Civic stage fright: Motivation and news satire engagement

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Abstract
This article explores news satire engagement and civic motivation, an area of concern in satire scholarship. Focused on what audiences ‘do’ with media, the ways in which young adults who regularly engage in news satire construct political efficacy is studied. Using a qualitative contextualising audience study, including in-depth interviews and focus groups with 31 young adults, a thematic analysis of transcript data identifies three discursive themes relating to civic anxieties; development and invitation, performance and knowledge, and conflict and ‘packaged deals’. These emphasise news satire as cultural form as well as shifting civic ideals and development processes: exposing how news satire’s ‘kynicism’ (non-nihilist criticism) connects to civic performance anxiety. The identified anxieties are understood as related to fears of exclusion, embarrassment and misrepresentation. The metaphor of civic stage fright is developed to further understand these, underscoring the role of emotion and social interaction in civic performance.

Keywords
Audience studies, audiences, citizenship, civic engagement, cynicism, emotions, fear, humour, news satire, satire

Introduction
Across the world, news satire continues to be popular albeit niche (Baym and Jones, 2012). Famous examples like Last Week Tonight (HBO, 2015 to present) and The Daily Show (Comedy Central, 2006 to present) have gained attention from scholars, as their ability to attract young audiences both fascinates and worries. Some wonder if engaging through laughter might be civically unhealthy, leading to cynicism or apathy (Colletta, 2009; Hart and Hartelius, 2007). Such arguments are often based in critical understandings of humour and irony as insincere or harmful, or amusement as pacifying or inactive.
(Morreall, 2005). However, a growing body of audience research shows that satire engagement is more complex (Day, 2011; Edgerly, 2017; Jones, 2010), calling for further qualitative approaches in different empirical contexts, to issues of civic motivation; here understood as dependent on political efficacy (Campbell et al., 1954) among satire audiences. Broadcast news satires’ targeting of young adult audiences and their civic development should be considered and situated within social, affective, cultural and material contexts in order to be understood in a deeper sense.

By emphasising emotions and orientations towards civic passivity, cynicism, fear, engagement and amusement on one hand, and news satire engagement on the other, the article pays special attention to subjectivity, needed in studies of news satire. It highlights humour’s association not only with amusement and laughter, but with complex dynamics of criticism, embarrassment, symbolic harm and social exclusion (Billig, 2005), arguing for scholarly focus on what audiences ‘do’ with such media (Hermes, 2005).

The coming section deals with previous research on news satire and its audiences, as it relates to the focus of the article; as well as the key theories and concepts used, emphasising civic culture, efficacy, humour and satire engagement. The following section deals with methodology and methods, where the contextualising qualitative audience approach is detailed. Then, the analysis centres on the three discursive themes of civic motivation identified in the data: development and invitation, performance and knowledge, as well as conflict and ‘packaged deals’. These relate to different civic fears and anxieties which can be understood further through the metaphor of civic stage fright, comparing stage performers’ anxieties (Kaplan, 1969) with the studied audience members’ strong focus on impression management and harsh self-scrutiny. The metaphor is developed in the ‘Discussion’ section, focusing on how performance relates to humour engagement.

The civic in news satire engagement

During the past few decades, news satire and other political comedy forms have interested researchers in several fields. Many focus on the popular *The Daily Show*; including studies on its effects (c.f. Amarasingam, 2011; Feldman, 2007) or its textual qualities (c.f. Baym, 2005; Goodnow, 2011; Holt, 2007). Debates concern optimistic or pessimistic perspectives on the genre’s growing popularity, as well as methodological issues. For instance, Hart and Hartelius (2007) argue that *The Daily Show* ‘has engaged in unbridled political cynicism’ (p. 263). Others such as Gray et al. (2009) argue that news satire ‘reveals a form that is always quintessentially about that which it seems to be an escape from, and hence a form that is always already analytical, critical, and rational, albeit to varying degrees’ (p. 8). Carlson and Peifer (2013) emphasise the programme’s journalistic value and credibility, and Hariman (2008) stresses the empowering aspects of humour and parody, labelling them comprehensive and an available symbolic leveller for citizens.

While often conceptually useful, some of these studies lead to assumptions or over-simplifications about audience engagement. Only a few studies approach news satire audiences in a more exploratory, contextually grounded way (Day, 2011; Edgerly, 2017; Jones, 2010), reflecting the methodological divide within political entertainment research more broadly (Young and Gray, 2013).
For Jones (2010), who studied adult audiences of *Politically Incorrect* (Comedy Central/ABC, 1992–2003) and *The Colbert Report* (Comedy Central, 2005–2014), an increasingly critical audience impacts the genre’s growing popularity. He stresses the value of playful spaces wherein audiences feel invited to engage (Jones, 2013b). Day (2011) focuses on activist and artist engagement with ironic modes of discourse characteristic of news satire, which ‘actively call upon audiences’ shared assumptions and predilections in an attempt to make members of existing discourse communities present to one another’ (p. 145), aiding citizen bonding. Edgerly (2017) focuses on how Millennials relate to news satire, illustrating how journalistic values like objectivity, accuracy, professionalism and credibility are ascribed differently to conventional news and news satire, even among *The Daily Show* fans. These studies clearly show that such approaches capture a complexity in news satire engagement, illustrating the importance of empirical context.

Importantly, qualitative studies of news satire audiences struggle to find evidence of unambiguous pessimism or cynicism. However, none of them single out young adults who regularly engage with the genre. As much of the scholarly scrutiny concerns this specific group – as vulnerable in the early stages of civic development, and as the target audience of most news satire – there is a need to explore this group further. Quantitative research has: for instance, Baumgartner and Morris (2011) searched for cynicism through surveys. They asked young Americans regularly engaged with *The Daily Show* to agree or disagree that (1) ‘Public officials don’t care much what people like me think’ and that (2) ‘I have faith in the U.S. electoral system’ (Baumgartner and Morris, 2011: 76), and found a correlation between higher levels of such cynicism and frequent engagement. However, causality is in question here, as well as the operationalisation of cynicism. What is cynicism, in relation to citizenship?

For Hart and Hartelius (2007), a cynic considers ‘any adherence to conventional practices [. . .] deplorable’ (p. 264), including acts like voting. Such nihilist orientations seem hard to find in news satire audience research, as well as in textual studies of contemporary news satire (Combe, 2015; Ödmark, 2018). While isolated utterances could be understood as nihilist, they are a part of a complex weaving of critical, emotional and ironic argumentation. Focusing on them would be to take them out of context, undermining audience agency. More useful then is Higgie’s (2014) writing on the Classical distinction or spectrum between cynicism and the lesser known ‘kynicism’, where ‘cynicism is the belief that there is no hope for change, that truth is dead’ (p. 183) and kynicism is a ‘non-nihilistic form of cynicism’ that ‘maintains that truth does exist, and is worth saving from political and media manipulations’ (p. 183). Kynicism captures a critical yet idealistic perspective, more relevant to contemporary political culture and citizenship.

The chosen perspective on citizenship is guided by scholars such as Dahlgren (2009) and Coleman (2013), representing a culturally focused bottom-up perspective, as well as Hermes (2005), considering what audiences ‘do’ with media rather than what they ‘should be’ doing. Dahlgren (2009) defines citizenship as ‘a formal, legal set of rights and obligations’ as well as ‘a mode of social agency’, which can ‘analytically be seen to have subjective identities that resonate (or not) with people’s other elements of identity’ (p. 57). Coleman (2013) stresses emotional aspects, arguing that contemporary citizenship suffers from an ‘affective deficit’.
As non-Anglophone news satire is under-researched (Baym and Jones, 2012) and its audiences even more so, and since humour is highly contextual (Das and Graefer, 2017), further studies are needed. Lacking insights from other contexts is problematic as both the subjective context of individual audience members and the broader contexts of political and media cultures matter (Jones, 2010). In order to achieve a bottom-up, contextually aware understanding, subjectivity is key (Corner, 2011). To avoid ‘extract[ing] citizens from their meaning-making environments’ (Jones, 2013a: 518), the concept of efficacy is utilised alongside kynicism to capture civic motivation. Political efficacy emphasises subjective aspects of citizenship, defined as ‘the feeling that political and social change is possible, and that the individual citizen can play a part in bringing about this change’ (Campbell et al., 1954: 187).

Hence, the study draws on scholarly debates on news satire as well as on civic motivation and avoidance, focusing on young adults who regularly engage with the genre in Sweden. More specifically, the article centres on the following question: In what ways do young adults regularly engaged in news satire construct kynicism and efficacy? Answering this question brings forth a more nuanced understanding of how civic motivation relates to news satire engagement among young adults in Sweden.

This contextualising approach does not mean that news satire’s popularity cannot be a symptom of any negative aspects of contemporary citizenship. Media is relevant, but it interacts with other aspects of citizenship in complex and unpredictable manners – it ‘participate[s] in our broader understandings of [. . .] what it means to be citizens’ (Jones, 2013a: 519). Here, political efficacy helps emphasise the developmental aspect of citizenship. Specifically, internal efficacy refers to the subjective understanding of one’s personal abilities to create change, and external efficacy to constructions of opportunities within the current political system (Campbell et al., 1954). It forces scholars to scrutinise the conditions young adults consider themselves part of, rather than normative understandings of what they ‘should’ be doing or thinking; especially important in relation to those drawn to what others label problematic or ‘cynical’ media (Hermes, 2005; Lunt and Stenner, 2005).

Day (2011) argues that the ironic mode of discourse common in news satire can aid motivation and bonding. She questions the common practice of conflating issues such as cynicism, apathy, selfishness and individualism:

There seems to be a commonly held belief that where there is irony, parody, or poking fun, there must be a smirking cynicism and, by extension, political disengagement. This is an accusation that consistently dogs irony in all of its forms. [. . .] however, there are currently a growing number of artists and activists who are looking to irony as a prime tool with which to combat indifference, to advocate for change, and to get others riled up. In other words, the opposing camp sees irony as a potential antidote to cynicism and disengagement, precisely the opposite of its detractors. (Day, 2011: 28; italics in original)

Some studies of political disengagement comment on a similar tendency of conflation, nondependent of irony or satire engagement. In Eliasoph’s (1998) study of political avoidance in the United States, the complexity of political and civic engagement is exposed. Even among activists and volunteers who are considered robustly engaged,
keeping motivation up is a dynamic process where both personal and broader political reasons contribute. In the Swedish context, Amnå and Ekman’s (2014) study of teenage engagement shows that ‘what is sometimes dismissed as “passivity” [. . .] actually consists of distinctly different orientations’ (p. 261f), such as disengagement and disillusionment as well as those who seem passive but really are ‘prepared for political action, should circumstances warrant’ (p. 262); an orientation they call being on ‘standby’.

This article uses Dahlgren’s (2009) definition of political engagement, as ‘subjective states, that is, a mobilized, focused attention on some object [. . .] a prerequisite for participation’ (p. 80). The focus on young adults draws our attention to the connection between engagement and inexperience. Inexperience relates not only to age and life stages, but to emotions; in this study expressed through negotiations of efficacy and kynicism, which relate to fears, that then feed back into civic development. To contemporary citizens for whom politics are mostly mediated, it is common to feel misunderstood (Coleman, 2013). Inexperienced voters wanting to engage might feel

the less conspicuous, faintly felt, but oft-repeated experiences of being spoken about by politicians without due acknowledgement; of finding the language and rules and customs of politics confusing and distancing; of feeling ethically compromised between the materiality of immediate needs and the aspiration towards enduring ideals; of encountering the frustrating vacuity of much that passes for political journalism; and of the discrepancies between promise and delivery, even when one has voted for the winning side. (Coleman, 2013: 229f)

Developing as a citizen further includes negotiations of civically important components listed by Dahlgren (2009), such as values, trust and identity. For example, some might perform ‘cynical chic solidarity’ (Eliasoph, 1998) to compensate for lacking efficacy, whereby they distance themselves from official discourse to show ‘that they have not been fooled into wasting their time on something they cannot influence and cannot be held responsible for whatever happens’ (Coleman, 2013: 100). In this sense, performing cynicism is face-saving when experiencing politically charged fear or anxiety. What might seem like cynicism could then be a ‘masking’ and sublimation of such fears, rather than an expression of nihilism or passivity.

A general tendency of social anxiety can be found in previous research on young people’s political engagement on- and offline (Ekström, 2015; Mascheroni and Murru, 2017). In their study of young people’s civic use of social media, Mascheroni and Murru note that for the less experienced, hyper-awareness is part of development, aiding judgement of how socially safe or unsafe various contexts of engagement might be. In this focus on the importance of social interaction to citizenship, Goffman’s (1959) emphasis of performance and impression management is helpful.

**Researching news satire engagement**

This study approaches civic motivation as efficacy and kynicism among young adults who engage with news satire regularly, through a contextualising audience study focusing especially on subjective constructions.
A combination of in-depth interviews and focus groups was used with the intent to provide insights into how social setting affects constructions of civic motivation. The focus groups resulted in fuller, more detailed constructions, yet included few disagreements and less self-criticism (relating to internal efficacy); while the individual interviews provided more nuanced constructions of internal efficacy. (Participants are marked as either ‘interviewee’ or ‘focus group participant’ in the analysis.)

Purposive or theoretical sampling was combined with snowball sampling, in accordance with the study’s focus on a particular group: Swedish young adults (18–35 years old, matching news satire target audiences) who regularly engage with news satire. This type of sampling seeks out ‘groups, settings and individuals where (and for whom) the processes being studied are most likely to occur’ (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994: 202). This study does not aim to produce generalisable truths about whole populations; instead it follows a theoretical logic, constructing sampling that is meaningful to that logic (Silverman, 2010). This ‘demands that we think critically about the parameters of the population we are studying’ (Silverman, 2010: 141); and meant sampling included different ‘types’, to comprise as much variety as possible within mentioned parameters. Variety was assured through a representation of demographic differences in age, gender, urban or rural living and geographical location; as well as by including individuals in different stages and types of careers, employment status or for students, subject of study.

The choice of programmes used for recruitment – Swedish public service radio programme Tankesmedjan (SR P3, 2010 to present) and American cable television programme The Daily Show – was based on some key similarities and differences. They share a focus on news satire as well as target audiences, both have high broadcast frequency (four episodes/week), and are popular and widely known (assessed through piloting and ratings). They differ in production country, media form and mode of finance. Although mentioned in the recruitment adverts, participants were encouraged to speak of other examples they considered news satire. This was motivated by the project’s wider exploration of political comedy hybridity and engagement (Doona, 2016).

The call for participants was spread in online and office spaces including a broadcast of Tankesmedjan with a live audience. Individuals who fit the sampling criteria and ‘like’ news satire, ‘such as The Daily Show and/or Tankesmedjan’ were invited, and urged to tell friends who fit the description. This process resulted in 31 participants (16 women, 15 men): 18 were interviewed individually, 13 were part of two focus groups (six and seven participants, respectively). Participants were given the choice of interview or focus group, to assure some comfort and security. The focus groups included mostly strangers, although one included a couple, and the other had participants who had met but did not know each other well.

Recruitment ended when the data was theoretically saturated. Variety was achieved as mentioned earlier, yet other parameters could have been included. For instance, all participants were born in Sweden, although six had at least one parent from a different country (80% of the population is born in Sweden; Statistics Sweden, 2020). Furthermore, most participants had gained higher education or were students, some combining studies with work (30% of Swedes have some higher education, 25% hold a university degree; Statistics Sweden, 2019). Some were the first in their family to gain higher education, which is important in this context, relating to issues such as invitation and knowledge.
Studies have shown that satire targets and attracts educated individuals to a higher extent (Bolin, 2013; Friedman, 2014), partly explaining the difficulties in achieving a broader sample. The purposeful sampling and non-generalising aim of the study motivated the recruitment strategy; however, future studies should strive to reach further through alternative sampling.

The interviews and focus groups were semi-structured to allow for exploration of subjectivity. This meant permitting less relevant tangents, signalling to participants that they had some measure of freedom. While the guides for interviews and focus groups differed (the interview guide was more detailed, the focus group guide left space for organic conversation, with topics rather than questions), they included the same themes. These dealt with the enjoyment of satire and issues of genre boundaries; then moved into citizenship-focused topics, such as learning, trust and democratic values. The final parts dealt with personal political engagement and identity, deemed to be more personal and an area where participants might want to ‘impress’ the researcher. Participants did speak of their shortcomings reflexively, indicating that this sequencing ensured some comfort.

Transcripts were qualitatively coded with the aim of identifying discursive themes (Schrøder et al., 2003). The process was guided by the theoretical focus, alongside participants’ constructions. The first stage of coding focused on constructions and involved grouping passages with a similar discursive focus. This, and the second stage, where groupings were divided into sub-codes, aimed at representing and accessing similar passages, for data retention rather than reduction (Bazeley, 2013). The final coding stage worked to distil analytical categories, following upon additional literature review and close reading of quotes. These categories were grouped into themes reflected in the findings section, ranging from an internal focus on development and invitation, on to a mix of internal and external focus on performance and knowledge, and finally, to a more externally focused theme concerning conflict and ‘packaged deals’.

**Civic motivation and news satire engagement**

Inexperience forces young adults to rely on assumptions about what might or could be the best way to engage politically. These assumptions in part depend on constructions of internal and external efficacy, where emotions and media engagement potentially replace experiential input (Coleman, 2013); exposing how civic motivation relates to constantly ongoing negotiations and struggles. Young citizens question if they – at least temporarily – should ‘land’ in a stable notion of civic identity and political imagination, which then leads them to decide what might be overly naïve, realistic, critical or pessimistic. While some of the participants of this study did have some previous experiences of civic practice and participation, it varied greatly. Some had voted, while some of the younger participants had not yet had the opportunity (Sweden’s voting age is 18). Some were or had been engaged in political parties or other political movements, such as Greenpeace.

Despite this, they had in common a motivation to engage with news satire, meaning a shared, however sometimes implicit, interest in political issues. Most of them shared a critical perspective – including a hyper-awareness characterised by harsh scrutiny of civic shortcomings: their own, other’s (citizens and elites), and/or of the democratic system.
Development and invitation

One of the least experienced participants is Harald, an 18-year-old upper secondary school pupil living in a small rural town. He has been on a journey of negotiating efficacy:

I guess I had more faith in politics before, but now it feels naïve to think like that, it’s more . . . like ‘get real!’ [Politicians] aren’t better that me, they’re just people who sit and whine about things. (Interviewee, Harald, 18 years)

His expression is striking as it seems to confirm previously mentioned worry; he is literally describing a loss of faith. But a close reading and contextualisation reveal further complexity. Harald is reflecting on his own civic development in relation to external efficacy. His referred naïveté relates to an earlier perspective of politicians as superior. He is developing, engaging with different forms of input – among those a range of political media including Tankesmedjan – which affords him symbolic levelling (Hariman, 2008); a tool which aids him in questioning such assumptions, which he considers a more adult perspective. A little later in the interview, he illustrates this through a Tankesmedjan segment on proposed legislation concerning the retraction of student aid for upper secondary pupils with low attendance. The segment jokes that members of parliament also ‘cut class’, as parliament attendance can be quite low. While not a mainstream issue, it is a point made in conventional news media too, including the metaphor of ‘cutting class’ (Hellsén, 2013; Tiberg, 2009). Harald says,

And [there’s] this irony, it’s so brilliant! It’s like, they highlight things . . . like yes, ‘this and this they haven’t said anywhere else, but it’s a great point!’ You have to practise what you preach, and that kind of makes you question your trust in those we elect. (Interviewee, Harald, 18 years)

Even if critics might mourn the loss of Harald’s belief, for him it is about understanding how politics actually works. The example of school attendance is relatable. The power of politicians to impact his life directly, while not necessarily having to live up to similar ideals is remarkable to him. In other words, he does not consider politicians inherently ‘bad’, rather, more like people in general. And even though this information is available through other types of media, for Harald, it has not been ‘said anywhere else’. Tankesmedjan has invited him to think critically (Jones, 2013b), which he does not feel other media does in this specific way. As he develops, gaining experiences and knowledge partly through news satire engagement, his perspective shifts. Harald is, in this sense, exposing a kynical stance, rather than a cynical one – he is not disillusioned or unengaged, just critical.

Linus, a 29-year-old more experienced participant who studied political science, had been a member of a political party and saw a future in politics, speaks with confidence as well. He says that his favourite The Daily Show:

definitely depicts politics as something impossible, that you’re always fighting with idiots. (Interviewee, Linus, 29 years)
But he quickly explains that this is not a problem, as his fellow audience understands the difference between news satire and news:

> For instance, I think it’s a very tiny part [of audiences] watching these programmes that don’t vote. I certainly think *The Daily Show* contributes to activating people, I do! And interested, or . . . participating somehow. (Interviewee, Linus, 29 years)

The fact that Linus as well as other participants believe audiences are aware of the humorous intention relates to genre knowledge (Doona, 2021) and connects to broader shifts in engagement with political journalism where emotional authenticity is sometimes valued over ideals of factuality and objectivity (Feldman, 2007; Marchi, 2012). Ivar, a 23-year-old living in a medium-sized city in southern Sweden, studied chemistry and was engaged in university politics as a student representative, said,

> I think that’s what [*Tankesmedjan* comedians] can do, 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 years)

As young citizens continue to express ‘disdain for the artifice and aloofness that accompany so-called objective reporting’ (Feldman, 2007: 422), news satire audiences enjoy not only humorous representations of politics – but news satire’s form. Feldman characterises this as using techniques of ‘emotion and subjectivity’ which imply ‘a shared understanding between communicator and receiver’ showing that they can be ‘active participants in the news process’ (Feldman, 2007: 422).

Critical representations of politics are in no way unique to news satire – rather, it is the application of humorous exaggerations and irony which engages young adult audiences, making them feel ‘active’. Comedians build trust among audiences on the basis of being more ‘equal’ to them, which differs from conventional news (Feldman, 2007; Gray, 2008). And while Sweden enjoys high rates of trust in conventional news media even among young adults (Wadbring, 2016), its ‘straight’ form of representation engages audiences differently. News satire is not ‘correcting’ bad journalism then, as is sometimes argued in the American context (Baym, 2005), but is responding to its formal restrictions and dominance.

**Performance and knowledge**

Consistently throughout the data, nondependent of experience, the construction of democracy is the most important political ideal. Participants were often critical of themselves, contemporary politics, or the way democratic systems function, but always from a perspective of valuing democracy.

A recurring theme in discussions about civic or political engagement was the worry that their perceived lack of experience or knowledge somehow made them inadequate for further participation, or at least that others could reject them because of it. Hence, this insecurity hybridises the lack of internal and external efficacy. A 24-year-old journalism student and interviewee Dennis constructed motivation as depending on a complex mix of factors:
Interviewer: Would you say you are politically engaged?
D: Well, at least interested.
Interviewer: And what do you put into the word engaged, how is it different?
D: I think it means I’m supposed to do things that are more active, more than voting and . . . Believe in things, more than feel things.
Interviewer: What makes you interested and not engaged?
D: I think it’s a process where I become more and more engaged. [. . .] But also that I’m lazy. And somehow it has to do with what opportunities there are. When I move to Stockholm in the autumn I’m going to have lots of friends there who are pretty politically engaged, and with a new environment and a new group of friends, I think chances will grow. Here, there are fewer opportunities . . . I think I lack the entryways here, if I were to get involved . . . I just can’t go [to a group of activists] and be like ‘Hi, I’m here!’

Again, the theme of invitation comes up, but here related to social interaction. Dennis’ reasoning refers to both internal and external factors of efficacy: he is ‘lazy’, but also speaks of political engagement as dependent on social capital or connection.

This idea of needing ‘entryways’ was prevalent, exposing an aversion towards entering social communities where others already know each other. At the time, Dennis lived in a large city (350,000 inhabitants), but constructed a lack of ‘entryways’ in comparison to his imagined future with a different social setting in Stockholm (1.5 million inhabitants). In this and similar constructions, the social performance ascribed to further engagement becomes an emotionally charged obstacle, associated with awkwardness and uncertainty.

Alexander, an unemployed 27-year-old who lived in a smaller city and volunteered at a local radio station, connected this social aspect to the party system:

I’ve thought about engaging, personally, I’ve thought ‘well, be a politician, I could do that’, perhaps it’d be fun to get to be there and make an impact somehow. But I feel it would be very strange to come in and compete with nine billion [social democratic] youth party members, who all know each other . . . Like it’s this very closed off world, there’s almost no real space for people to switch parties once they’ve gotten to a certain point. (Interviewee, Alexander, 27 years)

This theme connects constructions of self-identity and community, based on how participants see themselves inside or outside political collectivities. Also, another common construction in this theme is the meaning of changing opinions. Freja, a 22-year-old social work student from a farming family in southern Sweden, was the first in her family to gain higher education, which she described as alienating. She watched The Daily Show on her own – her friends and family did not share her interest in it, or politics. The ones who did had opposing views to her. Here, she expresses frustrations about political discussions on immigration, a heavily debated issue in Sweden, and the rise of an anti-immigration party:
you as a citizen need to be informed to know how and why you should decide and how that would impact you. And that’s hard [laughing]. [. . .] And now with the Sweden Democrats you kind of feel you want to give up because it feels like ‘what the hell can I do then?’ People are so narrow-minded and . . . you just feel, ‘why should I do shit?’ I won’t get into the debates on Facebook. Even if I want to scream at people, ‘fucking get an education and do something!’ But then I feel like, no, oh, no, no, because I can still have my opinions, and I don’t want to state my opinion, if I’d change it someday. (Interviewee, Freja, 22 years)

Freja is frustrated, veering towards cynicism but mainly problematising other people, rather than the system, criticising what she considers opinions not grounded in facts. Chemistry student Ivar’s stance stood out here, reflecting development:

I’ve felt [apprehensive towards political discussion] before, like ‘whoops!’ I’ve been wrong, and it’s been embarrassing. But then, I had a friend who said something smart: that it’s even more embarrassing not to be able to admit when you’re wrong, that it shows strength to show that ‘sure, I can rethink this and I’ve reached a different conclusion’. (Interviewee, Ivar, 23 years)

Although Ivar had overcome some of the fears mentioned by other participants, he shared a common concern with impression management (Goffman, 1959), using phrasing like ‘it shows strength’.

In relation to satire engagement, this anxiety might stem not only from deeply felt fears of embarrassment or exclusion, identified among young adults (Ekström, 2015; Mascheroni and Murru, 2017), but also from the dynamics of laughter. As humorous effect tends to derive from incongruence as well as social inclusion and exclusion – or from a more critical perspective, a more one-sided superiority (Billig, 2005), the regular news satire audience might also be exercising and fixating on such anxiety, as part of their civic development.

The feeling of performing does not just relate to general fears of embarrassment, but to the practice of monitoring. Some of the most common avenues for contemporary citizens to engage – social media and collectivities such as political parties – are associated with social uncertainty induced by an unknown audience that might scrutinise you. As argued by Senft (2013), social media prompts us to ‘monitor the activities of others’ (p. 347), strengthening the feeling of being ‘on stage’, because ‘in a very real sense, one is’ (p. 347).

Conflict and ‘packaged deals’

The final theme relates more explicitly to identity. Audience members worry that they will be mislabelled or mistakenly associated with the ‘wrong’ opinion, interest or group, or pulled into conflicts, often relating this worry to social media or political collectivities. As mentioned, participants constructed increasing political engagement as involving collectivities like political parties, or online spaces. Dahlgren (2009) agrees that ‘the political realm requires collectivities; the engagement and participation of the citizen are predicated on him/her being connected to others, by civic bonds’ (p. 81).

Related to social media monitoring (Senft, 2013), online spaces also make us ‘explicitly construct and present aspects of ourselves in order to engage in communication’
(Schmidt, 2013: 365). Here, Baym and boyd’s (2012) concept socially mediated publicness is helpful, referring to ‘how technology reconfigures publicness, blurs “audiences” and publics, and alters what it means to engage in public life’ (p. 320).

The participants’ priority of social dynamics in online and collective spaces reflects another type of negotiation of efficacy. Specific aspects include a fear of conflict, and a fear of being misrepresented, again exposing an overlap of internal and external efficacy.

One example comes from an interview exchange with Morgan, a 29-year-old college administrator and filmmaker living in a large city in southern Sweden. He is a fan of Jon Stewart, but not of conflict, considering social media especially problematic:

Interviewer: Would you say that you’re politically engaged in any way . . .
M: No.
Interviewer: . . . do you ‘like’ political stuff on Facebook or participate in discussions or anything like that?
M: No.
Interviewer: Is there any specific reason, or you just don’t enjoy it?
M: It’s a combination, I don’t think it’s any fun and . . . I notice more and more, since I have a wide friend circle, many of them believe different things; and of course they should, I’m not the one to say this is right or wrong. I think it’s important to actually believe something. But since people believe differently, to different degrees, there’s often unnecessary confusions and fuss. And I don’t think Facebook is a good forum. It’s not just that, there are a lot of other things, like I get stressed. Since Facebook came along, tiny things become humongous. So . . . politics and religion are things I’ve chosen to not comment on much. [. . .] It’s another thing if you’re with people, and you’re sitting and having a discussion. Although even there I feel it’s difficult . . . but at least that’s face-to-face; with the possibility of reading each other better, you can have a different type of dialogue. Text is so easy to misunderstand.

Here, conflict is constructed as misreading or misunderstanding one another, and Morgan’s social circle combined with social media and communication through written text has a high risk for conflict. While it is important to ‘believe something’, the wish to avoid conflicts blocks him from engaging further.

Rather than considering conflict an aspect of political engagement, perhaps even a productive aspect, Morgan and others like him associate it with discomfort. And while fear of conflict might hinge on other psychological or cultural factors, the contemporary tendency of individualisation problematised by Dahlgren (2009) arguably adds pressure to all social interaction; issues depend on single individuals, rather than collectivities. This pressure is carried in to the other main part of this theme, reflecting a lack of external efficacy, and several audience members constructed the issue of ‘package deals’:
If you want to engage further, you have to choose the package. And there you often get into this bickering, because you get branded: ‘I’m a Sweden Democrat!’ or ‘I’m a Social Democrat!’ And that adds to the bickering, because it makes it clear who you are. Instead of being more neutral and discussing the issue at hand. The brand becomes more important. (Focus group 1-participant, Susanna, 28 years)

This problematisation of collectivities relates to identity and the tendency to engage with single issues over traditional parties (Bennett, 2008). Susanna, a 28-year-old landscaping architect living in central Sweden criticises parties for behaving like brands. As such, she focuses on the conflictual aspect as well as the performative – the use of ‘bickering’ and ‘brand’ indicates it is not serious or substantial.

Benjamin, a 29-year-old salesperson living in a big city, expressed hesitation even towards more temporary collectivities, such as taking part in demonstrations:

if you join some type of group, you need to believe in their whole package, somehow. [. . .] and I know this is really terrible, if I’d go to like a demonstration against racism, it would feel like . . . a lot of the people there are probably going to be way more left-leaning and extreme leftist [than I am], and then I’d feel like I don’t want to mix with them, they may support other things too. (Interviewee, Benjamin, 29 years)

Benjamin’s worry focuses on what other opinions might be present within a group of people demonstrating, and fears being misrepresented as agreeing with them. He constructs this as partly his personal (internal) issue (‘I know this is really terrible’), yet he finishes by emphasising the risk of being associated with the ‘wrong’ opinion.

Discussion

In this section, the idea of civic stage fright is developed based on the identified themes and associated fears, and related to wider debates on satire and young adult civic motivation. As Eliasoph’s (1998) cynical chic solidarity exposes, constructions of cynicism – and, this article adds, kynicism – might be associated with engagement related anxieties and fears of being excluded or misrepresented, rather than disillusionment or disengagement.

While experienced audiences members spoke positively about the possibilities of political engagement, the inexperienced focused on obstacles – seemingly replacing lacking experiences with emotionally laden notions of what such experiences could entail. The task of participating in politics, thereby having to perform politically, was associated with exposing oneself and taking risks – be it in the minimal sense (posting comments or discussing with others) or the maximal (joining a political party or activist group; Carpentier, 2011).

These anxieties can be understood through the metaphor of stage fright. When these participants imagined stepping onto the public stage, some of the same anxieties that stage actors face were exposed – relating to internal and external aspects. Pushing this metaphor further, news satire engagement can be understood as a coping mechanism or self-treatment, begging the question if being drawn to news satire’s routine embarrassment of political actors can be considered a symptom of civic stage fright.
This study is about a mostly well-educated, mostly white middle-class young adult news satire audience. While inexperienced, they live in a country where civic malaise differs from that of the US: Voter turnout is high, and most of the study’s participants – like the population in general – engage with and enjoy comparatively high trust in conventional news media. While the data does not include much criticism of political journalism, common in American news satire studies where news satire is seen as correcting against poor quality journalism (Baym, 2005), it did include criticism of journalism as form. Furthermore, Swedish residents are offered free education. In general, they do not lack material, educational or cultural resources in the ways described by for instance, Eliasoph (1998) or Coleman (2013). However, membership in political parties and other kinds of collective action is diminishing (Dahlgren, 2009; Statistics Sweden, 2018). The fears identified here align with these societal developments, where experiences of participating through collectivities are decreasing. As a metaphor, civic stage fright captures the dissonance between these seemingly encouraging conditions and a critical awareness of potential shortcomings (internal and external), combined with lacking experience. And while seasoned actors might never entirely lose or forget the feeling of stage fright, they do recognize it as something to be overcome.

As conceived by Kaplan (1969), stage fright hinges on the disturbance of our sense of poise. In everyday life poise is ‘a disintegration of a favourable anticipation of collaboration with other people’ (Kaplan, 1969: 67), here, reflecting in young adult imagined political collectivities. Stage fright includes mental afflictions, such as ‘ideas of being scrutinized detrimentally by other people’ (Kaplan, 1969: 60). Of course, ‘real’ stage fright relates to pursuing a performing arts career, and performance psychology has developed since. However, focusing on stage fright as metaphor emphasizes the strongly felt performance ideal. For stage actors, there are now established protocols for handling performance anxiety, including an explicit recognition of its commonality. It is less so with civic performance anxiety, although emotional aspects are increasingly recognized. In this sense, news satire engagement is one way to respond to the experienced discrepancy between pressures of civic performance on one hand, and a critical political interest on the other hand.

In other words, audiences might be attracted to news satires’ routine embarrassment of political actors in order to ‘work through’ their civic stage fright (Ellis, 2000). In this sense, fixation on performance and embarrassment within the political realm is associated with maintaining critical engagement, rather than ending it. Instead of ‘looking away’, audiences confront what is scary in a way that feels safe. As expressed by Critchley (2002), ‘the feeling that accompanies laughter is not simply pleasure, but rather uncanniness. We often laugh because we are troubled by what we laugh at, because it somehow frightens us’ (p. 56f). Hence, there is a connection between young adult civic performance anxieties on one hand and the inherent social dynamics of humour and satire on the other hand.

This is especially important in relation to lacking experiences, where Kaplan’s aforementioned ‘ideas of being scrutinized detrimentally by others’ go unchallenged. He makes the point that ‘[t]he curtailment of action by anxiety requires a repression of the impulse that was sampled. Thought is experimental action, and anxiety is one of the crucial tests in the experiment’ (Kaplan, 1969: 72). According to this line of thought,
when young adults expose civic stage fright, they are attempting to curtail a more stifling civic fear. As Kaplan (1969) puts it, ‘anxiety is part of the phenomenology of taking risks’ (p. 82); news satire audiences expose stage fright because they are on stage, meaning engaged in some manner. If they were entirely disengaged – off stage – there would be no reason to be anxious – no social risks and no need to ‘face’ this fear.

The affordances and particularities of different kinds of communicative spaces draw attention to certain aspects of identity and community that might previously, as in the era of Goffman’s work, have been implicit. However, not entirely, for Goffman (1959), the cynic is someone who does not believe in their own ‘act’ or performance, and has ‘no ultimate concern with the beliefs of [their] audience’ (p. 18). This highlights how this news satire audience veers more towards kynicism than cynicism, as they, in several ways, display a very strong concern with the beliefs of their imagined audience. Hence, one of the most relevant affordances here is that of the unknown audience. According to the present and other studies, young adults worry about not knowing who populates this potentially ever-expanding audience (Mascheroni and Murru, 2017; Papacharissi and Easton, 2013) – in ways similar to Kaplan’s stage actors. The difference in digital spaces is that anxiety and hyper-awareness are strengthened by socially mediated publicness (Baym and boyd, 2012: 320) shaped by social media affordances, alongside social context, identity and practices. To varying degrees, participants of this study construct themselves as being forced to navigate several levels simultaneously; assessing how ‘safe’ a social setting might be, which in the online environment hinges on understanding and assessing social effects of technical affordances.

Worries about not knowing ‘enough’ to participate as well as about conflict further relate to and are supported by other studies (Ekström, 2015; Mascheroni and Murru, 2017). It seems to partly be about having the ‘wrong’ opinion, or belonging to the ‘wrong’ group; relating to fears of exclusion. Dahlgren (2009) proposes a perspective where knowledge is considered intertwined with opinion formation, since we shape our opinions throughout life, based on, among other things, formal education and interactions with others. It is worth noting that ‘as we move ever further into a technologically advanced and highly specialised society, the disparities between expert knowledge and that of the layperson continues to grow’ (Dahlgren, 2009: 77). This point is made over and over in the data; because however educated, young adults feel unsure about their own knowledge and opinions. This specific hyper-awareness seems to result in constructions of political opinions as requiring insurmountable amounts of knowledge. Hence, efficacy and motivation become fraught by a fear of being embarrassed. In other studies, such fears are mitigated through the development of online ‘protective strategies’, such as blocking, avoiding certain topics or unfriending contacts (Mascheroni and Murru, 2017). Arguably, news satire engagement works protectively in this sense too. Its kynical mode is an emotionally ‘safer’ alternative when maintaining civic motivation.

Conclusion

This article studies young adult news satire engagement and civic motivation by focusing on the ways in which audience members construct efficacy and kynicism. Through a qualitative contextualising audience approach including in-depth interviews and focus
groups, three themes related to civic motivation are identified: development and invitation, performance and knowledge, as well as conflict and ‘packaged deals’ – which expose underlying anxieties and fears. Reflecting a focus on internal efficacy, development and invitation relate to a fear of exclusion as well as embarrassment; the latter is also found in the theme of performance and knowledge, where internal and external efficacy overlaps. The theme of conflict and ‘packaged deals’, finally, focuses more on external efficacy, manifesting a fear of conflict and misrepresentation.

In a general sense, this confirms the work of Higgie (2014) and the Classics she uses; that what might seem cynical might actually be kynical – a critical engagement, coupled with a low sense of efficacy, internally and externally. It underscores the importance of identifying emotional processes as part of civic development, wherein civic stage fright works as a metaphor for the performance related anxieties that block further engagement, within civic processes of becoming. Constructions of civic stage fright rely on a complex waivering and negotiation of belief and disbelief in the democratic system and civic agency on a structural level, as well as on an individual level, concerning their abilities – to perform well, know enough, be understood and handle or avoid conflicts. These are in turn reinforced by inexperience and communicative affordances of various environments, especially collective and digital ones. In the latter, socially mediated publicness strengthens the feeling of being monitored, evoking further fears of embarrassment, exclusion, conflict and misrepresentation.

The fact that these fears and anxieties have been found in other contemporary studies of young adult citizenship tells us that news satire alone cannot be blamed for these young adult displays of kynicism – if they should even be considered a problem. Rather, the article suggests that these young adults are engaging in news satire because of a fixation with performance, wherein news satire confirms those fears. Humour and satire’s attention to the social force of embarrassment, misrepresentation, conflict and exclusion might be considered self-treatment. Participants feel supported by their news satire engagement in their civic development; leading to the conclusion that in processes of becoming – in this case full(er) citizens – these particular young adults perform citizenship by trying out various political orientations, identities and ideals; sometimes perhaps seeming cynical, but more accurately suffering from stage fright and questioning efficacy. In that sense, they are ‘kynically’ engaged in a cultural form that directs their attention to fears they harbour, rather than ignoring them.

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