# Book review*

**Mpofu, Shepherd (ed.) (2021)** *Digital Humour in the Covid-19 Pandemic:*
*Perspectives from the Global South***. Palgrave Macmillan.**

Written and published during the personal, professional, and logistical challenges of the Covid-19 pandemic, this book deserves special praise. Not only for managing to see the light of day at all during that period, but also – despite this somewhat belated review - for being one of the first (if not *the* first) book to have been published on the topic of digital humour and Covid-19. The importance and relevance of this topic cannot be overstated; we all remember our social media feeds during the pandemic. Indeed, the steady stream of humour was what kept many of us going during the various restrictions we lived through. Of particular significance in this case is the fact that the humour written about in this book pertains to the Global South, described by the editor Shepherd Mpofu as "both a political and geographic location, a collection of countries formerly known as the Third World" (p. 9).

The volume comprises fifteen chapters divided into three sections: (I) Meme-making practices and making sense of the pandemic; (II) Gender, race and family: Identity politics in the pandemic; and (III) Weapons of the masses: Humour, ridicule and confronting political power. The authors and chapters represent a range of countries, including Brazil, India, Kenya, Nigeria, South Africa, Vietnam and Zimbabwe and, as one would expect from a volume dealing with social media and the Covid-19 pandemic, they cover a wide range of topics and methodologies, and include a number of authentic social media examples and screenshots.

The first section on memes contains six chapters. Shepherd Mpofu (Chapter 2, "Social media memes as commentary in health disasters in South Africa and Zimbabwe") presents a comparative study of how South Africans and Zimbabweans used memes on WhatsApp, Twitter (as it was known at the time) and Facebook during the listeriosis health crisis in 2017-2018 and the Covid-19 pandemic, demonstrating how Black Social Media and the notion of *signifyin'* - which he describes as a "critique of […] socio-economic and political environments" (p. 28) - enable powerless citizens to use humour as a weapon in both countries.

In the third chapter entitled "Viral jokes: Humour and grace as critical devices in memes about the COVID-19 pandemic in Brazil", Alexandre Werneck effectively examines the evolution of the politically critical memes which circulated in Brazil in the four main phases of the pandemic: emergence (end of 2019–Mar 2020); isolation (Mar–May 2020); start of the plateau (May–Aug 2020); consolidation of the plateau (Aug 2020–). He maps these periods onto three distinct movements, which he calls *regimes*, and the criticisms that accompany each regime: the first two periods were "investigative" and attracted criticisms motivated by the initial estrangement with the virus; the third period was considered "routine" (in which the

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criticisms were consolidated); and the final period is referred to as the "new normal" - a new routine with new critiques.

In "'Coromentality': Nigerians' use of memetic humour during the COVID-19 lockdowns", Aje-Ori Agbese and Edeanya Agbese (Chapter 4) add to the growing body of research on Nigerian humour by investigating the use of dark humour in locally created memes in Nigeria, and how the memes can be categorised according to the three original theories of humour: incongruity, release/relief, and superiority.

In their chapter "An analysis of internet memes and discourses on traditional medicines as remedies for COVID-19 in Zimbabwe, against a backdrop of scepticism on the use of WHO-approved vaccines", Mbongeni Jonny Msimanga, Lungile Augustine Tshuma and Mphathisi Ndlovu adopt Bakhtin's theoretical lens of the carnivalesque to show how memes produced and circulated by Zimbabweans were a means to comment on traditional indigenous herbs and other medicines and practices as Covid-19 treatments as a challenge to dominant Western scientific knowledge systems.

Chapter 6 by Adamkolo Mohammed Ibrahim, Nassir Mohammed Abba-Aji and Phuong Thi Vi wins the prize for the best title in the book: "Can we uninstall 2020 and install it again? This version has a virus! Humorous pundemic and misinforming infodemic about COVID-19 pandemic on social media". The authors demonstrate how context is required to understand selected examples of pandemic-related humour in Nigeria, such as jokes, memes, fake news, misinformation and hoaxes, and how humour was employed by popular comedians to include health tips in their routines to circulate information about COVID-19, as well as by ordinary citizens to combat fake news and misinformation.

The final chapter in this section on memes is by Gloria Chimeziem Ernest-Samuel and is entitled "Social media audience's interpretation of selected humour memes on coronavirus pandemic in Nigeria". Ernest-Samuel undertook an ethnographic methodology to investigate twelve social media users' reactions to, and interpretations of, a selection of memes pertaining to education, humour, satire and health concerns on the pandemic, again in Nigeria. For some reason, some of the memes were described rather than depicted in this chapter, which somewhat detracted from the readability.

Section II dealing with identity politics opens with Chapter 8 ("Coronavirus satire: A dissection of feminist politics and humour") by Millie Phiri, in which she undertakes a methodical examination of the Zimbabwean comedian Felistas Chido Murata's Facebook page, "Mai Ts Diaries", during the pandemic. She argues that Mai T's humour is central to the articulation of black feminism, and that humour and social media in Zimbabwe are shifting the representation of women and their issues in the media. At the same time, however, Phiri describes how Mai T's humour contains falsehoods and conspiracy theories, is misogynistic at times, and her behaviour can be hypocritical.

Chapter 9, "'A nation that laughs together, stays together': Deconstructing humour on Twitter during the national lockdown in South Africa"), by Nonhlanhla Ndlovu takes a critical humour studies approach to the analysis of humour on Twitter between March and June 2020 in South Africa. Ndlovu examined how users targeted politicians, but also negotiated identity through a critique of dominant social discourses relating to gender, race and class, illustrating how "humour in this context destabilise[s] the notion of the 'rainbow nation'" (p. 193).

Mvuzo Ponono (Chapter 10, "Fear and loathing and laughter: COVID-19 as an expression of decolonial love") also discusses the racial divide in South Africa, and the complex relationships between race, decolonial love, resistance and multipositionality, illustrating how these are expressed by users of Black Twitter, not always humorously. Although shorter than the other sections, these three contributions are very strong and offer valuable insights into these postcolonial societies which go beyond the context of the pandemic.

Adelina Mbinjama opens the final section on the use of humour to confront political power with her chapter "#VoetsekANC and COVID corruption: A Foucauldian discourse analysis of 'A Song for the ANC'". Her chapter recounts the backlash against the African National Congress (ANC) in South Africa for providing personal protective equipment (PPE) to individuals within ANC social circles, instead of to frontline workers combatting Covid-19, and offers an innovative Foucauldian analysis of the parody "A Song for the ANC".

In Chapter 12, "Humour in the time of COVID-19 pandemic: A critical analysis of the subversive meanings of WhatsApp memes in Zimbabwe", Mphathisi Ndlovu examines the subversive nature of memes produced and circulated by Zimbabweans via WhatsApp in a particularly repressive political environment, illustrating how some memes critique the dominant hegemonic Western perspectives, how others depict the situation of disadvantaged communities excluded from online learning, and how yet others reinforce stereotypical depictions of black women.

Imran Parray's chapter entitled "Humour in the age of contagion: Coronavirus, 'Janata Curfew' meme and India's digital cultures of virality" presents a critical analysis of the 'Janata Curfew' meme, a collection of images and videos mocking Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Parray demonstrates how online users in India derive humour and satire from cultural industries such as Bollywood and current socio-economic and political tensions, and how the lines between humour, ridicule, comedy, trolling and threats are blurred.

In Chapter 14, "The use of meme and hashtags on Twitter towards government response during the COVID-19 curfew announcement from 1 June to 14 June 2020", Keziah Wangui Githinji and Joyce Omwoha look at Kenyans' use of memes and hashtags on Twitter (specifically #FreedomDay), following the government's unpopular announcement of the extension of the curfew on 6 June 2020, in which President Uhuru Kenyatta himself humorously referred to the trending meme.

Shepherd Mpofu closes out his edited volume with a chapter entitled "Dark humour, ubuntu and the COVID-19 pandemic: A case of subaltern humouring of political elite deaths on social media". He reminds us that "[t]he Covid-19 pandemic, according to the World Health Organization (WHO) (2020), is the first pandemic globally to take place in a digital age" (p. 320), leading to the sharing of fake news and disinformation on social media, as well as commentary about the pandemic in serious and humorous ways. He goes on to discuss social media used as a site of dissidence and resistance, dark humour, the deaths of two politicians - Zimbabwe's President Emerson Mnangagwa and Jackson Mthembu, a senior member of the South African ANC - and shows how these concepts interconnect with the concept of *ubuntu*, i.e. "a moral view binding Africans together in a way of living a life of humanity and empathy towards other people, especially outsiders" (p. 323).

As can sometimes be the case with edited volumes, some contributions are stronger than others, there is some repetition in the literature reviews across chapters, and a few editing errors have crept in. Furthermore, much of the information about the pandemic is now widely known and/or has been updated. However, these are minor quibbles and Mpofu is to be congratulated on this valuable publication which has paved the way for further research into digital humour in general, humour in times of crisis, and as used during the Covid-19 pandemic, in particular. In addition, not only does this volume contribute to and further the scholarship emanating from the Global South in general, but the various chapters enhance our understanding of the different contexts in this region, such as the role of political corruption, an increased risk of political scrutiny, citizen surveillance and/or the erosion of human rights in some countries, the complexities of identity politics in Zimbabwe and South Africa in particular, the contested meaning of 'nation' in South Africa, and – more specifically related to Covid-19 – how certain countries managed the pandemic (and the earlier Ebola pandemics), lockdowns and precarious

healthcare systems, and/or the impact of the late arrival or shortage of the vaccine in others. Above all, however, the volume unites citizens of the Global South and the Global North through the many similar experiences encountered and endured during the Covid-19 pandemic, illustrating to what extent humour and social media (particularly when combined) have the power to connect and entertain people everywhere when the going gets tough.

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