The use of parody in environmental texts

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Abstract

This paper serves to demonstrate the use of parody in environmental texts. A parody mimics the serious aspect of a source by making fun of, attacking, and exaggerating the source it is mimicking. Parody plays an immense role in mass media. While the intentional goal of parody is for humor and entertainment, it can be a factor in determining views on major public issues. Parodies of controversial issues in the news media have the potential to shape our perceptions and the decisions we make about the issues. Environmental issues are especially prone to parody. To demonstrate the use of parody in environmental communication, online videos were analyzed for this paper. The environmental texts chosen for this paper are online videos making fun of environmental issues such as the British Petroleum (BP) oils spill and wildlife conservation.

The research question posed for this topic was “How does the ecocentric ideology become empowered, and how does the anthropocentric role play a part in the empowerment?” To answer the question presented, critical rhetoric was used to define how parody plays a role in the chosen environmental texts. Critical rhetoric is the questioning or denunciation of a behavior, policy, societal value, or ideology. Critical rhetoric may also include the articulation of an alternate policy, vision, or ideology. Critical rhetoric seeks to reveal, challenge, and present alternatives to the dominant discourse. Analyzing the environmental texts with the use of critical rhetoric allows the audience to interpret how the dominant discourse is challenged.

The anthropocentric and ecocentric ideologies were used to critique the chosen texts for this paper. Analyzing the three chosen texts seeks to display the ecocentric ideology’s views of the anthropocentric side of the spectrum.

The parody videos presented in this paper contain applications to environmental communication, and can shape our views about issues about environmental communication. Parody is a powerful tool used in media, and the implications go deeper than just some video we watch for a laugh. Results of this analysis and can lead to further exploration of parody in environmental communication and applied to analyzing parody Twitter accounts, articles from the online source “The Onion”, and other social media outlets.

Key words: Critical rhetoric, parody, environmental texts, and media
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Comedy can play a substantial role in communication, and can take the form of parody. A parody mimics the serious aspect of a source by making fun of, attacking, and exaggerating the source it is mimicking. A parody can also be used for one source to attack another, placing blame and making the opposing source look foolish. Parodies have become increasingly popular with the development and popularity of YouTube and Hulu (Lim & Ki, 2007), (Duffy & Teruggi Page, 2013). Parodies and satirical texts have significantly increased in news coverage and late night television (Duffy & Teruggi Page, 2013). Video sites such as YouTube and Hulu allow people to access political comedy sketches, allowing them to connect with others through “humor, to be entertained at convenient and desirable times and places, and at the same time gain political information (p. 549).” Parodies magnify the persuasive force of rhetoric, “making their explanatory dramas more salient and persuasive (p. 560).” According to Baym and Jones (2012), parody seeks more than a laugh or audience share. News parody in particular may serve as a watchdog function in the media. Parodies may also serve interests of economic power, “functioning as a means to help undermine cultural trust in traditional public systems.” (p. 12) Audiences are invited to “reinterpet, ridicule, and challenge” the dominant discourse (p. 6). Within the political sphere, there are several examples of parody interrogating those who hold positions of power to shape popular understandings, and that entertainment is a source of influence (Esralew & Young), (Baym & Jones). The use of parody can take many forms, with examples ranging from Twitter accounts, online videos, online articles, news parody, and many other mediated forms of entertainment. Parodies in environmental communication are commonly portrayed from these types of mediated entertainment, especially online videos. To demonstrate the use of parody in environmental communication, online videos were analyzed for this paper. The environmental texts chosen for this paper are videos making fun of environmental issues such as the British Petroleum (BP) oils spill and wildlife conservation.

The research question posed for this paper is: “How does the ecocentric ideology become empowered, and how does the anthropocentric role play a part in the empowerment?” To answer the question presented, critical rhetoric was used to define how parody plays a role in the chosen environmental texts. Critical rhetoric is the questioning or denunciation of a behavior, policy, societal value, or ideology. Critical rhetoric may also include the articulation of an alternate policy, vision, or ideology. Critical rhetoric also seeks to reveal, challenge, and present alternatives to the dominant discourse (Cox, 2013). McKerrow (1989) describes the discourse of power as a “critique of domination on the discourse of power which creates and sustains the social practices which control the dominated.” It is also a critique of ideologies as rhetorical creations (p. 92).

In the case of environmental communication, critical rhetoric can take place in many forms. Critical rhetoric is applied to environmental communication in the form of how environmental texts are presented to the intended audience and how interpretations are formed from them. Hendry (2008) has described technology-caused disasters as a “technospector,” so that whether or not an environmental disaster is natural or human-caused, there are blurred lines as to what caused it. It acts as an agent that is beyond our control and that there really is not anything we can do about it (p. 303). Environmental texts have messages that have a dominant discourse. Critical rhetoric challenges the dominant discourse by looking at the ideologies and transformatives.

To expand understanding of how parody plays a role in environmental communication, critical rhetoric and the ecocentric ideology views of the anthropocentric ideology in environmental communication will be critiqued. The ecocentric ideology is like a circle, and no single species is
dominated by the other. All living and nonliving things are important and have value. The anthropocentric ideology is extremely human-centered; meaning humans are superior and dominate the entire natural world (Corbett, 2006). Analyzing the chosen texts seeks to display the ecocentric ideology’s views of the anthropocentric side of the spectrum. The ecocentric ideology perspective of the anthropocentric ideology will look for ways in which the anthropocentric reacts in certain situations by basing all elements of the text as strictly human things. Critical rhetoric will help reveal the anthropocentric details from the ecocentric point of view, which will emphasize the oppression of all living things and make the human aspect more prominent. Critical rhetoric with the ecocentric and anthropocentric ideologies in mind were applied to environmental parody videos for this paper. The main question encompassing this research is “How does the ecocentric ideology become empowered, and how does the anthropocentric role play a part in the empowerment?” To answer this question, videos making fun of environmental issues such as the British Petroleum (BP) oils spill and wildlife conservation were chosen as the texts of analysis.

**Background of the texts of analysis**

The College Humor, the Upright Citizens Brigade (UCB), Saturday Night Live, and the Wildlife Conservation Society’s YouTube channels and videos demonstrate the use of parody in environmental communication.

College Humor is a popular YouTube channel on the Internet, and claims to be one of the most popular comedy sites on the web. Videos from College Humor include award-winning sketches, animations, music videos, and web series. College Humor plays a key role in environmental communication in their YouTube video entitled “BP Turnaround.” This video portrays a parody about British Petroleum (BP), and the surrounding events that occurred during and after the oil spill.

Comedians Matt Besser, Amy Poehler, Ian Roberts, and Matt Walsh founded the Upright Citizens Brigade (UCB). The UCB was originally created as a television show for Comedy Central and then made its move to YouTube. The videos posted on this channel influence NBC, SNL, Conan, Late Night, HBO, MTV, and many other mediated channels. The UCB created a skit entitled “BP Spills Coffee” also portrays a parody about BP and the surrounding events that occurred during and after the oil spill, using a cup of spilled coffee and other symbols to demonstrate how BP handled the situation. UCB’s second video targeting BP, entitled “BP: Rich Fish” shows David Winthrop giving somewhat of an apology statement, but encourages the audience to look on the brighter side.

*Saturday Night Live* (SNL) is a popular, live sketch comedy show in the United States. Premiering in 1975, SNL actors perform a variety of comedic sketches and parodies. One of their opening sketches in particular portrays executives from BP, Halliburton, and Transocean giving a press conference on how their past efforts to clean up the spill have failed, but they have come up with some new ideas that they assure us, will fail. Not to mention they will make a profit, and continue to rob people blind at the gas pumps.

The Wildlife Conservation Society’s YouTube channel allows users to connect with the Bronx Zoo, the Central Park Zoo, the Prospect Park Zoo, the Queens Zoo, and the New York Aquarium. Videos on their YouTube channel include videos about how they are working to protect the world’s last wild places, and how the public can help. The Wildlife Conservation Society created a video entitled “96 Elephants: Vintage Horror Show—The True Cost of Ivory.” This video portrays a parody of
the Antique’s Road Show television show, demonstrating how many elephants are killed each year for their ivory. This environmental text will be the last text critiqued for this paper.

BP: College Humor, UCB, and SNL

The first video parody chosen for the environmental text is entitled “BP Turnaround” and is a video created by the College Humor YouTube channel. The video begins with comments of news stories regarding the BP oil spill. The video then pans to an actor going by the name of Tony Hayward, the BP Chief Executive. Hayward begins speaking about knowing when the time is to make a change, and that one cannot love a company such as BP without loving oil. Hayward then goes on to say how much he loves oil, and that everyone at BP loves oil. Two BP workers are then shown playing with crude oil in a laboratory. The video then takes a turn and Hayward begins the transition to speaking about the oils spill. His only commented word is “yucky.” The video then pans to BP executives watching a video of a focus group of concerned individuals about the oil spill. BP executives comment on the video by saying it’s “hard to watch”, “that was a downer, serious boo boo”, and “that one really gets you right here, I mean, owie zowie.” The video then pans back to Hayward, talking about how most companies would hide something like the oil spill, but BP faces it, which is driving them to be better. A picture of a bird covered in oil, taped to the wall by a hand washing sink, with a sign that says “Our Bad” taped beside it is the next visual shown the video. The video then depicts the BP executives chanting, “Who are we? British Petroleum! What did we ruin? The Gulf Coast fishing industry!” Hayward makes his way back into the video, talking about BP making sure the crisis such as the spill never happened again, but when it failed, they decided why fix the spill, when they can fix the brand? An actress going by the name of Sally Harris, head of BP public relations, takes the next scene in the video. She states they are rebranding the name, the logo, and their faces. Hayward then comes back in the video with a mustache, explaining the new name as “Baby Otter Smiles and Company.” The new logo is a green otter with a mustache. The video also goes into saying BP is “putting a dome over the whole thing.” Hayward and Harris are then shown going to the home of a fisherman’s wife in Louisiana to show off the new logo. They arrive at the house and show the new logo to the woman. She is less than pleased and calls them “monsters” and slams the door in their face. The video ends with Hayward saying, “she seems so surprised.”

The second parody video chosen for an environmental text is entitled “BP Spills Coffee,” created by UCB Comedy. The video begins by showing BP executives sitting around a table in a
boardroom. One of the executives spills coffee and chaos ensues amongst them. The executives discuss that it is a minor spill, but they may be underestimating how big of a spill it actually is. The executives in the room attempt to control the spill from items such as a laptop, a man's fish dinner, and one of the executive's maps of Louisiana. The video then shows one of the executives attempting to write out a plan on a paper towel, while the others worry that the public is getting suspicious. By the time the contraption is completed, they try it out, and it fails. Another cup of coffee is spilled and more chaos happens. Another member of the executives dumps garbage on top of the coffee in hopes that it will take care of the spill. Another member of the executives then cuts off some of his hair in hopes to soak up some of the coffee. The team decides to wait three hours to watch and reassess the situation. Depicted members from Halliburton enter the boardroom and the BP executives blame them for selling them faulty cups, knowing they were unstable. As Halliburton leaves, the coffee cups they had with them are spilled all over the table and total chaos ensues. Through the screaming, the main executive yells for everyone to calm down and that he has Kevin Costner on the phone. Costner inquires about how bad the situation is and instructs them to place a golf ball on the spill. The executives have a Ping-Pong ball, which Costner says will work. He instructs them to throw it on the spill and to see if it helps any. They proceed to throw the ball on the spill and nothing happens. Everyone starts to cry. The video then pans to the last scene of the video. The scene is of the coffee spill 47 days later. The boardroom is abandoned and the man behind the glass (representing the public) is shaking his head.

The views of the anthropocentric ideologies according to the ecocentric are also prevalent in this video. The most notable of this is the fact that all of the items on the boardroom table that are in jeopardy of being contaminated with coffee are all human items. The laptop, the fish, and the map of Louisiana each belong solely to the executives at the table. Coffee and the coffee cups are also strictly human items in this video. The human aspect of the BP oil spill is constantly reinforced in the video because of the human factors symbolizing what was affected by the oil spill. By these depictions, the ecocentric is advantaged and the anthropocentric disadvantaged by the ecocentric depicting the anthropocentric as portrayed as incapable of solving the issue of the oil spill.

The third parody video chosen for an environmental text is another video from UCB, entitled "BP Public Relations." The video shows an actor portraying David Winthrop, a BP Public Relations team member attempting to put a positive spin on the oil spill. Winthrop is the only individual in the video with the BP logo in the background, speaking to the camera. Winthrop goes on to say how the people at BP feel terrible about the oil in the gulf “business.” He goes on to tell us to think how rich the fish have become, that the fish are literally swimming in money. Winthrop makes a statement about how many of the fish were cleaned off and put back into the oil, and that the appropriate phrase should be “cha-ching.” He also mentions that the fish are from the Gulf of Mexico and Louisiana, where there is an incredibly low standard of living. He then goes on to say that a fish could go a long way with five dollars in his pocket...or gills. Winthrop concludes the video by stating BP is spreading wealth around, particularly on “your beaches.”

The anthropocentric ideologies through the lens of the ecocentric are first demonstrated by framing the oil spill as “business” as well as the aspect of money. Portraying the idea of money and the fish as rich by putting money in their pockets or gills. Winthrop also mentions the low standard of living in the Gulf of Mexico and Louisiana, and that the fish could go pretty far with five dollars. The last aspect of the lens is when Winthrop says: “We are spreading wealth around, particularly on your beaches.” By saying this, Winthrop is saying the beaches belong to the public, rather than an entity of nature or the environment.
The fourth video chosen for analysis is from the late night variety sketch comedy show *Saturday Night Live*. The video skit entitled “BP Oil Spill Cold Opening” begins as a press conference-like setting and the phrase “a message from the people who ruined our ocean.” The actors Bill Hader, Fred Armisen, and Jason Sudeikis are seen as portraying Tony Hayward from BP, Steven Newman from Transocean, and Tim Probert from Halliburton. The sketch begins by their statements of trying to contain the spill by using techniques such as a “top hat,” a “giant tube” (a suggestion from his 5-year-old daughter), both of which have failed. Hader’s character then goes on to describe the “junk shot,” where shoot a bunch of garbage at the leak and try to plug it up. They state it has not failed yet, but they are confident it will. They state they have come together to formulate other ideas by top scientists using state of the art technology. The first idea is “dolphins with mops.” This idea requires attaching mops to dolphins with scotch tape. They state it may not work, but Halliburton will make a profit. The next idea they introduce is the “Schweppes Offensive” where they take on the oil spill head on, with a bunch of club soda, because “club soda gets everything out”. The next idea is called the “Oil Whisperer.” This would involve hiring someone like a dog whisperer, but for oil. The Oil Whisperer would say “bad oil!”

Other ideas they mention include: Aquaman, blame the French, duct tape, and The Backup Plan, where they blow the whole issue off and go see the movie “The Backup Plan” because considering the situation, they could all use a good laugh. They end the skit by telling us what they do best, robbing us blind at the gas pump.

The human aspects of the sketch include many of the ideas stated to clean up the spill. The top hat, junk shot, dolphins with mops, Schweppes offensive, oil whispering, Aquaman, blaming the French, duct tape, and “The Backup Plan” are all human-centered ideas. None of the ideas are concerned with the issue of the environment. The entities are much more focused on the profit, especially with the statement of robbing us blind at the gas pump. The portrayal of the Transocean, BP, and Halliburton executives empower the ecocentric ideology because of the human frame on the BP oil spill issue.

**Wildlife Conservation Society**

The final parody video chosen for an environmental text is a video entitled “96 Elephants: Vintage Horror Show—The True Cost of Ivory,” created by The Wildlife Conservation Society. This is a parody video of the television show “Antiques Road Show.” The video begins with two men, the seller and the appraiser. The seller is having the appraiser determine how much his carved elephant tusk is worth. The seller is very excited because he found it at an antique shop and knew about the existing demand for ivory in China. The appraiser says before they can talk about the value of the tusk, they must talk about the provenance.

The appraiser then goes on to explain the tusk came from an elephant that was ruthlessly stalked and gunned down, and goes on to say:

About 96 elephants are killed every day in Africa for their ivory, which adds up to about 35,000 a year. Scientists say that forest elephants in
ten years will probably be extinct, but hey you have to go sometime. The elephant was probably still alive when they hacked its face off with a machete, could have been a mother with a calf; they probably shot the calf too. If not, the calf probably wandered around for a few days before it starved to death, but that’s natural selection. I mean, look at the detail of this carving! The child soldier that shot the elephant, probably with one of the rebel groups that is currently destabilizing the continent, you know they use ivory to buy guns so they can continue to murder and rape and pillage and child slavery and so forth. If there was a park guard trying to protect the elephant, he may have been murdered, but I mean, what a beautiful piece, it’s exquisite! So, now that you know the cost behind it, do you really want to know how much it’s worth?

The video then shows the seller with a horrified look on his face, and a script is shown at the bottom of the screen that says “True cost = One dead elephant.”

The 96 elephant video differs from the BP oil videos because it does not only make the item of discussion a human aspect, but also includes the life of the elephant. This still represents the ecocentric attacking the anthropocentric. As for turning the discussion to the human aspect, the appraiser mentions the lives of people it affects, such as the child soldiers and the park guard, as well as having a very nonchalant attitude when discussing the horrific incidents that took place in order for the tusk to be obtained. Once again the ecocentric is advantaged and the anthropocentric disadvantaged by the ecocentric emphasizing the human factor of what it takes to obtain a tusk the seller had appraised, and also emphasizing the life of the elephant.

Conclusion and future implications

The research question posed for this topic was “How does the ecocentric ideology become empowered, and how does the anthropocentric role play a part in the empowerment?” From the presented environmental texts, it can be determined that through the use of parody, the ecocentric is empowered by mimicking, placing blame, and attacking the anthropocentric. Common tactics for environmental parodies takes place by the environmental components of a text being portrayed as all environmental things becoming extremely human centered. Parody plays a substantial role in the media, especially in controversial events and issues. Although a goal of a parody may be for entertainment, parodies may have other implications in addition to entertainment. A common tactic is to use humor to educate the public about what is happening around the world. This can be especially true with environmental issues such as the BP oil spill and endangered species. With the public in mind, views of certain issues such as the presented may be swayed because of parody videos. Parody videos may not always be the best source of information, and could possibly confuse the public on what is true information, and what is for comedy purposes only. The use of parody could also be used as a tool to anger, and angered responses to environmental parody videos could be another perspective that could be applied to the research. This study of parody videos expands the understanding of how parody plays a role in environmental communication using the view ecocentric’s ideology of the anthropocentric. Each presented video contains these aspects, and should be
considered for further exploration of environmental communication. Other forms of parody must also be considered, such as Internet memes, twitter accounts, and news articles.
References


