

# DELIAH

DEMOCRATIC LITERACY  
AND HUMOUR

## Democratic Literacy and Humour (DELIAH)

[Democratic Literacy and Humour](#) (DELIAH, 2025-2029) was created in response to [HORIZON-CL2-2024-DEMOCRACY-01-08](#). It brings together six universities and a platform for political satire to examine the multifaceted role of humour across artistic, cultural, and digital spaces.

The project explores how humour can both support and undermine democratic participation and processes in Europe. In this sense, DELIAH explicitly recognises humour's dual potential. While long celebrated as a cornerstone of democratic debate, humour can also contribute to exclusion, polarisation, and harm. The project therefore addresses both sides of this dynamic: analysing how humour can be mobilised for anti-democratic ends, while also identifying ways to harness it for more inclusive and constructive forms of civic participation.

DELIAH builds directly on the research of HACIDA: Humour and Conflict in the Digital Age (2022–2024), a Scientific Research Network hosted at UGent, led by Prof. Andrew Bricker, and funded by ENLIGHT. This earlier collaboration laid the intellectual and institutional foundations for DELIAH, uniting scholars and practitioners around a shared insight: that humour plays a powerful yet often under-recognised role in shaping democratic life. By bringing these dynamics into sharper focus, DELIAH positions humour not as peripheral but as central to contemporary political culture.

Through a combination of meta-analysis, cross-European focus groups, legal and policy research, and work on counter-humour strategies, DELIAH is developing innovative, evidence-based approaches to strengthen democratic resilience. By bridging academic research, public engagement, and policy development, the project aims to make a lasting contribution to how humour is understood, governed, and used within European democracies.

DELIAH is divided into several smaller research projects (known as Work Packages or WPs) that focus on different forms of humour and research questions:

### **WP1: Meta-analysis of humour practices and democratic attitudes in Europe**

The starting point of DELIAH is a meta-analysis that provides a solid base for the rest of the project. What is already known about the relationship between democracy and humour and how can we build on this?

### **WP2: Conducting focus groups to discover how Europeans think about humour**

Next is a hands-on examination of how Europeans in different countries respond to humour. We are currently running focus groups in different countries where we show each group the same, or similar (because some humour is often language- or country-specific), examples of different types of humour to see how they react, before discussing these examples with them. The resulting report should provide valuable insights into how Europeans look at humour.

### **WP3: Disparaging humour and democracy: Best practices for free speech jurisprudence and content moderation**

Disparaging humour, meaning humour that mocks and belittles vulnerable individuals and groups, is often at the center of complex legal cases, where judges have to draw a line between safeguarding freedom of expression on the one hand, and countering incitement to discrimination or violence on the other. In addition, social media platforms and content moderators often struggle to find a balanced approach to jokes or memes that might be considered harmful or discriminatory by some users.

How can courts and online platforms ensure that humor (including provocative or potentially offensive jokes) is preserved as a vital component of democratic debate, while at the same time protecting the rights of targeted communities?

### **WP6: Analysing humour and fostering democratic participation in times of conflict**

DELIAH aims to identify strategies of humour in cases where citizens confront political disinformation and anti-democratic propaganda. What role can humour play in enhancing democracy and civic participation?

### **WP8: Analysing uses of 'counter-humour' in media education and activism**

The online realm is, unfortunately, full of people that threaten, bully and exhibit other forms of toxic behavior. How can we use humour to effectively counter harassment and anti-democratic behaviour in the digital domain?

At the same time, UGent has played a pivotal role in bringing DELIAH from a concept to a funded project. The university's EU Team provided essential support in developing the proposal and budget, facilitating negotiations with the European Commission, and ensuring a strong administrative framework. This support continues throughout the project, notably through dedicated project management by Fede Dewulf, enabling the consortium to operate efficiently and cohesively.

Today, UGent remains at the heart of DELIAH's coordination and research agenda. Fede Dewulf (EU Team, UGent) and Prof. Andrew Bricker form the Project Management Team and lead WP10: Project Coordination and Management, ensuring strategic oversight and smooth collaboration across partners.

UGent researchers are also driving key intellectual strands of the project, contributing to outputs that range from educational toolkits and academic publications to policy recommendations, across several other work packages:

- **WP4** (Prof. Andrew Bricker) analyses the rhetoric of far-right humour online, examining how humour is used to undermine democratic norms and civic participation, while also developing tools to strengthen democratic literacy.
- **WP5** (Prof. Jeroen Vandaele and PhD researcher Olsen Zobar) investigates "laughter scandals"—high-profile controversies around satire, cartoons, and humour—through the lens of translation and cross-cultural circulation.
- **WP7** (PhD researcher Amber Kempynck) explores gender and stand-up comedy in

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the 21st-century Anglophone world, showing how female and non-cisgender comedians are reshaping the possibilities of humour as a space for critique, inclusion, and informal democratic engagement.

To follow the project and to receive research updates, subscribe to DELIAH:  
<https://deliaheu.substack.com/>