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Humour, Misery and Penguins

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Abstract

This study examines the relationship between economic downturns and the number of economics related caricatures in popular humour magazines. To this end, caricatures from editions of the weekly humour magazine *Penguen* from 2007 to 2011 were collected and categorised and the Misery Index of Turkey was compiled using data from TURKSTAT. It was found that there is a statistically significant relationship between the Misery Index and the number of economics related caricatures in humour magazines.

Keywords: Humour, Misery Index, Caricature

JEL Classification: A10, A14

1. Introduction

Humour has always had a place in society, whether through use of prose, paintings or simple jokes, it has always been a crucial coping and release mechanism for humans. Why humour exists in the first place has been a topic of discussion ever since Aristotle's *On Humour and Laughter*. A person would use humour to entertain themselves or cope with their dissatisfaction regarding an issue. After a long day of work, telling jokes about it or life in general with friends and family is a common method for coping with the stress of professional life. It is also important to note that in order for humour to exist, there has to be at least two people: one that creates it and one which receives it. In essence, humour exists insofar as it is a collective language, there can be no such thing as humour if there is only one person. Nowadays this is best observed by how people use social media to share caricatures, caps or memes to humour each other.

Currently, one of the leading perspectives in this area of research is the Relief Theory of Humour, initially put forth by Herbert Spencer. Spencer's Relief Theory emphasises that energy and stress accumulates in the person's body as time passes and therefore needs to be let out (Spencer, 1860). The proponents of the Relief Theory in general, believe that humour is what makes the necessary outburst of energy to happen. A humour expert, Michael Billig even argues that "Laughter has an aggressive element that erupts in rebellion against ... constraints that are vital for social life" (Billig, 2005). This is where the connection with economic activities becomes more apparent, because as mentioned before, work and urban life in general can cause immense amounts of stress and tension that cannot be relieved in public spaces by physical activities as

social norms force the person to “the suppression of external signs of feeling” (Spencer, 1860). It is at this point where humour becomes a key tool as a socially tolerable way of expressing a person’s feelings, especially given the social context.

Coming out from this theoretical background, and considering that economic activities such as work dominate a person’s life, it would be expected that humour is also used in media to illustrate the economic activities. This leads out to interactions borne out of those activities in a - mostly- satirical manner. Nowadays it is a common sight to see non-conventional news outlets using satirical headlines for almost anything, from a discussion on inflation to the results of a sporting event. However, even before the proliferation of social media, satirical news about the economy and political life were to be found mainly in newspapers’ opinion columns and in humour magazines. Criticism of the economic situation generally led to some interactions with the governments of the countries that these humour magazines were published. Some humour magazines, like Krokodil (1922-91) criticising capitalism in the Soviet Union were used for propaganda purposes while some like Hara-Kiri Hebdo (1960-70) in France were outright banned for their caricatures about government figures.

Figure 1. A Turkish Economics Caricature



Notes: A Turkish caricature saying “Rich Children go to indoor swimming pools, but do not be sad” criticising the wealth inequality in Turkey. Penguen, 323, 27 November 2008, 15.

In Turkey, there were no shortages of economic crises throughout history. From the Great Depression to the economic crisis Turkey is currently in, the country has often been plagued by economic woes. Therefore, economic and political satire has always had a place in Turkish society. In fact, Turkey has also had a long history of humour magazines starting from Diyojen (named

after Diogenes) in 1870 ridiculing the elites of the Ottoman Empire. Through the early years of the Republic of Turkey, political satire magazines like Markopaşa (1946-50) and Akbaba (1922-77) were frequently written and edited by an elite circle of writers of that time and were read by parts of the Turkish intelligentsia and the middle class. According to one of the editors of Markopaşa, Aziz Nesin, the magazine sold as much as the most popular newspapers of its time with the last editions selling as much as 50 thousand copies until the magazine was banned by the government. However, the most important breakthrough in the popularity of humour magazines came out with the Gırgır magazine (1972-1993) which became one of the bestselling humour magazines in the world. Gırgır was also the main starting point of many caricaturists who would go on to found the most popular humour magazines in Turkey during the 2000s, such as Leman and Penguen (Penguen being the Turkish word for penguin).

Since many humour magazines depend on political and economic problems in order to be able to create novel caricatures of satire, it could be expected that economic downturns would give them more issues to caricaturize. It is almost unheard of a humour magazine which caricatures a strong economic recovery, or a decrease in inequalities, mainly because the allure of those magazines are in their use as relief and coping for the readers.

In this paper the effects of economic downturns on the amount of economics and politics related caricatures are measured for the Penguen magazine in Turkey for the years of 2007-11. In the following section, the methodology and analysis used to measure the said impact are presented.

2. Analysis

The conduct of this research has been divided into three main parts; determination of the sample years and caricature magazine, collection and classification of caricatures from the said magazine and econometric analysis.

The timeframe for this research was chosen to be from 2007 to 2011 in order to be able to measure the change in the amount of economics related caricatures in response to the end of the IMF program in Turkey in 2007 and the Global Financial Crisis in 2008 and if the said amount changed as the effects of the crisis subsided. The time-consuming nature of collecting and categorising caricatures was also an important factor in narrowing the period to five years for sampling. For the selection of the humour magazine, there were a few candidates, but Penguen was deemed to be the one which best satisfied the sampling needs. Specifically, it was one of the bestselling humour magazines during the sampling period and was also known for its covers featuring satirical caricatures about ongoing events in Turkey which showed that the caricaturists were responsive to ongoing events.

The collection of caricatures was done by utilising the collection of Penguen's weekly editions in the National Library of Turkey. For each weekly edition, the number of total caricatures were counted -with strips counted as a single caricature- followed by a classification of whether the caricatures were of economic or political issues. A caricature was considered to be related to an economic issue if the said issue was in the list of subjects compiled. The detailed classification of economic subjects was done by creating a list of economics related issues such as poverty, unemployment, privatisations etc. and updating the list as the number of caricatures increased and

new issues that were not considered initially were added. A caricature was considered to be political if the issue it was addressing was either foreign relations of Turkey, or domestic politics of Turkey -outside of economic context. The two categories of economic and political are mutually exclusive and if a caricature included both a political and an economic message, it was considered as an economics related caricature. Therefore there are no redundant caricatures in these categories.

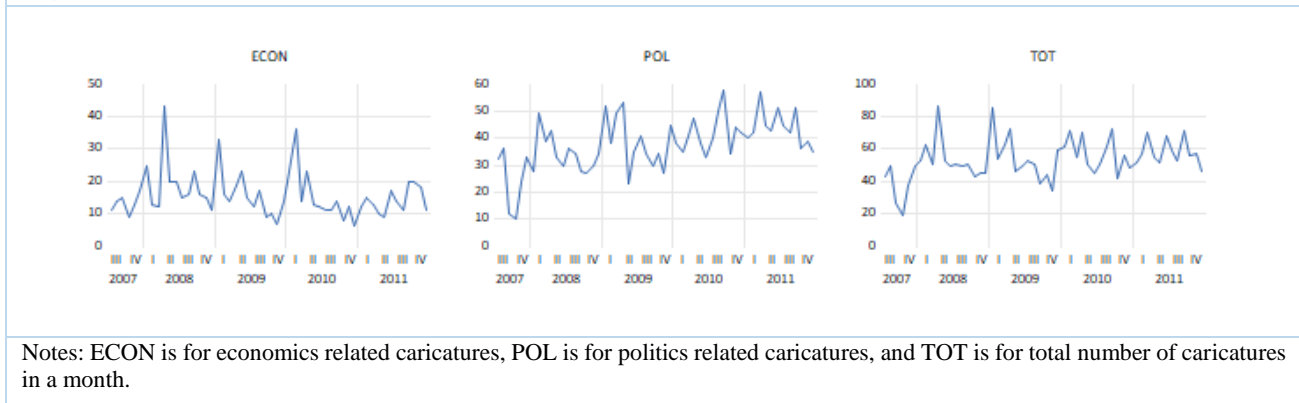
Table 1. Some of the Economics Related Subjects Taken into Account

Poverty	Power Blackouts	Taxation	Poor-Rich	Fraud	Bills
Hunger	IMF	Alcohol	Advertisements	Thievery	Social Security
Inflation	Exchange rates	Mafia	Energy	Insurance	Stock Exchange
Unions	Bankruptcy	Taxis	Corruption	Privatisation	Tax Evasion
Price Hikes	Worker Deaths	Real Estate	Minimum Wage	Transportation	Economic Crisis

Notes: The list does not contain all subjects in the list, which are 83 in total.

In total, 214 issues, over four and a half years (2007Q3-2011Q4), of Penguen were examined. On average, there were 3.72 economics related and 9.59 politics related caricatures per issue of the Penguen during the period of research. However, in order to more accurately measure the impact of events such as the 2008 Financial Crisis on the number of caricatures, it was decided that monthly data will be utilised, rather than weekly data. There were 15.74 economics related (with a standard deviation of 6.91) and 37.87 politics related (with a standard deviation of 9.75) caricatures per month on average in the Penguen magazine.

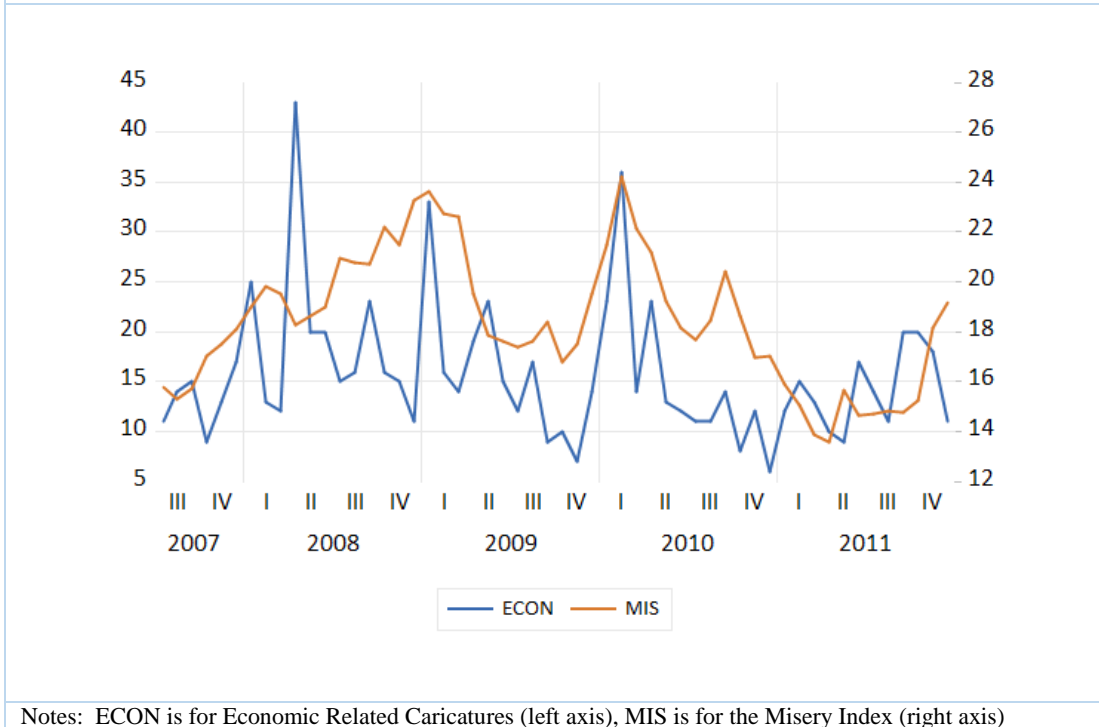
Figure 2. Economic, Political and Total Caricature Count Over Time



Notes: ECON is for economics related caricatures, POL is for politics related caricatures, and TOT is for total number of caricatures in a month.

For the measurement of the magnitude of economic change during this time period, Consumer Inflation and Unemployment data from TURKSTAT was gathered and added up to formulate the Misery Index of Turkey. Following that, economics related caricature count and the Misery Index were graphed together (Figure 3) to see if there was any correlation that could be seen at a first glance. The results from Figure 3 show a possible positive relationship between them and therefore the decision was made to do a thorough econometric analysis.

Figure 3. Number of Economics Related Caricatures and the Misery Index of Turkey



Using the Least Squares method, the effect of the Misery Index on the number of economics related caricatures was estimated. In Table 2, it is shown that the relationship is statistically significant ($p < 0.05$) and that the Misery Index does indeed have an effect on the number of economics related caricatures published by Penguen. It is also found that a percentage point increase in the Misery Index increases the number of caricatures by 0.926 per issue, which is also significant as the average month has 15.74 economics related caricatures and therefore this means a 5.88% increase in the economics related caricatures.

Table 2. Creation of Economic Caricatures and Misery Index Relationship (Spec 1)

Regression Equation ($n = 54$)	β_0	β_1	F-stat	R^2 (\underline{R}^2)
$ECON_t = \beta_0 + \beta_1 MIS_t + e_t$	-1.3219 (0.8338)	0.9256 (0.0082)	7.5599 (0.008189)	0.1269 (0.1101)

However, it must be noted that while inflation and unemployment may increase in a given month, it may take some time before their effects are felt by the populace. Therefore in order to improve the initial model, the effect of moving average of three months' Misery Index on the number of economics related caricatures in a month was estimated. The results (Table 3) show that a statistically significant ($p < 0.05$) relationship between the two also exists. Table 3 also shows that a percentage point increase in the Misery Index increases the number of caricatures by 0.902 on a moving average of three months, which is also significant as the average month has 15.74 economics related caricatures and therefore this means a 5.73% increase in the economics related caricatures.

Table 3. Creation of Economic Caricatures and Misery Index Relationship (Spec 2)

Regression Equation (n = 54)	β_0	β_1	F-stat	R^2 (\underline{R}^2)
$ECON_t = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \frac{MIS_t + MIS_{t-1} + MIS_{t-2}}{3} + e_t$	-0.8113 (0.9074)	0.9024 (0.0190)	5.8733 (0.0190)	0.1051 (0.0872)

A replication of the above-described analyses was also done for political caricatures, which has yielded no statistically significant results regarding a relationship between them and the Misery Index. A major reason for this could be the very construction of our variables themselves, as caricatures containing both political and economics were considered to be economics related.

3. Concluding Remarks

The research question of this paper was do economic downturns have an effect on the number of economics related caricatures in humour magazines. The results from the analysis show that there is indeed a significant effect of the Misery Index on the number of economics related caricatures published in Penguen. To be more specific, a single percentage point increase in the Misery Index increases the number of economics related caricatures by approximately 5.80% as measured in the analysis part.

However, it must be noted that the scope of this research was limited by time constraints and that due to the nature of collecting and categorising caricatures, may have led to errors of inevitable nature such as underreporting of the number of economic and political caricatures.

Furthermore, the results of this study have shown that for a single magazine, given a period of crisis and its aftermath, such a relationship between the Misery Index and the number of economics related caricatures in humour magazines exist. The findings also show that economic downturns are indeed felt by the editorial staff of humour magazines as well as the readers who continue to buy the magazine. Therefore, this paper has also shown that this topic can be studied further by looking at a large variety of magazines and different periods of time.

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