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Digital Comedy as Democratic Participation: Reimagining Public Discourse Through Humour in India's Digital Age

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Abstract

This interpretative review develops Digital Communicative Comedy (DCC), a framework for understanding how online humour in India functions as democratic participation. Integrating comedy studies with Habermas's communicative action and public sphere theory—alongside critiques by Fraser and Young—and digital media research on platform affordances, the paper argues that comedic texts can articulate validity claims (truth, rightness, sincerity) through humour, inviting audience uptake and deliberation in networked publics. Focusing on Indian stand-up and short-form satire, the review theorizes how platform logics (algorithms, monetization, moderation) mediate visibility, risk, and discursive quality, and how cultural specificity strengthens comedy's civic legibility. The paper argues that digital comedy, as illustrated by comedians such as Kunal Kamra, Varun Grover, and Vir Das, provides new avenues for civic participation that circumvent traditional gatekeepers, generating an atmosphere for democratic discourse. The paper outlines an analytic template for coding comedic validity claims and proposes research designs to test democratic outcomes (cross-cutting interaction, issue reframing, civic intent). DCC thus reframes digital comedy from “mere entertainment” to a participatory discourse repertoire within South Asia's evolving public spheres.

Keywords: Digital comedy, democratic participation, communicative action, public sphere theory, political humour, civic engagement, digital media, deliberation, civic engagement

1. Introduction

Today, the development of digital comedy as a site for political action indicates a major shift in civic engagement in democracy. The 2020 ban from onboard flights of comedian Kunal Kamra by Indian airlines, arising from his confrontation with a news anchor during a flight, demonstrates the political power of digital comedy. Stand-up comedians, comedians with an online satire presence, and digital humourists are no longer actors existing solely to entertain. They are now involved in political debate. Comedians like Kamra, Varun Grover and Vir Das have created new pathways to civic engagement and public discourse, circumventing traditional gatekeepers (Gray et al.). This, especially, is indicated in India and South Asia. Digital platforms have expanded access to political expression. They have also created space for alternative voices to enter and reshape democratic conversations (Udupa).

Existing theories often fail in explaining how comedy works as an authentic form of democratic participation. Comedy studies usually emphasise entertainment and cultural critique (Kuipers 89). Democratic theory is often characterised by the focus on rational discussion and institutional processes (Habermas, Structural Transformation). Digital media scholarship deals with technologies' affordances and network effects (Papacharissi), but it rarely connects these ideas with humour or democratic engagement. As a communication scholar, I find that existing studies do not fully capture the depth of the current new wave of digital political comedy shows in India.

Comedy studies often treat humour as mere entertainment, democratic theory emphasises rational debate over humour, and digital media research tends to overlook it altogether. This analysis seeks to address these gaps, though the challenge is more complex than expected. The key argument of this paper is that current scholarship overlooks digital comedy as a form of communicative action. Comedy can enable democratic participation. This is especially true in non-Western contexts, where it carries distinct cultural and political roles. This review challenges the existing perspective by comparing it to other perspectives utilising an interpretative method. It draws attention to theoretical tensions and empirical gaps that can be built into a framework called "Digital Communicative Comedy" that provides an explanation for how humour can work as rational discourse in digital public spheres.

2. Comedy Studies and Democratic Participation

To better understand the current setting of digital political comedy in India, understanding a few classical theories of the genre is essential. The classical theories of comedy as an art genre emphasise that comedy has an inherent tendency to resist and challenge authorities to provoke audiences to reflect on authority. Classical studies identify three main categories within comedy theory: superior theory - laughter is the result of perceived inferiority; incongruity theory - humour occurs because of a violation of expectation; and relief theory - humour is the release of contained nervous energy. Unfortunately, the classical theory of comedy is inadequate, as it fails to account for the complexities of the digital space. This paper proposes to build on the classical theories of the genre and consider how Indian digital

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comedy responds to state surveillance and platform algorithms, thereby reflecting contemporary political dissent.

This traditional lens separates the performer from the audience and tends to describe comedy as something performed for the stage (Bergson). It does not understand the complex nature of the digital platform. As a result, it does not recognise digital comedy in its interactive and participatory form. This form relies on audiences interacting, remixing, and sharing it (Jenkins). Traditional models focus exclusively on the power of comedy to challenge or offend, but they miss the value of the power of comedy to stimulate constructive democratic engagement. Gray et al. argue that political comedy can function as a repository for collecting information, thinking about and processing political issues, and discussing political values in a democratic way (Gray et al.). Along the way, Gray et al. demonstrate satirical texts influence not only political awareness but also improve the audience's civic behaviours and analytical skills in a democracy (89). Unfortunately, most of this research remains situated in Western contexts and/or uses conventional media and television formats, leaving digital, contemporary, and non-Western contexts neglected.

The relationship between humour and comedy has gained its academic interest recently. Baumgartner and Morris, in their study, prove that satirical comedy shows increase the political engagement and civic awareness of young audiences. Their findings challenge the idea that comedy only entertains. They argue that humour can open pathways to political participation and provide accessible entry points for civic involvement. Research on stand-up comedy demonstrates its potential as public discourse. Mintz describes stand-up comedians as "social mediators" who help audiences process complex social and political issues through humour. Comedians take on an active civic role by making political issues engaging and understandable.

However, researchers face important limitations when studying humour and civic engagement. Most studies focus on Western contexts and ignore cultural differences in humour, power dynamics, and democratic participation. In addition, researchers often treat comedy as a supplement rather than as a form of democratic discourse. They rarely examine how humour itself can operate as legitimate rational discussion. The existing literature leaves several areas of comedy's role in democracy unexplored. The current areas of study struggle to theoretically frame the relationship of humour to political discourse and deliberative democracy. Most studies view comedy in simple terms. They see it as either just entertainment or just politics. This approach misses something important. Humour might actually help improve public discussions. It doesn't necessarily harm reasoned debate as many assume.

Digital media transformed the framework of comedy. Nevertheless, research surrounding digital media and comedy has failed to follow this transformation. This is a significant gap in the academic understanding of comedy. Most of the research still affects traditional media. This generally refers to television shows or live performances in a theatre setting. In turn, researchers usually dismiss the digital media space. The digital media space creates new forms of comedy, and comedy may work differently in that space altogether. Digital media, or online spaces, also provide new entry points for engagement with democracy.

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Each of these media spaces provides comedic engagement with other means of engagement, allowing for new affordances to the process of comedy, such as memes, viral comedy videos, or interactive comment threads. Some of these engagement systems also alter the engagement quality of comedy or its possible political consequences.

Research strongly favours Western nations and neglects the narrative of places like South Asia. This gap, in and of itself, can generate significant problems. There have been substantial increases in digital platforms for comedy in India that have quickly emerged as a site of political critique and criticism and function as examples of comedian acts of agency, demonstrated by comedians such as Varun Grover, Vir Das, and Kunal Kamra (Vaishnavi). This is important, particularly because these areas hold different cultural, linguistic, and political lenses through which to look that likely afford different comedic engagement with democracy and differing forms of engagement that still go largely untapped. These gaps show that academic understanding of the democratic potential of comedy remains limited. Comedy is constantly evolving due to digital technologies. They also change how people participate in politics. This occurs in many nations and cultures. Academic understanding in this field is still lacking, though.

3. Habermas's Communicative Action and Public Sphere Theory

Habermas's idea of communicative action, which he proposed in the early 1980s, is arguably the most well-known conceptualisation of the conditions for democratic discourse (Habermas, *Theory of Communicative Action*). However, when his rationality model is applied to comedy, problems arise right away. For instance, is it ever possible for a joke to qualify as "rational argumentation"? For the most part, this question has guided my analysis for this project.

The theory argues that legitimate democratic decisions come from communicative processes. In these processes, participants engage in rational argumentation. They aim for mutual understanding. They do not use strategic manipulation. Central to this theory is the concept of validity claims. These are assertions about truth, rightness, and sincerity. They can be challenged and defended through rational argument. Habermas argues that genuine communicative action occurs when participants focus on understanding rather than success. This creates the foundation for democratic legitimacy through reasoned consensus.

Central to this theory is the concept of validity claims. These are statements about the truth of facts, the rightness of norms, and the sincerity of expressions. People can challenge and defend these statements through rational argument. Habermas argues that real communicative action happens when people want to understand each other. They do not just try to win. This creates the basis for democratic legitimacy. It works through reasoned agreement among people (Habermas, *Theory of Communicative Action*).

The concept of the public sphere proposed by Habermas continues to have enduring significance in the study of democratic theory (Habermas, *Structural Transformation*). He articulated it as a forum in which private citizens gather to deliberate issues of public concern. Members of the bourgeois public sphere are private individuals who gather to discuss public

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matters through a rational and critical lens. However, there is still a lot of criticism of this idea. Its exclusionary nature is highlighted by critics.

The idealised assumptions in the theory of the public sphere faced a significant critique. Nancy Fraser exposes the exclusionary nature of the public sphere framework, where Women, minorities, and the working class were systematically excluded from this supposedly universal space. She positions the idea of “counter-publics” as an alternative space to construct diverse discourses for marginalised groups. Thus, it helps comedy to amplify voices from marginalised positions ignored by the mainstream political discourse (Lockyer and Pickering). Stand-up Comedy uses humour as a counter-narrative to showcase underrepresented viewpoints.

The theory of Habermas was reconsidered by scholars with the digital transformation of political communication to identify the concepts that align with new technological affordances. Dahlgren argues that digital media create new possibilities and form the public sphere at the same time, posing challenges to rational discourse.

Digital platforms facilitate wider civic participation by reducing traditional gatekeeping practices. Papacharissi identifies that this practice will potentially democratise public discourse. But as digital spaces fragment information and use algorithmic filtering, it can also cause problems. This phenomenon causes emotional separation and disturbs rational discourses (Sunstein). These dynamics are essential to understanding the impact of comedy on democratic engagement. Comedy began to engage with the public more than ever through digital platforms. Along with this, the paradox emerges. The platforms broaden who can participate in public discourse, but the algorithm boosts the emotional reasoning over rational. At this point, Habermasian assumptions are challenged as they satisfy the logical democratic discourse.

The idea of rationality in the theory of Habermas challenges the analysis of comedy as democratic discourse. Iris Marion Young argues that his emphasis on rational argumentation excludes valid forms of democratic communication such as storytelling, emotional appeal, and cultural reference, which fall outside the narrow definitions of reason. A joke’s political work happens through emotional tone, like the shock of recognition, the release of laughter, not through syllogistic reasoning. When Kunal Kamra provokes audiences to laugh at political hypocrisy, he’s making a democratic intervention that Habermasian categories struggle to recognise.

When applied in other contexts, the theory’s Western roots cause issues because different communication norms and practices might be at work (Chakrabarty). For example, the democratic process in India is shaped by emotional appeals, religious allusions, and cultural narratives. Power relations and structural inequality further limit communicative potential (Benhabib 45). Comedians often speak from positions of marginalisation, using humour to critique power in ways that formal political speech fails to address.

4. Digital Media and Democratic Participation

Digital media enabled social media platforms to overcome institutional barriers that restricted public discourse among the elite and privileged (Loader and Mercea). This democratisation introduces new challenges around platform governance, algorithmic visibility, and corporate

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requirements. Social media platforms have been particularly significant as sites of political communication and mobilisation. Researchers found that using social media targets people into a higher level of political engagement. This seems particularly true of young people, who may be less plugged into traditional political institutions (Boulianne).

Digital participation faces many challenges, too. The diversity of information sources leads to confusion and inaccurate information. Algorithmic filtering creates echo chambers that cause biases instead of authentic conversations (Pariser). Every digital platform addresses various aspects of political communication. For example, the video format of YouTube allows for long video content that can create complex arguments and narratives. In contrast, Twitter's character limit encourages brevity and often wit, which reflects a comedic format (Burgess and Green).

Specific affordances of the platform lead to differences in how digital comedy does democracy. For example, stand-up comedy works well on video platforms like YouTube because comedians can maintain comedic argumentation and dialogue for global audiences over extended performative time. Social media platforms function in ways that encourage audience participation, sharing content, and contribute to interaction that could create possibilities for dialogical encounters around comedic content.

The algorithms used by platforms and monetization paradigms create competing pressures which complicate the democratic possibilities of digital comedy. Social media platforms grant higher visibility to content that achieves high engagement through clicks, or shares, or comments (Tufekci). This incentivizes comedic creators to prioritize dismantling political engagement through viral entertainment over disinterested political commentary on current events. Sensational or polarizing humour often perform algorithmically better than sophisticated satiric critique.

Comedic creators must simplify the pressure to generate engagement through humour while entertaining audience expectations for consuming motion art; all while balancing their personal conduit to constructive democratic discourse. These competing pressures do not automatically detract from democratic value, as any model of engagement through views, likes or shares could simply be a proxy for public interest and civic participation. Some successful digital comedians have found ways to reconcile viral stories and substantive political commentary. However, the pressure to generate views and shares could also encourage comedic products that reinforce stable beliefs, or criticize oppositional groups and individuals, rather than instigating constructive conversations. In this way, the democratic viability of digital comedy is contingent not on some reliance, or total lack thereof, on engagement-heavy mathematics, but rather are dependent on how creators, audiences and platforms are able to balance/combine all these different competing pressures.

India provides a distinct case to assess the democratic ramifications of digital media. Digital platforms produced new opportunities for political participation across cultures and in particular among those marginalized youth (Charmaraman et al.). Nonetheless, the Indian digital context offers challenges that are critiques of democratic action. The rise of extreme

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speech and mobilization of nationalism online is daunting for democratic dialogue (Udupa). The digital transformation of democracy does indeed prompt questions about the traditional democratic theory. Democratic theorists failed to follow how digital technologies intersect with established democratic theory and it appears more theoretical advancement. The research finds that “the digital era has created new opportunities and new challenges for direct democracy,” changing the ways that citizens engage with democracy, in ways that existing democratic theory was not designed to deal with (Rattanasevee et al). How do we understand democracy in a time where digital platforms offer new, and often different, ways of participating and expressing ourselves politically?

According to some academics, such as Bennett and Segerberg, democratic theory must incorporate new modes of participation like online debates and digital activism (Bennett and Segerberg). Others contend that democracy could be harmed by digital participation. According to them, it promotes impulsive, emotional responses to political issues rather than careful deliberation (Morozov). Because they provide insight into how digital comedies operate in democracies, conversations regarding participation in the digital realm are particularly important.

5. Integration of theoretical frameworks

The three academic discipline of comedy studies, Habermasian theory, and digital media research stand apart mostly. But they overlap in the areas of who participates in democratic discourse, what forms of communication is legitimate, and how power shapes public discussion. They all seek to help decide who can participate in the democratic process. The function of humour among members of different groups is examined in the study of comedy. Some groups may be excluded in accordance with Habermas’ theory. Research on digital media raises questions about how technology can increase access to political engagement and discourse for all.

Each field also addresses the link between formal and informal political communication. Comedy is generally informal, while dealing with contemporary issues that matter in the political realm or serious deliberation. Habermas’s theory revolves around formal rational debate yet can articulate that informal discourse is just as important, and digital media create spaces that commonly interweave both formal and informal elements of communication.

The central theoretical challenge is the divide between rationality versus emotion in democratic discourse. Habermas insists that legitimate deliberation requires reason, not feeling. Humour research demonstrates that comedy operates through emotional engagement, cultural knowledge, and storytelling. This conflict intensifies online, where algorithmic systems recompense emotional content. A Kunal Kamra video goes viral because it makes audiences laugh or feel outraged, not because it presents a carefully structured syllogism. Engagement and shareability are often based on emotional appeal rather than rational argument. Digital comedy that is quickly adopted and becomes viral is often effective precisely because it elicits emotional responses as opposed to rational reflection.

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The tension between particular and universal democratic values is another source of conflict. The goal of Habermas' theory is to establish universally applicable laws. Conversely, comedy frequently makes use of allusions and inside jokes that are unique to particular racial or cultural groups. Members of those groups are frequently the only ones who can understand these references. Comedy can be viewed and shared globally in the digital age. However, audiences may find it humorous in quite different ways depending on where they are.

5.3 Toward Digital Communicative Comedy Framework

To confront these challenges and gaps, this review recommends a "Digital Communicative Comedy" framework. The framework gathers insights from comedy studies, Habermasian theory and digital media while questioning the limits of these concepts. The framework consists of primarily four key propositions:

- Communicative process shapes democratic discourse rather than arguments, demanding active participants who prefer to understand, welcome challenge to their perspective and provide logical reasons for their claims.
- Comedy functions as communicative action as it engages valid claims through humour. Comedy express facts, moral stances, and perspectives facilitate democratic discourse through laughter.
- Digital platforms improve the democratic potential of comedy providing audience interactivity and engagement. Features like comments, shares, and remixes allows comedy from one-way performance into participatory dialogue.
- Cultural specificity strengthens democratic value of humour. It allows for authentic and meaningful engagement with political contexts and audiences.

6. Research Gaps and Future Directions

The theoretical framework constructed in this review provides different ways of potential research pathways. Researchers need to investigate in a systematic way how digital comedy functions as a kind of communication that operates in a real-world environment. They will also need to invent research strategies that can identify a logical content in comedy, while still accounting for the special cognitive characteristics comedy embodies.

Comparative research conducted in various political and cultural contexts may be able to test the suggested framework's wider applicability. The ways in which digital comedy discourse exposure fosters civic engagement, political literacy, and democratic engagement may be better understood through longitudinal studies examining its democratic effects.

There are a number of theoretical issues that need more research. There needs to be a more thorough theoretical analysis of the connection between entertainment and democratic values. In what circumstances does entertainment improve participation in democracy? At what point does it compromise it? More work needs to be done on the framework for evaluating the democratic value and quality of humorous discourse. What standards ought to be applied by researchers to assess digital comedy? How can we tell if it promotes democratic dialogue?

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Also, the applicability of the proposed framework to different forms of digital comedy requires investigation. This includes stand-up, satirical videos, memes, and other formats. Different comedy forms may have different democratic potentials and limitations.

Existing research methods analyse either humour or argumentation separately, but digital comedy requires approaches that capture both dimensions simultaneously. This review urges to develop content analysis coding schemes that evaluate comedic techniques alongside argumentative structure, and experimental designs that measure entertainment as well as cognitive and political value.

7. Conclusion

The analysis shows that the indirect democratic potential when it comes to comedy, humour, or discursive logic are not well accommodated within the existing literature. The framework of “Digital Communicative Comedy” offers foundational contributions to both democratic theory and comedy studies by advancing what we know regarding potentially non-traditional forms of discourse advancing democratic legitimacy, by offering explicit ways to analyse the quality of comedy and its democratic value without negating comedy’s distinctiveness, and by recognizing that digital affordances create new entry points into democratic engagement through comedy.

The framework is particularly useful for understanding democratic discourse in South Asia and India, where digital comedy has emerged as a major political communication medium. Each of the contributions accommodate cultural differences and alternative forms of thinking, and thus allows us to capture how comedy serves democratic ends across varying democratic and cultural contexts.

The framework is still an ongoing project which needs to develop and be tested further. Future studies need to consider systematic analysis of digital comedy discourse. They must also take comparative analysis of various political contexts into account. To completely capture the complexities of logic, humour, and democratic participation, new methodological approaches will be required. Further research on the phenomenon is also important, especially in view of the growing political influence of humour and the ongoing dangers to democratic discourse that arise in increasingly digital settings.

Digital comedy therefore continues to shape political discourse and participation in democracy. The need for theoretical frameworks capable of critically understanding the potential and limits of digital comedy are becoming more necessary for both academics and practitioners.

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