The cultural citizenship values of political comedy engagement

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2018

Document Version:
Peer reviewed version (aka post-print)

Citation for published version (APA):
Abstract for

International symposium Media Freedom

The freedom to express oneself as a citizen is paramount to contemporary democracy. However, this freedom is often questioned in relation to humour and the offence it might cause, especially in cases where humour is referred to as an excuse, as a defence to avoid criticism (Smith 2009). This article uses the concept of cultural citizenship (cf. Hermes 2005) to conceptualise citizen rights and responsibilities associated with humour engagement. More specifically, the paper addresses the issue through the study of young adult political comedy engagement, asking the question: what values are defended by political comedy engagement?

The concept of cultural citizenship is especially fitting as it stresses the importance of cultural form, practices and subjectivity in studies of media and citizenship, which allows researchers to explore the ‘blind spots’ of modern era conceptualisations of citizenship. In doing so, it emphasises popular culture’s value for identity and community construction; as well as the democratic importance of learning about and respecting others (Delanty 2007). Using empirical data on Swedish young adult political comedy audiences in the form of contextualised data from in-depth interviews and focus groups, the paper argues for analysis of engagement in various discursive forms, in the study of media and citizenship. By investigating themes of the young adult audience’s community construction, citizenship rights and responsibilities associated to humour and the freedom of expression are identified. It is argued that political comedy engagement defends the legitimacy of playful and emotional modes of engagement in, and through political comedy.

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