The “Humoralist” as Journalistic Jammer: *Zondag met Lubach* and the Discursive Construction of Investigative Comedy

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**ABSTRACT**

This study contributes to ongoing discussions on the societal role of satire as a platform for public debate. To this end, we analysed the metajournalistic discourse surrounding the Dutch television news satire show *Zondag met Lubach* to assess how it has been received and discussed in the Dutch media landscape. Through an analysis of 64 media appearances (2014–2020) with the host and staff members of the show, we zoom in on how discursive exchanges between *Zondag met Lubach* and media professionals reflect and shape understandings of the journalistic. Thereby, we distinguish three phases of identity construction for the show. Our findings reveal how *Zondag met Lubach* entered the Dutch media landscape as a comedic non-journalistic outsider, but has gradually become legitimated as a quasi-insider to the journalistic field, embodying the nuanced role of *investigative comedy*. We conclude by discussing how the concept of *investigative comedy* elicits reflection on the epistemic authority of novel incantations of journalistic storytelling, and how it contributes to the expansion of conventional assumptions among satirists and media professionals about what journalism can or should be.

The news satire show *Zondag Met Lubach* (ZML) debuted on the Dutch public broadcaster VPRO in November 2014. Since its release, ZML garnered both popular success and critical acclaim, resulting in up to an average of two million views per episode (n.b. on a population of only 17 million) and numerous television awards. Two years after its release, the show won the prestigious Dutch 2016 *Silver Nipkow Disc* award after a jury of journalists and media critics dubbed ZML as “a unique and successful combination of entertainment and investigative journalism [and] an important interpreter of the news” (Nipkowschijf 2016), placing it square on the intersection between comedy, journalism, and broadcast news.

ZML’s hybrid mix of comedy and news is part of a broader boom in the genre of televised political satire, taking off in the first decade of the twenty-first century—hallmarked by noteworthy forerunner *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* (*TDS*; 1999–2015, see, e.g., Baym 2005; Grey, Jones, and Thompson 2009)—and gathering international momentum in following years (Baym and Jones 2012). Nonetheless, ZML stands out in the Netherlands...
because of its distinct long-form satirical format, which covers societal issues through a well-researched comedic narrative. Boasting a team of both professional comedic writers and researchers, the show joins other political comedy formats—most closely *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver* (for a detailed description of *ZML*, see Nieuwenhuis 2018)—which on a weekly basis offer a form of investigative reporting on topics that are often not in the spotlight of the current news cycle (Davisson and Donovan 2019).

Notwithstanding the many accolades and popular appraisal, *ZML* has proven hard to classify as its multiple hybridity breaches genre boundaries for both journalistic and comedic discourses. This paper argues that *ZML*—by embodying elements of both investigative journalism and scripted television comedy—has fuelled public discussion on where to place shows like this within the broader media ecology and, in doing so, functioned as a site for reflection on the boundaries of legacy journalism itself. In this study, we assess how perceptions on journalistic and comedic identity are negotiated in interviews with staff of *ZML* conducted by members of the journalistic community. Bringing together theoretical reflections on the societal role of journalism and the inherent ambiguity of humour, our study explores the interplay of processes of identity construction within the metajournalistic discourse (Carlson 2016) surrounding the reception of *ZML* in the Dutch media landscape.

To this end, we analysed 64 media appearances of the show’s host and staff members. As it is within discourse that journalistic culture and identity is reproduced and contested (Hanitzsch and Vos 2017), the analysis of discursive articulations surrounding *ZML* sheds light on the place that the show ultimately takes up in the Dutch media landscape. By analysing the discourse surrounding *ZML*, this article not only broadens the literature’s geographical scope, but also adds to earlier theoretical insights about the news satire genre—and how it could be understood. In doing so, we contribute to academic debate that intertwines the proliferation of news satire and journalism’s problematized epistemic authority by identifying investigative comedy as one specific subgenre within the expanding landscape of television news satire shows. We trace investigative comedy and its attributions within the discourse surrounding *ZML* and discuss the implications it has for *ZML*’s evolving role within the Dutch media landscape.

**Mirror or Prism? Reflecting Journalism’s Many Faces**

Satire has been conceptualized as a mode of political discourse that interrogates societal issues and critiques power relations (Holbert 2013). Viewed as such, its aspirations are akin to professional journalism’s claims to capturing and narrativizing real-world events and portraying them as truthful interpretations of reality. Because satire recurrently parodies dominant societal discourses (Griffin 1994), many satirical phenomena also draw from recognizable patterns of journalistic style and practice collectively understood as an authoritative way of gathering and covering news.

Television news satire specifically is often a stylistic referent to broadcast news and implements similar visual tropes or argumentative techniques (Baym 2005). However, what distinguishes television news satire from “serious” broadcast news is, at least in definition, its mode of information delivery. By bringing together the performative aspects of news with the rhetorical and visual aspects of comedy, it opposes conventional journalistic ideals of an impartial, neutral and detached way of (re)presenting news issues,
and thereby takes up an adversarial relationship regarding the high-modern journalistic ethos organized around an ideal of achievable objectivity (Baym 2010).

As such, television news satire’s proclivity to the comedic and therefore subjective analysis of current affairs displays elements of a reflective style of journalism (Broersma 2010a; Harbers 2016). This style of journalism is characterized by an openly transparent and participatory search for truth as mediated by the subjectivity of its creators. In line with core tenets of literary journalism (Hartsock 1999), satire openly acknowledges the tentative nature of its coverage (Day 2011). Rather than bringing disembodied “news from nowhere” (Baym 2010, 2; Epstein 1973), news satire engages in a form of openly subjective storytelling that brings together facts with personal lived experience (Sims 1995) dedicated to facilitating democratic debate (Berning 2010). This in turn aligns television news satire with more opinionated strands of journalism and their distinct opposition against positivist epistemology (Steensen 2017). Its coverage is non-descriptive but interventional, and in a sense often solution- and public-oriented, corresponding to elements of the constructive journalism movement (Hermans and Drok 2018). Beyond its mode of delivery, certain strands of news satire openly draw on values and practices akin to investigative journalism. Stetka and Örnebring (2013) define investigative journalism as “sustained news coverage of moral and legal transgressions of persons in positions of power (...) that requires more time and resources than regular news reporting” (415). In terms of topic selection and topic coverage, this definition of investigative journalism resonates with the long-form, single-issue segments on politically-relevant topics that television news satire shows often produce.

A brief look at the topics covered by ZML in 2020, for example, shows episodes that deconstruct issues ranging from a local marketing company’s dubious regard for intellectual property to the Chinese oppression of the Uyghur population. Such segments often last between twelve and twenty minutes, reflecting long-form journalistic content (e.g., Boukes 2019) that manages to slow down the 24/7 news cycle in a similar vein as long-form investigative journalism. This allows satire shows to make sense of current affairs in a more slowed down and digestible fashion, thereby countering the disorienting “media torrent” of conventional news formats (Basu 2018, 252). Thus, ZML can be said to reflect slow journalism’s key goal of enacting “a critique of the limitations and dangers of the speed of much of the mainstream contemporary journalistic environment” (Le Masurier 2016, 439).

Licence to Laugh

On the other side of the satirical coin, news satire applies comedic framing to maximize humoristic output (Wiesman 2011). In contrast to regular news programmes, satirical news shows often blatantly acknowledge their pre-framed and scripted nature and, thereby, potentially add to the legitimacy of the host as an authentic purveyor of information (Tally 2011; Vraga et al. 2012). Furthermore, news satire’s humoristic delivery renders the genre an inherently polysemic form of news discourse. As Marsh (2018) stated, the comedian does not commit to the truth of what he says, but neither does he commit to speaking untruth either. By crafting a deliberately ambiguous space of comedic licence (Lockyer and Pickering 2010), news satire has the power to speak freely on certain topics that are avoided or difficult to address in non-humoruous modes
of communication (Richmond and Porpora 2018; Boukes and Hameleurs 2020). As such, it embodies the problem of ambiguity (Kuipers 2011) by implicitly contesting notions of the public sphere as a space where common ground is sought through rational debate and a minimalization of communicational misinterpretations.

What Petrović (2018) termed the politics of ambivalence can be used to operationalize news satire’s inherent humoristic ambivalence as politics, rather than merely a characteristic of political commentary: “the features of humour that are usually thought to diminish its political potential—its ambiguity, elusiveness, resistance to clear-cut interpretations and unpredictability of its effects [become] actual loci of its political relevance” (203). However, the idea that humour exists in a separate realm, free of real-world ramifications, falsely assumes the amoralist stance that satirists are never accountable for potential consequences of their actions (Carrol 2014). ZML seemingly overcomes this pitfall by, paradoxically, carefully balancing the roles of comedian and reporter in a form of comedic earnestness in which humour becomes a vehicle for a complex argument, rather than the goal in itself. Despite its occasional absurd humoristic style, the show addresses audiences in an explicitly didactic manner, likely rendering it hard to be misinterpreted by its audience (Boukes and Hameleurs 2020).

**Discursive Constructions of Journalistic Insiders/Outsiders**

Although news satire resides outside the boundaries of professional journalism, it can be argued that it nevertheless “reflects the socio-informative functions, identities, and roles of journalism” (Eldridge 2018, 858). Viewing journalism as subject to a plurality of interpretations implies that competing definitions of journalism exist and potentially interact.

Journalism scholars have focussed on multiple interpretations of its subject as a social practice. For instance, Zelizer (1993) proposed viewing journalists as members of an interpretative community who constitute meanings of journalism through shared discourse and collective interpretations. To this end, journalists engage in boundary work aimed at delineating the field of professional journalism and enlarging its institutional authority (Carlson and Lewis 2015). By drawing on a myriad of possible conceptions of journalism, journalistic practitioners shape their identities through processes of definitional control of a shared set of discursive understandings of what makes a journalist (Witschge and Harbers 2018, 110).

Correspondingly, satirists also actively sustain social boundaries between themselves and outsiders by differentiating the roles they perform from those associated with broadcast news and other satirical genres (Koivukoski and Ödmark 2020). In practice, news satire has been found to embody the roles of interrogator (Day 2011), interlocutor (Baym 2010), or even a form of comedic opinion news pundit (Brugman et al. 2021). This was not only found in the context of Western satire shows, but for example also in context with much less press freedom, such as Zimbabwe (Zirugo 2021).

News satirists themselves describe three specific roles that characterize their work (Ödmark and Harvard 2021): (i) the role of eye-opener—offering perspectives absent in mainstream public debate; (ii) the role of questioner—exposing hypocrisy and interrogating dominant ideas; and (iii) the role of reporter—functioning as agenda-setters through independent journalistic investigation (12). These three roles often characterize news
Satire in terms of its position in the public debate vis-à-vis perceived roles of professional journalism.

Similarly, among journalists a wide range of role conceptions exist about how they should fulfil their professional responsibilities (Patterson and Donsbach 1996). Traditionally, research distinguished four roles that journalists take up, although these are not mutually exclusive (Tandoc, Hellmueller, and Vos 2012; Weaver and Wilhoit 1996): (i) disseminator—getting objective facts to the public quickly; (ii) investigator—analyse problems, investigate claims; (iii) adversarial/watchdog—being critical of government, officials, and business; and (iv) populist mobilizer—motivating people to participate in civic activities. However, this list is not all-encompassing. More recent research also added infotainment—journalism addressing the audience as a spectator and centralized around personalization and emotions—to the list of journalistic role conceptions (Mellado et al. 2020), underlining the fluidity of the perceived continuum between journalism and political comedy.

Such reciprocal insider-outsider dynamics are fruitful sites to assess the intricate relationship between news satire and journalism. Emerging satirical phenomena as ZML, existing on the peripheries of the journalistic field, can foster normative debate on what is (and what is not) perceived as a legitimate epistemic form of journalistic storytelling.

The Framework of Metajournalistic Discourse

As Hanitzsch and Vos (2017) stated, it is within discourse that journalistic culture and identity are reproduced and contested by discursively articulating and enforcing particular roles (8). To assess which role ZML is ascribed within the Dutch media landscape and how it evolved over time, we draw on Carlson’s (2016) framework of metajournalistic discourse.

Metajournalistic discourse can be seen as a discursive field which “connects the creation and circulation of journalism’s sociocultural meanings to the social practices surrounding news production and consumption” (Carlson 2016, 350). Furthermore, metajournalistic discourse grasps how multiple actors “inside and outside of journalism compete to construct, reiterate, and even challenge the boundaries of acceptable journalistic practices” (Carlson 2016, 349).

Altogether, this assumes that journalism’s definitions are subject to a relational dynamic through which different practitioners seek to establish legitimacy, as journalists alone cannot coerce acceptance of their preferred meanings. In other words, an analysis of metajournalistic discourse surrounding ZML provides insights into whether and how the show has gained a place within the broader journalistic ecology (Perreault and Vos 2020). As parodic performers of news, satirists are embedded in their subject, and as a result, they are at least indirectly defined by journalism’s traditions (Borden and Tew 2007). Therefore, such a framework allows us to analyse how discursive roles concerning journalism, comedy and satire are negotiated within the discourse surrounding ZML.

Previous studies on the discursive construction of news satire have exclusively focused on the figure of Jon Stewart and The Daily Show, limiting their results to a very specific character from the U.S. context of almost a decade ago (Carlson and Peifer 2013; Feldman 2007; Tenenboim-Weinblatt 2009). Their findings revealed how news satire
functioned as “outside critique” which “challenges journalists to revisit the standards and assumptions of their professional practice” (Feldman 2007, 407). Tenenboim-Weinblatt (2009) focussed on the discursive transition of Jon Stewart within the journalistic community from late-night comedian to political commentator. Ultimately these studies describe a process similar to what Eldridge (2018) termed journalistic realization or the way in which news texts reflect either peer-legitimation or peer-marginalization of non-journalistic contributions (858).

Carlson and Peifer (2013) revealed how processes of journalistic realization of news satire occur, but are often accompanied by the construction of binary oppositions between journalism and non-journalism, or seriousness and humour. These studies offered relevant insight into how news satire managed to invade journalism’s self-ascribed epistemic authority in the public discourse by muddying the boundaries between the discursive realms of journalism and comedy previously perceived to be distinct. More than a decade later, we further this body of research by expanding our analytical scope beyond the already well-researched examples originating from the United States. Additionally, we adopt a rigorous discursive approach by zooming in on the interpretative strategies that offer an encompassing view of the discursive interplay between ZML and the broader Dutch journalistic community. Whether and how the television news satire of ZML is discursively legitimated by media professionals has to be site-specifically traced within the discourse surrounding those shows. Moreover, such meaning-making structures could potentially shift over time with increasing popularity or perceived influence of a show.

**Methodology**

We investigate what position ZML is ascribed within the Dutch media landscape, and which interpretative strategies are put forward to legitimate, define, and delineate said location. To this end, we analysed 64 media appearances of the show’s host and ZML staff in Dutch-speaking news and popular culture media. Our analytical scope contains the period of 2014–2020, which covers the airing period of the show. Although ZML’s final episode was aired in early 2021, we assert that this body of media texts allows us to adequately pinpoint the show’s processes of identity construction throughout its presence on Dutch television.

To gather our data, we made use of the search engine Nexis Uni, covering a broad spectrum of journalistic and popular outlets, and made use of the website Zwartekat.nl, which archives most media appearances of Dutch comedians and cabaret artists. Because ZML is aired on Dutch television, occasionally Flemish (Belgian) news media covered the show, which we have included in the analysis as well. The data makes up a diverse body of different media genres such as journalistic (radio) interviews, podcasts, appearances on current affair programmes, professional (academic) interviews, long-form newspaper interviews, or appearances in popular press. As some segments were taken offline throughout our analysis, an initial larger body of texts was reduced to the data presented in our analysis.

After transcribing each appearance, a close reading of the texts resulted in a thematic analysis based on the three theoretical dimensions of metajournalistic discourse (Carlson 2016): (i) definition making, (ii) boundary setting, and (iii) legitimation. We applied these concepts to reiteratively conceptualize how discursive exchanges between ZML, media
professionals, and journalists shaped mutual understandings on the journalistic. The concept of definition making, for example, allowed us to identify which definitions were points of contestation in acknowledging elements of ZML as journalistic, or how certain definitions were expanded or resignified; processes of boundary setting guided the identification of insider-outsider dynamics present in ZML’s media appearances, and allowed us to identify how perceptions on ZML’s role changed over time; processes of legitimation, finally, were identified in discursive exchanges on the epistemic validity and authority of either comedic or journalistic ways of covering news. As Carlson underlines, these concepts are “presented as distinct processes for the sake of explanation” and “certainly overlap in practice” (2016, 359). But applying them as theoretical guidelines can reflect relationships between journalistic discourse and practice—in this case, the television news satire of ZML. A second reading of our data allowed us to identify thematic shifts throughout the show’s airing period, resulting in three different chronological phases of the show’s reception and identification. We present our findings in chronological order to demonstrate how the show—and its location within the journalistic field—has developed over time.

Findings

2014–2015: Negotiating a Comedic Identity

At the start of the show’s airing period, metajournalistic discourse on ZML was characterized by a discursive struggle with the show’s hybrid format. Its novel blend of comedy and news makes ZML an ill fit within the existing broader Dutch media landscape of that time, which resulted in different attempts among interviewers to fixate ZML within pre-existing genres. For example, the show is introduced as a “satirical talk show in US style” (EénVandaag 2015, see Appendix), or its relationship to the news was emphasized as explicitly parodic and compared to comedic talk-show peers, such as The Colbert Report or The Daily Show (AD 2015, see Appendix).

In interviews, ZML’s host Arjen Lubach underlines how the show imitates features of the television news genre and merely “plays [as if they were] authoritative news” (DWDD 2014, see Appendix). For example, Lubach describes the show as having a “newsy feeling” and “semi-journalistic appearance” (LINDA.nl 2014, see Appendix). However, during its introductory year, Lubach predominantly self-identifies as a comedian (EénVandaag 2015; Jinek 2014; PersTribune 2015, see Appendix). In 2015, media attention for ZML focuses on several segments covering topics outside of mainstream news debates. Among these were the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP; Boukes 2019), the use of drones in governmental surveillance, and criticism on the Dutch monarchy. Consequently, we could observe how early on ZML was increasingly framed in terms of journalistic professionalism:

Interviewer: Despite being funny, it was also a great journalistic scoop, the rules about drones are completely unclear, and actually no one really knows whether or not it is an offense or not, to record [the Prime Minister’s office], it also reveals something.

Lubach: Yes, “a journalistic scoop” is maybe too much credit, but this is what we do strive for, to add these layers. And we’re the last to pretend to do journalism, or to come up with scoops, but the joke is that it’s (…) what in the States is
called investigative comedy and that could be what it is. (Nooit Meer Slapen, VPRO 2015, see Appendix)

By addressing the show’s coverage on the underlit topics of both drone regulations and governmental officials’ privacy, the interviewer legitimates ZML as a public investigator. Similarly, the host of current affairs show EénVandaag (2015) describes ZML as managing to do “what politics and serious media don’t manage,” associating the show with the adversarial watchdog role; functions commonly assumed to fit role conceptions of professional journalists (Tandoc, Hellmueller, and Vos 2012; Weaver and Wilhoit 1996; Zirugo 2021).

However, there is a distinction between outlet types and processes of ZML’s legitimation. Current affairs programmes and late-night talk shows are found to address ZML more often in terms of its comedic characteristics. In contrast, the print press and radio interviews in our analysis tend to discuss the show more explicitly in light of its perceived journalistic value. Such a distinction follows the argument that ZML—through its distinct discursive hybridity—functions as a site for professional reflexivity regarding journalism’s role and the re-articulation of its core dimensions (Feldman 2007). As journalistic self-understandings are shaped by internal and external influences (Ahva 2012, 790), ZML’s presence in the metajournalistic discourse especially invites traditional journalistic media to question their own values and practices.

Nonetheless, the show’s staff members themselves predominantly discard claims of journalistic legitimation by referring to the binary divide between the intention to produce comedy on the one hand and journalistic accountability on the other hand:

Interviewer: Is there an activist behind the comedian?
Lubach: We are comedians, we do humour
Interviewer: But you want to get topics on the agenda?
Lubach: We want to make jokes about topics which I find interesting. (EénVandaag 2015)

Throughout this period, Lubach sustains discursive boundaries between attributions of professional journalistic practice and an outsider identity as a comedian. However, the host is increasingly explicit on being inspired by US satirists, such as Seth Meyers and especially Last Week Tonight with John Oliver, in his media appearances throughout 2015. The explicit comparison to Last Week Tonight—known for its satirical news coverage that tends to highlight stories outside of the current news cycle (Davisson and Donovan 2019)—showcases an incipient awareness of a specific strand of political comedy which not in the least is acknowledged for its investigative efforts and impactful role in the news media landscape (Becker and Bode 2018). By explicitly addressing the existence of investigative comedy, Lubach acknowledges that ZML is potentially neither journalism nor just for laughs.

In this sense, discussion on ZML already shifted to questions of its ability to deconstruct societal issues through the use of its humoristic storytelling qualities. Quickly after its introduction, the show thus contributed to a fundamental renegotiation of assumptions regarding journalism’s epistemic authority and the practices that it constitutes:
Interviewer: You used a fragment from [a quality newspaper], and you make it funny, which makes it accessible for a very large audience who then knows what’s going on.

Lubach: It feels like translating a book, or reinterpreting a very old text. Indeed, we make it accessible for people who otherwise wouldn’t think about it or wouldn’t have known anything about it. And we re-tell the story, and we do that [bringing together different sources, remixing the news] but with humour. (Nooit Meer Slapen, VPRO 2015, see Appendix)

Through such statements, a discourse is constructed which aims to validate humour as a mode of political communication. In contrast with broadcast news (Borden and Tew 2007), ZML thus blatantly acknowledges its constructed nature, potentially adding to the legitimacy of the role of the host as an authentic purveyor of information (Tally 2011; Vraga et al. 2012).

2016–2017: Towards Journalistic Realization

From 2016 onward, the metajournalistic discourse on ZML is increasingly characterized by a negotiation regarding the show’s legitimation in either journalistic or comedic terms. Specifically, the exchange between interviewers and the staff of ZML is organized around a discourse of journalistic impact on the one hand, and a discourse of comedic intention on the other hand. Where ZML remains persistent about their comedic mandate, interviewers become more adamant in addressing the show’s societal impact and topicality:

Lubach: We do what you do, but then a parody thereof. I’m sorry.
Interviewer: But, it’s not just news parody that you do, because you also tackle important topics.
Lubach: Our foremost intention is—and it will always stay this way—comedy. And the idea is that if people haven’t laughed for a few minutes, then we’re doing something wrong. And of course, as a comedian you often arrive at topics which are important, and then yes, it touches upon news.
Guest: But it goes further than that, no? On my show I’ve never seen Minister Ploumen give guarantees about TTIP, and you’ve managed to achieve that.
Lubach: Yes, well that also surprised us, I have to admit. (Met het Oog op Morgen, NOS 2016, see Appendix)

The openly parodic nature of ZML is assumed by interviewers to go beyond mere comedic evocation of the news. Instead, ZML is seen as a ludic imitation that simultaneously interrogates the original. In doing so, interviewers are found to actively move toward acknowledging ZML as more than just a non-journalistic outsider, based on its intertwined relationship to the genre of broadcast news. Interview questions increasingly reflect this awareness of the show’s societal impact. Subsequently, we find interviewers pressuring ZML into acknowledging its role as a valid voice in the public debate by, for example, underlining how the show has “acquired an influential position (...) in the political arena” (De Wereld Draait Door 2017, see Appendix). This results in a gradual shift in ZML’s own discursive positioning, where Lubach increasingly acknowledged public ascriptions of journalistic relevance while explicitly addressing how his dismissal of a journalistic label is a deliberate discursive strategy in function of the show’s comedic licence:
Interviewer: How do you see your role as a late-night host in relation to your public impact?
Lubach: The problem with this matter is that as soon as we see that we have this part, or take ourselves seriously, see ourselves as journalists, than I fear the comedy will suffer. So, for once and for all we have to underline that we are comedians, that we make jokes (...) And of course, secretly, I get that our role looks a bit like that of a journalist and that it could have somewhat of a societal impact, only we have to be the ones who say ‘what are you talking about?’ (College Tour, KRO-NCRV 2017, see Appendix)

Here, we see an evolution towards a less conflicting dynamic between interviewers and the show’s host and staff. As the show garners attention and adherence, ZML no longer unilaterally dismisses journalistic accountability or opposes instances of journalistic realization by reporters. Rather, it aligns its comedic mandate with investigative journalistic aims to reveal information previously concealed, which is in the public interest to be revealed (Abdenour 2018). In this sense, the show begins to self-identify with the roles of comedic interrogator (Day 2011) and eye-opener (Ödmark and Harvard 2021) as valid alternatives to conventional interpretations of news narratives.

Consequently, ZML has been found to contribute to a definitional expansion of journalistic practice. We specifically noticed how the host and staff of the show addressed multiple dimensions of subjectivity in their satirical coverage of the news. In this period, metajournalistic discourse on the show exhibits elements of a reflective style of journalism (Broersma 2010a; Broersma 2010b), characterized by the mediated subjectivity of the host, and the overt subjectivity of the selection and coverage of the show’s topics:

Interviewer: And how do you deal with truth? How true does it have to be?
Lubach: What we say has to be true. Sometimes we make jokes, but of which you can obviously tell that it’s a joke (...) We found out that the deal is, when you hear [the narrator’s] voice it has to be real, and if I then say something it be can an absurd joke. So, we do try to clearly show where the division between information and jokes lie, but the information part must be true. And sometimes we take a shorter turn or withhold something, but not to such an extent that it corrodes truth. We do not lie about the story. (Onder Mediadoctoren 2016, see Appendix)

Such exchanges underline how the humorous approach of ZML is a discursive strategy through which a form of subjective but journalistic truth-telling is enabled: “Because of our comedy, [we] can take a standpoint of, let’s say rationality, or showing unjust claims or inconsistencies; that’s what we find interesting” (College Tour 2017, see Appendix). Additionally, interviewers aim to link Lubach’s personal political stances—Lubach is a staunch critic of the Dutch monarchy and self-declared adherent of republicanism—to the show’s selection of topics.

Nonetheless, ZML actively promotes an image of itself having an openly diverse political spectrum within the editorial board. At first glance, such claims of political neutrality could seem at odds with the show’s open subjectivity in its coverage. However, it is in the infusion of a form of journalistic storytelling with humour that the show’s subjectivity comes to the fore. Political neutrality is put forward as a self-ascribed necessity in function of a critical distance from their topics, while it is through critical humorous interrogations of political topics on either side of the political spectrum that the show expands
conventional notions of journalistic objectivity. Ultimately, this underlines how humour is gradually defined as both a means and an end, and increasingly invites definitional associations of ZML which go beyond mere entertainment as the show had become the flagship of Dutch political comedy.

2018–2020: Acknowledging Investigative Comedy

The final years of ZML are characterized by a further increase in journalistic realization of the show by interviewers and journalists, fixating ZML’s role as a relevant actor in the media landscape of the Netherlands. Media appearances in 2018 ongoingly reveal legitimation strategies that frame this role in distinct opposition to the show’s comedic intention. For example, one Dutch radio reporter described ZML as “not a clown, but a factor of importance” (Kunststoff Radio 2018, see Appendix). A similar line of reasoning is observed during another radio interview in which the anchor challenges Lubach’s recurrent rhetoric on the show’s explicitly comedic intentions: “Maybe your intention is not journalistic, but maybe the effect is journalistic, has a journalistic impact” (Perstribune 2018, see Appendix).

Such exchanges illustrate how journalism and humour are often still perceived in binary contrast to each other by journalists themselves, despite ZML’s acknowledged status of a hybrid comedic news show. These assumptions are tacit and subtle, or as Schultz (2007) has described, related to a journalistic “gut feeling.” The journalistic ethos that undergirds these assumptions is well-delineated around journalistic values, such as factuality, a watchdog role (Karlsson and Clerwall 2019), or the idea that journalism should, before anything else, serve the interests of civic engagement (Faina 2013). However, these journalistic identity markers are negotiated within the discourse (Ahva 2012; Hanitzsch and Vos 2017). Hence, ZML’s media appearances reveal an increasingly mutual discursive agreement with the interviewers about the consolidation of comedic intention and journalistic accountability:

Interviewer: You are clearly in a position where you do want to take up responsibility for non-fiction.
Lubach: Well, yes. By now I am.
Interviewer: And is that something you had in mind? To be a signal jammer in (...) the media landscape and the public debate?
Lubach: Not directly. I do think a satirist should strive to be a signal jammer, as it is one of the circles of power with a watchdog function. Ridiculing the ruling power is always a healthy element of democracy (...) but my heart for comedy is too big to always be occupied with wanting to change the world. (De Wereld Vandaag, Radio 1 2020, see Appendix)

As the show keeps garnering attention and its audience grows, its editorial staff is expanded and discursive distinctions are made between writers and researchers, implying an awareness and acknowledgment of ZML’s investigative journalistic characteristics. From 2018 onward, Lubach and his staff have become increasingly open about the journalistic practices at the heart of the show’s creation. Any disagreement between interviewers and ZML crystallizes in a reciprocally acknowledged discursive authority of ZML as a critical voice in the media landscape, explicitly in relation to its implementation of specific journalistic practices. For example, it has been acknowledged how ZML draws
on investigative practices, such as fact-checking and thorough investigative research, underlining how such journalistic qualities are associated with—if not imposed on—ZML by its audiences:

**Interviewer:** I am surprised you say it’s not journalism what you do, but (...) every show again I see investigative reporting reappear. There’s a name for it which is ‘investigative comedy’ (...) You work together with Follow The Money,³ so you build on other investigative journalists. Can you tell me something about how that works?

**Abbring (editor-in-chief):** Well, those names appear clearly, that’s because we find source referencing very important. I don’t want to create the illusion that we have scoops (...) That’s something other people dug up, and Follow The Money is a good example of that, an important journalistic platform. [People should] get that we reframe their news work and make jokes about that (...) It’s not that we make new news, or dig even deeper and call around, or make follow-ups. (...) The moment we claim to be a journalistic show, it becomes a different thing entirely. (Uitgelicht 2020, see Appendix)

News satire’s strength lies in addressing broadcast news’ rarely acknowledged constructed nature (Day 2011; Tally 2011). By openly addressing the editorial workings of the show, ZML reveals the occupational practices that make up “proper” journalism (Anderson 2019; Bennett 1996; Tuchman 1972), and simultaneously redefines it to fit its own expanded definition of journalistic storytelling. The infusion of journalistic practices with humour gradually becomes a discursive staple for the show’s production, and is viewed by outsiders as a legitimate ingredient for news coverage.

Blending journalistic practice with humour, thus, interrogates the perceived binary between “serious” communication and “humoristic” banter as it is discursively discon- nected from its perceived status of being the opposite of conventional detached journalistic coverage. Rather, as a “humoralist” (Kunststof 2018, see Appendix), Lubach expands tacitly ascribed labels of journalistic practice and ultimately resists dichotomous classifications, such as authentic versus parodic or serious versus funny.

By denouncing the label of journalist but identifying with some of journalism’s widely recognizable functions, ZML is seen as a quasi-insider to the journalistic field: They are comedians working under journalistic licence (Borden and Tew 2007), drawing freely from conventional and recognizable journalistic standards and practices. This quasi-insider identity is imperative to its goal. By sustaining an image of comedic and journalistic hybridity, ZML is ascribed the role of investigative comedy by journalists—aligning with what was already claimed by the ZML host himself in 2015.

This investigative comedy role is grounded in a bifold critique to journalism’s assumed roles and practices. On the one hand, its external critique addresses the perceived limitations of journalism’s watchdog role: Through the practice of investigative comedy, the show’s mission is described as an inherently progressive one, embedded in “imagining a world which does not exist yet, that is [our] job, to create something which doesn’t exist yet (...) by those that want to move forward” (Volkskrant 2018, see Appendix). As a form of internal critique, on the other hand, the show puts forward humour and
comedy—a form of genre critique on the broadcast news discourse—as a means to accomplish such a mission, opening up novel perspectives on existing news discourses.

**Concluding Overview and Discussion**

Despite the ongoing proliferation of the television news satire genre, political comedy newcomers such as *ZML* can still function as what Feldman (2007, 409) termed “critical incident[s] in journalism.” Existing on the boundaries of comedic and journalistic discourses, *ZML* elicited questions on the epistemic authority of broadcast news, journalism, and novel incantations of journalistic storytelling. Consequently, it can be difficult for audiences and journalistic practitioners to delineate such shows and assess their place on the (political) comedy/journalism continuum.

Our analysis of the metajournalistic discourse surrounding *ZML*’s reception and circulation reveals a shift from an initial identification of the show as a comedic outsider towards the role of a quasi-insider within the journalistic community. This quasi-insider position runs parallel to the increasing acknowledgment and legitimation of *ZML*’s investigative journalistic practices and ideals. It underscores that identifying *ZML* as merely satire, political comedy, or even journalism does not fully cover its singular and complex relationship to journalism’s societal function.

Rather, under the label of “investigative comedy,” *ZML* has been ascribed elements of different journalistic paradigms and was praised for its practices, which at times echoed roles conventionally ascribed to investigative journalism. Both journalistic interviewers and *ZML*’s host and staff acknowledged the openly subjective storytelling of the show and explicitly tentative nature of its news coverage. As such, in line with more opinionated strands of journalism, *ZML* was appreciated as a contrast to the ideal of objectivity and positivist epistemology of conventional journalistic reporting (Steensen 2017). The show was, moreover, legitimated for its solution- and public-oriented dimensions corresponding to elements of the constructive journalism movement (Hermans and Drok 2018).

The journalistic realization of *ZML* in terms of investigative work was linked to its infusion of news coverage with humorous subjectivity, which was legitimated for creating new perspectives to existing news discourses in the public interest (Abdenour 2018) and highlighting transgressions of actors in positions of power (Stetka and Örnebring 2013). Throughout the years, the role of humour shifted from being applied as a discursive defence against journalistic accountability—a self-ascribed comedic licence—to being framed as a constituent for *ZML*’s expanded notion of journalistic truth-telling. Ultimately, as “humoralists” or investigative comedians, *ZML* contributed to the expansion of definitional assumptions of journalism’s agenda-setting and watchdog role beyond conventional journalistic ideals of objectivity and impartiality.

However, the notion of investigative comedy is not a complete break away from the television news satire genre as it is known but—and this is arguably more relevant—allows to aptly distinguish between different satirical subgenres, contributing to the expansion of existing scholarship that aims to shed definitional light on the murky waters of the news satire format (e.g., Boukes 2019; Holbert 2013; Waisanen 2018). The notion of investigative comedy ties in with recent descriptions of similar, more overtly “journalistic” forms of news satire. It overlaps with Koivkuski and Ödmark’s (2020)
notion of “journalistic news satire” in the sense that media professionals praised ZML for its well-contextualized coverage of political topics and its adherence to factuality. As a result, our findings contribute to the increasing body of scholarly literature that views journalism as a discursively and relationally constructed continuum, away from the study of journalism in the singular, to that of *journalisms* in the plural (Harrington 2012). Similarly, political comedy exists on a continuum ranging from the predominantly comedic and humoristic to the more overtly journalistic. Arguably then, fictional sketch programmes as *Saturday Night Live* could be located on one end, while programmes as *ZML* or *Last Week Tonight* can be positioned on the other end. This article additionally contributes to the limited body of literature on the reception of satire within the journalistic community by focussing on a case outside of the Anglo-Saxon academic canon (see also Koivukoski and Ödmark 2020; Lichtenstein, Nitsch, and Wagner 2021). Our study shows that, similar to *The Daily Show* in the United States (Feldman 2007; Tenenboim-Weinblatt 2009), ZML underwent a number of discursive transitions as it functioned as a site for discussion among journalistic practitioners on the distinctions between news and entertainment. In contrast with earlier findings, the analysis of ZML’s reception reveals how satirists also occasionally abandon their argument of being comedians exclusively and increasingly accept ascriptions pertaining to journalistic practice. As such, our analysis of the metajournalistic discourse surrounding ZML resulted in a clear view of this “drawing and redrawing of journalistic lines” (Berkowitz and Gutsche 2012, 653) through discursive exchanges between host, staff, media professionals, and members of the journalistic community.

One critique could be that the framework of metajournalistic discourse entails a journalism-centred approach by assessing a non-journalistic phenomenon through the normative lens of professional journalism. Earlier empirical work on metajournalistic discourse often zooms in on discourse by journalists (Hanitzsch and Vos 2017; Vos and Thomas 2019) on journalism (Johnson, Thomas, and Fuzy 2021; Perreault and Vos 2020). However, our study joins Ferrucci (2018) in that “journalism studies scholars should not limit their definition of metajournalistic discourse to journalists (…) or actual journalism” (4821). Aside from studies on metajournalistic discourse, scholars by now also expanded their scope of journalism well beyond conventional journalistic practice to include, for example, political fiction shows (Peters 2012) or art (Postema and Deuze 2020). As such, popular culture phenomena such as investigative comedy are indicative for the rise of oppositional news discourses outside the dominant journalistic mode of communication. Ultimately, these views supports the idea that metajournalistic discourse highlights “shared understandings of journalism [that] arise through discursive processes that are then manifested in practice” (Carlson 2016, 361).

Future research could further the focus on journalistic outliers to alternative dimensions of the way that political satire facilitates professional journalistic reflexivity. Also, despite efforts to embed the investigative comedy concept in the existing literature on both political comedy and journalism, the current study of one case (i.e., ZML) calls for more fine-tuning of its interpretation and position, ideally in different national contexts. Finally, as reception and circulation are just two of the many dimensions of the role that television news satire plays in our contemporary mediascape, future studies can analyse how investigative comedy opens up the space for alternative perspectives of existing news discourses by including content or discourse analytical studies to this
expanding body of scholarly work. For example, an analysis of ZML’s coverage of specific topics could allow to compare the notion of investigative comedy to related studies on “satirical journalism” (e.g., Fox 2018) and aptly identify how such shows balance comedy and journalism in practice.

Notes

1. After recurrent peak ratings over two million, the final season of Zondag met Lubach broke its previous record with 2.3 million views, engulfing conventional evening news programmes on both the public and commercial broadcaster for that evening.
2. Lubach proposed to have himself elected Pharaoh of the Netherlands, launching a successful petition on the topic receiving more than 65,000 signatures making it legally fit for assessment in Parliament.
3. Follow The Money is a Dutch digital independent journalistic platform which strives to hold power accountable by “following financial flows, addressing societal problems and malpractices, reveal complex connections and offer solutions” (http://www.ftm.nl/over-ftm).

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References


Appendix: media appearances host and staff Zondag met Lubach (2014-2020)

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