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# Content Analysis in the Research Field of Satire

Dennis Lichtenstein und Cordula Nitsch

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## 1 Introduction

Satire is a communication style that is typically associated with aggression, judgement, mockery, play, laughter, and references to societal norms (Behrmann 2002; Brummack 1971; Day 2011; Simpson 2003; Test 1991). It provides social commentary and criticism, attacks power structures, and can add to controversial societal debates. Satirists are often perceived as credible sources and can serve as opinion leaders for the audience (Crittenden et al. 2011). Without a doubt, satire is an integral part of the communicative structures of today's political systems (Dörner and Porzelt 2016).

Even though satire is a cross-media phenomenon, research activities thereon concentrate on television, where satirical shows have become increasingly popular during the last decade. Studies stem from numerous scientific disciplines such as communication science, political science, sociology, cultural studies, and social psychology. In communication science, satire and humor are approached by different subfields, for example, health communication (Aust, von Hirschhausen and Fischer 2018; Schwarz and Reifegerste 2019), science communication (Bore and Reid 2014;

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Feldman et al. 2011; Pinto and Riesch 2017), and studies on social protest (Bore et al. 2017; Graefer et al. 2019). Most studies, however, relate to political communication and journalism studies. By building on considerations on infotainment that deal with a softening of news, these studies usually take a normative perspective and are interested in whether satire helps or hurts democracy (Otto et al. 2017). As a specific type of infotainment, satire is associated with a lack of quality and substance and is often expected to contribute to political cynicism (e.g., Brants 1998; Hart and Hartelius 2007; Prior 2007). More recent works, however, emphasize that infotainment formats present news in an understandable and attractive way and can substantially contribute to public opinion formation (Baum 2003; Holbert 2013; Wessler 2018). Some authors regard satirical TV-shows as a (quasi-)journalistic media format that provides information and orientation, thus fulfilling normative functions of the public sphere (e.g., Baym 2005; McClennen and Maisel 2014).

Satire as a research area comprises effects studies, communicator studies and content analyses. Effects studies account for the main share and concentrate on the impact of satirical shows on learning and attitudes as well as on the elaboration of satirical messages (e.g., Becker and Bode 2018; Boukes et al. 2015; LaMarre and Grill 2019; Nabi et al. 2007; for an overview see Becker 2013). Approaches that study the communicator's side are relatively rare. However, qualitative interviews with satirists (Farjami 2017; Handelman 1984; Koivukoski and Ödmark 2020; Lichtenstein et al. 2021) and quantitative surveys (Knieper 2002; Riffe et al. 1985, 1987) give interesting insights into motivations and role concepts of this profession. Content analyses, which are usually interested in the depiction of topics and (political) actors, have significantly increased over the last years.

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## 2 Common Research Designs

The vast majority of content analyses on satire concentrates on satirical TV-shows. Only few studies examine podcasts (Ödmark 2018) or other online outlets (Malmqvist 2015; Schwarzenegger and Wagner 2018; Tang and Bhattacharya 2011; Yang and Jiang 2015). Occasionally, satirical shows are compared to the coverage of news media outlets (Fox et al. 2007; Lichtenstein and Koerth 2020; Ödmark 2018; Nitsch and Lichtenstein 2019; Young 2013). Combinations of content analyses and surveys, focus group discussions, interviews or experimental designs (Bore and Reid 2014; Matthes and Rauchfleisch 2013; Morris 2009; Young 2004, 2006, 2013) are relatively rare.

The lion's share of studies focuses on the U.S. where the format of late-night comedy goes back to the launch of *Tonight!* in 1954. Recent research on American shows concentrates on *The Late Show*, *The Tonight Show*, *The Colbert Report* and *The Daily Show*. Only a few content analyses address European satirical outlets, e.g., Germany (Emde and Scherer 2016; Lichtenstein and Nitsch 2018; Nitsch and Lichtenstein, 2013), Switzerland (Matthes & Rauchfleisch 2013) and Sweden (Ödmark 2018), or shows in other world regions such as Australia (Harrington 2011). Comparative research between

countries is scarce. An important exception is a special issue of *Popular Communication: The International Journal of Media and Culture* that introduces satirical shows of different countries in single chapters (Baym and Jones 2012). Even though the articles do not entail a systematic comparison, the special issue clearly demonstrates that news satire is a globalized format with adaptations to country-specific news formats and audience expectations. Long-term projects that enable for comparisons over time are rare (Becker and Goldberg 2017; Lichter et al. 2015) and many studies from the U.S. are constrained to presidential election campaigns (Fox et al. 2007; Young 2004).

Analyses of satirical content conduct either qualitative or standardized content analyses. Qualitative analyses deal with stylistic aspects such as irony and exaggeration (e.g., Warner 2007) and discursive modes in interviews (Baym 2010). Furthermore, they entail discourse analyses on specific satirical events such as “VaroufAKE” presented by Jan Böhmermann in Germany (Bessant 2017) or the dealing of Irish satire with the country’s economic crash during the financial crisis (Boland 2012). Some studies examine the type of humor as well as the use of news clips and sound bites from the news media in single formats, for example *The Daily Show* (Baym 2005; Jones 2005) or the German *heute show* (Kleinen-von Königslöw and Keel 2012). Still, manual standardized content analyses are more common than qualitative studies. At the beginning, standardized content analyses dealt with rather basic variables such as topics and actors; recent studies also include frames and more evaluative variables. Automatic content analyses of satirical media content (Becker and Goldberg 2017) are the exception so far.

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### 3 Constructs Employed in Standardized Content Analyses on Satire

Frequent coding units in content analyses on satirical TV-shows are jokes, thematic segments, political actors and guest interviews. Jokes, such as one-liners in late-night comedy-monologues, are the smallest unit of analysis. They are particularly appropriate for the analysis of stand-ups, and are operationalized as verbal statements about a target that prompt laughter from the audience (Farnsworth and Lichter 2020; Lichter et al. 2015; Matthes and Rauchfleisch 2013; Morris 2009; Niven et al. 2003; Young 2004). In the coding of thematic segments or stories (Brewer and Marquart 2007; Feldman 2013; Lichtenstein and Nitsch 2018), both formal and content-related criteria can be used to distinguish between segments of satirical shows. Formal criteria refer to changes in the setting (e.g., from a monologue to a film sequence or an interview), content-related criteria to changes of the main topic (Lichtenstein and Nitsch 2018). For the coding of guest interviews, the whole interview serves as the coding unit.

Despite different research interests and levels of analysis, existing studies on satire can be summarized regarding several main constructs and results.

1. *Stylistic aspects*: Fox et al. (2007) categorize humor and differentiate between joking and laughing. Whereas funny music, silly statements, voices or gestures and obviously altered images are indicators for joking, laughing is indicated by sounds of laughter or chuckling, smiling and eye crinkling. Coding of stylistic aspects is also directed to footage and sound bites from television news programs (Brewer and Marquart 2007). Consistent with results from qualitative content analyses (Baym 2005; Jones 2005), these indicators point to a relatively high share of recycled news media content in *The Daily Show* (Brewer and Marquart 2007).
2. *Political actors*: Several studies analyze which individuals or collective actors are addressed as **targets of jokes** (Farnsworth and Lichter 2020; Lichtenstein and Nitsch 2018; Lichter et al. 2015; Nitsch and Lichtenstein 2013; Niven et al. 2003; Young 2004). Overall, satirical shows tend to personalization and repetition of jokes: individual actors are more often addressed than institutions or other collective actors and similar jokes are directed at different candidates or presidents. For U.S. late-night comedies, studies demonstrate a strong similarity regarding their attention to political actors. As humor comprehension requires at least some familiarity or knowledge about political actors, all shows rely on jokes on the most prominent politicians, i.e. presidents and political candidates as well as their families (Lichter et al. 2015; Niven et al. 2003; Young 2004) and focus mainly on national politicians. In Germany, the spectrum of politicians in satirical shows is noticeably larger (Nitsch and Lichtenstein 2013) than in the U.S. This can be explained by the political multi-party system that, opposed to the American two-party system, prevents paying attention to only two candidates.
3. *Evaluations of political actors*: Not surprisingly, criticism is more common than praise in the **evaluation of political actors** (Lichtenstein and Nitsch 2018). Scholars are also interested in the reference points of the evaluations. They differentiate whether the evaluations relate to role specific characteristics (e.g., leadership quality, political expertise) or political irrelevant aspects such as politicians' private life and outward appearance (Emde and Scherer 2016; Lichtenstein and Nitsch 2018; Nitsch and Lichtenstein 2013). Studies also distinguish between different tones of humor: Besides policy-based jokes on political actors, complimentary, self-deprecating, physical, stereotypical, dismissive or character-based jokes are coded (Matthes and Rauchfleisch 2013; Morris 2009). According to the findings, American shows have a low share of policy-related jokes and focus predominantly on personal traits, self-deprecation, and stereotypes (Lichter et al. 2015; Niven et al. 2003; Young 2004). Opposed to that, policy-based jokes on political actors and role specific evaluations outweigh personal and politically irrelevant evaluations in European satirical shows (Lichtenstein and Nitsch 2018; Matthes and Rauchfleisch 2013).
4. *Topics of satirical shows*: Many studies examine the topics that are addressed in satirical shows and measure the relative share of political topics (Brewer and Marquart 2007; Lichtenstein and Nitsch 2018; Lichter et al. 2015; Nitsch and Lichtenstein 2013; Young 2004). In focusing on institutional politics, they use a

rather narrow definition of political topics. Comparisons of satirical shows reveal that political topics are very pronounced in news satire and political cabaret, late-night comedy is more concerned with societal and media topics, people and conflicts (Lichtenstein and Nitsch 2018; Young 2004). In line with this, Lichtenstein and Nitsch (2018) found strong differences for the degree of given political (background) information.

5. *Framing of politics and political topics*: Analyses on the **framing of politics** differentiate between issue frames and strategy or game frames (Brewer and Marquart 2007; Fox et al., 2007). They find a high share of issue frames that parallels the depiction in the news media. However, issue-specific studies (Feldman 2013: global warming; Nitsch and Lichtenstein 2019: international crises; Lichtenstein and Koerth 2020: Ukraine crisis; Young 2013: Occupy Wall Street) reveal differences to news media discourses. Nitsch and Lichtenstein (2019) examine satirical shows' positions towards the frames. They find that the shows address but dismiss frame elements that are known from the news media and tend to support frame elements that play a minor role in news media discourses.
6. *Expression of opinion*: Some studies examine how satirical shows take a stance on political issues. Young (2013) coded the general tonality of satirical shows towards Occupy Wall Street. She found a considerable gap between a general positive tonality towards the movement and the depiction of delegitimizing frames, and concludes that irony is used to challenge news media frames. Satirical shows contain many comments on political topics but differ in the degree to which they take a stand towards political topics. While news satire and political cabaret express explicit and argument-based positions, late-night comedy remains rather implicit by using mockery and exaggeration (Lichtenstein and Nitsch 2018).
7. *Coding of guests in satirical shows*: Studies that deal with the coding of guests in the shows include manual coding of professions (Brewer and Marquart 2007) as well as automatic content analysis based on keywords and summaries of the episodes on Wikipedia (Becker and Goldberg 2017). Overall, journalists and artists are the most frequent guests in American shows; political guests make up 15 to 20 percent. Despite differences between the shows, half of the interviews address political topics (Brewer and Marquart 2007). Feldman (2013) coded the guests' position towards global warming. She reveals that "the shows are friends to global warming activists, environmental policy makers, scientists, and science writers" (Feldman 2013, p. 445); guests who are dismissive or neutral of climate change issues are in the minority.

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## 4 Research Desiderata

Research on the content of satire has provided us with numerous insights into the depiction of political and societal issues and actors. However, the focus on satirical TV-shows and the limitation of analyses to one or a few shows from a single country

leave many aspects yet to be studied. At the same time, new questions emerge due to the current rise of online satire and the blurring of boundaries between politics and satire. Three main aspects for further research on the content of satire can be emphasized:

First, comparative research on the content of satire is needed. *Cross-country comparisons* could shed light on how political and cultural conditions influence the content and normative role of satire. Such studies could also reveal international parallels and adaptation processes. Within single countries, *media comparisons* can find out how media logics shape the satirical performance, e.g., in print, online, TV or radio formats. *Issue-specific comparisons between satire and news media* could broaden our knowledge on inter-media agenda setting and on how satirical interpretations diverge from the news media.

Second, we need more studies that combine content analyses with effect and reception studies. Triangulation between content analyses and experimental designs enables to measure effects of different content types and can thus provide a more nuanced knowledge about the impact of satire on democracy, health prevention and science communication. Since satirical content varies with regard to different satirical shows, it is vital to analyze whether or not this elicits different effects. Ambitious research endeavors should also delve into mutual reinforcing effects of news and satire over longer periods of time.

Third, standardized content analyses compromise the coding of challenging concepts such as irony, sarcasm, emotions and discursive modes in guest interviews. Triangulation with qualitative research can help to establish adequate categories and indicators. Also, instruments for the standardized coding of memes and other visual content that emerge with the rather new phenomenon of online satire are still missing.

### **Relevant Variables in DOCA—Database of Variables for Content Analysis**

Targets of jokes: <https://doi.org/10.34778/3i>

Evaluation of political actors: <https://doi.org/10.34778/3g>

Framing of politics: <https://doi.org/10.34778/3h>

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