DID WE IGNORE THE SOCIAL COMMENTARY? RESPONDING TO BORAT ON YOUTUBE

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Abstract: Ever since the fictitious Kazakh journalist Borat Sagdiyev became an icon of contemporary popular culture, many questions have arisen about the reception of Borat by the general public. Namely, how have common people created a shared representation of Borat? And how is this complicated character and comedic manner undertaken by Sacha Baron Cohen being deciphered? These questions are crucial for understanding the challenges and constraints of social satire that exploits ethnically and stylistically sophisticated identity. To address these questions, which surely could be asked about other international media products as well, this article deals with the reception of Borat the character on YouTube. In particular, the viewers’ reaction to the YouTube video titled “The Best of Borat” is analysed. This video has been viewed more than seven million times and commented on more than seven thousand times. The conceptual framework of this analysis is derived from the theory of social representations postulated by Serge Moscovici. In line with this theory two main dimensions – anchoring and objectification – are explored in order to understand how shared or divergent knowledge of Borat is created. Thus the basic socio-cognitive processes behind Borat are revealed. The results suggest that anchoring of Borat is embedded in national identification discourse, whereas objectification differentiates people according to their sense of humour. Likewise, some implications of Borat’s reception for participatory culture and civic engagement are outlined.

Keywords: mockumentary, satiric discourse, social representation theory, YouTube comments

Ten years ago the world first met fictitious Kazakh journalist Borat Sagdiyev, who appeared in Da Ali G Show on Channel 4 in the UK. Exploiting the stylistic merits of mockumentary (ambiguity of characters and situations, improvisation, etc.), Borat, a character created and portrayed by British comedian Sacha Baron Cohen, attempted to unmask the discreet charm of the British and American middle-class lifestyle and worldview (hypocrisy, ignorance, righteousness). It took a couple of years to turn Borat from a largely indigenous phenomen-
on into an internationally recognised postmodern symbol. A milestone on the way to worldwide popularity was the release in 2006 of the movie *Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan*. Along with TV shows such as *The Office* or the cartoon series *South Park*, Borat the character has noticeably contributed to social commentary on the late-liberal political and public culture of Western societies (Boyer and Yurchak, 2010).

The central motive that underlies Borat’s skits is a grotesque perception of non-Westerners by Westerners and vice versa. Though conventional, such an approach has constantly evoked a public buzz. Since 2005, when Borat was invited to host the MTV Europe Music Awards, many controversies have arisen concerning the manner in which the Borat character is portrayed and how Borat represents different social groups. Some countries, such as Kazakhstan and Russia, even banned showing the movie. Likewise, it is speculated that the popularity of Borat has tremendously increased the number of British tourists visiting Kazakhstan (Saunders, 2010, pp. 119–20). A number of lawsuits have been initiated, and some have already been settled, against the creators of Borat by those ridiculed in the movie. In spite of all these disagreements, which also might be viewed as a part of Baron Cohen’s marketing strategy, the movie was a commercial success and was nominated for the 2006 Academy Awards and 2007 Golden Globes.

Up to now, scholars have focused on Borat’s role in branding a nation (Stock, 2009; Saunders, 2010), challenging movie genres (Torchin, 2008), reproducing folkloric patterns (Kononenko and Kuharenko, 2008), provoking national self-criticism and criticism on identity politics (Lee, 2008; Lalo, 2009), and even in drama teaching (Aitken, 2009). Moreover, special issues of academic journals and books have been dedicated to the Borat phenomenon. Apart from these researchers, ordinary consumers of popular culture have been discussing Borat as well. Yet surprisingly little scholarly attention has been focused on the public reception of Borat and how it has changed over time. This topic has remained somewhere in the background, although it explains a crucial part of the public discourse. To foreground it, this article addresses the reception issue by analysing internet comments about Borat on the video-sharing website *YouTube*, which has become a place where many famous videos are discursively elaborated. Michael Hoechsmann and Giuliana Cucinelli (2007, p. 95) have claimed that by posting scenes from *Borat* the film on *YouTube* Borat the character has been exposed to viral communication. In other words, Borat’s popularity has to some extent been influenced by Web 2.0 social networking and the user-driven content generation. Thus, *YouTube* comments as an outcome of viral communication provide us with ample information on how consensual or divergent knowledge of internationally mediated objects is created.

**THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: SOCIAL REPRESENTATIONS AND SATIRICAL DISCOURSE**

I define *YouTube* comments as a particular discursive field; they eventually take part in the creation of social representations and are influenced by already existing social representations. The conceptual architecture of this article is derived from social representation theory (SRT), which provides various heuristic tools for capturing the dialogicity of shared knowledge. SRT insists that our collective behaviour and identity are constrained by social representations: a system of shared values, ideas and practices inscribed within the framework of pre-existing thought. Social representations evolve around conceptual themata (source ideas, image concepts) which express essential and generic properties to classes of objects in the world and which are determinations and dispositions of intentions. Particular collectivity accepts themata as plausible and “in the course of history, [they] become problematised; for one reason or another they become the focus of attention, and a source of ten-
sion and conflict” (Marková, 2000, p. 446). Conceptual themata reveal themselves through various pragmatic manifestations or methodological themes.

Social representations to some extent resemble scientific theories: both attempt to explain an unknown or unfamiliar phenomenon or certain aspects of this phenomenon that is important to a social group. Scientists create a reified universe, however, by using rigid methodologies and systematic data analysis, whereas common people converse on a daily basis about unfamiliar social objects (politics, illness, movie stars) which “startles us out of a passive state” (Moscovici, 1988, p. 235), thereby creating a consensual universe where the social representations of these objects can thrive. Serge Moscovici, the founder of SRT, (2000, p. 34) has argued that

In a consensual universe society is seen as a group of individuals who are equal and free, each entitled to speak in the name of the group and under its aegis. Thus, no one member is assumed to possess an exclusive competence, but each can acquire any competence which may be required.

A consensual universe most likely emerges within a de-traditionalised and liberal public sphere, which, according to Habermas (1962/1989), originated from journals, coffee-houses, and reading clubs in 18th century Europe. A freely accessible and dialogical public sphere that tolerates differences is a crucial prerequisite for generating a consensual universe and, hence, competing social representations. (For a more thorough analysis of this argument, see Jovchelovitch, 2001, pp. 165-175.)

The very logic of a consensual universe presupposes that social representations are constructed within discourse. The discursive elaboration of social objects separates what Wagner (1998, p. 307) calls the world of something from the world of domesticated objects. In this context, humour, surely, is a peculiar mode of such demarcating discourse, which either affirms or transforms social representations. Humour has evidently a huge manipulative potential, as it is highly demanded by mass-media users. For a long time psychological theories have occupied scholarship on humour, downplaying the understanding of humour as a social fact. Only after the 1970s can one speak of a serious emergence of a sociological interest in humour (Kuipers, 2008, p. 361). The discussion of theories that have dealt with humour as a social phenomenon lies outside the purview of this paper. Here I just want to outline how ambivalence that is inherent to socially sensitive satirical discourse may influence the formation of social representations.

On the one hand, especially in terms of political and ethnic humour, we can interpret joking as subversive communication. For example, it may deconstruct established power relations in society by supporting alternative (sometimes also humiliating) representations of the collective identities of dominant groups. On the other hand, humour may reproduce social order, maintaining the established representations of dominant groups; thus, satirical discourse manifests its conservative nature. Another dimension of this ambivalence is recapitulated by Kuipers, who insists that “joking apparently manages, more than most other forms of communication, to combine the seemingly contradictory functions of hierarchy-building and bringing about solidarity” (2008, p. 366). Therefore one may argue that socially sensitive humour may implicitly divide its recipients into different interpretive communities. For instance, one group may favour humour that heals while another prefers satire that wounds as in the case of Horatian and Juvenalian humour (Holbert et al, 2011). In such conditions the existing social representations of collective identity ultimately play an important role by giving reasons to identify with one or another interpretive community. Hence, on
the social level, as Marjolein t’Hart (2007, p. 20) admits, a joke, certainly “can bring people together but it can also shock, hurt, and exclude. Humour can bind but also divide”.

Within satirical communication as well as in other discourses, two simultaneous processes take part in the formation of social representations: anchoring and objectification. Anchoring means to identify and assimilate an unfamiliar object on the basis of prior knowledge and experience; this process is based on ready-made opinions that express themselves in one of two ways: by generalising or by particularising. Objectification, in turn, helps to materialise abstracts and uncertain things. In relation to the core of social representations or themata, Liu (2004, p. 257) has argued that anchoring, as an inner-directed process, integrates new and unfamiliar phenomena into existing knowledge and enriches the meanings of a thema, while objectification, as an outer-directed process, turns abstract notions of a thema into reality and gives a thema its concrete form by means of pragmatic manifestations.

Regarding the social representation of Borat, we may interpret anchoring as the invoking of different stereotypes and social identities (national, sexual, gender, class etc.) within various audiences. Presumably, viewers already have some of these social categories (anchors) in mind when they are entertained by Baron Cohen. Otherwise it would be difficult to understand the mockery or insult of Kazakh journalist. In other words, ethnic and political humour in general and Boratian humour in particular spring up from existing social representations of collective identities. This idea is in accordance with t’Hart’s argument of humour as a political resource (2007, p. 17): “One condition must be met before humour can be utilised in social protest: the condition of a pre-existing collective identity, or a strict setting of the jokes”. On the other hand, objectification comes into play when the audience attempts to define Borat as a generic phenomenon. As a genre, a documentary is too weird or unfamiliar to be immediately comprehended, especially when one deals with variations of humour cultures across societies, e.g. different senses of humour and joking habits. To avoid uncertainty, the audience attempts to construct a shared image of this ambiguous comedic manner. By agreeing upon a common image, Borat becomes cognitively more controllable.

Endless communication on social objects within a group not merely creates but also transforms social representations. The nature of social representations, thus, is dialogical, and dialogicity occurs within representations as well as among different representations of the same object. Social representation is not a quiet thing, as Caroline Howarth (2006, pp. 65–86) recognises, and there is constantly a fight for meaning of reality among hegemonic and oppositional representations in the public sphere. Accordingly, an alternative representation, which is invoked by satire about particular collective identity, may enable the counter-discourse of a ridiculed group.

**YouTube as a Consensual Universe**

Drawing a parallel with the 18th-century public sphere, *YouTube* may be read as a 21st-century multi-storeyed coffee-house wherein a heterogeneous public converse on different topics and the coffeehouse owners do not usually constrain these conversations unless they violate basic rules of conduct (see *YouTube* community guidelines). *YouTube* is no longer just a tool for communication: it exists as a cultural system in its own right, encompassing different subcultures. As Burgess and Green (2009, p. 57) have convincingly demonstrated, “All contributors of content to *YouTube* are potential participants in a common space; one that supports a diverse range of uses and motivations, but that has a coherent cultural logic”. *YouTube* provides an opportunity to discuss hot issues or to challenge
propaganda, as well as to promote cross-cultural learning (cf. Lindgren, 2011; Bloom and Johnston, 2010; Christensen, 2008). The collaborative babble of YouTube, indeed, vividly illustrates how social representations are formed within a consensual universe as proposed by SRT.

Of course, the anonymity of the YouTube community does complicate the idea of a consensual world, since no one knows a particular YouTuber’s identity or who is behind them. Nevertheless, a number of social categories may already be assigned to YouTubers. For instance, in his recently published book Michael Strangelove (2010, pp. 103–136) outlines various identities of YouTubers emerging from their online practices: videographers, celebrities, fans, haters, spammers, and various deviants. Even though defined from outside, these identities illuminate the social order on YouTube that parallels the one outside social networking websites. However, the division of two social realities is analytical rather than empirical; participation in the YouTube community is at times motivated by the necessity to safeguard traditional collective identities (religious, national).

A satirical discourse on the Internet, and particularly on YouTube, is an important constitutive force for establishing a consensual universe. Doubtlessly, comedy is among the most popular content themes for YouTube (Strangelove, 2010, p. 125; Burgess and Green, 2009, p. 53). Moreover, many YouTubers respond to these videos by posting comments that not necessarily mean engaging in a thoughtful dialog. Viewed from a more abstract level, popular culture is part and parcel of a new media paradigm that revolves around participatory culture and collective intelligence, concepts in accordance with the Moscovician definition of a consensual world introduced in the early 1960s. Jenkins (2006, p. 244) has argued that this paradigm stems from changes in media consumption, which has shifted “from individualised and personalised media consumption towards consumption as a networked practice”. Evidently, the Internet is one of the major factors that have generated new participatory skills, which might be more inclusive than forms of participation demanding original content creation.

New online participatory skills are specifically being applied to popular culture, for which Jenkins (2006, p. 246) provides two reasons: (a) awareness that the stakes are low and (b) that playing with popular culture is a lot more fun than dealing with more serious matters. Moreover, popular culture has also found appealing ways of mediating politics that have facilitated civic engagement of otherwise apathetic citizens. Apart from empty entertainment there are good expressions of politics in popular culture that, as Liesbet van Zoonen (2005) claim, may raise political awareness and can be a relevant resource for political citizenship by making it more pleasurable, engaging, and inclusive. The consumption of popular culture that deals with political or politicised topics is a somewhat unintentional way of engaging in politics. Thus YouTube both as a coffeehouse and as the storehouse of popular culture is a place where “the online performance of political and religious selves can become particular acts and practices of (unlocated) citizenship” (Van Zoonen et al, 2010, p. 260). In line with this perspective, we may ask how the products of popular culture that are made global via YouTube influence political citizenship across different societies.

**Methodology**

By applying SRT to the topic of this article, I shall attempt to demonstrate how social representations of Borat have been constructed by comments on YouTube, and how they have changed over time. As Borat is “a chimera of Islamo-Arabic foreignness with a colorful Soviet gloss” (Saunders, 2010, p. 72) who is complemented by Judeophobia and misogyny, one might predict a multilevel anchoring of the character. Simultaneously, as highlighted
earlier, the uncertain comedic manner undertaken by Baron Cohen generates the necessity for objectification by assigning a more definite image to this style.

This article is based on qualitative analysis of Internet comments posted on the most viewed Borat video entitled “The Best of Borat” (with more than seven million hits). This 24-minute video clip consists of several well-known episodes from the first year of Borat’s appearance on Channel 4. The video was uploaded in 2006, and, as of the date when this paper was written, had received more than seven thousand comments. The qualitative data set was obtained from the comments posted during the period from 2006 to 2009. Although sometimes it was possible to infer the national identity of commentators, their real identity (national, gender, age) remains unknown. Therefore written discourse was the only plausible unit of analysis. Remarkably though, some YouTube commentators might be associated with institutionalised roles, such as haters and spammers. Moreover, within that four-year period it is possible to pinpoint active commentators (such as Bluebird1787, Cortezawwris, Folkmusic1991), some of whom are also active members of other online communities.

My qualitative analytical procedures are derived from grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006; Strauss and Corbin, 1998). I have used purposeful sampling strategy whereby only information rich YouTube comments that reflect the perception of Borat were selected. The first step in data collection was the demarcation of the unit of coding by selecting pertinent comments by identifying those that contained detailed opinion. Hence, numerous comments which appeared as spontaneous reactions to the video, consisting of only a few words (such as “cool video” or “that sucks”), were excluded from the coding. The next step was open coding: comments were thematically analysed, and salient basic themes were identified in each comment usually fixing them as in vivo codes. During this analytical phase, paragraph-by-paragraph coding was used: each paragraph of a single comment was assigned one or more labels that marked the presence of a particular theme (‘mocking Muslims’, ‘explanation of the skit’). Where posted comments were part of an explicit conversation, coded themes were also registered as discussion topics. As to open coding, word frequency analysis was used as an additional technique to identify basic themes.

Open coding was followed by further sorting and selection of basic themes until common patterns or organising themes were identified. The acquired organising themes and their mutual relations are illustrated in figure 1 which will be contextualised in the subsequent analysis. Insofar as was reasonable, the organising themes were broken up to create subthemes. A total of 427 references were coded and 46 thematic items were obtained. These items stand for two broad, but interrelated global themes: national identification and assessment of humour (for more on thematic analysis, see Attride-Stirling, 2001; Boyatzis, 1998). These global themes, as I shall demonstrate, operate on different levels of Borat’s social representation. To manage all these analytical operations consistently and effectively, qualitative research software Nvivo 8 was used. By offering systematic data collection and analysis, Nvivo embraces many analytical procedures of grounded theory (open coding, node creation, memo writing, etc.).

ANCHORING BORAT: THE FIGHT FOR NATIONAL IDENTITY

Whenever a particular national attachment of an individual or social group is emphasised, national identity comes into play. The mediated identity qualities that are possessed by characters of popular culture most likely become anchors for an audience. The situation turns out to be more complicated when the character’s identity fluctuates in meaning, as it does in the case of Borat. The national identification process is a major global theme, which organises the anchoring of Borat on YouTube. That is to say, commentators
either try to define the national parameters of Borat’s identity, or they highlight particular
identities within Baron Cohen’s ethnic humour that somehow defines Borat.

In 2006 and 2007, Kazakh and American identities were the most relevant categories
among YouTube comments, which is not surprising since Borat represents Kazakhstan and
he basically mocks Americans. The representation of Kazakhstan as created by Borat is
rarely accepted, and only a few commentators assume an insulting tone towards Kazakhs.
Overall, a dominant motive is protection of Kazakh identity, whereby the posted video and
also the movie are interpreted as offensive to Kazakhstan. Such protection attempts to re-
fute the false image of Kazakhstan created by Borat. Contrary to this image, religious and
ethnic tolerance and inclination to modernisation are stressed by commentators as an essen-
tial part of contemporary Kazakh society:

I am born in kazakhstan... this is not funny, what borat makes... kazakstan is a tolerant, modern country. (georgHAN)³

Borate shut up! Kazakhstan is very beautiful and the people there are not so! If you do not believe, come to Kazakhstan!!!
(bmskz777)

I’m from kazakhstan, and everything in this film not true. it’s fairy about our country. we have internet, TV, everything that
have all world! (Rahhhis)

Equally, they insist that Baron Cohen produces a misperception of a typical Kazakh
who looks Asian, not Arabian, although simultaneously the ethnic diversity of Kazakhstani
people is emphasised:
Why the hell does Borat look arabic? Real Kazakh people look asian! Do you fucking ignorants know where Kazakhstan is? Where was the Soviet Union? Not in the middle east! Check it out! This is sooo lame. (couek)

Noticeably, the advocating comments are also written by non-Kazakhs who base their positions on personal experience. Along with the common protective ethos, non-Kazakh comments express remorse that Baron Cohen has humiliated Kazakhstaniis. Apart from blaming Baron Cohen exclusively, a number of commentators admit that such misrepresentation of Kazakhstan stems from the ignorance of other people (other commentators) who are naïve and gullible to believe that Borat talks about an actual country. While the word-frequency analysis shows a decrease in the linguistic markers of Kazakh identity in the 2009 comments (see chart 1)⁴, protection remained a major theme when Kazakhstan was mentioned. Kazakh identity, however, is not as salient in comments made in 2009 as it was in 2006 or 2007. Arguably, that is related to a wider international context. The media were attracted by Kazakhstan’s public conflict with Baron Cohen in 2006, but they gradually fell silent in succeeding years. Saunders (2010, p. 126) insists that by the end of 2006 Kazakhstan brand managers had reshaped their strategy towards Borat, attempting to seize the opportunity to tell a positive story about Kazakhstan.

American identity comes to the fore through comments that reflect upon the ignorance of Americans. Using ignorance as an analytical category, I also capture comments stressing the stupidity and poor education of Americans. As a matter of fact, such comments frame Americans as people who are simply not able to see and understand cultures outside their own, therefore permitting Borat to say whatever he wants about Kazakhstan. US foreign policy is also a distinct object of criticism, spotlighting amorality and arrogance as characteristic features of Americans. Occasionally this negative image is contrasted with the positive features of Europeans, which is in line with Saunders’ argument that many Europeans wallowed in Borat the movie because it confirmed their deepest prejudices towards Americans (2010, p. 149).

Unlike Borat the movie, remarkably the posted YouTube video ridicules the middle-class habits of British not Americans; nevertheless, the British are insulted in only a few instances. Because Baron Cohen is associated with their highly regarded sense of humour, the British are generally portrayed positively. Apparently, the movie, which came out simultaneously with the YouTube video, elicited the so-called halo effect: regardless of whom Borat mocks, they will largely be generalised as Americans. Thus, Americans is sometimes used as a metaphor for the ignorance and hypocrisy of big nations:

What uneducated American you are i m sorry Kazakhstan is Asian steppe country. With distinct looking people that don't look European. I know you don't have a map in American maybe could buy one from another country. (cortezawwris)

Wow ur the fucking stereotype of an American, always thinking you're better than everyone just becuase you drop bombs on third world countries and kill thousands of "terrorist" children. And you probably don't know where your own country is situated on a map, so how can you tell that other countries suck? In Europe, people have better salary than in the US, and we have very developed military forces, if you want to have to deal with 25 countries. (yomama629)
The criticism of Americans triggers an opposite reaction as well: a desire to protect American virtues. However, defending comments most likely revolve around the same stereotypes, which are the impetus for criticism by anti-American commentators. Namely, the defenders put an emphasis on the mightiness and historical role of the USA in the progress of humankind. The salience of American identity decreases over the course of time. Furthermore, one may notice 2009 comments are less critical and more pro-American in 2009 (the same year President Barack Obama took office).

If Kazakh and American identities are inevitable, then other national identities elicited by the commentators are by-products of Borat’s hybrid image. Romanian and Polish identities are two visible examples of such side-effects: the scene set in Kuzcek, a shabby-looking Kazakh village where Borat lives⁵, was actually shot in Romania, and Borat constantly uses Polish expressions as if they were from the Kazakh language. Many commentators have written just to verify that “It is Romania not Kazakhstan” or “He is actually speaking in Polish”. Quite a few comments contain negative responses, however.

A number of YouTube commentators claim that Borat has humiliated Romanians by misrepresenting their country as deprived and underdeveloped. Likewise, they point to the arrogant and unjust attitude towards the inhabitants of the Romanian village of Glod, which Baron Cohen has exploited in his skits:

Borat is a fake shit, karderr [commentator’s name]. You know what he is doing is not legal? The romanian people in this film (witch is made in Romania not in Kazakstan) were paid for this movie. They knew that he is making a documentari movie about there culture but he made this shit (not legal) he is disrespecting my culture and my tradition. Kaderr you know Romaina is a lat-in origin country? That village is a gipsy village. [...] ROMANIA IS NOT POOR!!! (negrutzyu)

Since the village population is mainly Roma, their identity is also unintentionally evoked through comments that reveal traditional stereotypes about them (poor, illiterate,
thieving). In addition, discussions about Romanian identity attract commentators who, in fact, approve of the negative image of Romania portrayed by Borat. On the other hand, some YouTube commentators want to learn more about Romanians and Kazakhs; in some respect that echoes the idea of cultural learning underlying Baron Cohen’s parodies.

Unlike comments stemming from the depiction of a Romanian village, the usage of Polish expressions by Borat is perceived with deep incomprehension: the commentators (many of whom claim to be Poles) cannot understand why Borat speaks Polish if he is supposed to be Kazakh. Several comments indicate a rather negative context for such questioning, suggesting that Baron Cohen is making fun of Poles:

And at the beginning of his sentences he says "jehnkoojeh" <- i don't know how to write it in english :) , it's polish word, (dz-iękuję) and it means "thank you", then at the end of the sentence he says "yag sheh mash", which is also polish sentence (jak się masz?) and it means "how are you?" i'T'S STUPID! (Majesior)

Moreover, these comments are at times challenged by commentators who incorrectly believe that the Polish phrases jak się masz (How are you?) and dziękuję (Thanks), which Borat uses so frequently, are actually Czech expressions. Thus, ironically, those who cannot understand Borat’s connection with Polish identity are provoked to protect Borat’s Polishness by insisting that Borat speaks in Polish not Czech.

Comparing Romanian and Polish related comments, we may notice different national self-images: whereas the comments about Romanians tried to weaken the association between Romania and Borat, the comments about Poles refused/were unable to understand any linkage between Poland and Borat. Conversely, comments about Polish expressions were more frequent and salient, although Borat had exploited some Hebrew and Russian utterances as well. A couple of commentators, in turn, sought to generalise the Romanian case by saying that Borat either mocked or represented Eastern Europeans in general. Nonetheless, Eastern European and post-Soviet identity are somewhat silent issues among YouTube comments.

Another by-product of the comments concerns Jewish identity and largely relates to Baron Cohen’s Jewish ethnicity. His Jewish origin is a major reason for anti-Semitic utterances suggesting Borat is another manifestation of the Jewish conspiracy:

Clever trick by the Jews to shame Islam (Borat is none other than "Sacha Baron Cohen" - a zionist jew doing nicely for zionist isreal/hollywood. Let's not get fooled. The Kazah Jew's have been smashing down all other's religions for centuries, now...Islam - shaming with over-done sexism, hyperdirty talk (part of a dum-ming down, too, like Sarah Silvermann, etc, etc, etc). Look for the pattern - Isreal's using USA again Islam today. (c1amzy)

Suggestions of anti-Semitism became even more salient in comments made during 2009 (chart 1), possibly related to the release of the next Baron Cohen movie Bruno. It was negatively received by Austrians since the hero Bruno represented Austrians’ Gay TV®. The increase of anti-Semitism might also be elucidated as a gradually formed reaction to the anti-Muslim content of Borat hoax, which has reached its critical mass just recently, because initially there was not a discursive space allocated to this topic in YouTube comments. Incidentally, anti-Semitism is characteristic of YouTube comments generally, and the term Jew most likely can be seen in negatively rated or unaccepted comments (see Siersdorfer et al,
2010, p. 893). Apart from these explanations, Borat’s anti-Semitism might also be perceived as a model for how to do business on post-identity humour. As Steven Lee (2008, p. 24) puts it, “From a financial perspective, the brilliance of Borat is its ability to amuse multiple audiences – from those who understand Baron Cohen’s anti-Semitism; to those who... sympathize with Borat’s fear of Jews”.

On the whole, the comments suggest that over time the Romanian, Jewish, and partly Polish identities have replaced American and Kazakh identities as the two most important anchors of Borat’s social representation. Anchoring has chiefly been realised through national identification, leaving aside some other potential identities aroused by Borat’s misogyny and homophobia. Instead of multilevel anchoring, which might be enabled by different social identities (gays, feminists, etc.), analysed discourse is dominated by nationality issues. This suggests “YouTube is a potential site of cosmopolitan cultural citizenship – a space in which individuals can represent their identities and perspectives, engage with the self-representation of others, and encounter cultural differences” (Burgess and Green, 2009, p. 81). Due to Borat’s hybrid character, many commentators find a reason either to identify certain groups with Borat or to disassociate these groups from him and preserve the uniqueness of one’s national identity (Kazakhs, Romanians, and Americans). Thus, anchoring has been carried out as particularisation. Occasionally, as in the case of the Americans (the very object of Borat’s mockery), they have become a generalised anchor symbolising Western societies. Surprisingly, the association of Borat with Eastern European identity as another possibly generalised anchor has been rather weak. To some extent that refutes the opinion of scholars who have argued that Borat ridicules the otherness of Eastern Europeans (Wallace, 2008). Perhaps once again it shows the external nature of the definition of Eastern European identity and the vagueness of Eastern Europe as an imagined community.

**Objectifying Borat: the fight for humour**

The estimation of Baron Cohen’s comedic style is another broad theme that intertwines YouTube comments on Borat. Despite its institutionalised status, documentary is an unconventional genre, and when it is part of such a social object as Borat, it must be objectified. As Torchin (2008, p. 60) suggests, the Borat project “is thrown into uncertainty as each sequence provides a step backward from verisimilitude, offering a performative documentary about performance and a mockumentary of a documentary of a mockumentary”. By elaborating particular guidelines of how Borat should be perceived, the meaning of Borat the character emerges. Baron Cohen’s satirical manner as an analytical category covers three dialogically related attitudes towards the hoax: approval; criticism; and acknowledgment of a culturally diverse sense of humour.

Since different arguments come to the fore in praise of Borat’s skits, comments supporting Baron Cohen’s comedic approach are not necessarily homogeneous. First of all, his freaky way of ridiculing the Brits and Americans generates sympathy. As mentioned earlier, Americans usually become the most visible scapegoats in such situations, while Britain is perceived as a self-critical nation. Baron Cohen is associated with British humour, the category with a positive connotation, elevating Brits above Americans. Rarely, however, is social criticism raised as an intrinsic value of the Borat satire. Instead an immediate affective reaction prevails over Borat’s reflections on racism, exaggerated political correctness, homophobia, etc. In other words, Borat’s pranks are principally good not because they sketch the problems of contemporary western societies, but because they are simply funny:

The Brits are so much more hysterical to watch when Borat does
his thing. Their patience with this character is incredible. This is classic British humor! (siankane)

But if you look at the history of UK Comedians (lookup Fawlty Towers on Utube as an example) you will find we luuurve to make fun of our national stereotypes (ourselves !) Sacha just moved this onto other nationalities ..... who may not share our sense of humour. But we find it fecking funny... so fuck'em. (gp-fwestie)

Making fun of and stereotyping particular groups and (underdeveloped) nations like Kazakhstan or Romania are the impetus for a negative attitude towards Borat and his style of lampooning people. Yet, it is not so easy to find the same condemning attitude within pro-American comments. They are typically directed at safeguarding the US image rather than denying Baron Cohen’s parodies. A number of commentators, however, emphasise the crudeness of Baron Cohen’s humour: it is characterised as primitive, cheap, and, hence, amateurish.

What I find disgusting about this movie is that most of the people in the movie seem not to know that they are being made fun of. What gives this guy the right to use people like this? Shame on you Cohen. Hope you made enough money on this piece of crap so you don't have to make any movies again. (riskyshotz)

This humor is for uneducated, ignorant, and unintelligent sick-minded perverts. How can anyone find humor in his constant sexual references to 12 year old girls and animals? How do you find that funny? Why do you find so much humor in normal biological processes such as sexual intercourse? What is so humorous about that? (folkmusic1991)

Apart from the strictly negative attitudes, one may also pinpoint a more moderate approach that reconciles supporters and critics of Baron Cohen’s satire. Exceptional though such a balanced stance may be, it simultaneously states that even though Borat can be humiliating or disgusting, he is still funny:

He just makes fun of poor foreign people, which is not fair at all. In England there are lots and lots of homeless people, not to mention about disabled, gays, pedophiles, and so on!! More than in any country in Europe. Anyway, the rest of the "movie" is funny. More or less. (sperantz7)

Responding to the criticism, which increased in 2008/2009 comments, supporters claim those who cannot understand Baron Cohen’s social commentary do not possess a normal (British) sense of humour:

Oh my god its not supposed to be the real kazakhstan! get a feckin sense of humor! its just funny bcos he's trying to make himself into a stereotypical kazakh or whatever it is. ok they arent all like that...THATS THE POINT! (SalfordRed89)

You don't seem to understand the parody at all... Sacha Cohen
said it was meant to mock people who would actually BELIEVE
that Kazakhstan is like this... So you're falling in the moron-trap.
Lol (godelike)

Such a diagnosis, which Miranda Campbell (2007, p. 55) has labelled as “translo-
cation of racism”, in turn triggers an explanation of the accurate way the satire must be un-
derstood: its primary aim is to mock Americans and Brits and has nothing to do with
Kazakhstan or Romania. Accordingly, laughing at oneself, which Borat allegedly does, is
assumed to be the benchmark of a good sense of humour. Besides, laughing at oneself legit-
imises the ridiculing of the US and UK as well as the exploitation of other nations as means
of national self-criticism. As Hoechsmann and Cucinelli (2007, pp. 96–97) have argued,
light-heartedness, having a laugh, and not taking things too seriously is, in general, the pre-
vailing ethos of YouTube.

In respect to Borat the movie, Bronwen Low and David Smith (2007, p. 33) assert that
differentiation between who gets the joke and who does not has some culturally disturbing
implications: “It departs from satire’s model of attacking the powerful, or rather it makes
the cognoscenti the powerful, excludes them from the joke, and has them laughing at the
perceived lumpen, both in the film and in the theatre seats”. Implicitly though, comments
that stress the take-it-easy attitude illuminate hegemonic relations: if you do not understand
our humour, you are backward. Consequently, intentions to protect the image of Kazakhs
or other groups are downplayed, because the story is not about them. Moreover, this atti-
tude perhaps will again be endorsed by Western viewers when the sequel My Brother, Bor-
at, directed by Kazakh director Erkin Rakishev, takes revenge on the original movie (Levy
2010).

To sum up, not only is Borat a complex character, but also the genre picked by Sacha
Baron Cohen. The ambiguous approach that oscillates between social commentary and self-
sufficient, below-the-belt humour certainly provokes the objectification of Borat as a generic
phenomenon. The commentators draw a rather sharp line between good and bad humour,
and accordingly, express diverging attitudes towards Baron Cohen’s documentary: it ac-
quires either the image of distinctive British humour or the image of deliberate humiliation.
Obviously, many commentators attempt to explain the real meaning of Baron Cohen’s satire
to reduce the humiliation image; nevertheless, they usually do it at the expense of hege-
monic relations. In line with the ends justifying the means, they implicitly stress that if you
cannot laugh at yourself, you are not civilised and democratic enough. While for some
people humour functions as inclusive discourse, for others it might become exclusive. Like-
wise, the objectification of documentary, perhaps, reveals diverse representations of na-
tionalism that constrain commentators’ discourse. To some extent those who accept Baron
Cohen’s comedic manner lean to support civic nationalism whereas critics exhibit ethnic na-
tionalism.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

In this paper I have deliberately avoided the expert’s views on the satiric qualities
and socio-cultural background of Borat. And I have also disregarded Baron Cohen’s talent
and personality. Instead I have focused on the reception of Borat in a consensual universe as
reflected by YouTube comments. Tracing the development of major themes, I have sought to
demonstrate the creation and transformation of Borat’s social representation in one segment
of public discourse. The analysis of qualitative data has revealed anchoring and objectifica-
tion as the formative processes of Borat’s representation.

On a more abstract level, YouTube comments about Borat reveal interaction between
different types of social representations. Borat’s representation can be characterised as emancipated representation, which, as Moscovici (1988, p. 221) argues, has “a certain degree of autonomy with respect to interacting segments of society. They [emancipated representations] have a complimentary function inasmuch as they result from exchanging and sharing a set of interpretations and symbols.” With respect to emancipated representation each subgroup of YouTube community creates its own version of Borat and shares it with others. However, the salience of national identity and discussions about the right satiric manner allude to hegemonic representation that is uniform and coercive by nature and prevails implicitly in all symbolic and affective practices (Moscovici, 1988, p. 221). Attempts to protect nationality or to argue for the right meaning of good satire demonstrate that the reception of Borat is led by rigid definitions of national identity (ethnic vs. civic) and humour (self-criticisms vs. tolerance). In other words, the very hegemonic representations rather than particular aesthetic attitudes to Borat are the most decisive things to be defended; therefore hegemonic representations as “a strict setting of the jokes”, to use t’Hart’s phrasing, turn Baron Cohen’s pranks into a political resource.

The objectification of Borat illuminates the constraints of popular culture, which fuels participatory culture. In particular these constraints may be observed in the consumption of socially sensitive and sophisticated humour as in the case of Baron Cohen. This impossibility of universal satiric discourse is reminiscent of the infamous Monty Python sketch about the funniest joke in the world, which is buried in the Berkshire countryside, “never to be told again”. The anchoring of Borat, in turn, shows that YouTube in particular and participatory culture in general are not just places where media convergence and collaborative knowledge can thrive, as Jenkins proposes, but they also constitute a consensual universe occupied by social representations of different collective identities. Reception of Borat on YouTube illustrates that along with new ways of engaging citizens in public discourse, participatory culture expands the space for cultural practices that protect and reinforce one’s nationality on a global scale. Participatory culture seems to be a new opportunity at least for some population segments (e.g. those with technological competencies) to reinforce the social representation of their nationality. As McCrone (2008, p. 319) aptly points out, nationalism is a particularly flexible ideology that has the capacity to mutate into many variants.

The impossibility of universal satirical discourse highlights the constraints of popular culture regarding civic engagement as well. Although social commentary that is based on ethnic humour motivates people to converse about national identity and their own country, the outcomes of such conversation might be somewhat ambiguous. Namely, the genesis of the social representation of Borat illuminates the differentiation of YouTubers in civilised and uncivilised groups according to their ability to comprehend a sophisticated social commentary. Hence, international popular culture attracts people to political topics, but it may also establish hegemonic relations across different cultures. Of course, Borat the character is a very extreme case; however, this case reminds us about the limitations of popular culture as entertainment as well as a resource for political citizenship.

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onymous reviewers for many essential comments, which expanded its theoretical perspective.

ENDNOTES

1 Before inventing Borat, Baron Cohen made several attempts in the 1990s at portraying similar characters whose origins shifted from Moldova to Albania.
2 Burgess and Green (2009, p. 82) have speculated that YouTube “is a website that is US-dominated demographically to an extent”.
3 All commentaries are left in their original transcription.
4 Chart 1 shows frequency by which categories Kazakhstan* and Kazakhstani* are mentioned in comments. Similar frequency measurement was applied to other nationalities that dominated YouTube comments.
5 The village is shown in the opening scene of the posted video as well as in the movie.
6 After the release of Bruno, Emil Brix, the Austrian ambassador to Britain, urged people to protest against the movie for its “cheap” gags about Adolf Hitler and Josef Fritzl. See: Leach 2009.
7 The presence of Russian and Albanian identities can also be observed in the comments; however, they are less salient and too fragmentary to be analyzed here.

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