Beyond representation: Public service media, minority audiences and the promotion of capabilities through entertainment

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ABSTRACT

Entertainment programming is an important means for public service media (PSM) to address minority audiences, and to fulfill their social mission vis-à-vis these groups. We argue that these efforts are plagued by a thin normative grounding, stopping short at vague notions of representation. In this article, we argue that a capabilities approach invites a much-needed reconsideration of the fundamental objectives of such entertainment-based representations. The article offers a first operationalization of the capabilities approach in the context of televised entertainment. First, we identify and qualify a set of basic capabilities that we propose PSM should promote to minority audiences through entertainment content. Second, through a case study from Norway involving focus group interviews of young immigrants, we demonstrate how entertainment can facilitate the promotion of such capabilities. On this ground, we discuss the implications of a capabilities perspective for PSM efforts to accommodate marginalized audiences.

1. Introduction

The core rationale for public service media lies in its commitment to provide the cultural resources required for full citizenship, and thus stimulate political empowerment and citizen emancipation (Murdoch, 2004:1). The accommodation of ethno-cultural diversity thus constitutes an important part of PSM missions. This ideal is reflected in both EU and national broadcastings policies. Active membership in The European Broadcasting Union (EBU), for instance, requires commitment to promote balanced programming for all sections of the population, including catering for the interests of minorities (EBU, 2020). National broadcasters all have charters specifying their responsibilities vis-à-vis ethno-cultural minorities. Whereas the BBC, Swedish SVT and Dutch PSM have been at the forefront in developing diversity strategies (in terms of programming, employment strategies and organization) other northwest European PSM organizations have followed suit (Horsti, Hultén, & Titley, 2014).

At the center of PSM efforts to address minority audiences lie matters of representation. Audiovisual representation of ethno-cultural diversity is seen as a key measure to ensure symbolic inclusion. News and factual content make up one important source for such representation. Yet, in PSM, there is a longstanding tradition for producing entertainment content that addresses minority audiences. The most prevalent genres are drama, music programming and comedy, but more recently also different forms of reality formats (Malik, 2014; The Norwegian Media Authority, 2021). Through various forms of representation of minority experiences, lifestyles and conditions, the objectives are to foster inclusion and participation. The bylaws of the Norwegian Broadcasting

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Corporation (the NRK), for instance, state that the NRK has an obligation to offer cultural content that reflects the ethno-cultural diversity in Norway, and that is relevant to ethnic minorities in particular (NRK's bylaws). These obligations are in turn specified in strategy documents, in which entertainment – drama in particular – is seen as a key device to foster inclusion among specific marginalized groups, therein young immigrants (NRK's audience strategy 2020–22).

In this article, we argue that PSM efforts to address minority audiences through entertainment, in our case humor, are plagued by a thin normative grounding, which stops short at vague notions of representation. In PSM mission and strategy, representation is typically framed in terms of 'mirroring', 'relevance' and 'appeal' (i.e. Bjørnsen, 2014). Tellingly, the last white paper on media policy in Norway (White paper 17, 2018–2019), emphasizes "representativity" and "relevance" as key objectives for PSM content production. Whereas representation is a goal in itself, there is little consideration of what representation should achieve. It remains unclear what minority audiences should actually gain from engaging with entertainment.

We argue that the capability approach (Nussbaum, 2000; Sen, 1993) offers a normative basis on which to reconsider such questions. A capabilities perspective urges the shift of focus from access and exposure, to what media actually enable people to do or to be (Garnham, 1997). Indeed, a capability perspective resonates with the social responsibilities of public service media, which at the most basic level is to provide citizens with resources enabling them to function as citizens. Yet, it begs the question of how far and deep this responsibility should extend. Fundamentally, we argue, a capabilities perspective implies that the content provisions of PSM should not merely represent or mirror the lives and perspectives of minority citizens – it should be enabling in some capacity. It thus implies a deeper commitment to the transformational and enabling potential of content provision and calls for a reconsideration of what we should expect such content to achieve.

To consider such questions, in this article we focus on a case selected from the context of Norway. We operationalize the capabilities approach in two steps. First, we pre-identify and qualify a set of basic human capabilities we propose public service broadcasters should aim to promote to minority youth. This identification is based on Robeyn's (2003) procedural approach, which emphasizes that capabilities must be context-specific, clearly explicated, and open to scrutiny. Second, we explore empirically the potential of entertainment to promote these capabilities. We focus on the case of *Black Humor*, a humor show produced by the Norwegian public service broadcaster NRK to address minority youth. This case is strategically selected to elucidate the potential of entertainment, given the right circumstances and qualities, to empower minority audiences. Based on focus group interviews comprising minority youth at differing levels of social integration, we examine here the extent to which pre-identified capabilities were realized at the level of reception. Together, these steps allow for a theoretically founded, contextually situated, and empirically informed reconsideration of how entertainment can and should empower marginalized groups.

In this way, our aim is threefold. First, by offering a first operationalization of the capabilities approach in the context of televised entertainment, we aim to extend the scope of the capabilities approach within media and communication research. Second, we aim to demonstrate empirically how entertainment, in our case humor, can function as a vehicle for promoting basic capabilities. Third, by situating the capabilities approach within the context of PSM, we aim to provide new impetus to debates about the role of PSM in accommodating marginalized audiences.

2. Role in flux: public service media, entertainment, and minority audiences

PSM is currently under cross-pressure. As argued by the Van den Bulck et al. (2018: 17), since the introduction of commercial broadcasting in the mid-1980s PSM has been in a "..near constant state of flux at the confluence of social developments in technological, economic, political and cultural environments." In consequence, the legitimacy, mission, and funding of PSM have been, and still are, under heavy pressure, most prevalently from political actors working to limit remit and funding (i.e. Holtz-Bacha, 2021).) and from global content providers (Sundet & Syvertsen, 2021). Yet, we agree with the number of commentators and scholars who argue that this situation of flux only re-actualizes the importance of PSM. PSMs offer shared cultural spaces required for fuller participation, and thus a potential bulwark against the dynamics of exclusion and fragmentation (e.g. Murdoch, 2004; Van den Bulck et al., 2018; Horsti et al., 2014). For PSMs to assume this role, however, they need to regain the initiative, justify their value, and anchor their role (Lowe & Steemers, 2012). Compared to PSM in most other European countries, the Norwegian NRK still enjoys a high level of audience trust from across the political spectrum (Schulz, Levy, & Kleis Nielsen, 2019), high-level professional autonomy, and civic accountability (Benson, Powers, & Neff, 2017), as well as stable cross-party political support, yet grapples with many of the same challenges (i. e. Sundet & Syvertsen, 2021.).

The accommodation of ethno-cultural diversity is an important part of PSM missions – whose task is to empower *all* citizens through some level of social integration and access to information. Reflecting a shift of focus in the overall discourse about immigration, from multiculturalism to social cohesion, Malik (2014) observes a shift also in the motivations and strategies of PSM, from niche-programming for specific groups, to what she terms 'post-multiculturalist' strategies aimed at social cohesion and mainstreaming. According to Leurdik (2006), this shift manifested in increased programming with cross-cultural appeal – to viewers with different ethnic and cultural backgrounds. More recent scholarship (e.g., Panis et al., 2019), notes a further shift towards 'a management of superdiversity' in which the politics of diversity is or should be translated into the norms and practices of TV-professionals.

Representation of diversity through content is a key aspect of how PSM manages its responsibility towards minority audiences. This is a point emphasized also by Murdoch (2004), who argues that representation (and communication more generally) constitutes one of several core cultural rights that PSM should ensure – similar to citizens' rights to other welfare goods such as healthcare and safe public spaces. The issue of representation has a long history in media studies and other disciplines. In media studies, psychologically oriented studies have linked representation to the cultivation theory of media influence (Gerbner & Gross, 1976), feminist scholars have criticized the representation of women for exerting symbolic dominance (Mulvey, 1976) or even annihilation (Tuchmann, 2000),

while scholars from cultural studies (Hall, 1997) have connected representation to questions of power.

Starting from the premise that audiovisual representation not only reflects, but also constructs reality and social relations, Malik (2014), argues that the ways in which PSM programming represents minority audiences is vital to how (well) they manage their responsibility vis-à-vis these groups. She points out two dimensions of particular importance. The first is *textual representation* – the encoding and construction of meanings associated with cultural diversity through communication. The second dimension, on which this study concentrates, she calls *audience representation* – what is provided and how audiences evaluate it. Attention to these dimensions, Malik argues, "..can help us to understand public service broadcasting as principal signifying system in contemporary society", and scrutinize its merits vis-à-vis minorities (Malik, 2014: 20).

It is against this background of flux, multiple pressures and fluctuating diversity politics that we identify a need for renewed discussion of the objectives and strategies through which PSM seek to represent minority audiences. To facilitate such a discussion, we turn to the capabilities approach.

3. Capabilities, media, and entertainment

The capability approach was originally introduced by the economist Amartya Sen (1993), and later in a different version by philosopher Martha Nussbaum (2000). Grounded in a liberal yet redistributive idea of social justice, the capabilities approach foregrounds individual flourishing and well-being as the aim of development and policy. A fundamental objective is thus to extend discussions beyond economic measurements and metrics. In Sen's conceptualization, a capability is the opportunity people have to be or to do things they have reasons to value. Capabilities are in turn vectors for what Sen terms 'functionings', such as to be happy, have self-respect or take part in community. Crucially, the perspective is sensitive to the varying level of resources people have available to *realize* the same capabilities, that is, the resources they have available to make use of the goods or services they are offered. In a policy perspective, a capability approach thus posits that policies should be designed to enable people to be or do what they have reason to value, rather than simply to offer goods or services. As such, it is a normative egalitarian perspective used to both motivate policy-making and critically evaluate existing policies and policy outcomes. As argued by Nicholas Garnham (1997) more than twenty years ago, public service broadcasting is uniquely set up, compared to commercial alternatives, to facilitate the promotion of capabilities to citizens. According to Garnham, PSM has, similar to welfare services in the traditional sense, the capacity to extend provisions beyond access to goods and "distribute the social resources which make access usable." (ibid. 27). In this article, an ambition is to reinvigorate debates about the relevance of the capability perspective for PSM.

Although a feature also of earlier media scholarship (e.g., Mansell, 2001), the capabilities approach is now emerging as an increasingly important perspective in theoretical discussions about media justice and media policy (Couldry, 2019; Karppinen, 2019; Moss, 2017; Schejter & Tirosh, 2016). It has also motivated a growing number of empirical studies, including of election debates (Coleman & Moss, 2016; Coleman, Moss, & Martinez-Perez, 2018), social network sites (Shomron & Schejter, 2019), and digital infrastructures (Flensburg, 2020). Yet whereas the capability approach has recently gained considerable traction within media and communication research, little critical consideration has been given to culture and entertainment.

Entertainment, in its multitude of forms and genres, engages audiences on a daily basis with accounts of the world and the relations within it, be it in the form of drama, gameshows, or comedy. Entertainment engages audiences by means of a variety of expressive devices, including fantasy, dramatization, humor and suspense (Author), with the aim of joining viewers in a common or shared feeling (Bruun, 2014: 144). Most importantly, when effective and good, entertainment evokes *pleasure* in its audience, and thus brings well-being into people's lives. Comedy is an interesting genre in this respect. It enjoys high popularity among young people (i.e., NRK's Youth strategy, 2020), yet is also a genre which is considered 'risky' in PSM due to its power to offend and stigmatize (De Ridder, Vandebosch, & Dhoest, 2021; Dahl, 2021; Malmberg & Awad, 2019). However, as pointed out by Kellner (1995:1), media culture also provides models of what it means to be male or female, successful or a failure, powerful or powerless. Media culture also provides the materials out of which many people construct their sense of class, of ethnicity and race, of nationality, of sexuality, of 'us' and 'them'

Engagement with culture and entertainment has ramifications beyond fun and pleasure, it matters for people's identity, sense of belonging, and sense of worth. In this article, we thus maintain that entertainment has an important, if overlooked, potential for promoting basic human capabilities.

We are not the first to suggest such an idea. Nussbaum (2012) sees the strengthening of liberal arts education and institutions as a vital means to cultivate people's abilities for critical self-examination and narrative imagination, and more generally as a means to enable people to become democratic citizens. Drawing upon the capabilities approach, Appadurai (2004) argues that culture—also in its expressive forms—is important in facilitating the capacity to aspire towards a better life among economically marginalized citizens. For Appadurai, culture "…provides an ethical horizon within which more concrete capabilities can be given meaning, substance, and sustainability". (ibid: 82). In the field of cultural policy research, the capability perspective has been important for discussions of culture and sustainable development, in debates related to the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (e.g., Throsby, 2017), and as a framework for evaluating and motivating cultural policies (Zitcer, Hawkins, & Vakharia, 2016; Author).

Also Hesmondhalgh (2016) argues that the capabilities perspective offers a normatively grounded conception of the value of culture. Yet in contrast to Nussbaum's concentration on art, he rightly points out that also entertainment – ordinary, demotic, and sociable practices – may enhance people's wellbeing in meaningfully enriching ways.

Using the capabilities approach in the realm of media might help form a richer sense of the value of knowledge and esthetic–artistic experience, in terms of their ability to contribute to human flourishing, thereby clarifying arguments and positions in political activism and public policy (Hesmondhalgh, 2016: 215).

In this study, we take inspiration from Hesmondhalgh's call. For one, we maintain that in order to examine whether and how

entertainment may actually be empowering for audiences, we need to also examine their media experiences. Second, we start from a capabilities perspective to clarify a position from which to remotivate and reassess PSM efforts to address minority audiences. A capabilities perspective, we argue, implies that entertainment should not merely represent or mirror the lives of minority citizens – it should be enabling in some capacity. Hence it urges a deeper commitment to the transformational and empowering potential of content provision, and for a reconsideration of what we should expect content to achieve. The question then is, what sort of capabilities should we expect entertainment content to promote to minority audiences?

4. Identifying capabilities: recognition, voice and belonging

There is a longstanding debate about how to identify and justify relevant capabilities (e.g., Moss, 2017; Robeyns, 2003). A central feature of Sen's approach is that people should be free to pursue their own vision of a good life. From his perspective, capabilities can be thought of as any condition that makes possible the pursuit of this vision of life. Others, most prominently Nussbaum, have developed lists of basic capabilities to which all persons are entitled, such as bodily health, emotions, affiliation and bodily integrity (Nussbaum, 2011, 32–34). Whereas Sen's approach has been criticized for offering a too abstract basis on which to substantiate a framework for motivating or assessing policies, Nussbaum's has been criticized for being paternalistic and universalistic. Our ambition in this study is not to solve this debate.

Yet, and akin to Sen's position, we started from the premise that capabilities should emanate from audiences themselves: they should decide themselves what they need in order to flourish. In the focus group interviews we therefore started by asking the participants questions about their needs and circumstances, and what they lack to live full worthy social lives, followed by questions about how they think entertainment could alleviate or address such issues. This approach, however, proved not to work satisfactorily. Participants' responses to these questions were vague, incomprehensive, and provided an insufficient basis on which to identify specific capabilities. We realized that for this approach to be successful, we would have needed an enlarged research design, possibly with a separate round of group interviews designated to explore participants' biographies and life circumstances. Consequently, we opted for an alternative approach closer to Nussbaum's, in which we pre-identify capabilities based on existing empirical research on minority youth and young adults and their needs, and on social theory. In the following we describe the procedure for identifying capabilities.

To secure sound criteria and a transparent procedure for the identification of relevant capabilities, we start from Robeyn's (2003) procedural approach. First, Robeyn emphasizes that capabilities must be clearly explicated. The set of capabilities we are about to present do overlap and are to some degree interdependent, yet they are not reducible to each other. Second, she emphasizes that chosen capabilities must be open to (public) scrutiny. Our set of capabilities can surely be contested. At the most basic level, entertainment is life-enriching because it gives people fun and pleasure. Also, entertainment may very well be important because it can stimulate critical thinking and enhance understanding of the world. We do not say that these qualities do not matter. Yet in the context of PSM and minority audiences, we will argue that the following three capabilities are of particular importance. Last, and most important, Robeyn argues that capabilities must be sensitive to the context in which they are applied. In our study, we argue that there are two contextual conditions that are of particular importance. The first is the needs and circumstances of young immigrants, or more precisely, what they lack to live full worthy social lives. We maintain that entertainment should promote capabilities that enable them to do so. The second contextual condition is the obligations and scope of PSM. We argue that relevant capabilities must be grounded in the rationale and mission of PSM, as well as being feasible. On this basis, we identify the following three basic capabilities that we argue PSM should strive to promote to minority audiences through entertainment programming.

The first capability is *to feel recognized.* Empirical evidence indicates that minority youth in Norway and beyond suffer from a lack of positive affirmation of their presence in society, being subjected to systematic misrecognition by the media (Andersson, 2000; Friberg, 2021; Liebmann, 2018; Mainsah, 2011). As argued by Charles Taylor (1994), recognition is a vital human need: mis- or non-recognition from the surroundings prompt subjects to develop unhealthy identities, recognition – positive affirmation – is key in developing healthy identities. As shown empirically by several scholars (e.g., Maia, 2014; Dahl,2021; Nærland, 2019, forthcoming), mass-mediated representations make up a prime source of both the recognition and the misrecognition of people. Consequently, we argue that, for PSM organizations, an objective should be to provide entertainment content that, at a textual level, positively affirms minority presence in society, and at the level of audiences, is experienced to affirm positively their presence in society.

The second capability is to *have a sense of voice.* From empirical research we know that minority youth and young adults lack possibilities for public self-expression and feel subjected to mis- or non-representation vis-à-vis society at large (Horsti, 2008). This lack may be understood through the concept of voice. In social theory, voice accentuates people's abilities to give an account of themselves and narrate their own lives (Couldry, 2010). Whereas recognition accentuates how media representations can positively affirm minority experiences, voice, in contrast, accentuates how representations also involve the public articulation of their experiences. The feeling of voice thus hinges on the exposition of such experiences vis-à-vis a wider audience. On this basis, we argue that PSM organizations should strive to provide entertainment content that minority youth experience as giving a public account of their viewpoints and sensibilities.

The third capability is *to feel belonging.* Empirical evidence from Norway and beyond documents that a sense of exclusion and conflicted senses of belonging are widespread among minority youth and young adults in Norway and beyond (Andersson, 2000; Friberg, 2021; Liebmann, 2018; Mainsah, 2011). A mandated task of PSM is to alleviate such exclusions by symbolic means. In the context of entertainment, we therefore argue that a fundamental task of PSM organizations is to provide content that textually gestures inclusion, and at the level of reception engenders a sense of belonging to the larger community.

Importantly, these capabilities function as vectors for what Amartya Sen terms 'complex functionings'. To feel recognized, to have a

sense of voice and to feel belonging make possible important functionings such as to be happy, to have self-respect, and to take part in community. As documented in empirical research cited above, these are functionings that non-Western immigrants are often denied or have reduced possibilities to enact. Thus, by promoting these capabilities, PSM efforts have the potential to extend their purchase beyond mere representation and provide content that addresses the needs and conditions of minority audiences. And this, we argue, should be a key concern for PSM organizations.

4.1. Black humor: the case

In this study, we focus on the Norwegian humor show *Black Humor*. This case is strategically selected to elucidate the potential of entertainment, given favorable circumstances and qualities, to promote the capabilities in question. In methodological terms, *Black Humor* can thus be described as an 'extreme case' – a case well-suited for getting a point across in an efficient way (Flyvjerg, 2006).

Released first on social media in 2015, *Black Humor* soon appeared on the channels of the NRK, first as a sketch in NRK's satire show *Satiriks* and thereafter developed into a show in collaboration with an external production company (Personal interview, Yousef Hadaoui). Led by comedian Yousef Hadaoui, a Moroccan born Norwegian, the show mixes candid camera pranks with stunt interviews and sketches. The show is mostly set on the streets of Grønland – an inner-city neighborhood in Oslo, emblematic for its high density of non-Western immigrants. The butt of the joke is typically cultural differences between immigrants and the majority population, or immigrant's lack of knowledge about Norway or the Norwegian language. The show frequently makes use of stereotypical music and language, and centers on stereotypical beliefs about immigrants and the Norwegian society. The stunt interviews are the most prominent, and the joke here is often based on making immigrants give wrong or strange answers to questions about Norwegian language, history, and society. Although the premise of the show seems demeaning towards the immigrant population, its reception on social media indicates that it was popular among young Norwegians with immigrant backgrounds. Previous analysis of the show's own Facebook page (from the spring 2018), covering all videos that were published on the page (40 videos, around 60 comments per video) revealed that the majority of the people commenting and being tagged had names suggesting non-Western migrant background (see Dahl, 2021).

The production of *Black Humor* must be seen against the backdrop of NRK's social mission. NRK's multicultural strategy has largely followed the same trajectory as that of other northern European PSMs, with the Swedish public service broadcaster (SVT) and the BBC as role models (Bjørnsen, 2014). The strategy of NRK has undergone a transition from multiculturalist niche-programming for specific groups, to cultural diversity strategies involving content with cross-cultural appeal aimed at social cohesion and mainstreaming. It can now be seen to be shifting towards what Panis et al. (2019) term the 'management of superdiversity', in which the politics of diversity increasingly is seen as integrated in the norms and work practices of TV-professionals. NRK's multi-cultural obligations are stated in its bylaws (The NRK's bylaws, 2022)–which are defined in parliament. NRK has a responsibility to 'mirror the cultural diversity of the population' (§ 16), and contains a multicultural mission, stating that 'NRK shall spread knowledge about different groups and about the diversity of the Norwegian society." (§ 32). These general directives, however, say little about type, scope or the specific objectives of entertainment programing aimed at minority audiences.

How *Black Humor* took shape is thus largely a question of what Cottle (1998) has termed 'professional pragmatics'. Professional pragmatics refers to the practices and strategies used by professionals to deal with organizational goals and government-imposed targets in daily work contexts – by articulating, rationalizing, mediating and circumventing them. To provide some detail into the significance of such pragmatics, we interviewed NRK staff involved at various levels of the production of *Black Humor*. The head of the entertainment division in NRK, Charlo Halvorsen, contends that whereas the overall objectives of entertainment production are passed down from the central management, they nonetheless have to be reinterpreted in the division of entertainment (personal interview, Oslo, April 2018). According to Halvorsen, entertainment is important to NRK's mission as it can "give visibility" to specific demographic groups. He further notes that the genre of humor is particularly apt in this regard, as it can be sharpened to address the sensibilities of particular audience segments.

Similarly, the head of the humor section (a branch within the entertainment division), Kristina Resar, contends that mission statements are not instrumental to humor production (personal interview, Oslo, March 2018). According to Resar, the prime motivation behind the show was to invite identification through the depiction of milieus familiar to young immigrants. In this regard, Resar ascribes a key role to the program host, Yousef, who by nature of his own dual upbringing has a foot in both the majority- and immigrant culture. The program host himself, Yousef Hadaoui, contends that the main purpose of the show was to "humanize" people by entering their universe at their own level – "I am one of them: that's a huge advantage" (personal interview, Oslo, April 2018).

In sum then, the pragmatic handling of PSM mission, production attributes, and subsequent success with the target audience, indicate *Black Humor's* potential to promote the set of capabilities we have identified. In the next step, we will explore empirically the extent to which these capabilities were actually realized at the level of reception.

5. Method and data

We conducted focus group interviews consisting of young Norwegians with minority backgrounds at differing levels of integration. Focus groups were chosen over individual interviews as we wanted to capture the social and intersubjective generation of meaning (Meyer, 2008: 74). Although focus groups entail risks of silencing certain participants due to group dynamics (which also occurred in our talks), we still considered the social and 'real' dimension of shared meaning-making to be valuable for our purpose. In addition, focus groups are useful for inter-group comparison (ibid.), such as our comparison of participants with different levels of integration. The comparison of these groups not only offers insight into how level of integration impacts the reception of humor, but also allows for

a more lucid analysis of how Black Humor appeals to the various experiences and sensibilities of young minorities.

Our selection included in total 5 mixed-gender focus groups, each with four to seven participants, aged 16 to 25. Two of the groups were composed of first-generation non-Western immigrants who recently (shorter than 5 years) had arrived in Norway (hereafter designated as 'the newcomers'). Two of the groups consisted of either descendants of non-Western immigrants or young people who were born elsewhere, but had grown up in Norway (hereafter, 'the descendants'). The fifth was composed of second generation immigrants and ethnic Norwegians. All groups were ethnically mixed, although a majority of the participants had roots in the Middle East or North Africa. This choice was deliberate, as people from these groups, arriving in Scandinavia either through labor migration around 1970 or through asylum immigration beginning in the mid-1980s, are both economically and culturally marginalized. Statistically, they have a weaker link to the labor market than the average immigrant (Brochmann & Hagelund, 2012: 10), which together with controversies about Islam (ibid.) have contributed to a widespread experience of stigma among also young Norwegians from these groups (Andersson, 2001).

Participants were recruited through school classes in Norway's second biggest city, Bergen. As the participants go to school together, they already knew each other. The focus groups were conducted immediately after school hours in a classroom setting, with us present as interviewers, as well as a research assistant in order to facilitate later transcription of the interviews. Informed consent was secured through written and signed statements, and we also informed the participants orally before and at the start of each focus group session about the purpose of the collection of data, their right to confidentiality, and their right to withdraw their consent at any time. We started the focus group sessions by showing five different sketches selected to reflect the thematic variety of *Black Humor*. Subsequently, we initiated group conversation, framed first, to let the participants speak freely and generally about the show, then toward the end, we asked more specific questions from our interview guide.

The first group of questions focused on the participants' reception of key esthetic and rhetorical features of the show, based on a preliminary textual analysis. For example, we would ask about their opinions of the use of kebab Norwegian, a sociolect mixing Norwegian with different migrant languages. The second group of questions centered on the three capabilities we had pre-identified. For example, we would ask directly if the participants thought it was good thing that NRK made a show like this, how watching the show made them feel, and if they felt similar to the program host Yousuf. The focus groups discussions lasted between 35 and 90 min

We acknowledge that both the classroom setting where the interviews took place, and the fact that we as interviewers are grown-up academics from the Norwegian majority introduced a potential power dimension to the group talks. They may augment a sense of othering in the talks, which in turn may affect knowledge production (Gray, 2003). To mitigate such dynamics, there was at all times present a research assistant as part of our team belonging to a visible minority. However, such dynamics are impossible to avoid fully in this kind of qualitative, in-person research.

The interviews were transcribed and then thematically analyzed. In the analysis, we first looked inductively for recurrent phrases, topics, and themes across the conversations. Secondly, we looked deductively for articulations relating to the three preidentified capabilities. This procedure is consistent with ad hoc-methods of meaning generation common in qualitative interview studies, where an inductive analysis sensitive to patterns in the data is combined with analysis informed by the research question (Gray, 2003; Meyer, 2008). This latter analytic step was based on a basic operationalization of the capabilities in question. We looked for articulations of feeling recognized through the following two-step procedure: First, the extent to which the participants experienced that the show reflected their lifestyles, experiences and perspectives, and second, the extent to which these representations were taken to involve a positive affirmation of them and their place in society. When tracing articulations of voice, we looked for utterances in connection to the show referring to experiences of having their sensibilities, style and outlook represented to a larger audience. Tracing articulations of belonging, we looked for utterances in which our participants explicitly mentioned either that they belonged to a particular group, or that they felt a connection to members of a social group.

The NRK staff interviewed were selected to gain insight into the professional pragmatics involved in humor production in the NRK, at both strategic and creative level. Consequently, we interviewed the head of entertainment, the head of humor, as well as the creator of *Black Humor*. These must be considered 'elite' informants – all three consented to the use of their real names. Each interview lasted 30–45 min, was subsequently transcribed, and analyzed in regards to how PSM objectives and strategies are understood and negotiated in the context of humor production.

6. Analysis

Most of the participants were already familiar with *Black Humor*. All but very few in the descendant groups, and the majority in the newcomer groups reported that they had seen clips of the show. Most of them knew it from Facebook and YouTube, but one of the newcomers also knew it from NRK TV. Many of the participants reported that they had also actively searched for the show, by asking friends for links for instance. In the focus groups, the selected clips were generally met with appreciation – with laughter and chit chat in between the participants. Some of our participants even asked us for links to the clips in order to share them with their friends. The sketches that incited the most laughter were the stunt interviews centering on language-based misunderstandings. An interesting observation in this regard, to which we will return later, was that the descendants often explicitly identified with the show host and 'trickster', Yousef, while the newcomers identified with the interviewees who had misunderstood his questions.

6.1. Articulations of recognition

In the participants' responses to watching the show, feelings of being recognized were rarely explicitly articulated. One important reason for this may be that the participants did not have any clear conception of who or where the show originated from – who a

potential 'recognizing part' would be. This is partly a question of the authority and value they ascribe to the NRK as an institution. In general, our participants seemed to be aware that the show was an NRK production, but did not really reflect on this matter. Generally, they viewed the show as one of many things available on YouTube rather than something connected to a particular producer or broadcaster. Yet there were numerous occasions on which the participants expressed positive emotions in relation to characters and situations with which they identified. Such positive emotions largely revolved around three specific features of *Black Humor*.

A first and key feature is mode of address. A pervasive theme among both the descendants and the newcomers was that Black Humor was 'about them'.

Moderator 1: Do you think it's good that NRK makes a program like this?

(Multiple participants say yes)

Moderator 1: Why is that?

Hassan: Mmm.. It is like… I am used to watching Arabic series and then it was like, I have seen lots of episodes of that program. I found it funny since it like sort of *was about us*.

As several of the participants noted, this sense of being addressed as migrant youth was augmented by consistent use of ethnically marked forms of personal address, music and clothing throughout the show. Many of the participants also emphasized the importance of the host, Yousef, being an immigrant himself. It was also often commented that the jokes would have been insulting had they been made by a white comedian.

The second feature is the language used by the participants in the show. In all groups the show's use of 'kebab-Norwegian' (*kebabnorsk*), a sociolect mixing Norwegian and different immigrant languages, emerged as a main source of comedy. For example, one of the newcomer groups laughed out loud when one of the characters in the sketches said "Frollah", the Somali word for "O my god", which Somalis in Norway frequently use as an expressive. What emerged is that through such language play, our participants experienced positive emotions associated with the way that the show showcased their own use of language and slang. We interpret such positive emotions as instances of feeling recognized.

The third feature concerns the comedic nature of Black Humor. We initiated a discussion about humor as a way to be friendly versus humor as ridicule. It seemed clear that the participants thought that humor could be both, but that *Black Humor* definitely was friendly. One participant, Omar, for instance, stressed that this was largely due to the host Yousef, because "he is only good in his heart". Omar further maintained that it would be OK if also ethnic Norwegians found the show funny. It emerged that for most of the participants, connecting laughter and humor with something that can be a struggle – mastering the Norwegian language – was experienced as a positive affirmation of their presence in society.

There were also differences between the two group sets. The newcomers appreciated how the show made fun of *their problems* speaking Norwegian:

Omar: Somali! If he talks in Norwegian, we laugh, because it's a bit funny.

Yohannes: And they talk Norwegian right. That's why everybody laughs.

Omar: It is hard for us because when we speak it sounds a bit foreign.

Yohannes: (laughs)

The descendants, on the other hand, identified themselves with Yousef in the trick quiz-scenes. They explained that these scenes were similar to how they themselves teased friends who are less fluent in Norwegian than themselves. In general, they saw the show as something that was made for people like themselves – "people who enjoy kidding around":

Ali: …people who still are in the young phase, they would for sure think this is fun because this is something that we do with our friends every day, to bug them it is something we do and its fun and stuff. It's something we do with all our friends.

Black Humor thus appears to offer two different subject positions that our two sets of participants could identify with: The interviewees, who struggle with Norwegian, and the show host, who tricks people who struggle with Norwegian. Albeit in different capacities, these positions allowed for experiences that we interpret in terms of recognition. For the newcomers, the benevolent pranks offered an acknowledgement of challenges specific to their lives as newly arrived immigrants. For the descendants, the identification with the show's host and star-trickster, offered an acknowledgement of sensibilities and style familiar to their own lives as young and second-generation immigrants in Norway.

This recognition potential of *Black Humor* must be understood against the backdrop of the Norwegian media scape, where minority youth up until recently rarely were represented in their own terms, by someone sharing their background. As posited by Charles Taylor (mis)recognition of groups is a matter of how "..people or *society around them* mirror back to them a confining or demeaning or contemptible picture of themselves," (1994: 25. Our emphasis), or conversely positive pictures of them. Thus, whereas no clear recognizing part or subject – a recognizer – emerges in our analysis, we maintain that Black Humor, aired by the premium Norwegian broadcaster, is a composite of the society surrounding our participants and hence a symbolic source of recognition. We therefore interpret the participants' positive emotions connected to the showcasing of conditions and issues familiar to their own lives as experiences of such recognition.

6.2. Articulations of voice

Generally, our participants experienced Black Humor being 'for and about us'. A theme throughout the group interviews was that the show is set in a milieu, thematized experiences and made use of style and language highly familiar to their own lives. Yet, at the same time, they also expressed a general awareness that *Black Humor* is a show with reach beyond immigrants. Whereas the show was understood to represent authentically conditions close to their own lives, it was also understood to exhibit these conditions vis-à-vis a larger and non-immigrant audience. This is a feature that sets *Black Humor* up as a potential source for the participants' sense of voice.

However, there was considerable ambivalence in terms of *how* the show represented immigrant experiences to a wider audience. Several of the descendants highlighted how the show portrayed immigrants unfavorably. As one of the participants put it: "Maybe the show creates a kind of impression that immigrants are a bit.. in a way.. they don't understand that much and they're are a bit stupid in a way" (Hassan). Or as another participant noted: "They (immigrants) are portrayed as a bit stupid.. then Norwegians don't get a very good impression of the typical immigrant in a way" (Yasmin). Several participants also noted that the ethnic Norwegians' perception of the show is a matter of pre-familiarity with immigrants:

Ali: It depends on the person you talk to. If it is a Norwegian guy who has had a lot of contact with a lot of immigrants, he would see it in a different way from Norwegians who haven't had any contact with immigrants

At the same time, many of the participants expressed more positive emotions connected to such exposition vis-à-vis non-migrant audiences. For instance, one of the descendants emphasized how he thought *Black Humor* surpasses news portrayals of immigrants.

Aisha: In the news.. they show immigrants trying to escape from war and that kind of stuff.. Here they show what they're doing when they come to Norway. Yes, how they're doing here. So that's a contrast in a way.

Several of the newcomers also reflected that Black Humor showcased many of the frustrations involved in being new to Norway. One example came about when the participants reflected on a sketch in which the subject matter was the harsh Norwegian climate:

Reza: It is a big deal when foreigners arrives in Norway, and especially in winter when they arrived in Norway, and look: Snow, cold and then UDI (The Norwegian immigration authority) sends you a letter and says you need to move to North-Norway where its even colder (laughter).

These two latter examples thus highlight how the watching of *Black Humor* also incited feelings of being spoken for or as having voice. Voice in these instances does not mean making public claims or arguments, but the wider exposition of experiences or sensibilities familiar to their own lives. As such, our analysis does not evidence 'strong' articulations of voice. For instance, the participants did not contend that the show voiced particular experiences or viewpoints they felt important to communicate to the wider public. Also, the show exhibits a rather limited part of the social reality familiar to the participants. Yet, given the overall limited opportunity young Norwegians with minority background have to expose their lives to a majority audience, we interpret the positive emotions connected to the public exposition of their sensibilities, style and language as instances which gave the participants a sense of voice.

6.3. Articulations of belonging

In the focus groups, we saw many instances in which sketches appeared to incite social boundary-making. However, these were articulations of ethnic and generational boundaries rather than affinities to Norwegian society at large. An important social function of humor is its use in the formation of in- and out-groups, related both to who *gets* the joke and to taste in humor (Kuipers, 2015). We see both dimensions in our material. Watching the show appeared to energize our participants' sense of belonging to the immigrant community as well as youth culture – sometimes the combination of the two. This was especially important for the descendants:

Ali: I would think that this is much more fun for people with foreign background than for people with Norwegian background. Because we recognize ourselves in so much of what they say, when they start saying "yes Wallah brother" and all that stuff, that's something we say ourselves daily and something that is funny for us. Because…

Yasmin: Its the way we talk.

Ali: Yes.

There were few explicit articulations belonging to Norwegian society at large. This might be partly explained by how the groups were composed of 'immigrants only': The participants were addressed as immigrants through our research design. In fact, *Black Humor* can be seen to incite social boundary-making along migrant/non-migrant lines.

Ali: But other people don't see this as funny, sort of. I can just look at a guy, if he says "Wallah", just the way he pronounces it, it can be fun for me just because.. right? It is hard to explain, but it can just be fun for me, but that's not understood by let's say Norwegians. So, they don't get the point. Or they don't understand.. right? Well I don't know how to explain it (laughs).

We would, however, emphasize that the jokes in *Black Humor*, and the experiences of identification and belonging expressed by our participants, are connected to a Norwegian backdrop. It is the experience of being an ethnic minority in Norway that is central, not being Arab, Afghan, Somali, or for that matter Muslim *per se*. Although no direct articulations of belonging to the Norwegian nation were formulated by our participants, it could be argued that their articulations of belonging on one level indeed *are* very Norwegian – belonging to a minority *in* Norway. Whereas these articulations did not accentuate being part of a social majority, they nonetheless suggest a sense of place within the Norwegian society – which we interpret as experiences of belonging. And whereas the social boundary-making involved in the appreciation of humor may be seen to cement rather than alleviate difference, we maintain that the ethnoculturally coded appeal of *Black Humor* was key in inciting a sense of place in the Norwegian society.

One participant presented a counterexample to the largely positive experiences of the show discussed so far. He participated in our last focus group, the mixed group. The plan was that this group should be composed of multiple majority Norwegians and multiple descendants, but he was the only one with a minority background who showed up. This might be a reason for his stark criticism of the show. A striking feature of this group interview is that as soon as he voiced his criticism, the majority Norwegian participants in the group, initially positive about the show, remained largely silent through the rest of the conversation. His main point of criticism was that this show was lazy and worn out in its ridicule of immigrants, who were an easy target for bad jokes. In contrast to the other descendant-participants, he also brought up his parents: He emphasized that they had arrived as refugees, always worked hard, and did not deserve to be laughed at just because they sometimes misunderstood Norwegian words. This participant is an important reminder of how the appreciation of entertainment, and thus also the show's promotion of capabilities, is closely connected to both differing tastes and group dynamics. Here, the genre of humor genre can be particularly tricky. Humor can be highly popular with a strong

appeal to minority youth, but also runs the risk of backfiring due to potential offensiveness.

7. Conclusion: towards a needs-oriented approach to content production

We started this article by addressing the need for a reconsideration of the aims of PSM efforts to address minority audiences through entertainment programming. We have further argued that a capabilities perspective offers a valuable starting point for such reconsideration. A capabilities perspective implies that entertainment should not merely represent or mirror the lives of minority citizens – it should be enabling in some capacity. Accordingly, it calls for a deeper commitment to the transformational and enabling potential of content provision, and for a reconsideration of what we should expect content to achieve.

To consider such questions, we have operationalized the capabilities approach in the study of a case selected from the context of Norway. We did this in two steps, by, first, identifying capabilities that are theoretically grounded and context-sensitive, and then, examining empirically the extent to which these capabilities were actualized at the level of reception. Through our analysis we have shown how *Black Humor* largely, yet not without contradictions, was successful in promoting these capabilities.

Our analysis has shown how young Norwegians with minority background experienced humor to involve a positive acknowledgement of their presence in society – as a source of recognition. Albeit not without tensions, we have also shown how humor can give minority youth a sense of voice – as an exposition of their sensibilities and experiences to a wider audience. And, we have illustrated how humor can energize feelings of social belonging. Yet in our study, humor appeared to incite social boundary-making along both ethnic and generational lines, rather than affinities to Norwegian society at large. Finally, we highlighted how the appeal of humor, and thus its capacity to promote capabilities, is closely connected to differing tastes, contexts and group dynamics.

As such, the inherent ambivalence of humor is particularly interesting. Humor has the potential to be both light-hearted and deeply offensive (Lockyer & Pickering, 2008), subversive, and suppressive (Author). As already mentioned, humor can be highly popular with a strong appeal to young people with a minority background, but also runs the risk of backfiring due to potential offensiveness. Its potential to promote the capabilities discussed in this article is thus a matter of advanced sensitivity to the sensibilities of the audience.

To illustrate our approach, we have relied on a strategically selected 'model case'. Yet, we maintain that our two-step operationalization of the capabilities approach offers a starting point for evaluative analysis of other and potentially 'bad' cases. Such cases could comprise other genres than humor and stem from outside the world of public service media. In the analysis of such cases, however, the value of our approach depends on the identification of well-considered and context-specific capabilities, followed by a careful empirical examination of the ways in which these capabilities were realized, or not realized, in their particular contexts of reception. A limitation of our approach, however, is the reliance on preexisting empirical research to identify the needs and conditions of the target audience, and thus relevant capabilities. Ideally, capabilities should emanate from the target group itself. The approach in this study, in which capabilities are identified in advance, runs the risk of becoming paternalizing and not hitting the spot. Future applications of approaches similar to ours should therefore consider employing methodological designs securing the possibility for the audience to articulate freely what they need in order to flourish.

A further limitation is the reliance on a time limited case study of media experiences. What we have captured in this study is a snapshot of how a set of representations and rhetorical gestures is experienced at given point of time. However, PSM's promotion of capabilities is a question of how audiences experience content over time. Consequently, our study primarily highlights *the potential* of entertainment to address audiences in ways that are experienced as empowering. Future efforts should therefore consider expanding the research design to accommodate for investigations into how this potential is realized over time.

Further, we have provided empirical texture to the claim that entertainment, in our case humor, has the potential to function as a vehicle to promote basic capabilities. We have highlighted how ethnoculturally coded style, language, and gestures of identification are pivotal in energizing experiences of recognition, voice and belonging. Yet it is important to note, that the degree to which humor succeeds in promoting such capabilities is ultimately a question of fun and comedic quality. If humor becomes too instrumental in pursuing set goals, it will likely lose its appeal. For this reason, we do not argue that humor, or entertainment in general, should be produced in accordance with a narrow set of capabilities or in accordance with a narrowly defined procedure. This would run the risk of normatively overburdening production, stifling creativity and thus impoverishing creative output and appeal. Rather, our basic argument is that, in the context of PSM, a capabilities approach calls for entertainment production better grounded in audiences needs and conditions. Important to note, such an approach may very well end up identifying a different set of capabilities from the one we have identified in our study.

A commitment to the capability perspective implies that the audience and its needs are put at the center of content production. More generally, such a commitment necessitates the broader adoption of needs-oriented thinking in the internal culture and professional pragmatics of PSM organizations. To some extent, this is already the case in the NRK. One example is the employment of the so-called NABC-model in youth drama production, in which qualitative 'insight-work' among the target audience is used as the basis for the development of youth drama (Andersen & Sundet, 2019). Another example might be drawn from our case study. The commissioning of a humor show from the program host Yousuf, who in significant respects shares experiences and background with the target audience, was key in creating a show that resonated with our participants lives. At a more general level, we would argue that the recent developments in PSM handling of diversity, in which the politics of diversity increasingly is seen as integrated in the norms and work practices of TV-professionals (Panis et al., 2019), accommodates content production better sensitized to audience's needs and conditions.

Our study also invites reconsiderations of the scope of PSMs mission vis-à-vis minority audiences. We have illustrated empirically the potential of PSM to provide entertainment content that addresses the needs and conditions of marginalized citizens, thus extending its purchase beyond mere representation. This, we argue, should be a central concern for PSM organizations. Yet we acknowledge that

there are matters that complicate this basic argument. On a practical level, a systematic implementation of audience-centered content production is both costly and time-consuming, and thus may impinge on already strained budgets. On a policy level, a re-motivation of PSM along the lines of a capabilities perspective necessitates a broad debate among scholars, politicians, media professionals, and citizens alike, about, one the one hand, the fundamental aims of PSM and their obligations vis-à-vis the citizenry, and on the other, what kind of capabilities PSM should promote. On the level of programing, catering to the specific needs and conditions of particular (ethnic) groups may be at odds with the current ideal of mainstreaming and cross-cultural appeal.

Yet as Jakubowicz (2014: 238) has remarked, unless PSM organizations "seriously rethink their roles in maintaining social cohesion and ensuring communication rights, they will have their work cut out for them". On this note, we propose the idea that a strengthened commitment to provide content that is actually enabling for marginalized audiences could contribute to a deepening and specification of the social mission of PSM. It could serve to set PSM apart from other competing alternatives, justify their value and thus crystalize their continued relevance.

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