Laughter for Development

An explorative study into humour’s potential role in influencing stereotypical representation

Jamie Bowd
Abstract
Development issues are often described as important but dull, and ongoing stereotypical representations of a ‘distant other’ perpetuated by NGO’s and mainstream media create an increasingly disengaged public. In response to this, more creative means of communication are needed to increase engagement and counter dominant stereotypical narratives within the development sector. Humour is rarely considered as a communication strategy for development, but it has the potential to be an influential tool to lower societal barriers and challenge existing power relations.

This explorative research aims to examine how humour could be potentially used to disrupt stereotypical narratives and form a site of resistance against concepts such as the White Saviour Complex. It aims to explore the ways humour can engage a broader audience and challenge stereotypical representations of aid, especially within the western media. Considering two primary case studies; online campaign RadiAid and tv mockumentary series the Samaritans, it will explore the ways humour can be used to persuade, raise awareness and increase likability, while also being used as a form of critique. Through the lens of social semiotics, it considers commonalities in how humour can be utilised and how audiences react to it. This research also aims to find the advantages and limitations of using humorous techniques in such contexts.

Keywords: Humour, Creative Communication, Persuasion, social semiotics, representation, media, culture, NGOs
1 Introduction

The way development messages are communicated to public audiences is increasingly important due to the fast-paced and information overloaded nature of society today. With many organisations and companies competing for public attention, Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) maintain a high level of trust with audiences (Edelman, 2018), but their work is often relegated to the ‘worthy but dull’ category (Chattoo, Feldman, 2018). Thus, despite this trust, there is often a lack of engagement with the general public beyond the usual interested parties. NGOs often continue to ‘preach to the choir,’ especially within awareness raising and advocacy issues, while also transmitting (usually negative) stereotypical images to encourage engagement and funding for their causes. The way people (especially recipients of aid) in the development sector are represented is important as it influences the way audiences, governments and other NGOs engage with humanitarian issues from both a communication and fundraising perspective. By using images of pity or shock, notions such as the white saviour complex or feelings of hopelessness can be prevalent in the face of complex social issues.

Despite more information being available to the public than ever before there is still often a gap between the representations of ‘an other’ and the reality of their experiences (Bunce, 2017). Stereotypical advertising continues to use ‘traditional images’ of starving children with flies swarming or bloated bellies and mud huts in many ad campaigns and promotional materials today. Even when more positive imagery is used (such as women at work or the Africa rising narrative) there is still the same dynamic of ‘an other’ that highlights differences and reinforces the perceived need for a western saviour. These images continue to influence how audiences (particularly western) perceive distant others and can negatively impact how people interact with one another. Therefore, there is an increasing need to break down these stereotypical narrative structures and engage public audiences in meaningful dialogue about the issues people face rather than continue generalising and victimising entire continents.

This presents the challenge to communicate complex development issues in ways that are accurate and engaging instead of overwhelming and dull. Technology is playing an important and influential role both in how NGOs interact with their audiences and how people are represented. Social media especially allows audiences and organisations to communicate more directly than ever before. However, the focus on shareability of content and the
popularity of memes can incentivise NGOs to use a different tone. This has seen some organisations take a more humorous approach to their interaction with their audiences.

1.1 Aim and Key Research Questions

This study will aim to explore the effects of using humour as a method for social change with a more specific focus on awareness raising and social critique. By bringing together representation theories such as semiotics, theoretical motivations for humour and visual and discourse patterns within two primary case studies; this study will attempt to explore the potential and limitations of using humour as a communication strategy.

By considering if humour could be a useful tool to engage a broader audience, promote humanitarian causes and challenge stereotypical representations within the western media, it will explore how humour can potentially disrupt these negative narratives and humanise people within development. Recent research (Chattoo, 2018, Cameron 2015, Schwarz and Richey, 2019) highlights the growing interest in this area of communication, especially for issues that are considered overwhelming or have failed to generate awareness through other methods of communication.

Firstly, this study will consider ‘what are the potential benefits and limitations of using humour as a tool for social change within development issues?’ It will then further investigate if humour can effectively break down stereotypical representations of development/aid practices and if humour should be used to increase exposure and awareness of development issues to previously disengaged audiences. These questions focus on how humour could be implemented through advertising or entertainment to promote social change. There will be more focus on the impacts within western media. Though some of the examples have been created by non-western organisations, they still had a western target audience.

This thesis will firstly explore the complexity of defining humour as a concept, the theoretical motivations for humour and forms of humour. The second section will focus on the importance of representation and how stereotypes within the dominant development narrative can negatively impact development work. After this, it will consider the role of technological advances and specifically the impact of social media on narratives and communication strategies within the sector. It will then introduce the ways humour can
theoretically influence change before considering the role of social semiotics and intercontextuality as a methodology for analysis. The aim is to then bring these concepts together by analysing two core case studies (RadiAid and the Samaritans), while also briefly considering a few other examples to explore visual patterns. This will be done through visual analysis of the content and an additional analysis of the media coverage and social media comments to observe audience interactions with the works. Interviews with communication officers/ producers who have used humour as a communication strategy will also provide a secondary point of analysis. Finally, this study will attempt to lay out the potential and limitations of humour as a communication strategy in the concluding chapters.

2 Background on Humour Theory and Form

2.1 Defining Humour
In order to properly analyse humour’s influence on communication, it is important to clearly understand the way it functions. Due to its naturalised and interdisciplinary nature, it is extremely difficult to provide a singular definition of humour. Humour is a universal concept because nearly all humans participate in some form (Lynch, 2002), however the term is difficult to define as it means different things in various contexts and is often outright contradictory. Most people have laughed at a joke or found something amusing, especially at an individual level and would therefore argue they know what it means (Martin, 2007). But humour can be paradoxical and ambiguous in both meaning and intention, and those studying humour at an academic level come from a range of disciplines, making a singularly agreed upon definition exceptionally difficult (Plester, 2015, p2). Additionally, while almost everyone experiences humour in some way, people don’t laugh at the same things or find the same experiences funny (Fluri, 2019). What is considered funny is culturally and socially specific. This specificity is not necessarily geographical but based on prior knowledge and understanding of the context from which the humour is derived from.

What can be said is that humour plays an important societal role and can extensively contribute to a sense of both collective and self-identity (Lynch, 2002). It has the potential to exist in any context, both within the private and public domain and is an inherently social and communicative phenomenon. Topaltsis et al (2018) state that humour involves the “communication of multiple incongruous meanings that are amusing in some manner.” This
definition provides only a vague glimpse into humour and its potential meanings but fails to fully encapsulate the meaning and motivations for humour. Additionally, humour involves varying levels of complexity with some forms such as satire—which usually requires contextual knowledge of a topic—considered to be more complex while others such as slapstick are funny due to their simplicity.

Despite this complexity and contradiction, there are three commonly accepted theories of humour that can be useful to consider when attempting to interpret the motivation behind humour and the potential reaction to it; the superiority theory, the relief theory and the incongruity theory. Though these theories are generally seen as opposing, authors such as Plester (2015) and Watson (2015) argue that considering aspects of all three may provide a more holistic understanding of humour as the three theories complement each other more than many authors initially thought. These theories provide an interesting lens to analyse possible motivations and explain responses to humour.

2.1.3 Superiority Theory

The superiority theory focuses primarily on power relations and argues that people find humour at the expense of another. This theory suggests that there is a clear winner and loser in humour and directly associates humour with ridicule and feelings of superiority that highlight and exploit others’ weaknesses for enjoyment (Dadlez, 2011). It generally involves laughing at others but can also include self-deprecation. The theory has roots in ancient Greece, Plato was quoted as saying ‘what makes someone laughable is their self-ignorance’ but the more contemporary version is generally accredited to Thomas Hobbes (Watson, 2015). Hobbes argued in the seventeenth century that humour came from the superior laughing at a deflective other and that laughter was the ‘roar of the victor’ (Tavernor, 2019, p237). This idea comes from the joy historically found in the defeat of an enemy (Mulder, Nijholt, 2002). Though this theory sees humour as a form of control, it can also be used to reverse power dynamics and become a part of a resistance (Maon, Lindgreen, 2018). Increasingly, humour perceived as ‘punching down’ is frowned upon while humour aimed at those more powerful is readily accepted and often applauded. This has been seen in protests where authoritative groups are mocked, which can lessen their power at least at a superficial level (Wolf, 2018). Though the notion that superiority as the only motivation for humour has
been dismissed, aspects of the theory can still be used as a way of examining power relations between those using the humour and those who may be disadvantaged from it.

2.1.2 Relief Theory
Relief theory is arguably the most individualistic theory however some aspects such as its potential to promote feelings of solidarity make it relevant to this study. The theory suggests that people are motivated to use humour to release pent up emotional and psychic energy that has built up over time and that it feels good to do so (Watson, 2015). This theory also has roots in ancient Greece but was popularised by Sigmund Freud. According to Freud the relief was two-fold. Firstly, it allowed healing through the release of tension and secondly that humour can be an act of ‘aggression and sanctioned resistance’ (Lynch, 2002). This theory is clearly reflected in Fluri’s (2019) research surrounding Afghani women using jokes as a coping mechanism and ‘form of survival’ within their private social spheres. Within this theory humour can also be used to deal with forms of pain and suffering and be a way for people to challenge their situations in a less confrontational way (Clark, 2018).

Humour can be used as a form of resistance at a primarily individualistic level where humour is used to improve personal, emotional wellbeing, rather than used as a tool to create widespread social change. However, emotional wellbeing at an organisational and societal level (often within the context of workplaces) is also becoming increasingly important to increase productivity and creativity. The relief theory therefore can potentially provide insight into how humour could possibly increase feelings of solidarity and sustain positivity during the difficult situations that often occur within the development sector by providing an outlet for expression and release.

2.1.3 Incongruity Theory
The incongruity theory is widely regarded as the most dominant theory relating to humour. It attempts to provide a more intellectual motivation for using humour and is often seen as incompatible with the other theories (Lynch, 2002). The theory argues that for something to be amusing it must involve shock or contrast (Dodds, Kirby, 2012, p51). It can also be defined as ‘focusing on laughter as a cognitive response to something unexpected, illogical or inappropriate in some other way’ (Bore and Reid, 2014, p.456).
Sørensen (2017) goes as far as to say that ‘although all incongruity is not funny, there is no humour without it.’ This stresses the importance of surprise in humour. Even if people don’t find the content funny or disagree with the message, they may still recognise the humour and pay more attention to it (Nabi et al, 2007). Irony and parody are clearly well suited to this theory as they render something absurd by mimicking it (Lynch, 2002) and the laughter generated may be the factor that makes people pay attention. This will be explored further in later chapters.

It is also important to note that this illogicality must be resolved in some way, or it may just lead to confusion rather than humour. It is this need for resolution that contributes to understanding the cultural specificity of humour and why it is subjective and misunderstood in certain contexts. Without previous contextual knowledge, both the ability to recognise the absurdity and the ability to resolve it are missing.

Though both superiority and relief theories are generally discredited because they fail to adequately encapsulate the essence of humour (Kulka, 2007), they can provide useful insights into how an organisation’s motivations for using humour are perceived. The theories can also be used to critically analyse whether humour may be an appropriate tool for social change. For example, the superiority theory provides insight into the power relations between those being made fun of and those making the joke and encourage one to consider whether or how their use of humour may impact others. The idea that humour can be a release of energy and enjoyment emphasise how humour can be used as a coping mechanism for people affected by conflict or inequality. Finally, the incongruity theory provides a clear frame through which to consider the impacts of ironic depictions and help predict how audiences may react to various forms of humour based on their previous experiences and cultural context.

2.2 Forms of Humour
Apart from the various motivations for humour usage, the range of forms it can take in both private and public settings should also be considered. The breadth of what can be classified as humour again emphasises the difficulty in defining it. The diversity of humour can also provide organisations with a range of methods to engage audiences and different forms can serve different purposes. What is appropriate and effective in one context may not work in another. Humour can come in the form of anything from personal jokes in private settings, to
more collective or public forms such as stand-up comedy, ironic protest signs, highly mediatised, professionalised satire, advertising, feature films, internet memes and comics.

Chattoo (2018) breaks humorous forms into four useful categories including advertising, stand up, satirical news and scripted entertainment. Each of these have different strengths and limitations. For example, advertising works best when audiences have less pre-existing knowledge about the subject, while satire relies heavily on the audience having prior knowledge of the thing/event it is mocking (Chattoo, 2018). The medium can also affect how the content will be received. An online advertisement is judged differently to that of satirical news or scripted entertainment appearing on television. Different formats will also serve different purposes, some are better at inciting emotion and action while others focus more on raising awareness or even changing perceptions in a subtle way rather than directly addressing an issue.

Three other humorous concepts of parody, irony and satire are also important to define. While these three terms are sometimes used interchangeably and do have some significant overlap, there are some key differences (Watson, 2015). The most prominent difference is that satire and parody are generally considered genres/narrative forms while irony is a tool used by these forms (Watson, 2017).

Irony has commonly been defined as saying something contrary to what is meant, though many authors state this isn’t a complete or useful definition (Myers, 1974, Myers, 1990 and Watson, 2017). The main critique from these authors appears to be a lack of consideration of intention and that the generality of the definition excludes some forms of irony and includes some cases of non-irony (Myers, 1974). It does however provide a basic understanding of the general purpose of irony, if not its complexities. Irony is tightly linked to incongruity and the pleasure one gets from understanding the ironic text. As Ridanpää (2014) states, ‘irony attempts to be found out and transparent, however often it is not meant to be obvious for all participants.’

Parody and satire are more closely related and mainly differentiated by motivation. While parody can be (and often is) used for criticism, it is not strictly assigned a singular motivation and is basically defined as a rewriting of a text (Watson, 2015). Hariman (2008) also states that parody literally means ‘beside the song’ and highlights that parody is not copying a thing
but creating an image of it to be laughed at. Thus, to work parody needs to make its audience laugh. It does this by using the space between the original and parody to emphasise the ridiculousness of the original (Kenny, 2008). While satire uses humour as a weapon to attack ideas, behaviours, institutions etc (Bore, Reid, 2014, p454). Satire’s primary purpose is criticism, which inherently leads to a desire to persuade. Though Gruner (1992), argues that there is mixed research into the persuasive effectiveness of satire. Similar to irony, the effectiveness of both parody and satire is dependent on the audience’s understanding of the original context and existing personal factors such as political prejudice and intelligence (Gruner, 1992, Hariman, 2008).

3 Literature Review

3.1 Importance of Diverse Representation and Impacts of Stereotyping

How something or someone is represented plays an influential role in how audiences will react to them. Who is telling a story and how it is presented can also greatly impact public opinion. Hence, it is immensely important to consider the power NGOs have to influence audiences with the messages they disseminate, as they contribute greatly to the general knowledge and awareness of global inequalities (Dogra, 2012). Ongoing, dominant narratives of pity and superiority can lead to white saviour narratives or feelings of hopelessness in the face of complex development issues.

These narratives are summed up well by the White Saviour Complex (WSC) concept. The term was originally coined by Teju Cole in 2012 in response to Kony2012 and criticises the idea of western privilege and feelings of superiority (Cole, 2012). However, though the term itself is relatively new, the concept of white superiority and desire to ‘save’ vulnerable distant others has existed for much longer.

Representation can be defined as “using language to say something meaningful about or to represent the world in a meaningful way (Hall, 2013). However, it is more complicated than that definition would imply, as representations are often mediated and interpreted in alternative ways than the creator intended. This study will further explore how social semiotics can provide useful insight into the way stereotypes are used and how humorous
communications may be interpreted through their visual and linguistic cues in the theory section below.

Stereotypes are ‘systems of belief about a particular social group, beliefs that could influence the nature of a perceiver’s perception, inferences about and reactions to those group members’ (Mackie, Hamilton, 1993). There are various motivations for using stereotypes including as an ‘ordering process or shortcut,’ a way of referring to the world and an expression of values and beliefs (Lacey, 2009). It is often defined psychologically as simplification strategy and it is this simplification of characteristics and complexities of social groups that have a negative impact (Mackie, Hamilton, 1993). When audiences are continuously exposed to stereotypical images, it affects the dominant discourse and creates the notion of a ‘a distant other.’ The ongoing aspect is an important one because though a singular negative representation may be true for a certain group or population at a specific time, if it is all audiences see, they may assign larger groups the same characteristics that do not apply to them (Dolinar, Sitar, 2013). This has been particularly true within the development context in relation to how Africa is depicted to western audiences, both by media outlets and NGOs. Africa is often written about in a very homogenous way as a place of chaos and beauty and even when new more positive narratives such as the Africa Rising one emerge, it still promotes neo-colonial values of resource extraction and need for intervention (Bunce et al, 2017). These stereotypes can become immensely ingrained and naturalised to the point where they are no longer questioned. A VSO study in 2001 found that UK audiences assumed that Africa was the beginning of the developing world, in need of western aid due to their helplessness and extreme poverty. These beliefs held even when those surveyed lacked basic knowledge about the country they were questioned about. The importance of diversity of stories and voices to avoid stereotypes and a single narrative can help counter the dominant negative stereotypes (Adiche, 2009). The problem with stereotypes is not that they exist but that they are incomplete and fail to communicate the various aspects of reality (ibid, 2009).

Despite increasing awareness of the impact stereotypes can have on public perception, NGOs continue to promote stereotypical representations of those they are attempting to assist. Negative or pitiful images are extremely effective at attracting attention and donations for their causes (Scott, 2014). Additionally, topics such as death and destruction are more likely
to be picked up by wide reaching media outlets, so negative language can be difficult for NGOs to avoid (Anyangwe, 2017). Organisations are also often attempting to balance education strategies with fundraising ones which can make resisting the use of shocking images extremely difficult as the negative images generally encourage a good monetary response (Dolinar, Sitar, 2013). However, these images can also arguably cause compassion fatigue which can cause audiences to become overwhelmed and end up thinking ‘this is just the way things are there’ (Scott, 2014). New media is beginning to challenge the assumption that negative images get more attention as when causes are promoted over social media, a positive approach is often more ‘sharable’ and hence more effective (Botha, 2013). This will be discussed further in the next section.

As mentioned, enduring exposure to these images over time makes it difficult for audiences to relate to the people being portrayed, emphasise difference and promotes a false sense of superiority (VSO, 2001). Additionally, it can have negative impacts on countries in terms of international investment and tourism (Bunce et al, 2017). In response to the growing criticism towards negative imagery, there is increasingly a push for NGOs to communicate more positively and focus on facilitation rather than aid. Thus, at least rhetorically, there has been some progress in this regard with greater awareness around representation’s potential influence. However, in practice, even when positive images are used, there is still a power imbalance between those providing development aid and those receiving it (Chouliaraki, 2013). Though promoting a more humanised depiction of aid recipients is positive, its current form often fails to challenge the existing power dynamics and continues to promote the dominant narrative of western superiority. Thus, these images can also be critiqued for oversimplifying complex situations and continuing to enhance the same binary differences as more negative campaigns (Scott, 2014).

Content is not the only issue with the way development is communicated, the methods used can also contribute to these stereotypes. By using celebrity endorsements or incentivising westerners to get involved, the ‘voiceless victims’ narrative and implication that western society is all knowing is actually strengthened (Chouliaraki, 2013). Where audiences were previously encouraged to act based on feelings of ‘grand solidarity,’ they are now encouraged to act for more individualistic reasons. They are looking for how it benefits them either in terms of reputation or altruistic feelings (Chouliaraki, 2013).
Obviously, communicating development in an effective and constructive way is extremely difficult, but there are positive examples of successful communication and by diversifying who is considered authoritative will improve this further. This diversification is becoming increasingly easier with the growth of new media technology.

3.2 The Impact of New Media

The rise of new technology, particularly communication technology and social media has greatly influenced how development issues are communicated, the way they are received and what information is prioritised in this communication (Tavernor, 2019). Importantly, it has also increased the overall connectedness of populations irrelevant of distance and diverse audiences are now accessible at a global level. This technologization of communication has also led to changes in the way development is portrayed more generally.

With new media allowing increased interconnectedness and accessibility to the public discourse, a diversification of voices has occurred (Cornwall, 2016). However, the power of new voices is often overstated, and existing power structures still prioritise the traditionally powerful over others. Formal organisations’ messages are still prioritised over most individual ones (celebrity endorsements excepted). In order to be influential, the voice of those being represented needs to be paid attention to, however who gets the attention is often pre-decided with social and cultural structures influencing what is deemed important (Tacchi, 2016). Despite this, individuals still have increased power to directly communicate with organisations in a new way. Hence, NGOs are increasingly changing their priorities to directly engage with audiences and adapting strategies to adhere to new social norms (Botha, 2013).

The development industry has become increasingly professionalised with many more grassroots and larger organisations actively growing their communication capacities. As NGOs generally still rely on the public for funding, volunteers, support and action, there is now more focus on awareness raising, building an organisation’s brand and interaction with audiences. Whereas communication was traditionally one-way—with an NGO providing information and audiences passively receiving it—the creation of new communication technology means individuals can now respond directly to organisation’s messaging as well as create their own content. Many organisations now use social media such as Facebook and Twitter to directly interact with their members online. Social media allows a more direct
discourse between organisations and their audiences with individuals directly commenting on content and sharing it to generate a broader reach. This increased interconnectedness and mediatisation of development communication has pressured organisations to search for ways to increase engagement (Tavernor, 2019).

Hence, NGOs are producing more of their own content rather than relying on coverage via traditional media channels (though this still forms an important part of most NGO communication strategies). This has led to increased attention on the shareability of content within organisations and new communication techniques aiming to attract a larger audience. Positive content is perceived as being “more sharable” leading to more organisations moving towards this (Botha, 2013). However, social media is not just changing how NGOs interact with their audiences but how audiences and supporters interact with causes in general.

This increased engagement can also have negative consequences with some interactions encouraging anger, bullying and ‘trolling’ rather than positive relationships (Crawford, 2012). This has only increased recently, with the online world seemingly increasingly polarised and internet users tending to ‘stick to what they know’ (Scott, 2014, pp163). This is emphasised by audiences’ growing reliance on social media as an information source. This limits the ability of NGOs to broaden their audiences and more deeply ingrains existing stereotypes and fears because people are still exposed to these traditional dominant narratives.

Additionally, the internet has influenced audience priorities in terms of how people access information. Where previously sources were limited to daily newspapers or books, information is now easily accessible for most target audiences of NGOs. Due to this accessibility there is a limit to the effectiveness of purely informative campaigns to incite behavioural change (Topaltsis et al, 2018). Moreover, online content is constantly changing, and audience attention span is becoming increasingly limited which puts immense pressure on organisations to be constantly updating and creating new content (Møhring, 2015). These changes have been difficult for some NGOs but can potentially allow for more experimentation for creative communications. Humour can play a role here, especially if used in a more subtle way that can present information in an entertaining way.

However, despite informational flows and activism changing immensely over time, there are growing discussions around the use of new media for activism and social change (Tufte, 2017,
Some argue that the growth of ‘clicktivism’ lacks meaningful engagement, while others counter that social media can provide a good platform for organising ‘real-world’ action. Due to the scale of the development industry, any change from the traditional methods of communicating aid are slow moving and often met with structural resistance.

### 3.3 Humour’s Potential for Breaking Stereotypes

The way organisations are communicating is changing and more importantly the way audiences are interacting with content is also changing. While using shock to get attention is not a new strategy and has traditionally been used in relation to disasters, famine and poverty, there is increasing criticism because of its promotion of damaging stereotypes, and organisations are often looking for more positive and even participatory methods of communicating. As Scott (2014) argues that all forms of humanitarian communication are different ways of attempting to overcome distance between audiences and far away others through mediation, and considering changing communication dynamics, there is now an opportunity for organisations to be more creative and humour may be one tool to potentially engage audiences in a more entertainment driven society.

Humour is not a characteristic often associated with activism in mainstream Western culture (Wolf, 2018, p42), however it has many attributes that may be useful especially for awareness raising and critique. Humour can contribute positively to this as it is often seen as a power leveller and can create solidarity. It also has the potential to be an effective tool to entertain and educate people who may not have otherwise been interested.

There is increasing research exploring the potential of humour for persuasion and information retention. Chattoo (2018) created a framework suggesting that there are five ways that humour can influence social change. These include attracting attention, persuasion, simplifying complex social issues, dissolving social barriers and amplification of issues (through sharing). Other existing research also reflects this with various authors highlighting aspects that potentially make humour a useful tool. These include; its ability to increase likability (Nabi et al, 2007), reduce counter-argumentation (Chattoo, Feldman, 2017), provide critique in a less confrontational way (Kenny, 2008), destabilise norms (Hariman, 2008, Clark, 2018), make content ‘more sharable’ (Tavernor, 2019) and as an alternative to fear (Topaltsis et al, 2018, Bore, Reid, 2014). A lot of these aspects fit within the five headings Chattoo
provides and can be useful to consider when attempting to effectively communicate development issues to an often-disengaged audience.

3.3.1 Attracting Attention and Creating Awareness

As previously mentioned, communication of development issues and NGO work is often considered important but dull, and based on this assumption, humour can play a useful role in reengaging an audience. Cameron (2015) argues that when messages are not deemed very important, attention is more greatly focused on likability and perceived credibility of the source of information. Therefore, humour can act as the ‘hook’ to gain more attention (Waisanen, 2016).

Often the attention comes through the surprise of using humour, as development issues are not usually portrayed in this way. By doing something unexpected, the communication may stand out from other similar messages using more traditional techniques.

By using humour as a form of edutainment, it becomes a framing device for storytelling (Clark, 2018). This has also been used as a way of engaging students in topics they feel overwhelmed about and allowing them to feel relaxed within their learning environment (Ruggieri, 1999). The same technique can be useful to cover complex development issues as many people feel overwhelmed with problems happening to a distant other and it no longer seems relevant to them. Laughter can create a solidarity with others, regardless of distance and assist in creating points of similarity rather than difference.

Some topics such as climate change have an extremely negative and highly contested discourse. There is a dominant narrative of fear which causes feelings of hopelessness and large-scale disengagement with the issue. Here, the use of humour is being explored as a counter discourse to the primary one of fear that is currently failing to promote change (Topaltsis et al, 2018). As constant fear tactics tend to have a negative impact on engagement, a humorous tone can promote more positive engagement and reduce apathy with the subject. However, the counter argument to this is that fear can promote more careful consideration of an issue while happiness can cause more superficial thinking as people don’t want to reduce their happy feelings (Boden, Hausen, 1993). In the case of climate change conversations however, an alternative to fear is required as fear has often
been replaced with apathy and therefore humour could provide an alternative and promote a different way of thinking about the issue.

### 3.3.2 Destabilising Normative Assumptions

Humour can help identify existing assumptions that audiences may hold and highlight the untrue or absurd aspects of these (Dodds, Kirby, 2013). This is exceptionally useful when trying to counter stereotypical narratives such as the ones mentioned previously. Satire is commonly used in this way, to not only highlight an assumption but render it ridiculous and encourage audiences to question why a particular representation has been normalised. This is done through the novelty of a new perspective and unexpected presentation (Dadlez, 2011). As will be seen in the case studies below, common techniques for challenging these normative views are role reversals, sarcasm and comic counterfactuals.

Satire and parody are the most common ways of doing this. They create incongruity by using an existing stereotypical image and reversing it, rendering the original ridiculous (Kenny, 2008). It also encourages audiences to question their assumptions about the normalisation of the narrative the satire exposes. For example, in Saturday Night Live’s (SNL) 39 cents sketch, the idea of saving people at such a low cost is questioned and emphasised as problematic (SNL, YouTube, 2014). This video has been viewed over ten million times as of July 2019. It has such a wide reach due largely to SNL’s popularity at the time (SNL’s views range from the tens of thousands to tens of millions, so it was comparatively popular even within this context).

Waisanen (2016) uses the term comic counterfactuals to describe this phenomenon. He defines this as an alternative construction of the past using comedic methods, with the purpose of making audiences critically reflect on the social, political and performative consequences of certain events (ibid, p2). There needs to be a balance between reality, comedy and incongruity, as if something is too unrealistic, it will be ignored but if it is too close to reality, it may lose some of its rhetorical force because the audience may not recognise the alternative.

### 3.3.3 Persuasion

Humour and comedy can be a powerful source of influence on public opinion (Chattoo, 2018). Once the humour has generated initial attention for an issue the next step is to convince the
audience about the seriousness of the message. There is conflicting research on the effectiveness of this, however some authors such as Cameron (2015) focus primarily on the peripheral route of persuasion that humour can generate. By framing a message in an entertaining way, rather than taking a more serious, direct approach, humour can activate information processing but reduce counter arguments towards the message (Chattoo, Feldman, 2017). However, people often process ambiguous information in ways that suit them and their existing beliefs (LaMarre et al, 2009). This means if a humorous communication is left too much to interpretation, its serious persuasive message is likely to be ignored or missed altogether. This is especially relevant for online content that is often filtered through algorithms that prioritise content that matches what people have already accessed. Heiss, Matthes (2019) however argue that this may actually strengthen existing beliefs and could also foster greater political participation. In this case humour can still play a useful role, albeit to a different audience.

Another way humour can be useful in this regard is its possible ‘sleeper effect.’ This idea is contested but there is some evidence to suggest that even if a humorous message fails to change opinions or behaviour initially, the communication will be remembered, and behaviour change potentially triggered after a period of time (Nabi et al, 2007).

However, it is important to note that behaviour change and persuasion are not fast acting, both audiences in the general public and the development sector itself are slow moving and will not change due to a singular humorous communication.

3.3.4 Increasing Likability and Shareability

Fine and Woods (2010) state that ‘to joke is to embrace the illusion (and reality) of community.’ This emphasises the social aspect of humour and now with the increase in social media, it is easy to share and amplify messages through digital media. Sharing content that people find amusing is exceptionally common and allows them to express their identity and opinion to their extended connections, hence amplifying the message to places that may not have otherwise been reached through traditional means (Chattoo, 2018). As previously mentioned, positive content is often considered more sharable. Other factors to be considered are good storytelling and personality, however the traditional negative advertising often doesn’t translate so well in the social media context (Botha, 2013).
Unfortunately, there is only limited knowledge about what makes something go viral as there is often no visible consistency between viral posts and others that have less reach (Botha, 2013). Despite the lack of clarity there are some key aspects that are often used to justify why something went ‘viral.’ These include being content specific and creating an intra or interpersonal reaction (ibid, 2013).

Though humour can be a good tool for increasing likability, some studies show (Nabi et al, 2007) that using humour can reduce credibility of a source and message. This could obviously have negative impacts for NGOs attempting to both inform and receive ongoing support, especially from international or governmental donors. This effect is most likely more influential for organisations or individuals that do not already have an established relationship with their audiences. This trivialisation can be potentially resolved by following up humorous messaging with more serious conversations to greater influence social change (Chattoo, Feldman, 2017).

### 3.3.5 Less Confrontational Critique

Humour can be used as a way of criticising something/someone in various contexts through the use of puns, jokes, satire. This way of communicating humour can be seen as a ‘hedging of bets’ with it both being a critique and ‘only a joke’ if things are taken negatively (Westwood, Johnston, 2013). However, in many cases it allows critique to be heard by those it is aimed at without creating a knee-jerk defensive reaction. This can allow for more productive conversations after the issue has been raised. In many contexts, direct confrontation is not an option especially in areas where it can be dangerous and lead to punishment. However, Kenny (2008) argues that any critique given in this way will still be within the system and may not have any long-term effects on change. It can instead be seen as a way for creators to ‘let off steam’ and possibly become a distraction rather than basis for constructive criticism.

Additionally, some humour is based on stereotypes and has been used to uphold the status quo rather than critique it.

Sørensen (2017) also states that how the people/organisation are perceived in relation to the dominant discourse they are critiquing can also impact the effectiveness of the criticism. In cases where the criticism is coming from an untrusted source or one known for making false
claims it may not be as effective. In the case of the Yes Men activist group many of their activities were described in the media as ‘hoaxes,’ this terminology somewhat diminished the overall impact of the serious topics within their humorous protests (Waisanen, 2016).

4 Methodology

This chapter will explain the methodological approach and limitations, as well as the study’s relevance to the field of communication for development. A qualitative approach was taken to explore humour’s potential to effectively break down stereotypical representations of development/aid practices. This was chosen primarily because qualitative methods can provide important insight into interpersonal relationships and explicitly aim to understand the world, society and institutions (Tracy, 2013, p5). This emphasis on societal norms is extremely relevant because humour is a culturally specific and inherently social phenomenon.

Specifically, this thesis will explore the visual and discursive aspects of two primary case studies (though some secondary examples will supplement the research and highlight possible similarities in motivation and execution of humour usage). The Norwegian satirical NGO RadiAid, which is produced by student run organisation, SAIH, and Kenyan mockumentary series The Samaritans will be used to explore the social codes used in humour communication, audience reception to them and the motivations for their creation. As humour can be used in a range of contexts and for various purposes, these specific examples were chosen to focus more closely on how humour can be used to critique and create awareness of the development sector. Both cases focus on criticising aspects of the development sector, however they come from different starting points. While SAIH is a northern, European NGO criticising the way western NGOs are promoting ‘developing countries,’ the Samaritans was created by a Kenyan production company and focuses on the NGO sector in Kenya. It is criticising the structure of the industry rather than just the perception of it. These two seemingly immensely different examples were chosen initially due to their differences but there are also some notable similarities between them and the discourse surrounding them.
Firstly, the visual aspects of each example were introduced and considered. This is immensely important as a lot of the social critique from the examples was visual rather than explicitly stated. Additionally, by using a lens of social semiotics and intercontextuality this study also considered core contextual requirements for understanding.

Additional to this visual content analysis, social semiotics allowed exploration of both the intention behind using humour and how audiences reacted to it. Emphasis was placed on the social and contextual aspects of humour's usage in these case studies. This study did this by exploring the discourse surrounding the productions and their release to the public. This enabled greater insight into the existing power structures and how these influenced the intended meaning of the productions. Practically, this was achieved through an analysis of the media coverage (both traditional and through social media pages) surrounding the examples as well as four semi-structured interviews with producers or communications officers involved with the organisations. The four interviewees were Hussein Kurji (producer/writer of the Samaritans), Anne Gerd Grimsby Haarr (Communications Officer at SAIH), Liam Purcell (Communications Manager at Church Action on Poverty) and Hannah Fox (former head of media at Comic Relief). The interviews were conducted either through email or Skype depending on time limitations and consisted of a number of open-ended questions that can be seen in Appendix 1.

4.1 Ethical Considerations and General Limitations

When approaching this kind of research, it is important to consider any ethical ramifications of the work. Here there were several considerations regarding which examples to choose and how to conduct the social aspects of the analysis. There was less ethical concern surrounding the visual aspect as this was conducted on publicly available information, however it was still important to consider the language used was appropriate and not promoting stereotypes further.

Additionally, the discourse analysis required some more consideration regarding the social media comments. Though in the public domain, the commenters have not given their permission to be quoted in this research and thus shall remain anonymous, cited only in one figure and discussed in a generalised way. It was still possible to gain a basic insight into the
emerging patterns regarding audience interaction with the case studies within the limits of the social media landscape without infringing on people's privacy.

The interviewees were sourced through public emails, social media messaging channels and through a post within a communications professionals’ Facebook group asking for volunteers. Though initially seven people responded to requests, due to time constraints, only four were able to follow through to the interview stage. All participants of the interviews were told what the research was for and agreed to answer questions. Unfortunately, only one interview could be conducted over Skype with the others answering questions via email. All three email participants allowed follow up questions.

The sample size here is a clear limitation for this work and limits the generalisations that can be made about the patterns that emerge. However, even the small sample size does provide an interesting basis for future research that could explore these findings at a larger scale. Additionally, as two of the interviewees came from the organisations behind my primary case studies, they do provide good insight into the motivations behind their creations. It is also important to note that this was a secondary aspect to the research and therefore can be regarded as supporting the patterns seen within the other research methods.

Other methods including surveys to compare audience reactions between humorous and serious content were also considered. This was eventually discarded as most of the people responding would be friends and connections, which could create ethical concerns and lack real diversity in the responses.

4.2 Relevance to Communication for Development

Communication for Development (Comdev) is a diverse field with varying theoretical basis and definitions, however one of the primary aspects of the study is about how organisations communicate both internally and externally. Though the language often differs between authors, what Manyozo (2012) defines as the Media for Development approach best describes this study’s relevance within the field. Manyozo (2012, p17) states that this approach aims to ‘communicate development in ways that educate audiences and influence positive behaviour change.’ Humour is a potential way to achieve this aim and the examples provided highlight the desire to invoke social change and awareness in relation to representation of the aid sector. The concept of representation is also a primary concern for
many Comdev authors and thus it is important to critically consider the ways the development sector can potentially influence audience perceptions through their portrayals of distant others.

4.3 Research Methods

4.3.1 Visual Analysis

Though visual analysis places an emphasis on the visual aspects, it also considers how meaning is influenced by its surrounding cultural contexts. Visual analysis focuses on four primary questions; who is taking the image? When was it taken? Who is being framed? And who is telling the story? (Banks, 2001). Through these questions, one can explore the composition and intended meaning of the satirical productions in addition to their social context. Visual analysis can cover a range of theoretical tools, but this study will view the case studies through the lens of social semiotics.

Visual characteristics used in humour are extremely important in understanding its meaning, as when something is explicitly explained, it often fails to be funny. Images avoid direct explanation but can convey a lot of hidden meaning and form an important site of resistance or critique by highlighting the constructed nature of dominant imagery (Rose, 2001). This study will be based on a social constructivist view that meaning is subjective and created through processes of encoding and decoding of a message (as explained by Hall 2013). The two primary case studies use imagery extensively to critique development practices, however the social context they occur in is of equal importance to their form.

4.3.2 Social Semiotics

‘Semiotics or the study of signs is a way of analysing meaning by looking at the signs (words, symbols, images etc) which communicate meaning’ (Bignell, 2002, p1). However, it is less about simply collecting signs than about how they can be used to create meaning, how things stand in relation to other things, and how those mediated relationships help us understand things better (Shank, 2012). In other terms, signs and language both shape reality and are the means through which reality is communicated (Bignell, 2002, p6).

Ferdinand de Saussure and Roland Barthes are generally most associated with the theory of semiotics (Hall, 2013, Lacey, 2009) while Bignell (2002) and Shank (2012) also cite Charles
Piece as an important scholar. While it traditionally dealt with the use of signs within language, Barthes extended this to visual analysis, and it is this aspect that this study focuses the most upon. Traditional semiotics uses the term signs for the signifier (the item that is interpreted to have meaning) depicting meaning, however social semiotics prefers the term ‘resource’ as it does not give the same assumption of pre-determined meaning as the word sign (Van Leeuwen, 2005). This constructivist approach recognises resources as signifiers that have a “theoretical semiotic potential constituted by all their past uses and all their potential uses and an actual semiotic potential constituted by those past uses that are known and considered relevant by the users of the resource, and by such potential uses as might be uncovered by the users on the basis of their specific needs and interests” (ibid, p4). This occurs within a specific social context that can define whether the signifier is set or can be more freely interpreted. This interpretation of semiotics places emphasis on the cultural and considers the ‘conventions’ of society that influence meaning (Hodge, 2017). This emphasis on cultural and societal influences is extremely applicable when studying the influence of humour as it is often imbedded in societal and cultural norms and often requires certain cultural knowledge to be understood. Social semiotics was also originally studied in the context of language (Ledin, Machin, 2018) but is suited to analyse visual productions such as images, video and graphics. The idea that semiotic resources have ‘meaning potential’ emphasises that the various ways words and images can be interpreted is heavily influenced by the context they exist within.

However, Jewitt and Oyama (2004) make the important point that though interpretations of resources are more flexible than in traditional semiotics, most audiences still conform to the dominant meaning and it usually requires a certain level of power to overcome the assumed meaning in a public sphere.

5 The Case Studies

There are a range of examples of organisations and individuals already using humour to communicate and critique development. Though different in many regards including purpose and execution, there are some overarching patterns in the way they use visuals to convey certain messages to their audiences. Additionally, their motivations for using humour also have some core similarities. This study will focus on two primary examples. Firstly, the
Norwegian campaign RadiAid and Kenyan comedy the Samaritans. Both examples use humour to critique stereotypical representation, though the Samaritans arguably goes further to question the effectiveness of current aid structures of the sector.

5.1 RadiAid

RadiAid is arguably the more mainstream example to be used in this study, both in terms of academic analysis (Jefferess, Cameron, Schwarz and Richey have all used it to consider humour’s potential to communicate for social change) and measurable public reach. RadiAid is an ‘annual awareness campaign’ created by Norwegian study association SAIH (RadiAid, n.d). First produced in 2012, SAIH has since created a range of satirical videos annually. Additionally, they also created two annual awards that highlight positive and negative communication strategies of NGOs’ campaigns from that year with a focus on the representation and dignity of the organisation’s recipients. These awards are clearly linked with the radiator theme of the original video which focused on providing freezing Norwegians with radiators from Africa to save them from the cold, a campaign they dubbed RadiAid, Africa for Norway.

The organisation’s first satirical video was a satire parodying the Live Aid song and as of July 2019 had over 3.5 million views on the SAIH’s YouTube channel (SAIH YouTube, 2019). Though the organisation is based in Norway and the videos are promoted to a western audience, SAIH emphasises that they use a local production company in South Africa and cooperate closely with local partners when creating the videos (Møhring, 2015). In 2018 they moved away from satirical videos to release research surrounding representation of people in Africa in aid/development advertising. Previously they had also collaborated with another satirical production (Barbie Saviour) to create social media guidelines. These also were advertised using a satirical YouTube video but the guidelines themselves contained serious advice. Primarily SAIH has used YouTube to freely distribute their content and promoted it via social media. The first video especially was covered extensively in mainstream western media by Al-Jazeera, the Guardian and Africa is a Country (among others). This coverage will be discussed further in the next chapter.
5.2 The Samaritans

The Samaritans provides an interesting example as the first trailer for the show was released in 2013 by Kenyan film company, Xenium. The creators shot a limited number of scenes for the show before receiving funding for the first two full episodes from a Kickstarter Campaign and somewhat ironically an NGO (Chandler, 2014). The production company has no formal ties to specific aid organisations, but the producers collected multiple stories from the sector and describe the show as conscious comedy (Xenium Facebook, 2015). The show was described as a Kenyan NGO version of the Office (Wakefield, Dodge, 2014) and as of July 2019 had released two full episodes. These are available to rent online with excerpts available on YouTube. The Samaritans focuses on an NGO based in Kenya called Aid for Aid, an organisation that does nothing to help the people it originally intended to assist (AidforAid, n.d). There is a diverse cast of exaggerated characters that aim to highlight the stereotypical types of people found in the aid sector.

In the four-five years since its initial release, there have been no further episodes, but the surrounding social media accounts are still somewhat active, and creators are still attempting to find funding and commercial release for it. There are some key differences which make this a unique example as it is produced in Kenya but primarily for a western audience. Originally, it had the express aim of beginning conversations about the aid sector in Kenya and was directly critiquing how it functioned. Interestingly this purpose has changed over time, with the social change aspect playing a less prominent role (Kurji, email interview, 2019). Additionally, it is also a different format to the other examples as it is a full show rather than just a short 2-5 min clip or Instagram post and audiences need to pay to see the full episodes.

5.3 Other Examples

It is important to note that there are various other examples of satirical and humorous critique/campaigns. These include Barbie Saviour (an Instagram account created by two American women), Yes Men (also American and use satire and ‘hoaxes’ to protest various political issues), N.G.O Nothing Going On (Ugandan movie about two men setting up a fake NGO), skit show examples (Saturday Night Live sketch about 39 cents, TIMS smoothie machine one for one scheme), and development memes (sceptical third world child). All of these examples were considered (and may be mentioned) but for a variety of reasons were not
chosen to be the primary examples. In some cases, it wasn’t possible to watch the movies while others were not considered because their primary purpose was entertainment rather than an educational or awareness objective. However, they still provide interesting insights into how cultural contexts influence the knowledge required for understanding their underlying development narratives, even if their primary purpose is entertainment.

6 Visual Analysis Through the Lens of Social Semiotics

There are many tropes commonly seen throughout NGO campaigns. As previously mentioned, this is especially true in terms of the way that African countries are promoted. Most of the examples discussed in the following chapters cover the African context and the specific country is rarely defined.

The RadiAid campaigns specifically highlight this fact both visually and explicitly at the end of their videos. As RadiAid has done a range of videos over a number of years, this study will focus primarily on their earlier videos; Africa for Norway from 2012 and Who Wants to be a Volunteer video from 2014. However, it will also explore the similarities between their videos.

![Figure 1: Early Shots from Africa for Norway](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ojLqyuxm96k)

The 2012, Africa For Norway video begins with a piece to camera from a local charity worker, who is explaining why Norway needs African assistance before cutting into his justification with images of struggling Norwegians (as seen in Figure 1). The stereotypical images associated with representations of Africa are instead reserved for the Norwegian recipients and there are other visual cues that are generally more associated with westernised/developed nations. Placing things such as nice cars, skyscrapers and western
clothes provides audiences with resources that imply a degree of modernisation that is often not associated with ‘traditional’ images of Africa in the media. It is this novelty of perspective and unexpectedness of the reversal that contributes to undermining preconceptions of African people as helpless or passive victims (Dadlez, 2011).

The most obvious use of imagery and resources in the first video is the role reversal between Africa and Norway. Norwegians are portrayed as cold and unable to help themselves. They are the victims and are incapable of keeping warm in the winter without the support of the African people creating the charity song. This direct inversion of a situation where European nations are donating things to African nations, highlights the inadequacies of stereotypical representations in media and NGO coverage of development issues. This works because most people understand that Norway is actually one of the most highly developed countries on earth. But if someone who knew nothing about Norway and this was all they saw, they would have no way of knowing that, as Adichie (2009) writes it is not that stereotypes are wrong (Norway is actually cold), it is that they are incomplete (they also have the infrastructure to deal with it). Additionally, this video could also be seen as critiquing the systematic way aid sends things to African nations that they do not need. This aspect may be missed without knowledge of the aid sector. Audiences need to be somewhat in the know to fully understand the message, however they can still gain entertainment from it (Nabi et al, 2007) and most western audiences (at whom the content is aimed) would at least have basic awareness of the traditional stereotypical images RadiAid was criticising. The exaggerated portrayal of this reversal creates humour through the incongruity of the role reversal. However, audiences can identify strongly with the African characters despite the unexpectedness of their portrayal. This is because of an atmosphere of relatability to the characters through the above-mentioned semiotic resources that allow audiences to see themselves in the character. This inspires a certain amount of empathy (Scott, 2014). However, by focusing on the western audience, it potentially continues to emphasise westerners’ feelings and perceptions rather than promoting the independent voice of the distant other (Chouliaraki, 2013).
Figure 2: Who Wants to be A Volunteer

A clear parody on popular television show Who Wants to be a Millionaire, the video also exaggerates common tropes associated with the white saviour complex. Source: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ymcflrj_rRc&t=3s

Another example of this incongruity can be seen in the Who Wants to be a Volunteer video. It doesn’t use the same form of role reversal but rather parodies the premise of Who Wants to Be a Millionaire and changes the prize to become a volunteer who can ‘save Africa’ (See Figure 2). The beginning montage shows the white female lead running around throwing food at people, some of whom already have food in their hands, ‘teaching’ kids to play football and taking selfies surrounded by children. These images are heavily associated with advertising within the aid sector as food and education are often depicted as priorities that require donations (Dogra, 2012). The images here are exaggerated, and highlight the issues surrounding volunteers lacking knowledge and skills to provide useful assistance. The actions portrayed in the video have been increasingly criticised for encouraging aid dependency and spreading messages of helplessness but are still commonly seen in NGO advertising. This video takes the white saviour complex to its extreme and makes a point of highlighting the volunteers lack of knowledge by getting her to answer the question wrong but celebrating her answer anyway. The visuals throughout this video again aim to highlight the ridiculousness of these dominant narratives through exaggeration and turning aid into a game. By taking this to such a ridiculous level, RadiAid subverts the naturalised state of these development practices and encourages audiences to consider the meaning of them (Hariman, 2008). The humour is extremely important as it serves as a tool to avoid defensive reactions and make criticism more easily acceptable (Kenny, 2008). This is especially important when dealing with sensitive topics because these mistakes are usually made by people who have ‘good intentions’ and generally lack knowledge beyond the dominant narratives they have been exposed to.
Additionally, organisations such as SAIH need to balance their need to criticise bad practices without excluding those they are trying to persuade or donors who may fund other aspects of their work. Possibly due to this attempt to balance critique with positivity, the RadiAid videos do not challenge the dominant development norms as a whole but focus primarily on issues surrounding stereotypical representation.

Figure 3: Images of the White Saviour

As can be clearly seen here, many organisations use images of the white saviour in a satirical way to emphasise their point about the issues with these images. From Left to Right, Top to Bottom: SNL sketch 39 cents, TIMS $600 Smoothie machine, Barbie Saviour and the Sceptical Third World Child Meme. Sources: YouTube and Instagram

Some of the techniques mentioned here such as exaggeration and surprise are also used in other examples of humorous communication. As can be seen from Figure 3, the image of a white saviour is often presented and then another action is used to disrupt this narrative. For example, in both the 39 cents sketch and the development meme, the traditional victim is given the role of ‘calling out’ the dominant narrative. In the first sketch this is done by telling the white saviour to ‘ask for more’ and in the meme the facial expressions and accompanying text often gives more agency and intelligence to the boy. This way of ‘calling out’ highlights
the ability of humour to shift the dominant status quo and give agency to marginalised voices (Chattoo, 2018). It also emphasises a slight reversal of power relations and is an example of the superiority theory of humour where the humour is based on bringing up one at the expense of another (in this case the usually more powerful white saviour). However, as this is done in a light-hearted way, the viewer is encouraged to laugh and consider the issue, rather than get defensive.

These examples are primarily a short form of communication and their main purpose is entertainment, they were nearly all featured online. Chattoo (2018) argues when using humour in this way, the combination of surprise and a lack of previous awareness can potentially have more impact to challenge perceptions.

**Figure 4: The Samaritans**

*Left: ‘We can’t lose site of what is important here.’ ‘Saving Africa.’ Right: Highlighting ineffectiveness and corruption through food. Source: [https://vimeo.com/111974903](https://vimeo.com/111974903)*

Though the Samaritans takes a different approach, similarities can be seen. While RadiAid emphasises and then reverses assumptions about Africa, the Samaritans takes place entirely within a singular office complex with no wider context shown onscreen. Instead of exaggerating the environmental features, the Samaritans focuses primarily on the characters to articulate and promote its message.

There are many visual aspects regarding the characters that intend to convey certain critical messaging. For example, one of the primary critiques the show makes is about the wastefulness of NGOs in Kenya. Visually this is established in the first few minutes of the first episode. As the characters are introduced, they are all dressed well in suits and expensive
clothing, and the communications officer shows off her Gucci bag. Additionally, the office is wide, open-plan and expansive with a large staircase. All are semiotic resources used by the creators to create a sense of wealth of those working for the organisation and to counter the idea of rurality and poverty generally associated with African stereotypes. In addition to the clothes and office space the second episode again highlights wastefulness and ineffectiveness of the NGO. The episode only covers one staff meeting that is supposed to finish at 3pm but continues throughout the evening due to inefficiency. There is an ongoing focus on the amount of food and wine sitting on tables and it is also mentioned explicitly multiple times.

The characters themselves also provide cues that support the messaging and are based on some of the common roles that are often critiqued within the humanitarian aid sector. Possibly the most prominent is the new white, young, male boss ‘Scott’ who has just been promoted by the central office in London. He has very little experience or cultural knowledge. Despite his lack of knowledge, he is confident and never questions his ability to run an NGO. This attitude is shown not just through his language but also visually through his actions. In the opening scene of the first episode he is seen attempting to tip his driver and refusing to take no for an answer, he also takes the microphone from a journalist as he assumes she is there for him (she isn’t). He also has his clothes stolen and later addresses his officers wearing only a t-shirt with the slogan ‘eat an elephant’. This shirt appears multiple times throughout the episode, possibly to reinforce the idea of inefficiency at NGOs. Scott’s inadequacy is also emphasised by his oppositional position compared to the deputy director who assumed she would get the job. She is well qualified and has knowledge of the practicalities and local context but continues to be overlooked. These two characters specifically emphasise the structural issues surrounding the development sector where the white saviour complex is deeply ingrained, and young white foreigners are often promoted overqualified locals. A range of other characters including some naive new beginners and employees who are not actually qualified in any way for their jobs also illustrate some of the power dynamics and structural issues of the organisation. Though some of this humour comes from the incongruity of a situation, much of it is actually closer to the superiority theory. Audiences are encouraged to laugh at other’s misfortune, misunderstanding and the general obliviousness of the characters. The humour used in the Samaritans does assume some prior knowledge of
the aid industry. Though many of the tropes are clearly recognisable to someone who has experience in the sector, it may not be as obvious to those without this knowledge.

Music also plays an important role from a semiotic perspective. The music in the RadiAid videos sounds extremely similar to music from the movie, the Lion King (which is about the African jungle) and is usually playing when something stereotypical is being shown. It is again using exaggeration to highlight the ridiculousness of the narrative in a fun way. Additionally, the first (and most viewed) video by SAIH for RadiAid was the parody to the Live Aid song. By creating many similarities within the video and parodying the extremely emotional yet uplifting feeling associated with the original song it criticises it in a way that shouldn’t make audiences too defensive. By criticising the song in this way SAIH received extensive media attention, not just at the time of creation, but also when a second Live Aid song came out to celebrate its 30-year anniversary. This meant that SAIH had a secondary chance to spread their message.

There are a range of common strategies being used by all of these organisations even if the execution differs. A lot of the humour comes from exaggerating or/and reversing stereotypical representations promoted by NGOs. In the case of the Samaritans, it is taken slightly further and aims to criticise the sector itself rather than just the communication strategies.

All the examples also rely on exposure to stereotypical representations that depict the white saviour complex. The exaggeration and reversal are only funny if the audience understands the original context, otherwise it will create confusion due to the inability to solve the incongruity of the situation. With most of the examples, only a rudimentary knowledge of the aid sector is required; it can be gained from being exposed to mainstream media news articles or common advertising campaigns using stereotypical methods. The Samaritans does require a deeper knowledge of problematic aid practices and stereotypes that less people may have been exposed to. This section has explored how semiotic resources can be used to create humour and the next section will explore more deeply the intension behind them and the reaction organisations received upon releasing them.
7 Context and Discourse Analysis

While the previous chapter explored the content of humorous videos, this section will focus primarily on the intentions and aims of the creators and the reaction to their work both on mainstream and social media. It is important to consider these, as traditional media continues to reach millions of people, while social media has become a primary method to share content and allows audiences to voice their opinion publicly, in a way that was previously impossible.

To better explore the intent behind some of these creations four people; Hussein Kurji (producer/writer of the Samaritans), Anne Gerd Grimsby Haarr (Communications Officer at SAIH), Liam Purcell (Communications Manager at Church Action on Poverty) and Hannah Fox (former head of media at Comic Relief) were interviewed. They will be referenced throughout as Kurji (2019), Haarr (2019), Purcell (2019) and Fox (2019).

They are relevant due to their usage of humour in relation to a development issue, either to critique, raise awareness or for fundraising purposes. Though all four interviewees came from a diverse range of perspectives, there were some commonalities between their answers. The interviews provided a good basis to get a better idea of the intentions behind the content especially in relation to the case studies as both Kurji and Haarr are directly involved in the creation/promotion of the Samaritans and RadiAid. Fox also brought a unique perspective from Comic Relief as this organisation has been criticised for their communication practices.

SAIH especially has been very open about their intentions with the RadiAid campaigns, they have clearly stated their intention of using humour to promote behaviour change and as a way to critique existing development practices. By taking a light-hearted approach rather than a more formal form of critique SAIH aimed to broaden their audience and avoid defensive reactions to their work (Viki, 2017).

There were various motivations for using humour including long standing policy (Fox, 2019), and to provoke a reaction when traditional communications failed (Purcell, Haarr, 2019). All four interviewees stated that humour brought more public attention to their content than serious messages had previously, and they were surprised by how quickly the humorous content spread publicly. Purcell (2019) said that the scale of the reaction his organisation received after they released satirical content online was more extensive than anyone
anticipated. He also added that the content has re-emerged periodically throughout the seven years since it was released. The success also meant they changed their follow up plans to avoid alienating certain groups they wanted to persuade to not push them too far. Additionally, Haarr (2019) from RadiAid also stated that SAIH was surprised by the amount of attention they received upon releasing the satirical content. The success of a humorous approach for SAIH is also reflected in the amount of the humorous content that has gone ‘viral.’ Some of SAIH’s RadiAid videos have over three and a half million views on YouTube while their non-satirical work has as few as forty views. Kurji (2019) agrees, stating that he wondered if the Samaritans would have been as popular if it was a drama. These findings highlight the effectiveness of humour to gain media attention. This is often the case if the content is seen as original or controversial as these have high news value.

Interestingly both Kurji (2019) and Haarr (2019) mentioned news organisations as the starting point for their widespread success. While Kurji (2019) credits an article from Africa is a Country (2013), he also mentions Al Jazeera’s coverage as it provides a serious follow-up to the issues raised within the mockumentary series. This type of serious conversation also occurred with the RadiAid campaign, although in that case it was an explicit goal generated by SAIH rather than by the international media. Both RadiAid and the Samaritans appeared in news articles in many western online news desks including the Guardian, Africa is not a Country, Al Jazeera, BBC, SVT, ABC (Australian) and others. This kind of widespread coverage highlights the ability of humour to get initial attention. This coverage did vary in depth. Some articles touched only slightly on the issues while concentrating more on the entertainment side, while others such as those published in Al Jazeera, more thoroughly discussed the surrounding issues such as white saviour complex, pay inequalities and whether good intentions are enough (Al Jazeera, 2014). As previously seen in the literature review, humour can be an effective means to promote a cause and attract attention in ways that dramas may not.

Both RadiAid and the Samaritans gained extensive media coverage from many western mainstream news outlets when they were initially launched. There is quite a lot of diversity in the coverage of these campaigns. Some news outlets focused solely on the content and its humour, while others discuss more seriously the issues the creators were trying to highlight. It is also interesting to see how this coverage has changed over the years since RadiAid began.
When the first video was released RadiAid was described as a ‘spoof organisation’ (Chandler, 2012), but more recently it is referred to as ‘a project of SAIH’ (Gharib, 2018) or campaign (Alake, 2019 NPR) and even a ‘Norwegian Aid Watchdog’ (Wenham, 2019). This change in language signifies a change in perception surrounding the RadiAid campaigns where they have gradually been given more legitimacy by the media. This most likely reflects the work they do in addition to the satirical videos. Each year along with a new satirical video, RadiAid also gave out awards for organisations both for positive representations (a Golden Radiator) and stereotypical negative one (Rusty Radiator). These awards continued to receive media attention each year along with the new satirical video. In 2017 RadiAid gave the Rusty Radiator to Comic Relief for a video featuring Ed Sheeran (SAIH, 2017). This led to many news articles focused primarily on Sheeran and varying levels of engagement with representational issues. Even those defending Sheeran still mentioned the award and cited good intentions and the amount of money raised as defences for the way Ugandan children were portrayed (Gharib, 2017). This defensiveness towards a dominant narrative featuring someone powerful highlights the difficulty of changing large issues of representation. Positively, Comic Relief did state that they would change strategy and not use celebrities in the same way (Fox, 2019). However, in 2019, Comic Relief received criticism again for another celebrity posing for a selfie in Uganda (Wenham, 2019). There are often attempts to justify this type of stereotypical advertising because it works to raise funds. Comic Relief does raise billions of dollars for aid through their combination of humorous and negative messaging (Fox, 2019). However, despite this justification, there needs to be continued critical analysis of the negative impacts associated with this type of communication strategy.

Interestingly, SAIH shifted techniques for RadiAid’s work last year, choosing to move away from a humorous approach and focus primarily on serious discussions about the humanitarian sector. This included producing academic research on how African people from multiple countries would like to be portrayed (RadiAid, n.d).

The coverage surrounding the Samaritans is different. When the first episodes were released in 2014 there was quite a lot of media interest. Kurji (2019) stated that the media attention really began with an article in Africa is a Country. The article by Chandler (2014) covered some of the issues raised by the show but was primarily an introduction to the series and interview with Kurji. Al Jazeera ran a segment on ‘The Stream’ that provided a more in-depth
conversation on the issues the Samaritans was addressing. Much of the coverage used the comparison to western show The Office as the headline to get people interested (Crossan, 2014, Wakefield, Dodge, 2014). This comparison is striking as Kurji (2019) mentioned that that type of entertainment is “not part of the culture here, it tends to be more about politics or Nigerian singers.”

However, in general the serious issues within the development sector were also discussed. Interestingly, though the comedic aspects were often mentioned they were rarely the focus of the coverage. Additionally, despite a lot of western coverage from a range of media, the show has still not been extended beyond its original two episodes. Despite this, the creators are still actively looking for funding to finish the season with Kurji (2019) stating that they had updated the scripts to match the changes in society and aid that had occurred in the five years since the shows original release.

He also added that humour could be difficult to sell across borders, especially if it isn’t coming from the UK or US. This comment highlights the common assumption that western content is prioritised in the media, forming a type of cultural dominance (Nelson, 2010). Additionally, the Samaritans was never specifically aimed at a Kenyan audience but rather always written with an UK/American/European audience in mind. This may be due to the cultural dominance of western media or because many of the issues brought up in the show are due to foreign control and investment in the NGO sector in Kenya. Thus, the western target group may have more power to influence change.

Interestingly, Kurji (2019) specifically said that the producers were no longer actively promoting their show as a way to change the development sector but felt that the serious conversation around the show would occur naturally when the full season is released.

Generally, all those interviewed said that the majority of the reactions to their work were positive. However, some critiques did emerge about using humour in this way. In the case of RadiAid, Haarr (2019) stated that though their biggest supporters came from the development sector, it was also where most of the critique came from. The main criticism was usually the simplification of issues to make it fit into the organisational objectives including fundraising. However, Jefferess, Dawd (2013) also criticised the use of Norway as a specific country example, while still defining Africa in a very broad way rather than with a
specific country. A more accurate role reversal would have been Kenya supports Europe, however due to the target audience in the west, perhaps this was decided to be taking the reversal too literally. Additionally, despite being filmed in South Africa, using a local production company and volunteer students as actors, the main decisions were still made by a Norwegian organisation who promotes how other nations should be portrayed.

For both the Samaritans and RadiAid, there was critique that promoting the wasteful or negative aspects could cause people to disengage and stop donating to aid agencies. SAIH has been careful to counter this narrative saying they support the development sector but that it is important to have these discussions to make change and that they want audiences to create their own meanings from their work (Bakken Riise, 2013).

Fox (2019) and Purcell (2019) also talked about criticism but from a different perspective. In Purcell’s campaign the target audience was politicians (as well as the general public) and their work was seen as supporting particular political groups, which was criticised as being inappropriate. Fox (2019) also had concerns surrounding offensive humour but stated that Comic Relief received more criticism for their traditional messaging (which often uses white saviour narratives) than the humour surrounding it. In both examples, the humorous/satirical aspects were not the point of critique, but neither could it override these criticisms.

Figure 4: YouTube Comments from Africa for Norway video

These comments highlight the diversity in reactions towards the RadiAid content.
Source: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oJLqyuxm96k August 2019
Social media has also played an important role in the widespread audience of these campaigns/productions. According to Haarr (2019), YouTube especially played a central role. A large part of RadiAid’s success is the shareability of content and ability to attract a broad audience via these new media platforms (Møhring, 2015). Comments on social media can also provide a basic insight into how general audiences perceive these messages. As can be seen from Figure 5 there was a diverse range of reactions, both in terms of content and when they were posted. As of August 2019, there were over 2,500 comments posted on this single video (SAIH YouTube, 2019). The range of answers supports the social constructivist notion that meaning is constructed by both the creator and the audience decoding it (Hall, 2013). There were four main types of answers; sarcastic (continued with the joke i.e. thanks for my radiator or I can give a hot water bottle instead!), positive (i.e. this is a great message, good work), criticising those who ‘don’t get it’ (i.e. it’s satire, they are criticising the white saviour narrative) and more serious answers citing authors such as Said or providing more context for the video. Unfortunately, there was also a range of racist/ignorant/offensive responses and it is difficult to tell if these are serious or just people wanting to create conflict. This study will therefore exclude them from further consideration. What these comments also show is that though there were some discussions surrounding the content in a serious way, mostly the content was perceived as entertainment rather than a vehicle for behavioural change. When there were some more serious conversations, there was little-no evidence of people changing each other’s minds. Many comments seemed to reflect views that were already held, highlighting that though humour can potentially be subversive in its persuasion, it often fails to change the status quo (Westwood, Johnston, 2013). Additionally, there are obvious limitations about what can be deduced from the comment section as it is impossible to know the motivations and true feelings of those commenting. However, it can provide some basic insight into how audiences reacted to content. Despite these limitations it is also interesting to see that the comments span over the course of six years with the most recent occurring only months ago. This highlights another advantage of new media; people can access the content years after it was originally released.

The social media commentary for the Samaritans is more difficult to gauge due to a few factors. It has less reach than the RadiAid videos (at least compared to the first ones) and because audiences need to pay to gain access to the content. There are trailers available on
YouTube and the main trailer does have over 180,000 views (Xeinium YouTube, 2019), however there are only 54 comments, and most are related to how they can access the show. On the production company’s (Xeinium) Facebook page, there are some comments but again they fall into two main categories of asking for access to the content, and praise for creating the show. Though the comments aren’t particularly useful in this case, there was a post of photos of the Samaritans being screened at the UN office in Nairobi. This shows that taking a unique approach can at least get the attention of those who may be able to create change on a wider scale.

These social aspects help provide a better insight into how audiences are engaging with the material as well as the creator’s intent when creating the content. Social media plays a large role in the dissemination of this content but can only provide limited insight into the extent to which audiences engage with the content. Humour and social issues often don’t share a common language, so it can be inaccessible to organisations trying to promote public engagement (Chattoo, 2018).

8 Conclusion

This study aimed to explore the potential benefits and limitations of using humour as a tool for social change within development issues. It did this firstly by exploring different motivations for laughter, forms of humour and how humour has been used in other contexts. This provided a theoretical basis to apply to the two primary case studies discussed. Exploring through the lens of social semiotics, led to several patterns emerging especially in the visual aspects and motivations behind the decision to use humour. Despite differences in method whether it be role reversal, exaggeration, satire or parody, both RadiAid and the Samaritans aimed to generate awareness and critique the development industry. In this regard they seemed to be reasonably successful, both examples gained extensive media coverage. Due to SAIH’s ongoing creation of new content their media coverage has extended and changed throughout time to give them more legitimacy to comment on social issues. What began as a spoof is now regarded as a watch dog function. Jahre (in Hallett, 2015) also stated that as the awards went on there were fewer negative options to choose from which may be a sign of actual social change. This claim would need further investigation.
RadiAid seemed to achieve more shareability than the Samaritans however, this may be due to the incomplete nature of the Samaritans. It also could be due to the ongoing dominance of western content over that from Africa. The show’s creators are still attempting to get funding and are hopeful to release a full season of the show.

Though these examples attempted to generate ongoing change, the Samaritans admitted that this had not been the case, despite positive feedback, Kurji (2019) stated that the scandals in Kenya had only gotten bigger in the years since the show’s original release. He did however add that he was hopeful that if the series was released in full, it may influence discussions surrounding corruption and inefficiency more effectively than it can currently.

So, can humour effectively break down stereotypical representations of development/aid practices? Should humour be used to increase exposure and awareness of development issues to previously disengaged audiences? In short, maybe. Humour has potential to be a tool for communicating development in an engaging way and fits well into existing edutainment strategies, however there are a range of limitations. Though humour can be effective to create initial awareness and conversation on a topic, its long-term persuasiveness and ability to change minds remains heavily contested. Another challenge with using humour within the development context is the cultural specificity of humour. What is funny in one context may not be in another. As mentioned, this cultural specificity may not necessarily be geographical but based more on knowledge of the development industry and the norms surrounding it. It is also important to realise that not all humour is positive, and humour based on stereotypes can be damaging and continue to perpetuate existing stereotypes in a negative way.

As seen with SAIH’s RadiAid, humour is not static and the strategy needs to develop over time to maintain relevance, something becoming increasingly important in the fast-paced nature of social media. The online aspect can also be a source of longevity as audiences can still access and discuss content that was posted years ago (as was seen in the comments section of Africa for Norway video).

Finally, humour cannot and should not replace more serious forms of communication for development but used in combination, it can provide an effective ‘ice breaker’ and allow
difficult discussions to take place in a safer environment. This can be an exceptionally useful tool when discussing difficult and sensitive topics or using criticism.

8.1 Recommendations for Further Study

Due to the limited sample sizes of this study, it would be beneficial to do a larger scale study into how audiences react to humorous content and if they are aware of the persuasive elements of a comedic text. There are many forms of humorous content being used for social change, so a different focus, for example on the role of memes in areas where freedom of speech is suppressed could also provide fascinating avenues to explore further. Additionally, it may be beneficial to further explore the connection between using humour and serious discussion in combination. Humour as a form of edutainment in comparison to more dramatic works would also make for an interesting study.
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Appendix

Base Template for Questions for the Interviews:

- What was the thought process behind choosing a humorous approach?
- What are the advantages/disadvantages of taking a humorous approach?
- Who is your primary audience, and did they react in the way you expected?
- Did you get any negative feedback regarding the show/advertisement/campaign etc?
- Do you think there are any topics/themes where a more humorous approach shouldn't be used?
- Is there a particular form of communication (fundraising, social change/critique, awareness) that you think humour is more suited for?
- What kind of resources were required for the creation of the show and was this different to other productions you have created?
- Do you think it is important to follow humour up with more serious communications or can it stand alone?