

## PART 2 - Free Speech and humour – The right to joke

### INTRODUCTION

**Video 1**      Ian Hislop shares the joke that got someone arrested | LBC  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PZSbwzygMmE>

**Ian Hislop** is known for his sharp wit and satirical style, particularly as the **editor of *Private Eye***, a **satirical magazine** that often mocks political figures and current events. He often critiques politicians, the media, and society with biting humour, a type of humour that walks a fine line between social commentary and controversy. Hislop, along with Paul Merton, has been a team captain on the cherished BBC show “Have I got news for you?” since it began in 1990.

**Satire** as a genre often **targets** powerful institutions or figures, sometimes pushing boundaries in order to provoke thought or highlight injustice. This is why some people see satirical jokes as harmless, while others might find them offensive or inappropriate.

**Video 2** - Pick out key words to create a word cloud. Give a definition of what “cancel culture” is.  
**NewsFeed - 'Cancel Culture' is the Word of 2019**  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A8MGV5t4ZzQ>

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### SYNTHESIS

#### Document 1



*Upholding the First Amendment*, by Adam Zyglis, The Buffalo News, distributed by Cagle Cartoons - September 2025

## **Document 2**    **Being a High-Profile Comedian Right Now Is No Joke**

By Jason Zinoman, *The New York Times*, Sept. 20, 2025

You can't joke about anything anymore. It's a refrain we've been hearing from certain comedy circles for the last decade. The danger of cancel culture is a running theme of "The Joe Rogan Experience." Dave Chappelle has repeatedly spoken up for free speech in the face of fierce criticism over his jokes about trans issues or the politics of Israel. The world's richest comedy nerd, Elon Musk, told us comedy had become illegal.

Now that the talk shows of Stephen Colbert and Jimmy Kimmel — two late-night hosts who made jokes about President Trump the centerpiece of their programs — have been cancelled and suspended, respectively, what are the heavy hitters of the comedy community doing? Would you believe they are heading to Saudi Arabia? Starting next week, many of the most popular American stand-up stars (Chappelle, Bill Burr, Kevin Hart) will perform at a huge new festival in Riyadh, hosted by a government not exactly known for its openness to dissent. The optics were never great, but the timing is now especially awkward.

Tim Dillon, a comedian who boasted on Rogan's show about getting paid \$375,000 to perform at the festival, announced yesterday that he was fired from the event for comments on his podcast. In a grim echo, he also addressed the crackdown on comedy in this country, criticizing the suspension of Kimmel. "It's wrong to pretend it's because the show sucked or because it was losing eyeballs or money," Dillon wrote, likely aiming his comments at right-leaning comedians who didn't like Kimmel. "Clearly it was a politically motivated hit job." Credit to him for straightforward bluntness. It's easy to roll your eyes at late-night comedians getting applause for mocking the president. Many people, myself included, found some of those jokes pandering. But that now seems a little glib. When Kimmel joked about the president, he knew that a target was on his back. Trump, who has already effectively mounted pressure campaigns against universities, law firms and media networks, had made this clear, calling for Kimmel's show to be cancelled long before ABC's decision to pull him off the air.

In his first monologue after "The Late Show" was cancelled by CBS, which cited a "purely financial" decision in an explanation that looks less and less credible, Colbert responded to the president's social media reference to his fellow talk show host ("I hear Jimmy Kimmel is next," Trump posted) by waving his finger at the screen: "No, no, absolutely not Kimmel," he said. "I am the martyr. There's only room for one on this cross."

Apparently not. At this point, no one can say for sure the size of the cross. We are living in unprecedented times and comedians are going to have to adjust to new challenges. What is a network comic to do when faced with threats like these? What will Lorne Michaels do with the cold open of "Saturday Night Live"? How will Jimmy Fallon steer "The Tonight Show"?

Colbert called what happened to Kimmel "blatant censorship," but Fallon adopted a more evasive approach, and said: "To be honest with you all, I don't know what's going on — no one does."

Really? Anyone paying attention should have some idea what is going on, but the temptation to play dumb is surely real. To be fair, Fallon does not portray himself as the kind of man who broods over the responsibilities of the artist in an age of authoritarianism. He has never seemed especially interested in politics, but that hasn't stopped him from becoming entangled in it. He was blamed for helping to usher in the first Trump presidency because he ruffled his hair on "The Tonight Show" in 2016. That always struck me as unfair. Trump (and hair jokes) had been a hallmark of popular culture for decades. Fallon was just following the crowd.

But there have lately been signs that Fallon is trying to get ahead of it, to avoid attacks from the administration by playing nice, downplaying political comedy, working both sides of the aisle. A recent "Tonight Show" guest was Greg Gutfeld, the Fox host who, on his own show, sounded distinctly unbothered (to no one's surprise) by the suspension of Kimmel. Fallon's guest list didn't stop Trump from responding to the news about Kimmel's suspension by saying that Fallon would be next.

### **Document 3 Dave Chappelle faces backlash for free speech joke in Saudi Arabia**

By Marni Rose McFall, *Newsweek*, 3<sup>rd</sup> October 2025

The comedian Dave Chappelle is facing backlash online after he criticized free speech in the U.S. while on stage at the Riyadh Comedy Festival in Saudi Arabia.

The Riyadh Comedy Festival is currently underway in Saudi Arabia and has some of the most famous comedians in the world on its bill. The festival though had become a cultural flashpoint before it even began, with the comedians on the roster facing mounting scrutiny over their performances.

Saudi Arabia is continuing to amplify its cultural presence as part of its 'Vision 2030' strategy, which aims to position the country as a destination for culture and diversify the country's economy. The plan was outlined almost a decade ago by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. Saudi Arabia is an ally of the United States.

Critics, though, have argued that these efforts are serving to distract from the country's record of repressing free speech and dissent, as well as human rights violations, which have been widely reported. Human Rights Watch released a statement in response to the festival, which read: "The Saudi government is using the Riyadh Comedy Festival 2025 from September 26 to October 9 to deflect attention from its brutal repression of free speech and other pervasive human rights violations."

Chappelle, who was a headline act at the festival, said during his set, "Right now in America, they say that if you talk about Charlie Kirk, that you'll get canceled. I don't know if that's true, but I'm gonna find out," according to the *New York Times*. "It's easier to talk here than it is in America," Chappelle said, as per the *Times*.

Kirk, 31, was shot and killed while speaking at a campus event at Utah Valley University on September 10. His assassination has sent shock waves through the country and highlighted divisions gripping the country. It has also reignited a discourse about free speech in America.

Chappelle's joke was met with swift backlash online. The photographer Madhu Menon posted on X in response, "Is there a more textbook example of irony?", while the writer Adnan Belushi wrote in a post on X: "Dave Chappelle is projecting his privileged experience of Saudi Arabia. Americans on average, still enjoy more free speech." Frank Luntz, the media personality, added in a post on X: "Dave Chappelle said 'it's easier to talk here than it is in America' at a comedy festival in Riyadh where comedians had to contractually agree not to tell jokes about Saudi leadership or religion."

Comedian David Cross on released a statement on Monday shaming Chappelle, as well as fellow Riyadh performers Bill Burr and Louie CK, for signing up for the event and condoning "totalitarian fiefdom." "Clearly you guys don't give a shit about what the rest of us think, but how can any of us take any of you seriously ever again?" Cross added. "All of your bitching about 'cancel culture' and 'freedom of speech' and all that shit? Done. You don't get to talk about it ever again. By now we've all seen the contract you had to sign."

Burr had an entirely different outlook on the event from the inside. He said on a Sept. 29 episode of his "Monday Morning Podcast" that Riyadh was one of the "top three experiences" he's ever had. "It was great to experience that part of the world and to be a part of the first comedy festival over there in Saudi Arabia," Burr said. "The royals loved the show. Everyone was happy. The people that were doing the festival were thrilled."

## **Document 4 Joke about Charlie Kirk death may be protected speech, judge says**

By Stephany Matat, *Tallahassee Democrat*, 10th November 2025

A federal judge seemed to agree that a former Florida wildlife biologist's Instagram joke about whales reacting to the shooting of conservative activist Charlie Kirk was political speech protected by the First Amendment. U.S. District Judge Mark Walker heard argument in Tallahassee Nov. 10 in what may be the first suit in Florida by an employee fired for a social media post about Kirk's assassination.

Brittney Brown, who was a Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) biologist, had reposted another account's post on her private Instagram story. It said, "the whales are deeply saddened to learn of the shooting of Charlie Kirk, haha just kidding, they care exactly as much as Charlie Kirk cared about children being shot in their classrooms, which is to say, not at all."

Kirk was killed Sept. 10; Brown filed suit Sept. 30. Walker did not rule immediately, but his decision may sway other federal courts in viewing the speech rights of public employees who comment on political issues in their off hours.

At first, FWC attorney Taylor Greene said this wasn't protected speech. But the judge countered: "Help me understand how that kind of satire does not fall under the heart of the First Amendment," Walker said, while questioning Greene. "This was a joke making fun of the violent attack of a political figure," Greene said. When pressed further by the judge, he said, "I'd be willing to concede that point."

Brown, a Bay County resident who worked at the agency for about seven years, was fired Sept. 15 at a time while others in the public and private sectors across Florida also were undergoing termination or disciplinary action for critical posts related to Kirk's death.

But the day before, her post came to light after the hard-right social media account called LibsofTikTok posted her LinkedIn page and a screenshot from her Instagram story. The account posted: "Your tax dollars pay her salary. She should be fired ASAP."

Gary Edinger, a Gainesville-based First Amendment attorney representing Brown, told the judge her repost was an "offhand, whimsical social media post." He expressed this was political speech discussing more than Kirk's assassination, but a greater issue of gun violence in the country. "It's a political statement on a matter that everybody in America is talking about," Edinger told Walker.

"We see the state's action plainly for what it is: a concerted effort to purge state employees with political beliefs that differ from our state's current leadership," said Bacardi Jackson, executive director of the American Civil Liberties Union of Florida, which is helping represent Brown. "The years-long effort to censor our students, professors, and now state employees has become Florida's trademark but also a dangerous attempt to erode the limits of the First Amendment to favor those in power."

Greene, the FWC attorney, told the judge Brown was fired because of the backlash after her repost, saying she was "making fun of the political assassination." When FWC fired Brown, it posted on X: "The comments and actions of this individual are not in line with the FWC, our values, or our mission. We have a zero-tolerance policy towards the promotion of violence and hate, and we will not stand for such behavior."

Brown wants her job back, even before final resolution of the case. If the judge agrees, she would go back to work as an FWC biologist, without lost pay from the time she was fired, but the case would go on to determine whether FWC retaliated against her in violation of her free speech rights.