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A double-voiced engagement

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Young adult audiences, news, and news satire: A double-voiced engagement

During the past decades, news satire and news parody have become increasingly popular in many parts of the world (Baym & Jones 2012), while some conventional news genres seem to be losing some of its younger audience (cf. Marchi 2012; Wadbring et. al. 2013a). This development has been investigated through textual analysis and within effects studies (cf. Göttlich & Herbers 2014; Prior 2003), while little focus has been placed on the subtler changes associated with the contemporary media landscape, where young audiences engage with both news and its satirical counterpart across varying media forms. According to some scholars, certain examples of news satire in broadcast, print and online media, such as *The Daily Show* (Comedy Central, 1996-), can even be considered a ‘new form of journalism’ (Göttlich & Herbers 2014:83; see also Baym 2005). Per definition, news satire and parody are hybrid genres that are difficult to define, ‘compris[ing] many textual forms, from faux news anchors who posture authoritatively at pretend news desks, to puppet shows, sketch comedies, and panel discussions’ (Baym & Jones 2012). This text will use the label of news satire, as the word ‘satire’ can indicate a both comedic and serious intent (Corner et al. 2013), although readers should be aware that not all examples that come up can be assumed to have such an intent.

While the mixing of news and comedy has been linked to growing cynicism and lacking political engagement by some (cf. Hart & Hartelius 2007), this study interprets it differently: as processes of hybridization and fragmentation of media and its audiences, that can be linked to symptoms of lacking political efficacy among young adult audiences, as well as a dissatisfaction with conventional political journalism.

More specifically, this extended abstract develops on findings from a study on political comedy engagement among Swedish young adult audiences (Doona 2016), focussing more specifically on the modes of engagement and genre work of these young adult audiences, in relation to news and news satire. In other words, it seeks to understand the relationship between news and news satire better, through the various ways in which young adult audiences engage with news and news satire, by asking how young adult audiences of news satire construct their news and news satire engagement. This focus will contribute to the scholarly discussion on the values of news satire in relation to ‘straight’ news; as well as the problems of engaging younger audiences, facing conventional news media. An important aspect of this issue – and an argument for this study’s focus on subjectivity – is that young adult audiences seemingly harbour what Coleman calls a ‘democratic distaste for fundamentalist certainty’ (2013b:383) towards conventional journalism, begging a second question: how does news satire engagement challenge certainty?

The tendency to avoid audience subjectivity in research on news satire by focussing on the text, effects or impact, reflects two problems: first, the isolation of specific media use in studies of media and citizenship (see a critical account of this in Jones 2013a); and second, an overly-narrow perspective on news and news satire as valuable only if they ‘inform’ citizens, i.e. provide them with information that they retain. This study aims to counter these tendencies by focusing on contextualised and subjective audience constructions, with regards to young adult citizenship and the increasingly fragmented ‘flow’ of media sources available.

Subjectivity and overflowing news

The study draws on conceptual work on news engagement and citizenship (Dahlgren 2009; Coleman 2013b); humour, satire and irony (cf. Corner et al. 2013; Jones 2013b) as well as on the analytical framework on audiences by Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998). In various ways, these works stress the active engagement of audiences; the importance of contextualization of and attention to subjective meaning-making among such audiences; and the fact that contemporary news media needs to problematise its ways of engaging young adult audiences, in order to attract and aid them in the process of becoming citizens.

In a time when de-regulation and digital media allows for a wide variety of news or news-like media, democratic citizenship entails a kind of news engagement characterised by constant sorting, evaluation and assessment of sources and texts, that might seem overbearing to some (Dahlgren 2009; Coleman 2013b). According to Coleman, it can also create ‘self-informed’ audiences (2013b), who in many ways act as their own editors. Both those types – those who feel overwhelmed and those who roam digital media in a more confident way – are represented in the data of this study. Beyond that, the theoretical frame highlights how news satire criticizes conventional news media in various ways (Jones 2013b); which can be related to the ‘double-voiced discourse’ (Bakhtin 1987:324) of irony, that characterises much of contemporary news satire (Day 2011). This is important as it has a bearing on audiences’ modes of engagement, and reminds us of Corner’s argument: that studies of media should take into account form, subjectivity and power (2011).

Methods and genre work

The study utilizes data from questionnaires, in-depth interviews and focus group sessions with 31 Swedish young adult (18-35 years old) who regularly engage with the Swedish public service news satire programme *Tankesmedjan* (Swedish Radio P3, 2010-), and/or the American cable channel programme *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* (Comedy Central, 1996-2015¹). These programmes were chosen for recruitment because of their popularity at the time, and the fact that they represent radio/podcasting and television; are national and international; and are produced by public service and commercial actors. As they were used in order to recruit participants they were the most often discussed, but they were not the only examples of news satire mentioned by participants, as they were encouraged to bring up other programmes or comedians.

Part of the study rests on audience constructions of genre, where audience members are conceptualised as using genre work when deciding on how to engage with a particular media text (Hill 2007; Doona 2016); and then asked to explain this in an interview or focus group setting. Here, it is worth mentioning the ‘dilemma’ of the study of genres, mentioned by among others, Neale (2000) and Turner (2008). In order to study a genre, researchers need a working definition of said genre, yet also need to avoid premature definitions. For that reason, the study doesn’t claim to find new or improved definitions. Rather, the genre work – often characterised by messiness and contradictions – will be the main analytical focus of this text, used to gain insights into audience constructions.

¹ The programme continued on with a new host, Trevor Noah, after Stewart’s retiring, but the field work was carried out when he was still host.

The analysis of transcripts was guided by a search for discursive themes (Schröder et al. 2003); specifically focusing on constructions of the genres of news and news satire; as well as journalism and political journalism. The questionnaires were used to contextualise the themes, which were based on the research questions and theoretical frame, and then distilled into narrower sub-themes. This approach is first of all motivated by the methodological aim to contextualise audience constructions' and focus on subjectivity, but also has to do with the fact that a lot of the previous research on political and news satire lacks this dimension.

Analysis and preliminary findings

As mentioned, the study's participants were recruited because they regularly engage with news satire. Some of them with both *Tankesmedjan* and *The Daily Show*, while others with one of them, or one of them and something else. The following section will consider the study's participants' engagement in conventional news media, followed by sections that deals with genre work and the comparison between news satire and news.

News media engagement

Based on the questionnaires and transcript data, several of the participants considered themselves engaged in an always ongoing 'flow' of news. It was a common metaphor that explains how they felt more or less overwhelmed in the fashion described by, among others, Dahlgren (2009), Corner (2007) and Coleman (2013a; b). It was clear that some of them were quite heavily engaged with news, specifically in online or broadcast forms; describing how they checked certain websites several times per day or listened to public service radio news equally often, which for some then amounted to several hours every day.

Those who can be characterised as heavy consumers would actively search for more news on stories that interested them; followed journalists and politicians on social media platforms such as Twitter; and engaged in comparing various news sources' versions of the same story. Interestingly, these participants didn't seem to engage with televised news often, only engaging with it through news satire programmes, or in clip-form on the websites of news networks such as CNN, the BBC or Swedish Public Service Television (SVT). Instead, television news attracted those who engaged with news a bit less or not very often. This group was characterised by either active avoidance of news in various forms, or a more sporadic engagement.

When studying individuals, it is clear one way to understand the news habits of young adults is to consider not only frequency, but control. Some participants would avoid any kind of media that can be characterised as 'pushing' content, such as broadcast television or radio, and printed press; in order to be able to control what media content they engaged with more precisely. This meant that they would engage more with 'pulled' content, found in media such as streamed television, podcasts and online newspapers. Others would do the opposite, meaning they were sometimes engaged in media content, such as news, even if they hadn't planned to.

The complexity of these 31 young adult Swedes' news habits cannot be overstated, arguing for further qualitative research in studies of young adults and news media. For the purpose of this study, the most important point is that none of the participants avoided news consistently – whether on purpose or not, it is not really possible to avoid news entirely in contemporary Swedish society (Wadbring 2016b) – but some of them engaged more heavily than others, calling themselves 'news junkies'.

Genre work – a source of enjoyment

The idea of genre work comes from Hill (2007), who alongside Hermes (2005) refers to John Ellis' conceptualisation of how television aids audiences in 'working through' contemporary complex issues (2000). Instead of drawing on psychodynamics, as Ellis does, this study draws on conceptual work on humour engagement, to fit the line of inquiry better. One example of this is Morreall (2005), who stresses the fact that humour is 'engaged in for its own sake rather than to reach a goal' (2005:68).

The point of prompting participants to engage in genre work is that news satire is a hybrid genre. It combines conventional news with humour and irony, which invites different kinds of engagement – in part for 'its own sake' and in part 'to reach a goal' (ibid.); which forces audiences to focus on what in a media text can be considered serious, and not. Hill, who has studied hybridity and the audience in other contexts, describes the concept of genre work as 'involv[ing] multiple modes of engagement. It is the work of being both immersed in watching a genre, and reflecting on this experience' (2007:84).

Interestingly, this is one of the attractions of news satire: participants of the present study enjoyed the genre work itself, both in their everyday engagement with news satire, and in the interview or focus group settings. Based on their previous knowledge, they weighted various aspects of a programme or a comedian, against each other, to decide if something was meant to be serious or not. In that respect, news satire is a form heavily dependent on perceived intent: Is this to be laughed at, or food for thought?

These audience constructions are examples of the kinds of work or activity an audience produces. In this respect, Abercrombie and Longhurst argue, what might be considered an 'ordinary' audience member is actually more like a 'fan,' or 'enthusiast,' (1998:122). This focuses attention towards the 'skill mobilised' by audiences, which leads them 'to be productive in two general senses: materially of things and meanings; and of identities' (ibid.). This point is important as there has been worry among some scholars and journalists regarding audiences' ability to discern what in news satire is meant as serious and not (Johnson et al. 2010) or as mentioned, that it can create a general kind of cynical or pessimistic engagement with news media and/or politics. If the audience actually enjoys this kind of work and inhabits these skills – analysing, deconstructing and drawing on previous knowledge that is then built upon through further engagement with both news and news satire – it can be argued that news satire engages a kind of audience that is well equipped, or on their way of becoming well equipped, to understand the differences between serious and silly intent.

The late modern value of news satire

The issue of a potentially growing cynicism is difficult to establish in itself. In my previous work on these audiences, I argue that we should consider the growing interest in news satire as a symptom of shifts in late modern political culture and media, rather than the other way around, in line with the perspective of engagement in and through media as complex; something beyond measurable causes and effects. Instead, late modern citizenship, as theorised by among others, Coleman (2013a; b) and Dahlgren (2009) and expressed in the data of the present study, is characterised by a cautious reflexivity:

I understand that [commercial television channels] need to make money, but I still think ... somehow there's a certain responsibility, to actually contribute to public debate. But I guess, if a child gets to choose

between carrots and candy ... it'll always choose the candy. But that doesn't mean that candy is better, really. That's kind of how I feel. Sure, there's always the risk that you come off all moralist and preachy [...] but I mean, it's too bad because [news satire] is great entertainment as well, I think people need to get used to it to understand what it's about (interviewee Benjamin, 31, shop clerk).

This reflexivity is also detectable in how some young adults have a low belief in modern era collective action (consistently constructed as 'packaged deals') and lack political efficacy (internal and external), yet strongly believe in a liberal democratic and 'informed' citizenship. This seeming contradiction, labelled 'uneasy citizenship' in my previous work, cannot be blamed on a specific media genre or the hybridization of genres.

In other words, engagement in news satire is compared to engagement in news and democratic values – albeit with various levels intensity. It is not surprising, as news satire is enjoyable in part because it plays off the news. Participants spoke a lot about the problems they saw in news media, which is in line with the argument of Jones (2010), that contemporary audiences are 'media-savvy,' meaning they understand aspects of how the media and news production functions. Since a major part of news satire focuses its satire on the news, rather than on politics directly, it follows that it might attract those who already are critical of conventional news journalism, as well as aids the audience in developing a certain 'savvy':

I sometimes feel that there's an additional need for a critical awareness [among audiences] of sources in [news satire] contexts. But not that much greater, because I think that regular news demands so much of that type of critical awareness from the get-go ... so like if I were to compare ... like yeah, 'you know I saw this thing on Jon Stewart' compared to 'I read this thing in *Dagens Nyheter*,' I feel it's almost the same. And you know, that sort of critical awareness is a lot of hard work. And it is that way with most things, I feel. I'm not that nervous about using [news satire] as a source either. Although it depends a bit on what you're watching as well (interviewee Dennis, 24, political science student).

The study's participants were reflexive in their comparisons of news and news satire. The line of reasoning represented by the quote from Dennis was common, but it was clear that news satire does things that conventional news cannot do:

I think that's what [*Tankesmedjan*] can do, that they don't have to ... be as correct, or whatever. [...] regular news can't be aware of everything either and it's not as if they are (interviewee Ivar, 23, engineering student).

News is mostly very neutral. They don't have any views on the news, it's just news. But they do in *Tankesmedjan*, they agree, or disagree with someone, always. That's the thing, and then they make fun of that. [...] And I guess that's what's fun about it. It's boring with people who try to be neutral all the time. Like, you have to have a position. That's what's funny (focus group participant Thelma, 20, student in media and communication).

Another thing, I think, is that the news flow is so big and it can be tough to take it all in, you get kind of jaded. But some of the satire and humour can actually make you regain some empathy. Because you come to that position where [news satire] can be very brutal, and you're pulled back to this thing of 'Oh my God, that's so terrible!' If it were just in the news flow it would flow past you like the rest of it does (focus group participant Susanna, 28 years old, landscaping architect).

Correctness; opinions and bias; and a brutality that 'cuts through' and engages on an affective level, which would be considered more or less problematic according to contemporary journalistic standards, were constructed as attractive, authentic, enjoyable and important. Some of these aspects have been found in research in other countries too, such as Marchi's work on American teenagers, who enjoyed 'the ideological clashes found in social networking sites,

blogs, fake news, and opinionated talk shows' (2012:258), leading her to the conclusion that news producers need to reconnect to what she calls the 'original intention of the concept of journalistic objectivity' (2012:258) so that news can be considered independent of public relations and propaganda, and provide information that allows young audiences to engage critically with the news (*ibid.*).

Conclusion: The beneficial double-voiced engagement

While agreeing with Marchi, I argue that the issue is wider than journalistic independence. The young adults represented in the present study enjoy aspects of news satire that news journalism, at least if it adheres to standards of clarity, objectivity and neutrality, cannot provide. This enjoyment is important because it ensures regular engagement (although this should be studied further to be fully confirmed as engagement is dynamic), and makes challenging engagement with news and politics playful and attractive.

As audiences are tasked with sorting through a flow of news and information in their everyday, alongside many other tasks, which demands a kind of critical awareness invited by news satire. News satire's preoccupation with conventional news signals that news and political communication matters.

Further, the so-called affective turn (cf. Burkitt 2014; Papacharissi 2015; Bessant 2017; Coleman 2013a) shows that affective processes have been ignored in modern era conceptualisations of media and citizenship. Through the study of news satire engagement it becomes clear that alternative forms of news can provide an affective charge or dimension. This lets young adult audiences engage with trust and emotions, which potentially aids them in prioritising news and political engagement over other pressing aspects of late modern young adult life, and allows them to engage on a much needed emotional level.

As the study is not yet finished, these conclusions are not yet fully developed, but indicate a complex engagement that matches the 'double-voiced discourse' mentioned by Bakhtin (1987), with both news and news satire. Contrary to the belief that this creates cynical or distanced citizens, I argue that the double-voiced discourse is important to the development of young citizens, and of a political identity more generally. This argument is based on the notion that the late or postmodern rejection of absolute truths isn't equitable to cynicism or nihilism (cf. Coletta 2009). Rather, it is a way of widening political discourse, to allow for expanded 'set[s] of circumstances within which we view matters, providing fresh perspective and additional information' (Combe 2015:301); as well as allowing audiences to 'analyze issues for [them]selves' (*ibid.*:301f; see also Jones 2013b). The challenge to certainty, and associated with that, rationality, is constructed as more accurate by the young adult news satire audience, and is something they carry into their engagement with and through the media.

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