'Uncivilized' Comedy and its Reception

Helena Popovic
University of Zagreb

Summary

This research sets out to explore the social reception of the television comedy *Da Ali G Show* - a text that raised controversy due to its politically incorrect discourse. It was carried out in two different socio-cultural settings: London/United Kingdom and Zagreb/Croatia. The results are based on eighteen interviews with these interpretive communities (Fish, 1980) built on shared preference for the show and the type of humour it promotes. There were obvious differences in the position the text itself had in these respective communities: While it was very popular in the UK, especially among young people, it had a marginal position the in Croatia, viewed by a small niche that considered themselves to be alternative to the Croatian mainstream. The decoding of the text showed profound differences: in the UK interpretive community mechanisms were found that enabled appreciation of the show while still remaining within a politically correct discourse. In the Croatian interpretive community, however, these mechanisms were absent, since there was no sense of violation of a norm if one engaged in a politically incorrect discourse. The findings suggest that the broader social context determined the position the text itself had in these respective interpretive communities, and was important in shaping the way it was decoded by the readers.

Keywords: television comedy; *Da Ali G Show*; civilized; political correctness; reception; interpretive community, United Kingdom, Croatia

Introduction

This research set out to explore the social reception of the television comedy series *Da Ali G Show* in two different socio-cultural contexts: London/United Kingdom and Zagreb/Croatia. Following reception theory's assumption that interpretation and the negotiation of meaning is always social, I attempted to locate how meaning is produced and what maps of meaning emerge in regards to this text. The social context within which maps of meaning are formed is important because it fosters some interpretive repertoires while rejecting others, and thus reveals what types of ideas are dominant in a specific socio-historical context.

In addition to the fact that all popular texts are useful for understanding everyday life and the construction of meaning, creation of identity and community in a particular culture, comedy as a genre reveals the boundaries of what can be said in public, as well as what counts as civilized and tasteful in contemporary society. This is particularly interesting since comedy and humour in general is an area in which tolerance of the blunt and the outspoken is more acceptable than in most spheres of life, revealing the nitty-gritty of social life – the acceptable and its transgression.

Even if the transgression of norms and values is expected in comedy, some texts occasionally bump into the limits of what is defined as appropriate utterance in public, which is why they raise controversy. Limits to humour are by no means anything new, some forms of censorship and self-censorship in comedic discourses are constant; but what is changeable – in a historical and cultural context – is the target and theme of scorn. Even if what might be viewed as sensitive themes provoke reaction and constantly balance on the border of (un)acceptable utterance, it seems that comedy, in the last two decades, has carried a more overt 'ruthlessness'. I used *Da Ali G Show* as a case in point: it stirred up debate on a global level. The overall discussion about the show in the extra-textual environment evolved around the same dualities: was it offensive, or did it give a brilliant social commentary?

The Text: *Da Ali G Show*

Da Ali G Show[1] – created by Sasha Baron Cohen – is a television comedy that originated from the United Kingdom. It was selected for analysis due to its global success amidst controversy raised by its provocative humour but also due to some personal favouritism on my part. Its communicative strategies make it intentionally polysemic, opening up the possibility of multiple modes of decoding. By using irony, parody and satire as communicative strategies, it has a capacity for ambiguity and, combined with a merciless rhetoric, and a biting, uncompromising tone, it provoked anger or discontent on the part of some viewers.

The extra-textual environment[2] tended to deal with the show predominantly through the expression of polarised views: either praising it as superb satire, or condemning it as offensive. Irrespective of how the text was decoded – as superb satire or as offensive – identity and power relations were always at the heart of every discussion. In the section below, I outline how I decoded the text, framed within the broader debate about political correctness, which is important for the way this research was structured. Needless to say, this decoding is only one possible way to understand it and, as the audience analysis will show, this text surely meant very different things to different people.

In *Da Ali G Show*, Cohen embodies three trickster characters who represent identities of the 'Other': the homosexual (Bruno), the low-class (underclass), black, hip-hop subculture (Ali G); and the Oriental (Borat). All three characters are fake journalists who either invite guests to the studio, or go out to report 'live' on specific stories. This cover enables Cohen to make people take part in the show, since their expectation is that they are

interacting with 'real' journalists. The humorous situations develop from their unpreparedness to be confronted with the characters that Cohen embodies, and the kinds of questions he asks. The programme includes discussions in a studio, as well as field-reporting with different kinds of people – from politicians and celebrities to 'ordinary' people and various groups pursuing different activities and interests.

From looking at the three alter egos and their characteristics, it cannot be claimed that the show displays a clear position. We might ask ourselves: Who is the target of its irony? Who/what is satirized? The marginal identity groups that his alter egos represent or the power structures he confronts them with, the ones that build and perpetuate stereotypes? His choice of collective identities represented by his characters is undoubtedly linked to left policies emerging in the 60s – identity politics, and the protection of minorities. However, the *way* he depicts the alter egos *can* be seen as perpetuation and confirmation of existing stereotypes. On the other hand, if one takes into consideration the binary structure of the show and the confrontation of supposed antipodes, then the focus moves from the three scripted characters to the unscripted reactions provoked by their appearance, which then reveals how exclusion and inclusion operates in contemporary Western societies.

In the television comedy viewed as a whole, Cohen constructs the show around identity issues, by taking the position of subaltern identities. Cohen is probing the question of political correctness. For instance, the character Ali G says:

> 'Respek' is important. But the sad thing is there is so little 'respek' left in the world, that if you look at the word behind me in the dictionary, you will find that it has been taken out (the word behind him is spelled 'respek' so naturally it is not in the dictionary). So if this show teaches you anything, it should teach you how to 'respek' everyone: animals, children, bitches, spazmos, mingers, lezzers, fatty boombahs, and even gaylords. So, to all you lot watching this, but mainly to the normal people, 'respek'! West Side.

The whole concept of political correctness is related to the requirement to respect minorities, or the 'Other' – collectivities that have, in the course of history, been suppressed in a world dominated by white, Anglo-Saxon protestant, heterosexual, males. This is an important element of the occidental civilization today – a result of the self-reflexive critical discourse that has emerged within it. It evokes the concept of 'civility' in a new way and in a new context. To be 'politically correct' is an important feature of 'being civilized' in contemporary societies, even while the term *per se* is a rare example of one which is simultaneously much disputed and yet much in use. It could be argued that political correctness is a permanent dimension of every society if it is defined as taboos that should not be uttered, or as positions/world views that are censured by political authority and legally prosecuted (such as National Socialism in Germany after World War II). However, I consider political correctness to be a new phenomenon; a specific form of self-censorship that has emerged as a result of pressure coming from a part of the upper strata of western

societies. It is a form of self-reflexive critique that has introduced sensitivity into language especially linked to less powerful, subaltern groups, some of which were constituted as new collectivities in the 60s and 70s. What formed the basis of this idea was the attempt to point towards deep inequalities and firm hierarchies in the West, embedded in language. With the recognition of these inequalities and an attempt to change them, it was necessary to change the conceptual tools in usage.

Thus, the term 'politically correct' is primarily related to language. David Macey defines it as the 'avoidance of the discriminatory and offensive language and behaviour associated with sexism and racism' (Macey 2001, 301) but it also refers to any type of discriminatory or offensive language oriented towards different identity groups.

Political correctness is usually comprehended in binary frames according to political position: the critique from the Right is – as US conservative Roger Kimball argues – oriented towards the liberal's effort 'to promote affirmative action and to nurture multicultural aspiration' and towards the spreading of an 'abstract moralist triumph over realism, benevolence over prudence, earnest humorlessness over patience'.[3] However, this polarization on the basis of political orientation simplifies it, and ignores the varieties of critique also coming from the Left. The critique coming from multiple directions including the Left is related to the belief that it prevents certain questions being articulated, which provoke uneasiness, a process that ends up in self-censorship. It is also seen by some as a hypocritical position, in which the inequalities are tackled on a superficial level, remaining on the level of language; while changes in attitude and behaviour – that would give hope for the overcoming of inequalities –are not necessarily encompassed. To only advocate changes in language ensures a comfortable position for the supporters of political correctness: on the one hand the insistence on politically correct language implies a political position that roots for equity, but on the other hand it leaves structural inequalities intact. This kind of critique of political correctness goes beyond Left or Right political orientations.

Contemporary western societies have, to a greater or lesser extent, introduced the awareness of what 'appropriate' language is, and this is reflected in the changes in power relations to a certain degree. However, this awareness is also often the subject of criticism because the attempt to accomplish equality in and through language re-invokes issues of freedom of expression, which, potentially, ends up in a hypocritical collective silence through which prejudices towards the 'Other' are present but not discussed and brought into the arena of public discussion.

Finally, even though political correctness as a term has often been subjugated to harsh criticism and referred to as negative and nonsensical, it is still frequently referred to in the context of dismissing expressions that are considered to be harmful, insensitive, uncivilized etc. Since the expression 'political correctness' *per se* has a pejorative note, there have been attempts to replace it with expressions such as 'inclusive language' or simply 'civility'; however, 'political correctness' as an expression is still more widely used. Thus, it can be argued that political correctness is one dimension of being civilised today; it is incorporated into the old matrix of being civilized, well behaved, polite, mannerly, tasteful. Due to the fact

that *Da Ali G Show* plays with this dimension of being civilized, it tends to raise controversy – it provokes discontent on part of some viewers, while others applaud its existence.

Sketching out the context: Croatia and the United Kingdom

The success of particular comedies is hard to anticipate because of their complexity. One's own language and its conceptual organization, as well as the context within which a comedy appears and to which it refers, contributes to our understanding of it. Locally produced programmes are generally, regardless of their particular kind, likely to be more popular, while other genres with themes such as violence and crime or pornography travel more successfully into other cultures. Interestingly, there are texts within various genres that transgress locality and successfully migrate on a global level where they manage to speak to the experience of diverse social groups from very different cultural backgrounds, even though their reception and appropriation on a local level can be completely different from case to case (this is visible in the early study conducted on *Dallas* by Liebes and Katz, 1990). In contrast to these, comedy is more specific in being 'produced from the matter of dominant cultural assumptions and commonplaces' (Stott 2005, 8), and relying on implicit understandings of cultural codes. For this reason it is more likely to be successful if locally produced. This 'success' may not necessarily imply laughter or amusement (this is much more complex) but it does imply that the communication codes are familiar and shared.

One way to delimit the 'local' or the socio-cultural context is the nation-state. In this respect I find Benedict Anderson's (1983) vision of a nation as an 'imagined community' useful because he conceptualizes it as a social construct in which the members of the community 'imagine' their belonging to the community through a unified field of communication, a standardized language that represents the language of authority, and a sense of a commonly shared and experienced social world. This understanding of a community has been eroded by changes in media technology that enable 'global cultural flows' (Appadurai 1990) and other globalising unifiers that have diminished the role of the nation-state, while supra-national and sub-national formations have gained more attention. Even if this erosion has triggered debates as to whether it is possible for the nation and its political organization – the state – to remain at the centre of research, they are here treated as relevant because of the specificities of the genre that I am considering: comedy and humour. Funny stories, jokes about other nationalities (usually the 'neighbouring other' (Irish and British, Norwegians and Swedish, Bosnians and Croats etc.) are commonplace in defining ourselves in relation to others, and for the creation of a sense of identity. Language is important for an understanding of the subtleties of humour. In addition, themes and topics of ridicule, satire, jokes and the like are often linked to public persons, national politics, and other issues of public concern that require 'inside' information in order to be understood, let alone appreciated as a successful joke.

The two socio-cultural contexts I am focusing on are Croatia and the UK, two European nations which are quite different in terms of history, social and political organization, economic strength, and structural position in the world order: the UK being constructed as a

part of the West, and Croatia being seen as a part of the East. The division of the world in terms of power relations on a global scale has been pushed forward in numerous theories with different approaches, among them: Immanuel Wallerstein's (1986) economic world-system theory of the interrelated Core, Semi-periphery (among other states also Eastern Europe), and the Periphery; Edward Said's (1978) culturalist approach to the power relations between the Occident and the Orient; Samuel Huntington's (1997) culturally exclusive theory of the 'clash of civilizations' based on cultural specificities, most notably religion; Norbert Elias's (1994) sociological approach to the civilizing process by which the West 'civilized' other parts of the world through colonization processes which in turn led to the development of the western self-awareness and assumption of supremacy relating to behaviour, science and art. Even though 'civilization' as a concept has been heavily criticized in post-colonial theories as a 'colonizing discourse', and the world order and power relations have changed in the last few decades, the West (the main focus here is on West Europe and the USA) still dominates discourses on what is 'civilized' and what is not. The common denominators that perpetuate the notion of a common civilization of the West as a large-scale cultural formation normatively include democracy as a political system, liberal market economy, commitment to human rights, multiculturalism, freedom of speech, definitions of deviance and crime etc. Even though this implies only looking at commonalities while ignoring the vast differences that are present within this cultural formation, it is useful for the purpose of outlining the power relations between the West (of which the UK forms a part), and the East (which would include ex-socialist states such as Croatia). The East is hence narrowed down to the former Eastern bloc, or the region that implemented socialism as a political system during the Cold War. Even though this political system formally collapsed in 1989, and despite the fact that a considerable part of the Eastern bloc embraced the values of the West (manifested in the integration processes of the European Union), the division between East as 'followers' and West as 'leaders' still serves as a platform of distinction.

Some of the differences between the East and West that are important for this study – because they sketch out the context within which cultural texts are encoded and decoded (Hall, 1980) – include the assumption that the West is built upon a long tradition of freedom of speech, which implies that the state should not engage in any form of censorship. The role of the state is, in this sense, smaller in western democracies, not only as a result of the bygone Cold War split, in which the fear of statism (or étatism) present in the eastern bloc, was constant, but also because of the domination of free market ideology, in which the limitation of individual action is condemned, especially if such limitation comes from the state. Instead of 'external' forces determining our actions, there is a positive emphasis on self-regulation and self-reflexive actions that lie in the core of individualism. One important form of self-censorship emerged with the political correctness debate.

In sharp contrast to this, post-socialist states have a tradition of state regulation, welfare, collectivism, but also forms of state censorship, something which has, in contemporary societies, been blended with new values of liberal democracy and the free

market that were embraced after the fall of the Wall. This result in frequent confusion on what is acceptable and desirable and what is not, especially coming from the political establishment. In former Yugoslavia, "hostile propaganda" was regulated by the Yugoslav Criminal Code, specifically by Article 133 penalizing the so-called "verbal delict". At the time, forms of critique of the regime were prosecuted, something that is still traceable in contemporary Croatia: criticism of the establishment or of powerful social groups – whether in 'serious' or satirical form – can still have repercussions, even though the legal framework has changed and ensures broad freedoms. [4]

These differences and inequalities in terms of power-relations between these large-scale cultural formations (West, East), and nation-states that form a part of them (UK, Croatia) are important because they provide the broad context within which the media text in focus here was decoded.

Audiences as interpretive communities

Throughout the development of media theory, the audience has been conceptualised in a variety of ways: as masses, groups, market niches, according to socio-demographic variables including age, gender, ethnicity, class, etc. There has been a recent move away from the tradition of viewing audiences in terms of sociological variables, instead, the new trend is to conceptualise according to similar interpretive frameworks and consumption practices. In this respect, the notion of 'interpretive community' (Fish 1980) contributed to an important shift in how we think about audiences, because they are analysed as 'discourses' rather than in terms of traditional socio-economic categories (Barbatsis 2005: 286).

Stanley Fish (1980) defines interpretive community as groups of people whose interpretative practices are guided by shared cultural codes. Fish points out that the process of meaning-making is primarily a social act, in which interpretation is constantly negotiated and in which the reader 'authors' the text. Fish's idea of interpretive communities brings the reader into the spotlight, claiming that interpretation will depend on interpretive strategies that circulate within the reader's interpretive community – a community whose members can have different structural positions.

Fish's concept has since been widely used. It was introduced into empirical reception studies by Janice Radway in her research on romance readers. Radway points out that, even though she used Fish's concept, his notion of it was not sufficient to explain 'the nature of the connection between social location and the complex process of interpretation' (Radway 1987: 8). Radway started with an interest in the way romance novels were interpreted but then realized that the actual 'event of reading' was much more telling. As she claims, she became interested in 'the way romance reading as a form of behaviour operated as a complex intervention in the ongoing social life of actual social subjects' (Radway 1987: 7). According to Radway, the specific cultural competences that are acquired as a consequence of social location are constitutive for an interpretive community.

Fish's introduction of the concept and Radway's later application of it yielded very different uses and explanations of what an 'interpretive community' is. Kim Christian

Schrøder (1994) criticizes this (ab)use and attempts to clarify the concept. He identifies two different ways it has been used in reception research: the interpretive community understood as an interactional social network, and the interpretive community understood as a discursive formation. Schrøder points out that both approaches presume that interpretation competences originate in the complexity of everyday life, so that the media are thereby pushed to the margins (Schrøder, 1994) In his view, the media are constitutive for interpretive communities, they 'may correspond to natural sociostructural communities such as the family, but it is their media use alone which defines them as an interpretive community' (Schroeder, 1994: 344).

In his study on Tolkien fans and their readings in the 60s, Martin Barker (2006) proposes 'the notion of a projected community – that people may conceive of a set of shared values, even of sorts of people with whom they would want to form a kind of community, but so far only in their heads, or partially, or fragmentarily' (Barker, 2006: 90). It is about imagining others with a 'common imaginative utopia' (Barker, 2006:99). From this perspective the *Zeitgeist* is important within which a media text is read – it enables an imagination of other readers that feels close not only due to their media preferences but also in terms of shared social experiences and occurrences.

The broad reach of this concept is due to the fact that it connotes both a sense of belonging and shared social interaction (community), as well as meaning-making and explanation strategies (interpretation). In this research, the community was constructed on a macro-level that included not only the state (Croatia and UK) that implies a form of 'membership' (which can, of course, be involuntary), and an identifiable formal organization, but also, what is more important, a shared socio-cultural context including language, citizenship, rules of conduct and dominant values. This macro-level was used both to indicate a sense of belonging (adherence to a community) as well as to explain the interpretation strategies of the media text. Surely, as Schrøder (1994) points out, we are all members of multiple communities; however the complexity of social life is always reduced in any theoretical or empirical endeavour. Thus, the focus was placed on the socio-cultural context where the constructs of 'us' and 'them' operates as distinguishing factors in a dynamic intercultural environment.

On a micro-level the interpretive community was identified through shared preference for the media text and the type of humour it promoted, however the way the participants interpreted some features of the text was different *within* the communities as well as *between* them. Thus, it was not the interpretation of the text *per se* that allowed for a construction of a community with shared interpretive strategies, but rather the way it was embedded in a wider social context. That was the point at which the shared repertoires of the participants became most visible: they engaged in similar discourses that went way beyond the text. This, I hope, is exemplified in the following sections.

Methodology

The audience was conceptualized as an interpretive community, and I used an expression of commitment to *Da Ali G Show* as my basis for identifying it. Specifically, the research included viewers who claimed that they used to watch this television comedy, and who also expressed a positive attitude towards the show and the type of humor it presented. This double criterion was important due to the fact that the text in question raised controversies and generated polarized positions regarding the acceptability of its provocative, politically incorrect humor. However, this principle which guided the selection process could not predict how this text would be appropriated in the respective socio-cultural settings, and the degree to which interpretative strategies guided by shared cultural codes would be identified that would demonstrate the applicability of the concept of interpretive community.

My research was conducted in two separate settings in order to bring into view any shared cultural codes which would suggest the existence of distinct interpretive communities in the two national socio-cultural contexts. It was therefore comparative in perspective, aiming at disclosing any similarities and differences in the meaning-making process in the two settings: the UK (where the text originated), and Croatia (into which the text had been imported). Even though these two countries are quite diverse, as previously mentioned, it was interesting to compare because one of the motifs in the show dealt with power relations between the 'uncivilized East' and the 'civilized West', which could be linked back to different modes of reception in the respective settings.

Because of my interest in audience discourses, I chose interviewing as a method to gather data. The interviews were conducted individually because I wanted the participants to discuss the topic in their own terms and drawing on their own linguistic repertoires, but unhampered by others (as can often be a problem with focus group interviews). Participants were selected using a snow-balling method, which sought out (as mentioned above) people who used to regularly watch the show and expressed a positive attitude towards the type of humor it offered. In this sense, the selection provided a one-sided view, since the arguments of other (opposing) discourses were ignored. Eighteen interviews were carried out in 2009-2010, nine in London, UK, and nine in Zagreb, Croatia. Even though the sample was small, I hope it is sufficient to provide a foundation from which it would be possible to build a more comprehensive study. The interviews lasted approximately 30 minutes and were audiotaped.

The interviews were semi-structured and the interview guide included the following topics:

- watching practices (the context of watching the show);
- decoding of the text (likes and dislikes; communicative strategies: ambiguous or not; authorial intention as perceived by the interviewees);
- broader social reception of the text (in relation to the controversy it aroused);

- debates about freedom of speech and the limits of humor;
- discursive construction of the audience (as a projection technique);
- fandom and fan practices.[5]

These also provided the main categories in subsequent grouping of the materials gathered from the transcripts. Two of the topics will be outlined in this paper: the discursive construction of the audience of the show; and the modes of decoding of the text.

Even though the primary topic of the interviews was the television show featuring the three characters (Ali G, Bruno and Borat), discussion often moved into a wider consideration of Cohen's comedy in general, due to the fact that his movies were based on the television characters and that he often appeared in the media as one of his characters, eroding the borders of 'real' versus 'fictional'.

Some of the methodological problems that arose from situating the research in the two socio-cultural settings were linked to the differences in my own ability to master the nuances that emerged during the interviews in London, in a 'foreign' cultural context where I occupied the position of an outsider – compared to Zagreb, Croatia which, as my country of origin, enabled me to have more of an 'insider's' perspective. This had repercussions for the way the interviews were conducted, particularly on my ability to lead the semi-structured interviews in which topics are supposed to arise naturally, with digressions (where they occurred) likely to be of use (Bertrand and Hughes 2005). In addition, the focus on discursive strategies in my research makes language extremely important, with the implications of the way ideas are expressed crucial to later interpretations. I consider this to be the weakest part of the research.

Discursive constructions of the audience

Based on the interviews it is evident that *Da Ali G Show* was very popular in the UK, and was watched as a matter of course, especially among young people interested in keeping up with the latest hip thing. The Croatian context was quite different, the television show was marginalized; not many people noticed or watched it, and those who did had the perception that it would not be accepted or understood by the majority. The television show had an alternative, marginalized status.

In our conversations, participants discursively constructed the audiences of the show, and thus indirectly positioned the text as a cultural form carrying specific characteristics that 'speak' to a specific segment of the population. For the UK-based participants, age was, without exception, discriminatory in this respect. They claimed that the show was for young people, teenagers to thirty-somethings. It was often claimed that the youth population have a shared sensibility towards other popular culture references and that these differ from generation to generation; i.e. it is the references to music, videos, movies etc. that brings a generation together. It was emphasised that the older generations were different and would not understand the reference points.

> **Rose**[6]: Most people I knew was 18 to 40 something, I didn't know, kind of, older people, I mean, older people of my acquaintance tended to have a different sense of humour and enjoyed a different kind of comedy … I mean obviously they probably wanted to reach an audience as big as possible but it seems to fit the younger demographic.

> **Sophia**: …mainly teenagers to mid-thirties maybe…Yeah I think the MTV kind of audience.

Besides age, another socio-demographic variable that frequently emerged was that it was more a 'male thing', related to vulgarity and disgusting scenes, childish, school-boy type humour, car references and the 'pumping music'. The construction of the show as a 'male thing' was also explained by the fact that Cohen was male, but also that this type of programme had a 'cultish' cling to it, which was seen as a gender thing:

> **Henrietta**: It might be more male than female (...) There seems to be a different way in which men and women relate to popular culture. But again it is a generalisation, but the kind of cultish association of these shows (...) The cultish attachment particularly to comedy shows that is more of a kind of male personal identification. I am not quite sure... [It] brings me back to music, knowing it in detail, being attached to collecting, all that is a little bit more male in society.

Class divisions were not agreed upon. Some participants claimed it was for the middle classes, and connected this to the identity of the author, others that it was for lower classes, while others again said that class divisions were not applicable to this television show, because television was a medium of the masses and the show was 'Something that is so clearly young and popular. You know, all young people watched it.' (Sophia)

The issue of nationality also came up, in that the show and the type of humour it promoted was viewed as specific to English culture. For example:

> **James**: I always thought there was something quite peculiarly English about that kind of humour. It is just the awkwardness of it… the fact that there is no kind of real sort of slick jokes, it is just…what is funny is just the awkwardness, the discomfort that you can feel, you know, in the interview situation and sometimes even within the audience. I was amazed that it had such a wide appeal.

Apart from socio-demographic characteristics such as gender, age, class and nationality interviewees also made reference to personal traits, where again Cohen's characteristics were related to the audience that might watch the show, i.e. that they were likely to be

skilful, clever and intelligent. The audience of this type of comedy was seen to be one that had knowledge about specific topics, and competences to 'read between the lines' which enabled it to find meaning in his comedy. It was seen as a text that required an intellectual inclination and an interest in political issues.

Overall, the analysis of the interviews showed that the UK-based interviewees worked with the traditional socio-economic categories of age, gender and class, when identifying the show's audience. Age was the most important feature. However, the description of the audience as they see it was mostly measured against the socio-demographics of the comedian – young, male, middle class.

The construction of the viewing audience in Croatia was somewhat different, even though one similarity between the Croatian and the UK-based participants was obvious: that age was an important variable in constructing the audience of the show. Similarly to the UK, the show was seen as being for the younger generation since the older generation might not be able to understand this type of humour or enjoy it. However for the Croatian-based interviewees, the idea of youth was also linked to the idea of an English-speaking population, one that is therefore in contact with the Anglo-Saxon culture', and also 'modern' people who watch MTV and are used to new media usage - something viewed as belonging only to a small portion of the population in Croatia. Differently from the UK-based participants, in Croatia the audience was thought of as a small niche that was more progressive, a part of the population alternative to the 'mainstream', and this is why interviewees stated that the show was not suited to the broader viewing population. For example, Drzislav argues the following:

> I don't think this is watched by the average person. Perhaps an average person would go to the cinema because they saw the ads, so they go to watch it, but I don't think that this type of humour is for the majority of people.

The audience also was seen to include people who are not easily influenced by predominant values in society, but are able to critically engage in social matters, being rebellious and against conventions:

> **Karlo**: I think it is a diverse audience. From my perspective the only thing that linked them was the joint… Meaning, a crowd that is not burdened by… aaa, norms… people who don't care about [conventions] and are open minded.

This minority was viewed as open-minded, having a more liberal world view (as opposed to the UK-based interviewees who did not relate the show to a particular political orientation). It was repeatedly stated that the show was not for conservative people, as here:

> **Dmitar**: People who are not church goers and are not burdened with religious beliefs and national issues. It is not for conservative people, older people and

conservatives, influenced by the church and the current political establishment.

The participants in both settings constructed the audience in accordance with the way they situated themselves as readers in the wider context. The UK-based interviewees mostly related the show to socio-demographics, of which age was the most important one, followed by gender (more male) and class (mostly middle class). It was basically measured in terms of their own position, and linked to Cohen and his place in the social structure – a young, middle class, white male. The Croatian-based interviewees by contrast defined the audience as a small niche, a minority (of which they too formed a part), constructed through specific traits that were seen as the opposite of the Croatian mainstream: to be urban, English-speaking, modern, liberal (meaning not burdened with issues of nationality and religion), unconventional, open-minded, 'thinking with one's own head', knowing etc.

Modes of decoding: Ambiguous or Not?

As previously mentioned, Cohen embodied three characters who represent identities of the 'Other'. As fake journalists, they either invited guests to the studio, or went out to report 'live'. Guests and topics were carefully chosen, and the part played out by any of the three characters was scripted, at least to a certain extent. The unscripted part occurred because the other protagonists in the show were not aware that they were dealing with a fake character/journalist, so Cohen needed to improvise depending on their reactions. The target groups he invited or visited as a 'journalist' were diverse – public figures (such as politicians, economists, scientists etc.), celebrities, activists, representatives of various firms, civil society associations etc. The choice of collocutors was made precisely on the basis of difference, the opposition to whatever he represented: low class-upper class, uneducated-educated, vulgar-sophisticated, uncivilized-civilized, East-West, distasteful-tasteful, illegal-legal, unconventional-conventional… The Janus-faced game he played with his characters and collocutors (potentially) created ambiguity, which is why the target of his comedy could be differently defined by different readers.

Thus, the decoding of the show was assessed with a specific focus on its communicative strategies (irony, parody) which created this ambiguity – something that lay at the heart of the show's controversy. The prevalent view that dominated within the UK-based group was that Cohen's show was unambiguous, in the sense that, even though he impersonated and stereotyped different subaltern identities, the joke was on the people he dragged into his show:

> **Rose**: I think they should, kind of, read between the lines and see, that he really isn't, as far as I can tell, he is not homophobic, he is not racist he is not any of these things it is not what he is trying to do… He is not trying to poke fun at them, *he is trying to poke fun at the people who view these groups in a certain way…*

> **Anne:** I don't think anything he did was actually offensive, people would find it offensive, but I don't think he meant it like that, *he just wanted to point… to make all the people look stupid, [and] what they were doing, rather than make himself look stupid.*

As different from the interviewees who directed their attention towards the collocutors who were dragged into the show, others pointed at its ambiguity, in the sense that the characters too could be viewed as the target of his comedy, however the majority thought of this ambiguity as a useful way of deconstructing firm categories and forms of censorship and making people think about injustice, or simply as a way of making people more relaxed about themselves.

In a case when the ambiguity was perceived as potentially offensive it was argued that it was questionable who the target of the comedy was: people in power or powerless minorities. This was especially seen as problematic having in mind the identity – especially socio-economic background – of the author. The targets should not be minorities or people that are below the comedians' socio-economic status.

> **Sophia:** It definitely opens up questions… But maybe it wasn't clear enough, what his aim was… He expose people that he interview in a funny way and the way they did it all by themselves that is acceptable to me…Especially when it involved maybe high status people in power, but sometimes he, kind of, comments on minority groups that are not in power and that I have some issues with. (…) Even though I don't know what background he has, Jewish or whatever, but he was very much from a privilege background, had a high level of education and I think that making fun of groups that are of much lower socio-economic background wasn't that cool.

In a general sense, most of the interviewees moved discursively within issues of political correctness, stereotypes, inclusiveness and exclusiveness, minorities, representation etc. It was also visible that – regardless of the position one held with respect to the show's ambiguity – the interplay between what Cohen represented with his character and the collocutors he confronted, was recognized and guided the evaluation of the show: as potentially offensive or good satirical comedy.

The Croatian-based interviewees had quite different decoding strategies. It was not easy to assess the issue of ambiguity in the Croatian interviews, because there was no sense of the violation of a norm if one made fun of the characters Cohen represented. It was not seen as a victimization of the powerless – scorning gays, Eastern Europeans or Blacks (as well as other identity groups) was not seen as particularly problematic, which is why there was not, as my interviewees decoded this show, a clear separation between the impersonated characters and people's reactions to them. However, more attention was implicitly paid to

the reactions of the people he dragged into his show. As Tereza argued:

> He is exposing insane and a-logical things that people preach with huge
> passion… As the case with animal rights and protection, I mean, I am an
> advocate of such rights, but I am awfully irritated when people goes to the
> extreme…

The idea that it might be offensive to some groups was discarded, and in the cases when the idea that there might be 'victims' of Cohen's humour did come up, it was mainly related to those people who turned up in the show/movie without knowing what was at stake. This sense of imposture was pointed out in several cases, while the group identities and their potential 'victimization' were not seen as problematic at all. Cohen scorned politicians, the aristocracy, overnight celebrities, stars, reality shows, Jews, Kazakhs, British, human hypocrisy etc.

The idea that he ridiculed everyone was regarded as positive, and the identities that he impersonated with his character were viewed as a successful critique of 'reality' in which the raw, superficial and backward on the one hand, and the uptight, starchy, upper class on the other, were both viewed as negative.

> **Karlo**: Look, the man is black, he is black under quotation – from the slang to the
> manners and gesturing, movements of hands, body and everything – he is black!
> (…) In a way, he scorned black stereotypes. Black stereotypes in music videos is
> that they have tits and ass, fancy cars, gold and [the type of communication],
> you know, 'mother fucker' stuff… He [also]scorned the characters that came to
> his studio, the 'serious' guys, [with] good manners (…) class and norms, social
> norms… he scorned that side as well...according to my view, he wanted to show
> the two extremes – one is the tits-and-ass kind of thing and the other is the
> 'stuck-up' [the starchy].

To make fun of the identities he impersonated with his character was not viewed as problematic. Borat was viewed as an Eastern European, someone similar to a specific type of Croat, and this was considered to be legitimate because:

> **Dmitar**: Everybody thinks of themselves as if they are something. [We] In
> Croatia as well. We want to be great, but we are nothing. (...) And he comes
> across as such, as a petty guy from Kazakhstan to America where they think of
> themselves as the 'world police', that everything they have is the best, that
> other things suck, and it is there that he drags them onto thin ice. It is here that
> he shows how stupid they are... There is no difference between us and them, we
> all have our East. Look, we are eastern for the Germans, Bosnia is our east,
> Slovenia talks about southerners, the Serbs thinks of Bulgaria and Romania as

gypsies, you know, we all have our East...

The scorning of the identities he represented was also viewed as justifiable with the character Bruno. The way homosexuality was talked about revealed a considerable amount of homophobia:

> **Domagoj**: [When he played Bruno] he pointed at the gay lobby, because, aaa… there is a bit to much of that nowadays, you know... Nowadays they say that it is normal, 'it is normal'! Realistically speaking, I don't think it is normal, you know…He is mostly making fun of the gay lobby, because all of that is the gay lobby, the fashion shows, stylists…

A proportion of the Croatian-based interviewees decoded the show as mainly scorning the people that Cohen confronted with his character, but there were no attempts to remain politically correct by 'protecting' the identities he represented. The show was decoded as scorning universal human traits, ridiculing human flaws, 'criticizing human stupidity which is endless' (Marija) – without getting into the problem of any specific minority group or other power related divisions in society.

The show was also seen as justifiably targeting conservative people, not only in the traditional political sense of 'conservative', but also people who are dogmatic in their views, or radical in their approaches (vegetarians, animal rights protections, nationalists etc.). In addition, it scorns groups who are in a sense exclusive, extremely sensitive, and are pussyfooted around by others (examples were given like the upper class, gays, Jews etc.). Thus, Cohen's humour was seen as targeting groups that considered themselves and their attitudes to be the most important thing. Because everyone is a target, Cohen is not scorning a particular position or worldview, but rather the intensity of keeping your own position in the centre of the universe whatever that is. It was also viewed as a critique of societies and their weak spots, such as conventions and tradition in Britain, and American provinciality and conservatism.

My analysis of the interviews conducted in Croatia revealed that the whole issue of ambiguity created by the characters he represented and by the people he confronted was simply bypassed. The Croatian-based participants either implicitly focused on the people he confronted (without paying attention to its ambiguous strategies, and therefore potential offensiveness), or they explicitly emphasized that he scorned everybody and pointed at both the characters and the people they confronted as legitimate targets for the jokes.[7]

Thus, the differences between the UK- and Croatian-based participants in decoding the show were profound. In the UK, the interviewees talked about exposing prejudices towards minorities, and the positive aspect of pushing people to discuss things as a way to challenge intolerance. Because of the felt need of the majority to remain politically correct, it was important to keep the focus on the reactions of the collocutors towards the characters representing the 'Other'. Even in the case when the ambiguity was recognised and both

sides were held in focus, the mere recognition of the interplay between these two pools indicated a need to remain within a politically correct discourse.

On the other side, the majority of the Croatian-based participants did not try to divide the characters from the people that they confronted. They primarily saw the show as scorning human weaknesses in general – especially extremist positions, provinciality, conservatives, stupidity, narrow-mindedness (all of which was pointed out as characterizing the mainstream in Croatia). The show was decoded as making fun of everyone regardless of the structural position of particular groups or identities. And even though some of the interviewees focused more on the people confronted by the characters, they did not explicitly raise the issue of ambiguity of the show. In addition, the interviewees that saw the show as mocking everyone also showed prejudices towards the characters that Cohen represented. The only exception in viewing the show as ambiguous was Tereza, who used a discourse similar to the one displayed by the UK-based participants; but instead of defining powerless groups through race, sexual orientation, gender etc, she was more concerned about groups that were marginalized, disabled, and lived on the fringes of society (for instance, the extremely poor, mentally ill, alcoholics, prostitutes).

Overall, while the polysemy of the text is confirmed by looking at the various interpretations of the show that occurred *within* the two settings, the comparison *between* them shows profound differences, particularly in respect to the decoding strategies applied. Thus it can reasonably be argued that the concept of interpretive community is indeed applicable, at least in regards to the way these two interpretive communities developed different strategies for making sense of the text, strategies which are framed within the broad political correctness debate. This is developed further in the following section in which I deal with the meta-discourse that the participants engaged in.

The meta-discourse

The discourses which the interviewees deployed when talking about the show were quite different between the Croatian- and the UK-based interviewees. The Croatian interpretive community more frequently engaged in a discourse that put the Croatian nation at its centre. This served as a reference point in the meaning-making process. The fact that Cohen was from the UK made his critique so much more appealing, because it was seen as a critique coming from the inside, as a self-reflection of the West and its weak points. Tereza for instance argued as follows:

> I think his success is based on the fact that it is perceived in the context of all our critiques of global American culture **and then you have someone from that culture that makes fun of it completely.** Meaning, we are stupid, uneducated, racist, apolitical, we have totally wrong values and we are fighting against wrong things, and he criticizes the American, Anglo-Saxon globalised value system – as someone who is from there, of course people found that appealing.

The British were depicted as conceited, distant, extremely polite, conservative and traditional, but also as having a great sense of humour. Measured against the USA, Britain attains a superior position on grounds of its traditions, while American dominance is questioned, because Americans lack the requisite qualities.

> **Katarina**: The British have a history; they really pass down their etiquette from generation to generation. Their bourgeoisie is not a fake one because they have a long tradition (…) the Americans [on the other hand], they don't have that, they are trying to represent themselves as something they aren't (…) That's why he [Cohen] moved from England to America [with his show], the English are able to laugh at themselves, and you cannot mock them in the same way you can mock [Americans], that's my opinion at least.

A considerable amount of anti-Americanism was noticeable: America was depicted as being inflexible and backward (by Marija, Karlo, and Ignjat); primitive, stupid (Katarina); musty (Domagoj), and provincial (Matija).

> **Katarina**: Borat exposes the American society, their primitivism, a high percentage of Americans is like that... I haven't been to America, but the way I experience them, and the way he depicted them is that there is a huge percentage of horribly primitive people... a small part is somewhat urban - which is not to say that if you aren't urban that you are primitive - but most of them are, somehow, empty-headed, they don't think with their own head, they are not educated and they are not interested in anything.

The dominance of the American culture worldwide was perceived negatively, and popular culture – especially the film industry – was seen as a propaganda tool to sustain that dominance (Dmitar). Cohen's show was seen as a critique of the USA because of the way he twisted the false picture that the Americans wanted to send out to the rest of the world

> **Dmitar**: He shows what things are really like, you know… meaning that Americans are, I don't know, smug, egoistic, imperious, that they are the only existing people in the world, along with all the American movies. They are saving the world in every movie... Now it is the Islamist, for a while it was the Balkan, Serbian terrorists (…) All these movies... and they are always the ones saving the world...

The West, more specifically the USA and to a lesser extent United Kingdom, were not the only criticized nations. The interviewees were also very critical towards the East, and specifically towards Croatia. The unity of the East was visible in the way Kazakhstan and

Croatia were interlinked – Croatia was seen as a country that could have been used instead of Kazakhstan:

> **Ignjat**: Perhaps, if Croatia was involved instead of Kazakhstan, a lot of people here would, - especially since we are so conservative, a conservative state and conservative people - I am sure millions of associations would rise when he would scorn [Croatia]...

Croatia was talked about as a 'wannabe important state', pretentious, conservative, hypocritical and provincial:

> **Marija**: We [Croatians] are immeasurably conservative - conservative, hypocritical, you know... you can do all kind of horrible things but [we] do it quietly. We are extremely conservative…

> **Matija**: The topics he uses in his show are, in some way, near to us here in Croatia, since we are faced with provinciality and conservatism at every corner...

Furthermore, Jews were seen as too sensitive and as an ethnic group who always had to be exempted from criticism because of historical circumstances:

> **Katarina**: They are really extremely sensitive, much more sensitive than any other victims of anything else... black people who also suffered, historically speaking...

> **Ignjat***: Self-pity is the worst thing ... I mean, Jews suffered a lot in WW2, but they cannot always, on account of that, demand extra points for the next hundred years...

In contrast to the Croatian interpretive community, which had a quite openly critical view both of its own nation as well as of other nations, ethnicities and identity groups, the UK interpretive community was much more restrained in its utterances.

The focus on nationalities and the stereotyping of national characteristics were not present in the same way, nor did the nation state discourse appear. Or, when it did, it was only in relation to the USA – and without a negative attitude towards Americans, perhaps due to the fact that Cohen made a good part of his show there. On the few occasions Kazakhstan was mentioned, it was to say that nobody had ever heard of the country. In this respect, the show was seen as useful in raising awareness of its existence (even though the representation of the country, except for the signifier, was totally inaccurate).

> **George:** Honestly, most people don't know where Kazakhstan is, he could have used any country in that direction and no one would be any wiser really in the West, it wasn't until the film came out I learned that Kazakhstan is the size of western Europe, I didn't know that before, I didn't know it is mineral rich …

The lack of knowledge about Kazakhstan was connected to a lack of reference points: people didn't have anything to compare the representation of Kazakhstan with, which made the show/movie the first source of information, and since it was a negative depiction, the consequences were potentially damaging:

> **Sophia:** When they first said that Kazakhstan was up in arms about what Ali G was saying about their country I first thought: 'Oh, come on it is only a joke! Anyone can say anything about a country; it is not the end of the world, especially one person. Rise above it and laugh about it!' (...) I don't know why I am not offended about a whole country especially if they're feeling offended… I mean… I think maybe as well because I have never heard of Kazakhstan before. I didn't know whether it was really a place or... [and] it only worked because no one had ever heard of it, so they could imagine that maybe people from there did all that … there was nothing established, and he just established that as, you know, a stereotype for that country. (…)

Otherwise the discussions mostly triggered debates about the show and the specificities of English humour that was attached to it, especially in the light of its global success, which came as a surprise because of its typically English characteristics, especially linked to the Ali G character. The English were viewed as having a specific, awkward sense of humour – a claim made by Melvin, Stephen, and James:

> **Melvin**: That is a very English humour [in the sense that] the English are very good at laughing at themselves…

Overall, while the UK interpretive community engaged in the discourses that evolved around the opposition between the powerless minority and the powerful majority, the 'Other' and the 'Same', reflecting the heated social issues in the UK linked to multiculturalism, minorities, tolerance and the problem of ridiculing groups which attempt to gain positive representation – minorities, most notably Black, but also gay, women etc., the Croatian interpretive community engaged in a discourse of power relations between nations and supranational formations (What is our position compared to the West? How do we view other nation-states?).

If we take a general look at these two interpretive communities consisting of audiences both with preferences for politically incorrect humour, it is interesting to notice how two such different discourses have evolved within the respective cultural settings. The UK

interpretive community engaged in a pretty clear-cut politically correct discourse during the interviews – and this applied to all those interviewed. A complete opposite, politically incorrect or 'uncivilized' discourse appeared within the Croatian interpretive community. Negative judgements were openly uttered without a self-censoring impulse that would communicate an awareness that it is no longer 'desirable' or even 'allowed' to utter an open negative statement regarding a specific group (even if you do hold a negative opinion). They openly expressed negative attitudes towards gays, Jews, Americans, human kind in general, Blacks, the East, and of course also Croatians …

Conclusion

My audience research shows that the broader social context is important in shaping the meaning that the show had for the readers. There is an obvious difference in the position the text itself has for these respective interpretive communities. This was notable in the way the readers constructed themselves as audiences. The UK interpretive community constructed the audience in relation to socio-demographics, of which age was the most important one, followed by gender (more male) and class (mostly middle class). These broad formations were embraced since the show was very popular in the UK, it was almost obligatory to watch it, especially among the young people, as a way of being trendy. The Croatian interpretive community defined the audience as a small niche, a minority (to which they belonged), constructed through specific traits that were seen as the opposite of the Croatian mainstream: being urban, English-speaking, modern, liberal, unconventional, open-minded, knowledgeable etc. This reflects the marginal position the show had in Croatia, where it was enjoyed by a small oppositional minority.

The meta-discourse revealed two totally different orientations within the respective cultural settings. The UK interpretive community engaged in a clear-cut politically correct discourse; in the Croatian interpretive community, a politically incorrect discourse was dominant. The majority of the Croatian interpretive community explicitly expressed negative attitudes towards different groups, including Croatians.

The engagement in a politically correct discourse in the UK interpretive community that supposedly aimed at protecting the powerless, was a demonstration of the self-reflexive, self-critical 'awareness' of past 'sins' and inequalities. On the other hand, nation-state discourse visible in Croatia was written from the position of the 'victim', generalized on the national level and inscribed in a generalized geopolitical construct of the East. Thus, the difference in the engagement in a politically correct discourse was partially determined by the perceived structural unequal position of the respective countries. While the UK interpretive community talked from the position of the perceived superiority of the West, the Croatian interpretive community spoke from a perceived under-privileged position of the East.

The nation-state discourse was predominant in the Croatian interpretive community in relation to this text, and can be viewed as a result of recent historical turbulences in a nationalist movement which resulted in state formation. Croatia has, since the 90s, relied

heavily on nationalistic sentiments which are still very strong. By the same token, the UK press was immersed in identity politics, especially racial issues, as its multicultural state is burdened by problems of exclusion and inclusion. This indicates that the meaning-making process is strongly related to the familiar, the area that feels the closest in the respective context.

The differences in the meta-discourse were reflected in their decoding of the show. In the UK interpretive community mechanisms were found in the process of meaning-making which enabled one to appreciate the show and still remain within a 'civilized' discourse. This 'window' was provided by the ambiguous communicative strategies. It was seen as exposing hidden prejudices towards marginalized groups, but also as being a welcome provocation in order to open up debates on the issues of identity and exclusion in Britain that seemed to be suppressed by the imperatives of political correctness. The mechanisms visible in the UK interpretive community were absent in the Croatian interpretive community, since there was no sense of a violation of the norm if one engaged in a politically incorrect discourse. The appeal of the text for the Croatian interpretive community seemed to lie in the already mentioned all-inclusive scorning that was in accordance with a somewhat cynical worldview of the Croatian interpretive community. However, it was also due to its subversion of the superior image of the West which showed that the supposedly inclusive, civilized, politically correct conduct of the West was fallacious.

Neale and Krutnik (in Neale 2000) argue that the social significance of comedy is not universal and that it has to be analysed at the local level. This proves to be relevant because, in this case, the (potential) subversion of political correctness and the initiation of a debate (that was pointed out by the UK interpretive community) can be defined as affirmative in societies in which political correctness signifies a problem, because of a collective suppression of open debate. However, in the societies in which this has not (yet) happened – in which there is no self-censorship linked to offensive language regarding identity groups – the text can obviously not generate the same meaning and serve the same function. It cannot subvert something that has not yet been mainstreamed, something that – although brought into a discursive existence – has not been internalized. For the Croatian interpretive community the text was more empowering in its subversion of narrow-mindedness as opposed to open-mindedness, and was more important in sustaining an idea of belonging to a 'progressive minority'. This was visible in the way the interpretive community discursively formed the audience of the show – something that was, as already mentioned, heavily guided by the position the television show had in each country – while it was very popular in the UK, it was a marginal text in Croatia.

In a general sense, the findings suggest that the meaning-making process is shaped by the social context. The way a text is interpreted is always in relation to the broader systems of signification. External agencies, such as dominant ideologies, institutions and values that circulate in the discursive environment guide the way a text is read. These external agencies determine both the way a text is encoded as well as decoded. Together, the interconnectedness of these parameters is what shapes various maps of meaning.

Biographical note:

Helena Popovic is Lecturer in the Faculty of Political Sciences in the University of Zagreb, Croatia. Her research interests cover cultural studies, popular culture, media audience research and forms of censorship. Contact: helena.popovic@fpzg.hr.

References:

Allen, C. Robert, Audience-Oriented Criticism and Television, in: *Channels of Discourse, Reassembled*, (ed.) Allen, C. R, New York: Routledge, 1992, pp 101-138.

Anderson, Benedict, *Imagined communities*. London and New York: Verso, 1983/1991.

Appadurai, Arjun, Disjuncture and Difference in Global Cultural Economy, in: *Global Culture*, (ed.) Featherstone, M., London: SAGE, 1990, pp 295-310.

Atluri, Tara, Lighten up?! Humour, Race, and Da off colour joke of Ali G. *Media, Culture and Society*. 31(2). 2009, pp 197-214.

Barker, Martin, On Being a 1960s Tolkien Reader, in: *From Hobbits to Hollywood. Essays on   Peter Jackson's Lord of the Rings*, (eds.) Mathijs, E. and Pomerance, M., Amsterdam, New York: Rodopi B.V., 2006, pp 81-99.

Barbatsis, Gretchen, Reception Theory. In: *Handbook of visual communications: theory, methods, and media*, (eds.) Smith, Ken et al., London: LEA, 2005, pp 271-294.

Braudel, Fernand, *Civilizacije kroz povijest*. Zagreb: Globus, 1990.

Campbell, Miranda, The mocking mockumentary and the ethics of irony, in: *Taboo: The Journal of Culture and Education*. Vol. 11 No. 1. 2007, pp 53-62.

Carter, A. Roymieco and Villaverde, E. Leila, Laughing at ourselves (in the Dark): Comedy and the Critical Reflections of Social Actions. In: *Taboo: The Journal of Culture and Education*. Vol. 11 No. 1. 2007, pp 101-111.

Chehade, Ghada, The Problem with Borat, In: *Taboo: The Journal of Culture and Education*. Vol. 11 No. 1. 2007, pp 63-72.

Cruz, Jon and Lewis, Justin, *Viewing, Reading, Listening: Audience and Cultural Reception*. Boulder: Westview Press, 1994.

Elias, Norbert, *The Civilizing Process (The History of Manners and State Formation and Civilization)*. Trans. Edmund Jephcott, Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1939/1994.

Elias, Norbert, *O procesu civilizacije. Sociogenetska i psihogenetska istraživanja*. Prev. Marijan Bobinac. Zagreb: Antibarbarus, 1994.

Fairclough, Norman. *Discourse and Social Change*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992..

Fish, Stanley, *Is There a Text in this Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities*. London and Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980.

Hall, Stuart, Encoding/Decoding. In: *Culture, Media, Language: Working Papers in Cultural Studies*. Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, London: Hutchinson, 1973/1980, pp 128-138.

Howells, Richard, 'Is it because I is black?' Race, Humour and the Polysemiology of Ali G, *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*. Vol 26, No. 2. 2006, pp 155-177.

Huntington, Samuel, *Sukob civilizacija i preustroj svjetskog poretka*. Zagreb: Izvori, 1997.

Kimball, Roger, Political Correctness, or, the Perils of Benevolence. *National Interest* 74, 2003. (Retrieved: 25 May 2008).

Klinger, Barbara, *Melodrama and Meaning: History, Culture, and the Films of Douglas Sirk*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994.

Liebes, Tamar and Katz Elihu, *The Export of Meaning: Cross-Cultural Readings of Dallas*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990.

Lockyer, Sharon and Pickering, Michael. eds. *Beyond a Joke: The Limits of Humour*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006.

Macey, David, *The Penguin Dictionary of Critical Theory*. London: Penguin Books, 2001.

Mennel, Stephen and Goudsblom, Johan, *Norbert Elias: On civilization, Power and Knowledge. Selected Writings*. eds. With an Introduction by Mennell and Goudsblom. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998.

Moores, Shaun, *Interpreting Audiences: The Ethnography of Media Consumption*. London: SAGE Publications, 1993.

Morley, David, *The Nationwide Audience: Structure and Decoding*. London: BFI, 1980.

Morley, David, *Television, Audiences and Cultural Studies*, London: Routledge, 1992.

Neale, Steve, *Genre and Hollywood*. London: Routledge, 2000.

Popović, Helena and Hromadzic, Hajrudin, Media Users: From Readership to Co-Creators". In: *Digital Culture: The Changing Dynamics*, eds. Uzelac, A.; Cvjeticanin, B. Culturelink Joint Publication Series No 12. Zagreb: IMO, 2008 pp 43-59.

Radway, Janice A., *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy and Popular Literature.* London: Verso. 1987.

Said, W. Edward, *Orijentalizam*. Trans. B. Romic. Zagreb: Konzor, 1978/1999.

Schrøder, Kim Christian, 'Audience semiotics, interpretive communities and the "ethnographic turn" in media research', *Media, Culture & Society*, 16(2), 1994, pp. 337-47.

Slide, Anthony, *Incorrect Entertainment or Trash from the Past: a History of Political Incorrectness and Bad Taste in 20th Century American Popular Culture*. USA: Bear Manor Media, 2007.

Staiger , Janet, *Media Reception Studies*. New York: NYU Press, 2005.

Stott, Andrew, *Comedy: the New Critical Idiom*. New York: Routledge, 2005.

Wallerstein, Immanuel, *Suvremeni svjetski sistem*. Zagreb: CKD, 1986.

Notes:

[1] The show developed out of *The 11 o'clock show* broadcast in 1999, where the character of Ali G appeared as a cast member. *Da Ali G Show* was first broadcast on Channel Four in 2000. After the success of the television comedy, Cohen has continuously appeared on television, embodying one of the three characters he developed: Ali G, Borat and Bruno. The success of the television comedy was accelerated with the three movies starring the three characters: *ALI G Indahouse* (2002), Universal Pictures; *Borat cultural learnings of America for make benefit glorious nation of Kazakhstan* (2006), 20th Century Fox, News Corp.; *Bruno* (2009), Universal Pictures and Columbia Pictures. The television show was broadcast in Croatia on Nova TV – a commercial television channel with national reach. It was broadcast in 2003 for the first time, and then in 2004 and 2006.

[2] This article is a part of a broader research that includes the analysis of the extra-textual environment, more specifically, newspaper articles published from 1999 to 2007, in UK and Croatia on *Da Ali G Show* and Sasha Baron Cohen, and academic articles (in English) written about this comedy. This does not exhaust the list of different mediators of meaning in a society, however I

found the newspaper articles particularly interesting since they form a part of the media industry that sets the agenda and provide coordinates on interpretative frames to a larger readership. Newspaper articles also contribute to the formation of the 'imagined community' that Anderson (1983) links to the nation-state, and provides a window into matters of concern raised in a particular context – in this case in the UK and Croatia. The newspaper articles were important in order to assess the way in which this particular text was decoded in the respective countries within which the interpretive communities operated.

[3] Roger Kimball 2003. Political Correctness, or, the Perils of Benevolence. *National Interest* 74. (Retrieved: 25 May 2008).

[4] As an example, in 2008 the president of the Youth Forum of the Social Democratic Party Niksa Klecak, from Dubrovnik, Croatia, started a group on Facebook called 'I bet I will find 5 000 people who dislike Sanader' (the Prime Minister at the time). The website contained provocative photomontage of the Prime Minister Sanader in a Nazi uniform. As a result, the police searched his apartment, confiscated his laptop and mobile phone, and held him for a few hours at the police station for interrogation. The Prime Minister justified this intervention by claiming that this was against democracy, as he said: 'There is no satire or play with the swastika, Nazi, or Ustasha symbols'. However, it was very clear that it was a critique of the Prime Minister and not a glorification of Nazism. http://dnevnik.hr/vijesti/hrvatska/nacisticka-obiljezja-na-faceboku-okrenuta-su-protiv-demokracije.html (retrieved: January 5, 2009).

[5] Among the specific questions asked were the following: How did you used to watch it? With whom - alone, with friends…? What do you find amusing in this television comedy? Which character do you find most amusing? Why? Are there some things you don't like about it? What do you think is the aim of Cohen? What does he want to do? What do you think about the controversies it raises? Are there topics that cannot be joked about? If so, can you give an example? Who do you think watches this type of television comedies? Would you say you are a fan? (if yes) What does fandom mean for you?

[6] The Croatian interviewees were: Domagoj (37), Dmitar (33), Drzislav (40), Ignjat (32), Katarina (38), Karlo (34), Marija (35) Matija (39), Tereza (30). The British interviewees: Anne (26), Albert (23), George (56), Henrietta (39), James (32), Melvin (35), Rose (24), Stephen (26), Sophia (26). All the names of the interviewees have been changed in order to ensure anonymity.

[7] Only one interviewee (Tereza) engaged in a politically correct discourse and pointed out its ambiguity and potential offensiveness albeit with a critical distance towards the sort of self-censorship PC pushes forward.