

“Ignorance is strength”: Representing COVID-19 Facebook experts in Danish textual news satire

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate how Danish textual news satire constructs its social critique of the many Facebook users whose comments during COVID-19 imitate expert statements in disregard of authoritative health science statements. Since the outbreak of COVID-19, UNESCO has proclaimed a disinfodemic of emotive narrative constructs and pseudo-science on the internet and especially in the social media. As with the ruling Party's paradoxical slogan “ignorance is strength” in George Orwell's dystopian novel *1984*, we sense a similar trend of the public disinfodemic, but studies of this paradox in satirical publications are scarce. Thus, the goal here is to scrutinize this enigma exemplified in an article in the Danish spoof news online media of *RokokoPosten* in which such experts are parodied in a kind of “doublethink” style which begs critical reflection on social media credibility. Hence, such textual news satire may potentially provide a vaccine against post-truth delusions of health science as it provides immunity against the disinfodemic by its own causative agents.

KEYWORDS

style, satire, rhetoric, misinformation, health science, disinfodemic

Introduction

The goal of this study is to put the linguistic and stylistic construction of textual news satire about the disinfodemic of COVID-19 under a qualitative microscope. During 2020, the Danish spoof news website *RokokoPosten*, for instance, published an abundance of articles about various aspects of the pandemic, such as the lockdown, hygiene, self-contradictory guidelines and restrictions, the decision to kill all minks in Denmark, the government's and the Health Authority's self-appointed power, etc., to open the readers' eyes to paradoxical takes and measures in our country. But how is this awakening achieved? Recent studies in fact demonstrate how people presented with both ordinary informative content and satirical content on TV are prone to change their minds about a serious matter the most based on the satirical content (Moyer-Gusé et al., 2018). This is a thought-provoking mindset which calls for further interrogation: News satire, I propose, is a kind of upsetting fake news as it encompasses and confronts the true and the untrue at the same time as it basically holds two truths (the translation of factual truth into a representation of non-factual truth). The reader is asked to hold both in the mind and then choose to decode the untrue as the truth. Thus, the nature of news satire is a kind of translational Orwellian 'doublethink', constituting *real information* in a symbiosis with the *disinformation* of a kind of fake news. Since news satire has the purpose of correcting the malaises of society, this kind of 'doublethink' may become a vaccine against delusions of health science as it provides immunity against the disinfodemic by its own causative agents.

Even though this reasoning is unfolded in intricate metaphorical terms, it is still safe to propose that news satire may remind news consumers to reflect on the illusory endeavour of searching for the truth, while at the same time functioning as a critique of the curiosity and clickbait codes and conventions of news media in general (Reilly 2012; Berkowitz and Schwartz 2016; Auken 2019). In this way, news satire may be regarded as a significant form of culture jamming, i.e., criticising mass media through its own means (DeLaure & Fink, 2017). But how is the linguistic and stylistic construction behind such doublethink formed? This leads to the following research question:

- How does textual news satire convey its social criticism of post-truth behavior in the social media during COVID-19 through its language and style?

Answering this question, I hope to contribute with significant knowledge about the linguistic construction of news satire in the fields of textual news satire, rhetoric, and text and discourse analysis.

Contextual background

Immediately after the outbreak of COVID-19, The World Health Organization (WHO) declared a so-called “infodemic”, i.e., “an overabundance of information – some accurate and some not – that makes it hard for people to find trustworthy sources and reliable guidance when they need it” (WHO, 2020). Their communication team worked 24 hours a day trying to combat numerous non-evidence-based myths and rumors about false prevention measures and cures which in fact might harm public health. For instance, specific toothpastes, dietary supplements, and creams have been sold illegally in the USA due to claims that they cure the virus (Porter, 2020). Poisonous fruit from the datura plant has been sold as a cure, too, probably because its spiky appearance resembles the corona virus, resulting in eleven people ending up at hospitals in India (*The News Minute*, 2020). And even more bizarrely, celebrities have been advocating taking six deep breaths and then coughing as a treatment of COVID-19 infection (Oliver, 2020).

One would then expect health science communication to act as it aims to enhance the level of health science knowledge in society. It also aims to enlighten and educate the public about various health risks based on scientific results, advocate against delusions about health science, and engage people in making the right decisions (Trench & Bucchi, 2010). But in the present post-truth, or post-factual, era, these tasks have become increasingly challenged. In 2016, The Oxford dictionaries declared “post-truth” the international word of the year as it characterizes a disturbing trend of a new epistemology where researched facts may be regarded as less credulous than personal feelings, anecdotes and opinions (D’Ancona, 2017). *The Oxford English Dictionary* defines it thus: “Originally U.S. Relating

to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping political debate or public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief” (*Oxford English Dictionary*).

Several current behavioral studies demonstrate how people presented with both persuasive facts and misinformation tend to continue to believe in the misinformation even after learning that it is false. In fact, if the truth counters people’s worldviews, their belief in the falsehood seems to be strengthened. Corrections only seem to work if they affirm the individual’s sense of self-worth, if the person learns about the motives behind the disinformation and is then offered an alternative explanation (Lewandowsky, Ecker & Cook, 2017, p. 355). But the entire post-truth “malaise” is not readily corrected as it is an alternative reality living its own life by (ab)using a confrontational political discourse and rhetoric of overgeneralization, sensationalism, *ad hominem* attacks, partial truths and downright misinformation basically aimed at generating uncertainty and thus preserving status quo (Lewandowsky, Ecker & Cook, 2017, p.360). A pertinent case in Lewandowsky, Ecker and Cook is the entire climate change debate in which scientists’ cry for action is mistrusted and undermined by popular beliefs and the invention of scientific postulates of the contrary.

Scientific knowledge is to be found everywhere on the internet, and it is easy to pick and choose what you like rather than engaging in laborious research to get to the bottom of an issue. And the digital culture of social media has turned into an epistemic space where everybody is an expert on-the-go in either epistemic bubbles, where you do not hear the other part, or echo chambers, which are formed based on distrust in the other part (Nguyen, 2018, p. 2). Here “propagandists, hoaxers, hackers, partisans, and activists” (Reilly, 2018, p. 139) can post quick glimpses into truths and non-truths and then actually be heard, seen and liked. And Reilly concludes: “The twenty-first century era of fake news is increasingly bolstered by economic, technological, social, and political factors, making it a highly adaptive cultural form that continues to elude regulation and reform” (Reilly, 2018, p. 140). Such truths may be expressions of “truthiness” – a term coined by the satirical *The Colbert Report* on 17 October 2005 – representing the truths you want rather than the real truths (*Language-log*, 2005). This is a kind of motivated self-deception and may lead to downright science denialism, as in the above-mentioned cases of cli-

mate change denial, which may be regarded as a form of pseudoscience or junk-science (Hansson, 2017). Unmotivated self-deception, on the other hand, entails either seeking information which confirms one's *a priori* beliefs, or avoiding that which counters them, otherwise known as confirmation bias (Froehlich, 2017). Thus, the public opinion of the post-truth era is contaminated by (self-)deception, misinformation, disinformation, truthiness, denialism, confirmation bias and pseudoscience to such a degree that we are talking about a so-called disinfodemic.

In their Policy brief 1, UNESCO labels the spread of fabricated health communication about COVID-19 a “disinfodemic” and distinguishes between misinformation and disinformation: “The production of content promising fake treatments for reasons of private profit is an example of disinformation. But it can be described as misinformation when the same content is believed to be true, and it is then shared with the intention of being helpful” (Posetti & Bontcheva, 2020, p. 2). This document categorizes the disinfodemic into four main types: 1. emotive narrative constructs and memes; 2. fabricated websites and authoritative identities; 3. fraudulently altered, fabricated, or decontextualized images and videos; 4. disinformation infiltrators and orchestrated campaigns. These may be combatted by way of a typology of four responses in which one is relevant to this study, i.e., supporting the target audiences of disinformation by way of ethical, normative and educational responses, such as a) public condemnation of disinformation, recommendations, media and information literacy development, and b) empowerment and credibility labelling efforts, such as verification tools and misinformation tracking centres (Posetti & Bontcheva, 2020, p. 12).

This disinfodemic ironically takes us back to The Ministry of Truth's “doublethink” in George Orwell's famous dystopian novel *1984*: “To know and not to know, to be conscious of complete truthfulness while telling carefully-constructed lies, to hold simultaneously two opinions which cancelled out, knowing them to be contradictory and believing in both of them, to use logic against logic, to repudiate morality while laying claim to it” (Orwell, 1949/2000, p. 34). This is of course a deliberate orchestration of lies from one entity. In our world, on the other hand, different entities send out opposing truths in a dialectical war for prevalence, which leads to the same kind of confusion. And such cacophonies of voices paradoxically

still resound the Orwellian oxymoronic slogan that “Ignorance is strength” (Orwell, 1949/2000, p. 27). In this study, I propose to adopt the expression ‘doublethink’ as a metaphorical framing device which lends explanatory power to an understanding of today’s misinformation as it epitomizes people’s trust in the lie even after learning that it is a lie. However, there is an alternative means of expression that may help cure this post-truth malaise of scientific denialism, and that is textual news satire. Paradoxically, this genre relies on the same kind of doublethink by way of incongruent defamiliarization.

Theory and method

Previous published research on news satire, COVID-19 and disinformation is limited. The few publications either examine the widely distributed satirical memes (Kaur, 2020) or the possible links between satire and dangerous messages in conspiracy theories of 5G and COVID-19 posted on Twitter (Ahmed, Vidal-Aball, et. al., 2020). A special edition on COVID-19 of the *Journal of Science Communication* has also seen the light of day in which analyses of newspaper cartoonists, crisis memes and games are made (Massarini, Murphy et. al., 2020). But since such studies are sparse at the time of writing, it is my hope that the present inquiry will contribute to laying the foundation of a prospective area of study.

Previous studies on the nature of satirical fake news are, however, less sparse. In *The Oxford English Dictionary*, satire is defined as: “A poem or (in later use) a novel, film, or other work of art which uses humor, irony, exaggeration, or ridicule to expose and criticize prevailing immorality or foolishness, esp. as a form of social or political commentary”. In extension to this, news satire in the press, then, may be “regarded as a parodic form (an intertextual game wherein two texts – the original one and the fake one – are set against one another resulting in comic incongruity) with satirical content (i.e., with a critical intention of laying bare, by way of ridicule, the wrongs of politics and society)” (Ermida 2012, p. 191). Furthermore, news satire has a corrective, educational function as it aims to persuade people to change their delusions or misguided behaviors (Reilly 2012) – hence my suggestion of satire being a vaccine which may cure the disinformation by way of its own causative agents.

In the literature, news satire is also referred to as satirical fake news (Reilly 2012; Berkowitz and Schwartz 2016; Auken 2019), which must not be confused with the mis- or disinformative type of fake news mentioned in the contextual background of this study. Without going into detail with the nitty-gritty pros and cons of treating news satire and satirical fake news as either synonyms or two different phenomena, this study will treat them as belonging to the same spectrum of presenting fake news with the intention to criticize and ridicule societal sickness - and in this particular case study the news media themselves.

According to Berkowitz and Schwartz, satirical fake news may serve as a kind of watchdog which observes and reacts to every move of the real news media (Berkowitz and Schwartz 2016). They suggest that news satire may turn into a so-called 'fifth estate' which holds the 'fourth estate', that is the news media, accountable for their indirect but also key role in influencing the political system (Berkowitz and Schwartz 2016, p. 1). In this way, satirical fake news may become "hyper-real" as it is difficult to distinguish between reality and a simulation of reality (Berkowitz and Schwartz 2016, p. 3). This nature is further emphasized in particularly *textual* news satire which, contrary to the loud and host-oriented clowning of satirical news on TV, is typically anonymous and thus more closely resembling reality (Berkowitz and Schwartz 2016, p. 3). This may lead to situations where various readers believe in the fake stories, which the website *Literally Unbelievable* about Facebook reactions to the American news satirical website *The Onion* testifies to (<https://www.literally-unbelievable.com/>). In other words, news satire/satirical fake news is a parodic imitation of real news events with the purpose of critically exposing and commenting on these events to elicit laughter and eventually change people's minds about the matter.

When it comes to scrutinizing how this hyper-reality is constructed by way of language and style, results are meager. Some studies on the linguistic and discursive construction of textual satire have appeared (Simpson, 2003; Ermida, 2012; Reilly, 2012; Auken, 2019; Klitgård 2020), but more profound inquiry is needed if we are to fully understand the incongruent defamiliarization of 'doublethink'. But first we need to understand the nature of humor.

According to Billig (2005), all cultures use ridicule as a disciplinary means to uphold norms of conduct and conventions of meaning.

One way of understanding this is to regard humor as resting on the mind's faculty of making judgments on what it perceives as either the same or different from previous perceptions as expressed in John Locke's *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690). Billig explains: "If judgement involves carefully distinguishing between things that appear to be similar, but which are actually different, then wit is based on the reverse process. It brings together ideas that are different in order to treat them as if they were similar" (Billig, 2005, p. 60).

Thus, eighteenth-century thinkers' preoccupation with wit took flight, and numerous philosophers continued this tradition which has been called the incongruity theory of humor. In 1792, for instance, Dugald Stewart added the layer of surprise: "we consider wit as a sort of feat or trick of intellectual dexterity, analogous, in some respects, to the extraordinary performances of jugglers and rope-dancers" (quoted in Billig, 2005, pp. 61-62). In *Thoughts on Laughter* (1725) Francis Hutcheson regarded laughter as the response to incongruities. And Ashley Cooper, the third Earl of Shaftesbury, envisaged humor as crucial in maintaining common sense and as a weapon to ensure liberty from religious dogmatism (Billig, 2005, p. 73) – much on a par with Berkowitz and Schwartz' Fifth Estate. Later, Mark Akenside (1810) was of the belief that such reason was divine, and hence "the sense of ridicule always judges right" in all controversies between claim and fact (quoted in Billig, 2005, p. 74). Thus, the Age of Reason paved the way for the view that congruities (common sense, wisdom, good manners and decorum) and incongruities (dissonances) are neatly separated, and that only incongruities are prone to ridicule.

Today, the incongruity theory of humor has continued in psychological studies of the cognitive shifts in jokes (Latta, 1999; Boyd, 2004). We suddenly have to reorganize our frames of references when confronted with an incongruity, just as Locke told us. This observation evolves into the linguistic script-based semantic theory of humor (SSTH) represented by Victor Raskin in 1985. This theory was later developed into a general verbal theory of humor (GTVH) together with Salvatore Attardo (Attardo and Raskin, 1991). To Raskin, the following two criteria must be met to form a verbal joke:

- (i) The text is compatible, fully or in part, with two different [semantic] scripts
- (ii) The two scripts with which the text is compatible are opposite [...]. The two scripts with which the text is compatible are said to overlap fully or in part on this text (Raskin, 1985, p. 99).

The punchline of the joke makes us suddenly shift from one script to another, and thus laughter is elicited.

This theory has gained wide precedence due to the idea of these semantic scripts, otherwise known as frames. They are defined in the following way:

The script is a large chunk of semantic information surrounding the word or evoked by it. The script is a cognitive structure internalized by the native speaker and it represents the native speaker's knowledge of a small part of the world. Every speaker has internalized rather a large repertoire of scripts of 'common sense' which represent his/her knowledge of certain routines, standard procedures, basic situations, etc., for instance, the knowledge of what people do in certain situations, how they do it, in what order, etc. Beyond the scripts of 'common sense' every native speaker may, and usually does, have individual scripts determined by his/her individual background and subjective experience and restricted scripts which the speaker shares with a certain group, e.g., family, neighbors, colleagues, etc., but not with the whole speech community of native speakers of the same language (Raskin 1985, p. 81).

Such scripts may be *rich, health, life, school master, tennis, riding, scientist*, etc. In other words, all kinds of words which elicit mental schemas in which the individual envisions a set of expected and associated constituents. Such cognitive scripts are crucial in creating humor.

According to Raskin, jokes are based on the principle of incongruity, meaning that a surprising clash or opposition must occur to create the effect of humor, and this happens when scripts overlap and/or collide. Such scripts may be *truth vs. lie, rich v. poor, normal vs. unnormal*, etc. And such clashes are also at play in the construction of satire. But satire is of course much more than just hilarious jokes with punchlines. Satire goes beyond mere shifts as it is a genre of a

kind of 'doublethink' in which incongruent layers of criticism and entertainment merge in a profound constellation of hybridity, and as in Orwell's *1984*, the readers must hold both layers in their minds at the same time.

A model of the linguistic and rhetorical construction of satire which explains this kind of translational 'doublethink' is Ermida's (Ermida 2012, pp. 194-95; Klitgård 2020, p. 13). Hence, it will form the method of text analysis in this study. The model consists of three components and various subcomponents: 1) The first major component is *inter-textual* as the piece of satire builds on a previous text or situation, and in this way, it functions as a kind of translation, parodic imitation or defamiliarization of the original text/situation. This component contains a *structural subcomponent* of a) a format imitation, such as the traditional format of a newspaper article in this case, and b) a *stylistic subcomponent* of style imitation, such as the traditional discourse of a newspaper article. 2) The second major component is *critical* as this is where the judgmental and disapproving nature of the exigent issue is embedded. 3) The third major component is the *comic* one which may be divided into three subcomponents: a) The first subcomponent is *lexical* and refers to the words which may activate and trigger the surprisingly overlapping scripts; b) the second comic component is *pragmatic* as the text must be constructed in such a way that the reader's cultural frames of reference and pre-suppositions are activated in the interpretation. And lastly, c) the third comic subcomponent is *rhetorical* and designed to intensify the script incongruencies by way of rhetorical tropes and figures, such as antithesis, hyperbole, personification, etc. In sum, this model enables us to unwrap the structural, stylistic and linguistic layers of criticism and entertainment making up spoof news articles as the one which is the object of this study.

Analysis

The print medium is *RokokoPosten – siden 1732* [*The Rococo Post – since 1732*, my back-translation] which is a Danish non-profit news satire website in the league of the American *The Onion*, the British *The Daily Mash*, the French *Le Gorafi*, and the German *Der Postillon* whose title font is closely resembling that of the Danish *Rokoko-*

Posten. Their description reads: “RokokoPostens nyheder er fiktive. Enhver lighed med personer – levende, døde eller bare meget sløje – er sandsynligvis tilsigtet” [RokokoPosten’s news is fictitious. Any resemblance with persons – either living, dead or just rather unwell – is probably intentional]. It was established in 2010 and has grown into one of the country’s most prominent satirical websites with more than 200,000 visitors a month. The Facebook group is also immensely popular with 123,571 followers at the time of writing. Their articles, which mimic the style and structure of real news articles, have been published in *Berlingske Tidende* and *Jyllands-Posten*, two major right-wing newspapers, since 2012. Marta Sørensen, one of the co-editors, says that their audience consist of people of 24-40 years old with a higher education. She adds that their texts have an intellectual aura and may be characterized as a bit dry and semi-academic social satire that does not speak to the lowest common denominator in society (Brix, 2017).

The case study is a satiric article about the shocking news that half a million Danes are wiser than the Danish Health Authority (*RokokoPosten*, 2020). It was published 12 March 2020 and thus reflects Ermida’s *intertextual component* of the at the time growing tendency for people to vent either their disbeliefs or amateur medical expertise and advice about COVID-19 on Facebook. It also follows the great public scandal that a major international horse show in the city of Herning in Jutland took place 4-8 March despite warnings of mass contagion. The *structural and stylistic subcomponents* are expressed through both the parodic news format and style of a regular newspaper article with a headline, a lead, background information and documentation presented in a dry, neutral and factual way.

The article may be summarized as follows: The conflict consists of the Danish Health Authority who are suddenly seriously shocked as their 600 years of knowledge of virology and epidemiology now face a defeat to ordinary people’s feelings and opinions. These are expressed through two *vox populi* representatives of Facebook comments in the article: A male boilermaker regrets that the Health Authority’s calculations are ludicrous compared to his own calculations as he has never met any Chinese people or Italians. A woman who is to participate in the major horse show comprising 1,000 participants thinks a cancellation would be wildly exaggerated and an expression of mass hysteria. If we do not die from the stupid virus,

then there are loads of other things that can kill us. Get on with it, she says. To balance the comments from ‘ordinary people,’ a researcher of future studies then says that ever since she participated in a first aid course in a night school, she has learnt to be rational about things. She, too, thinks all the restrictions are superfluous and that it might be a good idea to “call reality”. Her studies in the future tell her that we are all going to be contaminated anyway. In the light of these statements, the Health Authority will now have to fire all their medical experts and swap them with an answering machine where all Danes can express their insightful analyses to be used as documentation for governmental decisions.

This line of events, which will be unfolded below, leads us to believe that the text’s *critical component* is clearly to ridicule the behavior of many Facebook users who disbelieve science and the seriousness of COVID-19 and express themselves through an overabundance of *pathos* rather than *logos*. The article also ridicules future studies representatives as the woman here is represented as relying on intuition rather than scientific evidence. Together they represent the self-deceived post-truth denialists who participate in spreading the disinfodemic.

The comic component: the lexical subcomponent

The *lexical* content of the words must activate incongruous and overlapping scripts to release the humor. The lead, for instance, introduces the reader to a “chokmåling” [shocking figures - my back-translation] evidencing that half a million Danes are “klogere” [wiser] than the Danish Health Authority. Thus, we are immediately introduced to a surprising scenario where the scripts of *experts vs. non-experts* are contrasted, and the roles are reversed. A study of the “analyser” [analyses] by “helt almindelige danskere” [quite ordinary Danes] which have been shared on Facebook demonstrates that these Danes have far greater “medicinsfaglig indsigt” [medical health insight] than the experts in the Health Authority. In this way, people’s Facebook comments suddenly carry more weight than medical health science – personified in the Director Søren Brostrøm and over 600 years of knowledge from virologists and epidemiologists with PhD and Habilitation degrees.

This new reality is exemplified in the Facebook voices of a male boilermaker from a town in Jutland, a female horse show participant from a municipality outside Copenhagen and a leading scholar of future studies. They all draw on their personal experiences with COVID-19. The boilermaker has never met anybody who was contaminated; the woman thinks the situation is exaggerated and hysterical, which we learn through a lot of swear words; and the future scholar asks us to calm down, since we are all going to catch the illness anyway, and since we need to be rational about things. This is a lesson she has learnt on a first aid course at night school. So, there is no need to cancel all events and set up rules for kisses and hugs, she claims. She also introduces a phone metaphor: “Det er altså meget godt engang imellem at ringe til virkeligheden” [Sometimes it is actually a good idea to call reality].

The fact that the Health Authority then decide to fire all their experts to rely on “indsigtsfulde danskeres” [insightful Danes’] personal analyses – recorded on a phone answering machine – is grotesque. Thus, “regeringen kan trække på den bedste viden på området” [the government can draw on the best knowledge within the field].

So, here we see comically clashing cognitive scripts of *trust vs. distrust*, *Søren Brostrøm vs. the people*, *the Health Authority vs. Facebook*, *scientific knowledge vs. Facebook feelings*, *doctors vs. future scholars*, *virology/epidemiology vs. first aid course*, *university vs. night school*, *reality vs. future studies* and *facts vs. opinions*. These can be encapsulated in the overall scripts of *science vs. non/pseudo-science*, *truth vs. post-truth* and *power to the authorities vs. power to the people*. Embedded in these are also clashes between the rhetorical appeal forms of *ethos and logos vs. pathos and fallacies* represented in the three statements in the article. So, in general, the article criticizes the post-factual society where beliefs and bias in the social media win over traditionally authoritative knowledge and science.

The comic component: the pragmatic subcomponent

The second comic subcomponent is *pragmatic* in the sense that the satirical construction must activate the reader’s cultural frames of reference and presuppositions in the interpretation. These cogni-

tive schemas are here activated by for instance bringing in the Health Authority whose power and constant appearance in the mass media ring strong bells of white coat seriousness and science-based knowledge. The characterization of the Facebook users and the future scholar are also highlighted to the audience by way of regional origin, their tone and voice of their Facebook comments, and through what they mention as significant.

The comic component: the rhetorical subcomponent

The third comic subcomponent is *rhetorical* and designed to highlight and intensify the script incongruencies by way of rhetorical devices, such as tropes and figures. In this text not only the format and style mimic newspaper articles, but the tone and voice of the invented Facebook comments are also parodic. This is how the horseshow lady's haughty comment is rendered:

Det er totalt massehysteri, kom videre i livet... 😂😂😂 Og op i røven med den åndssvage virus ... Hvis det ikke er en virussygdom vi skal dø af, så er der andre 1000 ting, vi skal dø af... 🤞 Jeg giver ikke fem flade ører, endsige en hel Corona, for det pis.

[It's a complete mass hysteria, get on with it... 😂😂😂 And up yours with that stupid virus... If we are not going to die from a viral disease, then there are other 1,000 things we are going to die from... 🤞 I don't give a toss, or a whole Corona beer, about that piss.]

We note the frivolous language including invectives based on undocumented claims, the liberal use of punctuation and the typical smileys of ridicule together with a smiley of crossed fingers. Such traits are ever so familiar in Facebook and thus elicit our laughter through recognition - especially in hindsight as the comment is prototypical of early reactions of disbelief in March 2020.

The article also uses sarcasm as the theme of the text is the carnivalesque, inverted roles of experts and non-experts: In this preposterous scenario, suddenly half a million emotive Facebook users turn out to be the clever ones we should rely on, and the Health

Authority the fools who must step down. This dreaded scenario is amplified through discursive operations which do not quite take us to the opposite meaning but move on a scale of closeness and distance to the underlying critical component. Such ambiguous ambience is provided by the devices of exaggeration and understatement. However, they are not just represented in single, isolated statements or sentences, but as underlying rhetorical principles throughout the text. When turning up the brightness of either exaggeration or understatement, you still never lose sight of the satirized, i.e., the real situation. This interplay forms the linguistic technique which enables us to conceptualize both truths of the true and the untrue in the Orwellian slogan of ‘ignorance is strength’ at the same time.

Exaggeration is used in both the language and the content. For instance, the hyperbolic headline sets the agenda: “Chokmåling: en halv milliard danskere klogere end sundhedsstyrelsen” [Shocking figures: Half a million Danes wiser than the Health Authority]. This is elaborated in the fact that “et stort flertal af danskere på sociale medier er langt klogere på coronavirussen end Sundhedsstyrelsens eksperter, sender chokbølger gennem styrelsen” [a majority of Danes in the social media are far more knowledgeable when it comes to the corona virus than the experts of the Health Authority, and this sends shock waves through the Authority]. The Health Authority have more than 600 years of knowledge as well as high academic degrees, but they still must see themselves beaten by the wisdom of so many ordinary Danes. So, the impact of Facebook experts is not only depriving the experts of their status, but it also causes shock and mass firings. This revelation is further taken to the extreme as the Health Authority will annihilate themselves and just install an answering machine where “indsigtsfulde” [insightful] people can vent their wisdom. The word “indsigtsfulde” here elicits laughter as it exaggerates the level of cherry-picking sagacity, we have just read about in the three invented Facebook comments cited in the article. Thus, exaggeration is also used to emphasize the superiority of Danish Facebook users. The biased truthiness of emotive responses based on personal experience outperforms scientific research and results.

Understatement goes hand in hand with exaggeration as the values of science and knowledge are minimized when the values of ordinary Danes are maximized. This is illustrated in the boilermaker’s comment:

Hvis Sundhedsstyrelsen var i stand til at læse tal og se nøgternt på tingene som jeg, ville de ikke ænse denne virus på nuværende tidspunkt. Så længe man ikke møder nogen fra Kina eller Italien, kan jeg ikke se problemet, og det gør jeg stort set aldrig.

[If the Health Authority were able to understand figures and take a common-sense view on things as I do, they would not pay any attention to this virus at present. As long as you don't meet anyone from China or Italy, I don't see what the problem is. And I rarely do]

The Health Authority apparently do not know their math, and they do not consider realistic factors such as personal experiences with people from the disaster areas. In this way the interplay of exaggeration and understatement performs an ironic negation in which what is typically perceived as powerful, i.e., knowledge, reason and expertise (*logos and ethos*), now turns weak, and that which may be perceived as weak, i.e., emotions, imagination and incompetence (*pathos*), turns into a strength. Thus, the boilermaker's *ethos* may be regarded as a personification of the so-called Dunning-Kruger effect in which people of low ability overestimate their own abilities (Kruger and Dunning, 1999).

In general, the heuristics and cognitive conceptualisations of the three fictional Facebook users operate by the same standards of exaggeration and understatement as is the case with the comic rhetorical component of this case study. Their rhetoric is governed by the overgeneralisations and partial truths which characterize the post-factual era as stated in the introduction (Lewandowsky, Ecker & Cook, 2017, p.360). And in this way the effect emphasizes the analogy to Orwell's dictum that ignorance is strength.

The article serves as an example of the emotive narrative constructs of the disinfodemic which UNESCO warned us about: The three characters retort to emotionally loaded narratives to construct their self-deceiving apprehensions of COVID-19, and the article itself is an emotionally loaded construction of typical behaviour in the early stages of the pandemic. Such culture jamming, i.e., criticising mass media through its own means, begs reflection on credibility and serves as a vaccine against the post-truth malaise of disregarding science. In fact, the cognitively demanding nature of news satire may

be regarded as belonging to UNESCO's infodemic combat strategies of both public condemnation of disinformation and media literacy development as social satire *both* condemns behaviour and trends in society *and* educates the readers to exercise critical thinking when exploring the social media.

Conclusion

This Danish spoof news article conveys its social criticism of COVID-19 Facebook experts through a linguistic and stylistic double take – or doublethink – on reality and truth vs. non-reality and non-truth. This is orchestrated by way of intertextual, critical and comic components of lexical, pragmatic and rhetorical subcomponents which make up a structure and texture of surprisingly colliding scripts, parody, irony and an interplay of exaggeration and understatement which express the ridicule of the power of ignorance in social media responses to COVID-19.

Vigilant readers of *RokokoPosten* realize that the preposterous scenario in the article is a fictional and parodic representation of reality since the readers' frame of reference tells them that this has not happened to the Health Authority. And since the readers may also recognize the nature of the Facebook comments, they will realize that the whole scenario is out of proportions as the role of health scientific knowledge has been understated, and the roles of ordinary people and not-quite-accepted science such as future studies have been exaggerated. As in Orwell's *1984*, readers of such news satire know and do not know at the same time. The readers are made conscious of an apparent truth decoded from a carefully constructed satirical lie by holding both in the mind. But unlike Orwell's characters, the readers of this piece of satire are ultimately forced to choose between them as satire parodies reality in a defamiliarizing way by playing with uncertainty and deception – just as when reading any COVID-19 misinformation in the social media. So, one could argue that news satire may seek to cure misapprehensions by its own means of twisting the truth. Or in other words, it may hope to vaccinate the reader against the contagious COVID-19 disinfodemic.

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