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DOI

[10.1093/joc/jqae038](https://doi.org/10.1093/joc/jqae038)

Publication date

2025

Document Version

Final published version

Published in

Journal of Communication

License

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[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Boukes, M. (2025). Deliberation in online political talk: Exploring interactivity, diversity, rationality, and incivility in the public spheres surrounding news vs. satire. *Journal of Communication*, 75(2), 125-136. <https://doi.org/10.1093/joc/jqae038>

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Deliberation in online political talk: exploring interactivity, diversity, rationality, and incivility in the public spheres surrounding news vs. satire

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Abstract

Political satire is often believed to enrich the public sphere in ways distinct from traditional journalism. This study examines whether deliberative qualities of online political talk in response to satire differ from those in response to regular news or partisan news. The analysis focuses on four normative standards: interactivity, diversity, rationality, and civility. A manual content analysis of *YouTube* comments ($n = 2,447$) reveals that the public sphere surrounding political satire shows a notable strength: Less incivility, both in terms of impoliteness and intolerance. Surprisingly, aside from this, satire's public sphere did not differ much from that of regular news. Comments on partisan news were more opinionated and ideologically diverse. These findings suggest that online political talk prompted by satire is not inferior to that of traditional news. Additionally, this study highlights how the presence of different normative standards is often interconnected.

Keywords: satire, public spheres, Habermas, content analysis, deliberation, incivility, diversity.

A large share of the political communication literature is grounded in Habermas' (1989) concept of the public sphere, with "inclusivity" as one of its core principles. According to this idea, everyone has the opportunity to participate in political debate; from those in positions of power to individuals on the periphery. Historically, such interactivity was limited by the one-way, top-down nature of traditional mass media. However, over the past two decades, online platforms have increasingly enabled citizens to engage more actively in public discourse. Despite this, considerable variations remain in how, why, and to what extent people engage in online political talk (Kligler-Vilenchik et al., 2022).

Moreover, the widespread fragmentation of the digital media landscape has arguably led to an empirical reality of *multiple* public spheres—each with their own set of features. Replacing the notion of one monolithic public sphere, Gitlin (2002) has put forward the notion that the centrifugal motion produced by technology created a plurality of fragmented public spheres—coined as "public spherules" (p. 173)—which are organized around distinct affinities (e.g., the feminist movement, see Fraser, 1990), interests, or media genres.

Previous studies (e.g., Freelon, 2015; Jaidka et al., 2019; Ksiazek, 2018) have examined the quality of political talk in the online public sphere(s) since the public began participating in it. In this scholarship, the quality of political talk was often conceptualized by whether it lived up to a set of features characteristic of a healthy public sphere, such as interactivity, diversity, rationality, and respect (Habermas, 1989). Such research, generally, yielded mixed findings. Although incivility (i.e., lack of respect) was oftentimes less present than feared (e.g., Papacharissi, 2004; Rowe, 2015a; Southern & Harmer, 2019), an interactive discussion or exchange of rational and diverse arguments has also not been commonly found (Collins & Nerlich, 2015; Freelon, 2015). This article

explores both the presence of, as well as the associations *between*, these four normative standards of online political talk.

Notably, existing research has either focused on political talk in general or in response to regular news. However, Gitlin's (2002) conceptualization of distinct public spherules raises the question of whether the quality of online political talk differs per sphere—and whether these spheres may revolve around specific communities of media publics. To address this, the current study extends the literature by exploring the genre of political satire in comparison to traditional news. Although satire's ability to promote political talk has been demonstrated (Jeong et al., 2023; Meier & Berg, 2024), *how* this discussion is *characterized* remains to be explored. Theoretical efforts suggest that satire may inspire critical but good-natured conversation about politics (Baym, 2005; Jones & Baym, 2010); amongst others by relieving tension in ideological conflict (Paletz, 1990), which is especially dominant in today's polarized climate. This study therefore investigates whether the public sphere that surrounds political satire is of higher, similar, or lower deliberative quality than that of regular news (Faina, 2013; Holbert et al., 2010). Thereby, this study follows up on the call for an explicit normative approach to the study of political satire (Holbert, 2013).

Typically, studies about political satire experimentally compare viewers' responses to real-world satirical stimuli versus clips of regular journalistic news (see synthesis by Fox, 2022)—often with a single message instantiation for each condition. As many of these studies' authors wrote themselves, this has reduced the internal validity and generalizability of conclusions about the impact of satire: Stimuli (satire vs. news) were very case-specific and often differed on more than one feature from the control condition. Most essentially, satire stimuli were not just more *humorous* but also more *opinionated* than regular news. Hence, one could

Received: July 24, 2023. Revised: September 10, 2024. Accepted: September 23, 2024

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impossibly conclude whether it was the humor unique for satire that was responsible for any found effects, or whether effects were the outcome of satirists expressing an ideological position.

To overcome these limitations, this research presents a large-scale manual content analysis ($n = 2,447$) of user comments responding to not only traditional and satirical news clips, but *also* partisan news clips. Although the study primarily focuses on the differences between satire and traditional news (the main theoretical interest), comparisons with partisan news were included to provide a context where lack of neutrality and the presence of humor are not intertwined. After all, partisan news shares many features with satire (Boukes et al., 2014), especially its *lack of objectivity* (Landreville, 2015). A notable difference, however, is that satire is also marked by its *opinionatedness* with *humor*.

By including partisan clips, a more complete understanding could be gained of which satirical content feature (humor, opinionatedness) that is not present in regular news may be associated with differences in deliberative quality in comparison to regular news. The study's hypotheses were formulated in 2019 before the manual content analysis was completed (January 2022) and pre-registered before the first statistical data analysis (October 2022).¹ Without a randomized exposure, the current study is limited in its ability to draw causal conclusions.

Theoretical foundation: normative standards of deliberative democracy

Before hypothesizing about any differences in deliberative quality of online political talk, it is important to define *which* normative standards one considers characteristic of a high-quality public sphere (Althaus, 2012). After all, these standards are contingent upon the model of democracy one prioritizes (Freelon, 2010). This study followed four normative standards of a deliberative public sphere set out by Habermas (1989, but also inspired by more recent interpretations, for example Freelon, 2010; Friess & Eilders, 2015; Janssen & Kies, 2005): Citizens' engagement in the public sphere should involve (a) an *interaction* between actors who are responding to each other; (b) interactions should be ideologically *diverse*, so citizens can learn from multiple viewpoints; (c) viewpoints should be formulated *rationality*, so the strongest argument may prevail; and (d) this exchange of ideas should be *respectful* to allow reaching consensus. Following Dahlgren (2005), participants in online forums are labeled as "the public" to distinguish them from the passive "audience."

Standard I: interactivity through reciprocity

Satire has been found to trigger political talk (Jeong et al., 2023; Lee, 2012; Lee & Jang, 2017), sometimes even more than regular news—but less than partisan news (Boukes et al., 2022). Yet, the interactive standard of a deliberative public sphere requires that comments also display *reciprocity*: The public is required to do more than just commenting, it should also involve responding to other people. Thus, citizens must be reacting to each other rather than engaging in monologues only (Dahlgren, 2005; Janssen & Kies, 2005). Thus far, this interactive element has not been measured in previous satire studies, which relied on self-reports about the likelihood of engaging in future political discussions (Lee, 2012; Lee & Jang, 2017). Moreover, previous studies reporting

positive effects of satire on political talk (e.g., indirectly via negative emotions, see Lee & Jang, 2017) used a control condition with no media exposure as a benchmark; yet, similar levels of political talk were elicited compared to regular news (Jeong et al., 2023; Lee, 2012).

More generally, research has found that interactivity is *less* likely in response to more popular news videos (Ksiazek et al., 2016). Ziegele et al. (2014), for example, found more interactive dialogue among the German public of the serious magazine *Spiegel* compared to tabloid *Bild*. The reason is, arguably, that engaging in online dialogue is motivated by reasons of information sharing and social interaction, but *not* by the gratification of entertainment (Khan, 2017). Accordingly, it may be that the more entertaining genre of satire would be associated with relatively less interactivity in online political talk as compared to regular news, which is predominantly consumed for information gratification. After all, people do not only watch satire for information or to update their opinions (Barnard & Boukes, 2024), but also for reasons of escapism (Lee, 2013) and entertainment (Diddi & LaRose, 2006; Feldman, 2013). Thus, whereas satire may still trigger one-way commenting about viewing experiences (Boukes et al., 2022), it does not necessarily encourage online political talk in the form of two-way interaction with others (Bode & Becker, 2018; Lee, 2012).

H₁: *Online political talk in the context of political satire is less interactive than online political talk in the context of regular news.*

Standard II: ideological diversity in the expression of opinions

"Informed pluralism of opinion" (Habermas, 2022, p. 151) is a precondition for citizens to comprehensively form their opinions and make rationally informed decisions. Discussions need disagreement to allow an exchange of diverse ideas (Papacharissi, 2004). As Habermas (2022, p. 152) stated, "to argue is to contradict": Only with mutual criticism, we can learn from each other. Inter-ideological reciprocity benefits quality of debate from a deliberative perspective (Freelon, 2010) compared to situations in which one ideology dominates (Janssen & Kies, 2005). However, people often prefer discussion partners that hold similar opinions as themselves (Morey et al., 2018). Especially, the online public sphere is feared for its alleged risk of causing "fragmented, self-enclosed echo chambers" (Habermas, 2022, p. 159), and it is still unknown which news genre(s) can break through such echo chambers most effectively.

Political satire is often perceived as more biased than regular news, and also more biased than partisan news (Arpan et al., 2011). As satire accordingly attracts a liberal audience (Young, 2020) and has the potential to release tension rather than to increase tension between political opposites (Paletz, 1990), this potentially reduces the diversity in political talk compared to regular news. Moreover, cross-cutting exposure through satire *reduces* political efficacy (Becker, 2014)—making people feel less self-confident—potentially evoking a spiral-of-silence, which would make it unlikely to express opinions and ideologically diverse ideas to a perceived non-likeminded public (Lee, 2012):

H₂: *Online political talk in the context of political satire is less ideologically diverse than online political talk in the context of regular news.*

Standard III: rational exchange of ideas

Deliberative theory of democracy emphasizes the importance of a better argument quality (Friess & Eilders, 2015; Habermas, 2022). In this theory, public deliberation is expected to occur with the use of logic and reason (Dahlgren, 2005; Delli Carpini et al., 2004): When citizens discuss the news, they should ideally justify their arguments with internal logic or external sources (Janssen & Kies, 2005; Rowe, 2015b). Commenting rationally is indeed not uncommon in online debate, because *information sharing* is one of the most important motives to participate in online political talk (Khan, 2017; Kligler-Vilenchik et al., 2022).

When features of news are used as predictor variables, it has been found that factors of conflict, emotional language, and background information *stimulate* rationality in online political talk (Ziegele et al., 2020), because they would facilitate the public to make sense of their own experiences in their argumentation. These content features are, moreover, characteristic of modern TV satire too (e.g., Baym, 2005; Richmond & Porpora, 2019). Furthermore, satire is not short of substantive content (Kilby, 2018). In contrast, satire is heavily focused on political issues and actors (Haigh & Heresco, 2010), with political substance levels equal to that of regular news (Fox et al., 2007). Moreover, satire tends to thematically frame issues in light of societal relevance (Brewer & Marquardt, 2007; Ödmark, 2018) and satire's jokes are more likely to target politicians' "flawed policy" than their physical appearance or personality (Matthes & Rauchfleisch, 2013).

These features and the content of satire may, therefore, evoke more issue-relevant thinking than regular news (LaMarre & Walther, 2013) and trigger more mental effort to rationally think about its message (Feldman, 2013; Xenos & Becker, 2009). Regular news, by contrast, is often presented in factual and abstract terms, which is unlikely to inspire the public to contemplate the matter further (Buckingham, 1997; Costera Meijer, 2003). The heady, thoughtful, and reasoned discussions in political satire, therefore, might contribute relatively more to rational political talk than regular news (Baym, 2005):

H₃: *Online political talk in the context of political satire is more rational than online political talk in the context of regular news.*

Standard IV: respectful discussion *without* incivility

Finally, research on the quality of online public spheres emphasizes the importance of respect (Habermas, 1989). Most studies operationalized this as the *absence* of respect; in the form of incivility. This incivility is by many considered a major problem in online news commentary (Shearer & Grieco, 2019). Research confirmed incivility's undesirable outcomes: Incivility decreases open-mindedness (Borah, 2014), silences alternative views, and potentially invokes a "spiral of incivility" in subsequent comments (Hsueh et al., 2015).

Papacharissi (2004), nevertheless, made a strong plea for *heated* discussion in which politeness is not necessarily required as long as the collective principles of democracy are not threatened. Accordingly, Rossini (2022, p. 416) formulated: "Results show that incivility and intolerance occur in meaningfully different discussion settings. Whereas incivility is associated with features that reveal meaningful discursive engagement, such as justified opinion expression and engagement with disagreement, intolerance is likely to occur in homogeneous discussions about minorities and civil society—exactly when it can hurt democracy the most."

Incivility is thus a multidimensional concept, which caused challenges in constructing an operationalizable construct for empirical investigation; eventually, this has resulted in inconsistent operationalizations throughout the literature (see Ng et al., 2020). The current study follows Rossini's line-of-thought by operationalizing incivility into two sub-concepts: (a) interpersonal *impoliteness* and (b) *intolerance* for democratic principles. This acknowledges the multisided nature of the incivility concept, and it allows us to theoretically differentiate and empirically test for differences between the more problematic type of incivility (i.e., intolerance) versus the less severe form of impoliteness (Papacharissi, 2004).

Similar to frame-setting processes (Burgers et al., 2016), the mockery discourse of satire might potentially set the tone for uncivil political talk by its public. However, uncivil comments are partly motivated by anger (Elsayed & Hollingshead, 2022); and exactly this anger is reduced by humor (e.g., Baron & Ball, 1974; Skurka et al., 2018), because satire evokes the impression that not everything should be taken too seriously. Hence, satire appears as less confrontational than regular news (Warner, 2007).

Inasmuch, the general irreverence of satire toward political actors does not necessarily spill over to the audience's style of communicating with each other (Elsayed & Hollingshead, 2022). In contrast, political satire may mitigate the public's tendency to attack people on the other side of the ideological aisle with uncivil comments, because humor and laughter have the potential to relieve tension (Paletz, 1990). In that way, satire may create a playful atmosphere in which citizens perceive "the other" not as an enemy (Jones & Baym, 2010) but as a legitimate discussion partner (Paletz, 1990). By reducing the stress that people otherwise experience when debating about political issues, political talk in the humorous context of satire may be relatively more respectful (Elsayed & Hollingshead, 2022):

H₄: *Online political talk in the context of political satire is less uncivil—in the form of (a) impoliteness and (b) intolerance—than online political talk in the context of regular news.*

Method

Data

A dataset of *YouTube* user comments was scraped in the fall of 2019. These were comments in response to a variety of the most popular U.S. news and satire shows at the time of data collection. Specifically, six regular news programs were included, six partisan news shows from the left and the right, and seven satirical news shows (Table 1); all of which were available on *YouTube* as separate channels or playlists (i.e.,

Table 1. Overview of included TV news shows and number of manually annotated comments per number of sampled videos and topic

Regular news	Scraped		Video Clips: Manually Annotated Comments			
	<i>N</i> video posts	<i>N</i> comments	<i>n</i> Mueller/Comey	<i>n</i> economy	<i>n</i> Middle East	<i>n</i> total
<i>60 Minutes</i> (CBS)	1,086	173,015	1:18	24:80	0:0	25:98
<i>CBS Evening News</i>	16,421	886,238	6:31	8:24	16:61	30:116
<i>Face the Nation</i> (CBS)	3,735	211,702	6:55	2:2	11:35	19:92
<i>Meet the Press</i> (NBC)	8,30	151,591	4:25	0:0	0:0	4:25
<i>NBC News</i>	17,766	2,312,324	21:57	18:39	29:75	68:171
<i>World News Tonight</i> (ABC)	1,101	573,207	2:24	3:64	3:72	8:60
<i>n</i> regular news =	40,939	4,308,077	40:210	55:209	59:243	154:662
Partisan news (conservative)						
<i>Hannity</i> (FoxNews)	274	578,863	10:59	3:53	3:57	16:169
<i>Tucker Carlson Tonight</i> (FoxNews)	970	1,334,534	15:116	19:90	16:95	50:301
<i>n</i> conservative partisan news =	1,244	1,913,397	25:175	22:143	19:152	66:470
Partisan news (liberal)						
<i>Anderson Cooper 360</i> (CNN)	277	601,972	7:55	6:88	2:40	15:183
<i>Hardball with Chris Matthews</i> (MSNBC)	986	366,910	15:51	14:49	16:76	45:176
<i>The 11th Hour</i> (MSNBC)	1,282	608,775	23:58	4:11	0:0	27:69
<i>The Rachel Maddow Show</i> (MSNBC)	3	266	0:0	1:18	2:19	3:37
<i>n</i> liberal partisan news =	2,548	1,577,923	45:164	25:166	20:135	90:465
Political satire						
<i>Full Frontal with Samantha Bee</i> (TBS)	1,005	378,891	1:1	6:15	6:41	13:57
<i>Last Week Tonight</i> (HBO)	282	2,513,239	0:0	7:56	2:18	9:74
<i>Late Night with Seth Meyers</i> (NBC)	2,917	1,443,076	16:72	5:19	9:57	30:148
<i>Late Show with Colbert</i> (CBS)	5,700	6,197,897	27:74	18:53	22:58	67:185
<i>Patriot Act with Hasan Minhaj</i> (Netflix)	86	180,113	0:0	2:26	0:0	2:26
<i>Real Time with Bill Maher</i> (HBO)	1,616	1,632,549	4:60	8:54	12:58	24:172
<i>The Daily Show</i> (Comedy Central)	1,677	3,129,185	13:72	18:56	16:60	47:188
<i>n</i> political satire =	13,283	15,474,950	61:279	64:279	67:293	192:850
Total (<i>n</i>)			171:828	166:797	165:822	502:2,447

Note. Bold letters indicate the column total for a specific genre.

allowing a clean way of data scraping). The U.S. context was chosen because it provides a rich diversity of satire and partisan news shows, which is rare in most other countries. Moreover, the USA is a global trendsetter regarding satire productions (Lipson et al., 2023), making it likely that the findings have applicability beyond the studied context. The study focused on *YouTube*, as this is the main video-led network through which people consume online audiovisual content—and it increasingly grows as a source of news for the general public (Newman et al., 2023).

Data were collected that contained the exact video descriptions that TV shows' accounts had posted to *YouTube* (i.e., the video blurbs): For the overwhelming majority, these videos were segments of episodes about one specific news event/topic (and not full episodes). Next, the user comments in response to these videos were scraped. Details of how the data were scraped are described in Appendix B of Boukes et al. (2022).

Sampling

To enhance the similarity of analyzed comments (i.e., stability of content and, thus, internal validity of genre comparisons), three prominent political topics were selected from the dataset. Video topic is important to keep constant because the topic of news is a strong predictor of whether and how people comment on it (Stroud et al., 2016). The Latent Dirichlet Allocation Topic Model approach was used to determine the most prominent topics in all of the scraped *YouTube* videos (see Appendix C of Boukes et al. (2022), for the full LDA procedure). Three topics occurred most prominently across the three genres: the Mueller/Comey investigation, the economy, and the Middle East.

YouTube videos about these three topics were selected from the scraped dataset using a keyword search: 192 satire clips, 154 regular news clips, and 156 partisan news clips (Table 1 presents distribution per genre, show, and topic). Next, the dataset was split into nine sub-sets (three topics × three genres). For these nine subsets, an approximately equal number of comments was randomly sampled for each of the topic-genre combinations. To do so in a balanced manner, comments were proportionally sampled per show; that is, for shows with fewer video clips on a specific topic, more comments per clip were selected, and vice-versa (for shows with many video clips on a topic, relatively fewer comments were sampled).²

This stratified random sampling achieved a most balanced sample of comments per genre, topic, and show; thereby, the comments of one show could not dominate the dataset. Moreover, this sampling strategy maximized the variance across genres and topics as well as optimized the generalizability of the manually annotated sample. A fully randomized sample would have resulted in a skewed sample (e.g., an imbalanced set of comments across genres and/or topics) that would restrict the statistical power; because (a) some shows elicited more comments in general and (b) some shows published more/less videos on a certain topic (also see Table 1).

Measurements

Coder training and intercoder reliability

Using coding instructions from existing codebooks that were developed, tested, and validated in previous studies (e.g., Freelon, 2015; Papacharissi, 2004; Rossini, 2022; Rowe, 2015a, 2015b; Southern & Harmer, 2021; Ziegele et al., 2020), a comprehensive codebook was constructed

with items that have already been found reliable in existing research (see [Supplementary Appendix Table B1](#)).³ Notwithstanding their reliability in previous studies, the current research underwent a rigorous process of coder training and further validation of codebook items. Six rounds of coder training with two graduate students were conducted to achieve the best possible shared understanding of variables; the same two coders eventually also conducted all coding work. Four rounds were sufficient for interactivity, diversity, and incivility; a fifth and sixth rounds of training were necessary to optimize the reliability of the rationality items. To test inter-coder reliability, 200 comments were double coded.

[Supplementary Appendix Table B1](#) provides an overview of variables and inter-coder reliability. Unless noted otherwise, answer options were dichotomized into a binary option as “no” (0) or “yes” (1). Coding work began in May 2021 and was completed by January 2022. Krippendorff’s α and %-agreement are presented because α is easily undermined by skewed variables. As demonstrated by the Monte Carlo simulation study by [Geiß \(2021\)](#), a large sample size will partly compensate for the low(er) reliability of coding items.

Interactivity

The interactivity of a comment was measured by whether it referred to a comment or a claim of another commenter; regardless of its specific content (i.e., opinion, rationality or incivility). Thus, it indicates whether a commenter acknowledged the existence of other comments; and, thereby, showed that *at least* some kind of interaction or exchange had taken place between individual commenters (30.9% of comments).

Diversity

Whether a comment expressed any ideological position on a societal or political issue was measured first. This is, logically, a requirement for any diversity to occur. Next, coders determined whether a comment disagreed with the comment of another discussant; a condition was set that this “disagreement” only indicated ideological “opinion expression” if the comment was also coded as being politically relevant (otherwise, it could e.g., be disagreement about the dress of Kim Kardashian). Then, comments were categorized as being of (a) liberal/Democrat nature, (b) neutral nature with attacks to both political sides, (c) conservative/Republican nature, or (d) the absence of any ideological direction (see [Freelon, 2015](#); [Rowe, 2015b](#)). All three items were combined into one variable that measured whether any kind of political opinion was expressed or not. Furthermore, a variable was constructed that classified comments on what *kind* of ideological opinion was expressed: liberal (20.4%), no ideological direction, neutral, mixed or unclear opinion (64.1%), or conservative (15.5%). The “no ideological direction, neutral, mixed or unclear opinion” was used as the reference category in the analyses.

Rationality

Three items of existing codebooks were combined to measure rationality ([Freelon, 2015](#); [Rowe, 2015b](#); [Ziegele et al., 2020](#)). First, whether a comment used explicit reasoning and/or argumentation (i.e., elaboration on the opinion that was put forward, for example, using the word “because,” see [Camaj & Santana, 2015](#)). Second, whether the comment analyzed the background of the addressed issue or provided background information. And third, whether external evidence was provided (e.g., facts, verifiable evidence). The three

variables were summed and recoded into a dichotomous variable (scoring “1” if at least one of the three rational elements was present; 18.1% of comments). It proved to be difficult to achieve a closely aligned understanding across coders for these items, which resulted in a low intercoder-reliability (also partly due to its rare presence).

Respect: absence of incivility (i.e., impoliteness and intolerance)

Similar to previous work, respectful dialogue was operationalized as the absence of “incivility” ([Friess & Eilders, 2015](#)). Incivility was measured by following the codebook of [Papacharissi \(2004\)](#); see the codebook in the Appendix of [Rowe, 2015a](#), for details). Two items were added from other studies ([Southern & Harmer, 2019](#); [Ziegele et al., 2020](#)): (a) accusing others of incompetence or questioning their intelligence and (b) suggesting or invoking violence. Following [Papacharissi \(2004\)](#), two subdimensions of incivility were then distinguished: impoliteness and intolerance. The *impolite* expressions included name-calling, vulgarity, questioning intelligence or competency, shouting, and sarcasm. *Intolerant* expressions occur when constitutional principles are not respected, which eventually delegitimizes anything else that is being said ([Habermas, 2022](#)). This component was measured with three items: (a) threatening individual rights; (b) discrimination; and (c) invoking violence. Both concepts summed all their separate items and were then recoded into a dichotomous variable indicating whether at least one element of impoliteness (52.5% of comments) or one element of intolerance (5.0% of comments) was present.

Analysis

Multi-level logistic regression analysis was employed to test the hypotheses, because of the dependent variables’ dichotomous nature and nested structure of the data. Comments were nested in the respective shows to which they responded to account for a potentially mutual dependence of observations (i.e., units-of-analysis from one show may not be independent from another). The genre of the video was the central independent variable: satire (reference category), regular news; conservative partisan news; or liberal partisan news. Time (i.e., year) was included as control variable.

Due to the inherent interrelationships between the outcome variables (e.g., rationality is more likely in comments that express opinions), all analyses control for the influence of the other features of online political talk. Although not central to this manuscript’s theoretical aims, this contributes new insights into how the normative standards of online political talk are interconnected. An exploratory analysis of the associations between the four normative standards is presented at the end of the Results section (these were not pre-registered).

Results

Interactivity

Hypothesis 1 predicted that online political talk in the context of political satire would be less interactive than in the surrounding of regular news or partisan news. No significant differences regarding interactivity were, however, yielded between satire and regular news ($p = .169$, see [Table 2](#)). Also, the differences between satire and partisan news (both conservative and liberal) were insignificant; just as the differences between partisan and regular news ($p > .454$). H_1 was therefore rejected; interactivity was stable across genres.

Table 2. Logistic regression models predicting “interactivity,” “opinion expression,” and “rationality” as dependent variables

Independent variable	Interactivity				Opinion expression				Rationality			
	<i>b</i>	(SE)	<i>p</i>	OR	<i>b</i>	(SE)	<i>p</i>	OR	<i>b</i>	(SE)	<i>p</i>	OR
Intercept	157.68	(93.57)	.092		-118.60	(107.82)	.271		196.74	(116.29)	.091	
Satire (0) vs. Regular news (1)	-0.16	(0.12)	.169	0.85	0.10	(0.20)	.597	1.11	0.23	(0.15)	.115	1.26
Satire (0) vs. Conservative partisan news (1)	-0.11	(0.14)	.402	0.89	0.64	(0.25)	.009	1.90	0.08	(0.16)	.607	1.09
Satire (0) vs. Liberal partisan news (1)	-0.06	(0.13)	.653	0.94	0.78	(0.22)	.000	2.17	-0.17	(0.17)	.305	0.84
Year	-0.08	(0.05)	.091	0.92	0.06	(0.05)	.276	1.06	-0.10	(0.06)	.086	0.91
Topic: Economy	-0.29	(0.11)	.011	0.75	-0.64	(0.13)	.000	0.53	0.23	(0.14)	.108	1.26
Topic: Middle East	0.01	(0.11)	.961	1.01	-0.19	(0.12)	.121	0.83	0.34	(0.14)	.015	1.40
Feature: Interactivity					-0.31	(0.11)	.003	0.73	0.80	(0.12)	.000	2.23
Feature: Diversity (Liberal)	-0.47	(0.13)	.000	0.63					1.28	(0.14)	.000	3.61
Feature: Diversity (Conservative)	-0.70	(0.15)	.000	0.50					1.17	(0.15)	.000	3.22
Feature: Rationality	0.80	(0.12)	.000	2.23	2.08	(0.15)	.000	8.01				
Feature: Incivility (impoliteness)	-0.34	(0.10)	.001	0.71	1.65	(0.10)	.000	5.22	0.45	(0.12)	.000	1.57
Feature: Incivility (intolerance)	-0.29	(0.23)	.201	0.75	0.76	(0.24)	.001	2.15	-0.20	(0.25)	.427	0.82
<i>n</i>		2,447				2,447				2,447		

Note. Cells contain unstandardized logistic regression coefficients (*b*) with standard errors (SE) in parentheses, probabilities (*p*; two-tailed), and OR.

Table 3. Cross-tabulations of comments’ ideological direction per genre

Comment’s ideology	Satirical news	Regular news	Conservative partisan news	Liberal partisan news	Total
No Ideology	550 (64.7%)	427 (64.5%)	220 (46.8%)	199 (42.8%)	1,396 (57.1%)
Liberal	158 (18.6%)	105 (15.9%)	93 (19.8%)	144 (31.0%)	500 (20.4%)
Neutral	60 (7.1%)	38 (5.7%)	35 (7.4%)	38 (8.2%)	171 (7.0%)
Conservative	82 (9.6%)	92 (13.9%)	122 (26.0%)	84 (18.1%)	380 (15.5%)
Total	850 (100%)	662 (100%)	470 (100%)	465 (100%)	2,477 (100%)

Diversity

A prerequisite for ideological diversity is that people express any kind of political opinion. No significant differences were yielded regarding the likelihood that comments expressed a political opinion in the contexts of political satire versus regular news ($p = .597$, see Table 2). However, the comments in response to partisan news were about twice as likely to be opinionated than comments in the surrounding of both satire and regular news ($p < .01$).

Whereas online political talk regarding satire (and regular news) was thus less opinionated overall, H_2 predicted that the comments surrounding satire would also be less ideologically diverse. A cross-tabulation analysis (see Table 3) of all comments, Pearson $\chi^2(12) = 132.16$, $p < .001$, showed that the proportion of liberal versus conservative comments was more balanced in the context of regular news (15.9% vs. 13.9%) than satire (18.6% vs. 9.7%). Moreover, the comments under partisan news also had a larger proportion of opposing opinions than satire (liberal news: 18.1% conservative comments; conservative news: 19.8% liberal comments). This aligns with H_2 .

Multinomial logistic regression with standard errors clustered in the respective shows was used to test whether these ideological differences of comments were significant when also controlling for year, topic, and the other deliberative features (see Supplementary Appendix Table C1). No significant differences were observed for the comparison of satire vs. regular news for the likelihood of comments being either of liberal ($p = .357$) or conservative nature ($p = .470$) compared to

neutral/mixed comments. Thus, H_2 was not confirmed. Yet, comments in response to satire were less likely to express liberal opinions ($p = .012$) than comments made in the context of liberal partisan news. Comments in response to liberal partisan news, moreover, were also more likely to put forward a conservative opinion than satire ($p = .004$); the same was found for the comparison of satire and conservative partisan news ($p < .001$). Thus, partisan news was associated with more ideologically diverse comments; but this was not the case for satire, which combines partisan opinionatedness with humor.

Rationality

No significant differences were yielded when comparing the rationality of online political talk between satire, regular news, and partisan news (see Table 2). Hence, H_3 was not confirmed. Interestingly, the comparison between regular news and liberal partisan news yielded a significant difference (comments in response to regular news are more rational; $p = .015$); all other comparisons were insignificant. Thus, a liberal bias in (partisan) news may be associated with less rationality, but not in the surrounding of the humorous satire genre.

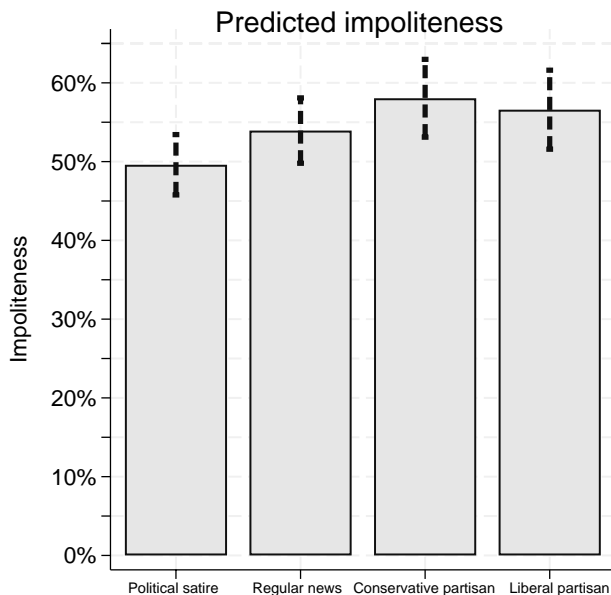
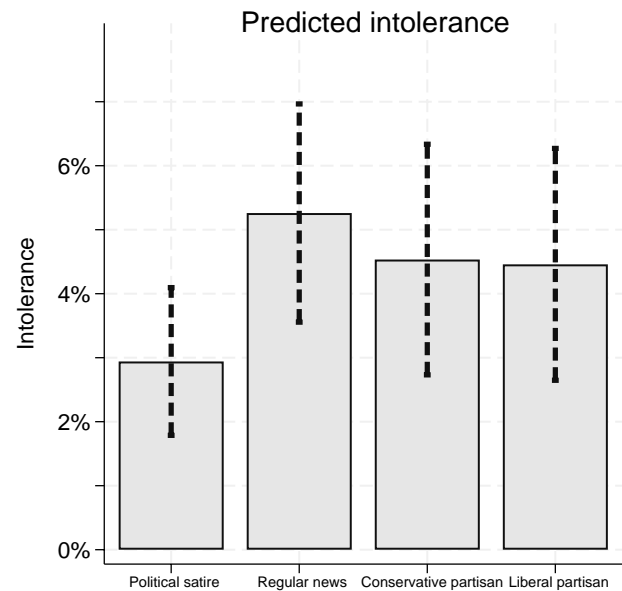
Respect

The absence of respect (i.e., incivility) was operationalized in two sub-dimensions: impoliteness and intolerance; the association between both was weak (Pearson’s $r = .095$), demonstrating their independent nature. Impoliteness in online political talk was found to be relatively more present in the surrounding of both liberal and conservative partisan news compared to political satire (odds ratio, OR, factor of

Table 4. Logistic regression models predicting incivility's two sub-dimensions as DV

Independent variable	Impoliteness				Intolerance			
	<i>b</i>	(SE)	<i>p</i>	OR	<i>b</i>	(SE)	<i>p</i>	OR
Intercept	52.77	(93.79)	.574		57.60	(203.43)	.777	
Satire (0) vs. Regular news (1)	0.18	(0.12)	.121	1.20	0.61	(0.27)	.022	1.84
Satire (0) vs. Conservative partisan news (1)	0.34	(0.13)	.011	1.40	0.45	(0.29)	.120	1.57
Satire (0) vs. Liberal partisan news (1)	0.28	(0.13)	.034	1.32	0.43	(0.30)	.145	1.54
Year	−0.03	(0.05)	.571	0.97	−0.03	(0.10)	.761	0.97
Topic: Economy	−0.22	(0.11)	.042	0.80	−0.14	(0.27)	.606	0.87
Topic: Middle East	−0.23	(0.11)	.036	0.79	0.75	(0.23)	.001	2.12
Feature: Interactivity	−0.33	(0.10)	.001	0.72	−0.29	(0.23)	.208	0.75
Feature: Diversity (Liberal)	1.69	(0.13)	.000	5.44	0.32	(0.24)	.184	1.38
Feature: Diversity (Conservative)	1.31	(0.13)	.000	3.70	0.59	(0.25)	.020	1.80
Feature: Rationality	0.45	(0.12)	.000	1.57	−0.20	(0.25)	.428	0.82
Feature: Incivility (impoliteness)					0.80	(0.22)	.000	2.23
Feature: Incivility (intolerance)								
<i>n</i>		2,447				2,447		

Note. Cells contain unstandardized logistic regression coefficients (*b*) with standard errors (*SE*) in parentheses, probabilities (*p*; two-tailed), and OR.

**Figure 1.** Predicted probability of impoliteness per genre.**Figure 2.** Predicted probability of intolerance per genre.

1.3–1.4 more likely); no significant difference was found when comparing satire to regular news ($p = .121$, see Table 4). The effect on impoliteness is visualized in Figure 1.

For the most severe form of incivility (Papacharissi, 2004; Rossini, 2022), a pattern was yielded that satire led to relatively less *intolerant* online political talk than regular news (see Figure 2): The comments under regular news videos were about 1.8 times more likely ($p < .022$) to contain elements of intolerance than comments in the context of political satire. The differences with partisan news regarding intolerance were not significant. Figures 1 and 2 illustrate that online political talk in the context of satire—for both sub-concepts of incivility—has the lowest likelihood of being uncivil. Thus, the found evidence was largely in line with H_4 .

Associations between features of online political talk

With the analyses presented above, a unique opportunity emerged to explore how the different deliberative features of online political talk associate with each other. Table 5 summarizes the OR results of the previously presented logistic

regression analyses (i.e., OR values below 1.00 indicate a negative relationship).

Overall, interactivity was less likely in comments that expressed a political opinion and also in comments that carry impolite elements; but interactivity was more likely to be found in comments with rationality. Opinion-expressing comments were, generally, more often rational, impolite (i.e., especially the Liberal comments), and intolerant (i.e., especially the Conservative comments). Besides interactivity and opinion expression, rationality was also positively associated with impoliteness but not with intolerance. Thus, impolite online political talk occurred more often in opinion-expressing, rational, and non-interactive comments. Intolerance stood rather on itself, only being more prominent in conservative opinion-expressing comments.

Discussion

By engaging in online political talk, the public participates in discursive interactional processes (Dahlgren, 2005)

Table 5. Overview of relationships between deliberative features of online political talk

Independent	Dependent variables				
	Interactivity	Opinion	Rationality	Impoliteness	Intolerance
Interactivity	—	0.73	2.23	0.72	0.75 <i>n.s.</i>
Ideology: Liberal	0.63	—	3.61	5.44	1.38 <i>n.s.</i>
Ideology: Conservative	0.50	—	3.22	3.70	1.80
Rationality	2.23	8.01	—	1.57	0.82 <i>n.s.</i>
Impoliteness	0.71	5.22	1.57	—	2.23
Intolerance	0.75 <i>n.s.</i>	2.15	0.82 <i>n.s.</i>	2.21	—

Note. Cells contain OR values; values above 1.00 indicate a positive association, whereas value below 1.00 are indicative of a negative association. Variables on the vertical axis (on the left) predict the variables on the horizontal axis. Relationships were significant at $p < .050$, unless noted otherwise with *n.s.* (non-significant); *p-values* with three decimals are presented in Tables 2 and 4.

through which they can construct their “political selves” (Van Zoonen, 2007, p. 544). This behavior is normatively desirable when evaluated from the perspective of deliberative democracy if it happens along the lines of normative standards (Habermas, 1989, 2022). This study contributes to the literature by scrutinizing the actual *content* of online political talk rather than the *frequency* of political discussion (e.g., Boukes et al., 2022; Jeong et al., 2023; Lee & Jang, 2017). Thereby, satire’s contribution to the public sphere has been explored along four normative standards: Are the comments made in the context of political satire contributing to a lively public sphere or are these comments mostly irrelevant (or perhaps damaging) from a democratic perspective?

Across-the-board, the comments made in the context of political satire turned out to be rather similar to those made in the context of regular news. From a positive point of view, satire could thus be understood as a valuable genre, which inspires online political talk of a similar democratic quality as journalism. From a less optimistic perspective, these findings do not meet the high expectations that Baym (2005) argued for regarding satire’s contribution to deliberative democracy: Although satire’s content potentially stands out on deliberative criteria compared to regular news (Baym, 2005), this is not reflected in how the audience responds to it through their commentary. These limited differences have implications for public sphere theory: The predicted variation between genres’ public sphericules (Gitlin, 2002) is less pronounced than expected. Arguably, online culture and the digital setting as well as the existing political atmosphere already present such a strong blueprint, that it is difficult for news genres to reshape how people engage in political talk.

This study found that only a minority of comments (30.9%) included elements of interactive dialogue with no significant differences between genres. The expectation that online political talk in the context of satire would be *less* interactive than in the surrounding of regular news was therefore *not* confirmed. The lack of interactivity in user comments aligns with the findings of previous studies (e.g., Collins & Nerlich, 2015; Freelon, 2015).

Further, no differences in comments’ rationality were found for satire compared to regular and partisan news. This was surprising because satire has been shown to encourage the public to elaborate on its content (Feldman, 2013; LaMarre & Walther, 2013). The lower measurement reliability of this concept will have caused higher standard errors and, thus, conservative estimates that potentially underestimate this effect (Scharkow & Bachl, 2017). However, even then, the yielded (insignificant)

relationships pointed toward a *negative* association between satire and rationality, which contradicts the hypothesis.

Whereas no differences were found concerning interactivity and rationality, the results for ideological diversity showed that comments to partisan news were more likely to express an ideological opinion than comments toward either satire or regular news. This echoes with findings that satire causes less controversy among its viewers (Boukes et al., 2022). Political humor may, thus, dampen the power of opinionatedness in news (i.e., present in both partisan news and satire) to inspire an ideologically diverse discussion.

A notable strength of satire is that commenters are less likely to express themselves in non-respectful ways: Comments to satire were less likely to be impolite and had a lower likelihood of being intolerant. This replicates experimental findings that satire restrains the public’s tendency to comment in uncivil terms (Elsayed & Hollingshead, 2022) in the natural setting of real-world online discussions. The finding is even more noticeable, because the public of satire is relatively more liberal (Young, 2020), while previous research found that liberals tend to be *more* uncivil in online debate (Rains et al., 2017; Theocharis et al., 2020). The current findings confirm that liberal comments were more likely to be impolite than conservative comments (OR = 1.45, $p = .023$), whereas both did not differ in intolerance ($p = .327$). Nevertheless, the comments in the context of satire were still the least uncivil.

Most literature states that respect is a prerequisite for an open dialogue to arrive at a commonly agreed-upon consensus (Collins & Nerlich, 2015; Friess & Eilders, 2015; Ksiazek et al., 2015). Impoliteness (e.g., profanity, offensive, or vulgar language) just as intolerance would silence the other (Dahlberg, 2001) and limit the ability of the public to constructively respond to each other (Theocharis et al., 2016; Wessler, 2008). Hence, the widely shared fear that incivility hampers the health of the online public sphere (Shearer & Grieco, 2019) is seemingly less problematic in the surrounding of political satire.

However, Papacharissi (2004) has also expressed that in *heated* political discussions, politeness is not necessarily required and even cannot be expected from the public. The priority in such discussions would ideally be the exchange of rational ideas and the expression of opinions, rather than strictly adhering to social niceties. In these cases, impoliteness (n.b., *not* intolerance) might simply reflect the intensity and perceived urgency of political discourse. This theoretical reflection is empirically confirmed in this study (Table 4): Impoliteness did *not* go at the cost of opinion expression and

rationality, but instead was positively associated with both these normative standards. Impoliteness, however, also decreased the likelihood of interactivity.

These insights gained about the associations between the normative standards of online political talk were possible due to the design of this study, which explored the features of the online public sphere through a content analysis of user comments. Although surely not an alternative for experimental methods to investigate the *causal* direction of satire effects, this method does circumvent a limitation of most existing satire research, including that of the author: It has always been difficult to generalize conclusions to the satire genre in general, simply because experimental conditions were too case-specific (e.g., Boukes & LaMarre, 2023) or differed on too many aspects from the comparison condition (i.e., not just the inclusion of satire/humor; e.g., Boukes et al., 2015). In experimental stimuli, different topics or story angles were presented by different hosts in different settings of different channels, which could all be alternative explanations (i.e., confounding factors) for the found effects instead of the genre difference.

For example, in the many studies on the *The Daily Show*, it was perhaps not the satire itself, but Jon Stewart's presence that was more convincing, trustworthy, or informative (not per se solely more humorous) than the regular news host in the control/news condition, which might have caused the effect. And when more internally valid, self-crafted stimuli were used (e.g., Boukes et al., 2015; Holbert et al., 2011), these were often not as funny as satire in the real world (i.e., lacking external validity). Moreover, people may respond differently in experimental settings where they know that their answers—and perhaps their sense of humor—are being observed (i.e., ecological validity). This study instead used a large spectrum of satire shows—seven in total—and compared the real-world online comments toward hundreds of satire videos with the videos of regular and partisan news shows. Thereby, the findings are arguably more generalizable to the satire genre as a whole, although the study is still restricted to the U.S. context and the three selected topics.

A limitation of this study is its inability to draw causal conclusions. Lacking random assignment to experimentally controlled conditions, one cannot be sure that the public actually watched the videos they commented on. Moreover, the findings may be partly attributed to selective exposure processes rather than to content differences between satire and regular news. Political satire in the USA is an inherently liberal phenomenon (Young, 2020) and unlikely to appeal to conservative audiences (Knobloch-Westerwick & Lavis, 2017); moreover, it particularly attracts the attention of a younger public (Boukes et al., 2015; Cao, 2008; Hmielowski et al., 2011). These audience features are an integral part of satire's public sphere and could, therefore, also partly explain the findings.

This study focused on *YouTube*, the most used social network for audiovisual news consumption (Newman et al., 2023). With the rapid rise of *TikTok* as a source of news (Newman et al., 2023) and the presence of major satire and news shows on this video platform, it would be relevant to also investigate how online political talk differentially unfolds there. Even subtle differences in comment section structures may influence the deliberative quality of online discussion (Peacock et al., 2019). Thus, every platform—with its own set of affordances—may have nuances in the (relative) presence of the normative features that characterize online political talk (Halpern & Gibbs, 2013). Moreover, this study

concentrated on four normative features—interactivity, ideological diversity, rationality, and respect—central to the deliberative quality of political speech (Habermas 1989). However, these four standards do not capture the full range of democratically desirable characteristics of online political talk. The systematic review of online deliberation research by Friess and Eilders (2015), for example, also presented equality, common good reference, and constructiveness as instruments to operationalize deliberativeness. Future research may, thus, considering to include a wider range of normative features.

Regarding the four normative features investigated in this study, though, the public sphere that surrounds the satire genre was filled with less incivility, but otherwise did not differ much from regular news; and less ideological expression was found in the context of satire and regular news than in the surrounding of partisan news. Thus, online political talk in the context of satire is *not* inferior to that of traditional news, it even has some normatively desirable characteristics (more respectful), but is also less ideologically diverse than its non-humorous equivalent of partisan news.

Supplementary material

Supplementary material is available online at *Journal of Communication* online.

Funding

This research was supported by the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO) with a VENI grant under project number: 016.Veni.195.123. Funding for the data collection was provided by the DigiComLab (<http://www.digicomlab.eu/>) of the University of Amsterdam.

Conflicts of interest: None declared.

Acknowledgments

I thank Eran Kan and Tobias Schreibmueller for their diligent coding work; Yue Peng and Soohyun Bae for their support in creating the codebook; and Dr Anne Kroon, Dr Theo Araujo, Xiaotong Chu, Abdulqadir Noon, and Rufei Liu for their support in the data collection and management.

Data availability

The data underlying this article cannot be shared publicly due to copyright restrictions; the data will be shared on reasonable request to the corresponding author.

Open science framework badges

 Preregistered

Research design was preregistered.

Notes

1. Details of pre-registration here: <https://osf.io/q5nhf>. Deviations from the initial pre-registration are described in [Supplementary Material: Appendix A](#).

2. Sampled comments were not dominated by very-active commenters; 94.6% of comments came from unique users. The maximum of comments by one commenter was 5 (one username), one user had 4 comments, and four usernames with three comments were present.
3. Full codebook and instructions, see: <https://osf.io/cajqm/files/osfstorage/65fd7af9d09d17022feed11>

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