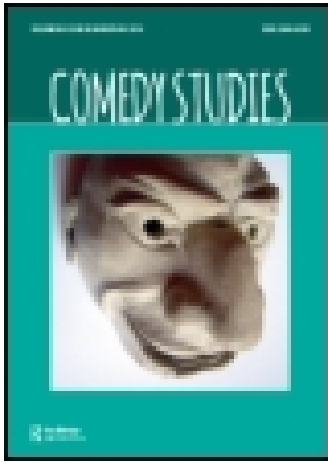


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On: 26 April 2015, At: 08:19

Publisher: Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



Comedy Studies

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rcos20>

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Published online: 09 Apr 2015.



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To cite this article: Rebecca Higgle (2015): Playful politicians and serious satirists: comedic and earnest interplay in Australian political discourse, *Comedy Studies*, DOI: [10.1080/2040610X.2015.1026077](https://doi.org/10.1080/2040610X.2015.1026077)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/2040610X.2015.1026077>

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Playful politicians and serious satirists: comedic and earnest interplay in Australian political discourse

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Recent scholarship has recognised that political satirists are important players in contemporary political discourse. Research on this phenomenon has been largely restricted to the work of US satirists Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert. This article examines the under-researched Australian context, arguing that the interplay between satirist and politician has contributed to a complex slippage between play and earnestness in contemporary Australian political media. It provides many examples, but focuses on the Australian satire team *The Chaser* and their work over the last decade. The paper argues that Australian politicians have increasingly sought to engage with satirists like *The Chaser* in a playful manner, even willingly satirising themselves, while satirists have been granted more of a licence to speak both humorously and seriously on political issues. It concludes that the advantages of this discursive confluence between serious politics and comic satire distribute asymmetrically – the satirical truth-teller is more successful at playing the hybrid role of joker/serious commentator than the politician who attempts to be both king and joker – but that the political co-option of satire is a distinct and real danger that should be more closely studied.

Keywords: satire; Australian politics; *The Chaser*; *Planet America*

Introduction

In theory, the serious realm of federal politics and the playful realm of satirical media may seem clearly distinct but, as this paper examines, this is not always the case in practice. Even from the perspective of the participants, the current Australian political landscape would seem to eschew the more serious aspects of politics. Former Australian MP Lindsay Tanner argues that we are suffering from what he calls the ‘sideshow syndrome’, where the trivial triumphs over the critical. He argues that journalists are now little more than court jesters: ‘they entertain and sometimes lampoon the powerful, but are careful not to seriously challenge the status quo’ (2011, 136). As a result, he says that politicians ‘have to be entertainers in order to win’ (92) and that spin ‘now lies at the heart of the political process’ (14). In Tanner’s experience, this trivial back-and-forth between journalists and politicians goes beyond satire. He argues that the ‘real-life interaction between media and politicians is, in fact, worse than the caricatures parodied in *The Hollowmen*’ (116), the scathing 2008 Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) satire about public relations in Australian federal politics. Although acknowledging that spin and performance have always been part of media and politics, he concludes that in the last decade, the sideshow syndrome ‘has more or less taken over’ (150).

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This article was originally published with errors. This version has been corrected. Please see Erratum (<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/2040610X.2015.1042213>).

Although Tanner laments the ‘sideshow’ of Australian media and politics, he never discusses satire or politicians’ engagement with satire, aside from this brief reference to *The Hollowmen*. He is scathing of politicians appearing on Australian comedy quiz shows like *Are You Smarter Than a Fifth Grader?* and *Talking 'Bout My Generation*, but he fails to mention their appearances on satire like *The Chaser*. It is not clear why he chooses to exclude satire in his discussion. Through either willing or unwilling participation, politicians can now expect to face the satirist in the press gallery, the news interview, at the party convention, or even their homes.

As satire has become a ‘key part of televised political culture’ in recent years (Gray, Jones, and Thompson 2009, 6), so too has it become a key topic of study in the mediation of western politics. American satirical television shows *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* have been at the centre of most scholarship on the subject, although there has been research on Australian examples as well (see Harrington 2009a, 2009b, 2008, 2012 on *The Chaser*, Bogad 2001 on Pauline Pantsdown, and Wendy Davis [2006] and Bye, Collins, and Turnbull on Norman Gunston [2007]). Most of this research on political satire tends to swing between binaries, albeit complex ones. On the one hand, many scholars have argued that these satires work as powerful and tactical responses to the failings of contemporary politics and media (particularly neoliberalism and conservative media) (Gray 2009; Boler 2008; Boler and Turpin 2008; Boler 2006; Hynes, Sharpe, and Greg 2008; Heflin 2006; Bogad 2001; Boyer and Yurchak 2010). Sotos goes so far as to define the likes of *The Daily Show* as ‘serve[ing] an essential function. . . a kind of “Fifth Estate”, the watchdog of the Fourth’ (2007, 34), though most scholars who ascribe to the watchdog idea tend to see political satire as an example of how journalism is evolving, rather than seeing it as a new or separate form. From such a perspective, satire provides a useful, critical tool for interpreting the news and politics (Gray 2006; Harrington 2009a, 2012) and encourages healthy, democratic scepticism (Manning and Phiddian 2004; Day 2011). On the other hand, scholars have also argued that these satires promote cynicism and apathy towards politics (Baumgartner and Morris 2006; Hogan 2001). Julie Webber even argues that it echoes and therefore reinforces the political agenda it purports to attack (2013).

Though this article cannot address all these varying, complex debates, it does start from an almost universally shared viewpoint in the scholarship: regardless of the value one ascribes to contemporary political satire, few can dispute that it plays a highly visible role in the mediation of western politics today. What is perhaps most interesting about this phenomenon is the way discursive practices within journalism, politics (especially political campaigning), and satire have and still are changing as a consequence of their interaction. This article looks directly at instances of politicians crossing over into the satirist’s realm, and satirists crossing over into spaces normally reserved for politicians and journalists, focusing on the largely unstudied interplay between satirist and politician as it has developed within the Australian context. I provide many examples, but use *The Chaser* and *Planet America* extensively as primary case studies to argue that politicians have increasingly sought to engage with satirists in a playful manner, even willingly satirising themselves, while satirists have been granted more licence to speak both humorously and seriously on political issues. This collapse of serious and non-serious registers leads to an intermingling of previously distinct discourses, but it is not always immediately clear who benefits from this collapse in terms of cultural and political capital.

Playful politicians: larrikins in power

In Australia, politicians regularly appear, both in and out of election season, on comedy and variety programmes. Journalist Dennis Atkins believes that Democrat Senator and

Leader Natasha Stott Despoja ‘became as famous for her appearances on frivolous television shows like *Good News Week* as she was for any policy position’ (qtd. in Muir 2005, 64). Despoja was unique in her regular appearances on *Good News Week* in the late 1990s to early 2000s; most other politicians tended to appear only on traditional news and current affairs programmes. In recent years, this trend has changed. While Australian politicians still appear in traditional media, more of them now regularly appear on satire, comedy, and variety programmes. During the 2010 election, for instance, Liberal Leader Tony Abbott appeared as a judge on *Hey Hey It’s Saturday*, Shadow Treasurer Joe Hockey regularly appeared on *The 7pm Project*, and *The Chaser’s Yes We Canberra (YWC)* featured numerous politicians from the major and minor parties, either through ambush or prearranged guest appearances.

The politician’s motivation for partaking in this ‘sideshow’ is fairly obvious – as Peterson says, these programmes offer the politician a ‘chance to demonstrate that he or she has a sense of humor, just like a regular person’ (2008, 171) – but, in Australia, having a sense of humour is particularly important. Jessica Milner Davis notes that humour has been closely aligned with how Australians identify themselves and others, saying,

For Australians, using and appreciating (or at least tolerating) humour is not so much permitted as compulsory. This is a culture that deploys humour openly as a weapon to identify those who are truly ‘at home’, in both the land and the society. (2009, 38)

Davis defines Australian humour as an ‘acculturating ritual’ (2009, 39), where a willingness to ‘take the piss’ is used to identify and unite different groups of people under the banner of ‘Australian’. While marking difference through ‘us vs. them’ narratives, this practice acts as a way of defining qualities that bring together all Australians (or at least those Australians who fit within the dominant hegemonic model of national identity). Even though it does highlight the differences between other Australians, it also welcomes ‘them’ as ‘one of us’ through the practice of ‘taking the mickey’. Davis notes many scholars and commentators have identified that taking the mickey or having a ‘broad licence’ (41) is considered to be an Australian ‘democratic right’ (40), something Australians all share and have a right to do.

No figure quite personifies this Australian ideal quite like that of the ‘larrikin’. The larrikin is a ‘carefree, mischievous character, with no intentional meanness’ (Rickard qtd. in Vine 2006, 68), who enjoys ‘playing up to the audience, mocking pomposity and smugness, taking the piss out of people... [and being] sceptical, iconoclastic, egalitarian yet suffering fools badly, insouciant and, above all, defiant’ (Gorman 1990, x). The Australian myth of egalitarianism, which ‘assumes that Australians do not tolerate injustice and that everyone can have, and should get, a “fair go”’ (Greig, Lewins, and White 2003, 167), is personified within the larrikin. The larrikin takes the mickey out of everyone, particularly ‘the wowser’, any figure that is too serious, politically correct, or unable to laugh at themselves. Collins argues the larrikin has often come to represent ‘the real’ or authentic Australian. The larrikin, she rightly notes, is ‘an imaginary but powerful figure of national rhetoric’ (2007, 90). Manning Clarke shares a similar sentiment, arguing that larrikinism acts as a ‘myth by which [Australia] defines and justifies itself’ (1990, 39). Larrikins legitimise ‘the delegation of “Aussie values” to the safe-keeping of an idealized and sentimentalized “ordinary Australia”’ (Collins 2007, 90). In other words, larrikins have an ‘ordinary’ and ‘common-sense’ knowledge that is privileged as trusted and authentic. The larrikin, due to its alignment with a perceived real, authentic Australia, is therefore a useful figure to associate oneself with in politics.

Turner and Edmunds have observed that the political embrace of anti-elitism has a long history, with former Prime Ministers such as Bob Hawke trading on ‘his larrikin [*sic*] past in order to present himself as “an ordinary bloke”’ (2002, 236). Politicians who have been able to present themselves as the ‘every man’ (and it tends to be men) or the ‘ordinary bloke’ have generally had more success with the electorate. In his memoirs, Hawke himself suggested that his world record for speed beer drinking – downing two and a half pints in eleven seconds as a university student – was the single most influential feat in his political success, ‘endearing him to a voting population with a strong beer culture’ (qtd. in Lion 2012). In Australia, politicians’ willingness to appear on comedy programmes can be seen to have roots in the enduring image of the larrikin.

Enter, pursued by larrikin: *The Chaser* as contemporary satire

The Chaser team are emblematic of contemporary Australian satirists who embody the larrikin trope. Produced by and starring five major players – Andrew Hansen, Chas Licciardello, Julian Morrow, Craig Reucassel, and Chris Taylor – their programmes are of particular interest not only because of their popularity and larrikinesque (and therefore ‘authentic’) satire, but because they are one of a few satires to feature politicians not just as guests but as active participants in the satire itself. Dressed in suits and in possession of ABC press passes and cameras, *The Chaser* crew did not present themselves as explicit satirists in their earliest programmes. Thus, in contrast to pre-arranged appearances on comedy programmes like *Good News Week* and *The Project*, *The Chaser*’s interactions with politicians created conditions for potential spontaneity or trouble. To examine this trend, this section will provide a case study looking at how politicians’ reactions to *The Chaser* have evolved over the group’s decade-long history. Through the history of *The Chaser* on television, the team’s aesthetics and politics have largely remained the same. What has changed is the way politicians respond to them.

In the early 2000s, *The Chaser* brought satire and mischief to politicians without giving them prior warning or time to prepare, beginning with their first television appearance *The Election Chaser*, a news satire that covered the 2001 Federal Election between John Howard’s Right-wing Liberal-National Coalition and Kim Beasley’s Left-wing Labor party. During the programme, some politicians laugh and play along with *The Chaser*’s antics, but few tolerate them for very long. For example, in one of their earliest public performances, Craig Reucassel goes to Parliament House dressed as a journalist but takes a foam bat and a ‘refugee’ with him, asking federal members if they would like to ‘bash a refugee’ because it is something politicians ‘really love to do... there are so many votes in it and it’s really fun!’ (*Election Chaser* 2001). Some politicians are very serious in their responses; Labor’s Dick Adams and Wayne Swan, and the Liberal’s Kevin Andrews and Warren Entsch dismiss Reucassel, ignore him and walk away. Entsch even tells him to ‘piss off’. Labor’s Duncan Kerr has a small laugh, but then tells Reucassel that some people would find the gag funny and that is very sad. Only the National’s De-Anne Kelly speaks with Reucassel, telling him that the actor playing the refugee is a ‘good-looking fellow’. She laughs when Reucassel tells her that such a response would not get her up in the polls. Labor’s Mark Latham plays along to an extent, grabbing the bat and hitting Reucassel instead of the refugee, but he then walks away, pushes past the camera and calls him a ‘fucking idiot’ (*Election Chaser* 2001).

However, in subsequent iterations of *The Chaser*, there are signs of increasing acceptance and even enjoyment of the satirists’ interventions on behalf of politicians. For example, by the time of the 2004 Federal Election, when Mark Latham led Labor against

John Howard, Latham's response is noticeably less aggressive. In one skit, Reucassel ambushes Latham at a café and bets him \$50 that he cannot say the Labor campaign slogan 'ease the squeeze' seven times on the leader's 'Great Debate'. Latham recognises Reucassel cheerfully, addresses him by his first name, and takes the bet (*Chaser Decides* 2004a). Following *The Chaser's* 2001 debut on television, through their 2002 and 2003 news parody *CNNNN*, and the 2004 federal election special *The Chaser Decides*, politicians begin to recognise the satirists and thus respond in an increasingly good-natured manner. While a great deal of this is dependent on the individual politician and what *The Chaser* production team decide to show, fewer politicians seem surprised or overtly frustrated. More of them instantly recognise and smile at the team. As part of this increasing mutual awareness between satirist and politician, some politicians even reference previous ambushes by *The Chaser*. After numerous media reports regarding Treasurer Peter Costello's desire to take over Liberal Party leadership from John Howard, Reucassel offers Costello 'Quit Smirking Patches'. He promises Costello that he'll be 'number one' in the public's eyes if he can stop smirking. Costello laughs and responds, 'but I was supporting Alan Cadman. I'm in the Cadman camp' (*CNNNN* 2003b). Here, Costello references a previous *Chaser* skit in which the satirists spread rumours that little-known backbencher Alan Cadman was challenging Howard for Liberal leadership, and then sought Liberal and Labor comment on the matter they had fabricated (*CNNNN* 2003a). This resulted in playful, confused, and angry responses, including a public denial from Cadman himself. Few politicians respond as wittily to *Chaser* ambushes as Costello, but more and more of them laugh, smile and attempt to reply humorously.

The behaviour of Tony Abbott, current Prime Minister of Australia, illustrates one of the greatest shifts in politicians' responses towards *The Chaser*. When he is ambushed in both *CNNNN* in 2002–2003 and *The Chaser Decides* in 2004, he either laughs nervously and walks away or completely ignores the satirists. In one episode, *The Chaser* team compare his unwillingness to talk to them with his reported discussions with high-ranking Catholic clergy. This references a news interview where Abbott was unable to immediately 'recall' if he had met with Catholic Cardinal George Pell during an election campaign. They show multiple clips of Abbott ignoring them, and Reucassel proposes that they might have more luck if they take a different tack. He then crashes a press conference dressed as a Catholic bishop and is ignored by Abbott again until the end of the conference when Reucassel asks, 'Have you met with an Archbishop in the last 10 minutes?' Abbott finally responds, saying, 'Mate, you're not funny and you should get outta here' (*Chaser Decides* 2004b). The tone in Abbott's voice is one of frustration, without any of the friendliness the use of 'mate' often implies.

From the first series of *The Chaser's War on Everything* in 2006, however, Abbott seems to change his strategy of ignoring or expressing frustration with *Chaser* ambushes. He even makes a few jokes, as in the human-animal hybrid sketch, where *The Chaser* question him over comments regarding stem cell research potentially leading to human-animal hybrids. Dressed as a centaur, mermaid, and minotaur, respectively, Reucassel, Licciardello, and Morrow crash a media appearance, demanding to know why Abbott finds human-animal hybrids so offensive. Abbott laughs and tells them that he thought human-animal hybrids were meant to be more muscular. When asked if he wants to 'kiss the mermaid', he asks, 'what'll I turn into?' He then kisses his own hand before planting it on Licciardello's cheek (*War On Everything* 2006). In 2010, when Abbott was the Liberal's candidate for Prime Minister, he appears just as receptive. In one instance, Reucassel challenges Abbott regarding his stance on Howard-era industrial relations legislation, which conflicts with the opinions expressed in his book *Battlelines*. Abbott is friendly, exclaiming,

'you're back', and puts an arm around Reucassel's shoulder in a friendly manner. Even though he ignores many of Reucassel's comments, Abbott responds by saying there will be an election edition of *Battlelines* and that he wants Reucassel to buy it (*YWC* 2010).

This change in attitude and behaviour from Abbott and other politicians illustrates a discursive shift in how politicians campaign. This shift is further evidenced in the increased willingness of politicians to appear on satire programmes and engage directly with the satire, often by satirising or poking fun at themselves. This kind of media appearance was once unheard of. One notable exception in Australia is prime minister Gough Whitlam's appearance in the 1974 movie *Barry McKenzie Holds His Own*, where he gives Edna Everage the title of 'Dame' in a parodic performance that ironically refers to Whitlam abolishing the imperial honours system in 1972 (Pender 2005, 68). Pender describes this incident as 'a moment when the politics of Australian theatre and the theatre of Australian politics directly and hilariously coincided' (67).

However, what was once a rare occurrence has become increasingly prevalent in contemporary politics. *The Chaser's YWC* is the first *Chaser* series in which politicians appear willingly in extended pre-arranged appearances, not ambushes or short-scripted skits. The premises of these appearances all revolve around the politician playing a game. For example, in Episode 3, Labor's Maxine McKew is hooked up to the 'pollie-graph', a fake lie detector that supposedly flashes green when she tells the truth and red when she lies. She tries to be playful in her responses, but is often labelled a liar by the machine. When asked if she prefers 'Julia [Gillard]' or 'the real Julia [Gillard]', she replies, 'Julia is a tough-minded lady and I like tough-minded ladies'.¹ When asked if she believes a proposed Labor citizen's assembly is a good idea, she answers yes. The machine flashes red on both occasions and, though McKew challenges the machine, the implication that she is lying is clear. What we see in this example is that McKew is willing to interact with the unserious realm of satire in a much more participatory fashion. A further demonstration of politicians' willingness to engage in satire, including self-satire, can be seen in Episode 1, where Julie Bishop, then Deputy Leader of the Liberal Party, uses her 'death stare' in a staring competition with Licciardello. Later, she aggressively stares down a garden gnome, which falls backwards and smashes on the floor (*YWC* 2010). She jokes that her stare has been classified as a weapon by the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation, asks if the game is a new format for the Leader's Debate, pretends to intimidate the gnome, and puts her hands up in victory when she wins. She willingly performs a popular media caricature of herself as a steely woman with the intimidating death glare.

Where once Australian public figures responded with confusion or frustration, they now engage *The Chaser* with good humour and even self-satire. There has been a shift from annoyance to tolerance, from tolerance to good humour, from good humour to joking, from joking to non-satiric participation, and finally to satiric participation. Of course, not all politicians go beyond displaying good humour (some do not go beyond tolerance), but the phenomenon of politicians participating in satire in a playful and indeed self-satirising manner has become increasingly commonplace. McKew and Bishop do more than answer questions in a comedy interview or laugh at a humourist's joke; they actively participate in making fun of themselves. This can be seen as politicians' recognition of *The Chaser's* cultural capital, and that it is perhaps something worth co-opting.

Serious satirists: earnest and humorous commentary in political media

In addition to the increasing entry of politicians into the ostensibly unserious world of the satirist, the interplay between satire and politics has also seen satirists enter the realm of

serious political commentary. Stephen Wagg argues that the contemporary trend of satirists and comedians being asked to cover, for example, controversial issues for current affairs television occurs because they are ‘perceived as truth-tellers outside of the organizational publicity machines [of politics and journalism]’ (2002, 327). What is notable about such instances is that they mark the satirist as truth-teller *outside* of satire, licenced to speak seriously on political matters *without* a comic play-frame. In my previous work on cynicism and *parrhesia*, I critically examine satirical ‘truth-telling’ as a resistive and performative practice in which one savagely ‘protests idealistic constructions that dictate human behaviour and lay claim to truth, yet claims that a truth – only alluded to; rarely if ever stated – exists outside media and political spectacle’ (Higgie 2014). Therefore, when I speak of satirists as ‘truth-tellers’, I am not saying that satirists speak any definitive or ontologically objective truth. Rather, I am saying that their practice of defining falsehoods in their satire is regularly accompanied by a corresponding, unspoken demand that the truth must be restored in opposition to what is widely regarded as the deeply untrustworthy and manipulative world of contemporary politics. This earnest demand for truth, whatever it may be, is central to a satirist’s seemingly insincere, ironic, or light-hearted critique.

Such an interpretation of the relation between satire and truth needs to be understood as distinct from that recently offered by Webber, who argues that satire ‘mobilizes an indirect form of criticism, refusing earnestness on principle’ (Webber 2013, 13). According to her account, contemporary political satire refuses to partake in political earnestness or journalistic objectivity, but it still rails against those who do not provide it. In postmodernity, this adds to the satirist’s authority as a ‘truth-teller’; as Webber says of Jon Stewart, satirists ‘must deny objectivity because the majority of [people] no longer believe in it’ (Webber 2013, 117). In this section, however, I shall examine moments where satirists depart from this satirically expressed ‘denial’, express themselves earnestly (either partially through a combination of joking and earnestness, or completely by dropping the play-frame all together), while still maintaining their authority.

One of the most telling signs that a satirist is considered a truth-teller is their invitation onto traditional news or current affairs programmes. This can be observed when *The Chaser* team, either together or individually, or other popular comedians, such as Magda Szubanski (*Kath and Kim*) and Josh Thomas (*Talking 'Bout Your Generation, Please Like Me*), appear on journalistic programmes like *Q&A*, *Sky News*, *Lateline* or *Compass*, or as guest columnists in newspapers. *Chaser* Julian Morrow, on presenting the 2009 Andrew Olle Lecture,² noted the interesting choice made in asking a satirist, particularly one known to be unruly, to speak at such a prestigious event, saying that he was ‘the first person to give an Olle Lecture who’s also been thrown out’ (2009). This comment, though said playfully, acknowledged the complex role Morrow had been given, which demonstrated a blurring between serious and comedic political commentary. The satirist was speaking outside of the licenced play-frame of satire and in the more serious realm of a public lecture, one from which he had previously been ejected, but where he now stood centre stage.

There are times when a satirist may actually use traditional news as a mouthpiece instead of satire in order to provide information to their audience. For example, Craig Reucassel used an article in the *The Sydney Morning Herald* newspaper and an appearance on the news talk show *Q&A* to create public awareness about long-standing government legislation that bans the use of parliamentary video footage for satirical or comedic purposes (Reucassel 2011; *Q&A* 2011a). Only a year later did he attempt to make the same points through satire on *The Hamster Wheel* (*Parliamentary Satire* 2012). In his

newspaper article, he presents the law as particularly hypocritical, given then prime minister Kevin Rudd's statement that the BBC needed to 'lighten up' and 'get an Australian sense of humour' after they banned *The Chaser* from using footage of the 2011 Royal Wedding in their satire. In his article, Reucassel interviews presenters from other 'non-news news-related' programmes such as ABC's *Hungry Beast* and Ten's *The 7pm Project*. Though he argues quite colloquially that, 'it is far more "un-Australian" that satirists can't sink their teeth into their own Parliament than a stupid royal wedding' (2011), he uses journalism to make his point, not satire.

Additionally, individual *Chaser* team members, usually Julian Morrow or Craig Reucassel, and a wide variety of other political satirists and comedians have been invited onto news programmes to provide both serious comment and entertainment. They are often questioned directly on matters relating to freedom of speech and the limits of satire or comedy, but their most interesting answers come in relation to politics. Often their comments are intermingled with humour. For instance, when Reucassel is asked about refugee policy on *Q&A*, he uses humour to challenge the validity of detaining refugees for not using official asylum channels. He highlights the desperation some asylum seekers face by saying, 'if you're in Afghanistan in a war zone, it's not like there's an Australian citizenship bench there handing out pamphlets for you' (*Q&A* 2010a). However, Reucassel also addresses the issue with great seriousness. He challenges the politicians on the panel who support refugee detention, pointing out several times that refugees who come by official channels are allowed to live in the community while their applications for asylum are assessed. He argues that asylum seekers who come to Australia through unofficial channels are being criminalised in the debate, while the desperation of their situation is ignored, and that both those who arrive by plane and by boat should be able to have their claims processed in the community.

Josh Thomas, an openly gay stand-up comedian, takes a similarly serious stance as a guest on *Q&A* in 2011. Switching between serious and comic registers, Thomas not only demonstrates a comfort in these alternate registers, but also takes advantage of the tacit permission he has to move between the two. For example, on the issue of same sex marriage, he jokingly argues,

I just want a day where I can get all my friends and family, I can say, 'I really love this guy. Now buy me some presents. I'm sick of buying you some,' you know. I'm sick of it. It's always give, give, give when you're gay. I just want a toaster. (*Q&A* 2011b)

At other times, Thomas passionately and earnestly illustrates his knowledge on the issue, arguing,

This is actually not a controversial issue. 63% of people want to see this. 74% of Labor voters want to see this. At the moment in this country you have – if you're gay, you're at a much higher risk – you're much more likely to experience self-harm, depression, homelessness, eating disorders, drug abuse. You're five to 14 times more likely to attempt suicide and the biggest contributing factor to that is homophobia and the Marriage Act, as it stands, it empowers homophobia and it needs to change. (*Q&A* 2011b)

In *Q&A*'s 2014 mental health special, Thomas' humorous and earnestly heartfelt comments on mental health and homophobia, particularly his serious rebuke of Independent MP Bob Katter, even went viral and made the news (see *Q&A* 2014; Kembrey 2014; O'Regan 2014).

These examples demonstrate that satirists have been able to transcend any apparent limit that would constrain them in the realm of serious discourse. In the most extreme manifestations of this tendency, satirists have even been known to usurp the position of panel mediator, grilling politicians as one would normally expect of a journalist. In one episode of *Q&A*, Reucassel is so insistent on questioning comments made by fellow panellist and Liberal MP Christopher Pyne, that the panel mediator and ABC journalist Tony Jones asks him if he would like to ‘shift over one seat’ into the position of host (*Q&A* 2010a). During a *Q&A* episode that addresses the Labor Party’s replacement of Kevin Rudd as Prime Minister with Julia Gillard, Magda Szubanski continually asks National Party Senator Barnaby Joyce if the Coalition would similarly replace a problematic leader, insisting that Joyce’s assertion that the Labor Party’s actions were ‘wrong’ is only political point-scoring (*Q&A* 2010b). All of these examples demonstrate both satirist and comedian engaging seriously with politics and news journalism. What is most interesting, however, is that they have been invited to provide comment on political issues *alongside* politicians, journalists, public intellectuals, and academics. Such invitations demonstrate how the apparent expertise and the ability of the satirist to offer political comment is in no way limited to the realm of the comic, but instead seems to now frequently enter into what would be considered serious political discussions.

Planet America: satirist as expert

In 2012, as perhaps the ultimate extension of this logic, *Chaser* Chas Licciardello took on the role of co-host for ABC’s *Planet America*, a hybrid entertainment news programme that covered US current affairs in the lead-up to and months following the American presidential election. The show featured reporting, commentary, analysis, satirical or comedic skits, and interviews. The programme was listed as ‘news’, airing on ABC’s 24-hour news channel, appearing in a list of news programs on the ABC website, and filed under the category of ‘News and Current Affairs’ on ABC’s catch-up streaming website *iview*. The programme, and Licciardello’s role in it, provides an interesting case of both the discursive shifts within political journalism and the satirist’s ability to switch between the roles of playful comic and serious commentator.

Licciardello’s co-host on *Planet America* is ABC News Radio personality John Barron. The role that each host plays on the programme is ambivalent. Barron dresses in a suit and always presents the ‘news’ segment of the programme, speaking directly to the camera and narrating news footage as one would expect of a news anchor. Licciardello, on the other hand, wears casual clothing featuring a different American election campaign t-shirt – such as ‘Ford 76’ and ‘Reagan Bush 84’ – each week. He also speaks in a more colloquial tone than Barron. However, Barron is by no means Licciardello’s ‘straight man’, nor is Licciardello the ‘comic relief’. Barron regularly offers opinions in a humorous manner and peppers his traditional style of reporting with out-of-place but nonetheless amusing colloquialisms. For example, he describes a sponsor of US Republican Presidential Nominee contender Newt Gingrich as a ‘sugar daddy’ (*Planet America* 2012c) and calls the relationship between President Obama and UK prime minister David Cameron a ‘bromance’ (*Planet America* 2012b). Furthermore, Licciardello is regularly called upon by Barron to explain the American legislative and executive systems and provide information about previous elections. Licciardello is positioned as the expert, confidently and earnestly answering complex questions from Barron and *Planet America*’s Twitter followers. He demonstrates a great deal of prior knowledge and research, and frequently directs the camera to his laptop for statistics, graphs, diagrams, and reports to

explain the political process and history of the USA. These detailed explanations became so regular on the programme that, at one point, he says, ‘I hate to do it again but let’s go right back to the laptop’ (*Planet America* 2012a).

Licciardello still provides a heavy dose of humorous commentary, and his statistics-based segment ‘Stat Dec’ is very reminiscent of *Chaser* in-studio skits. In one instance, he illustrates how much Americans dislike their Congress (sitting on 9% approval) by showing that it is less popular than Nixon was during Watergate (24%), BP during the Gulf oil spill (16%), and America going communist (11%). Only 3% consider Congress ‘above average’, and Licciardello argues that they were probably ‘these guys’, cutting to a viral online video of a young man eating corn chips that are inexplicably, like his hair, on fire. Licciardello poses the question, ‘Why don’t Americans just vote them out?’ and answers his own question with more statistics, showing that, although 71% of Americans think Congress spends too much, 57% think Congress should spend more in their district. Furthermore, only 20% of Americans think most house representatives should be re-elected, but 53% say that *their* house representative should be re-elected. Licciardello argues that, eventually, the gap between approval and disapproval will get so big that ‘you’ll be able to fit *anything* in there’, with a graphic of approval statistics separated by a gap that fits a tyrannosaurus rex, Sydney’s Centrepoint Tower, and controversial radio personality Kyle Sandilands’s ego-engorged head (*Planet America* 2012b).

In *Planet America*, Licciardello jumps from *Chaser*-style antics to serious political commentary with little pause. This, and the way Barron defers to Licciardello when it comes to complex legislative processes, positions Licciardello as a strange mix between expert and satirist. The programme itself fluctuates between humour and journalism to such a degree that in an interview with former Newt Gingrich aide Scot Faulkner, Licciardello earnestly seeks clarification about specific Gingrich policy changes over the last five years and then cheekily congratulates Faulkner for being able to work with Gingrich without marrying him (*Planet America* 2012b).³ The programme provides a clear example of how satirists in Australia inhabit a complex, ambivalent role in contemporary political discourse, given the licence to provide both satire and trusted political commentary. Licciardello’s role on *Planet America* exemplifies the tension between the trouble-making and truth-seeking nature of the satirist, as well as the slippage between information and entertainment that occurs in contemporary political media.

Planet America is by no means the first of this kind of hybrid programme. Other Australian examples in the last few decades include *Good News Week*, *The Glasshouse*, *The Panel*, *Hungry Beast*, and *The Project* (originally *The 7pm Project*). *Good News Week*, *The Glasshouse*, and *The Panel* involved, in various formats and segments, humorous comment on topical events, often about local and global politics, as well as more obscure news items. *Hungry Beast* and *The Project* share more in common with *Planet America*, as they approach current events with both seriousness and humour, whereas the other programmes tended (all of them are no longer on the air) to focus more on humour, making political jokes rather than political comment, either earnest or satirical. *Hungry Beast* reporters have been nominated for and won the Walkley Award for Excellence in Journalism. Monique Schafter won in 2011 for best television current affairs reporting (less than 20 minutes) (*Monique Schafter* 2012) and Ali Russell was nominated for Excellence in Coverage of Indigenous Affairs in 2010. Russell’s nomination came in the same year that *Hungry Beast* was nominated for an Australian Film Industry Award for ‘Best Light Entertainment Television Series’ (*Metro Screen* 2010). This juxtaposition is a startling illustration of how these satire/news hybrids are being recognised not just for entertainment, but for the information and serious critical commentary they provide.

Hungry Beast was, however, axed in the same year that it won a Walkley, with *The Project*, a weeknight current affairs/comedy hybrid on commercial station Channel 10, the only programme to continue in 2014. *The Project* does not focus purely on politics or current affairs, including entertainment reviews and celebrity interviews alongside its coverage of daily events. It rarely provides political satire. However, its prominence in the 7 pm and then 6:30 pm timeslot of a commercial station, alongside the proliferation of hybrid satire/news programmes and the increased presence of satirists providing serious political commentary in traditional political journalism, shows not only that the satirist is increasingly escaping the play frame of satire, but that satirists are indeed, as Wagg argues, ‘perceived as truth-tellers’ in the public sphere.

Conclusion: seeking the real sideshow ringleader

Satire sanctions behaviour that would be unwelcome in non-humorous contexts. It also provides the audience with a set of expectations and understandings. One knows that satire is ‘just joking’ and that joking is sanctioned, contained and understood within the generic space. However, when satire breaks this containment, by intruding directly on the worlds of politics and journalism, it becomes potentially subversive, disrupting discursive practices and generic expectations. When *The Chaser* and other satirical works escape their licensed spaces, they create the possibility for disruption, shock, and offense at the satirist’s outrageous behaviour and violation of established rules of social discourse. This surprise has faded, however, with wider recognition of the satirist and their antics. Politicians have consequently modified how they react; they have started playing along. So too, satirists have modified how they do satire as they are invited to speak in traditional political media. Furthermore, audiences have come to expect not only ‘joking’ from satire, but also ‘truth-telling’. This interplay has been formalised in the form of hybrid programmes such as *Planet America* and *The Project*, and through the growing appearance of satirists on traditional news programmes. Politicians have gained a licence to play, just as satirists have been licensed to provide serious political commentary.

This, of course, is not to suggest that satire has solely influenced recent shifts in political media practices. The nature of discourse is dynamic and responds to a wide range of factors. The so-called tabloidisation of journalistic practice over the last few decades, for example, has been influenced in varying degrees by changes to media ownership and broadcasting legislation, the growing prominence of digital technology (particularly in the areas of self-publishing), and the public relations (PR) units of political parties and governments, to name a few. Satire is another factor contributing to the evolution of political discourse, perhaps even to Lindsay Tanner’s ‘sideshow syndrome’. Even Tanner, however, believes the sideshow syndrome that plagues contemporary politics could be tempered by media that delivers ‘complex information in interesting formats’ (2011, 193), or programmes that feature an ‘entertainment format built around serious content’ (196). He proposes that outspoken commercial radio presenters or ‘shock-jocks’ provide one such form because they,

Connect larger, often less-educated audiences with the content of political issues in a way that no one else does. Apart from one or two who are totally outrageous protagonists or unabashed entertainers, the shock-jocks are a vital point of connection between the democratic process and the wider world. . . they provide a point of connection between serious and complex political issues and the concerns and feelings of ordinary citizens. (195–196)

This paper argues that such a statement can be more meaningfully said of many contemporary satirists. Not only do they provide that vital point of connection, but they also hold the politician's new sense of play as inherently suspect. The act of playing along or taking ridicule with good humour may give the politician some credit, but in subversive satire, the politician's good humour is directly challenged. When it came to McKew, for instance, *The Chaser* team challenged her continually by using the 'pollie-graph' to label her efforts as true or false, sincere or dishonest. The advantages of this discursive confluence between serious politics and comic satire thus distribute asymmetrically: the satirical truth-teller enjoys substantially more success at playing the hybrid role of joker/serious commentator than the politician who attempts to be both king and joker in the sideshow of politics. However, if the satirist is to continue in this hybrid role, they must maintain as much suspicion of the playful politician as they do of the earnest one, at least if satire is to function as critique and commentary as many viewers have come to expect.

Given that many satirists have been granted 'truth-teller' status in serious *and* satiric realms of political commentary, does the satirist have a new responsibility to ensure that the vehicle of satire is not used for hegemonic political purpose? Do viewers trust satirists so much now that they miss when politicians successfully co-opt satire for their own political interests, thereby damaging the often-celebrated democratic potential of satire? Scholars of the serious and the playful in the political sideshow may wish to explore these questions in future research.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes

1. This refers to a phrase used by Julia Gillard herself during the 2010 election, wherein she promised to go off script and show Australia 'the "real Julia"' (Hudson 2010).
2. The Andrew Olle Lecture is an annual lecture presented by a high-profile journalist or media figure. Since 1996, it has been hosted by the ABC in honour of the radio broadcaster Andrew Olle, who died suddenly of a brain tumour in 1995 (About Andrew Olle 2010).
3. This is a reference to Gingrich's three marriages, which included infidelity and his eventual marriage to a work colleague.

Notes on contributor

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