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When Comedy Collides with Law: Satire, Surrealism and Society

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ABSTRACT

*This article examines satire as a form of expression that unsettles, exaggerates and distorts in order to expose social and political fault lines, while repeatedly colliding with legal authority. Moving from Jonathan Swift's deadpan brutality in 'A Modest Proposal' to the participatory excess of the 'Grand Theft Auto V' and the anarchic sketches of 'Monty Python's Flying Circus,' it traces how absurdity functions as both comic device and critical method. The discussion situates contemporary meme culture within this longer tradition, highlighting the interpretive strain placed on audiences in digital spaces shaped by decontextualization and outrage. Through concepts such as 'Poe's Law' and case studies including *Hustler Magazine v. Falwell*, the article explores when satire is mistaken for fact, or when it otherwise attracts legal sanction. It argues that satire's ambiguity is not a defect to be engineered away, but a necessary condition of its cultural and democratic force.*

KEYWORDS

Satire, Absurdity, Memes, Expression, Defamation

INTRODUCTION

The satirical humour inherent in memes serves as an effective and pragmatic response to entertainment, politics, education, and culture, capable of altering, excluding, and reversing discourse by exploring novel or alternative outlooks. Meme culture refers to the rapid creation and dissemination of hilarious or satirical images, videos, text, and other content by internet users. Memes are integral to digital culture and online communication, offering entertainment, goofy self-expression, and commentary on contemporary events. Memes have emerged as a significant element of mass culture, serving as artefacts of internet creativity that produce digital works conveying novel meanings and codes. Memes have gained popularity due to their simplicity in creation and dissemination, becoming ubiquitous across numerous social media

platforms. Memes employ humour, relatability, and visual-textual interaction to captivate audiences and communicate ideas successfully in the digital realm. Meme culture has significantly developed from a mere internet fad to a crucial component of digital culture. This is particularly applicable to humour and satire. Initially, memes gained popularity due to their capacity to evoke laughter and astonishment, often mirroring the tumult and ambiguity of modern symbolic creation and interchange. Memes frequently utilise visual components like emojis and characters to express emotions, sentiments, or cultural allusions, so enhancing their communicative efficacy. Characters, emojis, and narrative elements significantly influence the content and effectiveness of memes.¹

Sometimes complementing satire, absurdist or surreal comedy stands in contrast to traditional humour, which typically depends on logic or the intentional twisting of it. Instead, absurdism is rooted in a complete rejection of logic, embracing chaotic and unpredictable impulses.² Absurdist humour, which is closely connected to black comedy, nonsense, and incongruity, can broadly be described as humour that centres on the absence or rejection of meaning. The word absurd itself derives etymologically from a term referring to musical discord, 'ab surdo,' suggesting something out of tune or discordant. In comedy, as in nonsense and incongruity, the absurd stands in opposition to conventional or serious discourse. Because of this negative or oppositional quality, the absurd can take many forms, though it is helpful to distinguish between two principal strands. The first is the rational absurd, which involves the collapse of logical reasoning. It is exemplified by the technique of *reductio ad absurdum*, where an apparently logical argument is pursued to the point of contradiction or nonsense. The second is the existential absurd, which addresses the perceived meaninglessness of human existence, often associated with French existentialist thought and the post-war Theatre of the Absurd. While not all humour is absurd, and not all absurdity is humorous, both strands provide fertile ground for comedy: the rational absurd tending towards formal playfulness and nonsense, and the existential absurd towards darker, more unsettling humour.³ The renowned television

¹ Dita Ayu Lestari and others, 'Meme Culture: A Study of Humor and Satire in Digital Media' (2024) 4 *International Journal of Advanced Multidisciplinary Research and Studies* 134 <<https://www.multiresearchjournal.com/arclist/list-2024.4.4/id-3013>>.

² Joz Norris, 'Is Absurdist Comedy Pure Nonsense or Is There More to It?' (Psyche.co26 February 2024) <<https://psyche.co/ideas/is-absurdist-comedy-pure-nonsense-or-is-there-more-to-it>> accessed 13 February 2026.

³ Will Noonan, 'Absurdist Humour', *Encyclopedia of Humor Studies* (SAGE Publishing 2014) <https://sk.sagepub.com/ency/edvol/encyclopedia-of-humor-studies/chpt/arousal-theory-berlyne#_> accessed 13 February 2026.

series 'Monty Python's Flying Circus' was known for combining satire with surrealist elements.⁴

The internet, particularly social media, is eroding the complexity of satire. It signifies that jokes and humorous works are continuously being interpreted in the literal sense. Dr Adam James Smith, the co-director of the York Research Unit for the Study of Satire, believes that the commercial paradigm of social media is also undermining conventional satire. He asserts that the most effective method for gauging involvement on social media "is through conflict," so incentivising users to interpret content in bad faith and disseminate their perspectives. Nonetheless, the internet has fostered novel forms of satire, including satirical pranks.⁵

JONATHAN SWIFT - A KEY HISTORIC CASE STUDY IN SATIRE AND DRY, ABSTRACT HUMOUR

As per a feature by 'BBC Maestro,' dry humour is typically presented with an intentionally flat, unemotional tone, which is why it's often described as "deadpan". Its impact comes from the contrast between the serious delivery and the ridiculousness of the content. Common features include irony, bluntness, and a style that appears accidental but is actually carefully crafted. As a broad category, dry humour also overlaps with elements of sarcasm, satire, and wit.⁶

A feature article in 'JSTOR Daily' opined that Jonathan Swift's "A Modest Proposal for Preventing the Children of Poor People In Ireland from Being a Burden to their Parents or Country, and for Making Them Beneficial to the Public" may be the most notorious work of satire ever created.⁷ The essay, presenting itself as an economic treatise, advocates for alleviating poverty in Ireland by the slaughter of impoverished Irish children and their sale as food to affluent English landlords. Swift's plan is a scathing critique of England's legal and economic abuse of Ireland. The article is a satirical classic, combining logical reasoning with an absurd conclusion, and its title has become emblematic of any proposal that offers an effective yet ludicrous solution to a problem.⁸

⁴ Ian Wilkie, 'Very Silly Party Politics: Surrealism and Satire in the "Pythonesque"' (2019) 10 *Comedy Studies* 213.

⁵ Sam Nichols, 'How Economic Crises and the Internet Have Changed How We Consume Satire' ABC News (9 February 2023) <<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-02-10/internet-capitalism-post-truth-era-modern-satire/101941648>>.

⁶ 'A Quick Guide to the Different Types of Humour' (www.bbcmaestro.com 2022) <<https://www.bbcmaestro.com/blog/guide-to-the-different-types-of-humour>>.

⁷ Matthew Wills, 'What Was behind Jonathan Swift's Modest Proposal?' (JSTOR Daily 30 September 2025) <<https://daily.jstor.org/what-was-behind-jonathan-swifts-modest-proposal/>> accessed 14 December 2025.

⁸ 'A Modest Proposal | Satiric Essay by Swift', *Encyclopædia Britannica* (2019) <<https://www.britannica.com/topic/A-Modest-Proposal>>.

In his pamphlet, Swift uses irony and satire to raise problems about poverty and political indifference. The 'Pretense Theory of Irony' explains why Swift turns to irony, presenting absurd proposals in an earnest-sounding way to force readers to see the deeper social critique. Swift's satire isn't just outrageous content, rather, it's how the content is framed, detaching the narrator's tone from the moral horror of the idea, so the reader must interpret it as satire.⁹

THE 'GRAND THEFT AUTO' SERIES AS CONTEMPORARY ABSURDIST SATIRE

The content of the 'Grand Theft Auto' ('GTA') video-game series functions as a sharp social satire, exaggerating real-world behaviours and institutions to absurd levels in order to critique contemporary society. Academic analysis describes the game as employing "satirical play" to expose and mock aspects of American culture, including consumerism, social decay, and the myth of the 'American Dream,' with characters, radio broadcasts, and environmental cues all contributing to this participatory satire. Journalistic coverage further highlights how the game lampoons celebrity culture, dysfunctional governance, social media obsession, and the relentless pursuit of wealth, often through grotesque or absurd scenarios that magnify real-world excesses to the point of ridiculousness. Analysts emphasise that the absurdity is central to the satire: by presenting hyper-exaggerated versions of societal behaviours, the game encourages players to critically reflect on these cultural contradictions, rather than simply consume them as entertainment. Moreover, it's noted that GTA V's design allows players to participate in the satire, making their actions within the open world part of the critique, a form of interactive absurdist commentary on social and political norms.^{10 11 12}

SURREALIST HUMOUR AND ITS VALUE

While 'surrealism' originated as a distinct cultural movement with specific artistic beliefs, it also has a broader, more general meaning in

⁹ Hayk Danielyan, 'On the Pretence Theory of Irony in Jonathan Swift's "a Modest Proposal"' (2020) 24 *Foreign Languages in Higher Education* 21
<https://www.researchgate.net/publication/369487621_ON_THE_PRETENSE_THEORY_OF_IRONY_IN_JONATHAN_SWIFT'S_A_MODEST_PROPOSAL> accessed 14 December 2025.

¹⁰ John Wills, "'Ain't the American Dream Grand": Satirical Play in Rockstar's Grand Theft Auto V' (2021) 16 *European Journal of American Studies*.

¹¹ 'How GTA V Uses Humor to Address Real-World Issues' (CGMagazine 30 May 2025)
<<https://www.cgmagazine.com/articles/gta-v-humor-address-world-issues/>> accessed 1 February 2026.

¹² Barbara Jouvenaer, 'The Satirical Message of Grand Theft Auto V: A Critique on Contemporary American Society' (Radboud University 2017)
<<http://theses.uibn.ru.nl/handle/123456789/4770>> accessed 1 February 2026.

everyday contexts. According to André Breton, surrealism involves thought that flows freely without rational control, embracing the power of dreams and playful, disinterested thinking. Similar principles appear in everyday conversational humour, where conventional expectations are often subverted to make interactions more engaging or enjoyable. Everyday speakers use imaginative, improvised rhetorical devices that defy strict logical rules, showing that surrealistic or absurd strategies are not limited to artists but can function as tools for argumentation, social interaction, or showcasing communicative skill.¹³ It relies on intentionally breaking the rules of cause and effect, creating actions and outcomes that defy logic. Representations of surreal humour often feature strange combinations, sharp incongruities, unexpected shifts, nonsensical scenarios, and elements of the absurd.¹⁴ Historically, surreal comedy appeared to possess a large following with the ‘Dadaist’ movement in Germany.¹⁵

Professor Shun-Liang Chao analyses how Surrealist humour operates not merely as wit or stylistic play, but as a way of approaching life ethically. At first glance, morality appears incompatible with Surrealism, since André Breton defines the movement in terms of psychic automatism - a supposedly disinterested flow of thought freed from aesthetic and moral constraints. Yet Surrealism can be seen as the only major Modernist movement to cultivate a powerful ethical impulse: a desire to transform existence by releasing the mind from the grip of bourgeois ideology. Humour becomes the principal means through which Surrealists, including Breton, Benjamin Péret, Victor Brauner, Salvador Dalí, and Man Ray, attempt to secure this psychic emancipation. By infusing their writing and imagery with comic distortion, they deploy what might be called “pseudo-metaphor”: an extreme variety of nonsense arising from accidental or partial resemblances. This mode of association echoes early childhood cognition, generating exuberant chains of identification. Through such verbal and visual strategies, Surrealist pseudo-metaphor dissolves conventional meaning in favour of absurdity and laughter, overturning rational order, dismantling hierarchy, and privileging childlike

¹³ Eleni Kapogianni, ‘Irony via “Surrealism” in M. Dynel (Ed.) *the Pragmatics of Humour across Discourse Domains*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins: 51-68. (2011) (Academia.edu 7 February 2013)

<https://www.academia.edu/2533125/Irony_via_surrealism_In_M_Dynel_ed_The_Pragmatics_of_Humour_Across_Discourse_Domains_Amsterdam_John_Benjamins_51_68_2011_> accessed 13 February 2026.

¹⁴ Peter Stockwell, *The Language of Surrealism* (MacMillan Education UK 2017).

¹⁵ ‘Where Does British Humour Come From?’ (BBC Bitesize)

<<https://www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize/articles/zfhpmfr>> accessed 13 February 2026.

perception over adult logic.¹⁶ Surrealist theatre, for example, utilises dark humour and absurdity to critique societal conventions and express discontent with traditional narrative structures and logic. This would appear to place surreal humour as a culturally useful tool for social commentary.¹⁷

For example, the ‘Monty Python’ comedy group, comprising personalities such as John Cleese, famously achieved an exceptionally bold and inventive brand of comedy, representing to some the pinnacle of surreal humour.¹⁸ The movie ‘Monty Python and the Holy Grail’ has been described as a comic revolution. It reshaped the possibilities of humour in narrative cinema, blending historical parody with absurdist sketches, self-referential commentary, and inspired slapstick. Its modest budget, and the deliberately makeshift sets and effects that came with it, became integral to the comedy, playfully undermining expectations of what a grand epic ought to resemble. Beneath the laughter, ‘Holy Grail’ stands as an excellent example of satire.¹⁹

In recent years, surreal humour has become very popular in the format of ‘memes’ on the internet.²⁰ In 2019, a feature article quipped that humour had become “horrifyingly absurd.”²¹ Gen Z in particular have become strongly associated with the creation and consumption of surreal humour, with comparison made to the Dadaist art movement.²² ²³ Gen Z’s humour has been described as “distinguished for its rich

¹⁶ Shun Chao, “‘A Tomato Is Also a Child’s Balloon’” [2018] Routledge eBooks 194 <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/327100386_A_tomato_is_also_a_child%27s_balloon_Surrealist_Humour_as_a_Moral_Attitude> accessed 24 March 2025.

¹⁷ Tania Neofytou, ‘Humour in Surrealist Theatre’ (2020) 10 *Journal of Literature and Art Studies* <<https://www.davidpublisher.org/Public/uploads/Contribute/5f18efe3bfe6f.pdf>> accessed 4 March 2021.

¹⁸ Fiona Sturges, ‘John Cleese Should Stop Moaning. Comedy Has Moved on from the Pythons’ (*The Guardian* August 2018) <<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/aug/01/to-comedy-monty-python-hannah-gadsby>> accessed 13 February 2026.

¹⁹ David Horn, ‘Exploring the Absurd Genius of Monty Python and the Holy Grail’ (*Aoide Magazine* 24 February 2025) <<https://aoidemagazine.com/exploring-the-absurd-genius-of-monty-python-and-the-holy-grail/>> accessed 13 February 2026.

²⁰ Louise Matsakis, ‘Surreal Memes Are the Last Escape the Internet Has’ (*VICE* July 2017) <<https://www.vice.com/en/article/surreal-memes-are-the-last-escape-the-internet-has/>> accessed 13 February 2026.

²¹ Rachel Aroesti, “‘Horrifyingly Absurd’: How Did Millennial Comedy Get so Surreal?” (*The Guardian* 13 August 2019) <<https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2019/aug/13/how-did-millennial-comedy-get-so-surreal>> accessed 13 February 2026.

²² Matt Sorce, ‘The Absurdist behind Gen Z Humor’ (*The Loyola Phoenix* 6 December 2023) <<https://loyolaphoenix.com/2023/12/the-absurdist-behind-gen-z-humor/>> accessed 13 February 2026.

²³ Elise Sanders, ‘Gen Z Humor Is the New Dadaist Movement’ (*Whitman Wire* 5 March 2020) <<https://whitmanwire.com/opinion/2020/03/05/gen-z-humor-is-the-new-dadaist-movement/>> accessed 13 February 2026.

absurdism.”²⁴ Surrealist works can also be seen as imaginative and playful investigations into the nature of reality.²⁵

POE’S LAW

Nathan Poe (apparently unrelated to Edgar Allan Poe) is the originator of "Poe's Law." It asserts that extreme parody or satire online may be interpreted literally by certain people unless there is a distinct indication of the author's comedic aim. The situation commenced when several users on a religious online forum interpreted a spoof of fundamentalism literally, eliciting either vehement outrage or genuine concurrence. To avert such misunderstandings, it was proposed that a conspicuous smiley face emoji be incorporated to indicate the author's funny intent. Nathan Poe's generalisation ultimately developed into "Poe's Law." Poe's Law was subsequently broadened to encompass all additional scenarios. Written material on the internet, devoid of vocal inflections, facial expressions, and body language characteristic of typical dialogue, cannot easily convey irony or mockery. The implementation of emoticons was attempted but yielded minimal impact.²⁶ Poe's Law also possesses a contrary interpretation, indicating that non-fundamentalists frequently misinterpret genuine presentations of fundamentalist views as satire.²⁷ On the topic of Poe's Law in 'The World Made Meme: Public Conversations and Participatory Media,' it is outlined that "when content and form are so grounded in ironic critique, communicative function becomes ambiguous."²⁸

There have been multiple instances where spoof 'news' articles from the satirical website 'The Onion,' containing absurdist and abstract comedic content, have been taken seriously.²⁹

²⁴ *Mattea Gallaway, 'Gen Z's Humor Will Only Get More Absurd' (BurntXOrange2024)* <<https://burntxorange.com/48662/voice/gen-zs-humor-will-only-get-more-absurd/>> accessed 13 February 2026.

²⁵ *Tom Cochrane, 'No Hugging, No Learning: The Limitations of Humour' (2017) 57 The British Journal of Aesthetics 51.*

²⁶ *Heyward Ehrlich, 'Poe in Cyberspace: Poe's Law' (2025) 26 The Edgar Allan Poe Review 80* <<https://scholarlypublishingcollective.org/psup/edgar-allan-poe/article-abstract/26/1/80/401598/Poe-in-Cyberspace-Poe-s-Law?redirectedFrom=fulltext>> accessed 14 December 2025.

²⁷ *Tom Chivers, 'Internet Rules and Laws: The Top 10, from Godwin to Poe' (The Telegraph 23 October 2009)* <<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/technology/news/6408927/Internet-rules-and-laws-the-top-10-from-Godwin-to-Poe.html>> accessed 14 December 2025.

²⁸ *Ryan Milner, The World Made Meme: Public Conversations and Participatory Media (MIT Press 2016).*

²⁹ *'All the Times People Were Fooled by the Onion' (ABC News 2015)* <<https://abcnews.go.com/International/times-people-fooled-onion/story>> accessed 1 February 2026.

RECOGNISING CONTENT AS SATIRE

Satire is proposed as a 'discursive practice' that predominantly employs irony to critique its subjects. Research on irony perception indicates that the probability of seeing irony as sarcastic rather than literal is contingent upon various contextual circumstances, including the speaker's gender, profession, and in-group affiliation. The aspect of in-group status becomes particularly pertinent as data indicates that political affiliation may affect how recipients perceive satirical news, determining whether they understand it as ironically intended or believe it conveys the satirist's authentic viewpoint.³⁰ Satire, being a subtle form of figurative discourse, remains relatively understudied, however, the cognitive ability to recognise, understand, and appreciate the humour in satire has been linked to higher levels of intellect.³¹ Work in cognitive psychology emphasises that satire and irony are forms of humour that involve cognitive complexity - distinguishing intended insincerity and figurative meaning from literal statements requires executive functions and reflective processing, which aligns with the role of reasoning ability in figurative language comprehension.³²

Satire is a prevalent style of comedic social commentary often analysed through Kenneth Burke's 'comic frame' theory. The humour and surprising juxtaposition of incongruous materials can alleviate tension surrounding sensitive problems, rendering new perspectives more accessible; yet, audience reactions to satire can vary significantly, encompassing both highly negative and highly positive responses. Instructing on satire should encompass an examination of rhetorical theory and audience reception analysis to adequately equip students as both consumers and creators of satire. Satire, with its intricate and multifaceted pedagogy, can serve as a significant element in the arsenal of the twenty-first-century rhetoric.³³

Humour can increase the credibility of satirical messages. Interpreting satire is cognitively demanding, as it depends on both familiarity with

³⁰ Britta C Brugman and others, 'Satirical News from Left to Right: Discursive Integration in Written Online Satire' (2020) 23 *Journalism*.

³¹ Stephen Skalicky, 'Investigating Satirical Discourse Processing and Comprehension: The Role of Cognitive, Demographic, and Pragmatic Features' (2019) 11 *Language and Cognition* 499 <<https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/language-and-cognition/article/abs/investigating-satirical-discourse-processing-and-comprehension-the-role-of-cognitive-demographic-and-pragmatic-features/E884A5BC33201CC6B074ED248D5E09C4>> accessed 2 November 2021.

³² Dannagal Goldthwaite Young, 'The Psychology of Satire', *Irony and Outrage: The Polarized Landscape of Rage, Fear, and Laughter in the United States* (Oxford University Press 2019) <<https://academic.oup.com/book/37376/chapter-abstract/331361610>> accessed 1 February 2026.

³³ Jane Fife, 'Peeling "the Onion": Satire and the Complexity of Audience Response' (2016) 35 *Rhetoric Review* 322 <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/43940530>>.

context and a willingness to engage in effortful reasoning. Audiences who lack knowledge of the events or topics being referenced, or who are disinclined to resolve apparent contradictions, are less likely to recognise the nature of something as being satirical. Even when effort is applied, satire is often deliberately ambiguous, allowing readers to draw selective interpretations that may align with their personal outlooks. The likelihood of recognising satire also depends on how it is presented. Text-based satirical news articles contain fewer explicit cues signalling humour than other satirical formats. In contrast, satirical news videos frequently include markers such as audience laughter that highlight the joke, cues that are typically absent from written articles. Compared with other types of content, satire relies more heavily on exaggerated and implausible claims. These distortions are often so extreme that they signal their own falsity - for instance, joke reports that Joe Biden spoke in tongues at a Pentecostal campaign event or that Donald Trump assaulted a baby after mistaking it for an Antifa supporter, both of which appeared in satirical news stories during the 2020 U.S. presidential election. The sheer absurdity of such assertions likely leads readers to infer that they are not meant to be taken literally.³⁴

Notably, during the 2020 U.S. Presidential campaign, Donald Trump appeared to have mistaken such a work for reality, and posted a link on Twitter to a satirical piece from the comedic website 'The Babylon Bee,' suggesting that the platform's CEO had personally taken the site offline to suppress damaging reports about Joe Biden. The president shared the article with his 87 million followers, adding the comment: "Wow, this has never been done in history. This includes his really bad interview last night. Why is Twitter doing this. Bringing more attention to Sleepy Joe & Big T." The satirical article Trump shared had humorously claimed that, upon encountering negative coverage of Democratic presidential nominee Joe Biden, Twitter CEO Jack Dorsey shattered a glass case in his office labeled "Break In Case Of Bad Publicity For Democrats." The case contained a sledgehammer specifically intended for destroying Twitter's servers. The article humorously continues that Dorsey then used the sledgehammer, assisted by a robot programmed to wield it, to demolish as many computers as possible. It concludes by stating that the robot, after overhearing Twitter staff discussing critical theory, "got woke" and turned its attacks on all "cis white males." At the time, 'The Babylon Bee' had already wittingly referred to itself on Twitter as "Fake news you can trust" and, on its website, described itself as "the world's best satire site."³⁵

³⁴ Shannon H Poulsen, Robert M Bond and R Kelly Garrett, 'Comparing Beliefs in Falsehoods Based on Satiric and Non-Satiric News' (2023) 18 PLOS ONE.

³⁵ Jack Hillcox, 'Donald Trump Shares Link to Satirical Article Claiming Twitter Was Shut down to Slow Spread of Negative Stories about Joe Biden' (Sky News 16 October 2020)

There is existing academic research showing that audiences often take satirical or ironic comedy at face value online, leading to swift criticism, outrage, or misattribution of intent, often amplified by social media. These discussions look at how digital audiences react to de-contextualised comedy, sometimes attacking comedians or their material without engaging with its intended satirical layer.³⁶

An article by Professor James Joyner discusses how, in today's fragmented media environment, many people struggle to distinguish satirical news from real news. Studies by Ohio State researchers found that satirical sites like 'The Babylon Bee' and 'The Onion' are often mistaken for factual reporting, with readers' political leanings influencing which satire they believe. For example, Republicans were more likely to believe false claims from 'The Babylon Bee,' while Democrats were somewhat misled by 'The Onion.' Satire's complexity contributes to the problem: it requires interpretation, awareness of political context, and recognition of exaggeration, which can backfire if audiences misread the intended target or meaning. Historical examples, like Stephen Colbert's show (where he famously performed a parodic conservative pundit persona), Harry Enfield's 'Loadsamoney,' and Archie Bunker - show that satire can be misperceived and even embraced by the group it critiques. This is called the "paradox of satire," where engagement with humour reduces critical consideration of the message. The researchers suggest a solution, which is clearly labelling satirical content as satire. Their experiments showed that such labelling decreases belief in, sharing of, and perceived credibility of satirical posts. Platforms like 'Google News' have adopted this approach for certain satirical content. In short, while satire can educate and entertain, its ambiguity makes it easy to misinterpret, and explicit labelling helps audiences navigate the line between comedy and news.³⁷

LEGAL SUPPRESSION - IT'S NO LAUGHING MATTER

Although not a simple "misinterpretation," news coverage has documented that comedians and satirical artists in the Middle East in recent years have faced serious state-level legal repercussions for work

<https://news.sky.com/story/donald-trump-shares-link-to-satirical-article-claiming-twitter-was-shut-down-to-slow-spread-of-negative-stories-about-joe-biden-12105615> accessed 1 February 2026.

³⁶ Isabel Vincent, "I Don't Think That's Very Funny": Scrutiny of Comedy in the Digital Age in Daniel Trottier, Rashid Gabdulhakov and Qian Huang (eds), *Introducing Vigilant Audiences* (Open Book Publishers 2020)

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/344459425_%27I_don%27t_think_that%27s_very_funny%27_Scrutiny_of_Comedy_in_the_Digital_Age accessed 1 February 2026.

³⁷ James Joyner, 'Americans Can't Distinguish Satire from Reality' (*Outside the Beltway* 18 August 2019) <https://outsidethebeltway.com/americans-cant-distinguish-satire-from-reality/> accessed 1 February 2026.

seen as poking fun at public order or societal norms, which might be perceived literally by authorities or those opposed to satire.³⁸

However, there have also been notable historical moves to suppress satirical comedy in the 'western' world. During the eighteenth century, satirical writing and performance were repeatedly brought into conflict with systems of censorship, revealing persistent struggles between expressive liberty and state control. Measures in Great Britain, such as the 1712 Stamp Act, which used taxation to curb the spread of satirical print, the 1737 Licensing Act, which placed strict limits on the theatre, and George III's 1787 'Royal Proclamation for the Encouragement of Piety and Virtue,' intended to restrain satire deemed morally or politically subversive, all demonstrate the extent to which satire was regarded as a potent and potentially destabilising force. Rather than diminishing its importance, these regulatory efforts emphasise satire's capacity to shape public attitudes, positioning it as a frequent point of contention in wider debates over the boundaries of free expression. The introduction of the Licensing Act in 1737 established Britain's first official framework for regulating the theatre. By placing dramatic performance under direct government supervision, it curtailed the expression of dissenting perspectives on the stage. The legislation authorised state intervention in theatrical production, including the censorship of scripts, the suppression of performances, and the exclusion of certain playwrights. This system of control endured for more than two centuries, remaining in effect until it was finally abolished in 1968. One notable satirical engraving, which is titled 'Reformation - or the Wonderful Effects of a Proclamation!!!' ridicules King George III's 1787 'Royal Proclamation for the Encouragement of Piety and Virtue.' Issued with the intention of promoting moral reform, the proclamation called on the public to embrace respectable behaviour and reject forms of entertainment considered improper. The print spoofs the contradiction inherent in a monarch seeking to impose moral virtue through official decree, while simultaneously attempting to silence satire's capacity for social and political critique.³⁹

In the 1970s, Monty Python's comedy movie 'Life of Brian' generated intense controversy upon its release, largely because critics perceived it as mocking religion, particularly Christianity, and accused it of blasphemy. Religious leaders, moral campaigners, and some local

³⁸ Hannah Jane Parkinson, "Amoral, Evil": Vitriolic Backlash Builds against Comics Who Played Riyadh Festival (The Guardian 9 October 2025)
<<https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2025/oct/09/backlash-builds-against-comics-who-played-riyadh-comedy-festival>> accessed 1 February 2026.

³⁹ 'Satire and Censorship: The Art of Mockery: Satire and Power in the 18th Century · Digital Histories (Kennesaw.edu 2025)
<<https://digitalhistories.kennesaw.edu/exhibits/show/theartofmockery/satireandcensorship>> accessed 3 February 2026.

councils in countries like the UK, Ireland, and Norway called for bans, leading to restricted screenings and public protests. Much of the backlash arose from a literal reading of the film: audiences often interpreted its satire as a direct attack on sacred figures, rather than recognising its broader commentary. Beyond religion, the film is a sharp critique of political and social group mentalities. It lampoons blind adherence to authority, factionalism, and the absurdity of ideological squabbles, portraying followers of different revolutionary sects as more concerned with rivalries than with reason or moral purpose. Through this lens, the Monty Python team highlights how humans can be easily manipulated, how social movements often devolve into petty conflicts, and how dogmatic thinking can distort justice and common sense. Decades later, 'Life of Brian' remains a landmark in satirical cinema, illustrating both the power of comedy to challenge entrenched social and political behaviours and the risks that arise when satire is misread or taken literally, provoking moral panic and censorship.^{40 41 42 43}

As recounted by the 'First Amendment Watch' initiative of New York University's Arthur L. Carter Journalism Institute, the Supreme Court's key decision in *Hustler Magazine v. Falwell* (1988)⁴⁴ strongly affirmed First Amendment protection for satire aimed at public figures. The case arose after *Hustler* published a crude parody portraying televangelist Jerry Falwell in a fictional and offensive scenario. Although Falwell acknowledged the piece was not meant to be taken literally and failed in his libel claim, he argued it intentionally caused him emotional distress. The Court unanimously rejected this argument, ruling that public figures cannot recover damages for intentional infliction of emotional distress unless they meet the strict standards of a libel claim - namely, proving a false statement of fact made with actual malice. The justices emphasised that satire and parody often cause offence by design and that allowing liability based on "outrageousness" would give juries too much subjective power to punish disliked speech. The ruling underscored the importance of protecting harsh, offensive, and emotionally distressing satire as part of the free exchange of ideas, recognising that such

⁴⁰ 'Life of Brian Would Be Risky Now, Says Terry Jones' (*The Guardian* 10 October 2011) <<https://www.theguardian.com/film/2011/oct/10/life-of-brian-terry-jones>> accessed 1 February 2026.

⁴¹ Philip Almond, 'After 40 Years, Life of Brian Is Still Offensive - but for Very Different Reasons' (*www.abc.net.au* 15 April 2019) <<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-04-16/life-of-brian-by-monty-python-is-40/11004394>> accessed 1 February 2026.

⁴² Laura Basu, 'Who Can Take a Joke? Life of Brian, Four Lions, and Religious "Humour Scandals"' (2014) 4 *Relegere: Studies in Religion and Reception*.

⁴³ Donald Clarke, 'An Awful Dump: The Ireland That Banned Monty Python's Life of Brian' (*The Irish Times* 2019) <<https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/film/an-awful-dump-the-ireland-that-banned-monty-python-s-life-of-brian-1.3807270>> accessed 1 February 2026.

⁴⁴ 485 U.S. 46 (1988)

expression plays a vital role in political and social commentary and must remain shielded from legal retaliation by public figures.⁴⁵

Another comedian known for producing absurdist satire is Sacha Baron Cohen.⁴⁶ Sacha Baron Cohen's films and programmes, particularly those featuring characters like Ali G, Borat and Bruno, have repeatedly sparked legal disputes. Following the release of 'Borat' in 2006, several people who appeared in the film without fully understanding the joke attempted to take civil legal action. They pursued financial compensation and, in some cases, tried to block the film from being shown altogether, through an injunction. Ultimately, the vast majority of these cases were unsuccessful.⁴⁷ As documented by the Global Freedom of Expression project at Columbia University, the US District Court in 2021 dismissed all claims brought by Judge Roy Moore and his wife, Kayla Moore,⁴⁸ against Sacha Baron Cohen and the producers of 'Who Is America?.' Judge Moore's claims were barred by a consent agreement he had signed before the interview, while Kayla Moore's claims were rejected on First Amendment grounds. The case arose from a 2018 satirical interview in which Cohen, in character, used a fictional device supposedly capable of detecting sex offenders, indirectly referencing widely reported sexual misconduct allegations against Judge Moore during his 2017 Senate campaign. The court held that the segment constituted political satire addressing matters of public concern and could not reasonably be interpreted as making factual assertions about Judge Moore. Drawing on established Supreme Court precedent, the court emphasised that satire, parody, and rhetorical hyperbole are protected forms of expression, particularly when commenting on public figures and contemporary political controversies. Given Cohen's well-known comedic style and the overtly absurd nature of the segment, the court found it "abundantly clear" that the interview was intended as humour, rather than a statement of fact. As a result, the court granted summary judgment for the defendants and dismissed all claims with prejudice.⁴⁹

⁴⁵ 'Emotional Distress: "Outrageousness" Has an Inherent Subjectiveness' (First Amendment Watch - New York University 11 October 2017) <<https://firstamendmentwatch.org/emotional-distress/>> accessed 3 February 2026.

⁴⁶ Sandra Hall, 'Likeable Cohen Misses His Marque' (The Sydney Morning Herald 16 May 2012) <<https://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/movies/likeable-cohen-misses-his-marque-20120516-1yqza.html>> accessed 3 February 2026.

⁴⁷ Zachary Elsea, 'Do Sacha Baron Cohen's Targets Have a Shot at Winning a Lawsuit?' (The Hollywood Reporter 18 July 2018) <<https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/business/business-news/do-sacha-baron-cohens-targets-have-a-shot-at-winning-a-lawsuit-1128129/>> accessed 3 February 2026.

⁴⁸ 19 Civ. 4977 (JPC)

⁴⁹ 'Roy and Kayla Moore v. Sacha Baron Cohen - Global Freedom of Expression' (Global Freedom of Expression - Columbia University 30 October 2024) <<https://globalfreedomofexpression.columbia.edu/cases/roy-and-kayla-moore-v-sacha-baron-cohen/>> accessed 3 February 2026.

Notably, in 2016, German satirist Jan Böhmermann ignited a major public debate over free speech and the limits of satire when he recited a deliberately provocative poem about Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan on his late-night show 'Neo Magazin Royale' - a piece that included explicit and exaggerated allegations designed to challenge Germany's rarely used 'lèse-majesté' law against insulting foreign heads of state. The broadcast prompted formal diplomatic pressure from Turkey, which filed a criminal complaint and requested German authorities prosecute Böhmermann under Section 103 of the German penal code, a move that placed Chancellor Angela Merkel in a difficult position as she sought to balance diplomatic relations with Ankara and constitutional protections for artistic freedom. German prosecutors launched an investigation and the poem was removed from the broadcaster's online archives, while critics within Germany both defended and attacked Böhmermann's approach: some argued his work was a crucial test of satire's boundaries and a critique of Erdoğan's human-rights record, whereas others saw it as abusive and offensive. A regional court in Hamburg subsequently issued an injunction banning certain passages deemed libellous, though it acknowledged the satirical elements of other parts, and prosecutors later dropped the criminal case on the grounds that the exaggerated nature of the poem meant no punishable offence could be clearly established. The affair sparked extensive discussion in German and international media about how far satire can go, the relevance of outdated criminal statutes, and the tension between diplomatic sensitivity and free-expression norms in democratic societies.^{50 51 52}

At the level of the European Court, this calls for a stringent proportionality analysis of each individual instance of satire, rather than affording national authorities a broad margin of appreciation - an approach that tends to favour the maintenance of restrictions. The Court's definition of satire in *Vereinigung Bildender Künstler (VBK) v Austria*⁵³ was insufficient to establish satire as a clearly distinct form of expression deserving heightened protection. In addition, the Court's concerning stance on controversial speech, whereby offence to personal feelings may justify limitations, leaves satirical expression in a vulnerable position. An academic piece in University College London's 'Journal of

⁵⁰ 'German Prosecutors Probe TV Satirist Who "Insulted" Turkey's Erdoğan' (Euronews 11 April 2016) <<https://www.euronews.com/2016/04/11/german-prosecutors-probe-to-satirist-who-insulted-turkey-s-erdogan>> accessed 1 February 2026.

⁵¹ 'ZDF: Böhmermann Poem "Legally Permissible"' (dw.com 14 April 2016) <<https://www.dw.com/en/german-broadcaster-zdf-defends-b%C3%B6hmermann-satire-as-legally-permissible/a-19189902>> accessed 1 February 2026.

⁵² 'Germany OKs Criminal Probe over TV Comic's Erdoğan Satire' (News24 2016) <<https://www.news24.com/germany-oks-criminal-probe-over-to-comics-erdogan-satire-20160415>> accessed 1 February 2026.

⁵³ *Vereinigung Bildender Künstler v. Austria (dec.)* - 68354/01

Law and Jurisprudence' addresses that shortcoming by developing a more coherent justification for safeguarding satire than that articulated in *VBK*, while also proposing a structured and rigorous proportionality framework to assess restrictions, ensuring that any exceptions remain narrow and carefully reasoned.⁵⁴

CONCLUSION

Satire has long occupied an uneasy position at the intersection of humour, politics, and law. From Jonathan Swift's deadpan absurdity to contemporary meme culture and interactive satire in video games, its power rests precisely in its capacity to exaggerate, distort, and provoke reflection through implausibility and absurdity. Yet, as this article has shown, the digital environment has intensified satire's inherent ambiguity. Platforms that reward outrage and de-contextualised sharing, combined with the absence of tonal cues online, have made misinterpretation not the exception but an increasingly common outcome. Poe's Law captures this dilemma succinctly: satire that succeeds too well at mimicking reality risks being read literally, sometimes with significant social or legal consequences. Legal responses to satire reveal a persistent tension between protecting expressive freedom and responding to offence or perceived harm. Historical efforts to suppress satire, whether through censorship of the eighteenth-century stage or moral panic surrounding works such as 'Life of Brian,' underscore how frequently satire is treated as destabilising rather than discursive. Modern jurisprudence, particularly in the United States, has taken a more robust stance in defence of satirical expression, recognising that offence and emotional discomfort are often essential to satire's function. Cases involving *Hustler Magazine* and Sacha Baron Cohen reaffirm that exaggerated, implausible, and clearly comedic speech about public figures must remain legally protected if democratic debate is to remain open.

Ultimately, satire's value sits in its discomfort. While clearer labelling and contextual cues may reduce misinterpretation, excessive legal restraint risks flattening satire into softer parody. The law must therefore tolerate ambiguity and offence, acknowledging that satire's misreadings are not a flaw to be eliminated, but a by-product of a form of expression central to comedy, as well as cultural and political critique.

⁵⁴ Lewis George Reed, "Taking Jokes Seriously": Establishing a Normative Place for Satire within the Freedom of Expression Analysis of the European Court of Human Rights (2022) 11 *UCL Journal of Law and Jurisprudence*.

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