
Web watch

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SATIRE, PARODY AND IRONY ON THE WEB

SATIRE

Satire: Exposing human folly to ridicule, often using humour, with a view to causing or preventing change.

Craig Reucassel spoke recently in the PEN “Free Voices” series about the ban in Australia on parliamentary satire (<http://www.pen.org.au/events/event/sydney-pen-presents-free-voices-there-s-nothing-funny-about-ban-on-parliamentary-satire-featuring-craig-reucassel>). He also wrote on the topic for *The Sydney Morning Herald* (“No Laughing Matter”, <http://www.smh.com.au/opinion/politics/no-laughing-matter-20120712-21yt5.html>).

Reucassel notes that, “In Australia the regulations for parliamentary broadcasts state: broadcasts may only be used for the purposes of fair and accurate reports of proceedings, and must not be used for satire or ridicule”, but points out that this ban makes little sense – it affects free speech, but does not necessarily protect politicians from scorn. Satire is allowed in other mediums, eg newspaper cartoons, but the House of Representatives Select Committee on Televising felt that television was a more powerful medium, and therefore its use should be more limited.

Reucassel also comments, “The most common justification for the rule given to me has been ‘to protect the dignity of the house’. If you have watched question time recently, where cat calls and guffawing pass the time before the daily call for the suspension of standing orders, such dignity may have evaded you.”

Stephen Colbert is one of the best-known satirists on television. He used to be Jon Stewart’s sidekick on *The Daily Show*, and now hosts *The Colbert Report*, which satirises a politically conservative talk show (<http://www.readersdigest.com.au/interview-with-stephen-colbert>). He grew up as one of 11 children in a family “humorocracy”, where “[t]he funniest person in the room was king” (<http://www.techcrunch.com/2011/02/17/techcrunch-repost>).

The Onion is a popular news satire website. It is often commented on by people who have not realised it is satirical and often fictional. Articles cover politics and current affairs, but also topics such as “More People Turning to YouTube for News” (<http://www.theonion.com/articles/more-people-turning-to-youtube-for-news,28816>) and the creative process of staff editorial cartoonist Stan Kelly (<http://www.theonion.com/video/behind-the-pen-reading-writing-and-robbery,29098>). The videos include advertising, and many of the topics are not for the faint-hearted (eg “GOP Trying To Keep Elderly Voting Base Alive Until November”).

In August 2012, the Daily Mash (another satirical news website) had a go at the Olympics, with headlines such as “Olympics Inspires UK to Watch Television” and “It’s Actually Not That Big a Deal, Everyone Tells [Usain] Bolt” (<http://www.thedailymash.co.uk>).

IRONY

Irony: A rhetorical device in which words are used to express the opposite of their literal meaning, typically for humour or emphasis.

In “The Final Irony” (<http://www.guardian.co.uk/theguardian/2003/jun/28/weekend7.weekend2>), Zoe Williams points out that when we ask “Isn’t it ironic?” it usually is not ironic, but is more likely to be “hypocritical, cynical, lazy, coincidental”. She also clarifies the many varieties of irony – Socratic, romantic, rhetorical, situational – and national differences in approach, using the United States and Germany as examples.

* All webpages cited were viewed August 2012.

Another good set of definitions is at The Oatmeal blog, which graphically explains irony (<http://www.theoatmeal.com/comics/irony>).

PARODY

Parody: A humorous imitation of the style of a serious piece of writing or other creative work with deliberate exaggeration for comic effect.

The College Humour website song “Actually Ironic” parodies the Alanis Morissette song “Ironic”, which has been criticised for having examples that are not actually ironic (<http://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/alanismorissette/ironic.html>; <http://www.collegehumor.com/search?q=actually+ironic&x=0&y=0&cx=015527643525715189653%3Awxkjoql9ew8&cof=FORID%3A9>; http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ironic_%28song%29). The website also parodies grooming product reviews, making up for many ghastly cosmetics sales spiels I have seen (<http://www.collegehumor.com/video/5826323/the-crucial-man-all-in-one-trimmer>).

Many parodies are available on YouTube, including The Hillywood Show’s parodies of the Harry Potter and Hunger Games movies (eg http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qvgVMecNp0c&feature=player_detailpage).

MEN’S GROUPS AND MENTAL HEALTH

MEN’S SHEDS

Men’s Sheds are a relatively new venue for men to participate in communal craftwork, including woodwork, gardening and repairs. The Australian Men’s Shed Association is funded by the federal government to provide practical support, and the Prime Minister’s partner, Tim Mathieson, is a Men’s Health Ambassador focused on work in this area. You can find out about the movement, and look for sheds in your local area at <http://www.mensshed.org/home/.aspx>.

FAMILY LAW WEB GUIDE

The Family Law Web Guide (http://www.familylawwebguide.com.au/spca/pg/affiliations/index.php&keep_session=1143118395) lists organisations affiliated with the Shared Parenting Council of Australia. The list includes many groups that assist separated men, including Dads in Distress.

Dads in Distress offers a helpline, support groups, one-on-one support, advocacy and web-based information to separated fathers and their families (http://www.familylawwebguide.com.au/spca/pg/affiliations/index.php&keep_session=1143118395). Its homepage lists five practical hints on what to do if recently separated. It receives funding from the Australian government to deliver its program and is sponsored by Fight Like a Pro boxing gym.

SELF-HELP INTERNET-BASED MENTAL HEALTH PROGRAMS

There are many self-help mental health websites.

myCompass is a new program “designed to help people gain control of mild to moderate stress, anxiety and/or depression using their mobile phone and/or computer. It teaches how to monitor different signs of stress, anxiety and depression and how to use simple self-help strategies to manage problems and improve resilience and wellbeing” (<https://www.mycompass.org.au>). There is a “How to” page with advice on registering with this free service, which is available to men and women.

The directory of e-mental health services and therapies from beyondblue (http://www.beyondblue.org.au/index.aspx?link_id=107.1203) lists self-help internet-based programs aimed at better helping people manage depression and anxiety.

The Black Dog Institute presents information on “Mindfulness in Everyday Life” (<http://www.blackdoginstitute.org.au/docs/10.MindfulnessinEverydayLife.pdf>). This is a form of self-awareness training in which participants focus on “being in the present” and accepting things for what they are. It provides some mindfulness techniques to practice.

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Reachout.com is a youth online mental health service (<http://au.reachout.com>). Its content is grouped into the following sections:

- Tough times;
- Wellbeing;
- Get involved;
- Apps & tools;
- Forums.

Reachout.com also has a link to “info, chat & phone support”, where there is information on Lifeline, Kids Helpline, and Suicide Callback Service.

CROWDSOURCING: ECAPTCHA AND DUOLINGO

eCAPTCHA and Duolingo are two recent crowdsourcing initiatives. Crowdsourcing involves outsourcing tasks (both online and offline) to an undefined public or crowd.

Luis von Ahn presented a TED talk on the development of eCAPTCHA (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-Ht4qiDRZE8>). CAPTCHA refers to the distorted sequences of characters you have to copy on websites to prove you are a person not a computer. 200 million CAPTCHAs are typed every day. eCAPTCHA uses the human effort of all this typing to provide character recognition for tiny chunks of text from books that have been digitised.

These words are presented in pairs. For one of the words the computer knows the correct spelling; the other is there to be translated. There is now a website (<http://www.captchart.com>) where people post screenshots of interesting random eCAPTCHA pairs they have encountered, along with an illustration inspired by the two words.

Duolingo is a website in which the same crowdsourcing principle is used to organise millions of language learners to help translate the web (<http://www.duolingo.com>; <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WyzJ2Qq9Abs>).

Crowdsourcing has also been used in an attempt to find missing mountain climbers. Satellite images were made available on the web, and people were asked to scour them for evidence of the climbers’ trail (http://www.dailycamera.com/news/boulder/ci_21204690/satellite-images-crowdsourcing-emerge-resource-search-missing-trekkers).

OLYMPIC MEDALLISTS IN ART COMPETITIONS

Art competitions were part of the early Olympic Games. Wikipedia has gathered a list of Olympic art medallists (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Olympic_medalists_in_art_competitions) and the Smithsonian Museum presents a history of Olympic art medals (<http://www.smithsonianmag.com/arts-culture/When-the-Olympics-Gave-Out-Medals-for-Art-163705106.html>). *The Wall Street Journal* has written about the combination of Olympic sport and art, including stories about athletes who become artists (<http://online.wsj.com/article/SB100008723963904435171045775564181506448.html>).

RABBLE-ROUSING

Speaking from a soapbox is a great democratic tradition. “A soapbox is a raised platform on which one stands to make an impromptu speech, often about a political subject ... the term is also used metaphorically to describe a person engaging in often flamboyant impromptu or unofficial public speaking” (<http://www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Soapbox>).

Soapbox orators have gathered at Hyde Park, London, since 1872, in the Sydney Domain since 1878 (http://www.hht.net.au/discover/highlights/insites/speakers_corner; http://warrenfahey.com/fc_eccentrics-soapbox.html) and at the Yarra Bank Speakers’ Forum in Melbourne since the 1890s (<http://ergo.slv.vic.gov.au/explore-history/fight-rights/workers-rights/yarra-bank-speakers-forum>). Vida Goldstein spoke there regularly.

A review on the Lonely Planet website (<http://www.lonelyplanet.com/australia/sydney/sights/park/speakers-corner>) sums up the spirit of speakers' corners, quoting Mr Bashful: "You are always entitled to my opinions!" People still get on their soapboxes every Sunday afternoon at the Sydney Domain and on the State Library Lawns in Melbourne (http://www.onlymelbourne.com.au/melbourne_details.php?id=17125). See a selection of soapbox videos at <http://www.youtube.com/speakersforum>.

Christchurch, New Zealand, had a resident wizard from 1974 until after the Christchurch earthquake. Ian Channell entertained tourists and fans first as "a wanted soapboxing miscreant evading arrest, and later as an honoraria-paid attraction registered by a local gallery as 'living work of art'" (http://articles.cnn.com/2011-03-01/world/new.zealand.wizard_1_wizard-christchurch-new-zealand?s=PM:WORLD).

Mr Bashful's website (<http://www.speakerscorner.org.au>) provides notes about and videos of many individuals, including "Miss Reticent", who holds a record for saying only four words. It also gives practical advice about being a speaker (<http://www.speakerscorner.org.au/like-to-be-a-speaker>).

In a modern twist, the Emerging Writers' Festival this year organised Lunchbox/Soapbox – "a simple idea: an old-fashioned speakers' corner in the middle of the city, in the middle of the day" (<http://www.emergingwritersfestival.org.au/event-detail/lunchboxsoapbox-with-anita-sethi>).

For a more detailed examination of the phenomenon of soapbox speaking, read Phillip Edmonds article, "The Soapbox" in the *Griffith Review* (<http://www.griffithreview.com/edition-19-re-imagining-australia/the-soapbox>).

And if you suffer from glossophobia (fear of public speaking), you can rant on the online soapbox at <http://www.bigoldsoapbox.com> (although be aware that they note that most people will find something offensive on the site).