



Popular Communication

The International Journal of Media and Culture

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: <https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/hppc20>

The democratic roles of satirists

Sara Ödmark & Jonas Harvard

To cite this article: Sara Ödmark & Jonas Harvard (2021): The democratic roles of satirists, Popular Communication, DOI: [10.1080/15405702.2021.1929995](https://doi.org/10.1080/15405702.2021.1929995)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/15405702.2021.1929995>



© 2021 The Author(s). Published with license by Taylor & Francis Group, LLC.



Published online: 31 May 2021.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 60



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

The democratic roles of satirists

Sara Ödmark  and Jonas Harvard 

Department of Media and Communication Science, Mid Sweden University, Sundsvall, Sweden

ABSTRACT

In the high-choice media landscape, satire has the potential to help news and politics break through information apathy barriers and reinvigorate democratic debate. While scholarly attention to the genre of satire has increased, interest in satirists themselves has been sparse. Using a theory of non-deliberative forms of public discourse and the idea of role conceptions, this study presents an analysis of interviews with Swedish satirists working in broadcasting media. Results showed that being Eye-openers and Questioners – meaning providing alternative perspectives and problematizing societal norms – were the primary contributions of satire, according to satirists. There were differing roles to take on when it came to social bonding and solidarity: Unifier, where the aim was to be bridge-building in a polarized debate, and Divider, where the main focus was to inspire critical thinking and foster independence from consensus. The role elements Reporter, Explainer and Solver were also introduced and discussed.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 12 April 2020
Revised 15 October 2020
Accepted 7 May 2021

KEYWORDS

Political satire; comedy; deliberative democracy; public debate; role conception; political humor

Introduction

In tough times people seek relief, but also clarity. The dual aims of satire, to both entertain and critique (Declercq, 2018), cater to these needs, and over the centuries the genre has flourished particularly in times of change and uncertainty (Marshall, 2013). What could satire contribute to the current era, with its combination of a high-choice media landscape and increasingly polarized political debate? Some hope that it could reinvigorate democracy by helping news and politics break through information apathy barriers. Satire feeds off an existing public democratic discourse and combines entertainment with societal engagement in ways which reframe citizenship (McClennen & Maisel, 2014). It has been shown that low-information voters after exposure to societal issues in entertainment formats move on to seek more in-depth knowledge elsewhere (Xenos, Moy, Mazzoleni, & Meuller-Herbst, 2018). However, the combination between the more frivolous esthetic purpose to entertain, and the broadly moral purpose to make truthful interventions (Declercq, 2018) creates an inherent tension in satire. It reflects the paradox that humor in a message increases attention, but also signals unimportance (Nabi, Moyer-Gusé, & Byrne, 2007). Interestingly, if the signal of unimportance is counteracted and a humorist establishes serious intent, satire can still have persuasive influence (Ibid.). The roles satirists take on are therefore essential: Do they emphasize entertainment or social critique? The current study investigates this balancing act and asks how satirists see their role in democratic

discourse. While scholarly attention to the genre of satire has increased, interest in satirists themselves has been sparse, and the study thereby contributes new knowledge. Although political satire is a global phenomenon with increasingly important discursive functions (Baym & Jones, 2012), Anglo-American studies have dominated previous research. The data in this study are drawn from Sweden, where the attributes of the Nordic welfare state and the Swedish consensus-culture of debate offer a different empirical perspective.

The democratic contributions of non-deliberative media discourse

The challenges of democracy are often viewed through the lens of deliberative democracy theory. But the classical idea that reasoned and equal debate can generate a rational consensus to guide collective decision-making is struggling in the present media environment. We therefore need to include the possibility that conflict, not consensus, forms the essence of politics (Mouffe, 1999). A broader view of what constitutes democratic debate is also called for. Michael Warner reminds us that alongside the dominant publics there are counterpublics with less direct influence on the “level of the generality of the state” but a greater freedom regarding choices of topics and forms of public address (Warner, 2002, p. 84). Theories of deliberative democracy also tend to underestimate the political force of popular culture, which, from its vantage point outside of established political debate forums, can have powerful political implications (Van Zoonen, 2005). That popular culture is inherently political, rings particularly true for satire, which has been described as a form of counter narrative intended to resist dominating forms of discourse (Hill, 2013), where the subversiveness of humor aims to level hierarchy (Douglas, 1999).

A way to overcome these limitations of a deliberative democracy framework is to see satire as part of a range of different types of media discourse, fulfilling different types of deliberative functions. Hartmut Wessler (2018) proposes a separation between the explicitly deliberative forms of media discourse that exist alongside decision-making institutions and are guided by particular values and implicit rules for debate, and alternative, non-deliberative forms of media discourse. These latter forms are found outside of the recognized venues of public political debate, but feed into democratic decision-making in significant ways and include satire, but also phenomena such as mediated protests and public rituals. Wessler proposes a typology of six possible democratic functions that such non-deliberative media discourse could have.

As can be seen in Table 1, Wessler hypothesizes that satire is mainly concerned with drawing attention to issues, normative problematization and providing arguments, but less prone to strengthen social bonds and increase solidarity. Satire would hypothetically also rarely introduce new perspectives, and would problematize existing standpoints rather than present solutions. When reviewing recent political satire research, the functions suggested

Table 1. Potential deliberative benefits of non-deliberative media content.

<i>Benefit</i>	Satire	Mediated protest	Mediated public ritual
Increase attention and interest	X	X	
Provide additional perspectives		X	X
Contribute to social bonds and solidarity		X	X
Provide normative problematization	X	X	
Provide arguments and justifications	X	X	
Present solutions		X	X

by Wessler can be identified, but there are also arguments against his emphasis. For example, it has been said that the new wave of more journalistic broadcast satire, through its embrace of greater advocacy, indeed does foster social bonds and contributes new perspectives and solutions (Baym, 2005; Waisanen, 2018).

This study takes these insights into alternative democratic expressions to further understand the role of satire in the fragmented media age. To emphasize the focus on the actors themselves, we combine the theory of non-deliberative discourse with a framework of role conceptions, in order to better capture how these types of actors position themselves in democratic debate. Media studies have highlighted how journalists' perceptions of their role in society influences news culture and, by extension, the content being produced (Donsbach, 2012). The term of role conceptions has been used to describe reflections and expressions of what a job entails, and has been defined as how members of a profession understand "how they (ought to) perform their function in a democratic society" (von den Driesch & van der Wurff, 2016, p. 442). Role conceptions are held by individuals, but create shared understandings of the role in society, making them both normative and descriptive. Recently the study of role conceptions has expanded from the field of journalism to other media actors such as public affairs practitioners (Ibid.) and lobbyists (Helgesson & Falasca, 2017). This study shifts the focus to satirists, and by applying role conceptions to the potential deliberative functions it will expand our understanding of the democratic role of satire.

In the digital media landscape, notions about the differentiation of news, entertainment and journalism are reexamined and re-negotiated, and boundaries between media professions and content types have become blurred (Koivukoski & Ödmark, 2020). This porosity also applies to the satirist, which is not a clearly defined profession to begin with. Instead of attempting to fit the satirists into predefined umbrella roles, this study builds a framework of role conception elements based on the potential deliberative functions of satire, and interprets how satirists position themselves in relation to these role elements.

With the terminology of Wessler, *drawing attention and enhancing interest* means raising awareness of, or increasing interest in, a particular issue, thereby expanding the range and depth of themes and topics on the agenda. This corresponds to the role element of Reporter. *Adding perspectives and increasing inclusiveness* refers to representing overlooked viewpoints or giving voice to minority standpoints, which can enrich discussion with unexpected and previously perhaps suppressed perspectives. We name this role element Eye-opener. Such adding of perspectives can lead to the *strengthening of social bonds and showing of solidarity*, which also refers to acknowledging adversaries as legitimate participants in the discussion. Here, the satirist is taking on the role element of Unifier. Non-deliberative discourse may also *highlight values and facilitate normative problematization*. One example is through revealing inconsistencies, which, even when it is made through affective expression, may contribute to the awareness of implicit assumptions or biases and bring the hidden basis of reasoning up for questioning. Hence, we call this role element Questioner. From its vantage point outside of explicit political debate non-deliberative discourse may also *provide arguments and justifications* for particular standpoints, utilizing a role element of Explainer. A final function is *offering solutions and imaging alternatives*. Although such alternatives may not be fully developed or coherent solutions, their existence can facilitate the movement of the political debate toward a distinct recommendation for action. We call this role element Solver.

Building upon these concepts, we ask the overarching research question:

RQ: How do satirists view their roles in democratic debate?

When presenting the findings, the research question will be analyzed against a backdrop of the six dimensions of potential democratic contributions of non-deliberative media discourse, and the role elements derived from them.

Method and material

In order to shed light on the democratic role conceptions of satirists, 14 in-depth interviews were conducted with people engaged in the production of broadcast satire in Sweden. The term satirist was defined as those involved in the production of satirical shows in roles such as producer, editor, scriptwriter, researcher or presenter. The shows should have satirical content as their main content, rather than just pure comedy or pop-culture commentary. To be eligible for the study, the satire shows should also have aired for more than a single season and be broadcast either in video or audio format. Based on these criteria, four shows were identified. The satire shows chosen for the study were one public service television show (abbreviation TVPS), two audio shows that were both available as podcasts and broadcast on public service radio (RPS1, RPS2) and one audio show which was independently produced in affiliation with a large newspaper and exclusively available in podcast format (POD). Available media measurement data illustrate that the shows varied in size, with audiences from close to 100'000 listeners per episode (Orvesto, 2018) for the online only podcast (POD), to around 1 million combined broadcast and streaming views (MMS, Media Measurement Scandinavia, 2020) for the TV show (TVPS). All shows aired weekly and all explicitly labeled themselves as political satire except one, which more broadly stated that it was providing an entertaining commentary on current affairs. While conducting this type of study on main US satirists may have been difficult due to lack of access to interview respondents, the key actors of Swedish satire scene proved to be more accessible. The main production team members of the selected shows were asked to participate in the study; all but four agreed to be interviewed, which made for 14 interviews in total – five women and nine men.

As Bleich and Pekkanen (2013) argue, the difficulty in evaluating the representativeness of the sample is a potential shortcoming of this type of study. The Swedish satire scene is heavily influenced by American role models, and can be presumed to follow the same satirist ideals as similar Western countries. There are however differences in context. Sweden has a democratic-corporatist media system with an important role for public service media (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). These media institutions are publicly funded, but as a safeguard against influence from politicians or the state owned by an independent foundation. Swedes are a highly digital people who are active on social media. Over half of the population listens to podcasts, a medium that has gained popularity in recent years, especially among younger audiences (Internetstiftelsen, 2019). In addition, Sweden has a relatively homogeneous public debate. Although there are tendencies toward increasingly selective media exposure, the degree of political polarization in the national public debate is still far from that found in for example the US (Dahlgren, 2020; Syvertsen, Mjøs, Enli, & Moe, 2014).

The study takes a qualitative approach, by using semi-structured interviews. A qualitative method helps capture the points of view of informants and aids in understanding their

Table 2. Interview participants.

Code	Professional title	Type of show
SAT1	Producer	TVPS
SAT2	Editor	TVPS
SAT3	Researcher	TVPS
SAT4	Writer	TVPS
SAT5	Presenter	TVPS
SAT6	Writer/presenter	RPS1
SAT7	Writer	RPS1
SAT8	Writer/presenter	POD
SAT9	Writer/presenter	POD
SAT10	Writer/presenter	POD
SAT11	Writer/presenter	RPS2
SAT12	Writer/presenter	RPS2
SAT13	Writer/presenter	RPS2
SAT14	Writer/presenter	RPS2

subjective experiences (Remenyi, 2011). This is relevant in this case, as it is the perceptions of the satirists themselves that are in focus. Through semi-structured interviews, we can collect information on self-concepts, behaviors and representations, as well as the imagined meanings of peoples' activities (Lamont & Swidler, 2014). This includes views and constructs surrounding their societal role. A range of concrete questions were formulated in an interview guide and the interview study was designed to both allow for general reflections about the democratic contribution of satire in society and to capture opinions regarding the six dimensions presented in the theory. The interviewees were encouraged to reflect freely on their place in public debate, after which more pointed questions were posed, such as: How do you choose topics? How do you relate to societal norms? Do you ever present solutions to societal problems, and if so, in what way?

A list of the participants' professional titles is presented in Table 2. The interviews were carried out via telephone, during the winter of 2018–2019, with the average interview lasting about an hour. The interviews were recorded and transcribed and the transcriptions were subsequently subjected to a coding consisting of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). During this analysis, the main points raised by the interviewed satirists were summarized and condensed into a series of statements and propositions. These statements were thereafter thematized in relation to the six dimensions of potential democratic contributions, and compared to the corresponding role elements. The quotes included in the results have been translated into English from Swedish.

Results: attention, normative problematization and providing arguments

We first turn to the results regarding those dimensions where satire according to Wessler has its main focus: *drawing attention and enhancing interest*, *normative problematization* and *providing arguments*. Drawing attention and enhancing interest can be said to be somewhat different functions of a similar role, the Reporter role. The first function is about putting new topics on the agenda, shedding light on seemingly underreported news stories or societal issues, while the second is about highlighting the relevance of, or reframing, the issues that are already on the agenda. Here, the shows represented in the material had different approaches. The satirists of one of the audio shows (RPS1), expressed no desire to set a news agenda of their own. Instead, they saw it as their particular mission to

address the issues already existing in “the political headlines” (SAT6). Others viewed their platform more as an opportunity to expand the range of topics up for discussion at the moment, and wanted to stay away from being “owned by the news cycle.” Their goal was to be more active than reactive: “Instead of running with the flow or running against the flow you can just keep yourself out of the flow” (SAT10). Studies of Danish satire have also observed this tendency of satirists to distance themselves from mainstream news media and traditional news reporting (Bruun, 2012).

Even when the satirists followed the news agenda, it was important to add something new. The choice of topics could be based on a wish to break free from the constraints of traditional journalistic work, and satire afforded them an opportunity to delve deeper into what they perceived as systemic problems. These systemic problems were identified using journalistic instincts, but could be addressed differently in satire, more critically and with a wider scope, than in the compressed formats and fast-moving cycle of regular news reporting. This reasoning highlighted the moral dimension of satire and held similarities to the moral justification of investigative journalism.

There was also the notion that satire perhaps did not have to introduce new topics, but in the fragmented media landscape of today should rather bring narrower topics to a larger audience. One way in which satirists could widen the gate to political participation was through simplification. Satire could be a sort of “politics for dummies” (SAT3) that made political facts and figures more accessible. Increasing political awareness and building engagement by “sweetening the medicine” was a phrase several of the TVPS satirists used.

There were topics that were mentioned as being less interesting for satire. The TV satire program (TVPS) had in place an informal ban on news stories about the US in general and Donald Trump in particular, and as a general policy did not address foreign affairs, sports and crime. Shying away from popular comedy topics such as the American president was seen as a way to avoid predictability and redundancy. More unexpected topics held more comedic potential, and addressing complex issues also rendered the work more meaningful:

If the gut feeling is that this is something that doesn't concern me, or us, that it's just too boring to talk about. Or joke about. That's usually the funniest to me. [Interviewer: Why?] I think it's because I know it's a lie. Usually the thing that seems too boring or complicated or irrelevant is the thing that concerns our society the most. (SAT8)

In summary, there were two different ways of relating to the Reporter role and the mainstream news agenda: Some aimed to draw attention to topics that existed outside of the journalistic spotlight, while others only wanted to tackle, twist and enhance the established stories of the news cycle.

Problematizing norms was presented in the theoretical framework as a main potential democratic contribution of satire, and was strongly emphasized as a core part of the satirist role by the interview participants as well. Being a Questioner and challenging societal norms was crucial, and could be achieved by exposing hypocrisy and encouraging people to be skeptical about matters that were taken for granted. This societal role of satire has in recent years inspired a scholarly debate where American satirists have been accused of increasing cynicism and decreasing trust both toward the political system and toward established news media (Baumgartner & Morris, 2006; Fox & Steinberg, 2020). Others, such as Hoffman and

Young (2011) instead argue that what is reflected is a healthy, critical view of government, which could lead to positive political behavior.

Normative problematization could, according to the interviewed satirists, also be achieved by providing alternative concepts of normality, and showing that deviation from norms was acceptable. A starting point was to acknowledge that to produce satire, as well as other forms of opinion material, meant taking a stance and choosing to represent one set of norms over another. That said, the positions taken by the satirists could shift week to week, and it was more important to continually question and challenge the norms of the current debate than to represent any consistent values. One key feature of satire was that it should challenge consensus and always press the envelope on what could be talked about in a society:

I don't like it when people get along too well. [laughter] I think it's a personality thing. I've noticed in my life that people get more stupid and boring when they agree in a group. (SAT12)

An interesting aspect of the issue of problematizing norms concerned whether *shared* norms really existed or could be identified, and what this meant for satire. For satire to be able to problematize societal norms, those norms needed to be clearly present in public conversation. The instability of the current political climate and the fragmentation of media was seen as complicating things for the satirist, since comedy “requires a fixed order to play with” (SAT10). If a clear order did not exist, then it became more relevant to bring order, rather than to increase the chaos. If the perceived norm that acted as a premise for a joke was not there, or agreed upon, then finding common ground was more rewarding.

Jokes are not funny if you feel that the premise is off. At present, the premise [for many jokes] is not there, because we don't have as many agreements on how things are, this kind of agreement concerning what is right and normal. [...] I have started thinking more and more that reasoning regarding which the premises are, is more interesting than the joke itself. (SAT10)

The idea that satire presents arguments and justifications implies that it acts as a worthwhile contributor to debates and takes on the role as an Explainer on current issues. During the interviews it emerged that arguments and justifications were used by satirists as building blocks for setting up the “case” around a particular issue, and were integral to the presentation together with comedic elements and perhaps a punchline conclusion. In constructing the presentation of the issue, satirists strived to use the classic elements of rhetoric, including not only ethos and pathos but also logos, meaning rational arguments. Some described their satire as reasoning around a main thesis through storytelling. The storytelling of satire differed from journalism in that it was freer, more emotional, and less focused on the presentation of facts.

For me in my profession this has been a reawakening. I have struggled with these things for so long, and I feel like in investigative journalism and news shows you only address ... You assume that the brain is rational. In receiving information, that all you are is a brain. (SAT3)

This meant packaging arguments in a particular comedic sequence, which was different from established pro-et-contra modes of deliberation. After a funny introduction, a joke to pique interest, came a presentation of relevant facts. The key move of satire was to then add a twist, an unexpected conclusion or next step. Thus, the thesis would be able to reach people indirectly via a sort of surprise effect. One satirist expressed it as first bringing people

on board for a ride, but once they had entered the vehicle it would swivel on to a “road to perdition” in which the audience were exposed to different arguments than they might have expected (SAT5). This notion coincides with humor theories such as relief theory, where laughter is seen as a result of pressure release (Morreall, 1983), and incongruity theory, that proposes humor as a form of dissonance between what is expected and what is presented (Berger, 1976). The way in which satirists achieved reflexivity and understanding of different arguments was by intentionally creating discomfort, and then releasing it in an unexpected way.

Results: social bonds, adding perspectives and presenting solutions

When asked about the role of satire as a Unifier, it was common for the satirists to refer to themselves as dividers rather than unifiers, in line with Wessler’s assumptions on the relation between satire and social bonds. However, there were differing opinions. In general, those interviewed agreed with the notion of Swedes as a traditionally conflict-avoiding people. Previous Swedish TV and radio satire was seen as reflecting this, being rather civil and nonsensical, softening critiques and delivering roasts “with a hug” (SAT1). But times were changing. Several satirists pointed to a new wave of political humor in recent years, inspired by American titles such as Last Week Tonight with John Oliver. The current media landscape called for a sharper, more topical satire in order to get noticed, especially by younger audiences. Being thought-provoking, power-challenging and hypocrisy-exposing were practices held higher than bringing people together. As previously stated though, not all agreed. Several interviewees referenced recent signs of positions becoming increasingly entrenched on opposite ends and some explicitly stated that they did not want to contribute to polarization. In a harsher public-debate climate, satire could have a uniting social role. By portraying different sides of the debate in nuanced and creative ways satirists could become “bridge-builders” and satire could “open up for more sensible people to have a dialogue” (SAT1). This hope for building bridges included setting a more relaxed tone for the debate. Pointing to absurdities and providing comic relief was seen as an important component of encouraging societal dialogue:

Our role is to make sure people talk to each other. And that they laugh, and know everything doesn’t have to be so serious. [. . .] Talk across borders! And I don’t just mean political borders but all societal borders. Everything is better if you talk to your neighbor. (SAT4)

Although a majority of the satirists in the material were associated with public service broadcasting, they distanced themselves from any assumption that they would promote state-sanctioned opinions. Instead, the predominant experience expressed in the interviews was one of independence from political institutions. In their view, satire needed to swing at different targets from many different directions, the satirist being a “loose cannon” (SAT13). At each moment, satire held a bias, it played on a particular set of assumptions, but over time the direction of this bias should be unreliable, a sort of unfaithful partisanship.

It’s boring when it’s predictable, when someone just attacks the same thing and never understands they are part of a pattern themselves. (SAT8)

Another aspect of the desired unpredictability was reflected in the choice of targets. Although directing your criticism upwards was mentioned as a satiric ideal, some of the

interviewed satirists actually preferred inward or even downward jabs. Mocking the powerful was certainly admirable, but making the political elite the butt of every joke would be “boring and safe” (SAT14). Making fun of ordinary citizens was presented as a way of taking them seriously, including them in societal conversation.

The issue of social inclusivity was closely related to who might be offended by the jokes. It was seen as an issue that impacted the satirists indirectly, but which they did not take into consideration when constructing their shows. Some of the satirists did though mention annoying or upsetting people as an indirect goal. If no one got mad, they were doing something wrong: “But you don’t want everyone to get angry, you want an appropriate number of people to get angry” (SAT5). Two controversies involving one of the public service satire shows exemplify the delicacy of this balancing act. In the first, the show had built a digital sign-up tool to illustrate the supposed absurdity of the Swedish school choice system. This led to critique that public service broadcasting media was politicized. The interviewed satirists saw this controversy as a success, claiming it had exposed hypocrisy within the Swedish middle class. The second controversy followed a segment meant to poke fun at Swedish ignorance regarding Chinese culture. The segment was accused of being racist and this controversy did not evoke similar feelings of accomplishment:

The satirist that doesn’t offend is worthless. It’s natural; if you challenge a taboo or try to violate expectations or make fun of things you will offend people. [. . .] [The problem in this case was that it] hit against people we didn’t mean to hit: Chinese people living in Sweden. That wasn’t the intention. (SAT1)

As Chen, Gan, and Sun (2017) indicates, when satire gets people annoyed it can have positive outcomes on political participation, particularly on issues they consider personally important. Anger could also be used for getting noticed in the attention economy. One interviewee whose satire had become a hot media topic saw the media controversy as a symptom of the narrow Swedish debate climate and the attention-driven news cycle. In her view media outlets felt a need to engage in current topics of discussion, regardless of relevance or actual indignation.

In contrast, there was also the concern raised in the interviews, that satire was only “preaching to the choir” (SAT10), meaning that they were only attracting an audience of already like-minded people, rendering the critique embedded in the satire redundant. This limitation of impact is supported by research showing that even when satire does reach a wider audience, those whose views are critiqued might re-interpret its message or dismiss the critique altogether (LaMarre, Landreville, & Beam, 2009). The satirists were divided regarding both the possibility of actually impacting opinions and attitudes with their work, and whether this was desirable. Their views ranged from it being a vital part of their choice of occupation to it being rather irrelevant. The ones with the latter inclination preferred to state that their sole role was to be “uncomfortable” or just entertaining. Whether or not this meant exerting influence was not important; the important thing was to add a different voice to public life.

The idea of adding new perspectives to the public debate was arguably the most stressed in the interviews. This is the area in which the results are the most in conflict with the theoretical assumptions made by Wessler (2018), and the notion was present across all types of interviewees, regardless of platform, audience size or broadcaster affiliation. Several satirists spontaneously mentioned aspiring to provide differing perspectives, wanting to function as Eye-openers in the debate.

It's all about finding a position that hasn't been taken. Or when there's a hot topic, to find the thing that hasn't been said. [...] it sort of comes up naturally. There's a mainstream perspective there, and since journalists never ask follow-up questions, there's always a subtext left to explore. And that, well, is what I do. (SAT12)

This goal was phrased as: a) forcing the audience to change perspectives (SAT5, SAT7, SAT8); b) adding less rigid perspectives (SAT1); c) contradicting or flipping the prevalent perspective (SAT3, SAT11, SAT12); or d) bringing your personal, unique perspective to the table (SAT4, SAT9, SAT10, SAT13, SAT14).

I feel like [adding perspectives] is what we do. Partly with the humor perspective, meaning you can laugh about stuff even if it's completely sick, but partly also through our argumentation. When we're connecting the dots, [...] managing to explain something, something new. That's when we add perspectives. And that's when I feel we are needed. (SAT5)

The humor perspective was explained as a way of forcing people to change how they normally view things; to open their eyes. As previously mentioned, a joke is often a twist, a statement that exploits an incongruity of some sort (Berger, 1976). In order to be in on the joke you had to "move your position on the couch" (SAT5) and see things the way the satirists see them. This differed from the presentation of political views in traditional news coverage, which was seen as more straightforward, more descriptive. Satire therefore had the potential to bring "aha moments" (SAT3, SAT5).

The notion that satire would be less prone to presenting solutions than highlighting problems and inconsistencies was partly confirmed in the interviews, where offering specific plans and taking on the role of Solver predominantly was seen as a task for others:

No, that's not something we do. [...] It gets a little crowded, there are so many others who present solutions. We are busy relating to those. (SAT6)

However, there were also interviewees who did feel they offered solutions. Whether they were humorous, sarcastic and/or perhaps nonrealistic solutions, they should still be regarded as containing a foundation of seriousness:

Sure, it can be our own, homegrown theories sometimes. In good satire we have to land in some kind of conclusion. [...] Our solutions are serious to the degree that they are founded in the argumentation we have spent time on. (SAT2)

Paradoxically, what gave the satirists license to engage with actual societal issues, was their disconnect from regular political debate, that they enjoyed "the luxury of not being so tethered to reality" (SAT5). This provided a unique speaking position which opened up for presenting more imaginative or unexpected alternatives or solutions. One way they could point out the flaws of existing policies or plans was by making their own absurd versions. The solutions were still presented as some sort of possible alternatives, and joke solutions were expressions of some sort of truth.

I present joke solutions fairly often. And they might have a core of what I think would be a better alternative in them. [...] Then there are a thousand reasons why you probably couldn't do it, but that's the beauty of humor. That I still get to say it. And have a vision, a joke vision. (SAT8)

According to this sentiment, even the most ridiculous suggestion or solution served a purpose by exposing the absurdity of the existing reality. A ludicrous take on a societal matter could question authority and rattle the status quo in a productive manner.

Discussion

As public debate has become more scattered across media forms, what role can satire play in the democratic process? The current study took as its starting point a theory of non-deliberative democratic discourse and has used the idea of role conceptions to shed light on how satirists interact with potential democratic functions. A presentation of the interview results can be observed in [Table 3](#).

When summarizing the results, two dimensions stand out by being emphasized almost unanimously in the interviews: Providing additional perspectives and normative problematization. These were areas where the satirists were united in their views on their democratic roles: they ought to offer new and surprising perspectives which they found lacking in the mainstream debate, and should expose hypocrisy and question hegemonic ideas. They should function as Eye-openers and Questioners.

In contrast, the role of Solver was the least supported by the satirists, who in general presented assumptions about their potential impact on the political process with caveats. They could however see evidence of indirect influence on democratic discourse, for example when other opinion leaders picked up their arguments. This also resonated in the role of Explainer, where it was suggested that satire inhabited a unique space, situated between serious political commentary and pure comedy, which enabled it to have influence by traveling under the radar. This rendered it, according to the theoretical model, implicitly or explicitly, a form of discourse bordering on the deliberative, as its presentations would enter general democratic debate as additional resources and potentially bring legitimacy to new voices regarding the topics it covered.

Table 3. Role conceptions of satirists based on potential deliberative benefits of satire.

Benefit	Potential democratic role for satirist	Degree of support from satirists	How satirists positioned themselves
Increase attention and interest	Reporter	Strong, but with differing emphasis.	As either agenda-setters who provide alternatives to mainstream news, or as agenda-addressers who comment on existing news.
Provide additional perspectives	Eye-opener	Strong.	As contributors of new perspectives. In part by searching for unexpected stances, in part by adding the unique "humor perspective".
Contribute to social bonds and solidarity	Unifier	Both strong support and directly opposing views.	As either unifiers who bring people together or as dividers who aim to break group-think and foster independence.
Provide normative problematization	Questioner	Strong.	As power-questioners and provocateurs. Mostly through exposing hypocrisy and inspiring critical thinking.
Provide arguments and justifications	Explainer	Semi-strong.	As explainers to an extent. Arguments are researched and used to build a thesis. Factuality is an ideal, but satirists also have a license to be nonsensical and exaggerated.
Present solutions	Solver	Weak, but existing.	As either non-solvers or solvers in an indirect way. If solutions are presented, they are usually not serious – but might still serve a democratic purpose.

When examining the remaining two dimensions: social bonds and solidarity, and attention and interest, they found both support and opposition among the interviewed satirists. The role of Unifier was claimed by some, wanting to build bridges between adversaries and not contribute to polarization. Others instead navigated toward a more dividing role, aiming to break group-mentality and political docility. The support for the role element Reporter was strong, but with differing approaches. One stance was that satirists should address and twist the mainstream news topics, while another was that satirists should function more as agenda-setters of their own and contribute alternative news topics and independent journalistic investigation.

The idea that satire should be eye-opening, fits well with newer research on deliberative democracy, which emphasizes the large degree to which democratic deliberation needs to be creative (Bächtiger & Parkinson, 2019). One reason humor has this creative capacity to be thought-provoking and mind-expanding is that it is viewed as being playful, which shifts the frame for political discourse and expands what types of statements are considered acceptable (Jones, 2013; Nabi et al., 2007). In satirical practice this could mean starting out by presenting a certain case or viewpoint, and then when the audience had accepted the premise, changing direction in order to add an element of surprise, meant to set off reflexive processes in the audience. This is similar to the humor function defined by Latta (1999) as providing a “cognitive shift.” In democratic debate, providing such a shift can be just as important as using the traditional resources of rhetoric and logical reasoning. A further function in public deliberation is to provide clarification and contribute to the continuous transformation (and possible improvement) of claims and arguments presented in the debate (Bächtiger & Parkinson, 2019; Wessler, 2018). In relation to this role, the practice of satirists of providing unexpected and sometimes even absurd reflections on the possible consequences of a particular position was also a way of contributing to clarification of topics by revealing consequences unknown to the audience.

In accounting for the emphasis of Swedish satirists on providing different perspectives, a reasonable explanation lies in the difference between media systems. In Sweden, which belongs to the group of Scandinavian democratic-corporatist countries (Hallin & Mancini, 2004), traditions of collective organizations are strong, and there may be said to be a higher perceived degree of consensus in society. With satire positioned as an anti-establishment force, to the extent that the collective consensus is perceived as representing the power structure, satirists may be more strongly inclined to see their role as mainly providing other perspectives than the dominating ones, as the interviews seem to indicate. This also corresponds to new challenges of the high-choice media landscape, where providing unique and surprising angles on news and current affairs is a staple of survival.

However, the existence of a consensus was also questioned in the interviews, and this was connected to a concern regarding increased fragmentation of the media and public debate. Proceeding from the understanding that joking and humor requires that the joker and his/her audience share frames of reference, the current social media climate was said to have resulted in a decrease in such shared premises. One satirist even expressed a desire to leave the genre of satire entirely, since catering to the need for order, basic facts and establishing shared frames of reference seemed more relevant than playing around with what used to be common public knowledge. This is an intriguing development that could be further explored in future research.

Disclosure of potential conflicts of interest

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributor

Sara Ödmark is a PhD candidate and lecturer at the Department of Media and Communication Science, Mid Sweden University. Her research concerns the role of professional comedians in public debate. She has a background in journalism.

Jonas Harvard is a senior lecturer at the Department of Media and Communication Science, Mid Sweden University. His previous works concerns historical changes in political language, histories of public deliberation and the concept public opinion.

ORCID

Sara Ödmark  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-3015-7423>

Jonas Harvard  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-3386-4396>

References

- Bächtiger, A., & Parkinson, J. (2019). *Mapping and measuring deliberation: Towards a new deliberative quality*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Baumgartner, J., & Morris, J. S. (2006). The daily show effect. *American Politics Research*, 34(3), 341–367. doi:10.1177/1532673X05280074
- Baym, G. (2005). The daily show: Discursive integration and the reinvention of political journalism. *Political Communication*, 22(3), 259–276. doi:10.1080/10584600591006492
- Baym, G., & Jones, J. P. (2012). News parody in global perspective: Politics, power, and resistance. *Popular Communication*, 10(1–2), 2–13. doi:10.1080/15405702.2012.638566
- Berger, A. A. (1976). Anatomy of the Joke. *Journal of Communication*, 26(3), 113–115. doi:10.1111/j.1460-2466.1976.tb01913.x
- Bleich, E., & Pekkanen, R. (2013). How to report interview data. In L. Mosley (Ed.), *Interview research in political science* (pp. 84–106). Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. doi:10.1191/1478088706qp063oa
- Bruun, H. (2012). Political satire in Danish television: Reinventing a tradition. *Popular Communication*, 10(1–2), 158–169. doi:10.1080/15405702.2012.638568
- Chen, H.-T., Gan, C., & Sun, P. (2017). How does political satire influence political participation? Examining the role of counter- and pro-attitudinal exposure, anger, and personal issue importance. *International Journal of Communication*, 11, 3011–3029.
- Dahlgren, P. M. (2020). *Media echo chambers: Selective exposure and confirmation bias in media use, and its consequences for political polarization*. [Doctoral dissertation, Department of Journalism, Media and Communication (JMG)]. GUPEA. <http://hdl.handle.net/2077/67023>
- Declercq, D. (2018). A definition of satire (and why a definition matters). *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 76(3), 319–330. doi:10.1111/jaac.12563
- Donsbach, W. (2012). Journalists' role perception. In Donsbach W. (Ed.), *The international encyclopedia of communication*. Blackwell Reference Online (pp. 1–6). Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons. doi:10.1002/9781405186407.wbiecj010.pub2.
- Douglas, M. (1999). *Implicit Meanings: Selected Essays in Anthropology*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Fox, J. R., & Steinberg, E. (2020). News you can't use: Jon Stewart's Daily Show media critiques. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 97(1), 235–256. doi:10.1177/1077699019851228
- Hallin, D. C., & Mancini, P. (2004). *Comparing media systems: Three models of media and politics*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

- Helgesson, E., & Falasca, K. (2017). The construction of an elusive concept: Framing the controversial role and practice of lobbying in Swedish media. *Public Relations Inquiry*, 6(3), 275–291. doi:10.1177/2046147X17713543
- Hill, M. R. (2013). Breaking boundaries| Developing a normative approach to political satire: A critical perspective. *International Journal of Communication*, 7, 324–337.
- Hoffman, L. H., & Young, D. G. (2011). Satire, punch lines, and the nightly news: Untangling media effects on political participation. *Communication Research Reports*, 28(2), 159–168. doi:10.1080/08824096.2011.565278
- Internetstiftelsen. (2019). *Svenskarna och internet 2019*. Retrieved September 25, 2020 from <https://svenskarnaochinternet.se/rapporter/svenskarna-och-internet-2019/>
- Jones, J. P. (2013). Parody, performativity, and play. In J. Hartley, J. Burgess, & A. Bruns (Eds.), *A companion to new media dynamics* (pp. 396–406). Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Koivukoski, J., & Ödmark, S. (2020). Producing journalistic news satire: How Nordic satirists negotiate a hybrid genre. *Journalism Studies*, 21(6), 731–747..
- LaMarre, H. L., Landreville, K. D., & Beam, M. A. (2009). The Irony of Satire. *The International Journal of Press/ Politics*, 14(2), 212–231. doi:10.1177/1940161208330904
- Lamont, M., & Swidler, A. (2014). Methodological pluralism and the possibilities and limits of interviewing. *Qualitative Sociology*, 37(2), 153–171. doi:10.1007/s11133-014-9274-z
- Latta, R. L. (1999). *The basic humor process: A cognitive-shift theory and the case against incongruity*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Marshall, A. (2013). *The practice of satire in England, 1658-1770*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- McClennen, S. A., & Maisel, R. M. (2014). *Is satire saving our nation? Mockery and American politics*. London, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.
- MMS, Media Measurement Scandinavia. *Weekly report 2018:11*. Retrieved September 25, 2020 from https://mms.se/wp-content/uploads/_dokument/rapporter/tv-tittande/vecka/2018/VeTvTitt1811.pdf
- Morreall, J. (1983). *Taking laughter seriously*. Albany, NY: State University of New York.
- Mouffe, C. (1999). Deliberative democracy or agonistic pluralism? *Social Research*, 66(3), 745–758.
- Nabi, R. L., Moyer-Gusé, E., & Byrne, S. (2007). All joking aside: A serious investigation into the persuasive effect of funny social issue messages. *Communication Monographs*, 74(1), 29–54. doi:10.1080/03637750701196896
- Orvesto. (2018). Swedish Pod toplist, 2018:2. Retrieved September 25, 2020 from <https://www.kantarsifo.se/nyheter-och-press/poddtoppen-20182>
- Remenyi, D. (2011). *Field methods for academic research: Interviews, focus groups, and questionnaires in business and management studies*. Reading, UK: Academic Publishing International.
- Syvertsen, T., Mjøs, O. J., Enli, G. S., & Moe, H. (2014). *The media welfare state: Nordic media in the digital era*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.
- Van Zoonen, L. (2005). *Entertaining the citizen: When politics and popular culture converge*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
- von den Driesch, D., & van der Wurff, R. (2016). Role conceptions of public affairs practitioners in The Netherlands. *Public Relations Review*, 42(3), 441–450. doi:10.1016/j.pubrev.2015.11.011
- Waisanen, D. J. (2018). The rise of advocacy satire. In J. Baumgartner & A. Becker (Eds.), *Political humor in a changing media landscape: A new generation of research* (pp. 11–29). Lanham, MD: Lexington Books.
- Warner, M. (2002). Publics and Counterpublics. *Public Culture*, 14(1), 49–90. doi:10.1215/08992363-14-1-49
- Wessler, H. (2018). *Habermas and the media*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.
- Xenos, M. A., Moy, P., Mazzoleni, G., & Mueller-Herbst, J. (2018). Political entertainment in comparative perspective: Exploring the applicability of the gateway hypothesis across media systems. In J. Baumgartner & A. Becker (Eds.), *Political humor in a changing media landscape: A new generation of research* (pp. 185–206). Lanham, MD: Lexington Books.