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6 “THINK BIG and then do absolutely NÜSCHTE”.

News Satire and the Climate Debate

Abstract: The chapter discusses how ACC is represented in news satire, and how the genre may affect climate change perception. News satire is first a humor genre, primarily intended to make people laugh, and any impact news satire may have on the ACC debate is dependent on this laughter. Based on an examination of a wide selection of news satire sites and video channels, the chapter identifies and discusses the most common types and targets of news satire on ACC. In general, climate denialism and public inaction relative to climate change are the primary targets. News stories satirically representing public figures, particularly politicians, as passive and in denial of climate change are also relatively common. Towards the end, the chapter moves to discuss the impact of news satire on climate change perception. News satire often presents a grim outlook on the future of our planet leaving little space for hope. At the same time, however, news satire allows for a perhaps more bearable emotional response to such hopelessness by inviting recipients to laugh at the ACC denier – a ridiculous figure regularly included in the news stories. News satire moreover transcends false balance issues in mainstream media and consistently confirms the reality and severity of ACC, thereby highlighting the importance of climate action.

6.1 Introduction

The purpose of the present chapter is to present and analyze the treatment of anthropogenic climate change (ACC) in news satire. As an arena rife with failings, selfishness, self-contradiction, human shortcomings, and ridiculousness, the climate debate is an open invitation to satire, and news satire makes the most of it. The chapter provides a brief general introduction to news satire as a genre and describes its coverage of ACC. On this background, the chapter analyzes how news satire on ACC works as an unusual, but potentially effective, genre for climate communication.

The relationship between humor and genre is underexplored in existing genre research with its consistent focus on the function and workings of genre (Devitt, 2009; Auken, 2015; Miller, Devitt & Gallagher, 2018). Even though they are a crucial factor in many forms of human communication, the functional aspect of the humor genres are harder to come by, as they are challenging, albeit not impossible, to describe as social actions in the Rhetorical Genre Studies tradition (Miller, 1984; and numerous other studies). However, the effects of humor have been examined in other parts of research, which are only partially represented here, so there are rich opportunities for

further studies. This chapter and the one that follows are in this sense only a beginning.

6.2 Convictions Blowing in the Wind

On September 8th 2017, after hurricane Irma had devastated several Caribbean islands, and two days before it took land in southwest Florida, the satiric news service *The Onion* published a story with the headline “Climate Change Denier Battens Down Worldview To Weather Hurricane Irma”.¹ In it, a person described as “local climate change denier Michael Dunn” spends the day before the storm trying to bolster his view “that climate change is a government conspiracy” by stockpiling “pseudo-scientific reports from the internet”. However, he still fears the effect of the storm: “All I can do now is ride it out and hope that I’ve done enough to protect my ideology from being completely leveled by this storm. I hate to say it, but I’m preparing for the worst.”

The story conflates two different, but related fields. The preparations made by locals in the storm-stricken area to protect their possessions from the oncoming hurricane, and the problems posed to the denial of ACC by the increased occurrence of extreme weather events like hurricane Irma. By picturing climate denial as something that *can* be blown away by hurricane Irma, in the same way as physical objects can, it enters into a crucial question posed by the increased proliferation of extreme weather events. Namely, whether and to what degree they can be said to result from ACC (Anderson & Huntington 2017, Otto, Skeie, Fuglestedt, Berntsen, & Allen 2017, Moser 2016), and – by consequence – whether such occurrences provide evidence for the reality of ACC.

The story does not directly pick up this question, but it takes a stand in the discussion through the conflation of the two spheres, by seeing the hurricane as evidence potentially strong enough to destroy the convictions of a hardened climate change denier like Michael Dunn. Paradoxically, the story’s protagonist himself seems quite aware of the unsustainability of his convictions. He fears the hurricane as “the big one that completely destroys my position”, hopes that he has done enough preparation against the storm to protect his ideology, but he is even preparing for “the worst”, i.e. to have his ideology smashed by the oncoming hurricane. He is, thus, not a realistically rendered character, but a parody of a climate denier, displaying his own delusions with a surprising level of candor and clarity.

¹ Seen April 13th, 2018.

6.3 News Satire

The last two decades have seen a steep rise in a genre of political humor² that both mimics, uses, and pokes fun at the genres in which the media represents current events.³ Broadly speaking, the genre takes two forms. News satire is not a new phenomenon; thus in the 1840s *Punch* in the United Kingdom and *Corsaren* in Denmark both published various forms of news satire. However, in their contemporary shape, the oldest is the fictionalized news reporting first made prominent by *The Onion* from 1988 and onward which in its basic form mimics newspaper reporting, but reports events that have not taken place, or have at least taken place in widely different ways from what is reported. *The Onion* continues to represent the gold standard for the genre, but excellent satire news services have emerged in its wake – in many countries and in many languages; some will be quoted here, but many more exist. The second, and probably most well-known, are the satiric newscasts made prominent by *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* and *The Colbert Report* and continued by Stewart's immediate heir Trevor Noah on *The Daily Show with Trevor Noah* and by former *The Daily Show*-alumni in *This Week Tonight with John Oliver* and *Full Frontal with Samantha Bee*. The heritage from Jon Stewart can also be found in the German version, *heute-show*. The TV shows mainly report actual news stories and the satire is the way the show's news anchor or correspondents comment upon it. In contrast, the vast majority of the stories in *The Onion* and its competitors are invented, and their commentary on current events is much more indirect. Even when they shift media and enter TV/video news, like, for instance, *The Onion*, *The Beaverton* and *Der Postillion* have done, they still mostly report “news” that has not taken place.⁴ By consequence, most research into news satire has concentrated on one or the other, with vastly more research into the TV shows (Berkowitz & Schwartz, 2015).⁵

It could feasibly be argued that we are dealing with two distinct genres. Thus, Tandoc jr., Lim, & Ling (2017), for example, distinguish between “*News Satire*” in the vein of Jon Stewart, and “*News Parody*” for the tradition from *The Onion*. However, the

² Political humor is a pervasive and many-sided phenomenon, and the research into it is extensive indeed. For an introduction and further references, see Møller (2018, 37–39) with numerous further references.

³ News satire is not treated in Reiff & Bawarshi (2016); nor in Miller & Kelly (2017). However, the genre, emerging in force in new media environments and acting in the public sphere with little in the way of an institutional context, would have fitted nicely into both.

⁴ Despite the fictive character of the news reported, the formal presentation of said news mimics the news presentation of mainstream media much more closely, thus establishing a strong clash between the serious presentation and the outrageous content. (See Waisanen, 2011).

⁵ Something is invariably missed in a literature search, but some trends are fairly easy to spot. Whereas research in the TV shows is prolific and easy to find, it takes some work to dig up even the limited number of studies on the news satire sites represented in the present article.

two also share central features, as they both unite parody and satire of news services as an approach to current events. This reflects the fact that they previously have had a joint genre label, “fake news”. (See, for instance, Berkowitz & Schwarz, 2016; Reilly 2012, Amarasingam 2011, and Kaye 2010).⁶ Of course, with the American election of 2016, and the rise of Trump, the genre label “fake news” has acquired a new and much more ominous role in contemporary politics.

However that may be, in the current context, it makes sense to treat the two as sides, or sub-genres, of the same genre. Readers are invited to make their own assessments as to the broader applicability or validity of this. Incidentally, BBC’s *The Mash Report* combines satiric commentary in the vein of Stewart and Colbert with fully invented news stories in the tradition of *The Onion*.

6.4 News Satire as Parody and Satire

The genre label (Nyboe, 2017) “News satire” consists of two very different genres, “news” and “satire”. This label reflects the self-representation of the news satire outlets themselves where variations on the genre label dominate. Thus, *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver*’s self-presentation makes the satiric intent explicit: “Breaking news, on a weekly basis. Comedian John Oliver satirically covers the week in news, politics and current events in this Emmy-winning variety series”.⁷ Along the same lines, *The Mideast Beast* carries the tagline “Because all news is satirical”,⁸ *The Beaverton* states in its legal disclaimer that “*The Beaverton* is a news satire and parody publication”,⁹ and *The Shovel* is equally clear at the bottom of its front page: “The Shovel is Australia’s satire news site”.¹⁰

However, another genre is as important, namely, the “parody” represented in *The Beaverton*’s disclaimer alongside satire. As a genre, news satire blends parody and satire.¹¹ The blending is, in fact, so close that it is very often impossible to establish the boundary between the two genres in news satire. The mixture of parody and satire is not unique to the genre, but is relatively common, historically speaking all the way

⁶ To confuse matters further, Acter speaks of *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* as “news parody” (2008, 278). The team running *heute-show*’s twitter-profile confirms that the “Nachrichtensatire” is one of the genre labels the show’s anchor uses to characterize the show. (<https://twitter.com/heuteshow/status/1006092722267152384>). Seen June 11th, 2018.

⁷ Seen January 8th, 2019.

⁸ Seen January 7th, 2019.

⁹ Seen January 8th, 2019.

¹⁰ Seen January 8th, 2019.

¹¹ The double genre character is also visible in the legal disclaimer of *The Duffel Blog*: “Duffel Blog is a parody of a news organization, and all content it publishes is satirical in nature. <https://www.duffelblog.com/about/disclaimer/>. Seen on January 8th, 2019.

back to antiquity; a well-known example could be Theophrastos' *Characters* which satirizes various forms of human folly through biting parodic renderings of a number of personality types.¹² Therefore, the interesting thing about news satire is not *that* the genres blend but *how*.

Parody works by making elements of the parodied intermingle with incongruent new elements leading to a clash within the parodic work. It is, thus, a “double-voiced discourse and, as such, addresses a sophisticated reader or viewer expected to decode multiple texts in dialogic relation” (Druick, 2009, 301). The fact that the news genre has become the object of parody is not surprising given that, according to Mikhail Bakhtin, “there never was a single strictly straightforward genre [...] that did not have its own parodying and travestying double, its own comic-ironic *contrepartie*” (Bakhtin, 1981, 53). In an already classic description, Linda Hutcheon notes that parody is “a form of imitation, but imitation characterized by ironic inversion, not always at the expense of the parodied text. [...] parody is, in another formulation, repetition with critical distance, which marks difference rather than similarity” (Hutcheon, 1985, 6). News satire works this formula by establishing a clash of elements. It repeats the visual layout, the choice of subject matter, the rhetoric, the language, and the structure of a variety of different news outlets (repetition), but at the same time undercuts these elements by adding less serious, silly, or just plain odd elements brought in by the news satirists themselves (difference).¹³ For instance, shifts in sociocultural or syntax and substitution of persons or subjects are common parody signals often found in news satire (see for instance, Rose, 1993, 37; Hariman 2008, 250).

Satire is as complex as parody. It uses humor to taunt and criticize failings, selfishness, human shortcomings, and ridiculousness in the surrounding society. Satire criticizes through humor. In fact, in the words of Ian Reilly, “criticism forms, in large part, the kernel of satire’s broader project” (Reilly, 2010, 34). Historically, it has been used to expose moral vices (greed, hypocrisy, corruption) and undermine those in power, thereby destabilizing social order (Condren, 2014, 1069). Through humor, it creates a community of those laughing against those laughed at. Interestingly, the two groups can be overlapping. For instance, you can satirize weaknesses of human nature to elicit laughter from humans sharing said nature. Along the same lines, satire is often sharply critical of its target and commonly is associated with aggression, as Northrop Frye’s widely cited definition of satire as “militant irony” also highlights (Frye, 1973, 223).¹⁴ However, it does not need to be aggressive. It can be quite mild, and may embrace its target while poking fun at it.

¹² See also Hutcheon (1985, 43–68).

¹³ For more see Acter (2008).

¹⁴ See also Berger (1997).

News satire expounds the full range of options in satire, from lightly teasing pieces to full-on attacks.¹⁵ Moreover, it appears in all the different genres of the ordinary news stream, reports, interviews, reviews, photo reporting, commentary, background reporting among others, and it mimics written news, radio news, and television newscasts.

Whereas the parodic gist in news satire is usually, though not always, directed at the supposedly serious news services, its satire is broader. Not only can news satire stories target anything covered by the news media, being fictional, they can even pick up topics beyond those accessible to other media. Thus, there are wide limits to what can be reflected in the skewed mirror of news satire. Nothing is beneath the interest of news satire and nothing is above it. Even if something is too sacrosanct in culture to criticize, news satire finds a way to bite. For example, at the death of Nelson Mandela, *The Onion* published a story titled “Nelson Mandela Becomes First Politician To Be Missed”.¹⁶ It adhered completely to the “de mortuis nil nisi bene”-rule of the obituary, and yet found an angle for crass satire, which even highlighted the accomplishment of the deceased.

It follows from what has been said above that even though news satire skewers the news, and often either tells invented stories or inserts invented information into otherwise real stories, the genre is unlike what is now known as “fake news”, as it does not seek to spread misinformation (Søe, 2017). Not only does the genre employ numerous and heavily signaled ironic moves (Booth, 1974; Hutcheon, 1994) to ensure that the recipient understands the irony, it misses its first and fundamental purpose, laughter, when this does not happen. For the very same reason, another kind of hilarity ensures when people still pick up the satire news stories as factual reporting because they are not being cheated, as those who fall for fake news, they actually and actively cheat themselves as evidenced by, for instance, the notorious exchange between *The Onion* and *The People’s Daily* (Deen, 2015).

The techniques and the rhetorical practice associated with news satire are frequently expanded beyond their original genre contexts into other genres. Examples of this could be *The Daily Show*’s twin coffee table books *America (The Book)* and *Earth (The Book)* (Stewart 2006, 2010). The factual character of the encyclopedia seems to make it an attractive target genre. Probably the most common genre in this field is the parodic encyclopedia; the largest online version, *UnCyclopedia* links to numerous other parodic encyclopedias in many languages, some of them stylistically loose,

¹⁵ At the mild end you find many, though definitely not all, the micro news stories, like “Grammar Nazi’s Day Ruined after Seeing Spelling Mistake”. At the more aggressive something like “Asshole Awarded For Asshole Behavior By Business Community Leaders”, in which an award ceremony in the business world is described in a language switching repeatedly between established journalistic expressions and explicit takedowns similar to the “asshole”.

¹⁶ Seen August 29th, 2018.

as is often the case with amateur work in news satire. *The Onion*, too, kicks in with *The Onion Book of Known Knowledge* (Harris, Reiss, Roeder, & Tracy, 2012) which also recalls the coffee table book. A further target is clickbait culture, most prominently through the site *Clickhole* which preys upon the forms, the rhetoric, and the ideology expressed in the genres of clickbait-sites like *Buzzfeed*, *Distratify* and *Upworthy*.

6.5 News Satire as News

As a form of news, albeit a non-standard one, news satire has an extensive and multifaceted relationship to the news reflected in the surrounding, and nominally more serious, media landscape. News satire largely responds to the same political, social, cultural, and economic events as other news genres. These events may be re-framed, re-interpreted, juxtaposed, twisted, or skewed in the course of their representation in news satire. However, the connection back to the original events, or to the representation of said events in the media landscape, must be recognizable, or the satiric effect is lost. This is true even in the cases where a story is fully made up, and is not related to any particular media story, as is the case with many micro-news stories in the local-news sections of news satire sites. These stories deploy all the usual techniques of journalism to describe events that are clearly too small to justify journalistic treatment, thus highlighting the artificiality of the journalistic genres while extracting mirth from the everyday situations described.

There is not always one clearly defined event behind a satiric news story. Other sides of the news can be targeted. Indeed, the target may be the media genres themselves, the reportage, the op-ed, the news telegram, the business special, or the lifestyle article. In addition, the inspiration may be other phenomena not immediately related to current events that are reframed within news satire; twisted into the often deliberately ill-fitting form of a news story. These topics range from theology, “Aging God fitted for Omni-Focals”¹⁷ (*The Onion*), over historical events, “The Christmas Tree is a Grave Blow to Danishness (from the archive, year 1808)” (“Juletræet er et voldsomt Anslag mod Danskheden (fra arkivet, år 1808)”) (*RokokoPosten*),¹⁸ to serial jokes, “‘I should have never crossed that fucking road’ admits chicken” (*Waterford Whispers News*).¹⁹ The genre treats these topics according to the normal approach of news. Thus, the chicken from the serial joke gets its life story told by an impressed journalist who is clearly in awe and moved by being in the presence of this important cultural figure. In cases such as these the inspiration is not an immediate news event, but it is the existence of the news media genres themselves that allows news satire

17 Seen August 29th, 2018.

18 Seen August 29th, 2018.

19 Seen August 29th, 2018.

to treat a genre-foreign story, as if it was a genre commonplace. Through their genre practices, they offer up not just news, but a number of genre templates for telling a story. What news satire does in these cases is to take up the template (repetition), but apply it to a material that is usually seen as foreign (difference) to the template.

6.6 News Satire on ACC

News satire is primarily a form of humor. Therefore, satire stories, whatever moral role they might get to play, are humor pieces, and the genre’s first purpose is laughter (Wiesman, 2011). Quite likely, the satirists and their audiences meet in this. The entertainment value seems to be one of the primary motivations for engaging with news satire (Young, 2013). There is a deeper point to this, but the obvious consequence is that not all stories involving ACC push a clear political agenda. Thus, *The Babylon Bee*, which mainly concerns itself with American church life, ran the story “Chief Cause Of Climate Change Revealed To Be Fire Metaphors In Worship Songs”,²⁰ using ACC as a means to poke fun at another, less dramatic issue, the imagery in church singing. Along similar lines, *Waterford Whispers News* has the story “Rain Stops In Galway For Record 17 Minutes”²¹ where the target of the joke is the dreary Irish weather, climate change is used for emphasis rather than being at the center of the story. The article concludes its description of the weather anomaly by stating that “there was some concern from meteorologists that the dry spell could be a sign of climate change, stating that dry weather in Galway could be more worrying than polar ice caps melting”.

So not all news satire on ACC conveys a clear political message. Take, for instance, the *Clickhole* article “Environmental Win! This Couple Is Infertile”.²² The story argues that a couple’s infertility is a climate victory, as it saves the world from “as many as three carbon-emitting children” that the couple initially had planned to have. Infertility is not the butt of the joke, however, and neither is climate change. The article, instead, takes aim – satirically and parodically – at another common news genre, the inspirational human interest story. This is underlined by the extensive use of exclamation points and exaggerated enthusiasm in the article, as if it was somehow telling a story worth celebrating. Another example is a story by *The Beaverton* titled “Local man unable to resist pointing out how beautiful day actually is a sign of climate

²⁰ Seen December 13th, 2017.

²¹ Seen March 24th, 2018. A parallel story is found in *The Daily Squat*: “‘We don’t know how Northerners will react to sunlight if global warming isn’t halted’, warns climate expert”. <http://www.dailysquat.com/dont-know-northerners-will-react-sunlight-global-warming-isnt-halted-warns-climate-expert/>. Seen March 28th, 2018.

²² Seen August 29th, 2018.

apocalypse”.²³ It randomly describes a day at some office, where “local man Geoffrey McLeod” simply cannot let his co-workers enjoy the nice weather, but must give voice to the dire predictions for the climate. Like in a typical news story, McLeod is given the chance to comment on his pessimistic remarks: “‘I tried, I really tried to hold it in,’ said McLeod. ‘But I had to do my part for the environment by not letting people enjoy even a few brief moments of happiness’”. But even when used in this spurious manner, ACC throws a shade over the silliness, as the tragedy of infertility is described as a form of triumph, and the all too familiar shade of doubt as to the possible ACC-origin of nice weather is given shape in the ever so slightly neurotic figure of Geoffrey McLeod.²⁴

6.7 The Material

News satire is a notoriously volatile field. *The Onion* has been around for decades, and with the fairly successful transition of *The Daily Show* from Jon Stewart to Trevor Noah the show has entered its third decade in good shape. Beyond that, the landscape changes swiftly, and few news services last for many years. Moreover, many official news media dabble in satire on a regular basis, and satire programs on TV frequently feature elements of news satire. Also, news satire plays out in many countries and in many languages, and even discovering any given satire news service is not a given, if you don’t partake in its cultural circle. An obvious example to the present authors is the Danish news satire service *RokokoPosten*. *Siden 1732* (The Rococo Post. Since 1732 (actual founding year: 2010)) that has been well-nigh legendary in the Danish media landscape almost since its foundation in 2010, but at the present point in time not even registered on the Wikipedia-list of “satirical news websites”,²⁵ much less found notable enough for a specific entry. Thus, a full tracking of news satire’s representation of ACC is beyond the reach of the present chapter.

Instead, we have searched 28 different news satire sites for the phrases “climate change” and “global warming”. We have also reviewed the coverage of ACC on 6–7 news satire TV-shows.²⁶ The list of reviewed satire news services are listed separately in the chapter’s bibliography; individual stories are referenced in the footnotes. The number of items available varies strongly from news service to news service. Thus, *The Onion* and *The Daily Mash* feature page after page of related stories, whereas

²³ Seen August 29th, 2018.

²⁴ McLeod and his attitude may even be a broadly recognizable figure, see Kirilenko, Molodotsova & Stepchenkova (2015).

²⁵ Seen March 2nd, 2018.

²⁶ The variation depends on whether you consider *The Daily Show* as one or two shows in the tenure of Jon Stewart and Trevor Noah.

others have few if any. Many factors influence this difference: the age and size of any given satire news service is central; an older, larger site will have more stories about ACC as a simple function of having more stories in the first place. In addition, a number of services are subject-specific, and only address ACC intermittently when it touches upon this subject. Thus, climate change plays a role on the catholic news satire site *Eye of the Tiber*, in several stories connected to the papal encyclical on climate change, but is barely mentioned otherwise.

The overall number of stories on climate change is equally hard to measure, as it would require a precise demarcation of what constitutes a story “on” climate change vis-à-vis a story that merely “refers to” climate change. Though there are many clear examples of one or the other, and both are interesting, such a line is impossible to draw. However you measure it, the ensuing material encompasses several hundred stories of which only a minor portion can be represented here.

6.8 Ridiculing Denialism

The most important target of news satire in relation to ACC is undoubtedly, and by a wide margin, climate denialism. Thus, the opening example of this chapter featuring “local climate change denier Michael Dunn” to a large extent encapsulates the stance of news satire vis-à-vis ACC.

The excessive emphasis awarded the opinion of climate change deniers is followed through to a *reductio ad absurdum* in an article in *The Beaverton* titled “Climate scientists seeking opinion of stupid idiot to complete study”.²⁷ In it, Dr. Naomi Prashad, the spokesperson of a group of climate researchers, explains why the inclusion of the opinions of “a total brow-furrowing goddamn dolt” would help the researchers finalize their studies.

‘It’s just very useful, to be forced to address the most ignorant views from ninnies who have done no work of their own,’ Prashad noted. ‘Look at the breakthroughs NASA is experiencing right now: gravitational waves, new solar systems – and they’ve had to spend a ton of time acknowledging flat-earththers. I don’t think it’s a coincidence.’

As is obvious, the *Beaverton* story repeatedly undercuts its presumed surface meaning by adding a series of derogatory descriptions to the climate denier sought for. The comical paradox being, of course, that the article treats the inclusion of obviously ill-founded opinions as a prerequisite for scientific quality. This paradox is highlighted in the ironic claim that the denialist opinions could be as important for breakthroughs in climate science, as the acknowledgment of flat-earththers has been for NASA.

²⁷ Seen August 29th, 2018.

The irony, of course, rests in the fact that not only has there never been a positive influence on NASAs work from having to debate flat-earthers; NASA has never been required to work extensively and repeatedly through arguments from flat-earthers as that would evidently be a waste of time. By consequence, the requirement that climate scientists are constantly asked to justify their work against scientifically unqualified climate deniers is reduced to the scientific absurdity it always was.

A parallel approach is found in *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver*'s now rightfully famous segment "A Statistically Representative Climate Change Debate".²⁸ In the latter, a TV debate on the reality of ACC is set up to match the actual division among the scientists, thus including three "skeptics" and a veritable flood of proponents representing the alleged 97% of climate scientist that hold ACC to be real (for the number itself, see Cook, et al., 2016).²⁹ The result, of course, is a complete flooding of the skeptics – demonstrating visually how overwhelming the scientific consensus actually is.³⁰

Similar positions against the ridiculousness of climate change denialism can be found in stories like "Science Is A Hoax, Man Types On Small Electronic Device That Can Do Everything"³¹ (*The Shovel*), "Climate change skeptic is fine with all other science"³² (*The Daily Mash*), or "Climate skeptics: The weather has a leftist bias" ("Klimaskeptikere: Vejret har venstreorienteret slagside")³³ (*RokokoPosten*).

A particular target in this category is the person who conflates weather and climate and claims that local cold weather events contradict the existence of ACC. This leads to stories like "Polar Vortex Causes Hundreds of Injuries as People Making Snide Remarks About Climate Change Are Punched in Face"³⁴ (*The Borowitz Report*) or "Man feeling a bit chilly declares it to be proof that global warming is hoax"³⁵ (*NewsThump*).

²⁸ Seen March 1st, 2018. See also Brewer & McKnight (2017).

²⁹ The 97% figure, which seem to be one of the more successful pieces of ACC-information in play, is used to effect again by Rachel Parris in *The Mash Report*: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GN8dLESkzWQ&t=4s>

³⁰ There are probably less than 97 people present, they do not fit in the picture frame which is set for a "normal" TV debate, but the impression is overwhelming, nonetheless.

³¹ Seen March 1st, 2018.

³² Seen March 1st, 2018.

³³ Seen March 2nd, 2018.

³⁴ Seen March 1st, 2018.

³⁵ Seen March 1st, 2018.

6.9 The Passive Politicians

Another frequent target is the lack of public action towards climate change. This is seen in a segment from *heute-show*, the German version of *The Daily Show*, made for the November 2017 UN Climate Change Conference in Bonn. “Reporting” from what is allegedly the German info-booth at the conference, one of the show’s senior correspondents, Tina Hausten, attempts to answer a question from the show’s anchor, Oliver Welke, about what the world should learn from Germany when it comes to climate change. Hausten does this by presenting a poster with Germany’s supposed motto for the conference: “THINK BIG and then do absolutely NÜSCHTE”. The double shift in language is telling. First, it moves to English to mark the hip, international ambience of the conference, then, at the point of bathos, it reverts to German with the slangish “NÜSCHTE” which translates approximately as “nada” or “zilch”. The segment then proceeds, with Hausten in a consistently ironic stance, moving through a brief, yet brutally effective presentation of the lack of coherent action in German climate politics, to the therefore inevitable climate breakdown and ending up in advice to her daughters to just have fun and consume away while there is still time. Following through to a *reductio ad absurdum*, at the end of the segment the info-booth is filled with people dancing and celebrating – completely consistent with Heusen’s surface message, and utterly at odds with the grave threat posed by the shifting climate also laid bare in her presentation.

Along the same lines, many satiric news stories specifically target the politician as passive or as a climate change denier. Such news stories typically revolve around politicians trying to pass legislation outlawing climate change without resolving the underlying issue. *The Shovel*, for instance, reports: “White House Cancels Climate Change”,³⁶ and similarly, in another story, that Australia and other countries plan to “withdraw from climate change”.³⁷ Since future predictions for the climate are grim, a government spokesperson in the article concludes, “climate change is definitely not something we want to be a part of”.³⁸ In the same vein, the claim by Donald Trump that climate change was a Chinese hoax to damage the US thus spawned two parallel stories at *The Rochdale Herald*: “Climate Change still insisting Donald Trump is a Chinese Conspiracy”³⁹ and “Donald Trump is a hoax, says Global Warming”.⁴⁰

Stories like these depict the politician as someone, who willfully believes that climate change is a matter of choice. As such, they serve to amplify that politicians

³⁶ Seen December 1st, 2017.

³⁷ Seen December 1st, 2017.

³⁸ See also: <https://www.thebeaverton.com/2017/06/trump-pulls-climate-change-agreement-hopes-climate-will-cave-give-better-deal/>. Seen December 1st, 2017.

³⁹ Seen March 14th, 2018.

⁴⁰ Seen March 14th, 2018.

would rather withdraw from or cancel their involvement in climate change in order to avoid dealing with its consequences.

Thus, news satire may also qualify as political humor as it serves a critical function: By targeting political inaction and evasion of responsibility when it comes to climate change, such stories simultaneously ridicule and undermine political authority and expose “discrepancies between how things are and how things should be” (Møller, 2018, 38). This is all summarized in *The Onion Book of Known Knowledge*’s entry on “Pollution”: “release of dangerous contaminants into the environment that can wait until later to be rectified, unlike steroid abuse in sports, bullying, Internet piracy, and \$2 bank fees.” (Harris, Reiss, Roeder, & Tracy, 2012, 153)

A particularly bleak version of this criticism comes from the otherwise fairly polite Danish site *RokokoPosten*; a 2015 story has the headline “World leaders: now we really have to do something about those climate changes” (From the future archive, 2053)” (“Verdensledere: Nu skal vi altså virkelig gøre noget ved de klimaforandringer (fra fremtidsarkivet, 2053)”).⁴¹ In this story from the future, nothing consequential has happened in the political reaction to ACC, numerous species have died out, others, including quite common ones like house sparrows and badgers, are on the brink of extinction. Half of Africa is uninhabitable, and New Zealand flooded. In the face of this, the politicians are finally moving into action; or so they say. The level of action actually proposed, however, is abysmally insufficient; the US moves to reduce its emissions by 0.03% and “try to make the state of Maine almost completely CO2 neutral”, and Mongolia promises to get 14% of its energy from renewable sources. So, the story basically takes a pessimistic view of current political discourse concerning ACC and projects it forty years into the future, thus making the dissonance between the gravity of the situation and the lack of political action even more evident.

6.10 A Grim Outlook and a Laugh

A lot of news satire on ACC is definitely bleak in outlook. We have already seen an example of a very grim approach in the segment from *heute-show*. Nevertheless, the implications of the *heute-show* story still were that something could actually be done, and that the fault was with political inaction. However, stories taking the inevitability of climate disaster as their starting point are fairly prolific and can be found in a variety of contexts. A parallel take can be found in the *Rochdale Herald* story “Break-

⁴¹ Seen August 29th, 2018.

ing: Climate Change Inevitable Declare Scientists”⁴² containing this harsh statement among others, supposedly from a climate researcher called Simon Winter:

You can switch your lights off all you want, stop using air freshener and deodorant or buy an electric car. It doesn’t matter because China are burning more coal than we did during the entire industrial revolution every day and cows are farting out holes in the ozone layer bigger than Africa every 30 minutes. Basically we’re fucked.

The quote presents the hopelessness and futility of action without any hope, and without much in the way of redeeming humor. In particular, the quote targets minuscule action taken on an individual level as useless compared to the global developments. The same target can be found in other stories like “Climate Experts Say Only Hope For Saving Planet Lies With People Who Save Napkins From Takeout Order”⁴³ (*The Onion*) and “Woman successfully offsets huge carbon footprint by sharing climate change article on Facebook”⁴⁴ (*NewsThump*) both of which mock ineffectual climate activism.

These kinds of stories are what might be called big-picture stories. They rarely target actual events, the way *heute-show* targeted the UN climate summit or *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver* targets Donald Trump’s announcement that the US would leave the Paris treaty. Instead, they address the big-picture news of the deterioration of the ecosystem and the long-standing political passivity connected to it. Moreover, they make the fears harbored by many people involved in the climate debate, including their feelings of personal responsibility, or – the other way around – their feeling of powerlessness to change anything. They follow the grim prediction of climate research through to their bleakest possible conclusion – and sometimes twist them and turn them for comical effect. This is true also when news satirist move into other genres, thus the entry on “Global Warming” in *The Onion Book of Known Knowledge* describes it as a global threat to civilization that becomes irreversible during the time it takes the reader to read the entry itself. The rendering of what an ocean is, is similarly dark: “continually rising body of water that in 250 years will be a vast ecosystem consisting of fish, algae, abandoned buildings, and 10 billion dead bodies” (144). Similarly, *The Onion*’s atlas, *Our Dumb World*, repeatedly refers to the effect of ACC, thus the Maldives are described as so low-lying as to be “gravely threatened by melting polar ice caps, light rain, and kids doing cannonballs off the coast of India” (198). Also, the description of the South Pole as a hellish ice-scape concludes: “Most agree that Antarctica will soon become a popular vacation spot for tourists looking to escape the 140-degree temperatures and massive flooding of the rest of the world” (Dikkers, DiCenzo, Guterman, & Randazzo, 2007, 238).

⁴² Seen April 4th, 2018.

⁴³ Seen April 9th, 2018.

⁴⁴ Seen April 9th, 2018.

6.11 News Satire for Political Action

The genre use in news satire's treatment of ACC is fairly classical by the genre's own norms and practices. It is probably not feasible to claim ACC news satire as a distinct genre compared to news satire in general in the way, for instance, Cli-Fi is identifiable as a distinct genre of fiction. There are no particular techniques used and no rhetorical purposes distinct from the overall purposes of news satire, in themselves complex. However, two trends do stand out – they are not enough to make a distinct genre but noticeable nonetheless. First, news satire's take on ACC is remarkably consistent. Whereas it usually takes on all possible sides in any given debate, in this one it is well-nigh unidirectional;⁴⁵ it consistently confirms the reality and severity of ACC and ridicules denialism.⁴⁶ Second, the apocalyptic language recurrently present in the coverage of ACC is an otherwise rare phenomenon in news satire – except in a few stories dealing with theological subjects, like *The Beaverton's* “Antichrist able to hire five horsewomen of the apocalypse for the cost of four horsemen”.⁴⁷ Thus, with these exemptions in mind, the way news satire as a genre handles ACC, and tries to act through its utterances, may feasibly be expected to be a parallel to the way it works in other instances.

It is known that news satire can affect the perception of ACC in their addressees. Several studies have investigated the impact of news satire on the public's perception of ACC. A number of studies conclude that satirical TV news programs such as *The Daily Show*, *The Colbert Report*, and *Last Week Tonight* affirm the reality of ACC (Feldman, Leiserowitz, & Maibach, 2011; Feldman 2013; Brewer & McKnight 2015, 2017) and, as a result, may shape audience perception of global warming (Feldman 2013; Brewer & McKnight 2015, 2017). Less is known about the impact of news satire sites like *The Onion*. Several possible impact indicators are possible for news satire

45 Something is inevitably missed in a search like this, but all we have found is a handful amateur stories on *Newsbiscuit*, some fairly vague stories on dedicated conservative sites and a single more professionally done story on *Call the Cops*. The latter story can be found here: <http://www.callthecops.net/arrest-warrant-issued-al-gore-theft-nobel-prize/>. Seen March 6th, 2018. A possible, though not definite, addition is this story from *Waterford Whispers News*: <https://waterfordwhispersnews.com/2016/05/10/dublin-man-beaten-to-death-for-querying-climate-change/>. Seen March 6th, 2018. Another possible candidate could be this story from *the pan-arabia enquirer*: <http://www.panarabiae-nquirer.com/wordpress/ive-flown-half-way-around-world-clear-message-reduce-carbon-emissions/>. Seen July 16th, 2018.

46 This claim contradicts Feldman (2013) who sees a fairly large percentage of statements about ACC on *The Daily Show With John Stewart* and *The Colbert Report* as either dismissive of or at least challenging the severity of ACC. The examples of this given by Feldman, however, are all clearly ironic and not to be taken at face value. This irony is not incidental, but defining for the discourse in both shows and in news satire generally. They are, thus, not dismissive of the severity of ACC, but highlights it through irony.

47 Seen on May 24th, 2018.

services; one such could be their general reach as shown by their respective representations on social media. Looking at leading sites *The Onion* has 11 million followers on Twitter, *The Daily Show with Trevor Noah* has 7,73 million, *The Daily Mash* has 143,000, and *Der Postillion* has 764,000. This puts them on par with leading politicians in their respective countries. By comparison prominent US politicians like VP Mike Pence or Senator Elisabeth Warren have 6,9 and 4,73 million followers, respectively. In the UK, first-line politicians have a significantly larger number of twitter followers than *The Daily Mash*, for instance Boris Johnson at 507,000 followers and Jeremy Corbyn at 1,9 million. *The Daily Mash*, however, does surpass other prominent politician like Keir Stamer (128,000) or Anna Soubry (118,000).⁴⁸ These figures have little to say about the impact of individual stories, but they do indicate that there is a social and political arena available for these stories to influence.

How does news satire act in this arena? Current research indicates that to break down ideological barriers effectively climate communication must be “Thoughtful, respectful, and deliberative” (Moser 2016, 352; see also Moser & Berzonsky, 2015). Yet, as is evident from the examples given, seen from one perspective news satire on climate change frequently appears to be anything but. It is rarely thoughtful. It does acknowledge the basic results of ACC science that climate change is real, serious, and connected to human activity. Beyond that, however, it does not stick to the facts, but invents information freely and runs with any odd idea that can draw a laugh; “objectivity of information presentation is not of primary concern (or even a matter of concern at all)” (Landreville, 2015, 562).

News satire is recurrently disrespectful. Even if this is unsurprising, given that both of the basic genres involved, parody and satire, are generally disrespectful, the approach to climate change is distinctly aggressive even by that standard. News satire is known to break norms of rhetorical objectivity entrenched in journalism; it argues with a chain saw. It routinely resorts to name-calling, often in very creative ways, but name-calling nonetheless, and it is merciless in its treatment of its targets. Thus, in one section *Full Frontal with Samantha Bee* sets up a Hell House to convert a group of hardline climate denialists, but only manages to convince one person, and only because that person is flabbergasted by the utter stupidity of the people with whom she has been on the Hell House tour. News satire, thus, does not strive for a balanced coverage, but for maximum effect, frequently by disrespecting its targets as much as at all possible.

News satire does not appear deliberative. It skips arguments and jumps to conclusions, it does not address the arguments of its targets with sympathy and recognition, it does not engage in a back-and-forth to arrive at points of joint understanding, and it does not lay out its own theoretical and ideological underpinnings for common scrutiny. In its projections of the future effects of current actions, it repeatedly states the

⁴⁸ All numbers checked on January 9, 2019.

worst possible outcome; and it frequently seems to discourage as meaningless any kind of action to mitigate the looming disaster. Thus, taken on the surface meaning alone satire news stories like these are not conducive to any kind of deliberative action, merely to fear, or even panic.

However, when seen from another angle, central features of news satire work clearly to inform and to encourage action in relation to ACC. We leave aside the oft-discussed relationship between storytelling and climate engagement (Moser, 2016 with further reference). The question is highly relevant and deserving of further investigation, but beyond what can be reasonably covered in a chapter like the present. Instead, we will highlight some of the other features where the genre engages in meaningful climate communication. Again, laughter is key. Even if the humor appears grim and aggressive, an obvious respect for the reader or viewer is present at a genre level in news satire, and this may prove to be an important part of its communicative strength. As previously stated, the first purpose of news satire as a humor genre is laughter. However, the laughter in news satire presupposes knowledge of current events, an ability to make complex moves in genre interpretation (Auken, 2015), and an advanced ability to decode parody and irony. In this sense, the hilarity following when a news satire story is taken at face value springs from the surprise of seeing somebody proving themselves unworthy of that respect. Therefore, news satire in its most fundamental genre features respects the independent intelligence of its intended receiver, and thus news satire on ACC communicates the fundamentals of science and the exigent character of the problem while encouraging the receiver to apply her own wit to decipher the message. It engages the viewer actively as an interpreter.

Thus, news satire's recurrent apocalyptic bleakness takes up the fear, dread, and ensuing apathy, in the meeting with the threat of ACC and turns them into laughter. This laughter may be dark to the extreme, but it still offers a different, and more bearable, emotional response to the gravity of the climate threat, and a way to talk about it without succumbing to despair, because the presentation of it is mixed with wit, irony, artistry, and laughter.

The free relation to facts notwithstanding, news satire represents the scientific consensus about ACC better than does much supposed journalism, since it has the basics right: the scientific consensus on the reality and severity of ACC and the grave and dangerous, yet utterly spurious, nature of climate denialism. By consequence, news satire avoids the false balance issues (Antilla, 2005; Boykoff & Boykoff, 2004, 2007; Schmidt, Ivanova & Schäfer, 2013; see also Benestad, Nuccitelli, Lewandowsky, Hayhoe, Hygen, Dorland, & Cook, 2017) that have recurrently muddled valid information about ACC with disinformation by giving recurrent equal coverage to scientifically speaking marginal views. Moreover, news satire denies the denialists the air of swagger, boldness, or interesting bad-boy notoriety, sometimes afforded them in mainstream news coverage (Boykoff, 2013). This is true both when news satire targets named politicians, and when it invents figures for a given story. The ACC denier is, almost invariably, a ridiculous and delusional figure.

In several critical ways this is, in fact, respectful, thoughtful, and deliberative. As previously stated, satire as a genre divides people into two categories, those laughing and those laughed at. The requirement in news satire to be among the laughers is the basic acceptance of climate science and a critical stance towards ineffectual politicians and phony forms of action. This stance is itself a constructive starting point for a sensible approach to climate action.⁴⁹

6.12 News Satire Sites

Call the Cops
 Clickhole
 Daily Squat
 Der Postillion
 Duffel Blog
 Eye of the Tiber
 Faking News
 Lark News
 NewsThumb
 Newsbiscuit
 Reductress
 RokokoPosten
 Southend News Network
 The Babylon Bee
 The Beaverton
 The Borowitz Report
 The Civilian
 The Daily Mash
 The Daily Squat
 The Onion
 The Mideast Beast
 The Rochdale Herald
 The Shovel
 the pan-arabia enquirer
 They Know Nothing
 Very Erzatz News
 Waterford Whisperer News
 UnNews (not searchable)

⁴⁹ The authors wish to thank Amy Devitt for her insights at a crucial point in the process. Thanks are also due to Maria Damkjær and Gísli Magnusson.

6.13 TV-shows

Full Frontal with Samantha Bee
 Heute-show
 Last Week Tonight With John Oliver
 The Colbert Report
 The Daily Show with Jon Stewart
 The Daily Show with Trevor Noah
 The Mash Report

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