

The Funny Thing About The Legitimacy of News Satire

Jan. 8th 2021



Alexas_Fotos:Pixabay

By Rasheeda A. Campbell

One night while indulging in my guilty pleasure of watching a missed episode of *The Bachelorette*, my brother walks in and challenges me for a turn to watch the T.V. He said that he wanted to watch the news, and as an aspiring journalist, I caved in. When I gave him control of the remote he turned from *The Bachelorette* to *The Daily Show with Trevor Noah*. Confused, I asked why he changed his mind about watching the news. "This is the news," he said.

In the name of journalism, I wondered then if I should have reacted in a way similar to one of Bill O'Reilly's meltdowns and debated with him why *The Daily Show* and other similar satirical

programs should not actually be referred to as “the news.” Instead, I followed the same procedure as President Donald Trump during a [press event](#) when reporters asked him about the George Floyd protests last year. I said nothing and walked away.

However, it made me wonder whether or not it's effective for people to rely on satirical journalism as a way to receive the news. Of course, one thought led to many questions including: Are comedians rightfully the “new modern journalists?” Are these programs having a negative affect on regular journalism outlets? Will YouTubers getting their own late-night television shows in the U.S. never end?!

Even as a fan of news satire, I thought that satirical journalism affected regular news outlets negatively. However, a few journalistic sources believe otherwise and think that regular journalism outlets can learn a thing or two from satirical journalism.

Satire has been around since the existence of journalism and even sarcasm for that matter. News satire, specifically, isn't something necessarily new either.

“Satire in journalism existed way before the digital era. Mark Twain is certainly among the pioneers of satirical journalism as we know it, along with Artemus Ward and Will Rogers – but there are and have been many others,” according to [whatsnewinpublishing.com](#). Now that we are living in a digital age satirical news is able to be produced and circulated faster and wider, reaching many audiences from across the world.

Although many from different demographic age groups can enjoy tuning into shows such as *Full Frontal with Samantha Bee* on TBS and *Real Time with Bill Maher* on HBO and reading content from sites like *The Onion*, satirical journalism mostly attracts a younger audience.

According to information found in 2017 by the research service, [Wonder](#) “News satire television show viewers also tend to be informed viewers, liberal, young, and male.” The article further breaks down who is watching and reading content produced by different satirical journalism outlets.

Millennials and Generation Z are viewing this type of content the most compared to older generations. To test the theory that millennials and Generation Z watch satirical news programs as a way to receive the news instead of traditional news programs further, I created a poll on Instagram for my small, but worthy followers to answer the question: “Do you watch satirical news programs instead of traditional news programs as a way to receive the news?”

From my results it turned out that out of 48 people who participated, 35 said “yes” and 13 said “no.” Those who answered are also between the ages of 19 and 37.

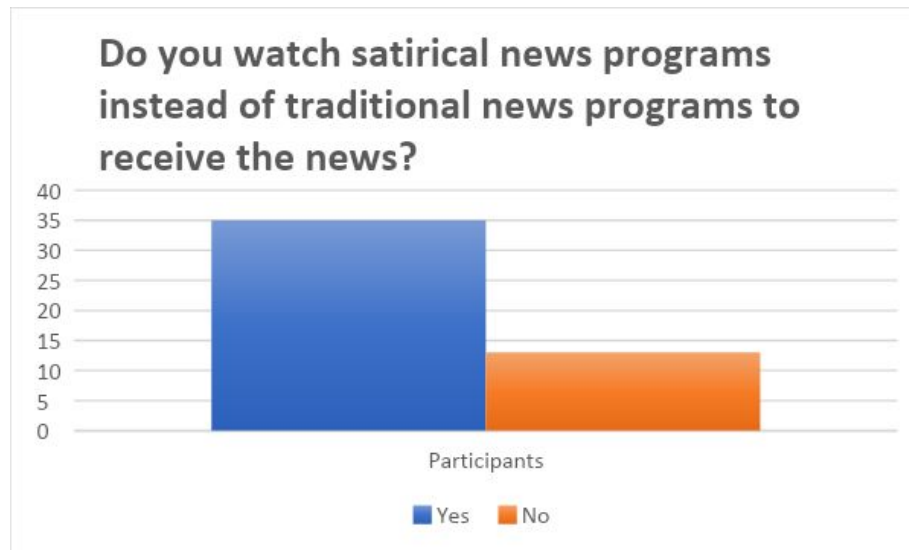


Chart created by Rasheeda A. Campbell

Graphics reporter for *The Wall Street Journal* and creator of *Inside The Newsroom*, Daniel Levitt believes that satirical journalism being able to reach a younger audience could be a reason for why it is more effective than certain regular news programs and outlets today.

“I think it says more about the hard news shows and sometimes how ridiculous they are, that younger audiences want someone they can trust to tell them actually what’s going on with wider context...it's actually the hard news programs on networks such as *CNN*, *FOX News* and *MSNBC* that have become more like the satirical shows, because of the 'horse-race' nature of U.S. news, as well as the misinformation disseminated on various shows,” he said.

It’s very noticeable that certain journalists who host their own news programs are copying comedians in satirical news programs by not practicing objectivity with commentary and disregarding transparency, which are two important elements to follow as a journalist according to the [SPJ Code of Ethics](#). As not to single out *Fox News* host Tomi Lahren, but if certain news programs are going to allow their journalists to copy the style of satirical news hosts then they should also at least be witty.

Satirical journalism attracts a lot of people, predominantly those of a younger demographic which adds a bit to the competition in the journalism and media world. Traditional news outlets are competing against one another, content creators, and also comedians and satirists for views. Although it may add more stress to those who work for traditional journalism outlets, a little competition from satirical journalism could affect traditional journalism positively overall.

According to Levitt, satirical news programs and websites “...will force the news networks to rethink their direction to capture the younger audience they so desperately need.” Hopefully, the

direction would be to not fully imitate satirical news programs but to continue to work towards being credible sources for the public in an appealing way.

When thinking about it, satirical journalism would be best viewed as traditional journalism's funny uncle who should never be quoted and taken too seriously, but who we need to have around to keep us sane. Satirical journalism creates some sort of balance in the universe by providing comic relief in a depressing world. Traditional news and satirical news go hand in hand with each other.

ITN television reporter and presenter, as well as founder and CEO of Right Thing Films, Warren Nettleford believes that satirical journalism is just as beneficial to humanity as regular journalism.

“Satire has its place with the news because in some ways people are tired. The world that we’re living in is so complicated and in so many ways unbelievable. The idea of having a degree of escapism, but having news as a backdrop as a way to be able to digest the news more easily makes it almost more acceptable because there are so many things that are wrong with the world. It seems that having some kind of satire to describe what is happening is appealing,” he said.

News satire has been proven to be beneficial to the public and even traditional news outlets in many ways. However, there is one way that news satire can do more harm than good. Unfortunately, the blame can’t just go entirely on people who lack a sense of humor. According to theconversation.org, “People have long mistaken satire for real news.”

Satirical news programs, especially satirical news websites, have ironically mastered the art of disguise. Those who fall victim to believing satire to be real can cause many problems in relevance to the two words that should never be said in a room filled with hostile right-wing nationalists: “Fake News.”

Freelance journalist and founder of asiennemagazine.com, Anna Ruth Ramos believes that satirical news is essential as long as the audience understands that the content is just satire.

“I think due to the current state of the constant flow of unregulated Fake News within the elder Gen X and Boomer populations’ social media, sometimes satirical news may do more harm than good.” This highlights the importance of journalists holding social media accountable when satirical news is not identified and labeled as such.

News satire, although its intent is not to mislead the public and to only make people laugh, in a way should be treated by journalists the same way as Fake News when circulated throughout social media. Journalists properly fact-checking information and reporting the actual facts is how they help the public understand the actual truth.

According to theconversation.com, “We found that labeling an article as ‘satire’ was uniquely effective. Users were less likely to believe stories labeled as satire, were less likely to share them, and saw the source as less credible. They also valued the warning.” This tweet by President Trump is an example of why labels are important:



Twitter

Of course the same goes for satirical news programs. Comedians who host satirical news programs who are not certified journalists should not be treated by the public as such. Understanding that while reading or watching news satire can make the experience more enjoyable in a way.

“It’s only okay if the viewer is fully aware that that comedian isn’t a journalist. That person who’s telling them what’s going on has a different agenda to make someone laugh. To make someone laugh is very, very different from wanting to tell someone what is actually happening and of course, telling someone what’s happening in a broadcast sense is very different to what’s happening in a newsprint sense. Don’t call it [satire]news,” said Nettleford.

Overall, news satire is essential. It has a special place in the media. Many satirical journalism programs and platforms as well as traditional news outlets both produce excellent forms of content. However, in order for satirical news to be effective, it's important to remember not to take it seriously.

Understanding the purpose of each is how to properly absorb and enjoy what they produce. As of now whenever my brother watches satirical news programs, he also makes sure to watch regular news programs and read their publications as well.

Sources:

1. <https://www.cnn.com/videos/politics/2020/05/29/donald-trump-white-house-avoids-questions-sot-vpx.cnn>
2. <https://whatsnewinpublishing.com/why-satirical-news-sites-matter-for-society/>
3. <https://askwonder.com/research/please-help-us-understand-audience-satirical-news-content-shows-websites-5io9hlveu>
4. <https://www.spj.org/ethicscode.asp>
5. <https://theconversation.com/too-many-people-think-satirical-news-is-real-121666>
6. <https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/1317044556328730625>