

# Comic Relief, Telling Unwanted Truth to Power and Ethical Journalism: Satire Writing in Print Media in Lesotho

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Satire writing in news comes in with a lot of humour yet and a lot of truth telling. In Lesotho newspapers, *Lesotho Times* has the Scrutator column and *The Post* has Muckracker. These are the columns that play the role of providing commentary on any issue trending in the news, more like the editorial but go further to tell the truth but in a manner that lacks seriousness due to the name calling and banter. This study sought to establish the real reason behind satire writing from the point of view of the journalists, newspaper editors, journalism scholars, and consumers of news in Lesotho. The study also sought to explore satire writing in newspaper news in relation to journalism ethics as name calling and labeling is one of the characteristics of satire writing in newspapers. Information was gathered, presented, and analysed qualitatively. Face to face and telephone interviews were carried out with print journalists and their editors as well as with journalism lecturers, journalism students, and newspaper reading citizens. The findings reflect that satire writing is understood differently by society with others regarding it as controversial and others liking it for truth telling. News producers and scholars appreciate it for the license it provides to tell truth outside the straight jacket strictures of political correctness guiding news production.

**Keywords:** satire, print news, Scrutator, Muckracker, journalism ethics

## Introduction

Satirical news plays the role of provoking otherwise apathetic news consumers to have interest in especially political news. This apathy might emerge as a result of constricted media practice through state control of news production and news producers having to stick to political correctness in order to avoid raising the ire of the authorities. In Lesotho, individual journalists and newspaper organizations stick to political correctness in the production of news content because the authorities do not take news production from a liberal perspective. Journalists have been known to flee into exile together with politicians during political tensions and newspapers also fear boycott of advertisements by government ministries and departments if they write contrary to government expectations. One newspaper editor barely survived an attempted assassination by military personnel because of the content of the satire column in one of the newspapers he edited in 2016. Burton (2010), for instance, wrote that in an age of infotainment and a failing news media, satirical news has emerged as an important force in revealing truth and engaging an apathetic public in politics and debate. Two newspapers in Lesotho (*Lesotho Times* and *The Post*) also resort to satire to tell those hidden truths that cannot

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be told in proper daily journalistic news stories. Satire, however, comes with a lot more than humour as issues of ethical journalism crop up together with name calling, labeling, and writing about individuals without giving them the opportunity to respond. This study sought to explore satire journalism in Lesotho newspapers considering that newspapers have been dragged to court for satire writing content (Retired Lesotho Defense Force Commander Lt General Tlali K. Kamoli versus *Lesotho Times*). Another example is that of *The Post* newspaper editor apologizing in *The Post* Volume 5 Issue 39, September 19-25, 2019. The editor apologized for Muckracker column in the 25 July edition of *The Post* headlined “Someone find Mapesela’s head”. Muckracker was citing the Defense Minister, Tefo Mapesela for an altercation with villagers who had trespassed with their livestock on Mapesela’s farm in South Africa. The minister complained to the newspaper that the article had caused him harm, hence the apology by the newspaper editor.

### **Statement of Problem**

Satire writing is supposed to be understood as harmless infotainment, but in Lesotho, it is not universally perceived as such. For instance, a newspaper editor was almost shot to death because of a satire column in one of the papers he edited.

### **Study Objectives**

The study sought to establish understanding of meaning making of satire writing from the perspectives of journalism practitioners, journalism scholars, and news consumers in Lesotho.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study is framed by the mass communication theory of gatekeeping. This is a theory expounded by Kurt Lewin in 1947 and it is about “...the traveling of a news item through certain communication channels in a group” (Lewin, 1947, p. 145, as cited in Roberts, 2005). Shoemaker, Eichholz, Kim, and Wrigley (2001) also said that gatekeeping is the process by which the vast array of potential news messages are narrowed, shaped and prodded into those few that are actually transmitted by the news media. This theory is related to the study as far as the journalism strictures of filtering news through labeling and framing information as newsworthy for publication is concerned. As they play the gatekeeping role, editors also categorise news; hence the resultant common understanding between the producers of news content and the consumers of news is that some stories are hard news, features, or opinion items.

### **Literature Review**

Satire is a way of using humour to show that someone or something is weak or bad and the word “satire” is derived from the Latin word “satur” and later “satura” (Wallanchy, 2016). Satire aims to explore societal inequities, or social and political issues. Wallanchy (2016) identified the genesis of satire with ancient writers, such as the 1st century Latin poet Juvenal who wrote five books of satire, and the 411 BC Greek playwright Aristophanes.

There are different types of satire, but LaMarre, Landreville, Young, and Gilkerson (2014) identified two types: Horatian and Juvenalian satire. They say that Horatian satire tells the truth, laughing and the Juvenalian satire is a more definitive, bitter approach to satire. LaMarre et al. (2014) also said that most conceptualizations of satire are grounded in the humanistic tradition of literacy criticism. However, satire has established itself in

print, broadcasting, and online media publication now.

Green (n.d.) wrote that satire is a literary technique in which behaviors or institutions are ridiculed for the purpose of improving society. What sets satire apart from other forms of social and political protest is humor. Satirists use irony and exaggeration to poke fun at human faults and foolishness in order to correct human behavior.

LeBoeuf (2007) wrote that satire is a powerful art form which has the ability to point out the deficiencies in certain human behaviors and the social issues which result from them in such a way that they become absurd, even hilarious, which is therefore entertaining and reaches a wide audience. Satire also has the ability to protect its creator from culpability for criticism, because it is implied rather than overtly stated; in this way, it becomes a powerful tool for dissenters in difficult or oppressive political and social periods.

Exploring political humor, Young (2017) wrote that political humor, in which satire plays a central role, encompasses any humorous text dealing with political issues, people, events, processes, or institutions. Young further associates political humor with parody, irony, and sarcasm in addition to satire. He says that parody often overlaps with satire and relies on the audience's prior knowledge of an original text or concept by exaggerating its most familiar aspects. Caricatures, or visual exaggerations of a known person's most identifiable characteristics are an example of parody, Young elaborates. He continues to say that irony is presented when a text exposes a gap between what is stated and what is meant and that is a common tool of the satirist. He goes on to say that just as satirical texts present critiques of society's ills through a humorous lens, irony offers a useful mechanism to playfully expose the gap between the way things are and the way things should be.

## Methodology

The study used qualitative methods of gathering information, presentation, and analysis because the aim was to establish how readers interpret and understand satire writing. Qualitative research is defined by Van Maanen (1979) in Merriam and Tisdell (2016) as an umbrella term covering an array of interpretative techniques which seek to describe, decode, translate, and otherwise come to terms with the meaning, not the frequency, of certain more or less naturally occurring phenomena in the social world. Random sampling technique was employed in selecting newspaper readers and student journalists, and purposive sampling was used for selecting lecturers and journalists for interviews. Twenty newspaper readers were interviewed, 10 male and 10 female. Ten student journalists were interviewed, five male and five female. Ten journalism lecturers were interviewed, five male and five female. Four journalists were interviewed and they were all male because the newspaper industry in Lesotho is populated by male news editors. Information-rich cases are those from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the inquiry because studying information-rich cases yields insight and in-depth understanding. Small samples were used in this study because the general aim of sampling in this qualitative study was to acquire information that is useful for understanding the complexity, depth, variation, or context surrounding the satire writing phenomenon, rather than to represent populations as in quantitative research (Gentles et al., 2015).

## Findings

### From Newspaper Readers

One male interviewee stated that when it comes to the Scrutator column in *Lesotho Times* and the

Muckracker column in *The Post*, he is not impressed because they sound unbelievable like they are written by someone who has a grudge against the people in power. He further said that they are also very rude and they make him uncomfortable to read. One female reader expressed her satisfaction with both columns because they expose corruption and misrule vividly. She further stated that she wishes everyone who wants to see Lesotho succeed should read the columns, especially *Lesotho Times* Scrutator column because it does not sugar coat anything; it tells truth it like it is. Another female interviewee indicated that as platforms of passing news to the public, Scrutator and Muckraker are the best especially for people who enjoy the truth as it is. She also stated that they are the best platforms because they get to see people in power for who they really are through the eyes of the journalists who write those columns. But the male readers argued that it is not the only platform that can be used to disseminate news, even if it does not get used no one will miss it because all it does is to misuse their power of being able to write everything and anything about anyone with impunity. Again, the male readers stated these two columns also mislead the readers because they are not always truthful about what they publish, so they bring confusion amongst the public. Another female reader stated that the two columns are necessary and not disrespectful to people who like the truth as it is. She stated that they are there to serve a purpose and they only offend people who are in power because they know what is written there is true and that truth hurts them. She added that people have every right to freedom to information and that if people in the world expressed their feelings freely without any fear this world would be a better place. But another male reader was of a different opinion that the two columns are disrespectful and that although people are given the freedom of expression they still have to choose their words wisely when addressing some issues because some newspaper readers are very sensitive and take matters seriously all the time, so if the story is not true, it can cause a huge misunderstanding between the readers and the people in power.

### **Findings From the Journalism Students**

In an interview with journalism students, they stated that both Muckraker and Scrutator columns are very important to them as future journalists because they somehow write analytically. The journalism students added that the two columns help them to be better journalists who are not fearful to report anything because the column is created for such platforms. For instance, if there is a story in the newspaper about a certain person in power and the editor decides to cut some important truths about the whole story, one is able to go to the column and write his/her own opinions and with that done, more readers are able to understand exactly what is going on. The journalism students also said that most print columnists on the news side are both columnists and also reporters so they definitely play by somewhat different rules depending on whether they want to report or they are writing a column. The ethics, however, do not change. So, they do follow journalism ethics.

### **From Journalism Lecturers**

Journalism lecturers said the average reader of newspaper stories might not fully understand satire when they come across it in the newspapers. They said for those readers, who are deeply steeped in tradition, it is not proper to mock someone in a position of authority. They would understand and find satire humorous if it is about an ordinary citizen. To the person portrayed in satire, it is not fair because this goes beyond news reporting, the lecturers went on to say. They say there is an element of exaggeration which does not portray the people being written about justly. They say it is unfair as it does not allow the platform for the person discussed an opportunity to talk for himself/herself. It only creates platforms for criticisms and exaggerations on view point. It makes the subject discussed a laughing stock or scapegoat. They went on to say that journalism and

ethics do not go hand in hand. The issue of whether satire has got a place in journalism writing brought different schools of thought within the journalism lecturing fraternity. Others said that they would encourage satire in print, broadcasting, and online media because it is proper infotainment and that it is good for business. They say quite a number of people buy newspapers because they enjoy reading the satire columns. Others however said that they do not encourage media to incorporate satire journalism even though it is enjoyed by the younger generation for entertainment than traditional news. They also say that writers use satire to persuade the readers to do or believe something by showing the opposite view. In other words, satire writing reflects writers being subjective all the time. Satirical writing may cause transformation of the individual but this is not the case, they argue.

### **Findings From Lesotho Civil Society**

An interviewee from a civil society organization in Lesotho said that he understands satire as literary work that uses sarcasm to expose human foolishness. It is also regarded as a subtle constructive criticism to the deficiencies of a certain topic. Satire in print media is used to create humour while, on the other hand, brings a thorough discussion to the topic at hand. He went on to say that it is not everyone who understands satirical columns in Lesotho as some take them too seriously to a point where newspapers are even taken to court for defamation. He made reference to a column written by “Scrutator” in the *Lesotho Times* issue dated 2nd July 2015 titled “Open Letter to Tlali Kamoli”. He went on to say that it is same article that brought serious bad blood between Lesotho Defence Force (LDF) and the newspaper. The interviewee went on to say that satire writing in some ways compromises journalism ethics as some columnists write without gathering facts. He said some columns are only meant to discredit others instead of giving constructive opinion. He continued to say that satirical articles are not in any way fair as they in most cases publish opinions that are not balanced. It does not give others a fair chance to respond or a right to reply. He, however, opined that it is important for print, broadcast, and online news outlets to publish satirical news. He also said that it does not mean that all published articles must be about politics but everything can be published as satire. He said satire creates an environment where audiences can look at certain topics in hilarity but also having received positive results.

### **Findings From Practicing Journalists**

One of the interviewed journalists said satirical writing does not fall under hard news. He said it can be classified under opinion. As in literature, it is humour/entertainment but also seeks to encourage society to see its flaws through the shortcomings of public figures to ultimately improve social conduct, he said. The journalist said that it encourages society to laugh off its shortcomings. If satire is in a vernacular newspaper, then potential bad jokes would be taken care of by cultural nuances embedded in a language, he went on to say. He also said that to choose a language is to choose a culture, as Ngugi says in “Decolonizing the mind”. He continued to say that there is a thin line between humour and offence in English papers because the allusions or analogies could be lost if the satire is written by a person from a different culture or if the person at whose expense a joke is made fails to see the joke. He continued to say that to more sophisticated readers, it enriches news by its entertainment potential and its inherent ability to transcend the strictures of the 5Ws. It is usually perceived as unfair in Lesotho even by educated people, the journalist said. He elaborated by saying the shooting of Lloyd (Mutungamiri, former editor of *Lesotho Times* and *Sunday Express*) had to do with the satirical column Scrutator lampooning Kamoli (former Lesotho Defense Force Commander) who is a well educated law degree holder. The source went on to say that notwithstanding the potential to step on the toes of

prominent people, satire should be part of print, broadcasting, and online news production. Newspapers should not just educate and inform, they should also entertain, he said.

Another journalist said that for decades, newspapers have used humour (satire) to comment on current affairs. He said that they ridiculed leaders, prominent people, and their country for mistakes, mismanagement, failures, and policies. The place to do this is the satire column of a newspaper, he said. He went on to elaborate that other newspapers use the cartoon section to achieve the same purpose. He also explained that there is no difference between satire in a newspaper column and comedy as a literature or film genre. He said the point is to make people laugh at their follies and mistakes. He also said it is meant to point the irony and hypocrisy in the world. The idea is that as we laugh we introspect on the issues, he continued. He continued to explain that satire, like comedy, makes you laugh but it is dead serious in its intentions and impact. He said newspapers use satirical columns because there are things they cannot say in proper news stories. He said it is because the ethical obligations are too strict for a journalist to infuse satire commentary in a hard news story. He went to explain that the satire column provides that leeway. He explained that the use of satire in Lesotho is fairly new, although it has been in use in newspaper production the world over for more than a century. The journalist said readers understand satire although it depends on the application of the reader. He said as an editor, he has never come across any reader who confuses a satire column for hard news. He gave the example that most of *The Post* newspaper readers understand the distinction between Muckraker and the rest of the news in the publication. He elaborated saying that nearly 40 percent of readers buy the newspaper to read Muckraker only. He says the readers are well aware that reading the Muckraker column, they are aware that they are not reading news but satire. He said they might not call it satire but they see the gist is not news but hilarious commentary on current affairs. The source said that ethical standards are measured for gathering, sourcing, writing, angling, and publication of hard news. Therefore, it is important to understand the process of writing a satire column, he explained. He said satire relies heavily on news already published and known. He said satire writers do not go around gathering news and do not interview sources because they are not writing news, therefore there is no correlation between ethics and satire writing. He said the satire writer does not pretend to be gathering and writing news facts; neither does the writer portray him or herself as an expert or authority on current affairs. He also explained that satire is not based on lies although there is exaggeration but not of the harmful or grievous nature. He says all that the satirist does is just to poke fun at the world us, its people, leaders, community, and government. He says satire complements journalism by ring fencing certain issues that journalists cannot write about as hard news. He says that way journalists focus on ethical etiquette whilst the satire writer tells his or her story outside confines of journalism ethics. The source said satire columns are not rabidly insulting. He said the point of satire is to chide, not to insult. He went on to say that if satire is good, even the person who has been written about laughs at it. He went on to say satire does not necessarily have to be fair. It, however, should be sensitive to societal values and the feelings of those mentioned, the source continued to say. The source said politicians, who are the main subject of satire, cannot complain about satire because they also throw stones at opponents through insults; therefore if they can criticize other people, then they can be criticized as well. The source went on to give the example of the Muckraker column which he said has not been sued by anyone. He said it is because readers understand the essence of satire writing in newspapers. He went on to say the world is full of satire publications, with some dedicated to satire only and others mixing satire with other genres. He said satire is necessary because the world is too serious, news is too serious, and therefore comedy and satire are necessary to the dreary monotony when reading newspapers.

### Discussion of Findings

Responses from news consumers are indicative of the fact that newspaper readers in Lesotho understand media content and the intentions of newspapers in news production. The fact that female readers are predominantly appreciate efforts by satire columnists in Lesotho shows that they are conscious of what satire in *Lesotho Times*' Scrutator and *The Post*'s Muckraker are trying to achieve. At the same time, the male respondents' predominant repugnance at the satirical content is informed by the issue of cultural traditional sensibilities as well as lack of trust in the media content. For instance, Peters (2012) opined that media audience awareness and appreciation of content is determined by literacy levels. He goes on to say that contemporary trends appear to indicate that higher levels of media literacy amongst the public seem to parallel lower degrees of trust in journalism. The case of male readers lacking appreciation of portrayal of their leaders as caricature cartoon characters and buffoons as satire writing characteristically does and liberally might be exactly what disgusts the male readers because they are aware of the agenda setting goals of the media, for instance. Contemporary newspaper readers do not absorb everything that comes from media institutions without interrogating the motive behind the production of content anymore, unlike in the past, when anything published by the mainstream media was regarded to be gospel truth. They are a lot wiser due to higher levels of media literacy.

Lecturers of journalism speak of traditional sensibilities by news readers and that satire is regarded as offensive in some quarters because of its ridicule of leadership. Journalists speak of satire being fairly new to Lesotho, yet has been alive globally for centuries. The journalists' standpoint is supported by abundant literature, especially from the West where satire is has been accepted longer due to the Western democratic traditions. African voices, however, may not be in total agreement with those Western perspectives and sentiment. The point is that readers may regard satire and its characteristics as totally alien to Africa and may be regarded as part and parcel of cultural alienation and cultural imperialism. The fact is that even in the 21st century, African sensibilities are still quite conservative in terms of respect for elders and respect for those in positions of authority. Eko (2015) was cognitive of that factor when he writes about cartoonists who ridicule leaders through cartoon drawings in newspapers. He says that African cartoonists do not have the right to ridicule and offend political leaders because the result is that cartoons deterritorialize African leaders by taking them out of their traditional zones of power and comfort, and place them in absurd, imaginary cartoon realities for purposes of criticism. This is usually met with censorious judicial and extra-judicial measures, Eko continues to say. He says censorship and these other measures are aimed at reterritorializing and rehabilitating the "tarnished" images of the powerful and enable them to control their media images. The news editor is therefore expected by the state to guard and protect the honor of those in power by exercising gatekeeping through keeping perceived offensive content out of their publications.

On the other hand, much as sentiments and sensibilities are to be respected, if Lesotho democratization efforts are to bear fruit, telling truth to power has to be part and parcel of the budding democratic media sphere. Satire column writing gives journalists just that platform. This is substantiated by Chen, Gan, and Sun (2017) who wrote that research has shown that exposure to political satire elicits negative emotions, which in turn mobilize political participation. They say that emotions play an important role in democratic politics due to their power in motivating citizens to break out of the cold individual utility calculation and mobilizing them to engage in political life. Emotions manifest individuals' appraisal of social situations and structure the kinds of

action they may take in response to social contexts. Satire writing triggers such emotions within readers when leadership weaknesses have been exposed.

### Recommendations

The study recommends that the reading public should be enlightened on different approaches to news production in order for them to have an appreciation of the sense behind satire columns. The study also recommends for journalism trainers to put the spotlight on satire and other columns that offer journalists an opportunity to inform readers about realities on the ground outside the parameters of traditional news framing. Editors should also allow space for satire and related columns in their newspapers to promote diversity of voices and critique of the political status quo rather sticking to traditional gatekeeping that protects the interests of those in power.

### Conclusion

Satire columns play the role of provoking apathetic newspaper readers to have interest in political news. In Lesotho, satire writing is however perceived differently with some readers regarding it highly for its truth telling to power characteristics and other readers looking at it disdainfully because they regard it as disrespectful to authority. News producers say satire columns offer them the opportunity to avoid the strictures of ethical news production and humorously tell unwanted truths without censure.

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