The Politics that Satire Makes

It is widely thought satire, and in particular satire distributed through mass and social media, is a politically powerful tool. This paper seeks to deflate this idea. Mass distributed satire, it will be shown, should not be expected to change many minds. This has to do with reasons related to both the nature of satire and the nature of trust.

I make my argument in two sections. First, I offer an account of humour and satire that foregrounds social dynamics. Humour is often used to negotiate group dynamics and group boundaries. In this sense, humour may be thought of as “affiliative” or “disaffiliative,” based on the attitude shown towards the humour’s target. Satire, especially mass media satire, is often of the outgroup-targeted, disaffiliative variety. This means that the satiric target is identified as someone from outside the group of satirist and audience, and the humour of the satire underlines that the target ought to be rejected from the group. I argue that this means that satire lends itself to a politics of “us and them,” where who gets politically included or excluded is of the highest importance.

In the second section, I apply an analysis of trust to my argument from the first section. If satire creates a politics of “us and them,” then it is critical that the satirist be able to gain the trust of the audience that they are part of the same “us.” Similarly, if the target of a satiric attack does not already trust the satirist, then there is little reason for them to take the criticism of the satirist’s attack seriously. Satire distributed through social media tends to be distributed to people through channels that they already trust. This heightens the dynamics identified by the trust analysis: satiric criticism is accepted by those who already trust the satirist, and ignored or rejected by people who do not already trust the satirist. If satire is mostly engaged by people who already agree with the point of the satire, then it should not be expected to be politically powerful.

Scope

Before we continue, there are three notes about the scope of this talk. This is just to flag up what I’ve chosen to focus on, and what that focus excludes.

I will be talking about mass distributed and often industrially produced satire. This does not account for all satire. The exact argument I give will not directly cover, e.g., cartoons in scene zines, though I believe my approach is good for discussing those too.

When I talk about the political effects of satire, I mean the direct effect a show has on its viewers. This is not exhaustive of all effects a work can have. For example, a 2004 study by Dannagal Young found that while *SNL* coverage of the 2000 US election did not have much direct impact on its viewers political opinions, it did affect how conventional news sources covered the election, and that conventional coverage did have an impact. I leave indirect effects such as that to the side.

Lastly, I am using a change in political belief as my instance of political impact. This leaves to the side other questions about potential political impact like activation, though in the case of mass media satire I don’t think I’m missing much.

Us and Them

Satire uses humour to criticize. In sociological terms, humour marks a target as “laughable,” which is to say it is apt to be laughed at. Even when humour is not the sort that actually engenders laughter — for example the subtle wit one may find it a novel — it nevertheless marks the target as the sort of thing it is correct to laugh at. If one were to laugh, one would not be having an inapt response. Laughter may be considered to be either “affiliative” or “disaffiliative.” In lay terms, this is the difference of “laughing with” and “laughing at.” For the purposes of this paper I am only interested in the sort of satire that deals in disaffiliative humour, although I believe that my argument can be easily used to make sense of affiliative humour.

Satire that makes use of disaffiliative humour is often going to be what is referred to as “Juvenalian” satire. This satire is defined by being more aggressive and mean-spirited, in contrast to what may be considered as the more light-hearted and forgiving Horatian satire. This is satire that casts its target’s vices, and often the target itself, as something that is the enemy, or the other, or otherwise someone or something to be opposed. Disaffiliative satire creates an opposition between the audience and the target. What the satirist identifies in the target is a reason for the audience to reject the target.

I want to now turn to a specific sort of satire: that distributed through mass media. By mass media I have in mind the network of media institutions including print, television, and film. Within this group I will focus on mock news shows distributed over network television, since that has been the subject of the preponderance of research, although I believe that most of my argumentation applies broadly.

By mock news shows I mean shows in the vein of The Daily Show or the Colbert Report. They may be largely non-fictional and quasi-serious, like Last Week Tonight with John Oliver, or wholesale fictions like The Opposition.

Michael Mulkay presents an analysis of mass media humour that I will argue suggests that mock news should be expected to be Juvenalian satire, which is to say that mock news trades in disaffiliative humour. The main goal of mass media humour, writes Mulkay, is to attract and retain viewers. In the case of network television, this is a week-over-week problem, where showrunners need to create enough novelty to bring viewers back, while not creating something so different that viewers will lose what brought them to the show in the first place. Furthermore, this all takes place in an industrial setting where a new show needs to be produced each week, meaning that writers or producers do not have much time to work with.

Mulkay, writing about sitcom-style satire (specifically Yes, Minister), writes that the effect of a short turnaround while needing to maintain familiarity “rends social situations static.” This is to say that for all the social criticism a satire may levy, since the show must go on, not too much may change. Importantly, the dynamics that define the show must remain unchanged.

This brings me to mock news programs. By focusing on current events these shows have a steady source of novelty, but nevertheless face similar constraints. They have an audience that they must retain, sponsors and patrons that they must not alienate, and have to create a show that gives them enough of a structure that they can do this week over week.

The requirement for the show to attract and keep an audience is a strong pressure to create a show that affirms the audience. In mocking the news of the week, the show must affirm the audience. This means that the satiric targets will be treated in ways that affirm the audience — targets that are aligned with the audience will be treated with affiliative humour, and targets that are aligned against the audience will be treated with disaffiliative humour. In the case of disaffiliative humour, the satirist is aligning themselves with the audience, and against the target. By identifying the target *as a target* for disaffiliative humour, the satirist is identifying the target as not belonging to the in-group of the audience.

Altogether, the demands of mass media require that satiric shows, to succeed within the mass media setting, cultivate and maintain an audience. These shows will pick targets for their satires. In the case of satire that works through disaffiliative humour, this will involve marking the target as outside of the audience’s group. In the context of political satire, this will tend to mean marking the target as outside of the audience’s group for social or political reasons.

The requirement of creating and maintaining an audience has two closely related effects on mass media satire. The first is that it creates a strong pressure to create a show that just preaches to the converted, which is to say that the regular audience already accepts the group dynamics presented by the show, which in turn limits the possibility of the show changing people’s minds. The second is that if viewers accept the group dynamics that the show presents, but do not accept the morality or judgements of the satirist, then the satire will also only solidify those group identities. A sort of obverse cousin of preaching to the converted.

The first point, about preaching to the converted, is important because it speaks to what we ought to expect from satire. While I do not want to commit so far as to say that there is no value to be gained from a political entertainment show aimed at an already-established and unchanging ingroup, the fact that mass media satire is aimed at maintaining an already-existing ingroup of viewers limits its ability to persuade. Its audience, in other words, are the audience because they do not need to be persuaded. If mass media satire should not be expected to change the minds of the people watching it regularly, it should not be expected to change very minds at all.

The second point concerns a subgroup of potential audience members who are not part of the show’s targeted audience. These potential audience members accept the group delineation presented by the satirist, but rather than identifying with the group of the target audience, they identify with the group of the satiric target (if they are not the satiric target outright). Recall that satire works through humour, and that the focus of this paper is disaffiliative humour. The satiric target, by being marked as the satiric target, is rejected from the group.

This sort of power exercise, of targeting someone or something for ostracization from a group, only has power insomuch as the target either wants to be part of the group or cares about meeting the group’s standards. However, there are any number of cases where the satiric target has no reason to care about the ingroup standards, and no desire to adhere to them.

Furthering the Point: Trust and Humour

So far I’ve framed humour in a very social way — foregrounding social groups and social group membership — so it makes sense to transition to talking about social media. The basic point I want to make here is that if ingroup-outgroup dynamics so important to humour, then part of what the satirist has to do is convince the potential audience that they are part of the apt ingroup. This is where trust comes in: the satirist has to be trusted as “one of the group.”

Mass media figures presented as personalities with social locations, and these identifiers may indicate group membership. Stewart and Colbert are not just hosts, but conform to an image of respectability, are reasonably well to do, urban, coastal, and so on. Other shows push this further: Full Frontal with Samantha Bee foregrounds that Bee is a woman, and Larry Wilmore’s blackness was important to The Nightly Show.

Mass media as limiting on possible social identities. Mass palatability. Filtering structures. We can infer that the hosts are not threatening to advertisers or executives.

Social media as more free form. They’re different because in social media, while architectured, you’re generally not interacting with employees/actors/people under direct control.

Social media personalities — contact through humour. Instead of through the form of a TV show, social media allows for incidental contact with isolated pieces of humour. Just a joke come across on a twitter timeline, or sent to you by a friend. This means that humour is more prominent in social media than it is in mass media satire. The television show is not just a show but specifically a satirical one. The social media community is “just” one of humour.

Humour communities come with their own insularity. Certain members become humour authorities who are either looked at as the most reliably funny, or deem what is and is not funny. A set of humour references develop, either through joke forms or joke content. The effect of this is that humour comes to be group-identifying. To be in the group is to share the humour, and to share the humour you have to be in the group. Accordingly, within social media, the satirist still has to hold the trust of the audience-community that they are a part of the group and not just someone aping its imagery practices.

If the community is formed on humour, humour deals in boundaries between us and them, and the satirist has to hold the trust of the community, then one of the things that the satirist has to do is show that they recognize the existing community boundaries. They have to show they know the “us” and the “them.” This effectively keeps satire in line, working within the references and prejudices of the group. If some piece of political humour does not keep to the group’s divisions, then that piece of humour would be rejected. It would be taken as a sign that the satirist is not part of the “us,” and so may be safely ignored.

Similarly, the satire that is accepted will be that which reaffirms the social media group’s boundaries. This was the outcome of the research into the Internet Research Agency (the ‘russian trolls’). As much time as they spent posting image macros to facebook, their work was only ever engaged by a small number of people who were already politically committed. The only people engaging with what they did were people who did not have to have their minds changed. They were already true believers.

Conclusion:

Not much for belief BUT, especially with social media, points towards relevance of social dynamics.

Other sorts of political impact. Ideologues without ideology.

Satire shaping the nature and boundaries of the group.

The other kind of radicalization: stable beliefs but extreme actions.