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Uneasy citizens: constructions of political cynicism among young satire audiences

Young adult citizens are a mixed group – in both research and media, they're seen as engaged *and* disengaged, as well as politically idealistic *and* cynical (cf. Amnå & Ekman 2014). This paper seeks to further understand this contradiction, by studying the Swedish young adult audience of news satire, a group that has expressed a diverse set of constructions of political idealism, uneasiness and cynicism (Doona 2016). Part of the issue, the paper argues, has to do with the often ignored role of emotions and affect in relation to political idealism and/or optimism – a phenomenon dubbed the affective deficit (Coleman 2013). The paper attempts to answer the question: How do young adult audiences of news satire construct contradictions and negotiate between optimistic and pessimistic notions of citizenship? News satire engagement is of particular interest because it has been put forth as a potential source of cynicism (cf. Hart & Hartelius 2007; Coletta 2009), since it is often directed towards teens and young adults, and its ironic mode of discourse is assumed to be potentially distancing. This paper puts forth a different argument, siding with scholars who criticise such assertions since they ignore the active engagement of audiences (cf. Jones 2013), as well as the interrogating role news satire can have in relation to 'straight' news (Painter & Hodges 2010). Humour and satire require a specific type of audience engagement, as audience members are addressed in a mix of comedic and serious ways. Using thematic analysis of data from in-depth interviews and focus groups with Swedish young adults (18-35 years old) who follow Swedish *Tankesmedjan* (Swedish Radio P3, 2010-) and/or American *The Daily Show* (Comedy Central, 1996-), it is argued that these contradictions depend on subjective processes of developing citizen identities. News satire engagement entails a constant weighting of utterances and statements, where the viewer or listener is prompted to decide if what is being communicated is meant to be serious or not. This engagement connects to ongoing processes of development, where the young adult news satire audience negotiates between fears of political exclusion and manipulation, and playful and emotional constructions of the political. Further, it is argued that some of the scholarly worry regarding news satire engagement among young adult audiences is based on conceptualisations of political cynicism that need to be problematized, as they tend to conflate cynicism with criticism (cf. Baumgartner & Morris 2011).

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