



The impact of online user-generated satire on young people's political attitudes: Testing the moderating role of knowledge and discussion

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the impact of online user-generated satirical content on young people's political attitudes in the case of the 2012 Chief Executive election in Hong Kong. During the election, the unpopularity of the candidates and several candidate-related scandals led to the proliferation of online user-generated satire. This study asks whether exposure to such content affected young people's candidate evaluations. More important, it examines whether online satire exposure also influenced attitude toward the electoral system. It is further hypothesized that political knowledge and interpersonal discussion may facilitate processes of elaboration that allow people to develop critiques of the electoral system based on the candidate-centered satire. Analysis of a survey on university students finds that online satire exposure did relate significantly to candidate evaluation, while a positive relationship between online satire exposure and critical attitude toward the electoral system exists among respondents who discussed the election with others. Contrary to expectation, ability to identify individual politicians, a type of political knowledge, undermined the linkage between online satire exposure and critical attitude toward the election.

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1. Introduction

On 25 March 2012, Hong Kong held the election that produced the Chief Executive of the Special Administrative Region government for the next five years. Although only the 1,200 members of the election committee had the right to vote, many citizens paid close attention to the event and actively expressed their opinions through new media channels. User-generated satire constituted one major form of online citizen expression. Such materials began to appear in late 2011 and proliferated in February 2012 after the outbreak of a number of candidate-related scandals.¹ The online satire was widely circulated through social media and reported by the mainstream news media. It thus constituted a major component of media and public discourses surrounding the election.

Similar phenomena, of course, exist around the contemporary world. The development of web 2.0 has ushered in an era in which “the people formerly known as the audience” (Rosen, 2006) have become active producers and disseminators of original content. The mainstream media have tried different ways to incorporate user-generated content (UGC) into their news products (e.g., Harrison, 2010; Lee, 2012; Ornebring, 2008). Even in authoritarian countries with limited freedom of expression, the circulation of political UGC via social media has been a notable phenomenon. Tufekci and Wilson (2012), for instance, found that half of the Egyptians they surveyed have produced and disseminated visuals related to the Tahrir

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¹ “e-gao can't stop,” *Ming Pao Daily*, February 18, 2012, p. A14; “e-gao spreading crazily,” *Apple Daily*, March 7, 2012, p. A01.

Square protests in early 2011 via social media. The rise of *e-gao* (which literally means ominous remaking of original content) in China is another case in point (Meng, 2011; Wallis, 2011).

Researchers have only begun to theorize about and empirically examine whether and how online political UGC could influence people's attitudes and behavior (Dylko and McCluskey, 2012; Lim and Golan, 2011; Ostman, 2012; Towner and Dulio, 2011). This article aims at adding to the nascent literature by examining the 2012 Hong Kong Chief Executive election. It asks: Did exposure to the user-generated online satire affect young people's attitudes toward the candidates? Would exposure to the satirical materials, despite their focus on the candidates, influence young people's attitude toward the electoral system? Would certain factors, such as political knowledge and interpersonal discussion, facilitate the articulation of a critique of the electoral system based on the candidate-centered satire?

Answering these questions allow this article to contribute to the literature on how the Internet shapes young people's political attitudes and behavior. Many existing studies on Internet and youth are premised on the seeming disconnection between young people and conventional political institutions. They then focus on whether the Internet facilitates young people's civic and political engagement (e.g., Bakker and de Vreese, 2011; Hirzalla and van Zoonen, 2011; Holt et al., 2013; Tang and Lee, forthcoming). Relatively few studies, however, have examined how young people develop their understanding about politicians and established political institutions through online political communication.

Nevertheless, the theoretical arguments underlying this study's hypotheses are not specific to young people only. Therefore, this study should also generate insights into the broader political significance of online user-generated satire. Online satire may only lead people to become more cynical, or it may provide resources for people to articulate criticisms toward the political system. It is also possible that the development of a broader critique would occur only among some people under some conditions. The societal impact of online user-generated satire would differ depending on which of these possibilities holds true.

2. The impact of online user-generated satire

User-generated online satire is not a phenomenon emerging only with the rise of web 2.0. In an early study of political websites during the 1996 US presidential election, Warnick (1998) differentiated between parodic and non-parodic sites. He noted that, on the parodic sites, "authors are often not identified, or are identified only obliquely; material is often not copyrighted, and much of it seems to be intended for appropriation and dissemination by browsers" (p. 310). He argued that parodic sites produced political cynicism without generating meaningful participation. While Warnick's judgment of the effects of online parody would need to be substantiated, his characterization of parodic websites is largely applicable to user-generated political satire in the contemporary Internet scene. Certainly, with the rise of social media, the materials "intended for appropriation and dissemination" can nowadays be indeed widely appropriated and disseminated.

Several studies have illustrated the impact of online satire or parody on viewers' political attitudes. Towner and Dulio (2011) found that viewers of the YouTube channel "YouChoose 2008" exhibited lower levels of trust in the government but not more negative candidate evaluations. Interested in inoculation against media effects, Lim and Ki (2007) found that experimental participants in the inoculation condition demonstrated a higher level of awareness of the manipulative intent behind a parody video and exhibited fewer attitude changes after exposure. Their findings, however, also mean that exposure to the video could affect people's attitude in the absence of inoculation. Baumgartner (2007) experimental research showed that exposure to online materials that made fun of US President George W. Bush could lead to lower levels of trust in political institutions. He also found that different types of political humor could have different effects on how people evaluate Bush.

Why does online user-generated satire matter? Insights into this question can be derived from studies on the impact of television political comedy programs. Researchers in the US have generally found that exposure to political comedy programs, many of which employed satire extensively, could lead to higher levels of political engagement, especially among people with low levels of political interests (e.g., Cao, 2010; Cao and Brewer, 2008; Parkin, 2010; Young, 2012). At the same time, the satire on such shows could shape people's political attitudes. Baumgartner and Morris (2006) found that exposure to *The Daily Show* led to more negative evaluation of political candidates, lower levels of trust in news media, and less faith in the electoral system. Guggenheim et al. (2011) found that satirical news use related positively to systemic cynicism and media mistrust.

Theoretically, Baumgartner and Morris (2008) argued that the influence of political satire can be understood by the elaboration likelihood model (ELM). In the ELM, people are expected to react to incoming information either by heuristic reasoning along the peripheral route or systematic processing along the central route (Petty and Cacioppo, 1996). While factors such as motivations and personal background can influence whether the central or peripheral route is taken, studies have found that humor tends to generate a positive mood and likeability with the message source, which in turn undermines elaboration and the production of counter-arguments (Lyttle, 2001; Nabi et al., 2007; Young, 2008). In other words, humor tends to lead to information processing through the peripheral route. As a result, people tend to agree with the "surface content" of the humorous message.

The above theoretical arguments should be applicable to online user-generated satire because the arguments are not dependent on medium characteristics. Besides, in the online arena, the effects of satirical content can be strengthened by the fact that people often encounter them as materials shared by people they trust. Moreover, social media users do not

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