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Provoking the Citizen: Re-examining the role of TV satire in the Trump era

TV satire has been commended for its ability to hold power to account and provide audiences with context and alternative perspectives to news events. Despite accolades to public discourse and journalistic integrity, TV satire is fraught with limitations including; its inability to change politics, its ability to encourage political apathy and promote a partisan logic. While this may be a counter-liberal response to the right-wing media and politicians it critiques, TV satire often preaches to a converted audience, the potential impact of which can lead to a repudiation of deliberative politics and increased political disengagement. Under the Trump Administration, America is experiencing more intensified demonstrations of partisanship and public distrust in political and media institutions. Furthermore, in a culture where satire has become reality and critical journalism has increased, its role has become problematic. By adopting a multi-method approach of content and discourse analysis this study examined whether TV satire could offer a different approach to reporting in the Trump era. The study found that TV satire is adopting solution and motivation building frames associated with advocacy journalism in an attempt to encourage audiences to engage with traditional forms of civic participation.

Keywords: Advocacy journalism, citizens, Full Frontal, Last Week Tonight with John Oliver, satire, Trump

Introduction

Over the last 20 years the U.S. has experienced a satire boom that has lambasted political institutions for transgressions and undemocratic policies. It has also been a staunch critic of the media for failing to keep government abuse of power in check. Contemporary satire has manifested itself on cable television, where award winning programmes like *The Daily Show* have left a legacy of engaging political critique that has since been adopted by shows like *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver* and *Full Frontal*. The problems identified by satirists like Stewart have not gone away. Under President Trump, the crisis of communication has intensified in the form of partisanship and public and political distrust in the news media.

Now more than ever America needs an informed and critical satire platform to hold truth to power. But the role of the satirist has become problematic under Trump, as writers and hosts are confronted with a stranger-than-fiction politics and president. *South Park* writers, Trey Stone and Matt Parker, have discussed the challenges of mocking and critiquing the current U.S administration because satire has become reality (*The Atlantic* 2017). Trump continues to be a target but, as seen in programmes like *SNL*, the humour is limited to parody. This humour may have a cathartic purpose but it refrains from challenging and critiquing Trump's politics.

The perception that TV satire offers more informative news to mainstream journalism is also being challenged. This is because Trump's claims of fake news and threats to journalistic freedom have damaged the transactional relationship

between politicians and journalists, and thus helped reinvigorate the work of political journalism (Shafer 2017). This is evident in the investigative work of *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*, who were recognized by the 2018 Pulitzer Prize Board for their reporting on Russia's interference in the 2016 election, and possible collusions with the Trump campaign.

The issues currently facing TV satire suggest that the genre may have lost the critical edge it once had. It was the intention of this study to re-examine the role of TV satire in the wake of Trump's presidency to see whether the genre could offer its audience a different take on news events. The shows that were examined included: *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver (LWT)* and *Full Frontal (FF)*. This study found that the TV satire genre is not redundant in fact under Trump it has reimagined the possibilities of satire practice by moving into the field of advocacy journalism. This challenges the perception that satire is destructive to the democratic process as the inclusion of advocacy strategies helped promote political problem solving and motivate acts of civic participation.

TV Satire as the Fourth Estate

Programmes like *The Daily Show*, and their hybrid mix of comedy and political commentary, have been heralded as the reinvention of political journalism (Baym 2010; Jones 2010). The reason is their ability to blur the lines of journalism and comedy that has struck a chord with millennials (Pew Research Center 2010; 2012) who have grown tired of packaged, sensationalized news (Buckingham 2000:5; Mindich 2005: 46). But rather than abandoning news altogether, young people are seeking out alternative news sources like satire (Baym 2010: 2) to gain deeper perspectives on political issues (Comedy Central 2012).

TV satire is a genre that is closely aligned with its audiences. This is why satirists are characterized as 'citizen surrogates' (Jones 2010: 238) as they work on behalf of citizens by airing their social grievances in the public sphere. This creates a bond between both parties, as satirists use their public platform to articulate citizen anger and apathy towards elite institutions, but in a biting and humourous manner. Such practices draw similarities to Freud (1960: 149) and Bakhtin's (Cited in Gray et al 2009: 10) work on humour, who argue that jokes make aggressiveness possible against those in authority while offering citizens temporary respite from the strains of society. This sheds further light on the democratic capabilities of TV satire and its ability to fight the audiences' corner by holding elite institutions to account.

In addition to the democratic capabilities of TV satire, its place within the infotainment genre should also be acknowledged. It falls within this category because of its hybrid mix of news and popular culture (Thussu 2010), and for some scholars (Franklin 2003; McChesney 2004) this is problematic because the latter is contributing to the demise of public discourse. This is because infotainment's preoccupation with sensationalism is part of the 'dumbing-down' process of contemporary communication, which is responsible for creating an uninformed and manipulated citizenry. But Temple (2006: 267) disagrees, arguing that popular culture can be essential to news reporting because it helps engage audiences who are unresponsive to conventional news programming.

Unlike other infotainment formats, TV satire is not restricted by the same operational norms and commercial imperatives, thus it has the freedom to offer audiences an alternative take on news events. This might be expressed through “blunt and honest” reporting (Baumgartner 2008) and its meaningful assessments of events that encourage audiences to question and play with dominant political discourses (Gray et al 2009: 11). Take *The Colbert Report’s* Super-Pac campaign, which offered audiences a simplified way of understanding election campaign finance. TV satire also performs an educational role by drawing the audiences’ attention to the framing activities of commercially driven news (Anderson and Kincaid 2013: 184). This is achieved through the juxtapositioning of videos that are used as evidence to highlight fabrication, lies and hyperbole in cable news reporting. These combined approaches are an attempt to show audiences that hegemonic ideologies communicated through mass media are “subject to contestation and oppositional understanding” (Anderson and Kincaid 2013: 183). Consequently, this reporting style can enhance the audiences’ political knowledge and deliberative skills, which are necessary for the formation of an informed and active democratic culture.

Satire & Political Advocacy

A significant flaw of satire is its inability to influence or change the political process (Hart and Hartelius 2007). Freud (1960: 11) expands on this view, asserting that the satirist can translate the audiences’ anger into a satirical attack, but not collective action. Thus, while it is described as humour with a social purpose (Kercher 2006:15) it is unable to move beyond comedic criticism and promote constructive ideas that aid political problem solving. This may have significant consequences for TV satire audiences, as research conducted by Baumgartner and Morris (2006) identified that engagement with this platform can encourage cynicism and alienation from the political process.

Contemporary TV satire has started to challenge this perception by promoting political action. In 2010 Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert held the ‘Rally to Restore Sanity’, an event that encouraged citizens to gather on the Washington Mall to advocate deliberative compromise in politics. While the rally had no discernable impact, it acted as a gateway for Jon Stewart to immerse himself into the field of advocacy journalism by promoting the Zadroger Act. Stewart was not solely responsible for the passing of the Bill, but journalists and NGO’s referred to his engagement with the event as an act of advocacy journalism (Carter and Stelter 2010).

Advocacy journalism draws numerous parallels with the work of TV satirists, with both adopting a partisan rhetoric that TV satire often uses to express a liberal agenda (Young and Tisinger 2006: 126). What’s more, they support and speak for those who are denied a powerful spokesman and promote perspectives that are typically either under, or misrepresented in the media (Fisher 2016; Janowitz 1975). Despite these similarities and examples of advocacy work carried by contemporary satirists, there is an absence of scholarship that explores the connection between

them. It was the intention of this study to fill this research gap by examining the advocacy strategies used by TV satirists during Trump’s presidency. This approach would show how TV satire has the ability to move beyond critiquing political issues by engaging directly in the political process.

Methodology & Theoretical Framework

To build a framework of analysis, this study borrowed elements of Entman’s (1993: 52) diagnostic framework, with a focus on ‘suggested remedies’ to capture instances where satirists adopted traits associated with advocacy journalism. This included solution building and collective action strategies that encouraged political awareness, and instances where the satirist supported or proposed a solution/strategy to a problem, idea, person or event (Fisher 2016: 712; Galtung and Lynch 2010: 17; Gamson 1992: 7). It also included instances where the satirists adopted the role of citizen surrogate that involved speaking for those denied a media platform (Galtung and Lynch 2010: 7; Janowitz 1975: 618). In addition, the framework also accounted for advocacy strategies that fell outside of Entman’s framework; namely those that sought to increase the power of the audience by encouraging them to participate in the social policy arena (Waisbord 2009: 714). These instances were identified as ‘motivational frames’ (Gamson 1995) where TV satirists would encourage audiences to engage in forms of collective action.

This study examined *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver* and *Full Frontal* because both shows have previously adopted advocacy strategies. The sample of programming included those aired during the first six months of Trump’s presidency. Content analysis was used to identify themes associated with solution and motivational framing. This part of the analysis yielded 39 shows in total (20 for *FF* and 19 for *LWT*) and 107 individual stories that were reported within the sample of programming. This provided a rich body of qualitative material for a discourse analysis on the range of solution building and motivational strategies that were found.

Advocacy in Action: Solution Framing

Table 1 shows most of the story items were context driven, yet both programmes also offered solutions to social/political problems and encouraged their audiences to engage in collective action. These are significant findings that identify new strategies adopted by TV satirists to encourage political engagement and acts of civic participation during Trump’s presidency.

Story Framing in TV Satire

Frame Type	No of Individual Items (stories)	Percentage of Individual Items (stories)
Context driven stories	46	42.9%
Solution framing	22	20.6%

Motivational framing	19	17.8%
Basic publicizing of story	15	14%
N/A (e.g. non political)	5	4.7%
Total	107	100%

Solution is defined as a means of problem solving or dealing with a difficult situation. The problem referred to in Example A is the credibility of journalism and press freedom that has been consistently undermined by President Trump. By hosting the *Not the White House Correspondents Dinner*, FF host Sam Bee firstly celebrates the work of alternative news platforms such as *Teen Vogue* and *Trumpcast*, for their informative post-election coverage. However she also uses her satirical platform to skewer what she calls the ‘critical pundit infestation’ on cable news with specific reference to *CNN*’s President Jeff Zucker.

Example A



“I watch cable news all day and I can tell you, *CNN* employs some of the most talented journalists out there. Please! Jeff [Zucker] set them free to use their journalistic skills! Who knows? One of them might uncover a way to turn their network back into a news organization.” Full Frontal 29th April 2017

Satirical skewering of television news is a common narrative in TV satire but in addition to diagnosing this problem, Bee proposes a solution to *CNN*’s sensationalized take on political news reporting. Her suggested remedy is grounded in a political economy critique of the contemporary media. For example, Bee praises *Teen Vogue* and *Slate* who are owned by large media conglomerates with commercial interests, yet they are still able to produce valuable journalistic work. In contrast *CNN*, who has as pitched itself as the embattled news network since Trump’s fake news claims, is churning out combative news featuring paid Trump supporters who are regularly pitted against credible journalists (Maza 2017). The manifestation of theatrics over factual journalism is a result of Zucker’s philosophy of reporting politics as sport. This direction to a large extent has proven successful, as the network has seen an increase in its viewership by 39% since Trump took office (Coen 2017). But short-term increased ratings and brand awareness could have

long-term consequences for the networks journalistic integrity and viewer knowledge. Thus Bee highlights this issue and proposes a solution to Zucker that requires utilising the skills of *CNN*'s competent journalists so that the channel can become the "unlikely hero" of news (Maza 2017) that it claims to be.

In Example B John Oliver explores the Republican's replacement of Obama Care, and the negative impact it will have on segments of the American public. According to Oliver this problem is compounded by Trump's lack of engagement with the bill that, on the campaign trail, he promised to be involved with. Oliver's solution to this problem is to address the president's ignorance by speaking to him and his supporters directly via the media.

Example B



"The [healthcare] bill Trump is championing will increase for older, poorer Americans and will cause millions of people to lose coverage. Somebody needs to explain this to him and since he is clearly still watching *Fox and Friends* we might actually be able to help here because you might remember last month we bought time on that show to have our Catheter cowboy explain to him what the nuclear triad is. Well saddle up partner. For tonight you ride again. Because think about it, who better to tell Trump what this bill will do than someone who stands to be hurt by it. Someone in the late 60's from rural America with an unspecified medical problem that requires constant treatment. Please enjoy this ad that will air on *Fox and Friends* in the DC area Wednesday morning." Last Week Tonight 12th March 2017

What follows is an advert featuring the Catheter Cowboy, a character who talks directly to the president to explain how increased AHCA premiums will make his older voters angry. *LWT* audiences may view the advert as a comedic attack on Trump's lack of AHCA knowledge, but the advert also strategically challenges the conservative hegemony of the *Fox News* brand. This is achieved by its placement within the commercial break of *Fox and Friends*; a pro-Trump programme (Byers 2017) that is regularly watched by the president. Furthermore, Oliver is able to target the show's largely conservative audience who are more likely to cluster around one single news source; specifically *Fox News* (Mitchell et al 2014). In doing so, Oliver provides a solution in the form of an advert, which attempts to cut through the partisan echo chamber by presenting *Fox and Friends* audiences with alternative information on the AHCA.

The *FF* and *LWT* examples highlight key traits associated with advocacy journalism in that both propose a strategy or plan (Entman 1993; Fisher 2016: 712) that is communicated through spectacle. Satire has become a successful form of protest spectacle because the inclusion of humor and social issues help garner attention and media access (Day 2011: 148, 149). Thus by highlighting the plight of journalists and

citizens, Bee and Oliver are performing a citizen surrogate role (Jones 2010; Gultung & Lynch 2010; Janowitz 1975); speaking out for those without access to a media platform. This may not be strictly applicable to Bee's advocacy cause, given that high profile *CNN* journalists possess enough symbolic capital to draw attention to issues within their industry. Yet in their role as independent journalists, they may be reluctant to express their personal opinions on social media (Folker and Bruns 2017). Bee then operates as the voice of the frustrated *CNN* journalists, by taking issue with the entertainment driven narrative of the network and encouraging Zucker to value the skills of his employees. In contrast, Oliver represents citizens that will be affected by the scrapping of Obama Care. However, his strategy attempts to capture the attention of a much wider section of the American public, specifically conservative viewers who would never watch his show and might not have been exposed to criticism of the AHCA Bill.

Mocking the Citizen: Examples of Motivation Frames

The results in Table 1 also found that *FF* and *LWT* actively encouraged audiences to participate in forms of civic action. It may not have been a staple element of satirical news reporting nevertheless the results illustrate their attempts to push the boundaries of satirical discourse beyond highlighting social problems. This challenges the perception (Hart and Hartelius 2007; Baumgartner and Morris 2006) that TV satire communicates a negative discourse that encourages cynicism and disengagement from the political process. The specific tactics of motivation used by Oliver and Bee are outlined below.

Example C



"What the shit Angelino's?.....Were you too busy Periscoping your avocado toast from the set of your web series to ensure that this guy, an actual candidate for mayor didn't wind up in charge of your city? Where were you?.....Maybe you didn't get the memo because it wasn't pinned on a beautiful celebrity's pelvic bone. It is not enough to just yell your opinions. That's my job. You need to vote...and the good news is you don't have to wait till 2018. There are special congressional elections happening right now" Full Frontal 15th March 2017

Example D



"We did our best to channel their fervor for change into a more practical march. Pay attention to small things in mid-term elections. They're really important.....We even tried to divert the herd to their local politicians office. But to be honest it was very hard to not get sucked into the reverie. The allure of an impossible dream was much easier to get behind than the reality of fighting for incremental change". [Reporter asks crowd member] "Is this the first protest you've been to that has a DJ?" Full Frontal 19th July 2017

Example E



"Yes I'm talking to you, everyone who posted May the 4th be with you for *Star Wars* day and every fucking year....for those of you who say you are too busy, yet five hundred and forty thousand of your commented on Beyoncé's pregnancy. For those who took the time to review the Grand Canyon on Yelp, 7 of whom gave it a one star review. What the fuck is wrong with you? I'm calling on all of you, the internet time wasters to join me once more in 5-10 minutes of minor effort to preserve net neutrality". Last Week Tonight 7th May 2017

Motivational aspects of advocacy journalism are present in all the examples and each of them share an additional commonality whereby the host ridicules and criticises the audience. In Example C, Bee tracks the progress of the Trump Resistance Movement, but it evolves into a criticism of their failure to get involved in conventional acts of citizenship. In Example D, *FF* reporters attend a Trump Resistance rally whose primary goal is Trump's impeachment. The narrative of this piece outlines the complexities of the impeachment process, and how this is an unrealistic protest goal. Example E is a follow up to *LWT*'s 2016 net neutrality story. Here Oliver encourages his audience to contact the FCC to help reverse the potential roll back on internet neutrality rules, but not before mocking them for using the internet for trivialities rather than political good.

What these examples illustrate is a shift in satirical skewering. Satire is a discourse of challenge that works on behalf of citizens by articulating their anger towards elite institutions (Baym 2010: 110; Gray et al 2009: 12). Satire resonates with its audience because it punches up against authority. But here Oliver and Bee punch

downwards at their audience. This is a disruption of the satirical status quo and a move that their audience would not be expecting given the deluge of negative stories surrounding Trump. To avoid feeding their audience the same narrative as the mainstream news, *FF* and *LWT* approach Trump-related stories from a different angle. This involved criticising their liberal audiences' apathy and unrealistic collective action goals, in an attempt to motivate them to seek out more meaningful forms of agency.

Motivation through Criticism: Addressing Audience Cynicism

Example E shows Oliver attempting to address his audiences' laziness and cynicism. While the latter is a trait associated with satire audiences, Goldwaite-Young and Esralew's (2011: 112) research found that they are in fact politically active individuals who regularly engage in political exchanges with other citizens. Their research does not discuss other forms of citizenship practice thus deliberation might be the sole extent of the audiences' participation in politics. Consequently, the level of audience engagement with politics draws similarities with Eliasoph's theory of the 'cynical chic' citizen. It describes individuals who are politically knowledgeable but who use cynicism and humour to convince themselves that they cannot change the political process (1998: 154). Oliver draws attention to this issue by mocking his audiences' cynical disposition, and their pointless attempts at online humour. For Oliver, it is the satirists' role to induce humour, but he also reminds the audience of their role as citizens by directing them to the predesigned website where they can contact the FCC.

Motivation through Criticism: Addressing Superficial Activism

Bee's satirical attack is aimed at the Resistance Movement's superficial engagement with activism and their unrealistic protest goals. For Bee, rally attendance, pussy hats, and Internet engagement are not effective forms of activism. For her this is an act of expressing one's feelings. Thus, similarly to the argument expressed by Oliver, Bee argues that it is her role as the TV satirist to express political outrage on behalf of the public.

Bee appears to compare these protest tactics with slacktivism, which requires minimal effort and serves to increase the feel-good factor of doing something worthwhile (Morozov 2009). While protest rallies move beyond slacktivism tactics like E-petitions and the Facebook like button, Tufekci (2017) believes that 'digitally fuelled' rallies, like those featured on *FF*, are problematic. This is because they often lack clear aims and objectives and a strategy for their political goals beyond protest gatherings. There has been much discussion about the democratic capabilities of the Internet, but the impact of communicative capitalism and social media monopoly has led to Internet users being faced with a deluge of information that persistently vies for their attention. This has a detrimental impact on affective politics because the online environment accelerates short-term loyalties to activism causes (Coudry 2015: 608), while undermining more time consuming activities that are needed to sustain long-term political opportunities (Dean 2005: 53).

Motivation through Criticism: Addressing Smug Liberalism

Bee also takes aim at citizens aligned with the Democratic Party by stating “Democrats suck at voting”. This comment and the monologue outlined in Example C is an unexpected narrative from a left-leaning TV satire show. But Bee is using her platform to challenge the self-righteousness of the audience by calling out their ‘smug liberalism’. This is the belief that working class American’s have been duped by conservatives into voting against their own self-interests (Rensin 2016). In opposition to this are the smart liberals who embody the politics of knowing because they are in command of good facts (Ibid). Bee’s criticism reverses this premise by ridiculing liberals for their preoccupation with Internet and celebrity culture, and their failure to engage in acts of civic duty. Her reference to celebrity endorsement in particular suggests that her viewers are more preoccupied with the sensational aspects of political protest. Much has been written about celebrity as a useful publicity and mobilizing tool for activism (Turner 2004: 84). But while celebrities offer short-term publicity to activist causes, this influence reduces over the long-term (Lester 2007: 919). Thus, similarly to the argument on digitally organised rallies, celebrity endorsement is a quick fix to political problems that require more sustained forms of political problem solving. In these two examples, Bee does not offer her audience relief humour as respite from the Trump administration. Instead, by mixing traits associated with satire and advocacy journalism, Bee mock’s her audience and uses this humour as rationale for their engagement in more practical forms of civic participation.

Conclusion

For over a decade, TV satire has been recognized for its ability to re-imagine the possibilities of political journalism. In spite of its success the democratic capabilities of TV satire should not be over overestimated. Indeed, it has the capacity to draw attention to issues, but political humour alone cannot contribute to political change or long-term solution building (Freud 1960). In fact, research shows that the ironic contempt displayed in TV satire is actually destructive to the democratic process, because it encourages political apathy (Baumgartner and Morris 2006). These factors are not conducive to the current political environment, which has witnessed a spike in activism amongst young people who were once considered politically apathetic (Feldmann 2017). Furthermore, this study has questioned the effectiveness of political comedy at a time when its presidential target is considered beyond satirical ridicule. In light of these issues, this study examined whether TV satire had adapted its reporting strategies in the wake of Trump’s presidency in order to maintain its critical edge.

This study found that TV satire has continued to reimagine the possibilities of the genre by adopting advocacy journalism practices that included solution building and audience motivation techniques. By adopting a hybrid-mix of comedy and advocacy traits, both satirists challenged the perception that satire is too angry to propose solutions to political problems. In fact, this study found that Oliver and Bee proposed strategies to help educate conservative news audiences and change journalistic practices, although these solutions were a tad ambitious.

The most significant finding was the satirists’ use of motivation building. It would have been far easier for them to make Trump the target of ridicule. However, this

would have been an example of the same old TV satire narrative: attacking the powerful and preaching to the converted liberal agenda of its audience. Instead, Oliver and Bee redirected their satirical skewering onto their respective audiences. This enabled them to mock and criticize the audiences' political self-righteousness, cynicism, and their superficial and unrealistic approaches to activism. These examples demonstrate the importance and necessary inclusion of advocacy skills within satirical discourse. After all, it is unlikely that comedic criticism alone would transpire into audience political action. Yet, when combined with traits of advocacy this enables the TV satirists to mitigate the impact of criticism by encouraging the audience to engage in more realistic and practical forms of civic participation.

In sum, this study argues that in the wake of Trump's presidency, TV satire's reporting practices have moved beyond comedy and critical discourse, and into the field of advocacy journalism. This development signals significant changes in the communicative strategies of the genre including political problem solving, a shift in satirical skewering and motivation building for political action. It may be too soon to measure the impact of satire's move into advocacy journalism. Nevertheless, this study acts as a starting point to discuss how the platform has moved beyond the limitations of the genre by actively contributing to the democratic process.

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