HUMOR, VIOLENCE, AND INFOTAINMENT IN THE BASQUE COUNTRY. A GOOD WAY TO TALK ABOUT POLITICAL VIOLENCE?

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ABSTRACT

Historically, political information in Basque Country has been polarized and guided by seriousness patterns, marked by terrorist experiences, so that during last decades it has been very difficult to find out any kind of humorous activity in public life, both political jokes and any other formats. However, in recent times the situation has changed, and the proof is the existence of some humour programs on basque radio and television, such as Vaya Semanita, which has achieved high audience ratings since it was launched in 2003.

The hypothesis of this work is that the success of this programme in the Basque Country means the triumph of a particular political discourse, relaxing y seemingly moderating one. To test this hypothesis, the contents of the first two seasons of this program (2003-2005) have been analyzed through focus groups, to see the impact of the program and how people interpret this. The final results show that, thanks to this humorous attitude while “informing” about basque politics, this infotainment program succeeded because it reinforced some social stereotypes about basque politics, especially those that were shared by the majority of the population. Besides, these comic stereotypes helped to put radical and serious political discourses in ridiculous and minority positions.

PALABRAS CLAVE

Humor / Therapy / Ridicule / Laughter / Political Discourse / Language / Basque Politics / Violence / Vaya Semanita

The aim of this chapter is to discuss a particular brand of humor in the first two seasons of the popular Basque comedy show *Vaya Semanita* (What a week), especially the episodes broadcasted on Euskal Telebista (ETB, Basque public television) from 2003 to 2005. There is a simple reason for choosing this subject matter. For decades, political information in the Basque Country was governed by a habitual and acute seriousness, shaped by the experience of terrorism, violence, and extreme political polarization. Thus, it was difficult for the media to find humor of any kind in the form of political jokes or satire related to Basque politics in general, not to mention humor concerning issues of violence or terrorism. At present, however, the situation appears to be changing. Since 2003, the program *Vaya Semanita* has proven successful in the Basque region and in a certain ways has created a new conduit in mass media using political humor, especially when concerning the topics of political violence and terrorism.

This chapter is organized into three parts. The first part is theoretical and methodological in nature and seeks to elucidate the different theories given to the role of humor in modern societies in tandem with the hypothesis and methodology that inform this study. The second part is a descriptive analysis that details the empirical outcome of the study. Finally, the third part summarizes the main conclusions and offers some reflection on the role of infotainment programs in addressing the phenomenon of violence.

**Political Comedy: Comedic or Political?**

“Infotainment” is a hybrid concept that refers to two types of activity: informing and entertaining—divergent notions that are increasingly fused. Supposedly, infotainment can mean two things. The first meaning refers to changes occurring in traditional serious formats for political information, such as news programs, which have sought to shape public opinion by introducing playful elements into information transmissions. The second meaning refers to the emergence of new ludic entertainment formats that handle political topics. That is, entertainment formats that “inform” on political matters in a pleasant, critical, or jovial manner, such as: television series with political content, talk shows, commercials, videos, comedy shows, and chat shows (Baum 2003). In theory, the difference between the two is fundamental because a journalist who
uses humor in a news program is not the same thing as a comedian who “reports” in the course of a comedy show. In practice, however, these distinctions are diminishing. Peter Sloterdijk explains that the emergence of infotainment in the mass media, even among those at ease with its usage, “is a phenomenon that reveals a shift in the media by means of passing on information through the generation of controversy via a provocative style of journalism and simplified mass hysteria” (2000, 88).

At the dawn of modernity, Thomas Hobbes, one of the first political theorists to analyze sociopolitical humor, warned that political humor is an extremely suspicious activity and should be treated with immense trepidation. This disposition, however, has changed from the time of the liberal bourgeois Enlightenment period of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when the use of generalized political humor was found most broadly among the more educated classes. In the twentieth century, and so far in the current century, there has been a massive widespread emergence of political humor enjoyed by different classes and social groups. This widening democratization and enjoyment of political humor corresponds to the growing importance of the so-called middle classes. A numerical majority and homogeneous in social and cultural terms, they share a similar disposition toward humor (Kuipers 2001).

Furthermore, the consensus among focus group respondents concerning the use of political humor in the media (including programs that deal with violent issues) is positive. This is because such shows target allegedly controversial content and simply make it funny. Thus, our society creates a distance between real problems and media discussion. Humor is a basic resource whose function is, to paraphrase Walter Benjamin, a certain “aestheticization” of politics (1968). When people think of political humor, even those instances addressing issues of violence, they supposedly believe that humor is healthy, therapeutic, and part of a positive energy that connects with the playful nature of human beings and the freedom of opinion manifest in calm, tolerant, and modern societies. Humor is something that tends to create a pleasurable and unrestrained social ambiance. Serving mainly to entertain, humor is free from any political purpose, so that any topic is susceptible to humorous expression (Davies 1990; Palmer 1994; Rappoport 2005). Its definitive success is ultimately linked not so much to control and censorship of political power but rather its ability to connect with the free market of appreciative applause.

In the analysis of humor, there is a second theoretical perspective that contradicts the alleged benefits of its therapeutic virtues. This perspective insists on analyzing how political humor circulating in our society is primarily a political tool, a construction elaborated in social settings and utilized to mock and ridicule an intended object. Jean Paul Sartre’s assertion in his famous essay Portrait of the Antisemite argues against the conventional image of anti-Semites as being rigid and humorless. Instead, he paints them as people who
are able to connect in a socially acceptable communal ethnic, national, and religious hatred—united with a sense of humor (1946). This reveals a side to the phenomenon of political humor that is dissimilar from before, less affable and more disturbing (España 2000; Husband 1988). Political humor appears rather as a violent mechanism capable of creating sociopolitical divisions and hierarchies. In this way, it reflects the political order of society, and the fine line between what is laughable and what is taboo among those who laugh and those who suffer (Boskin 1990).

The hypothesis explored in this chapter is that the Basque television program Vaya Semanita, especially during its first two seasons (2003–2005), was perceived more in line with the first theoretical perspective, although both theoretical angles are plausible and frame an interesting debate. Presumably, the impact of this television program in those years, according to the answers of the participants in my fieldwork, could be understood not only as a success of humor when talking about Basque politics in general, and terrorism in particular, but also as the victory of a particular political discourse—one that was more relaxed, less tense, and served to reinforce a particular image of Basque politics and terrorist violence and at a very specific political moment. From a formal standpoint, the program uses a modern audiovisual format that is energetic, lighthearted, linguistically informal, and sufficiently apolitical to suit the tastes of any social group or ideology. However, substantively, the program was perceived in a less neutral light than might have been revealed at first glance. In fact, arguably, it is no coincidence that Vaya Semanita made a significant change at the end of its second season, which coincided not only with the resignation of the initial program team, led by comedian Oscar Terol (2005–2006), but also with the holding of Basque regional elections in May 2005. These elections in themselves were, together with the Spanish general elections of March 2004, the beginnings of a series of changes to Basque political life (Llera 2005). Here, I argue that both the ludic and political theoretical perspectives used to analyze this type of comedy show are complementary, but not necessarily symmetrical in importance.

To test this hypothesis, our methodology involved conducting five focus groups with students from different social and political profiles in order to analyze social discourse concerning the image and content of Vaya Semanita in its first two seasons. The following information will be analyzed in four sections: (1) the first discusses the overall assessment of the program and its alleged ideological character, (2) the second examines the relationship between the target audience and the program’s objective and creators/subjects, (3) the third examines the program’s contents, and finally, (4) the fourth section discusses the role of such a program as a means to understanding politics in a modern society such as the Basque Country.
**Vaya Semanita: Revolutionary, Conservative, or Nationalist?**

The emergence of *Vaya Semanita* on Basque public television was considered a revolutionary act even though the ruling political party in the Basque Country at that time (and for previous decades), the Basque Nationalist Party (EAJ-PNV by its Basque and Spanish acronyms), was located in the conservative ideological, nationalist, and center-right political spectrum. This apparent paradox is important when assessing the arguments made by participants in focus groups regarding the alleged ideological focus of the program (Wilson 1990). Historically, political humor has been associated with left-wing liberal groups, with the assumption that they are more likely to press and encourage the use of corrosive, subversive, or uninhibited humor, as compared to traditional norms (Kercher 2006). By contrast, people located within the conservative ideological spectrum are supposedly more reactionary toward political humor because it assumes a dangerous contradiction with the maintenance of order and set values (Saroglou 2002). This romantic conceit is inherited from times when humor was associated with some heroism in the struggle for freedom and democracy. Today, this is a myth that hardly holds empirically (Asa Berger 1996, 27). As many authors have suggested, we should analyze to what extent the opposite view is actually more accurate. In other words, the “humoristic method” of communication is, in itself, a practice that seeks to accommodate a conservative vision within the sociopolitical status quo (Mulkay 1988).

As focus group participants pointed out, one of the “revolutionary” attributes of *Vaya Semanita* was its breaking of a taboo that had been present, which was more or less implicit, in the audiovisual media of the Basque Country—the comic taboo pertaining to political issues, and especially terrorism.

(1) “People accepted and liked *Vaya Semanita* a lot, especially in the first few seasons. This is because for the first time a television program portrayed Basque people in a humorous light, how they actually live with their problems. This dose of humor softens the problems which for many years have plagued the Basque Country” (GT3/gt6)

(2) “In *Vaya Semanita*, comedians portray taboo topics, but with a hint of satire and humor. This fine touch of humor deftly treats what could otherwise be a trauma” (GT3/gt2)

(3) “Programs like *Vaya Semanita* do not depoliticize the population, but rather the opposite... One could have less serious programs that are more entertaining and enjoyable. Usually, politicians are out of reach of the population, and it is through these programs that the populace gets to participate and gets involved in politics at a time that when disaffection is a virus in democracy” (GT1/gt5)

(4) “To say that political humor is frivolous politics seems mistaken. The fact that something will help to cool or to slacken the political preferences of citizens through smiles or laughter is something to be welcomed. In fact, laughter is a good approach toward politics, since it seeks to turn concepts on their heads” (GT5/gt3)
In these excerpts, it is evident that one of the innovative objectives of the program was precisely trying to depoliticize political issues—especially thorny ones such as violence—by removing any language that might generate a dehumanization of any group or political situation, so that later a key repoliticization occurred through humor (see quotations 3 and 4). Interestingly, comments that emphasized the idea that the humorous treatment of political violence in programs like this make sense to the extent that the political context was “more relaxed,” given the fall of ETA (Euskadi Ta Askatasuna, “Basque Homeland and Freedom”) terrorist activity in recent years (see quotation 1). If the political tension prompted by the terrorist attacks had decreased, participants said, one might then ask: what could be the cause of opposition to this new, lighthearted, humorous, and relaxed vision of Basque politics? The arguments of some people objecting to Vaya Semanita’s humor relating to political violence issues were in the minority. These comments were viewed with suspicion by the rest of the study’s participants who questioned if such opinions were enacted to decisively politicize the program’s vision. In fact, as shown in the following quote, the more or less critical voices resorted to proleptic arguments or ideas based on long anticipatory explanations in order to justify a position, knowing that this position was identified with a social minority. In view of quotation 5 below, we could say that one result of the program was to thwart any “revolutionary” attempt to seriously politicize Basque political opinion.

(5) “I think in a situation as serious as we are experiencing one cannot make wisecracks or jokes, because all you are doing is hiding behind a screen that covers up real life situations in which people have lived, and which no one could say was good. Very often, you forget the bad times and laugh at them; I usually find myself doing it. However, seeing it on television, conveyed with irony, makes you think the only way to address this issue is through these means. I don’t know . . . but hey, this is just my personal opinion. Although I do know that ultimately this type of program, I suppose, is downplaying the times we live in” (GT4/gt2)

Vaya Semanita and Its Viewers

The viewers of Vaya Semanita are a further key to understanding the success of the program. It is widely accepted that every joke usually has two kinds of recipients: those who are invited to laugh and those who are the target of the humor. The former belong to the social group that uses these practices to reaffirm its majority position. The latter, by contrast, are those who “suffer” to some extent the consequences of said humor, thereby reflecting their peripheral status. Following the classification proposed by Christie Davies, one of the world’s leading scholars on humor, dominant humor in all societies emerges for two reasons: due to “ridiculously dim-witted” behavior or “suspiciously canny” behavior (1990, 2002). The question, therefore, is to see how different actors position themselves according to their place in Basque society. In view of the opinions of the individuals who participated in the focus
groups, the students more sympathetic to the ruling party’s (the EAJ-PNV) ideological sensibility were the people most talked about in all group discussion. Additionally, they gave a positive opinion on the “therapeutic” benefits of the program. Moreover, individuals who had no particular ideological identification—those for whom the program was “just entertainment”—were of a similar opinion. In general, when asked who the potential target users were, most viewers shared the widespread impression that the program was intended for everyone.6 As shown in the following views, however, the groups also provided some significant nuances.

(9) “Vaya Semanita has become a benchmark that has managed to place politics in the service of laughter without any subterfuge. The political left, right, nationalists, and even terrorists or the police may be the targets of these comedians. In the vast majority of cases, they have managed to make people smile without ruffling too many feathers . . . and if they do this to the most radical on either side, then maybe the humor is even more successful. . . . After all, humor, in the end, can not only serve to broaden or solidify information, but also to connect the population via a cohesive kind of humor” (GT1/gt5)

(10) “Much of the program’s success lies not in mockery of the Basque County, but in identification with it. I mean that the vast majority of viewers identify with the situations and characteristics of the particular social groups that are presented. Either way, we identify with the situations reflected in the characters and their personal traits, and although we do not see ourselves identified, we do see a friend or family member embodied in them” (GT2/gt1)

(11) “The program Vaya Semanita has changed its brand of comedy following the change of government in Madrid. The first seasons were funnier. So, we might ask why? In my opinion, the entity being ridiculed before [referring to the PP, Partido Popular/People’s Party] was when discourse in society was more serious, more radical. So when this situation was ridiculed, everyone thought it was funnier” (GT2/gt2)

(12) “The debate is not whether the humor was appropriate. The point is that in a liberal society, if you don’t love it, you don’t buy it. It’s another thing entirely when humor creates certain xenophobic attitudes. One might say that both forms of humor work in the same way, often inseparably. In the case of Vaya Semanita, the aim of the humor was rather to ridicule the [conservative] group that was in power, the very same group who had laughed in different ways at radical Basque nationalists, socialists, and the masses” (GT2/gt3)

(13) “While it is true that Vaya Semanita is a program that is broadcast on ETB, I do not think its goal is to benefit the EAJ-PNV but rather it seeks to ease the tensions of the social climate in the Basque Country, toying with the perennial conflict through satirical and sarcastic humor that pokes fun at all the poles that exist in society, from Basque nationalists to Spanish nationalists. The truth is that making fun of it all tends to parody both extremes, giving very little latitude with regard to either the EAJ-PNV or PSE [Partido Socialista de Euskadi, Socialist Party of the Basque Country]” (GT3/gt2)

Following Davies’s thesis, in focus groups, students sympathetic to the moderate nationalist parties in power and those more apolitical or moderate are the social groups that could be considered the normal majority to which the humor of the program targets. They are considered the groups who primarily generate consensus on what is laughable in the community. They are the people who “are not at extremes,” and who do not consider themselves “dim-witted” or “canny,” but simply enjoy the humor in a neutral manner, without
being “radicalized” by it. They are the kind of people that do not make jokes because they identify with humorous parody, “even though we ourselves are not ourselves reflected in what we see.” This is the population for which the program and its brand of parody is primarily, though not exclusively, intended.

The arguments emerging from focus groups that identified more with the PP, radical Basque nationalism, and the PSE were somewhat different from sentiments previously declared. This begs the question: to what extent do their statements correspond to a different target profile entirely? In these cases, their basic approach was to say that the program’s political humor was “basically entertaining” (as stated more frequently by the supporters of radical Basque nationalism and the PSE, and much less so in the case of PP supporters, who considered it “basically boring”). However, they also stated that some of the program’s sentiments tended to have some political overtones, especially in terms of terrorism, which they did not like very much. In the case of students close to the PP, all indicated that the PP was one of the main targets of political ridicule in the program. As will be seen in more detail, the PP somehow represented the “canny group” par excellence. In other words, the PP is the allegedly astute social group that the playful storyline of the program suspiciously casts as wanting to change, from its position of power, the collective imagination of the Basque community. In the case of radical Basque nationalist supporters, they pointed out that the parodies concerning their social group referred to their “extreme” social position even though the mockery alleged the “dim-wittedness” of their violent actions. Some acknowledged that they even considered it funny. Finally, in the case of students sympathizing with the PSE, their position was more ambivalent, given that some of their critiques corresponded with radical Basque nationalism and the PP. In general, however, they were more in tune with the moderate position that strayed away from the extremes of “Basque independence and Spanish nationalism.” In a way, as I will show, the PSE was in a way ridiculed by its absence, because the program did not link it to “dim-wittedness” nor “cunning,” something that a few socialist sympathizers found humorous because they identified this with their own political experience.

One of the issues discussed by participants was the statement indicating that the program had been successful because it “ridicules all political parties equally.” Despite the generality of this statement, some participants, especially the supporters of radical Basque nationalism and the PP, were unwilling to accept it at face value. For them, the assumption that the humor of the program established a certain symmetry between all social groups and all subjects was a somewhat misleading argument. In the following quotations, two people with opposing ideological profiles, manifest their opinions.
(14) “In the first two seasons the program sought to ridicule the PP and HB [Herri Batasuna, the radical Basque nationalist party]. Ridiculing the PP did not pose a danger, because at that time it was in power in Madrid. After, the state elections of 2004, however, things changed when the PSOE [Spanish Socialist Party won in Madrid. When this occurred, there was no point ridiculing the PP, as it was no longer the governing party. So, they were forced to change the line of the program, increasingly ridiculing themselves, that is, the EAJ-PNV. In my opinion, this is a way of bringing politics into society, but always from the perspective of who controls it, that is, the EAJ-PNV. . . . Apart from this, another objective of the program was to introduce a particular way of narrating events through humor. This can be seen, for example, in the constant distinction between the Basque Country and Spain, which shows the strong nationalist presence in the program. It was an attempt to normalize a discourse that in reality brought out a lot of controversy” (GT3/gt3)

(15) “From the beginning, the program Vaya Semanita intended to strengthen the position of the Basque government. Why else would they allow such a program on a network that basically they manage?” (GT4/gt5)

The key to these arguments lies in an appeal to the process of creating Vaya Semanita. This is not so much a debate about viewers, but about the individuals who are actually producing the program. It is no coincidence that those who most identified with radical Basque nationalism and the PP made specific mention in their statements as to the source of this program and the governing party, the EAJ-PNV, as a key discursive position to justify their criticism of this kind of humor. It is clear that this way of politicizing the program revealed an attempt to discredit the alleged creator of the humor, the EAJ-PNV. In the opinion of the individual cited above, Vaya Semanita was not so much Basque humor made for the Basque people, but rather humor about a particular group of Basques—a humor that ridiculed all social groups, yet not all equally. Thus, it revealed a hierarchical position of each group, depending on the perspective of who created the subject of humor.

**The Content of Vaya Semanita**

The structure and program content of Vaya Semanita faithfully represents a dominant type of humor in modern societies. In other words, it presents a type of humor that traverses institutionalized spaces, mainly in the media, and is equipped with a typical framework in which humorous practices are organized serially, minimizing the originality of the contents, which are often subject to formal and repetitive structures (Taylor 1988; Pye 2006; Wagg 1996). The political humor in Vaya Semanita is basically a highly institutionalized humor; it is unidirectional, hierarchical, and formal according to the classification of the different spaces of humor outlined by Michael J. Mulkay (1988, 152–78), who situates humor in relation to how far it is institutionalized. This means that the humor is based on socially recognizable topics, amplified by weekly repeated gags and scripts without spectator participation. Obviously, this format facilitates control of the humorous content and permits scripts to follow predictable patterns.
According to the responses in virtually all the discussion groups in which participants were aware of the program, one of Vaya Semanita’s greatest moments was a series of sketches involving Los Santxez (the Sanchez family). These were based on a Spanish immigrant family from Salamanca who had come to live in the Basque Country. The sketches tell their story with humorous taglines and a repetitive structure that is easy for the public to grasp. These antics were repeated monotonously in each show ad nauseam. It is important to note that this series, displaying one of the largest political contents of the program, disappeared at the end of the second season in 2005, despite being one of the most successful and best remembered by the audience.

(16) “It is difficult to get the big picture of the Basque Country when you live here, and Vaya Semanita has enabled many to have a vision of Basque society more in tune with reality, such as the Sanchez family from Salamanca with one son in the Ertzaintza [Basque police force] and another who is a radical nationalist. In other words, these are faithful recreations of Basque society” (GT4/gt4)

(17) “Vaya Semanita targets a diverse social spectrum; it seeks to reach the different political sectors. It transmits an image that I think is normal, or normal in the sense that nationalism is present in institutions, as two sides of the same coin, as is inherent to the nature of Basque self-governance. Its main function is to exaggerate real life, and that viewed from the perspective of politics, which leads to a dumbing down of political debates. Just like the response given by the mother from the Sanchez family when she was asked for whom they voted: ‘the same ones, that’s all’” (GT3/gt1)

(18) “One of the moments I most used to look forward to came in a sketch of the the Sanchez family. The heart of it was how they made fun of the PP father” (GT2/gt3)

The sketch series Los Santxez was, in all likelihood, the single most successful of the program. The family consisted of four members: the father (Pepe), the mother (Mari), and two sons (the eldest, Patxi, and the youngest, Antxon). The structure of the sketches was fashioned around four characters allegedly representing the four organizations that span the Basque Country’s political spectrum, the EAJ-PNV, PSE, PP, and radical Basque nationalists. In the sketches each week, they interacted comically reflecting current political news. In focus groups, one of the issues noted by the participants was their identification with the imparted political sensitivities of each of the members of the family, taking into consideration of course—as participants more or less agreed—that the sketches contained a sort of “political evaluation.” The issue of political violence and terrorism was, in fact, one of the central elements of familial tension.

It is significant then that the vast majority of participants in focus groups claimed that the most ridiculous character in the family (and the one who aroused more laughter from viewers, as much for his politics as for his hysterical attitude toward Basque terrorist violence) was the father, who is clearly identified as a PP voter. The next character whose ideology was equally evident and laughable was the youngest son, Antxon. He is unmistakably
identified with radical Basque nationalism and ridiculed for his rather naive and impish defense of the use of violence for political ends. The eldest is a police officer for the Basque police force and reads the newspaper *Deia* (a newspaper empathetic to the EAJ-PNV). Participants in focus groups stated that what made this character humorous was the way he represented “political order”—in other words, he took pleasure in exercising legitimate violence by political power. The final character, the mother (the only woman in the family), was in a more unique position, if possible. Although supposedly close to the PSE, she was ideologically indeterminate. The mother emerged in the discussion groups as the character who most clearly opposed any justification of violence. Interestingly, this sort of common sense provoked less laughter among the participants. One could argue that the success of the *Los Santxez* format (as noted in quotation 16) was based on its ability to reproduce what was then considered as a credible family prototype. Though exaggerated, it diversely parodied the Basque political spectrum: a family of Spanish nationalist parents who migrate to the Basque Country and have Basque nationalist children, one of them linked to ETA violence and the other fighting against it as a police officer. The fact is, however, that the disappearance of the PP after March 2004, with the loss of the general elections in Spain, made a narrative that parodied and exaggerated nationalism to the point of ridicule harder in the new Basque imaginary. And this paralleled a new strategy of peaceful opposition proposed by new Spanish PSOE Prime Minister Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero that concerned various initiatives in Basque politics, such as the Plan Ibarretxe or the fight against terrorism. As stated by several students in the groups, *Los Santxez* disappeared from the show in 2005 because “something was missing.” That “something” was surely the lack of real conflict between the stereotypes of the PP and Basque nationalism in Basque political life. Given this absence, the humor had lost much of its appeal.

**The Role of *Vaya Semanita* in Basque Politics**

The fourth and final deliberation among the focus groups was to assess the role that this type of comedy show had in democratic societies such as the Basque Country. The problem of censorship is especially problematic when it pertains to political violence and the representation of victims of terrorism, which was one of the recurrent themes among the groups. Likewise, this topic is addressed in much of the humor studies literature (Davies 1996). As quotation 19 reflects, and as found in most of the groups, there is a notion that political humor maintains a profoundly constructive relationship that is connected to freedom of expression and the design of democracy. Thus, any call for potential censorship should, in principle, be criticized.
(19) "The kind of political humor and satire allowed is indicative of the level of democracy and freedom of expression of a country. A country that does not accept humorous criticism on certain topics means that its level of freedom is reduced. There are artists who endeavor, in different ways, to introduce political humor in society, but soon fall under the power of censorship. Either way, the natural environment for humor is democracy" (GT5/gt1)

(20) "Vaya Semanita illustrates everyday situations in a humorous and exaggerated way, but it also sets limits. There is no humor concerning the victims of ETA, not because they do not exist, but because there are misgivings about the effect this would have on viewers and at a political level. The same applies to the role that is given to the batasunis [a parody of Sesame Street puppets, portrayed here as radical nationalists] or that of kale [bolo, low-level politicized violence and vandalism]. There is no room for humor in relation to arrests, torture, and imprisonment. These limits go beyond simply maintaining an audience. What if the above issues were to become the subject of humor? Vaya Semanita cannot escape the control and censorship of its financiers. This phenomenon occurs today in all media, without exception" (GT4/gt2)

(21) "There is an issue that still haunts our society, that is the victims of terrorism—and to cast it humorously is complicated, if not even more violent. As a follower of the program, I do not remember any engagement with this topic. Maybe it's a subject that is very difficult to speak about, but having breached the topics of ETA and gays in the Civil Guard, one shouldn't be so squeamish. Surely, soon enough, this topic will arise in serious, and not so serious, programs" (GT3/gt6)

The problem of censorship in comedy shows is related to debates about the limits of these types of practices. As quotation 20 reflects, respondents raised concerns about the need for some level of censorship or self-censorship in this type of program—pertaining not only to Vaya Semanita but also to a general level when addressing certain issues, especially those related to terrorism. It is interesting to note, however, that the majority opinion in the groups, as indicated in quotation 21, recognized that political humor is, by definition, expansive in content and format, so any attempt to impose censorship on humorous practices is difficult to justify. Likewise, as noted in a recent study on the use of humor in the Netherlands, the degree of inhibition along with the existence of a more aggressive ruthlessness in dealing with issues prone to humorous depiction (such as happens with terrorism) is correlated with the degree of tolerance, individualization, and secularization of society. Arguably, this allows for greater acceptance of this type of humor (Kuipers 2001, 145). In the Basque case, the narratives of the participants in focus groups ranged from a theoretical recognition of the existence of some kind of censorship to a specific recognition of a trend in our societies toward a hyper-humorization of any subject, which in theory should not be negative.

Moreover, one last perception that ran through the focus groups was the notion of the risks that such programs have when it came to projecting a certain depoliticization of public debate. As stated in quotation 22, although these programs are positive because freedom of expression is a fundamental value in illuminating and analyzing problems, they may also contribute to a trivialization of critical public attitudes in society. In other words, the excessive ridicule inherent in the program could be seen as equally detrimental as the excessive
seriousness of those respondents who argued that within the show’s subject matter truly important things were at stake.

(22) “Political humor works to show problems, but that is it. If society resorts only to mockery and derision of the problem, it never faces it. It’s good that we laugh at the problems of housing, the economy, and terrorism . . . but this is nothing more than venting. Keep in mind that problems are not fixed by themselves, save for a need to change. If we expect the final push to come from politicians because they are pressured by humor, then we’re in real trouble” (GT3/gt6)

The paradox of allegedly frivolous infotainment programs like Vaya Semanita is that, in reality, they have helped to show a democratic maturity in Basque society concerning sensitive issues such as political violence or terrorism. They have also served to reinforce the idea that in a truly liberal and democratic society the comic treatment of any subject can expand in proportion to a diminishing fear of free expression. Although there is a risk that humor could replace crucial conversations pertaining to issues in the media (such as the issue of victims of terrorism), the truth is that the use of humor may help to better contextualize genuine understanding within society.

Conclusions

An analysis of the information obtained from focus groups suggests that Vaya Semanita possesses similar features to programs viewed elsewhere, but it also renders specific features particular to the dynamics of the Basque Country. My first observation noted that the novelty of this program in 2003, along with the state of Basque society at a time when it was democratically more mature (with respectively low levels of terrorist violence), were the main reasons that contributed to a public medium like Basque public television’s ability to “report” on sensitive issues. Utilizing a comic approach, it generated high ratings and became a genuine social phenomenon.

The second observation dealt with the structure, content, and viewership of the program. As Davies argues, in all societies in which ethnic, cultural, religious, or partisan differences exist, humor is built on stereotypes that reflect and reinforce certain asymmetric and dominant ideas that such humor exploits. The program Vaya Semanita, in this sense, is not an exception. It does not create new stereotypes or provoke social or political change. Rather, its success lies in its ability to take advantage of the existence of a particular Basque political imaginary. Through this specific view of Basque political reality, legitimized by majority opinion, it somehow reinforces these stereotypes and turns them into comedy. Any comedy show with political connotations works successfully by means of caricatures and stereotypes that are recognizable to the public and seen as fair targets by most people. These are manifest in two forms: the
stereotype of the “dimwitted” and the “canny” individual. In this case, as recognized by the focus group participants, the humor of the program between 2003 and 2005 worked to the extent that its viewers detected these stereotypes. For example, there was the case of ridiculing the “canny,” which was directed at the PP (seen as a threat to the identity of the Basque community). In addition, to a lesser extent, there were instances of ridiculing the “dim-witted,” directed at Basque nationalists (who were seen as a threat to the good image of the Basque community). The most prevalent parallel in most of the focus group participants’ narratives was to defend the program as playful and harmless. This was accomplished by reaffirming the mocking and the stereotypes, both political and nonpolitical, that were offered in search of a comic evaluation of reality. In turn, the reactions of participants who said they were upset with some of the comic elements, especially on issues related to violence and terrorism, came in two forms. On the one hand, there were those trying to laugh at themselves, so as not to increase the level of ridicule directed toward them. On the other hand, there were those trying to seriously criticize the show’s creators and warn of the dangers of trivializing political issues. This second opinion only demonstrated a certain vulnerability when it came to understanding the use of a humorous stereotype in which there is no means to control it.

In sum, as noted in the initial hypothesis of this research, the program Vaya Semanita was perceived by most people in our discussion groups as a comedy show and not as a political program. This did not preclude some political interpretations of the show, especially by those persons more sensitive and closer to certain issues, such as terrorist violence. This made their evaluation and interpretation of the program much more complex. In fact, in these cases, a liking for the humor mixed with a disaffection for the same humor that, in some ways, was perceived to have been made by others.
References


SARTRE, Jean Paul (1948): “Retrato del antisemita” en Obras Completas


TEROL, Oscar (2005): Todos nacemos vascos, Madrid, Aguilar.


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1 The program is currently (2012) in its ninth season, 2011-2012.
2 The list of authors who have studied humor from a positive perspective in the various academic disciplines, especially the social sciences, psychology, and cognitive linguistics, is enormous. Among many others, the following should be noted: Attardo (1994); Berger (1997); Davies (1990, 2002); Fry (1963, 2002); Haig (1988); Idigoras (2002); Oring (2003); Raskin (1985); Sloane (2001); Stallybrass and White (1997).
3 The list of authors who pose a more critical view of humor is equally wide. Among many others, the following should be noted: Billig (2001a, 2001b, 2005); Dundes (1987); Dundes and Hauschild (1988); Ford (2000); Holmes (2000); Lewis (1997, 2006); Lockyer and Pickering (2001, 2005); Mulkay (1988); Paton and Powell (1988); Paton, Powell and Wagg (1996); Willis (2003).
4 The fieldwork for this research was conducted from 2005 to 2007. Four variables were considered important for the selection of focus group participants: (1) the degree of knowledge of the program *Vaya Semanita*; (2) the degree of appreciation of this type of comedy program; (3) the degree of closeness to the Basque Country, and (4) the ideological orientation. Of the five focus groups conducted, four were on the campus of the University of Basque Country with students from the Faculty of Social Sciences and Communication. The other group were conducted at the Center for Basque Studies at the University of Reno, USA, with students who were minimally knowledgeable of Basque culture. In the text, the discussion groups are cited indicating, first, the group member and, second, the number of the participant. Thus, GD3/dg1 is the person assigned the number 1 in focus group number 3.
5 The term “suffering” as related to the topic of humor must be clearly differentiated from other social practices and policies that actually produce physical and material pain. As Christie Davies (1990,8) notes, one must not confuse jokes and genuine aggression given that it is difficult to ascertain how humor devalues and trivializes the importance of causes that really do generate social pain.
6 At this juncture, it is interesting to note that ETB was the most important media and information source in virtually every social group, according to survey data from Euskobarometro concerning the years 2003 to 2005, as ascertained via discussion groups in 2005 and 2007. The only exceptions in this case were the supporters of the PP (Partido Popular, People’s Party) in the Basque Country, only a minority of whom recognized Basque public television as their medium of reference.
7 In fact, one of the “comic objectives” in this sketch was how the Spanish family, originally known as *The Sanchezes* (in Spanish spelling), could become a Basque family by changing the spelling of their name to *The Santxezez*, reflecting the Basque language spelling and pronunciation.
8 One of the most important debates in the Basque Country and Spain during these years was the reform of the Law of Autonomy in the Basque Country, popularly known as Plan Ibarretxe, in reference to the Basque *lehendakari* (president) Juan Jose Ibarretxe (EAJ_PNV), the driving force of the reform.