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Between Headlines and Punchlines: Journalistic Role Performance in Western News Satire

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ABSTRACT

News satire has proliferated worldwide and has emerged as a valid site for public discourse. What we see today is a spectrum of news satire formats ranging from the predominantly absurd and comedic to more overtly journalistic satirical deconstructions of current affairs. This maturation of news satire as an alternative form of journalism thus underlines the necessity for further research into the journalistic roles that certain news satire formats carry out. This study assesses the journalistic roles in three international news satire formats i.e., the United States' *Last Week Tonight*, the Swedish *Svenska Nyheter*, and the Dutch *Zondag met Lubach* and presents the findings of a content analysis of 150 satirical segments having aired from October 2020 to April 2023. We conclude that Western news satire displays a fairly united execution of journalistic role performances with high scores for the *Advocate*, *Watchdog* and *Civic Educator* roles, yet low scores for *Reporter* and *Loyalist* roles. Furthermore, we present the *Comedic Interlocutor* role, and discuss its place in alternative conceptions of professional journalism today. This study empirically validates that humor and entertainment are not irreconcilable with a factual, civically engaged, critical kind of journalistic coverage.

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Introduction

News satire has gained popularity across the globe in recent years. At the start of the twenty-first century, shows such as *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* were uniformly recognized as benchmarks for the news satire genre, where today, it has proliferated into a wide array of different formats that blend discursive modes of entertainment and politics (Brugman et al. 2021). The result is a spectrum ranging from more absurdist, comedic forms of satire on the one hand, to explicitly “journalistic” and informative formats on the other. Shows such as *Last Week Tonight* are characterized by the collaboration of professional journalists alongside professional comedians, the use of journalistic techniques, and the overt pursuit of journalistic goals (Koivukoski and Ödmark 2020). Despite

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originating outside the boundaries of the traditional journalistic field, such forms of news satire nonetheless “reflect the socio-informative functions, identities, and roles of journalism” (Eldridge 2019, 858). In a rapidly changing digital landscape, these programs gain traction and visibility due to their contributions to public debate and impact on political policy (Boukes 2019). This exemplifies how the current moment is characterized by what Nieuwenhuis and Zijp (2022) recently termed the repoliticization of humor: a sociopolitical context where humor and comedy increasingly take part in the negotiation of societal power struggles.

Furthermore, this repoliticization of humor refers to the increasing extent to which political contributions of humor are explicitly debated in the public sphere. Conventionally, satirists are known to minimize their roles as political commentators (Young 2012) or have been delegitimized as journalistic outsiders (Tenenboim-Weinblatt 2009). Today, satirists are increasingly acknowledging their involvement in public debates and, as a result, their political impact has become the topic of public scrutiny with satirists themselves openly acknowledging levels of journalistic accountability and accepting the label of “investigative comedy” (Nicolai, Maesele, and Boukes 2022).

This maturation of news satire as an alternative form of journalism thus underlines the necessity for further research into the journalistic roles that such formats carry out. Previous research on satirists’ roles presents a fragmented and somewhat theoretically disjointed view. Some have focused on the role conceptions and perceptions of the satirists themselves (see Lichtenstein, Nitsch, and Wagner 2021; Ödmark 2021; Ödmark and Harvard 2021), while others have zoomed in on singular aspects pertaining to the journalistic (e.g., Kilby 2018; Waisanen 2018). These studies have placed news satire within specific journalistic subgenres which has been named, for instance, journalistic news satire (Koivukoski and Ödmark 2020) or satirical journalism (Fox 2018). However, which kind of journalistic role performances these hybrid genres employ has not yet been investigated as a whole. This study addresses these concerns by offering a structured and empirically tested understanding of journalistic role performances in Western news satire. To this end, we comparatively assess the journalistic roles in three international news satire formats i.e., the United States’ *Last Week Tonight* (LWT), the Swedish *Svenska Nyheter* (SN), and the Dutch *Zondag met Lubach* (ZML), guided by the overarching research question: To what extent are journalistic roles performed in news satire?

After a general introduction to journalistic roles and role performances, we discuss the extent to which news satire can incorporate journalistic methods and perform journalistic roles. Based on the literature review, we present six roles to be empirically tested in our study: (i) *Reporter*, (ii) *Advocate*, (iii) *Watchdog*, (iv) *Civic Educator*, (v) *Comedic Interlocutor*, and (vi) *Loyalist*. Following a description of our cases and methods, the results section provides an overview of the roles and their findings. We conclude by discussing the importance of our findings and their implications for a broader understanding of the alternative conceptions of professional journalism today.

Beyond Journalistic Roles as Journalistic Professionalism

It has been argued that the rise of social media has contributed to the cultivation and competition of identities instead of ideas (Bail 2021), making roles and role performances

more central in the media landscape. Journalistic roles can be seen as discursive constructs that legitimize and delegitimize certain norms, ideas, and practices (Hanitzsch and Vos 2017) and are discursively negotiated in a relational structure (Carlson and Lewis 2015). Furthermore, they are the collective results of personal beliefs, ideas of societal expectations, and behavior (Mellado, Hellmueller, and Donsbach 2017). A way of viewing journalistic roles then is to distinguish between the normative and cognitive aspects of journalistic role orientations, on the one hand, and the practices and narrated dimensions of journalistic role performance on the other (Hanitzsch and Vos 2017, 9).

Viewing journalistic role performance as a site of contestation of journalistic identity allows for expanding views on journalism's normative core. Studies on role performances have identified some basic tensions in journalistic professionalism, such as passive versus active forms of journalism, and neutral versus advocating journalistic perspectives (Donsbach and Patterson 2004). Claims of a uniform journalistic identity (e.g., Weaver and Willnat 2012) have been countered with claims highlighting a more fragmented journalistic landscape (e.g., Deuze and Witschge 2018). Audience studies have pointed toward expectations of journalism that overlap with conventional assumptions of factual, non-partisan, civically oriented journalism (e.g., Karlsson and Clerwall 2019) while simultaneously underlining an increased appreciation of subjectivity and emotion (e.g., Chong 2019). The rise of social media has led to new developments in journalistic role performances (Mellado and Hermida 2021), and adaptations to social media logic have, for instance, led journalists to engage more with humorous content, both as producers and as commenters on different social platforms (Negreira-Rey, Vázquez-Herrero, and López-García 2022).

In a media landscape characterized by increasing convergence in terms of modality, genres, and discursive registers (Chadwick 2017), what constitutes journalism is thus subject to change. For example, as journalism can be seen as an omnipresent endeavor, examinations of journalistic role performances should therefore include genres other than news (Eide 2017). Following Witschge and Harbers (2018), we contend that it is equally important to find "more inclusive ways of locating and defining journalists, focusing not just on what happens in the center of the newsroom, but also in the margins and outside of the newsroom" (109).

In this light, the concept of hybridity has become an oft-cited asset in the field of political comedy and news satire research (Baym 2005) and has recently garnered growing attention in journalism studies (Hallin, Mellado, and Mancini 2021; Mast, Coesemans, and Temmerman 2017). As a result, recent explorations of alternative journalistic practices have expanded dogmatic interpretations of detached and neutral journalism to fit subjectivity (Harbers 2016), intimacy (Steensen 2017), emotion (Wahl-Jorgensen 2019), and joy (Parks 2021) as valid tools for journalistic storytelling. In this sense, journalism is growing ever more diverse, expanding its previously well-delineated professional values and ideals to various hybrid journalistic modes.

Mapping Journalistic Role Performances in News Satire

Journalism and satire are historically intertwined in the form of satirical print press formats (e.g., Lockyer 2007), political cartoons (e.g., Hampton 2014) and, since the advent of television, satirical television broadcasts (e.g., Wagg 2002). What we term Western news satire

here refers to a subgenre of satirical television shows that are overtly influenced by or created in the example of United States forerunners such as *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*. Notwithstanding that satire, as a form of political discourse, is embedded in particular sociopolitical contexts, these shows have also become blueprints for many political satire shows in other regions of the world (e.g., Ibrahim and Eltantawy 2017; Lipson, Boukes, and Khemkhem 2023), solidifying their global impact.

News satire is defined by a multifaceted relationship with journalistic performance, informed by its blend of genre conventions or “discursive integration” (Baym 2005) and the conflation of the politico-normative and the aesthetic-expressive (Baym 2010, 13). Not only has this led to an expansion of perspectives on journalism’s core norms and values to surpass epistemic ideals of objectivity and neutrality. This also entails that media genres previously associated exclusively with entertainment purposes increasingly meld with talk of and engagement with politics. As such, news satire blends humor with existing news coverage to construct its own comedic news narrative. This results in news satire taking up a role in the broader media landscape as an alternative voice on the journalistic periphery.

Through parody or comedic reinterpretation, news satire assumes a “parasitical” role to journalism (McKain 2005). Because satire draws on existing journalistic genres to make its claims, news satire thus contains a form of media critique and can facilitate media literacy among its audiences (Peters 2013). As such, it functions as “a watchdog of the journalistic watchdogs” (Boukes 2019, 6). In this sense, Peifer and Lee (2019) assert that journalism’s normative aspirations are similar to those of satire in that they both are “propelled by an impulse to elucidate; to highlight some truth” (1): News satirists share goals with investigative journalists who are concerned with exposing injustices and abuses of power. Additionally, news satirists are also found to embody similarities to cultural journalists, in that they prefer subjective narrative styles over journalistic objectivity (Chong 2019). This is especially the case in the increasingly popular instances of Western “journalistic news satire” formats (Koivukoski and Ödmark 2020), which openly acknowledge drawing on forms of investigative reporting to highlight social issues outside of the mainstream news spotlight (Davisson and Donovan 2019).

In this light, we introduce six roles relevant to empirical testing of the genre of journalistic news satire. Important to note is that these roles overlap and are not mutually exclusive. As such, multiple roles can simultaneously be identified in journalistic content, whereas others can be absent in certain journalistic subgenres. The first—the role of Reporter—is inspired by the conventionally acknowledged disseminator role, which refers to the journalist as a neutral observer and an objective conveyer of factual information (Tandoc, Hellmueller, and Vos 2013). This role assumes that a credible reporter usually does not use first-person address in their reporting, nor do they embellish text with adjectives, or show any opinion or judgment. The Reporter also attempts to lay out multiple sides of an issue. The second role—the role of Advocate—reflects the notions of journalistic intervention (Mellado 2015) and mobilization (Tandoc, Hellmueller, and Vos 2013). In contrast to the reporter, the advocate takes a stand on an issue and participates in societal deliberation by, for instance, manifesting a need for change or by making clear which side in a dispute has the better-supported position. Advocacy has recently been identified as a key aspect of certain news satire formats (e.g., Kilby 2018; Waisanen 2018), but further empirical validation is required.

A role more in line with the classic views on journalistic duties is Watchdog. In this study, the watchdog quality was defined as including the display of criticism toward an individual or institution, and/or appearing to investigate official claims (Mellado 2015; Tandoc, Hellmueller, and Vos 2013). Simultaneously, it reflects news satire's inherently critical intentions of holding power accountable (Holbert 2013). The fourth role—Civic Educator—draws from the civic dimension of journalism with some inclusion of service acts (Mellado 2015). The educator engages in citizen-oriented journalism, which manifests in education on citizen duties and rights, information on citizen activities and the impact of certain political decisions on specific communities and/or individual citizens.

The fifth role—Comedic Interlocutor—expands on recent reflections on journalistic roles which take into account dimensions of humor, expressed as the “joker” role by Mellado and Hermida (2021; 2023). By expanding beyond the realm of professional journalism in social media environments, the Comedic Interlocutor role reflects growing trends of “softening” of journalistic political communication (Otto, Glogger, and Boukes 2017), and addresses the particular context of journalistic news satire. Through emotional expression and comedic style elements such as metaphors and the rhetoric of ridicule (Mellado and Hermida 2021), satirists engage with their audiences. Using direct address enforces this audience engagement and contributes to the function of interlocutor. The Comedic Interlocutor role incorporates the knowledge that news satire has the potential to challenge dominant media frames (Lichtenstein and Koerth 2022), or function as a gateway to traditional news (Feldman and Young 2008), and is important to include to fully capture the nuance of the subgenre of journalistic news satire.

A sixth role—the Loyalist—represents journalistic tendencies to aid the government's development efforts, facilitate social cohesion, and foster a sense of national unity (Mellado 2015; Romano 2005) as associated with the journalistic genre of developmental journalism. While not all-encompassing, we argue that these six roles cover both the more traditional journalistic role performances, as well as cater to the developments of the field previously discussed.

Cases

This study investigates the journalistic role performances of three news satire shows from the United States, Sweden, and The Netherlands. The shows included in our analysis are as follows:

(1) *Last Week Tonight (LWT)*, US

As a weekly half-hour show, *LWT* first aired in 2014 on the commercial broadcaster HBO. Considered the flagship of news satire in the United States, it has won seven prime-time Emmy Awards for Outstanding Variety Talk Series. *LWT*'s team has openly referenced engaging in research and fact-checking and has been praised for its valuable investigative reporting (Edmonds 2016). As such, *LWT* has drawn widespread media attention multiple times for landing interviews with noteworthy individuals or for redirecting the mainstream media spotlight to underlit news topics.

(2) *Svenska Nyheter (SN)*, Sweden

Since 2018, *SN*—literally translatable to “Swedish News”—has aired a weekly half-hour show on the public broadcaster SVT. In it, a studio host satirizes news and current affairs in front of a live audience. Viewership reaches approximately one million combined broadcast and streaming views per episode. The show is modeled after popular news satire formats such as *LWT* and employs both journalists and comedians as scriptwriters and researchers. There have been three different hosts since the debut, all three being established stand-up comedians. In 2019, the show won a Kristallen award (comparable to the Emmy Award), in the category Best News or Current Affairs Show of the Year.

(3) *Zondag met Lubach* (ZML), The Netherlands

ZML debuted on the Dutch public broadcaster VPRO in November 2014 and has garnered popular success and critical acclaim, resulting in up to an average of two million views per episode. In 2016, the show won the prestigious 2016 Silver Nipkow Disc, where a jury of journalists and media critics praised it for its “unique and layered combination of entertainment and investigative journalism” (Nipkowschijf 2016, 2). As a form of “investigative comedy” (Nicolai, Maesele, and Boukes 2022) *ZML* openly blends the performative aspects of comedy with rigorously fact-checked deconstruction of social issues, and is described by the show’s host, Arjen Lubach, as “the fourth ring in the democratic hierarchy” (Lubach 2020, 234) supplementing the establishment in the center, political opposition surrounding it, encompassed by the press as a mediating body.

What these three shows have in common is their overt journalistic nature, rendering them less rooted in the performative aspects of absurdist sketch or stand-up comedy found in other news satire formats such as *Saturday Night Live*. Rather, they explicitly incorporate genre traits of broadcast news and opinion journalism. We argue that these three satire shows are suitable research objects for this study because they are examples of the particular subgenre of news satire that is of interest and are similar enough in format to be comparable.

The units of analysis within the shows are satirical segments, where a segment is defined as a coherent satirical address of a topic proceeding for a minimum of three minutes. The duration minimum excludes less significant content such as monologue jokes, news video collages, other forms of unsubstantial commentary or occasional stand-alone in-studio acts.

Method

In order to measure news satire’s journalistic role performances, a coding instrument was constructed based on a literature review. This meant employing journalistic role performance indicators (Mellado 2015; Mellado and Van Dalen 2014) with input from journalistic role enactment items (Tandoc, Hellmueller, and Vos 2013) as well as previous studies on journalistic roles in news satire (Ödmark and Harvard 2021; Waisanen 2018). The roles were constructed on the basis of two criteria. First, to aptly capture the potential journalistic tendencies present in news satire, they should correspond to previous studies on traditional journalistic role performances. Second, to equally incorporate the specificity of news satire as a comedic genre, roles were adapted to include aspects related to the humorous delivery of news satire. In some cases, this meant no adjustment to existing

journalistic roles at all—e.g., the role indicators for the Loyalist role are examples of indicators transferred from the “Loyal” role (Mellado 2015) nearly verbatim—whereas in other instances, existing roles have been modified to aptly capture our subject matter—e.g., existing “infotainment” (Mellado 2015) and “joker” roles (Mellado and Hermida 2021) have been modified to reflect the central role of comedic storytelling in our material.

To assess how news satire performs the previously mentioned secondary Watchdog role of media criticism, we added a performance indicator that assesses levels of interrogation of news media and journalistic professionalism. We argue that the chosen role indicators represent the most relevant role performance aspects for an initial mapping of this type. Appendix A offers an overview of our coding instrument and the individual items that constitute each role.

A test coding of approximately ten percent of the material was performed, after which the coding instrument was revised, and the coding instructions were clarified. Two coders conducted the coding, with one coder responsible for material from *ZML* and the other for *SN* and *LWT*. The coding process was collaborative and included discussions on language and/or cultural differences. Where there were indicators relating to cultural specificity (e.g., how to measure “direct address” in the three different languages), definitions were made after deliberations between the coders. An intercoder reliability test found that all variables scored a Krippendorff’s alpha above the recommended 0.80, except two: V8 (making clear which side has the better-supported position), and V10 (manifest the need for change) which scored 0.78. Because both variables scored above the generally regarded minimum result of 0.67 (Riffe, Lacy, and Fico 2014), they are included in the results, but the scores can be considered during the reading of the findings. Krippendorff’s alpha coefficients for all variables are included in Appendix A.

The material included in the study was gathered from the latest two seasons of each show, which for *LWT* and *SN* meant segments published in the period of July 2022–April 2023, and for *ZML*, segments published October 2020–March 2021. In total, 150 segments were analyzed, with 50 from each program. A Pearson chi-square test of independence was calculated for each variable to ensure statistical significance, and only significant differences between countries are discussed in the results. A complete notation of which variables showed statistically significant differences between countries (i.e., $p < 0.05$), and which did not, can be found in the coding instrument (Appendix A). Although we acknowledge the moderate size of our corpus, we argue that the dataset can still provide sufficient material for this type of initial mapping of role performances. Further studies could expand on our work and preferably explore non-Western materials as well.

The methodology should be understood as a blend of quantitative and qualitative analysis. The quantitative data were complemented with qualitative textual interpretation of the segments (Kohlbacher 2006). The qualitative reading proceeded from the coding instrument but reviewed *how* and *in what ways* the role indicators were performed (or not performed) in the material. The qualitative interpretations have informed the analysis of the quantitative data and provided the results sections with illustrative examples to enrich the understanding of journalistic role performances in news satire. The genre of news satire has been observed to adhere to a “postmodern style” (Baym 2010) where visual and audial elements such as graphics, facial expressions, speech emphasis, and hand gestures add to the performative impact of their meaning. Hence, the aesthetic

experience of news satire enacts political work, and in this sense can serve a journalistic function as well, or is tied to specific opinionated journalistic roles (Nieuwenhuis and Zijp 2022). In this sense, we employ a multimodal analysis that is not limited to the textual dimensions of the shows' scripts but also includes the visual and stylistic elements.

Reporter

The results for the Reporter role are distinct (see Figure 1): Across all cases and segments, there were three Reporter role indicators that were hardly ever performed. As such, the news satirists seldomly presented segments devoid of opinion or judgment, tended to use adjectives routinely, and frequently addressed the audience in first person, as illustrated by the following quote, taken from the *LWT* critique of Qatar hosting the World Cup:

It's not the players that are responsible for this mess, it's FIFA. They put the World Cup in Qatar, and everything that has happened since then has been a complete disgrace. And here's the thing, I'm not saying you shouldn't watch this World Cup or be excited about it, as tough as this is to admit, I will be watching! (...) But let's try and make sure a line is drawn here. (*LWT*, November 20, 2022)

These results correspond to studies showing how satirists' news framing is more personal than that of traditional journalists (Ödmark 2018). However, there was one Reporter role indicator that was highly present in the material: News satirists do often attempt to lay out multiple sides of the issues they report. In doing so, they report factual information on issues and the standpoints of different political actors on these issues. The satirists are also placing topics on the news agenda, or raising awareness of topics that are already there. Here, our results are in tandem with interview studies on role conceptions and perceptions, where the satirists embrace some aspects of the Reporter role, such as being factual and topical (Koivukoski and Ödmark 2020) and informing the audience on news

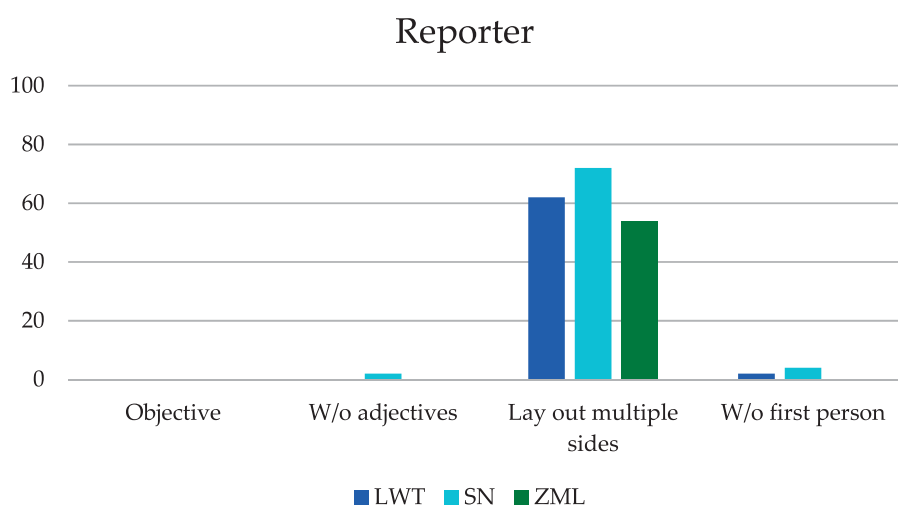


Figure 1. Reporter role performance in journalistic news satire. The bars show the presence of role indicators for each satirical program in percentage.

topics on the mainstream agenda—or illuminating issues the satirist thinks *should* be on the news agenda (Ödmark and Harvard 2021). The longer segments tend to not follow the mainstream news agenda as much as the shorter segments but serve as a possibility for the satirists to engage in agenda-setting and tackle societal issues of their own choosing.

The news satirists alternate between conveying factual information and making humorous comments in a matter that makes the distinctions between the two fairly clear to an audience. As such, they manage to dialogically play out multiple perspectives against each other by juxtaposing different discursive registers. In doing so, news satire segments have the potential to contribute to media pluralism by abandoning the quest for coherence and consensus in representing social issues, associated with modernist interpretations of journalism (Koljonen 2013). By scoring high on the variable of laying out multiple sides of issues yet scoring low on other traits of the Reporter role, news satire sidesteps conventional “news style” journalism (Broersma 2010) and adheres to a more “reflective style” of journalism (Harbers 2016), which centralizes the overt subjectivity of the host while all the same adhering to facts.

Advocate

In contrast to the Reporter role, Figure 2 shows how the Advocate role is commonly performed in journalistic news satire. This role consists of arguing more in favor of one side in an issue than the other, explaining possible causes, meanings, and effects of political decisions, manifesting the need for change, and sometimes directly encouraging the audience to participate in civic activities. The longer segments in particular show a uniform trend of advocacy, although they often fulfill the Reporter indicator of laying out multiple sides of an issue. Furthermore, the results showed an overlap with the Civic Educator role, indicating that advocacy coincided with, for example, education on citizen duties and rights and providing political background information. As an illustration, in one *ZML* segment titled “Article 23”, Lubach discusses the legal freedoms

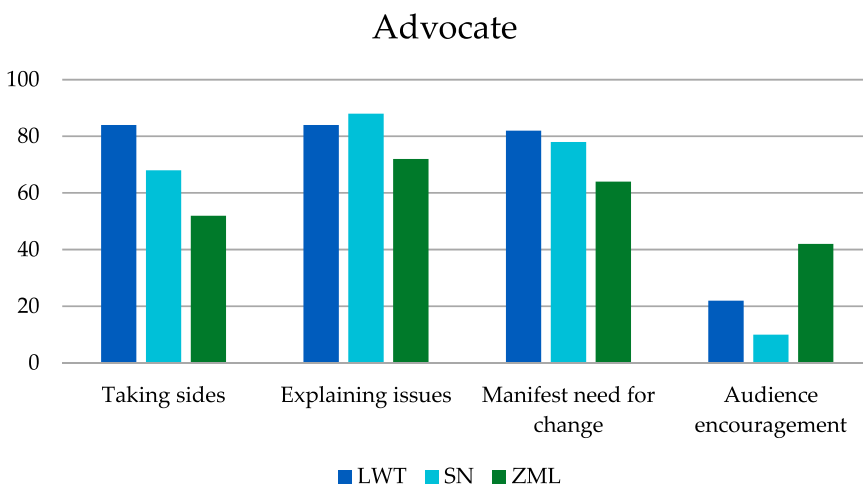


Figure 2. Advocate role performance in journalistic news satire. The bars show the presence of role indicators for each satirical program in percentage.

schools have to decide their own curricula, which can lead to inadequate standards for educational norms. The segment centers on a specific case in which a reformist school asked parents to sign a declaration denouncing homosexuality as “morally unacceptable.” The segment continues with Lubach discussing the tensions between freedom of education on the one hand and the laws against discrimination on the other hand. Following a detailed description of both perspectives, Lubach argues that “[S]chools should be a place where students are exposed to different perspectives of thought. At home you listen to your parents, in school, you engage with the world.”

Previous studies on the satirist’s own role conceptions have found differing perspectives on their roles as advocates. Some satirists still stress that they are independent commentators on public debate rather than performing any kind of interventionist role (Lichtenstein, Nitsch, and Wagner 2021; Ödmark and Harvard 2021), while others have evolved over time into being more comfortable with advocacy claims (Nicolai, Maesele, and Boukes 2022). As an example, when the current affairs show *The Problem with Jon Stewart* was launched in the United States in 2021, it was promoted by saying it would explore the “advocacy work” of the host, award-winning satirist Jon Stewart (Koblin 2020).

One noteworthy deviation between the shows is the high level of audience engagement in *ZML* compared with *LWT* and *SN*. We contend that this can in part be explained by a difference in addressed news topics. A large part of the *ZML* segments aired during the COVID-19 pandemic. It has been noted before that as the COVID-19 pandemic persisted, news satirists found themselves urgently redefining their roles in the absence of live audiences and under the pressure of monotonous pandemic-centric news. Forced to produce content from their homes, and responding to the severity of the developing pandemic, satirical talk shows such as *The Late Show* began to urge audiences to adhere to health and safety regulations (Zekavat 2021), with similar strategies found in *ZML*’s pandemic coverage (Nicolai and Maesele 2023).

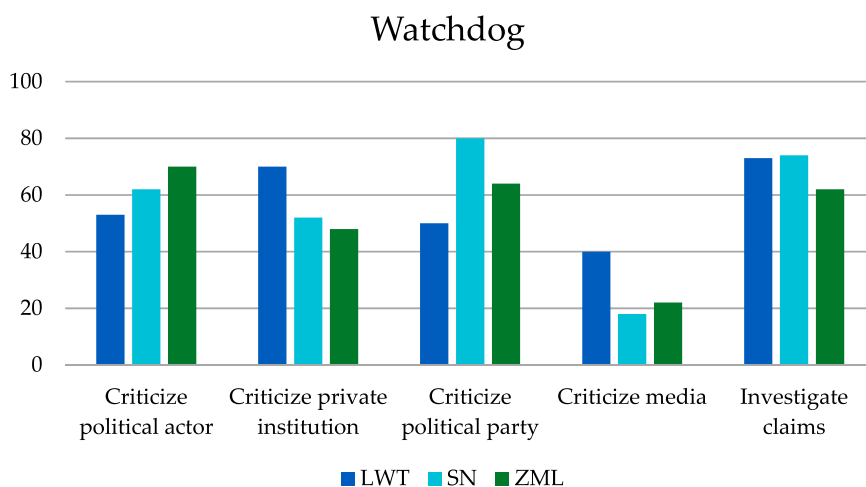


Figure 3. Watchdog role performance in journalistic news satire. The bars show the presence of role indicators for each satirical program in percentage.

Watchdog

The results of the Watchdog role performances are shown in Figure 3. A majority of the material displays critique toward at least two of the target categories. Although the critique on media is the lowest, it is present to a degree—especially in *LWT*—targeted predominantly at media institutes across the partisan aisle, such as *Fox News*. Arguably, this can be in part explained by the heightened polarization of the United States’ media landscape compared to the less politically segregated media landscapes of Sweden and the Netherlands. Concerning the other role indicators, the material displays conventional journalistic watchdog qualities, and routinely investigates official claims. An example can be seen in a segment on mental health care from *LWT*:

The government has, to this point, done shockingly little when it comes to enforcing parity laws. Multiple federal and state agencies have responsibilities for this [shows agency logos in graphics], but the truth is, they rarely penalize plans. The Labor Department, which oversees most workplace plans, closed just 74 investigations last year finding violations in only 12. As for state-level enforcement, a study found that they’ve levied fines just 13 times since 2017, which is absolutely pathetic. (*LWT*, July 31, 2022)

The differences in government models and public/private institutions between the countries could possibly influence the choices of targets of critique, and while finding slight variations in the variables “criticizing political actor”, “criticizing private institution” and “criticizing political party”, the only statistically significant result was connected to the high score of critique against a political party in *SN*. This finding is likely related to the general elections being held in Sweden within the period of our analysis, resulting in a large focus on election coverage in their segments.

Civic Educator

Civic Educator traits were relatively high in all shows (see Figure 4). In the case of *ZML*, we notice a higher score on the variable where audiences are given practical tips to manage

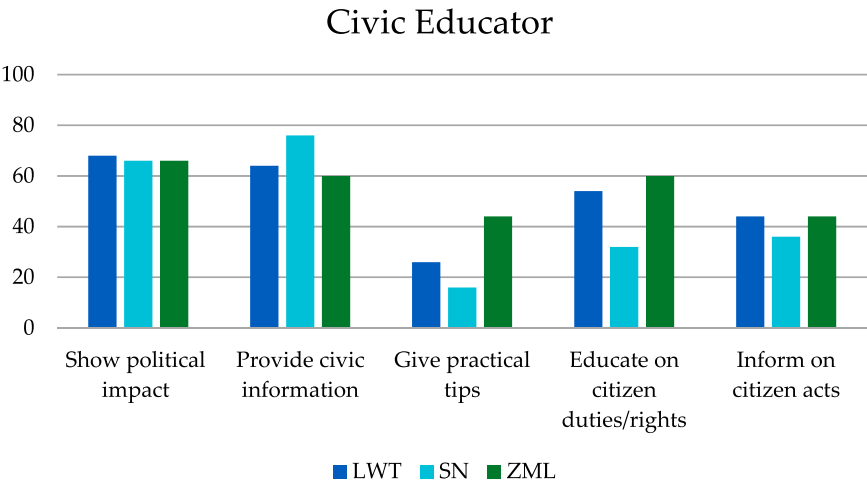


Figure 4. Civic Educator role performance in journalistic news satire. The bars show the presence of role indicators for each satirical program in percentage.

problems they might face. Similar to earlier findings for the Advocate role, this deviation can in part be explained in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. During the pandemic, ZML expanded its conventional critical-satirical role to include public dissemination of governmental pandemic measures (Nicolai and Maesele 2023). The higher instances of practical advice thus coincided with the explanation of certain pandemic measures or adjusted voting measures in the context of physical distancing.

There is a high presence of mentioning the impact of certain political decisions on specific communities and/or individual citizens, as well as providing the audience with background information helpful for making political decisions. These aspects can be illustrated with the following example: Leading up to the Swedish general elections, SN featured polling results that showed a lack of understanding of the election system among voters, in particular regarding the election to the regional assembly. The show dedicated a main segment to providing information on the responsibilities of the different assemblies and encouraged people to use the “blue ballot”, meaning the ballot paper for the regional assembly election:

Guys, here's what we'll do, here's some homework for you. First, find out who runs your region. Then, you figure out that they are no good, and then you vote them out. If everyone watching this teaches ten people what the blue ballot is for, I honestly believe we have the chance to actually raise some fucking awareness. (SN, August 26, 2022)

The segment concluded with an appeal to “fix the healthcare system once and for all, together.” Since the Swedish regions are run by different political parties, the appeal can be considered non-partisan and educational.

Comedic Interlocutor

As expected, the Comedic Interlocutor role is highly represented in our material (see Figure 5). The use of comedic metaphors and/or analogies allows satirists to deconstruct complex topics for their audiences. Humor as comic relief allows them to maintain

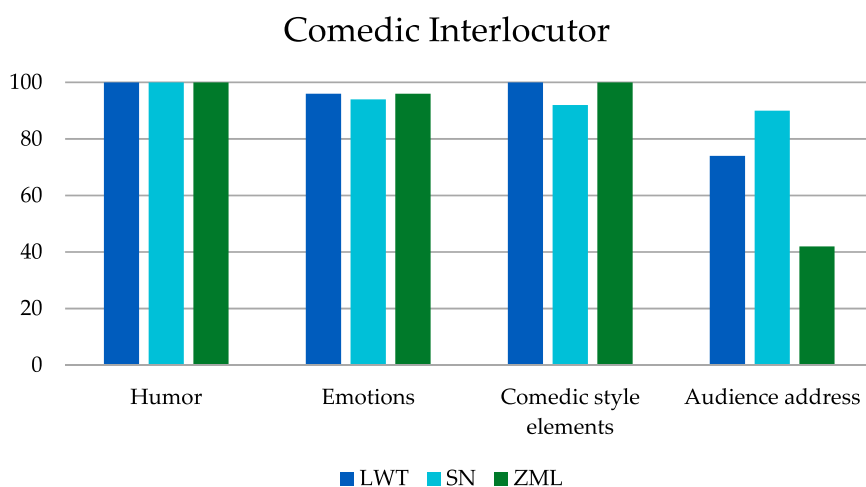


Figure 5. Comedic Interlocutor role performance in journalistic news satire. The bars show the presence of role indicators for each satirical program in percentage.

audiences' attention through long and information-heavy segments. While traditional news journalists might be concerned about how using humor could influence their credibility (Mellado and Hermida 2023), satirists have more freedom in this regard because of differing audience expectations vis-à-vis their intentions. Furthermore, satirists' emotions and personal audience address allow them to function as "citizen-surrogates" (Jones 2010). Comedy in this case should not be seen as a pejorative obstacle to "real" journalism, but as an expansion of journalistic role performances more in tune with contemporary interpretations of *journalisms* in the plural (Harrington 2012), tying in with, for example, recently explored emotional (Wahl-Jorgensen 2019) or interpretative turns in journalism (Cushion 2015).

When *SN* reported on a newly implemented tax on plastic bags, it sounded as follows:

A report from 2019 shows that plastic bags only account for one percent of trash on Swedish beaches. The other 99 percent are cigarette butts, ice cream wrappers and Germans. (...) 90 percent of the plastics in the oceans get there via only ten rivers located in Asia and Africa, I don't know their names for purely racist reasons. So [the tax is] completely disconnected from the problem it was intended to resolve. Naturally, everyone is pissed off. (*SN*, Jan 27, 2023)

The quote illustrates the use of humor, emotion, and comedic style elements, for example, the metaphorical use of "Germans" as trash. This quote also illustrates the mode of alternation between factual information and jokes mentioned previously.

For *ZML*, we find lower scores for the variable of direct audience address. We explain this through *ZML*'s distinct formatting: In contrast with *SN* and *LWT*, *ZML*'s shorter segments are more akin to news parody segments such as *Saturday Night Live*'s "Weekend Update" or *The Late Show*'s "Meanwhile", which are less urgent than deconstructions in longer segments found in all three shows. As such, these shorter segments adhere more to a news style of journalism (Broersma 2010) in which the host comedically relates events without addressing audiences.

Loyalist

On average, the Loyalist role was the least performed of all six roles in our material (see Figure 6). We explain this through news satire's inherent tendency to target those in power, thus always being, at least in some sense, a discourse of dissent (Tinic 2009). Our findings indicate that *ZML* deviates from this trend with relatively higher scores for praising policies, showing country triumphs and making patriotic statements. Again however, these findings can be understood in light of the ongoing pandemic context, which resulted in high coverage of vaccination policies and international comparisons of implementations of pandemic measures. With the Netherlands being one of the fore-runners in vaccination policy due to their development of the Janssens & Janssens vaccine, positive coverage of Dutch vaccination policies set apart *ZML* from *SN* and *LWT* in our analysis, as exemplified by the quote below.

Europe is not progressing as fast as Israel [in vaccination policies] but we are progressing much faster than, for example, Nigeria, Pakistan, Zimbabwe, or almost any other country in the world! This is us here [on this graph]. Not to compare ourselves to the poorest kids in class, but we're just months away from being where Israel is now: Enjoying some drinks in a nation divided to the core. So things are going pretty well. We're on track and the harbor is in sight. (*ZML*, March 28, 2021)

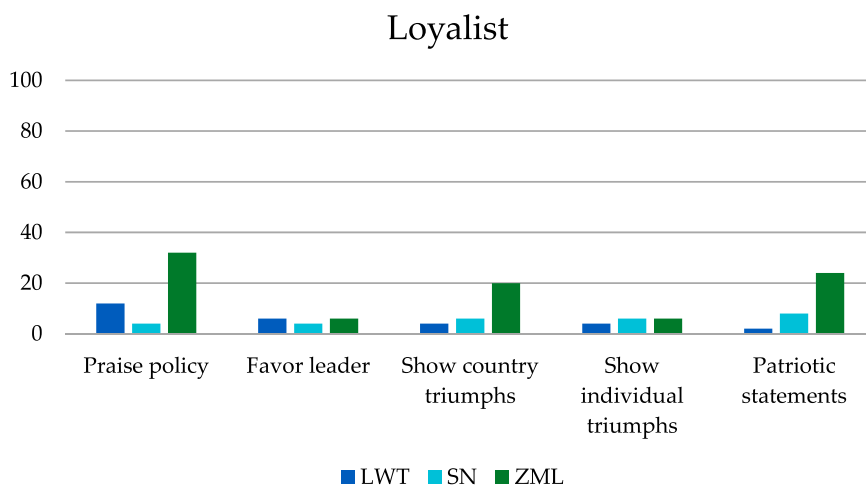


Figure 6. Loyalist role performance in journalistic news satire. The bars show the presence of role indicators for each satirical program in percentage.

In sum, the high scores for their role as watchdogs makes *LWT*, *SN*, and *ZML* show little intention to aid governmental development efforts or foster a sense of national unity (Mellado 2015; Romano 2005) as it is in these spheres that news satire locates dimensions of power that elicit critical interrogation (e.g., Anderson and Kincaid 2013; Wild 2019).

Conclusions and Discussion

This study maps the journalistic role performances in three Western “journalistic news satire” formats (Koivukoski and Ödmark 2020). To this end, we developed and measured six distinct roles that reflect conventional ideal-type journalistic norms and values (Mellado 2015; Mellado and Van Dalen 2014; Tandoc, Hellmueller, and Vos 2013), while also encompassing aspects connected to the maturation of news satire as a journalistic genre.

Our results reveal that all six roles are present in each show, with some more pronounced than others (see Figure 7). As expected, the Comedic Interlocutor role was most prominent, underlining how news satire hinges on the production of highly subjective and emotional comedic news narratives. This reflects earlier claims that the genre creates an “innovative experience of involvement for [their] audience, employing active forms of emotionality (...) as opposed to passive emotional postures more typically associated with journalism” (Peters 2013, 172). Lower values for the Reporter role indeed reflected this incompatibility with neutral and detached “news style” journalism (Broersma 2010). Nonetheless, the emphasis on humor, comedy, and emotion coincided with high values for Advocate, Watchdog and Civic Educator roles in more than half of all segments. An overlap was also found between the Advocate and Civic Educator roles for all shows, indicating that advocacy elements were commonly accompanied by education on civic issues.

Despite the fact that these findings call for further finetuning and investigation, what they show is that these examples of journalistic news satire represent a distinct take on

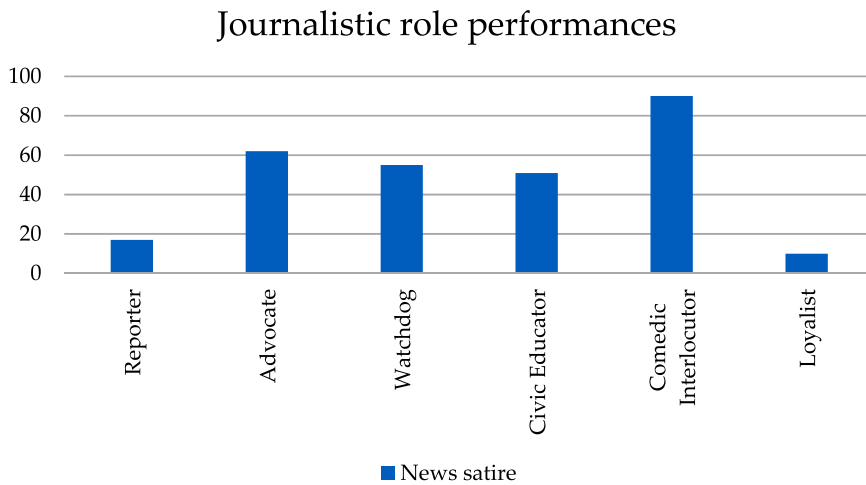


Figure 7. Journalistic role performances in news satire. The bars show the average presence of role indicators for each role in news satire from Sweden, the Netherlands, and the US (in percentage). $n = 150$.

journalistic conventions, blending fact with opinion, and neutral coverage with partisan meaning making. These findings empirically strengthen the claim that so-called “infotainment” genres are not a deterioration of journalistic quality, but that they play an effective role in “inform[ing] citizens about politics and eventually engaging them democratically” (Boukes 2019, 2). The results point towards distinct characteristics associated with the specific subgenre of advocacy satire (Kilby 2018; Waisanen 2018), which shares similar partisan rhetoric and practices with advocacy journalism aimed at developing solutions and motivating audiences. Such a journalism explicitly “takes a point of view” (Thomas 2018, 393) and falls along a continuum ranging from subtle to overt displays of advocacy. The Civic Educator role shows how journalistic news satire also actively informs audiences on political *and* civic issues in a way that transcends ridicule and the formulation of social critique, which is often viewed as self-evident in satire. Nonetheless, the largely absent Loyalist role arguments in favor of news satire’s role as inherently progressive or anti-establishment, coinciding with, for example, Wild’s (2019) description of *LWT* as a form of neoliberal critique.

Looking closer at the three news satire shows represented in our material, all three shows produced similar results with minor exceptions. Therefore, we conclude that Western news satirists display a fairly united execution of journalistic role performances. Some roles were scarcely enacted by all three shows uniformly (e.g., Loyalist), while others yielded high scores for some indicators and lower scores for others (e.g., Civic Educator). Some of these differences displayed could be attributed to socio-political contexts within the period or our analysis, e.g., the pandemic (*ZML*) and general elections (*SN*), which lended the three satire shows to covering different news topics with different properties. In addition, other findings could be related to matters such as the heightened polarization of media and debate in the United States. As such, the roles presented are not exhaustive for satire’s journalistic qualities: Conventional journalism can refrain from advocacy or watchdog reporting while still being considered journalism all the same. On the one hand, then, our findings reflect broader discussions on normative interpretations of

ideal-type journalism (e.g., Deuze and Witschge 2018). On the other hand, they pertain to differences between journalism and the “journalistic” with the former highlighting discussions of professional journalism’s boundaries (Carlson and Lewis 2015) and the latter viewing journalism in the plural, facilitating the existence of a variety of different journalistic modes combining, for example, conventional journalistic roles with openly subjective comedy.

Because of the relatively small sample size, this study offers a basis for further studies to expand insights on role performance in news satire. As the genre continues to proliferate internationally (Brugman et al. 2021; Lipson, Boukes, and Khemkhem 2023), scholarship can focus on cases beyond an exclusively Western scope, where satirical formats equally inform political discourse (e.g., Punathambekar 2015) or reflect broader systemic conditions for press freedom (e.g., Echeverría and Rodelo 2021). Furthermore, a global perspective including institutional-level factors such as media organizational aspects or journalistic culture can expand our focus on content and facilitate insight into broader performance-conception gaps (Mellado et al. 2020) present in news satire’s journalistic practice.

In essence, these findings reiterate the need to look beyond consensual presentations of journalism’s occupational professionalism (Deuze and Witschge 2018). All three shows can be seen as productive sites for the discursive negotiation of journalistic roles and identities (Hanitzsch and Vos 2017). Our study shows that the maturation of news satire into different forms of more overtly journalistic comedy still embodies what Baym (2010) called “the neo-modern watchdogs of late-night comedy” (173) which “[harness] the power of entertainment in pursuit of high-modern ideals of rational-critical inquiry” (175). However, their explicit aims to advocate social issues and inform audiences of civic duties transcend conventional satirical-critical roles. News satire can be understood in the context of increasing personalization of public discourse (Van Zoonen 2012) and “a world where experience and expertise become synonymous, fact and opinion are muddled” (Peters 2013, 172). Similar to journalistic actors within the bounds of professional journalism, news satire then functions as an “amplifier of the conversation society has with itself” (Deuze 2008, 848). Finally, the question of whether news satire *is* journalism has long occupied satirists, media, and researchers. This study formulated the answer that news satire does indeed *do* journalism, and in doing so, expands our conception of what journalism can be.

Disclosure Statement

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