

CARME FERRÉ-PAVIA AND CATALINA GAYÀ-MORLÀ

Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona :

Infotainment and citizens' political perceptions: Who's afraid of 'Polònia'?

ABSTRACT

Our research focuses on a satirical political television programme called 'Polònia'¹ broadcast on a public Catalan channel. Infotainment is a controversial subject in academic circles. After an academic review of the civic effects of the television satire on the general public, we provide data on infotainment in terms of its effects on the general public's understandings of Catalan and Spanish politics and politicians. Our study reflects viewers' understandings of 'Polònia' and adds to the data on trends in European television. Two surveys and two focus groups were organized, involving a total of 1985 people with different social, political and viewing profiles. The results confirm the influence of infotainment in generating changes in peoples' perceptions of politics. There is a general agreement among the participants that the programme affects neither the voting turnout nor voting patterns. The results suggest that 'Polònia' could reinforce the previous political malaise.

KEYWORDS

Infotainment; political satire; political communication; politics perception; electoral mobilization

Introduction

This article presents the results of a research aimed at assessing the influence of political infotainment in articulating people's perceptions of politics. Its object of study is a Televisió de Catalunya programme called 'Polònia', which consistently has had the highest viewer ratings in Catalonia since it was launched in February 2006. The programme (where actors and journalists parody politicians) is also a source of controversy, given its humorous take on politics. This choice was based on the fact that the programme represents a new development in Catalan television: for the first time a programme that has lead viewer ratings in Catalonia since it was launched has a format that can be described as infotainment. Previous research has linked the consumption of entertainment and information with either a reduction or increase in civil and political participation.

Putnam (1995, 2000) and Bennet et al. (1999) have signalled television as the cause of reduced social capital and people's distancing from institutions. Norris (1996, 2000), on the other hand, has linked greater televised news consumption with increased political participation. A study by Shah (1998), meanwhile, points to the fact that the role of the media in sowing distrust depends on the type of programme.

Another area where there is a shortage of studies is the impact of infotainment on viewers in terms of whether it tends to feed on the mediatic unease, or whether it is truly informative and leads to greater civil and political participation. No studies of 'Polònia' have been conducted so far to assess its impact on viewers: since it was first broadcast, are people more aware of and interested in politics and in the political problems of the country? 'Polònia' has opened a debate in Catalonia on the effects of satire on politics, whereas intellectuals, politicians and the media are growing more and more concerned about political dissatisfaction. Just when political participation is at a historical low, fun is being poked at politicians, at the way they relate to each other and at their actions.

The confrontation between the spiralling cynicism referred to by Cappella and Jamieson (1997) and the virtuous circle referred to by Norris (2000) is also evident in the infotainment format. Parodying, satirizing and making fun of political leaders has always been controversial. One only has to recall groundbreaking programmes of the 1980s like the British 'Spitting Image' (Jon Blair, 1984–1992) and US talk shows (which reached their apogee with the Monica Lewinsky case), not to mention programmes from other cultures, such as the Israeli 'Eretz Nehederet' (Muli Segev, 2003–) and the Argentinean 'Gran Cuñado' (Ideas del Sur, 2001–2009), all of them also ratings leaders.⁶ Another element meriting reflection is the growing popularity of infotainment in contrast with a deepening crisis in political participation through traditional electoral and association channels. The question is whether there is a direct cause–effect relationship between these two phenomena, or whether the background to both developments requires us to consider other ways of understanding politics and participation.

Hybrid formats

Infotainment is a television format that provides information on newsworthy current affairs developments. These news items will already have been covered by traditional journalistic genres familiar to informed individuals. The entertainment aspect of infotainment relies on the use of humour or satire to depict newsworthy items. The genre developed in a context of permeability between information and entertainment in terms of both programming and news coverage: As traditional hard news has become increasingly driven by consideration of entertainment value, perhaps to combat sagging rates of attention among readers and viewers, and entertainment programs take on more serious topics, the resulting admixture has been dubbed 'infotainment'. (Moy et al. 2005: 113) The criticisms directed at infotainment are not only aimed at the genre as such, but also at the tendency to trivialize

news as entertainment – a phenomenon referred to as soft information (Thussu 2007: 5). Other authors refer to the fact that the boundaries between information and non-information have become blurred, making it difficult to clearly distinguish between them (Delli Carpini and Williams 2001: 161).

According to Jones (2004), humour is a tool used by infotainment to explain events that have actually happened. In ‘Polònia’, real facts are fictionalized and represented by actors whose humour is satirical. A number of authors agree with Jones in stating that humour is especially appropriate when the underlying facts seem absurd or surrealist (Moy et al. 2005; Baum 2002).

Other authors sustain that political satire, burlesque and parody have always acted as an escape valve. Jones defends the fact that infotainment makes us laugh at ourselves, but underlying the criticism is a publicly expressed desire for honesty (Jones 2004: 53). This author further points to the fact that criticism of the political class is very strong and humour can and is used by the people to express this dissatisfaction.

According to the definition by Valhondo (2007: 64), ‘Polònia’ can be classified as an infosatire programme, given that it parodies politics. However, it also has the features of a serial programme, imbued with creativity and with characters all with their own personality.

The actors representing the politicians appeal directly to sentiments and emotions, whereas traditional media tend to attach more importance to ‘the bare facts’. Fictionalization is superimposed on the typical format for presenting daily news, with an admixture of journalistic rituals and theatrical elements aimed at explaining political developments. The satirical element undermines the fiction that uncontrolled emotions have no place in political relationships. Events are portrayed through a populist filter; emotions excluded from traditional media are satirized and in a somewhat stereotypical way. Also permeating the production is the feeling that the communication media cannot be relied on to tell things how they are, perhaps because they have their own political agenda and preferences.

According to Jones (2004), these programmes play a political role; genres that link politics and humour, in fact, help to palliate an apparent fatigue with traditional political coverage formats. Such programmes are therefore an escape valve or an antidote to disillusionment, a topic that will be discussed further below. Bitzer points to the interaction between political culture and public opinion:

Conversely, changes in people’s beliefs and attitudes can impact and evolve a society’s political culture. As any society and its citizens mature, attitudes and beliefs can evolve and change as well. While the underlying beliefs and attitudes within a society about its politics and government serve as its political culture, the day-to-day (and often year-to-

year) attitudes and beliefs about politics and government are a society's public opinion (Bitzer, J. M. in Foy 2008: 48).

Personalization and scepticism

'Polònia' focuses on certain politicians in particular, and so excludes events in which the politicians parodied in the programme played no role. A thematic filter is thus applied by the programme in the personalization of particular events in terms of specific politicians.

Characters from 'Polònia' have been mistaken for the politicians they imitate, even by the media. For example, a property magazine illustrated a news item on the property crisis (Spanish Real Estate. *La revista del mercado inmobiliario*, 28 March 2009) with a picture of the actor Xavier Noms, who, in 'Polònia', parodies Antoni Castells, the economics minister of the Catalan Government.

One of the recurring controversies surrounding 'Polònia' is whether ridiculing politicians can affect perceptions of the political class. Authors such as Brants claim that infotainment raises awareness of politicians and politics, arguing that, at a time when political ideologies are becoming blurred, this format makes political personages known (1998: 332–333).

Valhondo, on the other hand, points to the fact that the target audience for infotainment has been raised in a culture of scepticism with regard to government institutions. The genre, therefore, merely reflects this distrust by ridiculing those in office. Infotainment consequently would have a demobilization effect and would help to accommodate citizen antipathy towards public institutions (Valhondo 2007: 69).

Although theoreticians and empirical researchers both sustain that political debate is a vital element in democratic citizenship, differences emerge in regard to the effects of television comedy. Some authors consider that programmes of this nature can enhance political commitment; Moy et al. (2005: 124) for example, point to the debates arising from these programmes that actively involve people, although these authors also concede that the effects tend to vary according to the different audiences.

Many of the studies reviewed reported that infotainment programmes brought politics to the people one way or another and, by generating greater interpersonal communication on political subjects, thus contributed to political life. Some authors have even referred to 'democratization' (Brants 1998; McNair 2006; Thussu 2007). Thussu (2007: 164), furthermore, has referred to the fact that even the US government has acknowledged the power and potential of entertainment to bring politics closer to the people. For Gray et al. (2009: 11) 'satire not only offers meaningful political critiques but also encourages viewers to play with political statements, to examine them, to test them, and to question them rather than simply accepting authoritatively sourced truth'. Other authors confirm that it is through discussion, conversation and debate that politics can be brought closer to people

who would otherwise show little interest (Moy et al. 2005: 113). Jones (2004) is also of the opinion that, thanks to what he calls 'political television', viewers are implicated in citizenship and in politics in different ways: behaviourally, because they talk about politics; cognitively, because they analyse programme content and contrast it with their own views; and socially, because they share their opinions with other people.

What remains clear is that viewers must have a minimum level of prior interest in the information in order to be able to understand and enjoy the televised political satire. Therefore, an issue to be clarified, and assuming this previous information input, is whether this kind of programme enhances or reduces interest in political news. Moy et al. (2005) argue that it is necessary to know the facts underlying a parody to be able to follow the argument, as this reinforces interpersonal communication, which would therefore be one of the effects generated by this kind of debate.

Authors such as Thussu (2007) point to the fact that entertainment is present in news and mixes not just with news, but also with politics (politainment), education (edutainment) and reality shows. This might corroborate the arguments of Brants (1998), who refers to the democratizing function of this format and its liberalizing potential. The fact that political information is presented in an interesting way may awaken and stimulate an interest in politics. 'By making political communication appealing, those who are not politically informed could be more interested in civic affairs, contributing to a more democratic and inclusive media environment' (Thussu 2007: 162).

Van Zoonen (2005: 15) also defends an 'entertainment culture [that] can be articulated within the requirements of political citizenship, and the kind of public virtues that can be evoked and maintained through popular culture'. This last point regarding interest in politics – a more social rather than academic controversy – is linked with the possible influence of this format on viewers' voting intentions. On 27 March 2008, just over two weeks after the general elections of 10 March, the Catalan newspaper *Avui* posed the following question in an online survey: 'Do you think that "TV3's" "Polònia" had a bearing on the election results?' At 19:04 hours, of the 3416 votes counted, 55 per cent had answered 'no', 22 per cent had answered 'yes, greatly' and 23 per cent had answered 'yes, but minimally'.

This would point to a divide between those who think that programmes of this nature affect electoral mobilization and those who think the opposite, further demonstrating that infosatire, infotainment and, in general, political content handled in different television formats produce directly contradictory perceptions among loyal followers of a programme and among citizens in general.

HYPOTHESES

The general aim of our research was to assess the influence of the infotainment programme 'Polònia' on the political perceptions of viewers. A generic sample of 1985 individuals was used for our research. The related hypotheses were as follows:

1. 'Polònia's' format is perceived by its audience as a filter of Catalan political information.
2. 'Polònia' has emotional effects on people's perceptions of the political class.
3. 'Polònia' is perceived as a political debate-generating programme.
4. 'Polònia' is viewed as a programme that favours civic participation.

Aim 1. Infotainment and information

The research aimed to determine what information was perceived as filtered by viewers of 'Polònia' and what conclusions could be drawn with regard to possible bias. The research questions were linked to the consumption of the programme as information and the perception of infotainment as a genre offering a level of freedom of information that is different from traditional news programmes.

Aim 2. Perceptions of the political class

Accepting that infotainment is based on more or less well-intentioned parodies and caricatures, we aimed to ascertain how much knowledge of the political class (i.e. its most mediatic members) was gained by viewers from the programme. In several ways we attempted to determine whether or not the programme made political personages known to people.

Aim 3. Depictions of political life

In their interrelationships with each other and their actions, the personalities in 'Polònia' transmit one image or another of the significance of political interplay (understood to be the politics of agreements, negotiations, debates, pressures, etc.) and political life as represented by political parties. We want to know whether its audience perceives the programme as a faithful depiction of political life, and whether it is viewed differently if there have been prior news inputs.

Aim 4. Infotainment consumption and participation

Researchers are divided in regard to whether television programme consumption encourages or discourages civil and political participation. Our research contributes data based on 'Polònia' and its reception by viewers to this academic debate. Do viewers who follow the programme consider themselves to be participative? How do they participate? Does the image of political life transmitted by 'Polònia' encourage or discourage viewers in any way?

METHODOLOGICAL DESIGN

We conducted a general survey using social research tools that included a survey of the general population, an online survey of fans of the programme and the organization of two discussion groups, involving a total of 1985 people. Obviously, only people who were viewers of the programme were surveyed as being able to express an opinion.

The general random survey

The survey was conducted in the greater Barcelona area⁷ between 1 and 15 July 2008. A total of 1241 people responded to the random survey. Screening to reduce the number of individuals representing the same age and working profile was applied to avoid socio-demographic bias. In order to balance the sample we reduced the size of each group (same age and occupation) to six persons. It was not necessary to apply the filter in terms of gender because there already was an acceptable spontaneous balance. Once filtered, the sample resulted in a corpus representing 987 individuals. In terms of sex, the sample was composed of 476 women and 511 men. In terms of age, represented were people aged as young as 8 years up to people aged 88 years (but not including ages 86 and 87). The youngest age group (individuals aged under 17 years) was represented by 32 individuals; their responses were analysed separately from those of the adults. The random survey elements associated with the research objectives were as follows:

- Audience programme viewing
- Audience news consumption
- The audience's perception of infotainment
- The perception of the limits of caricature
- The perception of conflict in political life
- The capacity of the programme to inform
- The capacity of the programme to generate memorable content
- The capacity of the programme for making politicians known
- The capacity of the programme to change opinions
- The capacity of the programme to change attitudes.

The questionnaire was composed of thirteen questions, ten closed and three open. Of the three open questions, two had a second related control question. In total, there were eleven analytical fields, plus fields for respondent sex and age. The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences program was used to analyse the data. There were a total of 46 tables, thirteen referring to the responses to the questions and 33 generated from the resulting cross referencing.

The focus groups

The focus groups enabled us not only to further explore the political values of participants, but also to examine the possible impact of the programme on civil and political participation. Two groups of individuals who did not know each other were formed. Their compositions were as follows:

- Workers group (Group 1): six persons with the following professional profiles: taxi driver, painter, retired teacher, unemployed immigrant, postman and carpenter
- Civil society representatives (Group 2): five individuals, representing the Fundació Trias Fargas (a Catalanist organization), Comissions Obreres (a trade union), Càritas (a catholic charity organization) and Casa Amèrica-Catalunya and Espai Mallorca (both cultural bodies). Note that the group was intended to have six participants, but the representative of another NGO failed to turn up.

The discussion was focused in a similar way in the two groups, although the image of political figures was not explored to the same extent in Group 2, given that some of the participants had political functions.

The group discussions were transcribed and a system of indicators covering the following points was devised:

- The capacity of 'Polònia' to focus attention on political life
- The capacity of 'Polònia' to create an interest in politics
- Representation of political life in 'Polònia'
- 'Polònia's' influence on the image of politicians
- 'Polònia's' potential for encouraging or discouraging civil and political participation

- ‘Polònia’s’ potential to enhance or reduce electoral mobilization
- General opinions on the infotainment format. • The capacity of ‘Polònia’ to create an interest in politics
- Representation of political life in ‘Polònia’
- ‘Polònia’s’ influence on the image of politicians
- ‘Polònia’s’ potential for encouraging or discouraging civil and political participation ‘Polònia’s’ potential to enhance or reduce electoral mobilization
- General opinions on the infotainment format.

The website survey

The general survey and discussion group data were complemented with an online survey of ‘Polònia’ fans, with the aim being to compare website

responses from programme followers to responses obtained in the general survey. The ‘Polònia’ website was assumed to be the most reliable means for making contact with individuals interested in the programme, and we were able to count on the cooperation of the ‘Polònia’ programme and website teams. The survey was displayed for three weeks on the programme website (until 25 November 2008). In order to make responses comparable, we collected data for the first 987 respondents to the website survey. The format and tone of the survey were similar to those of previous surveys on the website so as to ensure the spontaneity of the responses. The survey questions referred to interest in politics, impact on opinion and impact on participation.

RESULTS

Aim 1. Infotainment and information

Viewer profile

The theoretical discussion as to the profile of viewers of infotainment is based on the possible real impact of the format. Researchers such as Moy et al. (2005) posit the existence of a sophisticated public consisting of viewers who can interiorize parody and so change their political perspective. This public is usually identified with a segment of the population that is young, informed and relatively well educated. Our results only partly validate this

argument. 'Polònia' does indeed have viewers who consider themselves well informed, but these are aged 60 years and older; moreover, the programme content has a memorable impact on them. In our research we needed to examine whether viewers were indeed informed so as to further clarify the validity of theories in this regard about the genre. Previous information input represents a balancing factor in regard to the effects of parody and the dangers of confusing fiction and reality mentioned in some studies (Edelman 1995). The data compiled in relation to the profile of 'Polònia' viewers is described below.

Fidelity

Loyal followers of 'Polònia' (i.e. people who watch the programme every week) represented 40.2 per cent of the respondents to the general survey; the remaining 59.8 per cent of respondents were people who watched the programme sporadically. People aged 65–87 years were the most loyal followers of 'Polònia'; in this age bracket, loyal and sporadic followers were represented equally. People aged 26–48 years were the least loyal followers of the programme; of these respondents, 36.5 per cent were regular viewers and 63.5 per cent were sporadic viewers. We can conclude that most 'Polònia' viewers are sporadic viewers (they do not watch the programme every week) and that the most loyal viewers are aged 65 years and older.

Informed viewers

Followers of 'Polònia' are individuals who consider themselves to be informed, with 76.2 per cent consuming news daily. The people who consumed the most news overall were in the age bracket 65–87 years (90 per cent). Therefore, the most loyal age bracket – 65 to 87 years – was also the age bracket that consumed information most frequently (46 per cent of this age bracket stated that they read the news every day). At the other extreme, only 32 per cent of young adults aged 17–25 years consumed news daily.

Impact

In regard to the capacity of 'Polònia' to generate memorable images, 73.2 per cent of the general survey respondents recalled at least a sketch from the programme. Those who best remembered sketches, logically, were habitual viewers of 'Polònia', with 90.7 per cent recalling a programme sketch.

Programme informational content and information consumption

In regard to whether ‘Polònia’ was viewed as an informative programme, most respondents stated that the programme was to some degree informative (83.3 per cent), and 43.5 per cent said that the programme complemented other information sources. This majority response was similar for all the age brackets. Elderly viewers (88 years and over) were the ones who most underestimated the informative character of the programme. In this age bracket, 18.2 per cent considered that ‘Polònia’ provided no information, compared to a maximum of 9 per cent in the other age brackets. ‘Polònia’ was a complementary source of information for 45.7 per cent of the respondents who consumed news daily. Of the respondents who consumed news sporadically, 50 per cent considered that its information value was low. Among young adults (17–25 years) the percentage of those who considered the format to be very informative increased significantly, although this age group was also the group that consumed the least news. Of those who considered the programme to be very informative, 87.2 per cent recalled at least a sketch. In fact, the youngest viewers had the best recall of programme sketches. Response percentages for the other options – not at all informative, little informative and complementary to other information – were 60.9 per cent, 69 per cent and 76.9 per cent, respectively. A directly proportional relationship is established, therefore, between the general consumption of news, the impact of the programme and the perception of the programme as a vehicle for information.

Freedom of information in infotainment

Of the respondents to the general survey, 58.6 per cent considered that ‘Polònia’ represented greater freedom of information than other television formats (in other words, the programme explained things that traditional news programmes did not explain). This percentage increased among those who said that ‘Polònia’ was very informative (82.1 per cent). In other words, ‘Polònia’ viewers who appreciated its informational capacity also appreciated its greater freedom of information compared to other formats. In the discussion groups, the greater freedom of information in ‘Polònia’ was acknowledged by some of the participants, and also figured as a debated issue.

Aim 2. Emotional perceptions of the political class

This section focuses on whether the infotainment format could affect people’s perceptions of politicians. One concern is that ridiculing politicians might reduce viewer interest in politics, and some researchers and social commentators question whether politicians could be confused with the actors who represent them.

Most of the participants in the focus groups emphasized that although certain aspects of political life may be excluded in the parodies, politicians were generally humanized. There

was wide agreement that the depictions of politicians were not necessarily impartial. It is at this point that a distinction becomes evident between the more and less sophisticated, informed and critical publics, with the former understanding the format and aware of the potential dangers. Parody can affect attitudes towards the real person: 49.4 per cent of the survey respondents indicated that the programme's characters provoked feelings of affection or antipathy towards the parodied politician. Caricaturization appeared to reinforce the political disenchantment that already existed in some parts of the population.

Making politicians known

An analysis of the discussion group outcomes indicated that 'Polònia' was perceived to focus on representing politicians, and excluded other aspects of political life. The programme is considered to be a medium for making politicians known; consequently, it should bring politicians closer to the people and enhance public knowledge of politicians. In the general survey, almost 70 per cent of the respondents were aware of and referred to the post of Vice President of the Spanish government, occupied by María Teresa Fernández de la Vega; 44 per cent of children aged less than 17 years knew of her, even though they did not consume news. Of those who regularly followed the programme, 43.2 per cent knew of Fernández de la Vega, and only 33.8 per cent did not know of her. The age group that best recognized the position was also the age group that saw the programme most frequently.

Humanizing politicians

The conclusions of the discussion groups also revealed that infotainment has the effect of humanizing politicians, as interpersonal relationships are normally excluded from traditional news accounts of the political activity. Politicians are presented in a more relaxed context within an emotive framework. The general opinion was that politicians were brought closer to the public and that this could bring about opinion changes, depending on how the politician was represented. From the point of view of most focus groups participants, the handling of the characters was not entirely impartial: some of the politician characters were declared not to be 'nice'. For example, opinion was almost unanimous that the head of the Generalitat, José Montilla, was more favourably represented than the other politicians.

Changing viewer attitudes

Nearly half of the respondents surveyed in the street said that the parodies could possibly affect their attitude towards the real person. Caricatures of politicians are likely to provoke positive or negative reactions among viewers. The discussion group participants pointed out that although some members of the public were likely to be aware of the format, others could confuse reality and fiction and assume the attributes of the fictional character to be real. More sophisticated viewers were aware that the traits of politicians as represented by actors were likely to be distorted to a greater or lesser degree. The discussion groups were wary of the capacity of the programme to generate stereotypes. The results of the general survey revealed that most people (91.2 per cent) saw resemblances between the politicians and the programme's characters.

The focus groups concluded that a format of this nature did not generate false realities, as it was always clear that the politicians and situations were parodied. Caricaturizing politicians might, however, lead some viewers to lose interest in politics, although these were likely to be those already disillusioned with politics and distrustful of politicians.

Aim 3. Depictions of political life

Representations of political life

Of the respondents to the general survey, 50.9 per cent believed that politicians did not relate to each other in the confrontational manner depicted in the programme, whereas 49.1 per cent asserted that they did or even that they bickered among themselves even more. It was the older respondents who had a more conflictive vision of political life; they also underlined the value of parody in the programme and saw even further room for satire. In the discussion groups, meanwhile, they agreed that the humour of the programme had a calming effect regarding the political situation.

Generating interest in politics

With regard to generating interest, 50 per cent of the most loyal 'Polònia's' followers in the online survey stated that the programme had heightened their interest in politics. The focus groups clearly concluded that 'Polònia' was useful in terms of learning about politics provided one had previous information from other sources. The relationship established with information was one of dependency; in other words, it was necessary to be informed in order to follow the programme. It was considered to be a dangerous (disinformation) format if its content could not be compared to information from other sources. As for whether a programme of this nature generates debate, the answer depended on the type of viewer: comparing the discussion groups, the civil society group agreed more with the statement that the programme generated debate. Nearly half of the website survey

respondents (considered to be programme fans) stated that ‘Polònia’ had increased their interest in politics, since it enabled them to make comparisons between different interpretations of political events.

Aim 4. Infotainment consumption and participation

No positive results were obtained in regard to a level of participation that surpassed the stages of being interested in and debating politics. Of the website survey respondents, 61.5 per cent stated that the programme did not induce people to be more participative; for almost 30 per cent the programme was merely entertainment. Clearly evident in the discussion groups was an underlying distrust of politics and politicians. The civil society group, however, tended to distrust the media rather than politicians. Of the website survey respondents, 20 per cent manifested a clear disinterest in politics, regardless of the programme. Noteworthy is the fact that political satire was appealing, despite the fact that politicians and politics were perceived to be distant.

Capacity to change opinions

Neither the general survey respondents nor the focus groups perceived that a programme of this nature could change opinions, with the vast majority (90.8 per cent) of survey respondents denying this possibility. There was a correlation between those who said that the programme changed opinions and those who considered ‘Polònia’ to be informational. Among those who believed that the programme changed opinions, the opinion of the programme as one that was very informative was 20.9 per cent, whereas among website respondents this percentage was 69.3 per cent among those who believed in the potential of the programme to change opinions. Consequently, programme enthusiasts rated the programme’s capacity to change opinions more highly.

Electoral effects of infotainment

As for the electoral effects of ‘Polònia’, the mostly assignments of the discussion groups accepted that the programme would not affect electoral mobilization or demobilization. However, they also said the image transmitted of politicians and their relationships with each other could further distance people who did not vote by reaffirming arguments in favour of their apathy. Humour may act as an escape valve, but the satire of politicians and their relationships could act as a disincentive or reaffirm the disenchantment of some of the electorate.

SYNTHESIS AND DISCUSSION

A misconception that we wish to highlight is that of the average age of 'Polònia's' viewers. Many considered that the audience consisted of younger viewers; however, people aged 65–87 were actually the most loyal followers of the programme. Our research shows that such a programme does not just connect with a young audience. It must be taken into account that, despite it belonging to the infotainment format, it is a political satire and not a late show. In the present context of audience fragmentation (Patrick and Salerno 2009), 'Polònia' could be considered as a programme addressing a predominantly adult audience accustomed to viewing news and current affairs programmes. Our results indicate that the majority of 'Polònia' viewers are well-informed individuals with an interest in current affairs. This confirms the profile of a sophisticated public referred to by Moy et al. (2005). This group considers infotainment to be a format that complements other news sources but also depends on them. The most well informed are those who best appreciate the informative elements of the programme and, by extension, the infotainment format. The fact that a viewer has previously been informed seems to act as a balancing factor in terms of the possible effects of the humour and the dangers of confusing reality and fiction pointed to by some studies. No confusion between reality and fiction was detected among the viewers of 'Polònia' included in our study. Rather, viewers considered that political satire in 'Polònia' offered a level of freedom of information that was missing in traditional news programmes. The discussion of the effects of infotainment focuses on the political aspects. Particular attention is paid to the broad issue of opening or closing the gap between people and politics, and how this is largely affected by interpersonal communication (Moy et al. 2005; Delli Carpini and Williams 2001). The programme was perceived by a majority of the respondents as a way of bringing politics closer to the people, of animating the debate about politics and of enhancing interest in politics. The political humour programme would therefore make politicians known and bring them closer to the public. Nonetheless, the caricaturization of politicians could well reinforce pre-existing political disenchantment among some elements of the electorate. A conclusion of the discussion groups – which were designed to throw further light on aspects of the survey – was that the programme was not likely to affect voting patterns; in other words, the programme would neither encourage nor discourage the mobilization of potential voters. The power to bring about opinion changes was acknowledged more by the most loyal viewers and by those who most appreciated the informative content of 'Polònia'. In fact, when comparing the results of the web survey with those of the random survey, one can see that the agreement with the statement that the programme has the capacity to generate changes in opinion varies from a low 10 per cent (random) to 70 per cent (web). The capacity to create changes in attitudes – in other words, to develop positive or negative feelings towards politicians – was accepted by nearly half of the surveyed population. When comparing the results generated by the different methodological tools, it can be observed that the emotive effects are among

the most noticeable: the programme makes the politicians more accessible to the viewers, it humanizes them, it converts them into likeable or unlikeable characters, or it ridicules them. Individuals who participated actively as representatives in civil society were more distrustful of the media, which, in their opinion, tended to impoverish the image of politics. The least participatory individuals appear to have the least faith in politicians. Our research confirms that this consideration that relates media and political cynicism varies according to the viewer's background. Our results confirm the escape-valve effect of infotainment pointed to by some authors. This conclusion is endorsed by authors such as Brants (1998), Fields Group 1 (workers) Group 2 (civic institutions members) Random survey Web survey Attention to politics Increases the public awareness of individual politicians Increases the public awareness of individual politicians Increases children's awareness of individual politicians Increases the public awareness of individual politicians Facilitates the interpretation of political news Interest in politics It does not create debate nor interest Generates mistrust towards politics It creates debate Generates mistrust towards the media Increases interest in politics Generates mistrust towards politics Political representation Represents politicians, not politics Shows the internal politics of individual parties, not real politics Is not ideologically neutral Creates or reinforces stereotypes Real life politics is more complex than which is depicted in the parody Politicians representation Humanizes politicians and makes them more accessible Humanizes politicians It does not distort political figures

Fields	Group 1 (workers)	Group 2 (civic institutions members)	Random survey	Web survey
Attention to politics	Increases the public awareness of individual politicians	Increases the public awareness of individual politicians Increases children's awareness of individual politicians	Increases the public awareness of individual politicians	Facilitates the interpretation of political news
Interest in politics	It does not create debate nor interest Generates mistrust towards politics	It creates debate Generates mistrust towards the media		Increases interest in politics Generates mistrust towards politics
Political representation	Represents politicians, not politics	Shows the internal politics of individual parties, not real politics Is not ideologically neutral Creates or reinforces stereotypes	Real life politics is more complex than which is depicted in the parody	
Politicians representation	Humanizes politicians and makes them more accessible	Humanizes politicians	It does not distort political figures	

(Continued)

Source: Authors

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