The Boundaries of Freedom of Expression and Hate Speech in the Humor of the Stand-Up Comedy Mens Rea by Pandji Pragiwaksono: A Norman Fairclough Critical Discourse Analysis

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Abstract

This study aims to describe the representation of criticism of political and social power in the stand-up comedy show Mens Rea, analyze the boundary between freedom of expression and hate speech based on Jeffrey W. Howard's theory, and analyze the implications of the discourse in Pandji Pragiwaksono's stand-up comedy show Mens Rea for the dynamics of Indonesian democracy. This study employs a qualitative method using Norman Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis paradigm, which encompasses three dimensions of analysis: the textual dimension, discursive practices, and sociocultural practices. The primary data source consists of transcripts of the stand-up comedy show Mens Rea available on Netflix, while secondary data was obtained from mass media reports, digital media, podcasts, interviews, online discussion forums, and public responses. Data were collected through observation, note-taking, and documentation, then analyzed using the Miles, Huberman, and Saldana model through the stages of data condensation, data presentation, and the drawing and verification of conclusions. The results of the first focus of the study indicated that, in the textual dimension, Pandji Pragiwaksono critiques democracy, political dynasties, nepotism, abuse of power, public policy, the political elite, and the political culture of society through linguistic strategies such as satire, irony, metaphor, hyperbole, labeling, binary opposition, and political humor. In the dimension of discursive practice, Mens Rea is the result of the transformation of various public issues that have developed in the mass media, social media, and the political sphere, which are then reproduced through the global Netflix platform, thereby expanding their distribution, consumption, and public debate. In the dimension of socio-cultural practice, political humor functions as a form of counterhegemony that encourages citizen participation in monitoring power while simultaneously fostering a space for democratic discussion. Based on the second focus of this study, the findings revealed that 31 data points fall under free speech, 17 under offensive, and 2 in the gray area, with no instances of hate speech identified. A key finding (novelty) in this study lies in the identification of the gray area, which highlights a zone of semantic ambiguity within Mens Rea humor. The two data points classified as gray area "MR/P/N/24" and "MR/P/N/43" demonstrate that a statement can cause moral harm through stereotyping or symbolic delegitimization without meeting the criteria for hate speech. As for the third focus of this study, it found that the discourse on Mens Rea has implications for the vitality of public discourse, strengthens the relationship between democracy and the law, and reinforces the role of humor as a means of criticism in a democracy.

Keywords: *Critical Discourse Analysis, Norman Fairclough, Jeffrey W. Howard, Freedom of Expression, Gray Area, Mens Rea, Political Humor, Netflix*

A. INTRODUCTION

In early January 2026, Pandji Pragiwaksono's stand-up special Mens Rea became one of the most-watched shows on Netflix Indonesia (Kompas.tv, 2026), while Google search interest in stand-up comedy rose by more than 80% between 21

December 2025 and 9 January 2026 (Google Trends, 2026). The special, built on a live show that aimed to draw an audience of 10,000 (Liputan6.com, 2025), criticizes democratic practice, political dynasties, government elites, and religious organizations (Kompas.com, 2026). Public reaction was sharply divided. Supporters read the material as political satire and a legitimate exercise of freedom of expression in a democracy. Critics read it as insult, defamation, and blasphemy, and complaints were filed with the Jakarta Metropolitan Police (Polda Metro Jaya) alleging incitement and blasphemy (inews.id, 2026; news.okezone.com, 2026). Reuters (2026) reported that the comedian was summoned by police after five complaints. The controversy also extended to the ethics of criticism itself, for example in the debate over a joke about the physical condition of Vice President Gibran Rakabuming Raka, which some commentators framed as body shaming (Kompas.com, 2026). The episode shows that humor is not only entertainment. It is a site where meaning, ideology, and power relations are contested, and where the line between criticism, satire, and hate speech is argued in public and in law.

Stand-up comedy is a performance genre with its own conventions, such as the set-up and punchline (Papana, 2016), and a growing body of work treats it as a vehicle for social, political, legal, and cultural critique (Gilang et al., 2025; Rosmaria, 2025). In Indonesia, comedians have used the genre to voice criticism of institutions, political systems, and state policy, and Pandji Pragiwaksono is among the comedians most closely associated with political and social issues (Gilang et al., 2025). Studies of political comedy also suggest that it can raise attention to public problems, particularly among younger audiences (Rahmadani & Handayani, 2025).

The distribution channel matters as well. Netflix operates as an over-the-top (OTT) streaming service that delivers content online rather than through traditional broadcast channels (Rana Fergus Putri & Kusuma Paksi, 2021), and its content passes through editing, curation, and review before it is shown (Saputri, 2024). A special like Mens Rea therefore reaches a national and potentially global audience outside the conventional gatekeeping of broadcast media, which changes who can see a political joke, how fast it circulates, and how it is contested afterwards.

This visibility sharpens a long-standing normative problem. Freedom of expression is a core right in democratic societies, yet language that insults, stereotypes, or discriminates against individuals or groups may amount to hate speech (Howard, 2019). Humor complicates the problem further because jokes carry layered and ambiguous meanings, and the relationship between insult, humor, and free speech is contested in the philosophical literature (Hietalahti et al., 2016; Woodcock, 2015). Whether a given joke is protected criticism, an offensive but permissible remark, or something closer to hate speech cannot be read off its surface form. It requires attention to the text, to how it was produced and circulated, and to the social context in which it is received.

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) offers a way to connect these levels. Fairclough (1995) treats language use as social practice and proposes a three dimensional model that links the linguistic features of a text, the practices through

which it is produced, distributed, and consumed, and the wider sociocultural context of ideology and power. For the normative question of where protected criticism ends, this article draws on Howard's (2019) account of free speech and hate speech, which treats the right to speak as vital to democracy but bound by moral duties and open to counter-speech as a response.

Existing research on Mens Rea has approached the special from several directions. Dingkol (2026) examines news coverage of the show through Van Dijk's critical discourse analysis. Hidayat and Widuri (2026) study humor in the special as a mechanism of social control. Anggraini et al. (2025) read its irony and symbolism through Umberto Eco's semiotics, and Novela Sari et al. (2026) investigate audience reception. These studies illuminate coverage, function, symbolism, and reception, but to our knowledge none analyzes the transcript of the special itself across Fairclough's three dimensions while also assessing, with an explicit normative framework, where its content falls between free speech and hate speech.

This article addresses that gap. Using Fairclough's three-dimensional CDA on the transcript of Mens Rea and secondary data from media coverage and public responses, it asks: (1) how criticism of political and social power is represented in the special; (2) where the boundary between freedom of expression and hate speech lies in its content, as assessed through Howard's (2019) framework; and (3) what the discourse implies for the dynamics of Indonesian democracy. The study contributes to CDA by extending Fairclough's model to platformized stand-up comedy and by pairing it with a normative theory of free speech, to the study of political humor by identifying a zone of ambiguity between protected speech and hate speech, and to public debate by informing more critical media literacy about political messages packaged as humor.

B. LITERATURE REVIEW AND ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

1. Humor, Satire, and Political Critique

Humor is commonly understood as a source of amusement, but research increasingly treats it as a resource for social and political critique. Dadlez (2011) argues that irony, sarcasm, and satire do more than provoke laughter: they can expose falsehood, hypocrisy, and the abuse of power, and so function as a form of moral criticism. She distinguishes two classic accounts of humor, the superiority theory, which sees humor as mockery of the weaknesses of others, and the incongruity theory, which locates humor in the gap between expectation and reality. Both accounts imply that humor can reveal faults or contradictions in individuals or social systems. Irony and sarcasm rest on a gap between literal and intended meaning, and satire uses this gap to criticize folly, hypocrisy, and moral deviation. In political settings, satire allows criticism of power without direct confrontation, by showing the clash between appearance and reality (Dadlez, 2011).

Research on Indonesian stand-up comedy follows this line. Rahmadani and Handayani (2025) analyze figurative language as a linguistic strategy of political criticism in Indonesian stand-up. Gilang et al. (2025) examine the rhetoric of Pandji

Pragiwaksono's political performances, and Rosmaria (2025) studies how language and identity operate in humorous discourse. Together these studies establish stand up as a legitimate object for discourse analysis and as a space in which social critique is packaged as entertainment.

The same features that make humor effective for critique make it difficult to evaluate. Humor works through double meanings, and different listeners may interpret the same joke differently (Hietalahti et al., 2016). Woodcock (2015) discusses the ethical questions raised by jokes that are morally problematic yet funny. The literature thus supports two claims that frame this study: humor can legitimately carry criticism of power, and humor can also harm, so its evaluation cannot rely on form alone.

2. Critical Discourse Analysis and Fairclough's Three-dimensional Model

Discourse analysis studies language use in relation to its purposes and conditions of emergence (Eriyanto, 2011). Critical discourse analysis goes further by relating language to social processes, aiming to uncover the ideological and power relations behind utterances and to attend to context, including setting, situation, and conditions (Fairclough, 1995). Fairclough's model analyzes discourse at three connected levels.

Text (micro). The textual dimension examines how language represents events and people, how it constructs relations between speaker and audience, and how it projects identities (Fairclough, 1995; Saraswati, 2017). Analysis attends to vocabulary, grammar, sentence structure, cohesion, and coherence, as well as figures such as metaphor, irony, and sarcasm, and to modality and evaluation (Fairclough, 1995; Permita, 2019). Language is treated as non-neutral: word choice and syntax shape how actors and events are seen. In a comedy transcript, devices such as satire, hyperbole, labeling, and binary opposition are therefore not mere ornament but analyzable ways of representing power.

Discursive practice (meso). This dimension concerns how texts are produced, distributed, and consumed (Fairclough, 1995). Production is shaped by the producer's ideological background, communicative aims, and social position (Suhartatik et al., 2024). Distribution is shaped by the institutions and media that control circulation, and what reaches audiences may differ from the original text (Cenderamata & Darmayanti, 2019). Consumption involves audiences who actively interpret rather than passively receive. This level also includes intertextuality, the relation of a text to earlier texts, and interdiscursivity, the mixing of different discourse types within one text (Fairclough, 1995). For a special that reworks issues already circulating in news and social media, these concepts are directly relevant.

Sociocultural practice (macro). This dimension places discourse within wider social structures, ideologies, and power relations (Fairclough, 1995; Chandra Ulfayah, 2021). Discourse can reproduce or challenge existing social arrangements, and ideology often operates through ways of speaking that appear natural. Because every

discourse arises under particular historical and social conditions, CDA aims not only to understand but also to critique unjust social practices (Mudiawati et al., 2023).

3. Free Speech, Hate Speech, and Howard's Framework

For analytical purposes, this study operationalizes Howard's argument through three lenses. Autonomy treats expression, including criticism of power, as an exercise of individual moral agency that restrictions must not lightly override. Moral duties concerns the obligation not to threaten, defame, incite, harass, or demean others, a duty that can be violated without the speech being legally punishable. Counter-speech asks whether the speech leaves room for rebuttal and argument in public discourse, which Howard presents as a more democratic response to harmful speech than prohibition. Used together, the lenses allow a graded rather than binary reading: expression can be located as protected free speech, as offensive speech that strains moral duties without amounting to hate speech, or as hate speech involving threat, incitement to hatred, or discrimination, with a gray area between the first two where meaning is ambiguous and judgment depends on context, purpose, and social impact.

Table 1. Zones of Expression Used in the Analysis

Zone	Defining Features	Main Lens Engaged
Free speech	Criticism of power, institutions, or social phenomena that does not breach moral duties toward others	Autonomy
Offensive	Insult, innuendo, or demeaning remarks that do not necessarily meet the traits of hate speech	Moral duties
Gray area	Ambiguous meaning that may cause moral harm through stereotyping or symbolic delegitimization without meeting the criteria of hate speech	Moral duties, counter-speech, and context
Hate speech	Threat, incitement to hatred, discrimination, or serious harm to individuals or groups	Moral duties

Source: Howard (2019)

4. Prior Research on Mens Rea and the Research Gap

Research on Mens Rea has so far been dispersed across approaches. Dingkol (2026) applies Van Dijk's critical discourse analysis to news about the special in Kompas.com, so its object is media coverage rather than the performance. Hidayat and Widuri (2026) treat the humor in the special as a mechanism of social control. Anggraini et al. (2025) use Eco's semiotics to interpret symbolic meaning and irony. Novela Sari et al. (2026) study audience reception and how viewers interpret and

respond to the show. Beyond Mens Rea, Gilang et al. (2025) analyze Pandji Pragiwaksono's performances through Aristotelian rhetoric:

Table 2. Prior Research on Mens Rea and the Gap Addressed in this Study

Study	Approach	Object	Gap or contribution
Dingkol (2026)	Van Dijk's critical discourse analysis	News coverage in Kompas.com	The performance itself is not analyzed
Hidayat & Widuri (2026)	Humor as social control	Humor in the special	Discursive practice and the speech boundary are not addressed
Anggraini et al. (2025)	Eco's semiotics	Irony and symbolic meaning	Discursive practice and the speech boundary are not addressed
Novela Sari et al. (2026)	Audience reception	Viewer interpretation and response	The text and its production are not analyzed
Gilang et al. (2025)	Aristotelian rhetoric	Pandji Pragiwaksono's stand-up performances	A different analytical lens (rhetoric)
This study	Fairclough's three dimensions with Howard (2019)	*Mens Rea* transcript, media coverage, public responses, Netflix	Integrates text, practice, context, and the free-speech boundary

5. Analytical Framework and Guiding Propositions

The qualitative design of the study does not call for statistically testable hypotheses. Instead, the literature above yields four guiding propositions that structure the analysis and are examined against the data rather than tested in a confirmatory sense.

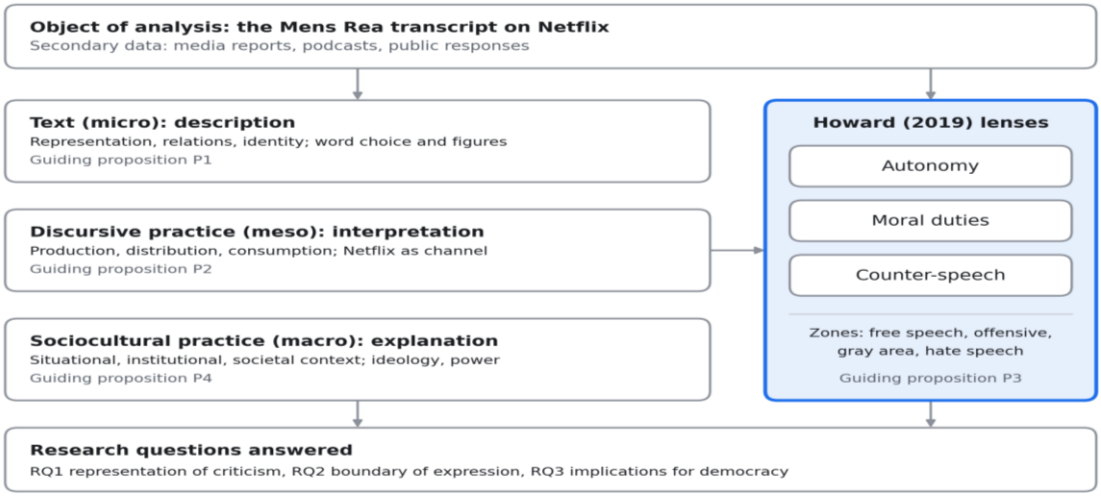


Figure 1. Analytical Framework

C. METHOD

This study uses a qualitative design within the critical discourse analysis paradigm of Fairclough (1995). A qualitative design suits the aim, which is to interpret how criticism is represented, produced, circulated, and contested, not to measure it. The object of analysis is the stand-up special Mens Rea by Pandji Pragiwaksono, released on Netflix on 27 December 2025. It forms part of a comedy tour that was staged earlier at Indonesia Arena, Jakarta, on 30 August 2025, and it runs for about 90 minutes.

Following Moleong (2017), qualitative data consist mainly of words, here the spoken words of the performance. Primary data serve the textual dimension of Fairclough's model, and secondary data serve the dimensions of discursive and sociocultural practice. Table 3 summarizes the data by dimension.

Table 3. Data and Collection Techniques by Analytic Dimension

Fairclough dimension	Data	Technique
Text	50 coded utterances (MR/P/N/01 to 50) from the transcript of the special	Listening, note-taking
Discursive practice: production	Statements by the comedian about his material	Documentation
Discursive practice: distribution and consumption	The Netflix platform and coverage of the release	Documentation
Sociocultural practice and implications for democracy	10 public-response items (IW/MR/P/01 to 10) from January 2026: national news (2), legal analysis (1), civil-society statements (2), legal expert opinion (1), social-media sentiment report (1),	Documentation, purposive sampling

	Reddit comments (2), online interview (1)	

Three techniques were combined, which the study treats as technique triangulation. The first was listening (simak). The researcher watched the special repeatedly without taking part in the performance, following the non-participatory listening technique described by Sudaryanto (2015), and attended to nonverbal cues such as intonation, facial expression, and gesture that can change the meaning of an utterance. The second was note-taking (catat), the step that follows listening (Mahsun, 2017): the spoken text was written down as a verbatim transcript. The third was documentation, which involved archiving URLs, taking screenshots of the special, and gathering secondary material from online sources. Secondary sources were selected by purposive sampling for their relevance to the research focus and were taken from the period of the controversy, January 2026.

The researcher is the main instrument and is responsible for planning, collecting, analyzing, and drawing conclusions. Four supporting instruments were used: a guide for listening, note-taking, and documentation that keeps collection within the research focus; a verbatim transcription sheet; coding sheets with a coding matrix; and digital devices and software for building the database.

Analysis followed the interactive model of Miles et al. (2014), which runs continuously through three stages. The video was transcribed word by word, repetitions and utterances irrelevant to the research focus were removed, and each remaining utterance was coded. Initial codes were sensitized to social inequality, power relations, and ideology, and the data were then grouped by research question. The analysis covers 50 coded utterances (MR/P/N/01 to 50). Coded utterances were identified, classified into tables by research focus, and described. Interpretation followed Fairclough's (1995) three dimensions: the text dimension (representation, relations, identity, and the linguistic strategies that realize them), discursive practice (production, distribution, and consumption), and sociocultural practice (situational, institutional, and societal context, with attention to ideology and power). Within each, the analysis moved from description to interpretation to explanation. To locate the boundary of expression, each utterance was also assessed against the three lenses of autonomy, moral duties, and counter-speech (Howard, 2019, as operationalized in Section 2.4) and assigned to one of the zones in Table 1. Conclusions were treated as provisional. They were re-checked by returning to the data and could change when new evidence appeared.

D. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section reports the findings in the order of the three research questions. The analysis covers 50 coded utterances from the transcript of *Mens Rea* (MR/P/N/01–50) and 10 public-response items (IW/MR/P/01–10) collected in January 2026. Percentages refer to the 50 coded utterances, not to the special as a whole. Utterances are quoted in the authors' English translation.

1. Representation of criticism of Political and Social Power

a. Targets of Criticism

Coding grouped the 50 utterances into five themes according to the object of criticism (Table 4). Criticism of political figures and criticism of government policy and democratic practice were the most frequent themes, with 14 utterances each (28 of 50, 56%). Criticism of political elites and the exercise of power (leadership, human-rights violations, patronage, nepotism) followed with nine utterances, criticism of social phenomena and community organizations with seven, and criticism of state institutions (the legislature, police, military, bureaucracy) with six.

Table 4. Themes of Criticism in Mens Rea (n = 50)

Theme	Focus	n	Codes
Political figures	Capacity, competence, image, performance	14	01, 03, 05, 08, 09, 13, 14, 15, 16, 20, 21, 25, 32, 36
Policy and democratic practice	Taxes, money politics, voter behavior, identity politics, political image-making, electoral democracy	14	02, 04, 07, 10, 11, 12, 19, 23, 24, 26, 27, 28, 29, 34
Political elites and power	Leadership, human-rights violations, elitism, patronage, nepotism	9	06, 17, 18, 22, 30, 31, 33, 44, 49
Social phenomena and organizations	Popular culture, social organizations, stereotypes, personal insult, identity, celebrity politics	7	35, 39, 42, 43, 45, 46, 50
State institutions	Legislature, police, military, bureaucracy, quality of public bodies	6	37, 38, 40, 41, 47, 48

Note: *MR/P/N = code of the transcript utterance (all codes in the table are prefixed MR/P/N/).*

b. Textual dimension: linguistic strategies

At the textual level, criticism is realized through ten linguistic strategies (Table 5). Because a single utterance can carry more than one strategy, the 50 utterances received 75 codings in total. Satire was by far the dominant strategy, present in 25 utterances (50%). Hyperbole, metaphor, and mockery followed with seven utterances each, sarcasm and direct insult with six each, and labeling, rhetorical questions, and wordplay with five each. Generalization appeared only twice.

Table 5. Linguistic strategies and their function (n = 50 utterances; 75 codings)

Strategy	n	Function in the Text
Satire	25	Sharpens and emphasizes criticism of its target
Hyperbole	7	Exaggerates a situation for humorous effect
Metaphor	7	Conveys criticism through figurative expression

Mockery	7	Produces humor through personal or group jibes
Sarcasm	6	Delivers criticism indirectly through humor and irony
Direct insult	6	Expresses offensive sentiment through coarse words
Labeling	5	Assigns an identity or predicate to the target
Rhetorical question	5	Leads the audience to reflect without demanding an answer
Wordplay	5	Builds humor through diction and associated meaning
Generalization	2	Forms stereotypes or generalizes about a group

Several recurring textual patterns are worth noting. First, criticism is frequently personalized: naming a politician directly ("For Gibran's salary," 05) ties a general policy problem to a particular beneficiary. Second, criticism is built through juxtaposition and implicature rather than explicit accusation. In utterance 20 ("Prabowo's cat is named Bobby" / "Bobby. Now the Governor of North Sumatra"), the audience is left to infer a comment on patronage, and "The President's son. The President's son-in-law" (31) invites the same inference. Third, historical representation links present figures to past events, as in "This person once kidnapped activists" (16). Fourth, metaphor recasts political roles in everyday terms, for example "a vice president with a customer-service flavor" (21). Fifth, criticism of state institutions is delivered in blunt declaratives, such as "Our police kill" (47) and "Our soldiers do politics" (48).

A second group of strategies is evaluative rather than argumentative. Labeling ("Stupid people vote for stupid legislative candidates," 35), mockery, and direct insult ("You're an idiot," 11) appear mainly when the target is a public figure or a group of voters. These are the strategies that later prove decisive for the free-speech classification in Section 2.

c. Discursive Practice: Production, Distribution, and Consumption

Production. The material in *Mens Rea* does not introduce new issues. Across all five themes, the utterances take up topics that were already circulating in news coverage, social media, election campaigns, and political debate, such as the abduction of activists, kinship ties in politics, taxation, the role of celebrities in politics, and the conduct of the legislature, police, and military. This is intertextuality in Fairclough's sense: the stand-up transforms existing public discourse into comedy, and the comedian positions himself as a commentator who recontextualizes it for laughter. The special grew out of a live show at Indonesia Arena, Jakarta, on 30 August 2025, and was released on Netflix on 27 December 2025.

Distribution. Netflix extended the reach of the material beyond that of a live comedy stage. The special entered Netflix Indonesia's top-10 TV shows in early January 2026, and search interest in stand-up comedy rose by more than 80% between 21 December 2025 and 9 January 2026. Media reports and social-media discussion then re-circulated excerpts and judgments of the special (Section 3), so the text that audiences encountered was increasingly mediated by commentary rather than by the full performance.

Consumption. The public-response data show that audiences interpreted the same material differently. Some framed it as legitimate satire; others as insult, defamation, or incitement and blasphemy, leading to complaints at the Jakarta Metropolitan Police. How a joke was read depended on viewers' political knowledge, social experience, and ideological position, consistent with Fairclough's (1995) view of consumption as active interpretation.

d. Sociocultural Practice

At the sociocultural level, the five themes converge on a common context: the period after the 2024 general election, marked by heightened political polarization, the growing prominence of celebrity politicians, debates about electoral democracy and nepotism, and declining trust in public institutions among parts of society. Against this background, the special functions as a form of informal citizen oversight. It allows criticism of political figures, elites, and institutions to be voiced in a register other than formal political language, and it invites the audience to evaluate leaders not only by their office but also by their competence, communication, and public image. In this sense the discourse operates as counter-hegemonic: it challenges dominant representations of political authority while remaining within a legally protected democratic space.

2. The Boundary between Freedom of Expression and Hate Speech

a. Distribution of Utterances Across Zones

Each of the 50 utterances was assessed against the three lenses (autonomy, moral duties, counter-speech) and assigned to one of the zones in Table 1. Thirty-one utterances (62%) fall in the free-speech zone, 17 (34%) in the offensive zone, and 2 (4%) in the gray area. No utterance met the criteria for hate speech. Table 6 cross-tabulates the zones with the five themes of criticism.

Table 6. Zones of Expression by Theme of Criticism (n = 50)

Theme	Free speech	Offensive	Gray area	Total
Political elites and power	9	0	0	9
State institutions	5	1	0	6
Political figures	9	5	0	14
Policy and democratic practice	7	6	1	14
Social phenomena and organizations	1	5	1	7
Total	**31**	**17**	**2**	**50**

Note: *Cross-tabulation computed by the authors from the coding in Table 4 and the zone classification of each utterance*

The cross-tabulation shows a clear pattern. All nine utterances criticizing elites and the exercise of power, and five of the six criticizing state institutions, fall in the free-speech zone. Offensive and gray-area utterances cluster in the themes that involve personal targets or social identity: political figures (5 offensive), policy and democratic practice (6 offensive, 1 gray), and social phenomena and organizations (5 offensive, 1 gray).

b. Free Speech

The 31 free-speech utterances (codes 02, 03, 05, 06, 07, 10, 12, 13, 14, 16, 17, 18, 20, 21, 22, 25, 26, 27, 29, 30, 31, 33, 36, 37, 40, 41, 44, 45, 47, 48, 49) criticize power, state institutions, government policy, democracy, the behavior of political elites, and social phenomena without attacking the identity of an individual or group. They satisfy the autonomy lens most clearly: criticism of the government and of those who hold power is the form of speech that Howard (2019) treats as most strongly protected, because it keeps power accountable. Examples include the reversal of authority in "We are the boss. The boss of Prabowo" (03) and the criticism of institutions in "Our police kill" (47) and "Our soldiers do politics" (48). All of these can be answered by rebuttal, correction, or political debate.

c. Offensive Speech

The 17 offensive utterances (codes 01, 04, 08, 09, 11, 15, 19, 23, 28, 32, 34, 35, 38, 39, 42, 46, 50) contain insults, mockery, labeling, coarse words, or demeaning expressions. Examples are "This one monkey, that's always been his tune" (01), "You're an idiot" (11), and "No wonder the idiot lost" (42). These utterances strain the moral-duties lens, because they demean a person rather than address that person's conduct. However, they are directed mainly at individuals in their capacity as public figures, not at a group on the basis of identity, and they contain no call to discrimination, hostility, or violence. They therefore remain within the offensive zone and do not reach hate speech. They also remain open to counter-speech.

d. The Gray Area

Two utterances, MR/P/N/24 and MR/P/N/43, were classified as gray area. MR/P/N/24: "Sundanese people love voting for celebrities." MR/P/N/43: "You are spiritually sick". Utterance 24 generalizes about an ethnic group. It contains no call to hatred, hostility, or discrimination against Sundanese people, so it does not meet the criteria for hate speech. It is not neutral either: it attributes a collective political tendency to a whole group, and the implied meaning that Sundanese voters share a uniform preference can reinforce ethnic stereotyping. Utterance 43 is addressed to a specific person rather than to a protected group, so it also falls short of hate speech. Its metaphorical reference to a "spiritual" condition nonetheless implies that the addressee's moral or religious state is defective, which can produce shame, stigma, or loss of social standing. In both cases the harm is a moral harm created through stereotyping or symbolic delegitimization, not through incitement. Their meaning depends on context, purpose, and how listeners interpret them, which is what places them between the offensive and free-speech zones.

Supplementary analysis with speech-act theory (Austin; Searle) and conversational implicature (Grice) indicated that the problem with both utterances lies in their illocutionary function and implicit meaning, which open interpretive space, and not in an intention to hate, discriminate, or incite violence.

e. Triangulation With Public and Legal Responses

The classification was cross-checked against public and institutional responses. Legal expert Usman Hamid stated that Pandji's speech "is still in the first category," so

it "absolutely cannot be criminalized" (IW/MR/P/02, Tirto.id, 13 January 2026). Mahfud MD likewise said that Pandji "cannot be criminalized" (IW/MR/P/04, Kompas TV, 9 January 2026). These positions align with the study's finding that no utterance reached hate speech. A Reddit commenter who was critical of the special nevertheless focused not on hatred but on whether Pandji's claims could be proven as "truth" (IW/MR/P/09), which is a question of accuracy and responsibility rather than of hate speech.

3. Implications for Indonesian Democracy

The ten public-response items were grouped into three themes (Table 7). They come from five media outlets, two organizational statements, a social-media sentiment report, two Reddit comments, and one online interview.

Table 7. Public-response Data by Implication Theme

Theme	Items	Key finding
A space for public discussion	IW/MR/P/01, 03, 07, 10	The special became a national topic. Kompas.com described it as the talk of the public, with a wave of pro and contra. GoodStats recorded 624 articles, 954 mentions, and 19,787 sampled mentions. Pandji described the mixed reaction as "very normal" and argued that in a democracy criticism through comedy is part of the public sphere.
The relationship between democracy and law	IW/MR/P/02, 04, 05	Legal experts framed the content as protected speech. Muhammadiyah's central board stated that the complaint was not an official position and that the complaining youth alliance is not an official Muhammadiyah organization.
Humor as a medium of democratic criticism	IW/MR/P/06, 08, 09	PBNU's Gus Ulil distinguished the complainants from the organization ("He is not an NU person"). A pro-comment asked "Can he be jailed?" and answered "So far, not yet." A contra-comment questioned whether Pandji's claims could be proven as "truth."

The special moved from entertainment to a topic of national debate. The metaphors used in news coverage ("talk of the town," "a wave of pro and contra") and the volume of digital conversation indicate wide public engagement. Pandji's own statements position comedy as a legitimate part of democratic communication, and the diversity of reactions he describes as normal is treated as part of that debate.

The responses of legal experts and civil-society organizations show the debate moving from the content of the jokes to the limits of criminal law. Hamid and Mahfud MD argue that the content does not fulfill the elements of a criminal offense, and the statements of Muhammadiyah and PBNU separate individual complainants from institutional positions. Together they construct democracy and law as complementary: democracy provides room for criticism, and law marks the limits that are legitimate under constitutional principles. The responses also show that the legitimacy of humor as criticism is contested. Some read the special as protected criticism in a democratic setting, while others stress the responsibility to support claims with truth. The debate therefore concerns not only whether humor may criticize power, but under what epistemic and moral standards it should do so.

The findings show a special whose sharpest criticism is aimed at power, whose offensive language mostly targets individuals, and whose ambiguity concentrates where humor touches group identity. This section interprets each of the three findings in turn. The dominance of satire (25 of 50 utterances) fits Dadlez's (2011) account of satire as a way to criticize power by exposing the gap between appearance and reality without direct confrontation. Utterance 03 ("We are the boss. The boss of Prabowo") inverts the expected relation between ruler and citizen, and utterance 20 leaves the audience to complete an accusation that is never stated. Hyperbole, metaphor, and labeling work in the same direction, turning political roles into familiar images (21) or assigning a predicate to a target (09). In Fairclough's (1995) terms, these devices are not ornament but ways of representing power, and they position the audience as co-interpreters of the critique.

At the level of discursive practice, the special introduces few new issues. It reworks matters already circulating in news, social media, and political debate, so its force lies less in revelation than in recontextualization: a familiar grievance is returned to the public in a form that is easier to share and to laugh at. Netflix widens this circulation. As an over-the-top service it delivers content online outside traditional broadcast channels (Rana Fergus Putri & Kusuma Paksi, 2021), but because its content is edited, curated, and reviewed before release (Saputri, 2024), the platform acts as a gatekeeper of a different kind and not as the absence of one.

This reading is compatible with Hidayat and Widuri's (2026) treatment of the humor in *Mens Rea* as a mechanism of social control, and with Rahmadani and Handayani's (2025) finding that political stand-up can draw attention to public problems. Earlier studies have examined news coverage (Dingkol, 2026), symbolism (Anggraini et al., 2025), audience reception (Novela Sari et al., 2026), and rhetoric (Gilang et al., 2025) separately. By joining text, practice, and context, the present analysis shows how the same joke can function as accountability for one audience and as offense for another.

The classification suggests that the boundary in *Mens Rea* is drawn less by the harshness of the language than by its target. The most pointed criticism, such as "Our police kill" (47) and the allusion to abducted activists (16), lies in the free-speech zone because it is directed at power and its conduct. Offensive utterances cluster where the

target is a person or a group of voters (Table 6), and the two gray-area utterances are those that touch group identity or a person's moral standing. As operationalized here, Howard's (2019) account gives the first group the strongest protection, tolerates the second while holding that it strains moral duties, and reserves hate speech for threat, incitement to hatred, or discrimination, none of which appeared.

The legal and the moral evaluation should be kept apart. Legal experts concluded that the content could not be criminalized (IW/MR/P/02, 04), yet the moral-duties lens still registers that 17 utterances demean people and two touch group identity. The framework allows both conclusions at once, since a duty not to demean others can be breached without the speech being legally punishable. This distinction is useful in a public debate where legal and ethical questions are easily conflated.

Humor complicates the boundary because jokes carry layered meanings that different listeners interpret differently (Hietalahti et al., 2016), and because a joke can be funny and morally problematic at once (Woodcock, 2015). The gray area captures this. Utterances 24 and 43 call for no hatred, yet each carries an implied meaning, a uniform political preference attributed to an ethnic group and a defect attributed to a person's spiritual state, that depends on context and reception. Supplementary analysis using speech-act theory and conversational implicature (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969; Grice, 1991) locates the difficulty in the illocutionary function and implicit meaning of the two utterances and not in an intention to hate

Three limits apply. First, all 50 utterances were judged answerable through counter-speech, so this lens did not separate the zones; in practice the moral-duties lens did most of the work. Second, the three-zone scheme is the authors' operationalization of Howard's argument and not a taxonomy proposed by him. Third, the gray area rests on two utterances. It should be read as a heuristic for graded reading, not as an established category.

The public-response data indicate that the special became a trigger for public deliberation. The volume of conversation (624 articles, 954 mentions, 19,787 sampled mentions) and the range of actors, from media and legal experts to civil-society organizations and social-media users, show that the debate was not confined to comedy audiences. Pandji's own claim that criticism through comedy belongs to the public sphere (IW/MR/P/10) was thus tested in practice, with the response coming from many sides.

The responses also tied democracy to law. Legal experts framed protected speech and the limits of criminal law as complementary, and the statements of Muhammadiyah and PBNU separated individual complainants from institutional positions. The dispute over a joke therefore became, in part, a dispute over who may speak for an institution.

Finally, the legitimacy of humor as criticism proved contested. The Reddit comment questioning whether Pandji's claims could be proven as "truth" (IW/MR/P/09) shows that audiences judge political humor not only by the freedom to speak but also by epistemic responsibility. Two practical points follow. For comedians, the most protected material in this special is the material aimed at conduct

and policy. For audiences and media, excerpts that circulate apart from the full performance can change what the criticism means, which supports the case for more critical media literacy about political messages packaged as humor.

E. CONCLUSION

This article asked how criticism of power is represented in Pandji Pragiwaksono's *Mens Rea*, where the boundary between freedom of expression and hate speech lies in its content, and what the discourse implies for Indonesian democracy. Using Fairclough's three-dimensional critical discourse analysis together with Howard's (2019) account of free speech and hate speech, the analysis of 50 coded utterances and 10 public-response items yields three answers.

First, criticism is aimed at political figures, policy and democratic practice, elites, state institutions, and social phenomena, and is realized mainly through satire, supported by hyperbole, metaphor, mockery, sarcasm, and labeling. It recontextualizes issues already in public circulation, reaches a wider audience through Netflix, and functions as informal citizen oversight. Second, 31 utterances fall in the free-speech zone, 17 in the offensive zone, and 2 in a gray area, and none meets the criteria for hate speech. The boundary is set mainly by the target and context of the utterance, not by the harshness of its language. Third, the discourse widened public debate, linked democracy to law, and showed humor to be a recognized but contested medium of democratic criticism.

The study contributes to critical discourse analysis by extending Fairclough's model to platformized stand-up comedy and pairing it with a normative theory of speech. It contributes to the study of political humor by identifying a gray area in which an utterance can cause moral harm through stereotyping or symbolic delegitimization without being hate speech, a finding that is exploratory given its small base. For public debate, the results suggest separating criticism of power from attacks on group identity, and responding to contested humor through counter-speech and context before turning to criminal law.

Future research could compare other comedians and specials, test the three-zone scheme with more than one coder, and study how audiences with different political and social positions interpret the same material.

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