mäenpää was interrogated by the police because of it. The party's parliamentary election campaign video also sparked public debate and disapproval in the spring of 2019 (Sakki & Martikainen, 2021), but did not become a national scandal.

In general, national humour scandals in Finland in the latter part of the 1990s and the beginning of the 2000s were primarily related to television comedy programmes, such as political satires, whose humour was seen to test the moral order. During the 21st century, the number of national humour scandals increased and the starting points became more diverse. For example, artistic experiments testing the limits of humour and political campaigns now cause scandals. Since the mid-2000s, humour scandals seem to have been increasingly associated with the rise of right-wing populism. This can also be seen in the topics relating to scandalised humour: even though the "Willy Card Case" marked a watershed of sorts for humour scandals, there have been quite a few national humour scandals clearly related to gender in the last 30 years. Yet humour connected to minorities, and especially ethnicity, has become a central source of humour scandals since the end of the 2000s. The role of the internet and social media in scandals also appeared to intensify as we entered the 2010s.

While right-wing populist mocking of immigrants and other minorities has become a central topic of humour scandals, humour itself has become an explanation for the scandals rather than their starting point. However, in some cases, this is unclear due to the "doublespeak strategy" of right-wing populist communication, where messages are more radical in one's own groups than they appear to the general public (Mudde, 2000, pp. 168–169). In this way, some of the humour scandals linked to the Finns Party may turn into scandals because the general public does not recognise their humour at all. Even in these cases, however, the scandal reveals the transgressive nature of humour and, for example, the clash between racist jokes and prevailing moral codes.

In the following section, we conduct a more detailed analysis of three national-level humour scandals, which we think aptly illustrate the changes in the focus of scandals and the media environment and societal moral order in Finland from the 1990s to the 2020s. These scandals comprise the Ahtisaari couple's indignation over the *Italypsy* TV satire in 1999, the public disapproval of SAK's election advertisement in 2007, and the uproar in 2013 caused by the Nazi salute passed off as a joke in the Finnish parliament house by a guest of James Hirvisaari, a Finns Party MP.

5. Three national humour scandals from the 1990s to the 2010s

5.1 President Martti Ahtisaari's indignation at TV satire *Italypsy* (1999)

In the latter part of the 1990s and the beginning of the 2000s in particular, humour scandals were often connected to political TV satire programmes. From the early 1990s, TV satire experienced a surge in popularity in Finland, with programmes cultivating harsher humour compared to previous decades, including more direct mockery of the personal characteristics of those in power (Zareff, 2020, pp. 48–60). This ridicule targeted incumbent President Martti Ahtisaari in

the period 1994–2000, who was denigrated quite harshly, including mockery about his weight, by *Italypsy* (1993–2001), a TV satire aired by public broadcasting company Yleisradio (Zareff, 2020, p. 151).

Ahtisaari and his competitor Elisabeth Rehn had already been ridiculed in the programme during the presidential election in 1994 (IS 15.3.2019). These events can be regarded as a kind of "pre-scandal phase" (Thompson, 2000, p. 73), but the mockery did not morph into a scandal per se until the latter half of Ahtisaari's presidency when he and his wife Eeva Ahtisaari were publicly outraged by *Italypsy's* sneering content. In 1999, the indignation escalated into statements directly and indirectly criticising *Italypsy*, accompanied by demands for an apology, widely discussed in the media, especially in May–June and December.

In May 1999, Eeva Ahtisaari claimed that the media and entertainment programmes had a role in the presidential game when mocking Ahtisaari (HS 12.5.1999). The president himself was interviewed by the established periodical *Suomen Kuvalehti* in June, in which he criticised Yleisradio's political entertainment and supported the public service company's privatisation (SK 24.6.1999). Ahtisaari did not mention *Italypsy*, but the media interpreted him as referring to it (HS 4.7.1999; TS 29.6.1999). According to the president, Yleisradio's satirical programmes focused on mocking only certain individuals.



Figure 2. President Martti Ahtisaari was repeatedly ridiculed by Yle's satirical show *Italypsy*.
Picture: Yle kuvapalvelut.

At this point, journalists defended satirists' right to mock the president. They did admit that the president was treated in a "substandard" manner in the programme but emphasised that tolerating satire is part of the presidency (HS 18.5.1999; HS 4.7.1999; TS 26.06.1999). According to the editorial of one leading regional paper in Finland, *Turun Sanomat*, "too much fun has been made of the president's weight, but it is not political". According to the text, it was understandable that the satire was aimed at the power elites: "Democracy is not mature if it cannot tolerate fun being poked at figures in power" (TS 26.06.1999).

The turning point in the scandal came in December when the president demanded, in an Independence Day interview on nationwide commercial channel MTV, that entertainers should apologise for mocking him and his wife (IS 27.12.1999). No apology was forthcoming from the *Italypsy* staff, but in December 1999, Peter Nyman, the host of another topical satirical programme, *Uutisvuoto* (Yleisradio, 1998–2018), apologised at the beginning of the programme (IS 27.12.1999). However, the apology did not specify to whom it was addressed, and hence it could also have been interpreted as irony.

The scandal continued for a long period, featuring in the media, especially during the summer and in December 1999, although it was not particularly clear-cut. However, the case was covered in several leading national media, so it meets the criteria for a national humour scandal. The scandal also had a fairly clear structure: the president had been mocked in entertaining satire programmes on television since the election, which provoked thoughts about the limits of the appropriateness of political entertainment, but the subject only became a real scandal when the president and his wife publicly expressed their indignation. The scandal had died down, accompanied by apologies, by the time that Ahtisaari had withdrawn from daily political life.

Ahtisaari did not run in the 2000 presidential election. He had refused to stand in the primary election for the Social Democratic Party's presidential candidates in April 1999, but still left the door open for the actual election. After Tarja Halonen won the primaries at the end of May, Ahtisaari announced that he would not run for a second term. It is unclear to what extent the satirical ridicule influenced his decision not to run, but for someone who had become president from outside politics, the extensive and sensational publicity of the time was a strain: according to his biography, Ahtisaari's media relationship changed from positive to negative during his term of office (Merikallio & Ruokanen, 2011) – and this was also the case when it came to TV satire.

Societally, the scandal was primarily about the collision caused by the changed relations between the media and politics. A large number of those who served in top political positions in the 1990s had lived through a period when the media was on a tight political leash and the roles of journalists and politicians were clearly compartmentalised. In the 1990s, the relationship between politics and the media was at a turning point. Struggles between politicians who were used to the old moral order but not to the new publicity sometimes erupted into scandals. The change in the political media environment in the 1990s was epitomised in a comment made by Pekka Sitari, editor-in-chief of the Finnish regional paper *Karjalainen*, in which he described what would have happened to the creators of TV satires during past president Urho Kekkonen's time in office: "If TV or radio had behaved similarly in Kekkonen's time, Yle and MTV would have been swept away by those in charge. And we would have given our blessing to a major newspaper clean-up" (According to HS 12.5.1999).

5.2 SAK's rabble-rousing election video (2007)

During the parliamentary election at the end of February 2007, the Central Organisation of Finnish Trade Unions, SAK, released a campaign video in which a member of the "crooked bourgeois", played by Oiva Lohtander, feasts on food and rejoices that the workers do not bother to vote (see Figure 3). The election video was made in a situation where voter turnout had been systematically declining for a couple of decades, and left-wing parties in particular had suffered from the loss of loyal voters (Kantola, 2011, p. 35). The goal of the video was to use irony to encourage the working class to vote.

However, bourgeois influencers were outraged by the advertisement, and a scandal erupted about the topic, which was widely reported for about two weeks. SAK's management initially defended the video but eventually shelved it before it was officially aired on television, and made a new commercial. However, the video was still available on YouTube (and still is at the time of writing), and was one of the most watched election-related online videos in the spring of 2007 (HS 17.3.2007).

Key actors in media coverage of the controversy were the bourgeois politicians and lobbyists who criticised the video, and the SAK representatives who defended it and commented on its shelving. Criticism of the video was delivered by the country's leading right-wing influencers, such as the directors of the Finnish business and labour market organisations, as

well as by key figures from the right-wing conservative National Coalition and Centre parties. SAK representatives, such as the organisation's president, Lauri Ihalainen, and the director of the member services department, Matti Tukiainen, initially defended the advertisement, but were eventually convinced to shelve it and commission a new video (HS 28.2.2007; HS 11.3.2007; HS 1.3.2007; IS 28.2.2007).

SAK had produced its advertisement in cooperation with an advertising agency. Before its official release, it was shown on television news and current affairs programmes and YouTube in the last week of February. It was after this that right-wing influencers expressed strong disapproval of the advertisement, with the Social Democratic Party's parliamentary candidates and chairman Eero Heinäluoma ultimately adding their voices to the criticism. The scandal was discussed in the media for more than two weeks, both on the news and in opinion pieces.



Figure 3. SAK's TV advertisement was widely discussed during the 2007 Finnish Parliamentary elections. Picture: SAK (a screenshot).

Right-wing critics considered the original advertisement outdated, inauthentic, tasteless, and designed to incite confrontation. Commentators claimed that Finns do not need "the line of intimidation and confrontation" represented by SAK's advertisement (HS 28.2.2007), arguing that it was an inappropriate exaggeration (IS 28.2.2007). In connection with the scandal, bourgeois influencers also criticised the Social Democratic Party's TV advertising, which was likewise considered "indecent" and which was suspected of hindering constructive cooperation (HS 1.3.2007). Defenders of the advertisement said that the purpose of the video was to encourage citizens, especially SAK members, to vote, a situation in which provocation was considered a good strategy (HS 11.3.2007; IS 28.2.2007). Subsequently, however, the SAK representatives explained that the decision to shelve the advertisement was made based on feedback from the membership because "it crossed the line of good taste" (HS 11.3.2007).

The ad campaign was scheduled to start running on television at the beginning of March, but SAK ended up withdrawing it before then. SAK quickly produced a new election advertisement, which was broadcast on television right away. In the advertisement, a crying office worker was comforted with the words: "Well, this has become messy now. Come on, you can vote for whoever you want." According to SAK, the new advertisement was ironically commenting on the uproar caused by the previous one (HS 8.3.2007). The humour scandal

related to SAK's election advertisement duly followed the traditional and typical political scandal pattern (Thompson, 2000, p. 73), with a prologue (the video was presented before the campaign), the actual scandal (the controversy surrounding the video was critically discussed in public), a turning point (the ad was withdrawn), and an epilogue (a new advertisement commenting on the case appeared).

The scandal was analysed in some newspaper articles. For example, according to journalist Tommi Nieminen, the 2007 parliamentary election was probably the first "image election" in Finland, which was why everyone was talking about the SAK video case (HS 11.3.2007). Media historian Jukka Kortti, on the other hand, analysed SAK's video campaign from the perspective of the history of political TV advertising in a column in *Helsingin Sanomat* (HS 8.3. 2007). According to Kortti, political campaign communication in Finland had become Americanised. The parties used advertising agencies, and the perpetrators of negative campaigns were often organisations or financiers close to them, as in the case of SAK, instead of the parties or politicians themselves.

SAK's election video scandal is reminiscent of the Ahtisaari case in two ways: television played a key role in both, and the role of journalism as an originator of the scandal was not essential, even though the scandal lived and died in media publicity. Robert Entman (2012) has studied political scandals related to US presidents and emphasised that in the creation and maintenance of scandals, an influential political opponent front plays a more important role than the media. The US two-party system differs significantly from Finland's consensus-oriented multi-party system, but in the SAK video scandal, the corresponding confrontation between political camps was obvious. Without the active united front of the bourgeois camp, the scandal would probably have been insignificant.

In 2007, television served as the main stage for publicity related to national elections. Unlike in many other Nordic countries, election advertising was allowed on television in Finland in the 1990s, which further emphasised the importance of (commercial) TV in political communication (Moring & Himmelstein, 1993, p. 6). Thus, it was understandable that SAK's provocative TV advertisement attracted considerable attention. The importance of the internet in election campaigning had also grown, and candidate selection programmes, discussion forums, and blogs had been cited as new channels of political communication (Herkman 2010). After being shelved, SAK's video spread specifically on internet platforms, such as YouTube. In the political culture of the internet, provocations, confrontations, and humour were common means of exerting an effect. The election video was therefore released at a time when the political communication environment was changing radically in Finland, and polarisation in political discussions was increasing.

From the outset, SAK's election video was obviously humorous, but the inherent humour itself was – surprisingly – hardly mentioned during the scandal. Types of humour were discussed with references to bad taste, exaggeration, and rudeness. However, what was essential in the criticism was that the limit of what was acceptable had been exceeded. Not even the producers of the advertisement explained it with humour, but rather, for them, humour was largely a means of attracting attention. The scandal died down rather quickly when the video was withdrawn, but it is unclear whether the public scandal led to the cancellation of the campaign. In SAK, the cancellation was purportedly a result of the negative feedback delivered by their own people, especially towards partying. SDP went on to lose the election and eight seats in parliament.

5.3 Nazi salute in the Finnish parliament (2013)

In October 2013, far-right activist Seppo Lehto published a photograph of himself giving a Nazi salute in the parliament building in a blog post supporting Jussi Halla-aho's (the Finns Party) candidacy for the European Parliament. The picture had been taken by MP James Hirvisaari (the

Finns Party), who had invited Lehto to the parliament. The photo spread online, and a scandal erupted on the subject, as a result of which the Speaker issued Hirvisaari with a notice of censure, and the Finns Party expelled him from the party permanently. In addition, Lehto was banned from entering the parliament building. According to Hirvisaari, the act was committed by “a misunderstood super-humourist” (IS 14.10.2013), but according to several public commentators, the prank was not funny at all, and could not be dismissed as mere humour.

The leaders and party members of the Finns Party, as well as representatives of other parties, and the Speaker, Eero Heinäluoma, commented on the scandal in the media. Key stages in the scandal were the publication of the photo on Wednesday 2 October 2013, Hirvisaari's dismissal from the party on Friday 4 October 2013, Hirvisaari's voluntary resignation from the Finns Party's parliamentary group on 7 October 2013, and Hirvisaari's joining the new Muutos 2011 party on 8 October 2013. The scandal was quite clear-cut and came to an end in about a week.

According to Speaker Heinäluoma, the Nazi salute was a completely inappropriate and reprehensible act that could not be resolved by talking. According to the Finns Party leadership, Hirvisaari's error was an act against the party's interests (HS 4.10.2013). Party leaders also referred to previous commotions concerning Hirvisaari (IS 4.10.2013). According to the Party Whip, the reason for the dismissal was Hirvisaari's repeated xenophobic statements and the knowledge that he was the one who took the Nazi salute picture (HS 5.10.2013). It should also be remembered that the scandal took place before the party changed from a more traditional populist movement to a clear-cut radical right-wing party under Jussi Halla-aho's regime in 2017.

In April 2012, Hirvisaari had already been dismissed from the Finns Party parliamentary group for a limited period because his assistant, Helena Eronen, had ironically suggested the use of armbands for foreigners living in Finland to make "the work of the police easier". The case in question was also a national-level humour scandal in our material. In addition, before the Nazi salute, Hirvisaari had, among other things, compared homosexuality to mental retardation, published racist blog posts, and called a journalist a "wanker" (HS 4.10.2013). In connection with the resignation, the Finns Party members said that they liked Hirvisaari as a person and colleague, but the Nazi salute crossed a line that could no longer be accepted (IS 4.10.2013).

According to those who commented on the topic in the media, the Nazi salute could not be deemed humour. Speaker Heinäluoma pointed out that Nazism caused "the greatest disaster in European history – and does not represent any kind of humour" (HS 4.10.2013). Hirvisaari's humour was also tackled by his municipal council colleague, who commented that Hirvisaari was two-faced and "explains everything with humour – and finally states that it is difficult for others to understand the humour of the Finns Party" (IS 4.10.2013).

Analytical perspectives on the topic were presented in a *Helsingin Sanomat* editorial (HS 4.10.2013) and by *Ilta-Sanomat*'s editor-in-chief (IS 14.10.2013). The former discussed the topic from the point of view of the political game played by the Finns Party. According to the editorial, provocations can benefit the party when it is seeking attention and support, but a party that openly aspires to be in government must be stricter in terms of the consequences of its actions. The latter text, on the other hand, compared Hirvisaari's case to a previous scandal that had led to the resignation of Minister Heidi Hautala (Green Party) just a week before. According to the editorial, Hautala and Hirvisaari avoided commenting on their actions, downplayed their significance, portrayed the matter in the best light, and blamed others. This was also the only article among the sample in which Hirvisaari's framing of the event as humour was repeated (IS 14.10.2013).

Hirvisaari's humour scandal was also ridiculed in *Ilta-Sanomat*'s columns and cartoons. Cartoonist Jarmo Korhonen, for example, depicted Finns Party leader Timo Soini as a ringmaster guarding a human-faced elk with a Hitler moustache and a camera around its neck in the circus ring (see Figure 4). The name "Hirvisaari" means "elk island" in Finnish.



Figure 4. Leader of the Finns Party, Timo Soini, and party member James Hirvisaari. Picture: IS 5.10.2013, Jarmo Koivunen (IS Kuvat).

Like Halla-aho's humorous outbursts, the Hirvisaari scandal also started from content that spread on social media, which was then picked up by the journalistic media. In this sense, these humour scandals were scandals that stemmed from the internet or social media. On the other hand, the scandals would not have expanded to the national level without mainstream media coverage and commentary. In addition to the transformations in the media environment, the scandal was connected to the rise and success of the Finns Party in Finnish politics in the early 2010s.

The scandals related to Halla-aho and Hirvisaari are typical scandals linked to right-wing populist actors, which Herkman (2018) calls "neo-populist scandals". Neo-populist scandals originate from offensive language or inappropriate behaviour, such as flirting with generally rejected extremist groups. Norm transgression is often committed on purpose and shared in like-minded social media forums, but it spills over into the wider public and causes public outrage. The Nazi salute delivered with "humour" by a guest invited by Hirvisaari was such an incident, the scandalisation of which was connected to a political movement that established its position in the parliament in the early 2010s. As analysed in *Helsingin Sanomat's* editorial on 4 October, such a scandal can benefit populist movements that are enjoying an increase in support. However, the establishment of a position in political institutions also means an increase in sensitivity to, and more serious consequences of, scandals when the journalistic media unleashes its "watchdog" even more harshly against populist actors than before (see Herkman & Matikainen, 2020).

6. Conclusion and discussion

According to our research, the number of humour scandals in Finland increased significantly between 1990 and 2020: there were only a couple of national-level humour scandals in the 1990s, but in the 2010s, this figure rose to 15. Most of the humour scandals of the 1990s and early 2000s dealt with the relationship between TV satires and politicians, whereas after the

mid-2000s, the subjects and themes of humour controversies became more diverse. Among other things, artists' works, satirical campaigning, and ethnic humour became the subject of national disputes. Humour scandals related to the populist (radical) right Finns Party in particular became more common after the 2011 parliamentary election.

Our results are in line with scandal research (e.g., Allern et al., 2012; Zulli, 2021), according to which the increase in scandals is primarily related to a change in the media environment, but the results also reveal interesting insights into other changes in Finnish politics, society and moral order. On the one hand, the media opened up to competition, and entertaining scandalous content became more sought-after than before. On the other hand, the media began to operate as a watchdog more eagerly than before (Kantola, 2011). The increase in humour scandals thus partly indicates a change in which the dominance of party ideologies as the basis of the political system began to crumble in the second half of the 20th century, and in many countries, media publicity, especially television, came to dominate politics (Manin, 1997, pp. 228–232). In Finland, during the presidency of Urho Kekkonen (1956–1982), most entertainers were hesitant to criticise the leading politicians – especially Kekkonen – so during the 1990s TV satirists strove to distinguish themselves from this era by mocking the powerful, including on personal matters such as being overweight (Zareff, 2020, p. 151).

In the 1990s and early 2000s, humour scandals were associated with political TV satires, which tested the limits of the sense of humour of those accustomed to the old order. Entertaining television was in its heyday at that time and was the most visible forum for politics. However, in the 2000s, the dominant position of television began to waver, and during the 2010s, social media became a central platform for political communication (see Strandberg & Borg, 2021). This was also seen in humour scandals, which were increasingly linked to social media: on the one hand, politicians and other public figures have been able to present their views without the intervention of journalists, while on the other hand, activists and citizens have been able to hold them publicly accountable in social media (Koivukoski, 2022, pp. 38–39).

The role of the journalistic media in humour scandals appears to be twofold. It has generally been thought that the media plays a central role in the creation of political scandals because it is precisely journalism that brings the scandal's underlying and hidden norm transgression to the public eye (Ekström & Johansson, 2008; Thompson, 2000). In many humour scandals, however, the media itself is the accused. This applies in particular to scandals related to television satire and sketch comedy shows. For example, when President Martti Ahtisaari criticised *Ittalypsy* in the late 1990s, the media served as both the perpetrator of the norm transgression and the public forum for the scandal.

Humour scandals almost invariably arise from the fact that those who are the target of the humour are offended and express public disapproval. In humour scandals, the role of the journalistic media is therefore often more passive than in other types of political scandals in which journalists do the muckraking and expose misconduct. In turn, in a humour scandal, the perpetrators, the targets, and their stakeholders are usually the most central players. Still, it can be argued that it is precisely the journalistic media that sustain the publicity of a humour scandal: national scandals typically live and die with the news media, which have a strong influence over mainstream audiences. In this sense, journalism also plays a vital role in humour scandals.

The change in the media environment was also related to the rise in popularity of right-wing populist political movements and politicians, which had a significant impact on the humour scandals of the 2010s in Finland: the nationalist, nativist, and sometimes racist rhetoric of right-wing populists often includes the use of humour to attract like-minded groups (Sakki & Martikainen, 2021; Wagner & Schwarzenegger, 2020). This was particularly visible in Finland in the early 2010s when the Finns Party achieved success with such rhetoric, but subsequently became embroiled in public scandals after achieving a significant position in the political field (Herkman, 2016). At the same time, it was evident that humour functioned in scandals more and

more often as an explanation or an excuse rather than as a clear starting point. Right-wing populists often justify expressions mocking minorities by framing them afterwards as "just a joke".

The topics of humour scandals are also indicative of the moral codes and changes in society. For example, the lack of sexist humour as a starting point for national humour scandals in Finland is striking. This is not to say that sexist humour does not exist, but it seems that after the "Willy Card" incident of the early 1990s, key political actors at least have been wary of making fun of gender. MP Mauri Pekkarinen's (Centre Party) case from 2011 is a good example of how sexist humour is dealt with very quickly and therefore something that audiences are alert to. Gender equality has been established in the Nordic countries for such a long time that women in significant public positions are seldom mocked in the way that those from ethnic groups are ridiculed, for example. Nevertheless, sexual harassment revelations and scandals still occur in Finland with regrettable frequency, and young female Social Democrat Prime Minister Sanna Marin and her female-dominated government were constantly mocked in social media during their term in office in 2019–2023, even though those humour controversies did not erupt into nation-level scandals.

Our mapping of humour scandals and three case studies also demonstrate that alongside the transformations in the media environment and the success of radical right-wing populism in the political field, the targets of scandalous humour changed dramatically during the period under review. Whereas in the 1990s and early 2000s, the humour often mocked political power-holders, during the 2000s political actors started to ridicule each other, and in the 2010s the radical right in particular started to make fun of minorities. In a way, the targeting of scandalous humour switched – at least to some extent – from a bottom-up to a top-down approach.

However, at the same time, mockery of minorities is also increasingly viewed more critically, and various global movements, such as #MeToo and #blacklivesmatter indicate a general change in the moral environment. Both comedians and audiences are more aware than before of conventions related to representations of social groups and the need to challenge them (Koivukoski, 2022, pp. 41–43). In our data, this was seen, for example, in the fact that MP Pirkka-Pekka Petelius (Green Party) publicly apologised in 2019 for the TV sketch comedy characters he played in the 1980s and 1990s, which made fun of the Sámi and Roma people. At the time of their creation, the sketches were treated as "mainstream culture", and no major scandals ensued, although there was critical discussion about mocking minority groups even then (Herkman, 2000, pp. 381–382).

We argue, therefore, that the changes in humour scandals also reflect changes in the moral order that constitutes the Finnish social imaginaries (see Taylor, 2003). In the late twentieth century, Finland was still a rather homogeneous society and culture. The political climate encouraged media satire to mock the power-holders, as society and the media opened up to global (or Western) neo-liberal logic. At the same time, however, as political correctness increased, attention began to be drawn to inequalities concerning such identity dimensions as gender and sexuality, or traditional ethnic minorities in Finland such as the Roma or the Sámi people. During the twenty-first century, the fragmentation of society accelerated, multiculturalism intensified, and social media ruptured the power of journalism over the agenda in public discursive struggles. This emphasised both the public attacks against political correctness and sensitivity to minority rights. Hence, the increase in national humour scandals also reflects the diversification of, or even the struggle over, the moral order in Finland (see Table 2).

Table 2. National humour scandals and societal transformations in Finland

Decade	Conflicting actors	Media environment	Political order	Moral order
1990s	Media and politicians	National mass media, golden age of commercial TV	Strong emphasis on social democratic consensus	Challenging the old order, liquid modernity (Bauman 2000)
2000s	Various political campaigns and politicians	Digitalisation, globalisation and the spread of online media	Strong emphasis on centre-right consensus	Political correctness, neo-moralism
2010s	Moderate and radical politicians and activists	Hybrid media environment (Chadwick 2013), social media	Conflict between populist radical right and others, polarisation	Challenging political correctness, sensitivity

One of the key causes of disagreement in humour scandals is how harsh the mockery of political actors and groups of people can be. The question came up in our material in connection with both international and national humour scandals (e.g., the Muhammad cartoon scandal, Halla-aho's court cases, MP Hirvisaari's flirtation with Nazism or MP Juha Mäenpää's speech). In these cases, the core values of liberal democracy, such as equality, freedom of speech, protection of minorities, and freedom of religion, collide. According to Chantal Mouffe (2005), mutual, even harsh, competition between political factions is good for democracy because it offers citizens clear alternatives. However, antagonism must not turn into hostility, and those who disagree must be able to "agonistically" tolerate each other.

This thinking can also be applied to the analysis of aggressive political humour (Tuters & Hagen, 2020). On the one hand, the rise of aggressive humour on social media reflects increased polarisation of public discourse, but at the same time, provocative and controversial mockery of political opponents may amplify this polarisation. In public commenting on humour scandals, people usually group themselves according to their socio-political backgrounds because in this way the groups build mutual solidarity among their members and distinguish themselves from other groups that are the targets of ridicule (e.g., Laaksonen, Koivukoski & Porttikivi, 2021; Sakki & Martikainen, 2021). Social groups have always poked fun at each other like this, but the increase in humour scandals shows that the distinction between others in the construction of political identities also became more prominent in Finland in the 2010s with the help of populism and social media. In this way, humour scandals indicate that "consensus Finland" is eroding and a more conflict-oriented political era is emerging.

Using legacy media as the main source for our empirical sample is well justified for reasons of reliability and temporal comparison. We also genuinely believe that to become national, a scandal has to gain attention in mainstream journalistic media too, even in contemporary hybrid media environments (Chadwick, 2013). However, the increasing importance of social media in humour scandals, particularly since the 2010s, suggests that the role of various media platforms should be considered more thoroughly. It would also be interesting to explore how specific or typical the Finnish case is, given the obvious contextual differences in media systems and political cultures as well as in national moral orders. Hence, future studies could investigate humour scandals within and between different countries. Moreover, research could focus on particular types of humour scandals, such as populist (radical right) humour scandals or humour

scandals linked to culture rather than to politics. To this end, we are proceeding with an international comparison of humour scandals and more focused analyses of populist radical right humour scandals in our future studies in the POHU and HuSca projects.

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Appendix

Humour scandals in Finland 1990–2020

Humour scandal	Began	Description
“The Willy Card”	1990	Under the pseudonym ‘The Tupolev Brothers’, Finnish male labour market leaders sent Marianne Laxén, a researcher at the Parliamentary Advisory Board for Gender Equality, a card showing a naked woman using a bra as a parachute and descending into a sea of erect penises. The card bore a caption in French, “Vive les hommes” (Long live men). In February 1990, Laxen published the card and a scandal erupted, with more than 4,000 people signing a citizens’ petition demanding the resignation of those who had sent the card. The national conciliator, Jorma Reini, was the only member of the ‘brothers’ who publicly apologised for the matter.
TV satire Iltalypsy and President Martti Ahtisaari	1999	President Martti Ahtisaari criticised the Finnish Broadcasting Company's (Yleisradio) satirical programme Iltalypsy on two occasions in 1999. According to the president, the programme was engaged in politics but disguised as an entertainment programme with too strong a focus on specific individuals. At the same time, Ahtisaari called for the privatisation of Yleisradio and criticised the Council for Mass Media in Finland. The issue cause a furore, with journalists defending satire’s prerogative to mock decision-makers.
Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi’s ridicule of MEP Martin Schulz	2003	In July 2003, at the start of Italy's presidency of the EU, Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi suggested that German MEP Martin Schulz would be perfect for the leading role of a guard (a ‘kapo’, selected from among the other prisoners) in a film about concentration camps. The comment caused a scandal, with Berlusconi stating that he was just trying to be funny and that people did not get his joke. Martin Schulz called for Berlusconi to resign, while German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder and the Speaker of the European Parliament demanded an apology. Mr Berlusconi apologised for using certain expressions and comparisons that might have caused offence.

TV satire Itse Valtiaat and MP Ville Itälä	2004	In March 2004, politician Ville Itälä accused the Finnish Broadcasting Company's (Yleisradio) TV satire Itse Valtiaat of ruining his reputation. Itälä's comments came after his resignation as leader of the National Coalition Party. The incident led to a public debate on the portrayal of politicians in TV satire.
Danish newspaper Jyllands-Posten and the Muhammad cartoons controversy	2005	In September 2005, Danish newspaper Jyllands-Posten published a collection of twelve editorial cartoons, many of which depicted the Prophet Muhammad. In one of the cartoons, Muhammad's turban was portrayed as a bomb with a burning fuse. Muslim groups in Denmark and Arab countries condemned the cartoons, and the anger escalated into street protests, boycotts, and violence. The transnational scandal was also widely reported in Finland from December 2005 onwards.
Kaltio, Ville Ranta, Muhammad cartoon	2006	In February 2006, the Oulu-based cultural magazine Kaltio published a comic strip by Ville Ranta on the Muhammad cartoon scandal, which dealt with censorship, freedom of speech and the activities of the Finnish government. Following negative feedback, Kaltio's board and sponsors demanded that Ranta's comic strip be removed from the magazine's website. When editor-in-chief Jussi Viikuna refused, he was sacked. It was later discovered that a young Finnish man was behind the anonymous critical feedback.
A provocative election advertisement by the Central Organisation of Finnish Trade Unions (SAK)	2007	In the run-up to the parliamentary election in 2007, the Central Organisation of Finnish Trade Unions (SAK) released a provocative TV advertisement in which a feasting bourgeois was rejoicing about the fact that workers do not vote. Leading right-wing figures expressed their condemnation of the ad, which became one of the biggest talking points of the election.
TV sketch show Manne-TV	2007	In the summer of 2007, the Finnish Broadcasting Company (Yleisradio) began broadcasting a sketch show called Manne-TV in which actors, including Roma people, mocked stereotypes associated with the Roma. Roma organisations criticised the name of the programme and the way it dealt with negative stereotypes. According to the Finnish Roma Forum, the programme was racist and arguably broke the law. The Forum demanded that the programme be shelved and threatened Yleisradio with a lawsuit. The incident caused a scandal, leading to a public debate about the treatment of ethnic stereotypes in humour and satire, and the status of Roma people in Finland more generally.
Jussi Halla-aho's blog post on Islam and Somalis	2008	In November 2008, Green Women's Association filed a police investigation request following a blog post by politician Jussi Halla-aho (the Finns Party, then an independent candidate) in which he hoped that left-wing Green women would be the first to be raped by immigrants because, according to Halla-aho, rape is inevitably on the rise and left-wing Green women are to blame. The police opened an investigation into the matter, and in March 2009, Halla-aho was charged with ethnic agitation and

		endangering religious peace. The charges were filed for another blog post in which Halla-aho provocatively ridiculed Islam and Somalis. The case was covered in the media, and Halla-aho was eventually convicted by the Supreme Court in 2012 of ethnic agitation and breach of the sanctity of religion. Halla-aho, then an MP, withdrew from his post as chair of the Administration Committee.
TV satire Presidentin kanslia and Speaker Sauli Niinistö	2009	In January 2009, an episode of the Finnish Broadcasting Company's (Yleisradio) TV satire series Presidentin kanslia (President's Office) made fun of the age difference between Speaker of the Parliament Sauli Niinistö (National Coalition Party) and his partner Jenni Haukio. Niinistö was, for instance, equated with the paedophile Jammu Siltavuori. Lyly Rajala, an MP (National Coalition Party) and a member of Yleisradio's board council, was angered by the episode and wrote a letter of complaint to Yleisradio's directors and the programme's producer, causing a scandal. The scandal led to a public debate on whether the satire in the episode was too vulgar, and on the state of satire in Finland more broadly.
Author Jari Tervo's satirical novel Koljatti and Prime Minister Matti Vanhanen	2009	In September 2009, famous Finnish author Jari Tervo published a novel, Koljatti, which satirically dealt with Finnish politics, including the actions of Prime Minister "Matti Lahnanen", that is, the incumbent Prime Minister, Matti Vanhanen. Tervo told the press that his lawyers read the book in advance before its publication. The book's harsh satire was discussed in the papers for about a week.
Jani Leinonen and the "kidnapping" of Ronald McDonald	2011	In February 2011, a group led by artist Jani Leinonen "kidnapped" a statue of a Ronald McDonald clown and released a video that echoed the aesthetics of terrorist videos, threatening to behead the clown if the group's demands were not met. The group called for McDonald's to engage in a dialogue about food ethics, to which the food chain responded that it would not negotiate with criminals. In response, the group released a video in which a plaster cast of the original clown statue was beheaded. The group was later found guilty of fraud, as they had forged a document stating that the clown was being taken into custody.
MP Jussi Halla-aho's Facebook post about a military junta	2011	During the euro crisis in September 2011, MP Jussi Halla-aho (the Finns Party) posted a Facebook update calling for a military junta in Greece that would bring the protesters under control. A scandal erupted on the issue, with Halla-aho defending himself by saying that he was not really in favour of a military junta, but that the post was written in his typical manner. He is renowned for his sarcastic style. As a result of the scandal, he was suspended from the Finns Party's parliamentary group for two weeks.
MP Teuvo Hakkarainen and a proposal for a model society	2011	In October 2011, MP Teuvo Hakkarainen (the Finns Party) suggested that gays, lesbians and Somalis could be relocated to the Swedish-speaking island of Åland to observe the outcomes. His remarks sparked a scandal. Hakkarainen subsequently said

		that the suggestion was intended as a joke. While Finns Party Whip Pirkko Ruohonen-Lerner also considered Hakkarainen's statement humorous, the parliamentary group issued him with a warning.
The Finns Party's election manifesto and postmodern art	2011	In February 2011, the Finns Party published its election manifesto, according to which the state should not fund postmodern art, but nationalist art. The policy stand sparked much debate. At the end of 2011, party chairman Timo Soini revealed that the party's art policy was in fact “an election bite” aimed at attracting attention. Soini's revelation ignited a controversy in which it was discussed whether the Finns Party's policies were just jokes per se.
MP Mauri Pekkarinen and a joke about breasts	2011	In October 2011, MP Mauri Pekkarinen (Centre Party) joked about the breasts of fellow panellist Kristina Wikberg at a public discussion event. Maia Fandi, a city councillor for the Greens in Jyväskylä, accused Pekkarinen of sexual harassment, and the topic caused a stir. Pekkarinen initially strongly denied saying anything about breasts, but a video showed that he was talking about “boobs” [ryntäät in Finnish]. Pekkarinen later regretted his choice of words. Wikberg herself did not consider the incident sexual harassment, but did not comment on whether Pekkarinen's behaviour was appropriate.
MP James Hirvisaari and the blog post about sleeve badges	2012	In April 2012, Helena Eronen, an assistant to Finns Party MP James Hirvisaari, published a satirical blog post in which she suggested that foreigners should wear sleeve badges to make them more recognisable. The issue became a public scandal. The Finns Party demanded that Hirvisaari should dismiss Eronen, but because he refused, Hirvisaari was suspended from the Finns Party's parliamentary group for five months. Later in the summer, Eronen herself resigned.
Ylioppilaslehti magazine and “Poopgate”	2013	In February 2013, editor-in-chief Vappu Kaarenoja and journalist Aurora Rämö published a cover story in the centenary issue of Ylioppilaslehti, a famous Finnish student magazine. In the report, they described how they had intentionally defecated in their pants on a bus ride from Helsinki to Turku. The subject caused a stir, during which the question was, among other things, whether the journalists had actually pooped in their pants, or whether it was some kind of performance.
MP James Hirvisaari and the Nazi salute	2013	In September 2013, Seppo Lehto, a guest of MP James Hirvisaari (the Finns Party), made a Nazi salute in the Parliament House. MP Hirvisaari took a photo of the incident, which subsequently went viral on social media, causing a scandal that led to Hirvisaari's dismissal from the Finns Party in October. The Nazi salute was discussed in the media as a failed attempt at humour.
Terrorist attack on the premises of Charlie Hebdo magazine	2015	In January 2015, two French Muslim terrorists attacked the Paris office of the satirical magazine Charlie Hebdo, murdering 12 people. The motive was to kill employees that had mocked Islam in the magazine. It was one of the most followed news events of

		2015. The writing discussed, among other things, the relationship between satire, freedom of speech, terrorism, and Islam.
Provocative campaign by the Finnish Peat Industry Association and Hasan & Partners	2017	In January 2017, in cooperation with the communications agency Hasan & Partners, the Finnish Peat Industry Association, Bioenergy, launched an advertising campaign promoting peat. The campaign included provocative cartoon posters which, according to experts, contained factual errors and misleading information about the environmental friendliness and economic potential of peat. The campaign sparked controversy about the facts and ethics of advertising. The Council of Ethics in Advertising issued the Finnish Bioenergy Association with an official note due to one of the campaign posters, which it deemed insulting to elderly and disabled people.
Jan Böhmermann and a poem about Turkish President Erdoğan	2016	At the end of March 2016, Turkey demanded Germany to remove a mock song about Turkish President Erdoğan from the internet. A German TV programme, Extra3, had produced the song. After eight days of deliberation, the German government decided that the video was within the limits of free speech and should not be removed. In response, at the end of March 2016, German satirist Jan Böhmermann recited a crude mock poem about Turkish President Erdoğan on the satirical TV show Neo Magazin Royale, which airs on the German public broadcasting company ZDF. The mocking poem sparked an international high-level diplomatic conflict in which the Turkish government and President Erdoğan demanded that Böhmermann be prosecuted. The German government agreed to send the case to the prosecutor, who declined to prosecute as the poem was exaggerated. Erdoğan sued Böhmermann through a civil case, which concluded with a ruling that banned 18 lines of the poem as insulting. The German parliament repealed an old law that allowed the sentencing of people to jail for mocking foreign heads of state.
Aleksi Valavuori and tweets about gay people	2016	In October 2016, Aleksi Valavuori, general manager of the Espoo United basketball team and media personality, posted two messages about gay people on Twitter. The messages angered representatives of sexual minorities, and a scandal erupted. Valavuori apologised and said he was trying to be funny. Due to the tweets, Valavuori was dismissed from his position as general manager of the basketball team. In addition, the Finnish Basketball Association suspended him for two months.
Herald Sun, Mark Knight, and a caricature of Serena Williams	2018	In September 2018, Australian conservative tabloid Herald Sun published a cartoon by Mark Knight, which depicted tennis star Serena Williams throwing a tantrum on the tennis court, with a baby's dummy on the ground by her side. The cartoon was a reference to the US Open finals, in which Williams became angry with umpire Carlos Ramos because of the warnings she had received. Critics suggested that the cartoon echoed racist drawing traditions, and an international scandal erupted over the issue. During the scandal, Knight deleted his Twitter account

		because his family had become the target of insults. In February 2019, the Australian Press Council (APC) adjudicated that the cartoon was in response to the tennis player's outburst and was not racist.
MP Juha Mäenpää's parliamentary speech	2019	In June 2019, MP Juha Mäenpää (the Finns Party) gave a speech in the Finnish Parliament in which he equated asylum seekers with an invasive species. The police suspected Mäenpää of inciting hatred against an ethnic group and opened an investigation into the issue. Finns Party politicians framed Mäenpää's speech as humorous and expressive. A scandal erupted, which eventually led to a vote in parliament on removing Mäenpää's immunity from prosecution. Mäenpää's immunity was not lifted as a result of the vote, however, as it would have required a 5/6 majority.
MP Pirkka-Pekka Petelius's apology for old TV sketches about the Sámi and Roma people	2019	In November 2019, Pirkka-Pekka Petelius (Green Party), an MP and a famous former actor, publicly apologised for his old TV sketches. Petelius stated that the humour in the sketch series in the late 1980s and the early 1990s (Hymyhuulet, Pulttibois, and Manibois) was discriminatory and had caused harm to the Sámi people. Representatives of the Roma people also demanded an apology for the sketches about them, and Petelius apologised accordingly. The incident gave rise to a debate on the representation of minorities in entertainment. Petelius's apology came after an interview with the Prosecutor General, who was asked to take a stand on whether the old sketches could constitute an offence.
= 26 humour scandals		

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