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Humour and trust in pandemic engagement

Doona, Joanna

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LUND UNIVERSITY

PO Box 117
221 00 Lund
+46 46-222 00 00

Satirising science: humour and trust in pandemic engagement

Joanna Doona, associate senior lecturer, media and communication studies

Humorous interaction is prevalent online (David et al. 2018; Philips & Milner 2017), and incremental to practices of networking and community formation; building trust and intimacy (Krefting 2014; Tremblay 2016; Hampes 1999). This presentation focusses on humorous civic interaction online related to the covid-19 pandemic; more specifically, on debates concerning different national strategies and vaccination politics.

Humorous interaction is understood as a ubiquitous and inextricable aspect of civic engagement – expressed through jokes, irony, memes and sarcasm. The aim of the presentation is to understand how humour – as a social and emotional ‘mode’ – is engaged in vernacular discussions on complex scientific and political issues; specifically asking how trust and distrust in scientific, political and public knowledge production/institutions is expressed and negotiated through humour. Trust is understood as trust in media, government and other institutions of knowledge/expertise; as well as interpersonal trust, between citizens or groups of citizens – often overlapping in civic interaction (Meyer et al. 2008; Coleman et al. 2013).

Since humorous, satirical or ironic discourse challenges power (Hariman 2008) – including institutions of knowledge production – its link to issues of civic trust and distrust need to be further understood. Such exploration must be contextually grounded, to avoid the common conflation of humour, irony, scepticism and cynicism (Day 2011; Quiring et al. 2021). The presentation emphasises how humour engagement can be symptomatic of civic criticism, unease and lacking political efficacy (Doona 2021); as well as lacking ontological security, as trust in expertise/knowledge (Giddens 1990) is challenged continually. The analysis draws on digital ethnography, encompassing a broad selection of online spaces where pandemic trust/distrust is negotiated; including but not limited to comment sections on YouTube; social media related to public figures; as well as discussion threads in spaces such as Twitter and Reddit, where discussions on topics such as “big pharma” or “zero covid” are common.

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