Please note, this article was submitted before the presenting team of *Top Gear* were dismissed by the BBC. The published article, that considers these changes, can be found here: http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/17524032.2016.1211161

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Belligerent broadcasting, male anti-authoritarianism and anti-environmentalism: the case of *Top Gear* (BBC, 2002-)

Philip Drake and Angela Smith

Abstract

This article considers the format and cultural politics of the hugely successful UK TV programme Top Gear *(BBC 2002-) analysing how it constructs an informal address predicated around anti-authoritarian or contrarian banter and protest masculinity. Regular targets for* Top Gear *presenter's protest – which are curtailed by broadcast guidelines in terms of gender and ethnicity -- are reflected in the 'soft' targets of government legislation on environmental issues or various forms of regulation 'red tape'. Repeated references to speed cameras, central London congestion charges, and 'excessive' signage, are all anti-authoritarian, libertarian discourses delivered through a comedic form of performance address. Thus the BBC's primary response to complaints made about this programme is to defend the programme's political views as being part of the humour. The article will draw on critical discourse analysis and conversation analysis to consider how the programme licences a particular form of engagement that helps to deflect criticisms, and considers the limits to such discursive positioning.*

By any measure, the tv programme *Top Gear*, now in its fourth decade, can be said to live up to its self-description as the 'world's favourite motoring programme'. Its global appeal is shown in that it is currently broadcast in 170 different countries. It is endlessly repeated globally across cable, digital terrestrial, satellite and video-on-demand channels, and attracts a weekly audience in excess of 350 million viewers, and sometimes claimed to be up to a billion viewers (see Bonner, 2010)[1]. According to BBC Worldwide by the end of 2014 the programme's Youtube channel had over 4 million subscribers and over 800 million video views over 15 million 'likes' on Facebook, and was sold to 214 territories worldwide[2]. This makes it the *Guinness Book of Records* holder for

'most watched factual programme' in the world. In addition the spin-off *Top Gear Magazine* has a global circulation of 1.67 million and the programme has 6.8 million unique users on the website Topgear.com, over 8.9 million downloads of *Top Gear* mobile and tablet game apps, and over 1.5 million visitors to its live show, '*Top Gear* Live'.

Part of the appeal of *Top Gear* is undoubtedly the entertainment value it generates through its humour and irreverence, irrespective of which presenting team is on screen. This article will explore the ways in which this is performed in the UK version of the show, as broadcast between 2002 and 2015, referred to by the BBC's own listing magazine, *Radio Times*, as the 'Clarkson, Hammon, May era' in its Christmas 2015 edition. In particular, we will examine the various ways in which the show attacks those discourses and people in authority who seek to hamper the 'enjoyment' of motorists, particularly the environmentalist lobby which seeks to cut carbon emissions (and thus implicitly curtail the unnecessary use of vehicles that burn petrol or diesel) or else reduce inner-city traffic congestion through restricting private motorist access; political lobbiests who seek to make the roads a safer place by limiting speeds, or insisting on safety measures in vehicles that might otherwise 'spoil' the aesthetics of the design. The playful rejection of such authoritarian discourses we refer to here as being 'anti-authoritarian', and as such are closely linked to studies of gender (R.W. Connell 1995, Bethan Benwell 2004, etc) where this is typical of masculine power.

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The marketability of such anti-authoritarian entertainment in this format is clear in that in its current global incarnation the UK presenters' voices are sometimes dubbed into the local language, and in other cases the format of the show is also replicated under license. Local versions of *Top Gear* appear in South Korea, the USA and China, and France (Sudworth, 2010). In January 2015, the opening of the 2015 series was broadcast simultaneously in over 50 countries across Australia, Africa and the Middle East at the same time as the UK, with another 10 countries across Asia airing the episode within 24 hours of UK transmission. *Top*

Gear is also a frequent winner of awards for factual television, including the 2005 International Emmy for best show in the non-scripted entertainment category, and winning the UK's National Television Award for Most Popular Factual Programme in 2006, 2007, 2008 and 2011. By any measure, the programme is a global television and business phenomenon for the BBC. And yet, as Bonner (2010) argues, the programme has received little sustained academic attention (see Smith, 2008, for an exception). Bonner argues that this is due to 'generic hybridity; conservative masculinity; anti-environmentalism; and, on the scholarly side, a nervousness about confronting a text that so relishes its reactionary politics' (2010: 33). Working from a different academic context (UK not Australia) these claims might seem overstated; however, it is no doubt true that the programme has not been afforded the attention that its global profile might suggest.

What's what: a brief history of *Top Gear*

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The original version of the show first appeared on BBC2 in 1977 and was initially a consumer magazine programme that reviewed cars on behalf of viewers. Jeremy Clarkson, now the most well-known presenter, who had previously worked as a motoring journalist, joined the show in 1988, adding his own brand of 'tongue-in-cheek' journalism. However, he left to pursue other projects in 1999 and declining ratings meant that the BBC dropped the show in 2001. Most of the production team and presenters took the format to Channel 5, where they re-launched it as *Fifth Gear* (the BBC had retained the rights to the title *Top Gear*). This new show continued in the format of the old programme. Clarkson, meanwhile, had linked up with his former school friend and BBC producer Andy Wilman, and between them had proposed a revamped *Top Gear* to fill the Sunday 8-9pm television slot on BBC2. They proposed a show that 'people like them' would want to watch, and so emerged a formula that was framed as humorous, quirky and sometimes controversial. Clarkson was to be the main presenter and he was joined by fellow motoring journalists Richard Hammond and, after the first series, James May (replacing Jason Dawe). The three of them presented the show with a shared sense of jokey anti-authoritarianism, linked with a love of cars. In 2009 interview Wilman describes the new format in these terms:

> One, it would have a news section so "important but boring" cars could be dispensed with quickly. Two, it would be filmed before an audience in an old aircraft hangar, that would become "an oasis for people who like cars". Three, they would have an all-male line-up. Four, and perhaps most importantly, "it would always be an unfair show," says Wilman. "The BBC would say, 'You should get Professor Suchabody on talking about the environment' and we would go, 'Fuck off, he can have the Ten O'Clock News.' Do the Two Fat Ladies say, 'And if you want to have a low-fat version of this recipe you can use single cream'? They never do. They go, 'Pile it on; heart attack now'." (Wilman in Barkham '*Top Gear*: why we're mad about the boys', 2009).

It is this later format of the show, not that which preceded it, in which we are interested. Through a close analysis of the 'framing' and dialogue of some particular episodes, and by drawing on the theoretical work of Ronnell and Goffman, this article aims to analyse how this TV show's blend of anti-authoritarian libertarianism, belligerent masculinity and anti-environmentalism operates. Such work is important because, as our opening statistics show, *Top Gear* is a widely-viewed and influential site in which the performance of anti-environmentalism and anti-authoritarianism can be presented as 'common sense'. The relationship between the performance of politics, as presented by Top Gear, and representative politics is, of course complex and contradictory, depending on the decoding by audiences of the issues presented. We are interested in whether *Top Gear* offers simply 'contrarian banter' or presents itself in relationship to facts (such as data over global warning) and how irony and humour function to license or even legitimise the opinions presented in the programme.

Our starting point is to consider the nature of the humour of the programme as, despite its awards as a factual programme, the revamped show is a blended entertainment format, mixing 'challenges' (such as races, often across spectacular scenery), with magazine items ('News', 'the Cool Wall'), celebrity interviews ('Star in a Reasonably Priced Car', alongside 'tame racing driver, The Stig') and banter between the hosts, including catchphrases ('Some say [repeated] all we know is, he's called The Stig' and ; 'On that bombshell…' to close the show). The quirky humour of the revamped show is often ironic in nature, where we can understand irony as a tension between surface meaning and

underlying meaning, a form of insincerity that is constructed as 'knowing humour'. As Jackson et al (2001) have argued, irony can offer an internal defence against ambivalent feelings as well as outwardly denying charges of taking oneself or something too seriously. It can also help produce a sense of in-group membership, where you have to be 'in on the joke' in order to appreciate the humour. As such *Top Gear* presents itself and is positioned in the television schedule to allow a humorous, entertaining programme at the end of the weekend before return to work on Monday morning. This positioning as a buffer between the pleasures of the weekend and the tedium of the working week provides a perfect place in which to reject authoritarian discourses that would be regarded as 'common sense' in other contexts. As Smith (2008) has pointed out:

> In *Top Gear*, irony also allows the presenters to engage in other performances that appear to reject dominant discourses seen elsewhere as common sense. For example, there is an explicit rejection of 'political correctness' and 'green' discourses relating to environmental issues. This is in addition to attacks on those authorities who seek to impose rules or regulations that might inhibit the driver, regarding such authorities as kill-joys. Recent international debates about global warming have led to legislation in Britain that penalises drivers of vehicles that are inefficient in terms of fuel use and damaging to the environment in terms of carbon emissions. (2008:90)

This rejection of dominant discourses is articulated by what Ulrich Beck terms 'constructed certitude' (1987) whereby there is a construction of unambiguous narratives that are premised on the exclusion or circumvention of less certain or ambiguous beliefs. In *Top Gear* this is often in the rejection of environmental discourses related to fears of effects of global warming, and instead an emphasis on speed and style (and by connection, drama and excitement) over health and safety (and by implication, rules and 'red tape', regulation and the mundane or ordinary). Discourses such as the environment, health and safety, and national stereotypes are relatively soft targets for humour. For example in 2004 on the programme main presenter Clarkson joked that:

> Supercars are supposed to run over Arthur Scargill and then run over him again for good measure. They are designed to melt ice caps, kill the poor,

> poison the water table, destroy the ozone layer, decimate indigenous wildlife, recapture the Falkland Islands and turn the entire third world into a huge uninhabitable desert, all that before they nicked all the oil in the world. (*Top Gear*, Series 5, Episode 2, BBC2, 31 October 2004)

Firstly, we are required to observe is that this is presented as belligerent humour, a joke with an element of ironic distance, a joke, with the teller not completely meaning it: clearly, Clarkson doesn't make these claims with total sincerity. Yet through overstatement he underlines a message - supercars are exciting and that these other issues are not. To find such comments objectionable or puerile, then, is - for the programme's defenders - to refuse the knowing humour, its deliberate belligerence, to either not 'get' the joke or to 'take it too seriously'. In refusing the joke one is cast in the role of a comedy denier, not adequately understanding the framing of the comment as one that is both comedic and mocking. Further episodes illustrate this. Clarkson's comments of how a cow produces more pollution (through methane) than a Range Rover presented an anti-environment message as fact, even though it was contested and lead to protests at his house by environmentalists (Garnham, 2009).

Anti-authoritarian humour

Clarkson has a long history in baiting what he calls 'eco-mentalists' and climate change denial. This happens both on-screen - such as in the episode where Clarkson drives a Land Rover (often deployed, as with the Range Rover, as a symbol of British grit and engineering) up a Scottish mountain, to demonstrate the superiority of driving over hill-walking. His belligerence is an important aspect of Clarkson's screen performance, as it is with several other prominent male television presenters (for instance chef Gordon Ramsay, businessman Alan Sugar and journalist Jeremy Paxman) (Smith and Higgins, 2014). However Clarkson's media profile and views are also performed elsewhere, as a journalist, and inform our understanding of him as a celebrity presenter. Boykoff (2008) and McKnight (2010) discuss his newspaper columns for best-selling British tabloid, *The Sun,* and its broadsheet stable-mate, *The Sunday Times.* McKnight (2010: 701-2) identifies 16 columns for *The Sun* between 1998 and 2006 in which Clarkson ridiculed concerns about climate change. This includes such

comments as 'people will face a rise in their car tax because half a dozen scientists say carbon dioxide emissions from cars are causing global warming and that we'll all melt. It's rubbish' (Clarkson, 2000) and 'eco-mentalists say we must stop burning oil and gas immediately and go back to living in caves' (Clarkson, 2005). We are presented with a binary choice: cars or 'crazy' environmentalists imposing restrictions on people's lives.

Where there have been complaints about homophobia in the past, this has been dealt with by the BBC at production level with various warnings, publicly reported, given to the presenters. Whilst these also have the effect of underlining their anti-authoritarian credentials, it is now unlikely that comments such as the following would be heard on screen for the BBC programme, even if Clarkson is able to express them in print (here reported from an industry talk he gave):

> The problem is that television executives have got it into their heads that if one presenter on a show is a blonde-haired, blue-eyed heterosexual boy, the other must be a black Muslim lesbian (Clarkson, 2009).

Xenophobic, sexist or allegedly racist comments by the presenters have been the cause of official complaints to the BBC. In one episode broadcast in 2012 Hammond, in road testing a Mexican sports car, commented:

> Cars reflect national characteristics […] a Mexican car's just going to be a lazy, feckless, flatulent oaf with a moustache, leaning against a fence asleep, looking at a cactus with a blanket with a hole in the middle on as a coat.

The most high profile complaint in this case came from the Mexican ambassador, who said the remarks had been 'offensive, xenophobic and humiliating'. The BBC was forced to issue an apology on behalf of the programme, but defending it at the same time in terms of in-group membership:

> Whilst it may appear offensive to those who have not watched the programme or who are unfamiliar with its humour, the executive producer has made it clear to the ambassador that that was absolutely not the show's intention (Cited in *The Guardian*, 4 February 2011)

The use of humour, in this case, whilst typical of the hyperbolic statements employed as ironic comment, had been interpreted - it is implied - by people who did not understand the nature of the programme, and 'did not get the joke'. Indeed, the *Top Gear* team have since taken this Mexican episode as a long-running joke, where Hammond is often threatened with the punishment of being sent to Mexico to film. This performance of blundering masculinity reflects some of the qualities Bethan Benwell (2004) identifies as accounting for the heroic/anti-heroic tensions found in 'lads' mags', where the typical 'new lad' is positioned as trying but failing to achieve heroic, idealised masculinity. As Smith (2008) has pointed out, this is clearly found in *Top Gear* where the hero of the show is The Stig, whose silent, masked invincibility contrasts with the loud, unruly behaviour of the three main presenters. Left to their own devices in their 'challenges', they only win by cheating or sabotaging one another's cars. Unlike the heroic Stig, they are not capable of succeeding without trial and error.

If we take the first episode of the 20th series of the 'new' *Top Gear*, first broadcast in July 2013, we can see examples of their anti-authoritarian themes emerge. These are worth examining closely, because its anti-authoritarianism takes different forms. The show's 'News' section is a regular feature where the three co-presenters, led by Clarkson, sit around a table in the middle of the studio and discuss motoring news events, a discussion liberally sprinkled with anecdotes that are intended to be taken humorously. In this episode's News segment, the first story is a summary of a plan to open public houses in motorway service stations. The motorway service station was franchised mainly to three companies: Moto, Roadchef and Welcome Break. The Department of Transport, and by extension the State, owns the land and thus they are subject to terms and conditions that reflect this state control. For example, the services have to be available 24 hours a day, providing free short-term parking, free toilet facilities and provision of an adequate range of food and fuel. The *Top Gear* story comes from an announcement in June 2013 that a pub chain had successfully applied for a licence to serve alcohol at a motorway service station following a government consultation exercise that had lifted the restrictions on selling alcohol in such locations. However, far from rejoicing at such news, the *Top Gear*

team call such plans 'just stupid' (line 53-54). Their justification for such condemnation is couched in banter and hyperbole, as we can see:

JM	And now (.) the news (.) and there are plans (.) you may have heard of this to open pubs in motorway service stations	1
RH	I don't get that	
JC	I don't get that either because (.) as it's a motorway (.) you are bound to be driving (.)	5
JM	Mmmm	
JC	Which means you can only have one drink and when it comes to drink one is impossible	10
	[Audience laughter]	
JM	I guess [audience laughter] what if (.) what if you're the passenger	15
JC	Oh I see James (.) so I'm driving you	
JM	Mm-h	20
JC	And as I fill up with petrol you say I am going to go and get a gin and tonic	
JM	Yes [audience laughter]	25
JC	Well (.) if you do that (.) you may as well prepare a sign that says Hammersmith on a bit of card [audience laughter] and if you come out I'll have gone	
JM	I am not actually that in pubs on motorway service stations (.) what bothers me is why do they sell trousers (.) because I've never (.)	30
	[General laughter]	35
JM	Got half way (.) has anyone ever got half way through a motorway journey and thought (.) I've forgot my trousers (1)	
	[General laughter]	40
JM	I had better get these elasticated beige ones	
RH	I don't (.) I don't understand why people even stop to eat at a motorway service station	45

JM	There is no car journey in Britain that could be so long that you would starve to death before reaching your destination [Audience laughter]	
JC	That's my argument with the pub thing is that it's not that far to wait for a drink (.) you you don't think I'm so desperate I am going to pull over and have half a pint of shandy [audience laughter] just stupid	50 55
JM	I would	
JC	Well that's 'cause you're a raving alcoholic James [audience laughter]	60

There is an initial assumption that this is unfair on drivers, with May eventually offering the suggestion that it might be for the convenience of passengers (line 16). However, we can see that there is an underlying assumption that the driver would not drink, demonstrating their hegemonic acceptance of the drink-driving laws[3]. Their feigned disgust is at the idea of there being facilities made available in the form of a pub, which they would not be able to indulge in. The option of this being available to passengers is dismissed as ridiculous, with May's hypothetical passenger cast out of the vehicle and made to hitchhike back to London (lines 16-29). Ultimately, they dismiss this idea not on the basis of the law impeding their progress to an enjoyable experience, but on the grounds that they declare 'no car journey in Britain could be so long' (line 4 and line 51-52) that anyone would be have long to wait for the next real pub to appear at their destination. The laughter of the studio audience underlines this compliance with the 'common sense' that you don't drink and drive. Crucially, it is then at least possible for *Top Gear* to endorse the same rules as the state, and to endorse rules that 'restrict' practices (ie drinking alcohol then driving) in order to protect people, as long as it is done via criticising another set of rules or organisations. Anti-drink driving has become hegemonic common sense, even for *Top Gear.* This points to the mutability of libertarian discourse, and the multi-faceted nature of anti-authoritarianism.

Late in the same News section, we find a different approach taken to the authority of the state, but in this case, the national speed limits. Clarkson introduces this as a more serious piece of news, where he performs affrontedness that these practices might go on.

JC	Well the idea okay is that they've got speed limits on them you can temp- you can temporarily lower the speed limit to warn drivers of an accident or or congestion ahead and then (.) there are speed cameras on the back of the gantries to make sure that people do actually slow down (.) well here is my secret (.) it turns out that the police can turn those cameras on at any time they like	1 5
JM	Really	
JC	Which means that the Chief Constable sitting there at his desk (.) I fancy a new car (2) [audience laughter] pop the camera on (.) and after (.) I was going to say half an hour but probably ten seconds (.) he's got enough for a super-charged Jag (3) [audience laughter]	10
JM	JM We should point out for reasons of er BBC impartiality that other luxury cars are available to bent [audience laughter] to bent chiefs of policemen [audience laughter] (2)	15

Here, we have Clarkson taking us into his confidence by telling a 'secret' he claims to have just found out about speed cameras on motorways. The claim is that 'the police can turn those cameras on at any time they like' (lines 5-6). There is no further elaboration on this point, other than the fantasy story of a senior police officer using this as a form of personal income generation (lines 10-14). The unspoken implication is that drivers on motorways regularly exceed the speed limit, by Clarkson's own hyperbolic assertion with great frequency (it would only take 'ten seconds' for sufficient traffic fines to be garnered to equate to the cost of a luxury car). The audience only respond (by laughing) once he had made this hyperbolic statement, and then again when May adds a parody of the 'disclaimer' that is often found in BBC official documents that aid enhance its institutional impartiality. What this extract does show, though, is that the programme's anti-authoritarian stance is directed at the apparently arbitrary nature of speed limits, limits with curtail the enjoyment of driving. Aimed here at the state's representative in the form of the senior police officer, the team are drawing on stories of police corruption that is assumed to be widespread. Oddly,

this is juxtaposed with the initial statement of the purpose of speed cameras to prevent accidents (lines 2-3), where the police would be the front-line personnel dealing with the glossed-over horrors of such events.

Anti-environmental 'constructed certitude'.

So, *Top Gear*'s anti-authoritarian stance is not quite so clear-cut as we could imagine, with an arbitrary approach to 'hard' and 'soft' targets. One such 'soft' target is the environmental lobby, which is a long-standing target for the programme as it is often linked to reducing emissions, which would mean less powerful engines and fewer unnecessary journeys. Immediately after the News section of this episode of *Top Gear*, we find one of their team's regular 'challenges' being introduced. Such challenges seek to prove the superiority of the car, and usually feature one member of the team driving a car in a 'race' against other members of the team in an alternative form of transport, such as train, boat, aircraft, bus, etc. In this challenge, the race is between Clarkson in the car and May in a sailing boat, the aim being to see which is the fastest.

To begin with, the race is introduced by May and Clarkson jointly back in the studio with a map of the British Isles and various routes suggested (such as Great Yarmouth to Edinburgh), but this is apparently not dramatic enough for the programme and, without any mention of the expense or the environmental impact, we learn that they have raced around New Zealand's north island. May is shown in taped footage standing on a beach with a large map of New Zealand, in a parody of a science programme, with inserted footage of the sailing boat and crew.

Welcome to New Zealand (.) the perfect location for our duel (.) pretty landscapes for Jeremy to drive through (.) and most importantly for me (.) sea that 's warm (2) so our race (.) this is what New Zealand looks like (.) this is the bit we are interested in (.) blown up for you here (.) I shall be starting from this very beach (.) which is here on the map (.) and racing up here to the second most northerly point in New Zealand (.) Jeremy though will meanwhile will have to go down here (.) through the centre of Auckland (.) and all the way up here (.) to reach the same point so (.) I only have to cover two hundred and twenty miles (.)	1 5

Jeremy (.) has to cover four hundred and ten (2) to make matters even worse for Jeremy (.) thirty five percent of New Zealand's roads are unpaved (.) which would slow him down (.) and (.) this is what he would be up against (2) it's called an AC Forty Five and it's the fastest production sailing boat in the world (3) with a carbon fibre hull (.) and a ridged sail as big as the wing on a Boeing Seven Three Seven (.) we can reach over thirty knots (2) then there is the crew (.) all but one are winners of the Americas Cup (.) the most prestigious trophy in yacht racing (.) and as for the one who isn't (.) well he is Sir Ben Ainslie (.) four times Olympic sailing gold medallist (2) put all this together (.) and Jeremy hasn't got a chance	10 15 20

In contrast, Clarkson is shown picking up a small hatchback hire car, which he claims is the fastest car in the world on the basis of anecdotal evidence that hire cars are driven with reckless abandon and no care for the long term sustainability of the vehicle. In essence, this is a disposable car and we find that this is the case in the course of the race when Clarkson crashes this car, but quickly able to obtain a replacement hire car. This also links with the earlier point that 'cheating' is actually seen as amusing in the context of such a show.

Clarkson is the first on screen to reframe the race as not being to judge which vehicle is fastest, but as a competition between fossil fuels and wind energy.

This is not simply a race between a sailing boat and a little blue hatchback (.) I am on a mission from God (.) because the world has got it into its head that wind power is the solution to everything and I just don't think it is (1) wind is just annoying (1) the internal combustion is good	1 5

Using biblical imagery, he aligns his pro-petrol stance with a God-given quest against a deluded world of powerful environmentalists. It simplistically juxtaposes 'annoying' wind power against the 'good' internal combustion engine, the simplicity of his statement asserting that there is no argument to be made in favour of environmentalism.

The dialogue between May and Clarkson in the course of the race is typical of the sort of 'banter' that emerges at such points. In order to maintain a sense of excitement and drama, we find Clarkson driving along dirt roads with typically

reckless abandon, talking to camera about the joy of such motoring. There then comes a quieter section where Clarkson apparently 'realises' that the distance he has to cover is almost twice that of May's boat. However, if we look at May's introduction to this piece, we can see that this was planned down to the last mile (May gives us precise mileage and details of the terrain), so there should be no element of 'surprise' for Clarkson in this respect. The utterance only exists as an indicator of enhanced drama and to allow a link to a set-up phone call between May and Clarkson so the latter can check on his competitor's progress. The sense of competition is enhanced visually by Clarkson being handed an iPad showing a map that is tracking the two vehicles' progress. This scene is intercut with shots of May on the boat looking extremely uncomfortable and unhappy.

JC	[in voice-over] At this point the producers showed me a tracking device that showed me just how far ahead James actually was [on phone to May] Oh my giddy aunt (.) you are miles ahead of me	1
JM	Are you still talking to me (.) I can't hear you	5
JC	Ho- holy cow (.) get off the phone I'm busy	
JM	Hello?	10
JC	[Shot of Clarkson driving quickly round a corner. Then cut to graphic of tracking device.] [voice-over] James was a hundred and seventy miles form the finish line (.) whereas I (.) because of the unique way New Zealand is shaped (.) was still heading in the wrong direction (.) with three hundred and forty miles to go (2) [fade into shot of Clarkson in car] What if I lose this race people (1) If you're campaigning now to stop the government building two and a half thousand windmills in your back garden to provide you with enough electricity for the pump in your fish tank (.) and I lose this I can only apologise (.) I'm trying to help you out here but I'm losing (1) and I'm losing badly.	15 20

Clarkson's use of mild expletives (oh my giddy aunt – line 3; holy cow – line 7) show a performance of gently humorous anxiety on Clarkson's part. This sense of drama helps to validate the context of the race, and the unspoken cost of such a stunt is legitimized by its entertainment value. Clarkson's resumption of the race takes on a more serious tone, where he glances at the in-car camera and addresses us as viewers. We are interpolated into an assumption of widespread support for Clarkson in the car side of the race through his address to us as

'people' (line 16), which is then followed by a hyperbolic statement about wind farms. This linking of wind farms with the sailing boat as Clarkson's/the car's enemy is a similar strategy as we saw earlier in the News section's story about speed cameras. Here, though, Clarkson is continuing the biblical allusion of him as the saviour of the poor, beleaguered public, a point he repeats through his apology (line 20) which implies his role as rescuer, and again more baldly as 'I'm trying to help you out here' (line 20), where his sincere efforts to win the race are collocated with a wider anti-environmental discourse.

This heroic allusion is repeated towards the end of the challenge, where Clarkson claims: 'I am doing this now to uphold the honour of coal, gas and oil – the corner stones of civilisation'. This idea of fossil fuels being linked with civilization is the underlying metaphor of this challenge, where images of Clarkson driving along in beautiful countryside in the comfort of an air-conditioned car are juxtaposed with a bedraggled, uncomfortable-looking May, clinging to the beams of the boat to stop himself from being swept overboard. The satellite phone that they had been using to communicate early in the challenge ends up being swept out of his hand and out to sea half way through the journey, emphasizing the danger and discomfort associated with this particular mode of travel. The fact that May reaches the finish line before Clarkson is framed with bathos as he staggers ashore and collapses at the finish flag planted on the beach. Shortly after that, we see Clarkson arrive and walk across the sands to the prostrate May.

JC	Holy cow (.) have you seen your face (2) I was just about to conclude and say (.) we must now close down all coal and gas p-power stations and switch immediately to wind power because obviously it's better (.) but look what it does to you [points to May's face]	1 5
JM	It's brought me out in boils sores and blindness (.) [getting up from the sand] did you have to use any of your insurance waiver forms	 10
JC	No none at all the car got here without (.) a single scratch [shot of car stuck in sand dune] (3) May looks over the beach at the car	
JM	It was blue when you set off	 15

JC	It wasn't	
JM	Wasn't it (.) it was blue I could have sworn it was blue wasn't it	

Rather than jubilation at the sailing boat's victory, we find the uncivilized nature of this form of transport highlighted by both protagonists with unflattering comments made about May's face (lines 1-7). This bathos is continued by implicit reference to Clarkson's reputation for wrecking cars, which viewers are aware of as being true in this case but May, in his befuddled state, is happy to accept (or perform acceptance of) Clarkson's assertion that he has been mistaken as to the colour of his car.

This sense of bathos at the victory of sail over the internal combustion engine is replicated in the studio at the very end of the programme, with May backtracking from his earlier admiration for the sailing boat's pedigree into the discourse of incivility that has been the underlying theme of this challenge.

JM	Can I just say	1
RH	What	
JM	That boat (1) the boat	5
RH	Oh God he's moaning again	
JM	No but listen it's seven hundred thousand pounds okay (.) you don't get a cabin (.) you don't even get a chair or a table or or a radio to listen to or even a floor	10
RH	Yes yes but James (.) you won	
JM	I didn't win Hammond (.) the crew won (.) all I did was not fall off for twelve hours	15
RH	Yes well	
JC	Well anyway the conclusion is wind power is obviously great but it does give you a face like a prostitute's front door [audience laughter] (3) and on that bombshell it is time to end (.) thank you so much for watching (.) see you next week (.) good night	20

The trio of presenters, reunited in the studio in front of the audience at the end of the programme to sum up the challenge, engage in semi-scripted banter. Again, we find the contrast of civilization/the internal combustion engine with uncivilized/sailing. May represents this as a financial indicator of comfort, with his list of absences from the boat he sailed on being used to underscore his refusal to see this as a winning vehicle. Hammond's mock-sincere repetition of the winning nature of his journey (line 13) is downplayed by May's mock misery in 'all I did was not fall off for twelve hours' (lines 15-16). This is left undisputed by Hammond (indicative of the lack of spontaneity in their 'argument') and, as is the case with every show, Clarkson is left to sign off from the studio. Here, though, he uses it to emphasise the undesirability of wind power with the metaphor that 'it gives you a face like a prostitute's front door' (lines 20-21), a metaphor that prompts sustained audience laughter. As previously discussed, laughter is a marker of solidarity, and thus the sentiments behind Clarkson's begrudging praise for wind power are emphasised by the audience. In this case, the anti-authoritarian, anti-environmental stance is rendered humorous through a misogynist metaphor. In the next section, we explore the significance of this articulation between belligerent masculinity, libertarianism and anti-environmentalism in more theoretical detail.

Stupidity, masculinity and power

In her philosophical examination of stupidity, Avital Ronell deploys Marx's comment that 'stupidity is *an opinion's established right*. As far as language is concerned, stupidity dwells in the phrase' (2002: 57). She argues that '[s]tupidity exceeds and undercuts materiality, runs loose, wins a few rounds, recedes, gets carried home in a clutch of denial-and returns. Essentially linked to the inexhaustible, stupidity is also that which fatigues knowledge and wears down history' (2002: 3). This conveys a sense of stupidity itself as a performative, presenting particular world-views through repetition, and its denial of other points of view, often conducted through humour. In our preceding analysis we have suggested that *Top Gear* constructs an informal address predicated around anti-authoritarian or contrarian banter. Yet it is also

more than this: the laddish banter of *Top Gear* is presented along with a nod, a wink, its claims constantly undercut through irony yet at the same time insistently reinforcing a message: cars are essential to a well-lived life, and denial of such pleasures is to cave in to establishment authoritarianism, or simply to accept a mundane existence. Such a view - libertarian yet also potentially reactionary - is a powerful message. Performed comedic stupidity is often double-edged; it can be played both straight and at the same time be positioned as knowing and referential in its use of denial and returns (Drake, 2003). *Top Gear*'s familiar targets - 'eco-mentalists', 'caravan-owners' and so on - become comedic tropes through their repetition as caricatures for mockery, and issues such as global warming become a 'matter of fact' performance of opinion. The programme's credentials to offer opinion - as 'the world's most watched factual television programme' - is subtly reinforced by the ironic banter between the three male presenters.

We might draw on Connell's conceptualization of 'protest masculinity' (1995:110) to consider the nature of such middle-age male rebellion. As with Benwell's argument that such protest masculinity can be found in lads' mags, as Smith (2008) has shown, the associated heroic/anti-heroic stance of the three main presenters serves to underscore their anti-authoritarian behaviour, with particular focus on 'soft' targets such as environmentalism. The three male presenters, whilst constantly mocking each other, manage to perform an inclusive (male) 'we', reinforced by their challenges and their engagement with a studio audience, and to construct a communal bloke-ish common-sense world-view through humour. As a *Top Gear* producer comments, '[t]hick people doing thick things is not funny. Clever people doing clever things is not funny. But clever people doing thick things really is funny (in Barham, 2009).

Such is the reputation for anti-authoritarianism that the programme has garnered that, during the filming of the two-part 2014 'Patagonia Special', the entire production team came under attack by anti-British gangs in Argentina because of a perceived reference to the 1982 Falklands War. Despite having been in the country for nearly two weeks, towards the end of the trip social and

traditional media picked up the number plate of the car Clarkson was driving: a Porsche 928 Turbo registered as H982 FLK (read as a reference to the 1982 war between Britain and Argentina). The production team offered the defence of this being an innocent mistake, arguing that the car had held that registration plate since new. Indeed, it is more likely, given the registration system for British cars of that era allowing new owners to choose their registration from a range of numbers, that these numbers reflected the model of car (928/982). It might also be seen as out of character for the show to use a German car to represent a 'pro-British' stance. However, the claim of innocence of this particular form of anti-authoritarianism was rejected: the production team had to flee Argentina in a hurry after coming under physical attack from the gangs and, once again, the BBC had to defend the programme in the British media and to the Argentinian ambassador in London. The unplanned nature of the second programme - in which a large proportion is devoted to the crew escaping from the protestors (whilst the presenters waited nervously in a hotel) is revealing, not least in undercutting an important myth upon which *Top Gear* challenges are based, through unveiling what Goffman (1974) calls the 'backstage' of the performance. By witnessing footage of their large entourage of production vehicles and crew, with the various back-up vehicles and engineering equipment, the programme also offers an unexpected commentary on the illusion of risk and 'boy's own' adventure characteristic of *Top Gear*'s challenges. Notwithstanding the presenters' attempt to reference a forced heroic ending drawing on the Paul Newman/Robert Redford classic *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, as the situation becomes serious (and the presenters cower in their hotel) their anti-authoritarian male pose is revealed as exactly that: a fabricated performance. The breaking of what Erving Goffman calls the 'performance frame' acts as a commentary, underlining the fiction of the programme by commenting on it in frame terms (Goffman, 1974). But again the double-edged nature of performance is in play, as exposing the fabricated nature of the programme also underlines the authenticity of their situation. Here Goffman's description of breaking frame comes to mind; it can 'induce the belief that the person who has broken frame is no longer in a position to dissimulate' (1974: 479). Whilst the programme unusually unveils its own production, it shores up its authenticity

through the shaky hand-held footage of the under siege crew, the angry mob, the damage to the convoy, and the escape across the border.

'And on that bombshell…'

So, why does this matter, and why is *Top Gear* worthy of study? Sanna Inthorn and John Street (2011), in a study of young citizens' attitudes towards celebrity politics, noted that Jeremy Clarkson was mentioned by many of their focus groups as a celebrity 'with a chance of succeeding in politics', and in particular 'Clarkson's aggressive style of arguing fitted what many described as the image of a politician.' (2011: 483). Whether or not Clarkson's views are influential is unclear, however his belligerence is considered by their focus group members as a clear credential for political office. Studies of celebrity politics (2002, Drake and Higgins 2006) have suggested that celebrities lacking the official capacity of an elected politician (such as the musicians and campaigners Bono or Bon Geldof) actually underline an authority to speak without restriction, a freedom to express 'common sense' through performed humour and irony. This use of irony is something Benwell (2004) has observed as being a prominent feature of the postmodern condition as is found in the evasive masculinity of men's lifestyle magazines, but which is more widely found employed as a strategy to disclaim allegiances to particular political or critical positions (Hutcheon, 1994). Colin Crouch has argued that such qualities are characteristic of a 'post-democracy', which applies neoliberal market forces in a manner that destabilises representative democratic politics (Crouch, 2004). By seemingly being not part of the establishment, empowered through media celebrity, and otherwise distant from electoral politics, anti-authoritarian celebrities can appeal to an electorate tired and distrusting of the political elite. However such masculine authority, if not in crisis, is often incompetent, or - more accurately - performs incompetence to conceal its own hegemonic position of power. Bonner argues:

> In the last five or so years, a second recurrent theme has grown larger in the programme: one of failure and incompetence. It is as if the self-conscious naughtiness of their conservative position- taking encourages contrary readings that sanction more enlightened viewers' enjoyment

> (and subsequently disarm scholarship). Here the almost constant failure of the more elaborate stunts, like growing alternate fuels or driving modified cars across the Channel, exposes the presenters' vaingloriousness before others can do it for them (2010: 43).

But this perhaps misses a key point of such narratives: the anti-heroic incompetent stance of the presenters is actually there for *amusement*, and through the power of comedic license distils a discourse of common-sense. It is an ideology of fun, knowing and acknowledged yet at the same time speaking from a position of privilege and power.

In this respect, perhaps both the least amusing and most telling of the 'specials' is the 'Polar Special', which staged a challenge to race to the North Pole by car. In the Polar Special, there was no room for cheating, and failure in an undoubtedly hostile environment was not out of the question. Once the initial japery in setting out was dealt with, the very real dangers of the situation were clear. The environmental charity Greenpeace heavily criticised this particular episode; a spokesperson is quoted as saying: 'Perhaps Clarkson and his cronies felt that climate change wasn't destroying the Arctic quick enough, so they decided to do this' (quoted by Stephenson, 2008), and vociferously argued that Clarkson and the show were representative of the climate-sceptic lobby. It is ironic that, in this 'Polar Special', in which the presenters actually become the most 'heroic' out of all of their challenges, braving extreme physical conditions, it was at the expense of the 'soft' target of the environmentalist lobby.

Shortly after the controversy over the Porche number plate, towards the end of filming the next series of *Top Gear* in March 2015, Clarkson physically assaulted one of the production team over a minor matter of the provision of hot food at the end of a day's filming. In light of recent controversies, the BBC suspended further filming and Clarkson's contract was not renewed when it expired the following month. Hammond and May also found themselves out of contract. There was a huge amount of media discussion, with a Change.org petition to the BBC to reinstate Clarkson garnering over a million signatures. Even the prime minister, David Cameron, got involved, citing his daughter's

Comment [L1]: Why? explain

Comment [L2]: Needs final sentences a) wrapping up the power of the articulation between libertarianism, anti-environmentalism and belligerent masculinity. B) commenting on its potential mutability or weaknesses?

alleged action of threatening hunger strike if Clarkson was removed to deflect from his own friendship with and support for Clarkson. BBC Director-General, Tony Hall, had to publicly defend his decision not to renew Clarkson's contract after this attack. Hall justified that, while he enjoyed the programme and 'got the joke' (thus claiming implicitly his own in-group membership of *Top Gear* fans) that the moral obligation of the broadcaster had to be retained. It remains to be seen if this decision will 'cost' the BBC both economically in terms of programme sales and public/political goodwill. The new presenting team, as finally revealed in December 2015, features popular tv and radio presenter Chris Evans, who has appeared frequently on *Top Gear* as a well-known car enthusiast, was named as main presenter to much acclaim. In addition, a greatly expanded presenting team includes German racing driving Sabine Schmitz , actor and car enthusiast Matt LeBlanc, motoring journalist and blogger Chris Harris, and F1 team owner Eddie Jordan, and new-comer Rory Reid, who applied to join as part of an open recruitment trawl.

As we have established, *Top Gear* is meant to read as entertainment rather than documentary, and almost every frame is laced with humour. Indeed when there is a 'serious' story, it is difficult to know how to react to the tonal shift. In an episode where Hollywood stars Tom Cruise and Cameron Diaz were the 'Stars in a Reasonably Priced Car', the whole show built up to their interview. Yet the item straight after the stars' laps with the Stig was a preview of the race-driver Ayrton Senna film, a poignant and uncomfortable item to watch. The discursive slipperiness of *Top Gear*– alongside the trickiness of pinning down the politics of 'banter' - offers such interesting contradictions, and further scope for analysis. In this article we have suggested that the articulation between libertarianism, anti-environmentalism and belligerent masculinity is important to understanding the programme's mode of address, but also its popular appeal. It is articulated through humour and multiple performance frames that simultaneously question the presenters' sincerity yet at the same time reinforce the position from which they speak, what Goffman might term a 'lamination' of the performance frame. This research argues that it is important to develop a closer understanding of the discursive power of performance on popular

television, and its politics, and the complicated relationship that celebrity performers have to representative politics.

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[1] The *Top Gear* open wiki claims: 'The programme has an estimated 750 million viewers a day as of 2013 September, making it the most watched show worldwide. In 2007 it was one of the most pirated television shows in the world. It is also the world's second most expensive show in the world at £1.2 billion.' See http://topgear.wikia.com/wiki/Top_Gear (accessed 8 Dec 2014).

[2] See http://advertising.bbcworldwide.com/home/mediakit/reachaudience/topgear (date accessed 31 December 2014)

[3] The *Top Gear* Polar Special of 2007 featured a section in which Clarkson was seen drinking a gin and tonic whilst driving over an ice field. The drink-drive allegations that this generated were defended by the show's producers with the argument that they were over international waters at the time, and thus Clarkson was actually 'sailing' over frozen water and so would be beyond the international jurisdiction of drunk driving laws. An investigation by the BBC Trust found that this scene was not editorially justified and glamourized the misuse of alcohol (BBC News, 2 July 2008). As such, the show has since been very careful not to repeat this particular form of anti-authoritarian stance in relation to alcohol, and thus this might help us understand more clearly the discussion here. Accessed 21 January, 2015 http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/entertainment/7485313.stm