

The news that wasn't

April Fool's hoaxes as journalistic science fiction

CAROLINE NYVANG
Royal Danish Library

Abstract

This article examines April Fool's stories in Danish national newspapers from 1980 to 2024, arguing that they function as a form of journalistic science fiction. While April Fool's traditions have often been studied as ritualized interpersonal jokes, their mass-media counterparts operate as widely broadcast textual artifacts that blend news with imaginative speculation. Through a systematic survey of 80 April 1st hoaxes published in three major newspapers, combined with three in-depth textual analyses, the article identifies structural and thematic parallels with science fiction, including the use of a *novum*, cognitive estrangement, and extrapolation. The three case studies furthermore demonstrate how these pranks critique social norms, political institutions, technological developments and media practices. The analysis positions April Fool's stories as a hybrid genre – combining elements of news reporting, humor, and fiction – and illuminates the role of imaginative journalism in navigating uncertainty. In doing so, it calls for a more nuanced understanding of April Fool's stories as a legitimate mode of journalistic engagement with social reality, offering a timely reappraisal of the tradition at a moment when many news organizations are abandoning it in response to concerns about misinformation.

KEYWORDS

April Fool's, news hoax, journalistic fiction, science fiction

Introduction

April Fool's stories have come under fire in recent years, and many media outlets around the world have either explicitly renounced the practice or quietly abandoned it altogether. In the spring of 2017, citing growing concerns with fake news and the opacity of social media, several Scandinavian newspapers declared that they would no longer publish an annual fictional story.¹ In Denmark, the nationwide newspaper *Kristeligt Dagblad* justified that very decision in an editorial by arguing that:

(...) the erosion of society's general trust becomes evident when the distinction between truth and falsehood is blurred, as is the case on social media. Such blurring constitutes a genuine threat to democracy, insofar as citizens may no longer be able to rely on the veracity of what they see or read.

(Bjergager, 2017)

Supporting the same conclusion, Magnus Karlsson, editor of the Swedish newspaper *Smålandsposten*, wrote that he did not want his paper to publish a “potentially viral and erroneous story” (Nast, 2019). His statement alluded to broader concerns that social media platforms transform the circulation of news by collapsing previously distinct communicative contexts and audiences. Media scholars have described this phenomenon as “context collapse” (Marwick & Boyd, 2011; Davis & Jurgenson, 2014; Brandtzaeg & Lüders, 2018). April Fool's stories are particularly vulnerable in this regard. When shared beyond their original publication setting and detached from the temporal marker of April 1st, they risk being received as misinformation rather than sanctioned satire.

Years on, as the COVID-19 pandemic took hold, another score of news organizations followed suit, this time arguing that it was unjustifiable to gamble with overall credibility in an atmosphere already fraught with uncertainty and misinformation.² Opposing voices, however, have lamented the abandonment of a 100-year-old tradition, claiming that the annual jokes represent an important satirical form, and that they may even help strengthen media literacy (TV2, 2017; Rebensdorf, 2017; The Journal, 2025). The present article constitutes an academic attempt to explore and conceptualize this critical potential.

A media April Fool's story is a fictional piece of journalism, published or broadcast on April 1st, designed to be indistinguishable from genuine news reporting. One well-known example is the BBC's 1957 television report on the Swiss spaghetti harvest, which showed

farmers plucking strands of pasta from trees (Wainwright, 2008: 39-53). The joke worked precisely because it mimicked the conventions of factual journalism: authoritative tone, credible sourcing, and probable content at a time when pasta remained, for most British households, the stuff of culinary imagination.

Although humor has been scrutinized since ancient times, such April Fool's stories in the media remain relatively unexplored.³ The few researchers who have examined the tradition come primarily from the field of folklore and usually focus on local, face-to-face acts of trickery rather than their later incarnations in mass media. Within this previous body of work, the custom is typically interpreted as a form of practical joke⁴ that serves to reinforce social hierarchies, targeting the young, the naive, or the socially inferior (Dundes, 1988; McEntire, 2002).

This article argues for a reorientation of the analytical lens. April Fool's jokes underwent a significant transformation in the early twentieth century as they entered the mediated public sphere.⁵ While interpersonal pranks relied on sending individuals on pointless errands, their counterparts in the mass media took on a literary and speculative form, capable of engaging with collective imaginaries and public concerns. I therefore propose that April Fool's stories in the media are more productively understood in relation to fiction than to folklore. My claim is that these journalistic hoaxes can be analyzed as a form of science fiction – one that simultaneously estranges and critiques the current state of affairs by extrapolating contemporary trends and underlying fears – punching up rather than down.

Of course, April Fool's stories are not unique in combining journalistic form with future-oriented thinking and fictional devices. Scholars have long argued that news is not merely about reporting past events but also about highlighting ruptures, trends and potential consequences, thereby orienting audiences toward the future (Galtung & Ruge, 1965; Tuchman, 1978; Neiger, 2007; Hornmoen et al., 2023). Similarly, research on literary and narrative journalism has shown that journalists regularly employ imagination and storytelling techniques, e.g. scene-setting, dialogue, and characterization, to enhance factual reporting (Morton, 2018; Aare, 2023).⁶ In most of this literature, however, fictional devices function as means to an end. April Fool's stories represent a different practice. Here, fiction is not a stylistic resource but the primary objective. This makes April Fool's hoaxes a particularly revealing site for examining the latent speculative dimension of journalism itself. If everyday news already orients audiences toward possible futures, April Fool's stories are able to radicalize this orientation by presenting entirely imagined developments in the authoritative voice of the press.

To investigate how this potential has been realized in practice, I examine April Fool's hoaxes in newspapers – the first mass medium to adopt the tradition – focusing on a selection of Danish national papers published between 1980 and 2024. I address a descriptive question concerning both the frequency of April Fool's hoaxes in Danish newspapers and the patterns or themes that recur across these texts, alongside two more complex analytical questions: Which genre features do April Fool's jokes in the media share with science fiction? And how can this resemblance illuminate their critical and satirical function? By addressing these questions, the article provides a historical perspective on a tradition that many media organizations are currently abandoning. It also expands our understanding of science fiction as a concept that may also apply to non-literary genres and contributes to media studies by highlighting the role of humor in the journalistic processing of social transformation.

Materials and approach

The Danish context is particularly well suited for a systematic investigation of the dissemination and forms of April Fool's jokes, as the country has long maintained a strict legal deposit law, resulting in media archives with a high degree of coverage (Horstbøll et al., 1998). Drawing on these archives, the survey maps both the frequency of April Fool's stories across the three selected newspapers and the recurring themes and structural patterns that characterize them. Although comparative research is lacking, available accounts and anecdotal evidence – among them Wainwright's (2008) overview of *The Guardian's* April Fool's hoaxes through the ages – indicate that similar transformations occurred across Western media cultures. The Danish case thus provides a valuable point of departure for understanding a broader phenomenon.

The article is structured in four parts. The first section outlines the methodological approach, which combines a survey of April Fool's hoaxes across Danish newspapers with detailed analyses of selected examples from three national papers published between 1980 and 2024. The second section situates media-borne April Fool's pranks within the historical context of interpersonal practical jokes. In the third section, I examine how the pranks were embedded in journalistic form, and the fourth explores how they employ science-fictional techniques to critique contemporary society.

The study is based on three nationwide Danish newspapers, namely *Berlingske Tidende*, *Politiken*, and *Information*, published between 1980 and 2024.⁷ Together, these papers provide broad geographical and social coverage of the Danish press (Søllinge &

Thomsen, 1989). Although from the mid-20th century, major Danish newspapers no longer openly adhered to a specific political party (Schultz, 2007), their content selection and framing still had a political bias, and the newspapers also appealed to different segments of the Danish population. *Information* has typically attracted readers from the urban Danish left-wing, while *Politiken* appeals to those in the political center. In contrast, *Berlingske Tidende* targets a bourgeois-conservative and right-wing audience (Hjarvard, 2007).

Moreover, all of the selected newspapers were available digitally. I consulted *Berlingske Tidende* and *Information* through Royal Danish Library's web service Mediestream, which provides access to digitized newspaper issues from 1666 to around 2009, and the commercial media archive Retriever (formerly Infomedia), which holds digital newspapers from 1990 to the present. Digital issues of *Politiken* published before 1990 can only be accessed through the newspaper's own e-archive. Through these various databases, I have read all April 1st editions from the period 1980-2024 of the three selected newspapers.

The identification of fabricated stories was conducted through a close reading of all April 1st editions across the three newspapers, registering every article that by virtue of its content, framing, or subsequent journalistic commentary could be identified as deliberate fictional content. From this corpus, three cases were selected for close textual analysis. The selection was guided by two criteria: The examples had to be sufficiently substantial in length and content to sustain detailed examination, and together they had to reflect the range of editorial styles and target audiences represented by the three newspapers.

Methodologically, the study adopts a sender-oriented perspective, focusing on the intentions and structural characteristics employed by the media in crafting the joke, rather than on how audiences respond to it. This distinction is important because the effectiveness of an April Fool's joke can vary widely depending on each reader's prior knowledge, cultural context, and media literacy. By concentrating on the sender, the study isolates the deliberate design choices of the joke itself, allowing for a more controlled analysis of its textual and contextual features without conflating these with subjective reactions, which, while interesting, fall outside the scope of the present study.

April Fool's in the news

In much of the world, it has been a tradition for over 400 years to try to fool one another on April 1st. Traditional practical jokes often

involved sending someone on a Fool's errand, such as fetching an object of what Italian ethnographer Raffaele Corso described as "impossible, improbable, chimerical existence" (Dundes, 1988:4). For instance, a prankster might ask someone to retrieve a "left-handed screwdriver," a tool that does not exist. In other cases, people were sent to witness entirely fictitious events or occurrences.

Danish newspapers adopted the April Fool's tradition at the beginning of the 20th century. This coincided with the emergence of the more sovereign and wide-ranging omnibus newspaper, which replaced the older party-affiliated four-paper system. As a result, opinion pieces took a back seat in favor of self-produced news, reports, and in-depth feature articles (Schultz, 2007). This emphasis on news content seemed to provide a good foundation for date-specific prank stories.

The earliest April Fool's jokes in Danish newspapers shared traits with the classic practical joke, as the pranks were still centered on getting people to go on a pointless errand. Thus, many early April Fool's stories in the news still relied on the age-old humorous trick of tempting people into going outside to witness something extraordinary. This typically involved local landmarks that had supposedly appeared, vanished, or undergone some other fantastical transformation overnight. Another recurring theme was news articles featuring escaped animals, often illustrated with doctored press photographs incongruously situating these exotic creatures within an urban landscape.

However, early April Fool's pranks also differed from interpersonal jokes in that they could now fool a much larger audience simultaneously. In the days following the hoax, journalists often took delight in recounting how many readers had been tricked and it became a measure of the prank's success, highlighting the broader social reach and impact of these mass-mediated jokes (Nyvang, 2019, p. 239).

April Fool's hoaxes were regularly published until the 1940s, after which they became less common – a development also noted by journalists at the time. In a 1959-edition of *B.T.*, journalist Erik Pagh lamented that the era of April Fool's jokes in newspapers had completely passed, explaining this by noting that newspapers now had to cover the entire country to a greater extent (Pagh, 1959). This made it less relevant to stage hoaxes aimed at sending people out on local errands. However, the tradition experienced a revival in the 1980s, then spearheaded by nationwide newspapers, and this change of medium altered the comedic mechanism. April Fool's stories now increasingly centered on current issues that resonated with a broader public.⁸

80 April Fool's jokes

A systematic examination of the period from 1980 to 2024 reveals how the April Fool's tradition evolved in the press. During this time, the three selected newspapers – *Berlingske Tidende*, *Politiken*, and *Information* – collectively published a total of 120 April 1st editions. In twelve instances, the first of April fell on a Sunday or public holiday, days on which *Information* does not publish, and several editions of the other newspapers were also affected by strikes. Across these 120 issues, April Fool's stories were identified in 80 editions, corresponding to 66.7 percent of all examined publications. Journalists at *Berlingske Tidende* were the most prolific pranksters, responsible for 30 hoaxes between 1980 and 2024 – accounting for 37.5 percent of all identified April Fool's stories – while *Politiken* and *Information* featured 26 and 24 hoaxes, representing 32.5 percent and 30 percent, respectively. The data also reveal a clear upward trend over the period, and April Fool's stories gradually became a recurring, expected feature. The placement of the joke also changed over time, moving from minor, inconspicuous notices within the interior pages to more prominent positions on the front page.

The identified examples provide structural insights into the anatomy of April Fool's jokes in nationally distributed Danish newspapers. It suggests that these stories depart markedly from both interpersonal April Fool's jokes and locally rooted pranks in earlier newspapers. Rather than sending individuals on fruitless errands, the objective appears to be more self-reflective: to provoke a form of moral outrage in the reader, safe within their private sphere, only to later (perhaps) reveal that the indignation might stem from the reader's own ignorance or latent prejudice. For instance, *Information's* left-leaning readership was probably more inclined to accept and be provoked by the paper's 2005 hoax claiming that, in the future, Danish museums would be financed through the sale of their artworks and antiquities (Mikkelsen & Dahlin, 2005). The prank mimicked neoliberal strategies of privatizing public goods and exposed a cynical and absurd inversion of bureaucratic logic, namely, the preservation of cultural heritage by liquidation. Conversely, *Berlingske's* conservative audience would perhaps find it more plausible and infuriating when, on April 1st, 2003, the article reported that the countercultural community of Christiania would be designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site, thus exempting it from a promised state-led eviction (Hansen, 2003).

Overall, these hoaxes seem to rely on a temporary suspension of disbelief, although not the willing kind described by Samuel Taylor Coleridge in the early 19th century, but one shaped by the reader's assumptions about the world. As Coleridge argued, audiences may

accept even implausible narrative elements if presented with a certain internal coherence (Holland, 1967). In the case of April Fool's stories, this coherence often seems to align with the ideological inclinations of the readers.

In terms of content, April Fool's hoaxes in national newspapers also distinguish themselves from local media outlets, which are typically tasked with covering regional news, by addressing contemporary fears extrapolated into the near future. Hence, the internal coherence is not only ideological but also grounded in current events. By drawing on contemporary societal developments, April Fool's stories create scenarios – located just one step ahead of the present – that would feel probable to readers. In this respect, national newspaper hoaxes share traits and tropes with science fiction, extrapolating from the present to imagine extraordinary yet still credible possibilities.

Science fiction in the news?

In the wake of climate crisis and the Anthropocene turn, science fiction has gained renewed attention as more than mere escapism (Evans, 2018; Mock Book, 2025). As Amitav Ghosh (2016a, 2016b) argues, the environmental emergency is also a crisis of imagination, making the genre a vital space for envisioning what realist narratives fail to grasp. My argument in this article is that this critical potential to both envision and actively engage with not-yet-realized scenarios can, to some extent, be extended to journalists' April Fool's stories.

Science fiction is a notoriously broad and contested genre, often blending with adjacent genres such as speculative fiction, magical realism, and fantasy. While the boundaries remain fluid, a foundational theoretical definition has been provided by literary historian Darko Suvin, who characterizes science fiction as “distinguished by the narrative dominance of a fictional novelty, validated both by being continuous with a body of already existing cognitive logic and by being a ‘mental experiment’” (Suvin, 1978, p. 45).

At the core of Suvin's definition of science fiction is the *novum* – Latin for “new thing” and a term he has borrowed from Ernst Bloch's writings on utopian imagination – a scientifically plausible innovation or a conceptual leap that serves as the hegemonic pivot around which a narrative is constructed. According to Suvin, this “postulated innovation can be of quite different degrees of magnitude, running from the minimum of one discrete new ‘invention’ (gadget, technique, phenomenon, relationship) to the maximum of a setting (spatiotemporal locus), agent (main character or characters), and/or relations basically new and unknown in the author's environment” (Suvin, 1979, p. 64). While the *novum* must to some

extent be plausible according to our current understandings of the world, it also serves to clearly distinguish a fictional world from the author's own empirical reality. Hence, the novum simultaneously generates estrangement and actively engages the reader by drawing on their own cognitive frameworks, whether scientific, cultural, or everyday, making the scenario reasonable within these domains. This produces what Suvin terms cognitive estrangement – a concept adapted from Bertolt Brecht's *Verfremdungseffekt* (Suvin, 1978; Spiegel, 2006).

This approach aligns with Niels Dalgaard's argument that science fiction operates through a tension between distance and continuity. According to him, the genre bridges the gap between fictional worlds and the known reality of its readers, allowing for critical reflection through recognizable patterns reshaped in unfamiliar forms (Dalgaard, 1996). In this way, the novum enables science fiction to function as a mode of speculative thought, offering alternative perspectives on contemporary socio-political conditions through rational extrapolation.

Extrapolation is not only at the heart of the scholarly understanding of science fiction (the first academic journal dedicated to the study of science fiction, published from 1959, was aptly titled *Extrapolation*) but is also instrumentalized by science fiction authors themselves. Writer Judith Merrill, for instance, described science fiction as “stories whose objective is to explore, to discover, to learn, by means of projection, extrapolation, analogue, hypothesis-and-paper-experimentation, something about the nature of the universe, of man, of ‘reality’” (Merrill, 1966/2017, p. 27). In a similar vein, Ursula K. Le Guin defined science fiction as literary works that “extrapolate imaginatively from current trends and events to a near-future that's half prediction, half satire” (Le Guin, 2009). Scholars, too, have long recognized that this satirical impulse is a constitutive element of the science fiction genre (Pfaelzer, 1980; Borgmeier, 1989; Booker, 1994).

These various perspectives converge on the idea that works of science fiction are not simply imaginative entertainment, but also analytical as they offer a way of thinking through the present by envisioning the future. It is this critical and extrapolative capacity that this article seeks to trace in a selection of April Fool's stories. Though seemingly frivolous, many of these jokes share key structural and thematic features with science fiction. They, too, propose hypothetical and hyperbolic “what if?” scenarios by means of a novum – often technological or scientific in nature – to critique the contemporary state of affairs. As I will unfold in the following analysis and discussion, April Fool's jokes in the national media function as micro-

narratives that share some – if not all – structural and thematic features with science fiction.

An analysis of three journalistic hoaxes

The following analysis examines how April Fool's stories mobilize science fiction's critical and imaginative capacities in three specific instances. Focusing on just three cases provides the space to explore their structural and thematic features in detail. While the analysis is limited to a small selection, the same approach could be applied to other examples for further study.

The first step in my analysis is to isolate the novum within each April Fool's joke – that is, to identify the disruptive elements that mark its departure from the known empirical world. Since both the plausibility and potency of these hoaxes rely on proximity to real-world developments, I also trace the links that make the stories initially credible within their context. This is inherently a hermeneutical task that involves interpreting the joke in relation to both its temporal and media-specific circumstances, drawing on situated knowledge of the surrounding news landscape and public debates. This part of the analysis asks what aspects of contemporary culture is being extrapolated through the fictional scenarios in order to assess how these are anchored in, and act as a critique of, the empirical reality of the journalist.

Men redundant?

On the first of April 1996, *Information* brought a rather dystopian news story under the headline “Men redundant”. The article – spanning the front and back page – reported that women would soon be able to self-fertilize using hormones extracted from boar semen. This April Fool's story serves as an example of a narrative in which the novum is a new technology. Specifically, it presents a coming “revolutionary new method for fertilizing eggs without the use of male sperm” (Tingstrøm, 1996).

The technology in question is thus based on science that does not yet exist but is on the brink of being launched. It is further distanced through its setting in a foreign *topos* – allegedly under development in England – thereby constructing what Darko Suvin calls a spatio-temporal locus of estrangement, where speculative science is rendered plausible precisely by its displacement in space and time (Suvin, 1979, p.64). It does so by extrapolating not only from (then) current cutting-edge technology and inventions but was also informed by ongoing political debates. That same spring, the Danish Parliament had held its first reading of the Act on Artificial Insemination,

a debate that touched on the question of whether healthy women carrying known genetic disorders should be granted access to assisted fertilization. Concurrent advances in cloning, culminating in the 1996 birth of the cloned sheep Dolly, had likewise intensified contemporary public discussions about the ethical and medical implications of asexual reproduction.

The narrative also employs another genre-defining element from science fiction: the introduction of neologisms, that is, new, made-up words (Csicsery-Ronay, 2008, p. 14-20). In *Information's* April Fool's story, the novum method was being developed by British professor of genealogy Florence Gradgrind. The name appears to be an allegorical hybrid of Florence Nightingale – compassionate reformer of modern nursing – and Thomas Gradgrind, the Malthusian schoolmaster from Charles Dickens' *Hard Times* (1854). This neologism functions as a fictional marker, much like a traditional journalistic credibility marker but with reversed valence. Rather than lending credibility, it cues the attentive reader to the story's satirical form and subtly signals that this is not real news reporting.

The chimerical combination of the neologism furthermore establishes a conceptual juxtaposition between empathy and utilitarian rationality. In this way, it hints at both the promise and the disquieting implications of emerging reproductive technologies, the central critique embedded in this April Fool's joke. Interwoven with broader contemporary narratives concerning the marginalization of men, the article's quotation of Gradgrind – that although men “will no longer be necessary for reproduction, they will still have a place in the family” for practical chores – probably felt more unsettling than reassuring to many. According to Claus Tingstrøm, the journalist behind the story, the article resulted in a great number of concerned phone calls, all from male readers. Tingstrøm elaborated: “To me, a good April Fool's joke is one that makes you laugh at your own preconceived notions, and back then, there were quite a few men who were worried that well-educated, self-assured women would take all the good jobs”.⁹

“Men redundant” thus resonates thematically with a long lineage of biotechnological science fiction. Like the engineered reproduction of Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932), Margaret Atwood's state-controlled fertility in *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), and the world undone by male infertility in P.D. James's *The Children of Men* (1992), *Information's* April Fool's story appears as an invitation to critically reflect on how reproductive practices shape gender relations and social hierarchies.

Hyperbolic governance

A significant number of April Fool's Day jests in Danish national newspapers highlighted new and absurd legislation as the pivotal novum. One such example appeared on April 1st, 2012, when *Berlingske Tidende* reported that the European Union had requested that Denmark halt the sand drift from Råbjerg Mile, a protected hiking dune and a major tourist attraction in Denmark. This task was purportedly executed on the basis that the nation was bound by an obligation to ensure that "nature exists within the boundaries set by the Commission" (Ejsing, 2012), as part of the Natura 2000 initiative – a genuine EU-wide nature protection project whose name nonetheless carries futuristic undertones. The task, to shovel the sand back into place, would include "manual labor to an extent that could reduce unemployment to an absolute minimum" (Ejsing, 2012), possibly serving as a reference to previous Sisyphean employment schemes endorsed in Denmark's peripheral regions.

Råbjerg Mile is Denmark's largest migrating sand dune, comprising an estimated four million cubic meters of sand. Its projected annual movement of approximately 15 meters had long been a controversial issue that also set emotions in drift. In the late 19th century, large conifer plantations were established in the area to halt the drifting sand. This, however, sparked widespread protests over the alteration of the natural landscape, and the state eventually purchased the area on the condition that the dune be allowed to move freely. During the first decade of the 2000s, the migrating dune once again made headlines. In January 2008, *Berlingske Tidende* reported that Råbjerg Mile had been re-designated as protected, with new areas added to ensure that the dune could continue its natural movement even onto private land (Lumby, 2008).

By reworking these past controversies, the April Fool's article revives an age-old tension over where to draw the line between a nature governed by its own rhythms and one governed by human institutions. Yet, in *Berlingske Tidende's* April Fool's story, legislation is transformed into a hyperbolic technology. The article presents a satirical critique of EU's propensity to over-regulate everyday life, a tendency which had previously resulted in the establishment of stranger-than-fiction regulations pertaining to the curvature of cucumbers, the minimum dimensions of condoms, and the water level required in European toilet cisterns. The article thus gestures toward a dystopian future in which local efforts are at risk of being entirely overridden by a technocratic and supranational legal apparatus. This probably struck a particularly sensitive nerve with *Berlingske Tidende's* right-leaning readers, who normally regard the EU favorably.

Once again, an apt and telling neologism has been integrated into the text, as the article features several quotations from the fictional Coastal Management Office spokeswoman, Sandy Dune – a tongue-in-cheek name serving as a subtle giveaway to the attentive reader.

The future of food

April Fool's pranks in the examined newspapers often contained significant elements of media critique. This self-criticism is perhaps most evident in *Politiken's* 1999 April Fool's prank, delivered by the paper's then regular food critic, Adam Price. In the food section's columns, he reviewed the fictional restaurant Reaktor 2, which – as a commentary on the world as “a deeply fragmented, multicultural limbo” – served contrasting pairings such as foie gras on long-lasting German toast bread and chaffinch spleen marinated in tequila and bacon (Price, 1999).

Readers follow the critic and his companion from the arrival (“We peered inside on a frostbitten March evening” – a classic marker of authenticity that situates the scene) to the final assessment of the evening. The text thus adopts the conventional structure of a restaurant review, but the reader will quickly realize that the restaurant itself defied all formalities – the novum of the story – as Reaktor 2's raw industrial space lacked chairs, tables, or menus, and various conceptual gimmicks rendered the food practically inedible.

The narrative is clearly founded on an extrapolation of contemporary trends. The late 1990s were the heyday of celebrity chefs and jet-set clientele, which was reflected in a highly experimental fusion cuisine characterized by avant-garde and at times grotesque gastronomic creations. By enhancing current tendencies but morphing them into an even stranger and monstrous fission cuisine, this particular April Fool's joke thus seems to project a future in which restaurant meals are consumed in grey, cold concrete surroundings and on hard floors. This evokes scenes from science fiction, in which a clash between sensual indulgence – the consumption of food – and the cold, inhuman spaces of brutalist architecture form a satirical portrait of a decadent culture devoid of meaning and coherence.

I have included this example because it sheds light on a feature of media April Fool's jokes that sets them apart from science fiction. By fabricating a review that was itself a genre parody, it illustrates that the April Fool's joke could function not only as a form of social commentary, but also as a mode of media critique. When the critic, despite a relentless parade of unpalatable dishes (e.g., julienned canned meat with Piña Colada essence and blue cheese sorbet), finally awards the restaurant a five out of five review, the April Fool's story comes to demonstrate how the media and industry collude to

construct an illusory hype. This April Fool's joke probably landed hardest on Politiken's own core readership, holding a mirror to a consumer segment who were often teased for touting similar culinary absurdities. The fictional chef Pierre Marco – an aptonymic neologism alluding to Marco Pierre White – further anchored the joke in the contemporary gastronomic field, borrowing symbolic capital from one of the 1990s' most iconic culinary figures while satirising the media's celebrification of the chef.

Through imaginatively staging a restaurant that served subpar fish in abandoned industrial halls as a critique of consumer society's decline, Adam Price inadvertently prefigured the high-profile Danish restaurant Alchemist 2.0, which opened in a repurposed shipyard hall in 2019. In this derelict industrial complex, staff in Starship Enterprise-style uniforms serve “cryo-frozen greed granita on apple and spruce,” “caviar produced from vegetable waste cellulose,” “chocolate made from trawl-damaged langoustines” is served in, as a clear commentary on issues such as globalization and climate change (Rasmussen, 2019). Far from remaining a joke, the realized version of Price's fantasy became a critically acclaimed restaurant. Head chef Rasmus Munk was twice named the world's best chef, and in 2020, Alchemist received two Michelin stars for its innovative neurogastronomy, including a signature dish – an edible eyeball made from minced shrimp, raw peas crème fraiche and codfish eyes – aptly called “1984” (Mead, 2024), a nod to Orwell's dystopian vision of a society under constant surveillance.

This highlights another significant feature, which April Fool's stories seem to share with the science fiction genre: a pronounced ability to anticipate the future (Brozović et al., 2025; Livingston, 1969; Wright, 2021). From the years 1980-2024, a number of hoaxes published in both Danish and international newspapers have later proven to foreshadow actual events, inventions and/or political turns. For instance, in 1987, *Ekstra Bladet* ran a story asserting that overweight Danes would soon be subject to a “fat tax”. By 2005, the idea had left the realm of parody, with several politicians and scholars lending it their support. Also in 1987, *Information* published an April Fool's story claiming that then-Minister of Education, Bertel Haarder, intended to reintroduce morning song in public schools. By 2005, the very same minister did in fact endorse such a proposal. Last but not least: in 2008, *MetroXpress* reported that the United States wished to purchase Greenland (Ambrosius, 2008). Almost two decades later, actual U.S. foreign policy eerily echoed the newspaper's joke.

These examples are not cited to suggest that journalists possess prophetic powers. Rather, they underscore how closely April Fool's pranks operate to the threshold of reality. In the absence of a fitting

literary concept, we might describe this as a form of *satirical prophecy* or, returning to Ursula K. Le Guin's phrasing, as "half prediction, half satire."

Conclusions

The cases analyzed in this article confirm that mediated April Fool's pranks in Danish national newspapers operate according to a fundamentally different logic than their interpersonal predecessors. Where the traditional practical joke worked through direct, embodied misdirection, these stories achieve their effect by exploiting the shared assumptions and ideological blind spots of an entire readership. This capacity to work through collective imaginaries is what aligns them, structurally and thematically, with science fiction.

Of course, April Fool's stories are not science fiction in the conventional sense. Rather, my argument is that they employ comparable narrative devices, and that approaching them through this lens makes it possible to illuminate their satirical force and critical potential. What emerges is a form of speculative fiction that does not seek to build fully realized future worlds but rather to distort the present just enough to provoke reflection on existing inconsistencies and absurdities. This departure from the norms of factual reporting creates an unusual affordance: It allows both journalists and readers to confront pressing anxieties in softened form and from a safe distance, not unlike the thrill of a roller coaster ride or the brief, contained chaos of a controlled explosion.

Although my analysis shows clear conceptual overlaps between science fiction and April Fool's stories, the two genres also differ in significant ways. Unlike the former, April Fool's hoaxes are designed to blend seamlessly into the news flow, with only subtle cues that they are invented. This undeclared artifice gives the media April Fool's joke a distinctive edge. By never explicitly framing itself as a departure from fact, it actively tests readers' epistemic vigilance, that is, their capacity to distinguish credible reporting from fabrication.

Furthermore, April Fool's stories in the media are often grounded in a critique of journalistic practices themselves. They thus offer an opportunity for journalists to turn the satirical gaze inward and unmask journalism's own narrative formulas and authority claims. This lends the April Fool's joke a dual critical force: it simultaneously targets both social realities and the conventions through which journalism represents them. Read in this manner, April Fool's stories illuminate how humor and fiction can serve as legitimate tools for navigating uncertainty and processing social anxieties. They also

illustrate how journalists – although constrained by the imperative of factuality – can engage in cultural critique.

NOTES

¹ In a Nordic context, this included (but is not limited to) Swedish newspapers *Smålandsposten* and *Dalarnas Tidningar*. Norwegian *Aftenposten* and *VG* also abandoned April Fools' jokes in 2017.

² In 2021, the trade journal *Journalisten* reported that *Børsen*, *Jyllands-Posten*, and *Avisen Danmark* had announced that they would no longer publish April Fools' jokes (Jørgensen, 2024).

³ While April Fool's as an interpersonal practice has been investigated by folklorists and ethnologists, the media's handling of the tradition is sparsely studied. A few exceptions are Stattin (1996), Smith (2009), and Nyvang (2019; 2023).

⁴ Practical jokes consist of interpersonal setups in which the target is prompted to act in a way that makes them appear foolish (Marsh, 2015).

⁵ To be sure, the interpersonal practice of April Fool's was not eradicated by the advent of mass media. It continues to flourish. My argument is simply that the mediated variant of the tradition took on a different configuration, one marked by an implicit critique of power.

⁶ News satire has in recent years become a central object of scholarly attention within media and journalism studies. Although April Fool's stories share traits with news satire, the latter constitutes a distinct genre in which fiction is openly declared rather than temporarily disguised as factual reporting. A more sustained discussion of the relationship between April Fool's stories and news satire is offered in Nyvang (2023).

⁷ These time limitations are due to previous studies, which have indicated that Danish national newspapers began publishing April Fool's jokes in the early-1980s. This article thus in part relies on data that have previously been presented in Nyvang, 2019.

⁸ Moira Smith – one of the few scholars to have examined the April Fools' prank in the media – divides the phenomenon's development into three broad phases, though without proposing a clear periodization. In the early phase of journalism, fabricated stories were a common occurrence without any particular seasonal limitation. The subsequent phase was marked by the professionalization of journalism, during which false stories became confined to the annual April Fools' tradition. The third phase, which began in the mid-1970s, is characterized by the expansion of the April Fools' tradition beyond journalism. The April Fools' prank thus ceased to be the exclusive domain of journalists and was instead adopted by a wide range of actors, including advertising agencies and commercial enterprises (Smith, 2009, p. 275). This development aligns with the Danish context. Local newspapers, too, resumed publishing April Fool's jokes in the 1980s. Yet their focus was primarily directed at grandiose municipal projects, thereby preserving a distinctly local anchoring.

⁹ Email correspondence with Claus Tingstrøm, 6 June, 2025.

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CAROLINE NYVANG

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