

VIRGINIE ICHÉ, CÉLIA SCHNEEBELI, LYNN BLIN (EDS.). (2026). *CRINGE HUMOR ON SCREEN AND IN DIGITAL MEDIA: PRAGMATIC PERSPECTIVES*. CHAM: PALGRAVE MACMILLAN, 367 PP., ISBN 978-3-031-93001-0.

Within current increasingly fragmented public spheres, cringe has emerged as one of the most recognizable products of contemporary media environments (Hepp, 2019) and crucial categories of popular culture (Middleton, 2014), while simultaneously remaining difficult to define and delimit conceptually. As the editors of the reviewed volume observe, cringe is “both polysemous and multi-functional” (Iché et al., 2026, p. 1), and as such consequently invites a level of scholarly engagement that remains largely absent from contemporary communication and media scholarship.

In fact, despite the growing prominence of cringe in both public discourse and academic scholarship, there has been no comprehensive attempt to address its communicative and pragmatic dimensions. In this respect, the edited volume by Virginie Iché, Célia Schneebeli, and Lynn Blin (Montpellier, Dijon) provides a framework for understanding cringe humor as a distinct phenomenon governed by its own communicative logics and audience dynamics.

The volume is organized into three sections that guide readers from historical and conceptual considerations to analyses of specific media practices. In the opening chapter, Iché and Schneebeli provide a theoretical foundation by tracing the genealogy of the concept of cringe. Their discussion moves from early understandings associated with expressions of fear and submission to contemporary meanings linked to second-hand embarrassment. Particularly interesting aspect concerns their conceptualization of cringe humor as a phenomenon that brings together the seemingly contradictory experiences of amusement and embarrassment. The major contribution of this chapter lies in distinguishing between “cringeworthy,” “cringe,” and “cringe humor,” while situating these categories within broader traditions of pragmatic and media scholarship.

Chapter two, authored by Alexander Brock, develops a theoretical framework for identifying different sources of cringe humor. Drawing on the British panel show *8 Out of 10 Cats Does Countdown*, Brock introduces the concept of “cringe loci,” referring to the sites within humorous interactions where embarrassment is generated and negotiated. In fact, the “cringe loci” provided within the chapter represents one of the volume’s most substantial theoretical contributions.

In Chapter three, Agnieszka Piskorska examines the operation of cringe humor in talk-show settings. Her analysis demonstrates that embarrassment should not be viewed merely as the outcome of communicative failure but rather as an interactional resource that amplifies comedic effects. Chapter four, by Jacob Rigal and Dima Alkhateeb, focuses on *Between Two Ferns with Zach Galifianakis*. Through a multimodal analysis, the authors illustrate how facial expressions, gestures, gaze patterns, and interactional dynamics collectively produce moments of social discomfort and audience amusement.

The second part of the volume addresses the social and cultural dimensions of cringe humor reception. The contributors demonstrate that responses to socially inappropriate, uncomfortable, or norm-violating behavior are shaped by factors such as age, cultural context, and broader systems of social norms and collective identities.

Chapter five, by Marc Hye-Knudsen, offers a comparative analysis of British and American productions, including *The Office*, *Peep Show*, and *Curb Your Enthusiasm*. His findings underscore the importance of culturally specific understandings of shame, social propriety, and acceptable conduct in shaping the reception of cringe humor. Chapter six, authored by Luca Bischetti, investigates responses to humor related to the COVID-19 pandemic. Based on comparative empirical material from Italy and the United States, the chapter demonstrates that both age and cultural context significantly influence the experience of cringe.

Chapter seven presents a case study of “heterocringe,” an Instagram-based practice that employs embarrassment as a means of critiquing heteronormativity. Alice Cesbron, the author of this chapter, argues here that cringe possesses mobilizing potential and can function as a political and activist resource, ultimately serving as a tool for challenging dominant social norms. Chapter eight, by Célia Schneebeil, seems to be among the most theoretically productive contributions of the volume. Focusing on YouTube comments, Schneebeil examines how users articulate their experiences of embarrassment and negotiate the boundary between amusement and discomfort when engaging with cringe content.

The third section moves beyond conventional understandings of cringe humor. In Chapter nine, Thomas Messerli explores stand-up comedy and streaming platforms, analyzing the ambivalence that characterizes contemporary comedy consumption. His discussion highlights the tension between humor and viewers’ moral unease. Chapter ten, by Lynn Blin, examines Hannah Gadsby’s *Nanette*, offering an important clarification of the conceptual boundaries of cringe comedy and demonstrating that not all forms of uncomfortable humor should be subsumed under the category.

Chapter eleven focuses on the television series *Fleabag*. Adeline Terry shows within it how mechanisms commonly associated with cringe humor can also foster empathy toward fictional characters, thereby revealing the emotional and

relational dimensions of embarrassment. Finally, in Chapter twelve, Sylvia Sierra moves beyond media texts and investigates references to cringe in everyday interaction. Her analysis demonstrates that cringe has become a communicative resource not only within popular culture but also in ordinary social life.

Taken as a unified and completed work, the volume makes a significant contribution by providing a coherent theoretical framework for the study of cringe humor. The authors convincingly demonstrate that cringe cannot be reduced to a simple subtype of norm-violating humor. Rather, it constitutes a broader communicative phenomenon whose defining feature lies in the simultaneous presence of embarrassment and amusement.

From the perspective of communication and media studies, one of the volume's major strengths is its engagement with a diverse range of media environments, including television, digital platforms, and social media. This breadth also opens productive avenues for thinking about affect and affective publics in contemporary media culture. Moreover, the book offers considerable potential for scholars of political communication. Although political processes are not its explicit focus, the analytical tools developed throughout the volume could readily be applied to the study of politicians' digital performances, viral moments of public embarrassment, and the circulation of politically consequential content across networked platforms.

Two limitations nevertheless deserve attention. First, the volume is deeply rooted in Western popular culture and media contexts. As a result, its findings cannot easily be generalized across cultural settings. Second, the role of platforms themselves remains underdeveloped. While the case studies identify platforms and social media as spaces where cringe content circulates, they devote relatively little attention to the infrastructural and algorithmic conditions that may actively foster the production and visibility of such content (Papacharissi, 2015; van Dijck, 2013). In other words, the study of cringe on platforms is not fully accompanied by an examination of why platforms have become especially fertile environments for cringe culture, nor how this development may be connected to broader questions of communication power (Castells, 2009).

Overall, *Cringe Humor on Screen and in Digital Media* is a theoretically sophisticated and empirically rich contribution that establishes cringe as a legitimate object of scholarly inquiry. It will be of particular interest to researchers working in media studies, digital culture, humor studies, and communication research more broadly.

DISCLOSURE OF AI USE

The manuscript was proofread using GPT-5 (OpenAI) to improve grammar, spelling, and stylistic consistency.

REFERENCES

- Castells, M. (2009). *Communication Power*. Oxford University Press.
- Hepp, A. (2019). *Deep Mediatization: Key Ideas in Media & Cultural Studies*. Routledge.
- Iché, V., Schneebeli, C., & Blin, L. (Eds.). (2026). *Cringe Humor on Screen and in Digital Media: Pragmatic Perspectives*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Middleton, J. (2014). *Documentary's Awkward Turn: Cringe Comedy and Media Spectatorship*. Routledge.
- Papacharissi, Z. (2015). *Affective Publics: Sentiment, Technology, and Politics*. Oxford University Press.
- van Dijck, J. (2013). *The Culture of Connectivity: A Critical History of Social Media*. Oxford University Press.

Damian Guzek

 0000-0002-8138-8128

UNIVERSITY OF SILESIA IN KATOWICE, PALACKÝ UNIVERSITY OLOMOUC