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audience constructions of political comedy

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Transgressing the boundaries in political media: audience constructions of political comedy

As political comedy formats gain popularity among audiences (cf. Jones 2013; Marchi 2012), and young/young adult audiences seem to avoid conventional news programming to a rising degree (cf. Dahlgren 2009; Bennett 2008; Andersson 2007), it becomes increasingly important to understand what this hybrid form is: how it functions, and how it is constructed and understood by its audiences (Jones 2013) – which is what the paper aims to do. In doing so, it challenges the construction of 'entertainment' as strictly separated from 'information', and goes on to ask what labels such as 'satire' and 'parody' mean to the communication and mediation of the political.

Based on in-depth interviews and focus groups with 31 Swedish young adult (18-35 years) audience members of two political comedy programmes (American television programme *The Daily Show* and Swedish radio programme *Tankesmedjan*, 'The Think Tank'), a textual mapping of contemporary political comedy, as well as an analysis of a media scandal and controversy following a segment in *Tankesmedjan*, the paper illustrates how the definitions and distinctions of 'satire' (Hariman 2008; Corner et al. 2013) vary depending on context; and further, that the issue of intent in humour is paramount, both to its audiences, to a wider secondary audience, and to media producers, as they may have to face legal issues following controversies involving humour.

In addition, the paper problematizes the perspective of young adult audiences as migrating from 'serious' news to 'silly' entertainment (following Marchi 2012 and Jones 2013), and raises the question of what political comedy can do, that other forms cannot. By engaging audience members in 'genre work' (cf. Hill 2007), the paper explores the intergeneric space (Corner 2011) between news and comedy, and shows how there is a need for media that recognises the affective and emotional aspects of political media engagement, and citizenship (cf. Coleman 2013). News and current affairs are necessarily restricted by journalistic norms of factuality and neutrality, which audience members recognise, but as politically engaged, such individuals have a need of media outlets that go beyond such restrictions. Hence, political comedy creates a low-stakes space which functions as a 'symbolic leveller' for citizens (Hariman 2008) – a space that allows for a more playful, emotionally charged and ambiguous kind of political communication, where audience members get to connect to each other, understand issues better, test ideas, and 'feel' the political.