

The perceived effects of televised political satire among viewers and the communication directors of political parties: A European case

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Abstract

This study broaches the question of the impact of televised political satire as perceived by viewers. It offers a new perspective: the differing perceptions of citizens and the communication directors of political parties about its capacity for bringing about changes or contributing to the diffusion of information about political issues. The main research question is about whether there are differences between the views of citizens and those of the communication directors of political parties regarding the perceived effects of the satirical Spanish programme *Polònia*. As a result of data obtained by means of three cross-referenced methodological approaches (random surveys, focus groups and interviews), it is concluded that political communication directors consider that the satire is closer to real events than citizens do, and believe that it has a considerable persuasive effect.

Keywords

Media impact, perception of politics, political satire, *Polònia*, reception studies

Introduction

Study and research into the perceived impact of media messages on different audiences are backed by a long academic tradition, which includes, among others, the works of Lippmann (1946), Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955), McCombs and Shaw (1972), Noelle-

Neumann (1984), McLuhan (1994) and Lakoff and Johnson (2008) belongs to this tradition and focuses on the impact of televised political satire. As a genre, satire has a strong interpretive and critical potential, and is closely linked to facts referred to in the news:

Satire appears as a dialectical macro-genre that confronts truth with its parody, represents conflict and sets about designing characters which, on simplification, can end up as Manichaeism. Simplification, exaggeration and duality bring it close to the characteristics of persuasive material or propaganda. (Ferré-Pavia, 2013: 60)

Our aim is to reflect, using the different perspectives that the aforementioned authors and others provide, on the perceived effects of political satire and, more specifically, to compare how its significance is assessed by both television viewers and communication experts from various political parties. Using qualitative and quantitative techniques (interviews, focus groups and surveys) to assess perceived effects by different audiences can provide us with valuable information to analyse the perceived influence of satirical television.

We start out from the following research question: do citizens and the communication directors of political parties perceive the effects of political satire in the same way? The answer will provide new academic data for typifying audiences and for assessing the significance of the expectations of each sector when it comes to evaluating the resulting perceived effects.

We have chosen the television programme *Polònia* as the focus of our study. It is a political satire, which has been broadcast by the television station of the Autonomous Region of Catalonia in Spain (Televisió de Catalunya) on its main channel, TV3, since 2006.

From the very beginning, *Polònia* has been well received by viewers and its ratings are much higher than those for conventional political programmes on television. *Polònia*

closed its 2012–2013 season (the eighth) with average ratings that were close to 20 per cent of audience share (19.7%) and an average of 630,000 viewers per weekly programme. Catalonia has a population of about 7.5 million.

Historically, Spain and Catalonia have had a tense relationship rooted in ancient violent clashes. Catalonia was a medieval independent kingdom that was conquered and became part of a Hispanic kingdom in 1714. The Catalonia issue was one of the reasons for General Franco's coup d'état against the Spanish Republic in 1936. After the restoration of democracy in 1978, Catalonia recovered its autonomous status. However, the differences between Catalonia and the Spanish government in Madrid continued. These revolved around issues such as the use of the Catalan language and culture diffusion as well as the model for financing the autonomous region of Catalonia.

In 2010, a reformed Statute of Catalonia, approved in a referendum by the people of Catalonia, was quashed by the Spanish Constitutional Court. This gave way to a strong popular movement for self-determination and independence. Over the last few years, this movement has held spectacular large-scale demonstrations in favour of the self-determination of Catalonia.

Since December 2010, the government of Catalonia has been in the hands of the Convergence and Union party (Convergència i Unió, Catalan nationalist). It is a coalition that, since 2012, has supported the Catalan citizens' 'right to decide'. This has resulted in great political conflict between the Catalan and Spanish governments, as well as between those political parties favouring self-determination and independence and those who advocate preserving the unity of the Spanish state.

The programme has always had the same format – weekly 30-minute episodes consisting of a series of 2- to 5-minute sketches featuring character actors who imitate political leaders in a highly satirical manner. Unlike other satire shows, *Polònia* does not use the meta-tactic of a fake news structure (Warner, 2007). It creates theatrical sketches featuring interaction between the actors doing impressions of politicians and celebrities.

These sketches are directly connected to topical political stories. For example, in July 2009, the Estatut (Catalan law) represented by SpongeBob is seen lying in bed, dying due to Constitutional Court cuts. The leaders of the four parties, that finally put aside their differences in order to be able to draft the law, surround him (while still subtly extolling their differing view points). They are left a posthumous DVD featuring a supposedly positive message: the Monty Python song 'Always look on the bright side of life'. The altered lyrics mention that the situation is far worse in Afghanistan or Somalia than in Catalonia. This sketch features common elements: a musical parody featuring the actors as themselves and as other people.

This way of doing impressions is well-suited to original formats connected to theatre and carnival, rather than to global patterns (Kleinen-von KönigsLöw and Keel, 2012). It is worth remembering that Catalonia Television, through its TV3 channel, provides a large amount of daily political news to viewers. This is the raw material that Polònia works with. Importantly, the programme director, Toni Soler, 4 along with some of the senior staff, has a background in professional political journalism. As a result, for example, the Home Office Minister Felip Puig, who is sometimes accused of hard-line politics, always appears on screen with a baseball bat in his hand.

Polònia has managed to become a benchmark in television and, in a certain sense, a significant phenomenon in Catalan popular culture. It has been awarded several prizes and is now well established as a permanent focus of debate and controversy. In this context, the programme has been criticised by politicians who perceive it as eroding their image. Contrary to Young's assessments (Helonmore, 2014), this particular political satire impacts on both the entertainment and political worlds. It is of concern to the political parties due to the perceived journalistic bias of the programme's actors and staff.

Despite the fact that there is wide range of academic literature about the effects of satire, as far as we know, there are no detailed studies comparing the difference in the perceptions of satire between the public and a political elite. It is important, as considering the controversy about the effects of political satire raises the issue of satire as a 'space

in which hegemonic powers can be questioned' (Sienkiewicz, 2012: 107) and in which the authority of official political discourse is challenged (Dahlgren, 2009).

Comparing how each set of people thinks about the potential political effects may help to allay the controversial positions about the programme and political satire in general, at least with regard to personal perceptions. However, this article does not venture into the field, studied elsewhere, of psychological barriers in the face of satire (Moyer-Gusé and Nabi, 2010).

In keeping with the aims of our study we have used a combination of three different methodological tools: a random survey, focus groups and a series of targeted interviews with the communications directors of the main political parties represented in the Catalan parliament.

The conclusions of the study are based on a comparison of perceptions expressed by viewers and party experts regarding the representation of political life (political actions, institutional relationships, latest news) as broadcast in the programme *Polònia*.

The effects of political satire

The study of the effects of politically oriented media content has a long and intensive history. Notable from its early days are the contributions of Walter Lippmann (2003 [1922]) in *Public Opinion*. From the standpoint of impact on consumer awareness (Holbert, 2013), one set of scholars asserts that humoristic programmes bring politics closer to citizens and generate more interpersonal communication on political themes (Forgette and Russo, 2013; Klein, 2013; Landreville et al., 2010; Xenos and Becker, 2009; Young, 2004).

Studies to this effect differ as to whether the effect of television consumption impedes or incentivises the civic and political participation of viewers (Guggenheim et al., 2011; Hoffmann and Young, 2011). The contributions of Moy et al. (2005) consider that political satire programmes can increase political commitment, arguing in

favour of the persuasive effects they generate through debate. However, they do qualify their stance by adding that these effects vary depending on the type of viewer (Baek and Wojcieszak, 2009; Hmielowski et al., 2011; Young, 2004, 2006). Some authors even adduce ‘democratisation’ as an effect (Baym and Jones, 2012; Brants, 1998; McNair, 2006; Thussu, 2007).

With respect to targeted audiences, young viewers and young voters have been specially analysed (Cao, 2008; Holbert et al., 2007; Hollander, 2005). The present study is a response to several academic appeals for analysis of different audience perceptions in order to assess the effects of satire (Hmielowski et al., 2011; Holbert, 2013; LaMarre et al., 2009; Vidmar and Rokeach, 1974). In this research, we consider the audience’s perception of the effect with regard to both knowledge and persuasion.

‘Polònia’: a controversial case in Europe

From the very start, Polònia has been the focus of ongoing political debate, and some considered it a ‘persistent cretinising piss-taking that has ended up infecting the democratic institutions as well’ (Vallès, 2008: 400). On 27 March 2008, and in the context of the general elections that had been held earlier that month, *Avui*, a Barcelona-based daily newspaper, asked the following question in an online survey: ‘Do you believe that TV3’s Polònia has influenced the election results?’ By 7:04 p.m. (local time), 3416 people had voted. A total of 55 percent denied it had had an influence, 22 percent said it had had a ‘major influence’, and 23 percent said it had had ‘some influence but not much’.

In 2007, the Consell de l’Audiovisual de Catalunya (2007) (CAC – Broadcasting Council of Catalonia), the Catalan audiovisual regulatory authority, noted the lack of political debate programmes and offered some clues as to why some people felt uneasy with Polònia:

The decisive factor is not the success of Polònia, which belongs to the same tradition of political humour as other public television stations in Europe but, rather, the dearth of programmes concerned with political debate and civic

participation. This means that Polònia has become the staple in this type of programming instead of being a complementary part of it.

Polònia belongs to a long tradition, ranging from the British programme Spitting Image to the French Les Guignols de l'Info, the Argentine Gran Cuñado,⁶ the Israeli Eretz Nehederet and the Spanish Vaya Semanita. However, unlike the first two aforementioned programmes but like the latter three, Polònia uses character actors for its gags. From a global and social point of view, Polònia is a case specific to Europe and related to a theatrical tradition, rather than to that of replicated international late shows. The contents of Polònia cannot be fully understood without a specific knowledge of a particular cultural tradition and the recent Catalan political context. As Tsakona and Popa (2011) correctly note, this occurs in all genres and forms of humour.

National traditions in satire sometimes produce shows that cannot be exported. For example, neither Heti Hetes from Hungary or Canadian Royal Air Farce were successful in other countries (Ferré-Pavia, 2013). According to Oring (2003), despite having specific characteristics, the humour of most nations is similar in structure and basic content. Humour tends to integrate issues of language, class and myth. Whether or not humour is exportable or indigenous (or endemic) depends on the balance between the ubiquitous elements and the more unique traits.

Opinions are offered in Polònia through humorous entertainment and impressions. The distorting mirror of satire, that entails opinion, is applied to politicians and political reality (Balló, 2007). The programme plays on its humanisation of political figures and the conflicts, real or as reported by the media, in which they are involved (Ferré-Pavia et al., 2013). The use of the term humanisation aims to emphasise that the programme uses all the means at its disposal to ensure that the representation of the characters is as close as possible to reality. However, unlike a conventional programme, a parody adds psychological aspects that are normally perceived character flaws.

Research questions

Our starting point is the general aim of comparing the perceptions of citizens and of political advisers with regard to the impact that Polònia might have on political knowledge and opinion.

The case chosen is a programme that interprets the week's news through gags and that puts the actors/political leaders in humorous situations. By selecting and prioritising its items as conventional news programmes do, Polònia constructs and also presents its own agenda, that is, what it deems worthy of paying attention to and commenting upon. In keeping with the laws of satire and caricature, the programme accentuates and exaggerates certain distinguishing features in each one of its characters (Ferré-Pavia and Gayà, 2011).

Question 1. What is the image of the political leaders perceived by the viewers of Polònia?

Using a survey, focus groups and interviews, we have enquired into the question of whether the programme fulfils an informative function vis-a-vis political figures, whether it is perceived as a way of humanising the image of these leaders, and whether changes of attitude are recognised, always from the consumer standpoint.

Question 2. Do television viewers believe that the programme stimulates their interest in politics or motivates their participation?

We start out from the general hypothesis that, since we are dealing with a varied audience of people who are either very close to politics thanks to their profession, or far from it, all our questions will bring different results for the two sectors under analysis.

Methodological design

We have employed the following social research tools to triangulate results: a random survey in the form of a questionnaire; a focus group; and targeted interviews with the communications advisers of political parties. Compared with other studies related to this topic, the research design here is more balanced (LaMarre et al., 2009). This is due to the application of three tools, including an $n = 987$ survey.

The random survey

The survey was carried out on the streets of Barcelona and its metropolitan area by a team of 20 interviewers in the summer of 2008. Only respondents who were viewers of the programme were accepted.

There were 1241 respondents who stated that they were more or less familiar with the programme. Once filtered, the sample eventually took shape as a group of 987 interviewees. Some people who coincided excessively in terms of age or professional profile were eliminated in order to avoid social bias (a limit of 5 people from the same cohort was established e.g. no more than 5 architectural students in their 20s). In representing the total population, the sample's margin of error has been 3.7 percent, with a confidence level of 98 percent.

By gender, the survey sample consisted of 476 women and 512 men and, by age, included citizens from 17 to 88 years of age (with the exception of 86 and 87 year olds). The questionnaire took the form of 13 questions, 10 of which were closed-ended and 3 open-ended. Using the statistical analysis programme SPSS, 46 tables were established with cross-referencing results.

The focus group

Work with the focus group made it possible to investigate, in depth, values with regard to politics and the impact that a programme like Polònia might have on civic and electoral participation. The group consisted of six individuals, all with an average socio-economic status, not intimately connected with parties or institutions. In order to avoid the participants being known to the researchers, all were suggested via third parties.

Their profiles were random. The discussion developed around five key questions. Once the results were transcribed, a system of indicators was created in order to evaluate them in keeping with the aims of the research. The use of the same categories in the survey permitted cross-checking of the data obtained.

Targeted interviews with political party advisers

In order to address the perceptions of the political elites, meetings were arranged with directors or former directors of communication of all the six main parties in Catalonia's autonomous elections in 2010: David Madí, José Zaragoza, Eladio Jareño, Xavier Vendrell, Marc Rius and Jordi Cañas. The six targeted interviews with these respondents lasted between 45 and 90 minutes and took place between May and July 2011. The questionnaire consisted of 11 questions and was evaluated by means of textual content analysis. All interviewees gave explicit permission, to the authors, to be identified and for their words to be reproduced in this article.

Despite the time lapse between the survey and the interviews, the importance of the programme and the number of viewers was maintained throughout this period. There has also been a continuing debate about its contents. This programme continues to have the same success and audience share today (e.g. 22.8% in May 2014). In 2008, *Polònia* was a well-established programme, and in its first 5 years (2006–2011) it obtained a share of 23.5 percent. It is important to remember that directors' interviews referred to 2010 (the time of the most recent elections). In terms of the political context between 2008 and 2010, the government being satirised did not change. It was a left wing coalition and the main conflict at the time was caused by the weakness of this tripartite coalition. A change of government took place in December 2010. This was also when a different conflict began – one with the state. This was caused as a result of a Constitutional Spanish Court ruling against a 2006 Catalan law.

The results of the citizens' opinions revealed by the application of the initial tools justified starting research with representatives from the political class. Considering the uniqueness of the audience comparison and based on other comparable studies, this time lapse can be viewed as acceptable (Holbert et al., 2013).

In order to preserve objectivity in the analysis, in the random survey were not treated complex concepts as participation that could be confusing in a street fast encounter.

Regarding the focus group, positive statements are based only on agreement between participants. They are used to provide more depth and accuracy. During the interviews, directors are considered experts and key stakeholders in political debate. Therefore, their responses are stated as individual assessments. Of course, all of them, unlike other interviewees, work to create a specific image of those they work for. It is natural, therefore, that they would be more critical of a satirical television programme that often does not project the image or representation they advocate.

Although some methodologists argue that individual interviews should not to be used to study electoral behaviour (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009), others consider interviews useful for explanatory and descriptive research questions. These include those that enquire about beliefs and attitudes (Marshall and Rossman, 2010). There is a long tradition of questionnaires, focus groups and interviews in qualitative research in the social sciences.

Findings

In this article, the results are presented in an order that is in keeping with the aims of the research (Table 1). the three methodological techniques applied: survey, focus group and targeted interviews.

The survey results indicate that the main profile of the Polònia viewer is that of a person who considers himself or herself to be well-informed (76.2% did) and older than 60 years of age (45.2% of those aged 65 and older often watched the programme as opposed to 37% in the younger groups). At this point, it should be noted that the Polònia audience differs from the traditional age range late night shows normally attract. However, the younger audience does not show such differences. On one hand, some studies only interview young people and obtain data revealing a regular consumption (40%–50%) for 18- to 29-year-old viewers (Hariton, 2011). On the other hand, if American consumption data are considered – for example, in the case of *The Daily Show* –, 47.7 percent of 18–24 viewers watch the programme ‘at least occasionally’ (Baumgartner and Morris, 2006: 344).

At the same time, only 23 percent of regular Daily Show viewers report that they follow hard news closely whereas for the same age group in Catalonia the figure is 32 percent. The difference for older viewers is their consumption of daily news. For viewers aged 65–87 years, the figure reaches 90 percent. This circumstance leads us to confirm that each political milieu produces media products of different characteristics, and that both the type of audience and the features that are distinctive to each media outlet in its own context should be analysed.

Polònia is seen by viewers as a complementary source of information. Those who consider that the programme offers information, to a greater or lesser extent, account for 83.3 percent of the total. It is also interesting to note that 58.6 percent of the respondents state that a satirical programme has greater freedom in providing information than a conventional news programme. This shows a lack of trust in traditional news programmes.

Table 1. Comparative approach to responses in the three analysis tools used.*

Questions	Random survey	Focus group	Directors interviews
Informative capacity	Yes (90%)	Yes	–*
Politicians knowledge increasing	Yes (83%)	Yes	Yes
Changes of opinion	No (90%)	–	Yes
Attitude changes	Yes/No (50%)	–	Yes
Interest for politics increasing	–	No	Yes/No (50%)
Fidelity of representation of politics	Yes/No (50%)	No	Yes
Similarity between political leaders and characters	Yes (91%)	Yes	No
Political engagement	–	No	Yes
Electoral mobilisation	–	No	Yes

The image of public personalities: making political figures known

The random sample shows that the programme can help to make political figures better known. 83.5 percent of the interviewees knew who the deputy prime minister of the Spanish Government was at the time, and correctly named her position. Among the more

regular viewers of Polònia, the figure was 87.9 percent. This could suggest that regular watching of the programme would slightly improve the public's knowledge of political personalities or, even without any significant statistics, at least confirm the relationship between information and programme consumption with regard to audience type.

In the analysis of the results of the focus group, Polònia appears as a programme that provides information concerning political figures while overlooking – and the participants express this as a complaint – other aspects of political life. A clear distinction is established between political life and party leaders. The group members conclude that the programme humanises politicians and brings them closer to citizens.

The satire can affect their attitude towards the real person. For the group, if a politician appears on the programme it is beneficial for their popularity, even if they fear the way in which they will be caricatured. Such satirising would also seem to reinforce the political disenchantment already felt by part of the citizens.

The communications directors of the parties are in agreement that the programme contributes considerably towards greater knowledge of political personalities. Likewise, they concur that Polònia brings politicians to sectors of the population which, otherwise, would have no connection with their political representatives or party leaders. Hence, for example, José Zaragoza, former secretary of the (socialist) PSC-PSOE organisation who was in charge of communications, is of the view that the programme 'brings politics closer to a segment of society that would neither listen to it nor see it' otherwise.

Humanisation of political figures

The conclusions of the focus group also show that the format humanises politicians by presenting them in a relaxed and humorous manner and within a framework of interpersonal relationships. In that context, they seem to accept the personalisation of the politician's image on the programme. They accept suggestions that it brings political figures closer to viewers and that different perceptions can be created depending on how leaders are represented.

The specialists in political communication agree that the TV3 programme has an influence on the perceptions that television viewers may have of politicians and this can be either positive or negative. In addition, they show agreement, although not as inclusive as in the focus group, concerning the programme's ability to humanise the politicians it parodies. In this regard, the comment of Eladio Jareño, of the conservative pro-Spanish People's Party of Catalonia (PPC), might be taken as illustrative.

'There are some people whom it might have humanised and brought closer to viewers and the general public. In other cases it has done a lot of damage'.

Changes of position among viewers

There is clear division among those interviewed in the survey. There are those who state that the programme makes them like or reject the figures portrayed (49.4%) and those who say it has no such effect (50.6%). Hence, about half of the interviewees accept that the satire has brought about changes in their own day-to-day attitudes.

In the focus group it is held that political satire does not generate false impressions since the programme undertakes to make it clear that they are doing humorous impressions. Its members claim that such caricaturing of political figures can make part of the audience lose interest in politics. They affirm this would occur among already disenchanted viewers who distrust political figures.

The results for those in charge of communication in the political parties show that they agree that this programme, specialising in political satire, influences the viewer's perceptions of political personalities. Some suggest, moreover, that the programme could establish a stereotypical image that is difficult to modify.

However, there is clear disagreement among the communications directors with regard to the similarity between the Polònia characters and the actual political leaders' performances. There are all sorts of opinions on this. José Zaragoza (PSC-PSOE, socialist) considers that 'there is no likeness whatsoever; this is deformed reality'. Nonetheless, others suggest that the resemblance is 'great' or 'notable'. Marc Rius, communications

secretary for the eco-socialist party Iniciativa per Catalunya Verds-Esquerra Unida i Alternativa (ICV-EUiA), is among those who believe that the impressions offer quite an accurate portrait of the politicians. Referring to this distortion, David Madí, former secretary for communication and strategy for the centre-right, Catalan-nationalist Convergència Democràtica de Catalunya (CDC) introduces a proviso. 'It depends on the phase of construction of the character.

The more consolidated the political leadership, the less it is contaminated by Polònia, and the more the character is distinguishable from the reality'.

Politics and participation: generation of interest in politics

The conclusion of the focus group was that Polònia helps people to know more about political affairs as long as they have prior information. The relationship established with the information is one of dependence, which is to say, the viewer needs to be informed in order to understand the contents of the programme. The viewer needs to be informed in order to understand and grasp the full meaning of the jokes in Polònia. Catalan politics (a subsystem embedded in the context of Spanish politics) is articulated through two axes: Catalan nationalism versus Spanish nationalism and right versus left.

It is held that the programme does not stimulate either debate or discussion among viewers. A sharp distinction is made between being 'more informed' and 'more attentive'. All the participants agree that Polònia offers information but this does not mean more attention to politics. Some participants take the view that 'the information', in the form in which it is presented, could alienate already mistrustful viewers from politics.

The communications experts were clearly divided over the question of whether the programme stimulates greater interest in politics. Among those who respond negatively, David Madí (CDC) believes that any interest it might awaken is 'superficial'. Jordi Cañas (Ciutadans) thinks that while Polònia does not foster more interest in politics, it does bring it closer. 'It is one of the few forms by means of which citizens voluntarily move closer to the political scene, but more as if it were the arena of a Roman circus than

as an agora for debate’.

Marc Rius (ICV-EUiA) considers that the programme can encourage greater interest in politics. ‘For people who don’t have many instruments for thinking about politics, it could certainly be a tool for bringing them closer to it and, on that basis, creating interest’.

Capacity for bringing about change of opinion

Neither the survey nor the focus group indicated that a programme like Polònia could influence the views of the members of its audience. Among the participants in the survey, 90.8 percent denied that it had made them change their opinion at any point.

Those interviewees in the survey who believe that the programme has a considerable informative component are more prone to admitting that this aspect has caused some change of judgement (20.9%), which is to say that, in this sector of the interviewees, the percentage of people who acknowledge this power went up by 10 points.

The 90.8 percent who deny any change of opinion are once again virtually evenly divided (almost 50/50) among those who believe that the relationships between politicians are not as antagonistic as they appear in Polònia and the rest who understand them as a true or even toned-down portrait (with 20.2% believing that they fight ‘even more’).

As described above, the communications experts believe that the way in which political leaders are portrayed could have an influence on the impression citizens end up having of them. Similarly, when they are asked about whether Polònia might sway public opinion with regard to certain issues, the great majority responded affirmatively. The respondent who displayed most doubts, the socialist José Zaragoza (PSC-PSOE), considers that the programme is more influential in viewers’ perception of political leaders than in their opinions about political affairs.

The members of this group coincide in denying that the programme could have influ-

enced, or might influence the political agenda. Some of these interviewees note, however, that it could help in consolidating some specific issue. They also stress the closeness between the programme contents and the most recent news.

Participation and the electoral influence of satire

All the members of the focus group agree that the programme does not lead to involvement in political life. This unanimity is reinforced in the exchange of views about the electoral effects of Polònia. They all concur that it has no effect either on encouraging or discouraging mobilisation among its television audience.

Also appearing in this group is the statement that the image Polònia gives of politicians and the relationships among them could furnish arguments that reinforce estrangement among people who do not take part in the elections. Once again, one sees, in this group how misgivings about politics qualify many of its shared opinions.

In contrast, the communications experts agree that the television programme could have effects on electoral results, including abstention. Practically, all of them coincide in indicating that, since it is part of the political story and it attracts a large audience, then Polònia must of necessity have some degree of influence. This effect would consist, above all, in reinforcement of already existing electoral dynamics.

Nonetheless, there is no unanimity among the communications experts over the question of whether Polònia could contribute towards alienation among the citizens with regard to politics. David Madí (CDC) considers that ‘Polònia might cause disaffection but it could also mobilise people, depending on the circumstances’. Others, like Eladio Jareño (PPC), suggest that the programme ‘evidently does not contribute towards the reputation of politics and the prestige of politicians’. In his opinion, it would tend more to encourage abstention and blank votes than voting for a particular party. Jordi Cañas (Ciutadans) stresses that the image of the previous Catalan government (PSC-ERC-ICV) was profoundly influenced by the programme.

When asked why they advised the leader of their party to take part in the programme or, in the opposite case, advised against it, three main answers were given: (1) because it is good to demonstrate and encourage a sense of humour, and about politics too; (2) because it could be beneficial in political-electoral terms; and (3) because the other leaders would agree to participate.

Conclusions and discussion

Polònia has given rise to recurrent controversy over its influence on citizens' attitudes towards politics, or which leaders and parties are most benefitted or damaged by the programme's treatment of political news. It is plausible to think that in elitist, republican and pluralist political systems the image of candidates is a highly important political factor.

The research results show that with regard to its informative capacity, that is, generating knowledge about political life, the genre is seen by both sectors as effective in its influence. It is interesting to note that the party advisers are more prone to judging political life as conflictive since they feel that the programme's portrayal of it (arguments through humorous gags) is faithful. Citizens, however, are divided in this regard. We could imply that parties consider the programme as being more realistic than citizens. The citizens who took part in the survey would not accept that the programme might make them more interested in politics, bring about a change of opinion, affect their vote or lead to abstention. The political party advisers, in contrast, unanimously took the opposite view.

The research perspective can be widened. In other studies, a correlation has been demonstrated between satirical viewing, news consumption and political participation, to the extent of suggesting a decrease in political trust (Stewart, 2007).

Conversely, the level of the previous political engagement of the audience could increase their perception of the capacity of satire to influence. Such differences between citizens and political party assessors are precisely what

stand out in our research as a whole. The diversity of opinion lies in the perception the citizen has of himself or herself as somebody who is perfectly capable of distinguishing reality from the satirised version of it presented by the programme. In this case, the methodological proposals for analysing possible psychological barriers would seem useful (Moyer-Gusé, 2008, 2010; Slater, 2002; Slater and Rouner, 2002) since these results give the impression that self-perception significantly alters consideration of the satirical effect.

With regard to the first aim of the research, which is focused on the image of the political leaders, both citizens and experts highlight the power of programme in increasing public knowledge of political figures. Furthermore, they consider that its format makes it more appealing to citizens with little or no knowledge of current political affairs. Both groups coincide in the perception that the programme tends to humanise and bring the satirised leaders closer to the public. This is the only point on which citizens and assessors show agreement. In that sense, the results confirm Day's (2011) conclusions which envisage an alternative space for political discourse through satirical political television programmes.

As for the possibility that this might favour changes of attitude, the party advisers suggest that Polònia could bring about such changes. They agree that the distortion that is inseparable from caricature and parody would have more or less notable effects in accordance with the viewer's greater or lesser prior knowledge of political affairs and personalities. It is noteworthy that the regular Polònia viewers surveyed see themselves as well-informed and that 76.2 percent of them say they are news media consumers on a daily basis.

The general public believes that there is a real similarity between the actual personality of the political leader and the one portrayed by the impressionist on the programme. The communication professionals express a greater scepticism.

In our second aim, which is concerned with interest in politics and participation, the

survey participants did not agree with the proposal that Polònia generates more interest in politics. These citizens believe that the programme could not prompt them to change their opinion in any meaningful way with regard to politicians and political affairs. The self-perception expressed by these respondents coincides with what has been called the ‘third-person effect’, which surmises that individuals consider that certain kinds of mass media communication will have a greater persuasive effect in others than in themselves. The individual is convinced that while he himself is not influenced (or to only a slight degree), the same programme or content does influence others (Becker et al., 2010; Davison, 1983; Perloff, 1999, 2002).

Therefore, the third-person effect focuses on the indirect effects or individual reactions linked to the perception of political influence. This aim of the article is to analyse the way in which different groups feel that the entertainment programme Polònia influences their political behaviour and that of others. This is to obtain knowledge about the influence of political satire, focusing our attention on how recipients perceive this influence when it comes to both themselves and others first. Sometimes this belief that a programme or content has more influence on the rest of the audience – more impressionable minds – provokes exaggerated reactions, for example, political or religious groups reacting to certain messages.

When it comes to the citizens, our results are not very different from the findings of Delli Carpini and Williams (2001), Jones (2004), Moy et al. (2005), Young and Tisinger (2006) and Thussu (2007). The communications experts express reserve as to the citizen’s ability thus to shield himself or herself from this kind of interpretive genre. They are in agreement over the idea that Polònia does impinge on and influence certain aspects of the citizens’ relationship with politicians and politics. In their view, the fact that this is a comedy programme for entertainment does not neutralise its capacity for influencing viewers and changing political attitudes and behaviour.

Perception of the attempt at persuasion is crucial in the processing of messages. When individuals are aware that a message is seeking to persuade, they tend to shun it, present-

ing arguments against it or opting for some kind of biased mechanism in order to protect their preconceptions (Cacioppo et al., 1981; Chen et al., 1996; Holbert, 2013).

Citizens consume a programme such as this with a sense of humour and in keeping with the information offered. In that sense, they conceive the programme as a critical portrayal of the political life. The political communication directors interviewed, however, recognise and appear to be concerned about the mobilising capacity of a political satire programme like this one and the changes of opinion it might inspire.

Hence, with data showing discrepancies in perception in different sectors of the viewing public, the format cannot be accused of encouraging abstention or shifts to a particular electoral choice. Polònia viewers consider that they are well-informed and, in part, shielded from its influence. The show has a normal range of younger viewers. However, unlike a normal audience for a late night show it also has many older viewers. This could be linked to their higher consumption of hard news. They are people who are somewhat distant from politics and with different positions, frequently evenly divided (50/50) regarding their attitude towards the effects of the comedy programme.

From the comparative standpoint, the initial hypothesis is only partially confirmed since, with regard to the positive perceived effects of the satire in terms of knowledge of political figures, there are no differences between television viewers and the political elites. Polònia has an audience that is engaged with daily news and whose consumption of humour is deeply anchored in a contextual and critical understanding of politics. Political satire keeps on evolving and becoming more powerful in order to bring viewers closer to politics. It also changes the way viewers think and act.

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