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“No fun with a political public service” The SKOLKO controversy and public service satire

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In 2018, satirical public service programme ‘Svenska Nyheter’ (Swedish News, SVT, 2018-) sparked a debate in Swedish press and comments sections, after launching the web tool ‘SKOLKO’ (translates into ‘SCHOOL QUE’; also connotes the word ‘skolka’, meaning ‘to cutting class’). The tool was designed to make fun and correct an unfair allocations system for private school applications.

While there have been some studies of the textual qualities of satirical calls to action (cf. Baym 2005; Day 2011), there has been less focus on how satirical calls to action develop and blend with non-satirical ones, in the context of civic debate – especially in relation to public service satire. Public service news satire is particularly interesting since its portrayal of politics is less neutral than that of conventional news; which then becomes a topic of debate alongside the issue raised in the first place. Considering the ensuing SKOLKO debate as rhetorical and performative acts, we ask: how do various media, modes of discourse and stakeholders interplay and contribute to the processual development of the discursive and political meaning of the event?

The study is case-based and interdisciplinary, combining textual and social media analysis methods from rhetoric and media and communication studies. The analysis is approached from the perspective of dialogism (Todorov 1984), focussing especially on polyphonic, emotional, and contextual dimensions of the debate. Empirical materials consist of the SKOLKO episode, news and debate articles, and the programme’s comments section. Preliminary analysis shows how the contextualization of issues is a primary point of controversy, and how strategies of discursive positioning can expand the reach of a civic debate by appealing to non-aligned discursive communities. This demonstrates how a public issue emerges in a combination of constitutive rhetorical, satirical, cultural and social practices, across a range of media.