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NOTHING BUT THE TRUTHINESS: A HISTORY OF TELEVISION NEWS PARODY AND ITS ENTRY INTO THE JOURNALISTIC FIELD

by

CURT HERSEY

Under the Direction of Ted Friedman

ABSTRACT

The relationship between humor and politics has been a frequently discussed issue for communication researchers in the new millennium. The rise and success of shows like *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* force a reevaluation of the relationship between journalism and politics. Through archival research of scripts, programs, and surrounding discourses this dissertation looks to the past and historicizes news parody as a distinct genre on American television. Since the 1960s several programs on network and cable parodied mainstream newscasts and newsmakers. More recent examples of this genre circulate within the same discursive field as traditional television news, thereby functioning both as news in their own right and as a corrective to traditional journalism grounded in practices of objectivity. The dissertation utilizes genre, discourse, and textual

analyses to establish the attributes of television news parody and to analyze its role in past and contemporary journalism and culture.

INDEX WORDS: News parody, Television satire, Journalistic field, That Was the Week That Was, Saturday Night Live, Not Necessarily the News, The Daily Show, The Colbert Report

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by

CURT HERSEY

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2013

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Curt Wesley Hersey
2013

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by

CURT HERSEY

Committee Chair: Ted Friedman

Committee: Kathryn Fuller-Seeley

Jason Mittell

Alisa Perren

Leonard Teel

Electronic Version Approved:

Office of Graduate Studies

College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

August 2013

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated with love to my wife and son who supported me throughout this project, and to the memory of my mother and father, who instilled a love of knowledge and indulged my love of television—probably not foreseeing how the two would meet. They always believed I could accomplish whatever I wanted and because of that, so did I.

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Completing this project would not have been possible without the love and support of my family. My wife and intellectual partner, Karen, helped in ways too numerous to count: talking through ideas, creating opportunities for me to write, encouraging me when I doubted my own abilities, and struggling through the process with me. My son, Griffin, provided me with endless joy and helped me to remember that journalism and politics impact those who come after us. Lastly, my father, who walked through it all with me; I wish he could have seen its completion.

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INTRODUCTION

Newspaper editorial pages were appalled when a 2004 Pew Center Poll found young Americans were getting more news from late-night comedy programs than from traditional media outlets.[1] However, the Pew poll confirmed what many journalists already suspected—that the traditional media of newspapers, local/network/cable newscasts, and news magazines were increasingly irrelevant to a young audience weaned on the Internet, an audience more willing to learn from the ironic humor of Jon Stewart than from the self-serious deadpan of Tom Brokaw.

Television News Parody

The 2004 Pew poll proved a focal point for researchers interested in television comedy and politics. A number of books and articles followed, addressing the intersections of humor, politics, and journalism. This dissertation builds on this growing body of work in three primary ways. First, argue for historically contextualizing The Daily Show with Jon Stewart (TDS) and The Colbert Report (Colbert), two of the most discussed humor programs, as part of a genre of news parody, in order to trace the intersection of news and television imitations of news across the last half-century. Second, I juxtapose and attempt to reconcile the often-Balkanized work being conducted in television studies and that of journalism and mass communication. Third, rather than asking how this genre affects politics and journalism, I argue for understanding the programs as alternative forms of journalism, existing within the same discursive field as traditional reporting.

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[1] "News Audiences Increasingly Politicized," The Pew Research Center, http://people-press.org/report/?pageid=834.

News Parody and History

Critics and audiences often invoke older news parody television shows when discussing *TDS* and *Colbert*, yet with few exceptions researchers have curiously ignored these historic predecessors. *TDS* and *Colbert* are embedded in an American culture where television news parody has been nationally circulating since at least the 1960s, encouraging audiences to compare these newer Comedy Central programs to older shows.[2] Rather than treating these contemporary shows as a new phenomena, this study historically links *TDS* and *Colbert* with previous attempts at mock newscasts. Approaching television news parody through the lens of history can mutually illuminate past and contemporary news parody programs, and also create a way of tracing the shifting, interweaving discourses around journalism, politics, and humor within American culture. Presented as a series of case studies, this study analyzes five news parody programs that attempt to satirically mimic the look and tone of television news, ranging from the late 1960s to the present: *That Was the Week That Was* (*TW3*) (1964-65), *Saturday Night Live*'s (*SNL*) Weekend Update (1975-Present), *Not Necessarily the News* (*NNTN*) (1983-1990), *TDS* (1996-Present) and *Colbert* (2005-Present). These shows were chosen partially based on their success, but also because each debuted in a separate decade, providing different windows into culture, industrial practices, and television news norms at the time of conception and initial production.

While my study is structured around individual texts, each program debuted at specific moments in time, marking its own historicity through its engagement with

[2] News parody in other mass media forms obviously predated television, such as *Citizen Kane*'s "March of Time" sequence or Fred Allen's radio segment "The March of Trivia."

surrounding culture. Aniko Bodroghkozy points out that entertainment programming ultimately must engage an audience in a way relevant to their lives in order to find success.[3] Television reacts to cultural trends as much as it helps to create those trends. Some news parody programs, such as *TDS*, have found acceptance within dominant culture, while others, such as *TW3*, did not. Comparing these programs and their critical and popular reception can help trace the shifting contours of acceptable political humor, and of America's declining trust and respect for television news. An underlying assumption of my study is that popular culture engages in the negotiation of cultural hegemony—often reinforcing, but potentially acting to renegotiate or challenge hegemonic formations.[4] Television news parody can be viewed as an intervention into the hegemony of the journalistic field. Comparative analysis of these shows and their surrounding discourses allows for an interrogation of the level of journalistic and cultural hegemonic challenge within each text. My analysis focuses on four key features of the texts: the structural parody of television news, coverage of the U.S. Presidency, enactment of the news anchor's role, and the cultural/political radicalism of each show's humor.[5] I also demonstrate how each show potentially fulfills a journalistic role in its criticism of the press and politics.

Each case study addresses a different decade and a different moment in the industrial process of American television. From the network-dominated era of the late

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[3] Aniko Bodroghkozy, *Groove Tube: Sixties Television and the Youth Rebellion* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001). 3.
[4] For a discussion of popular culture and hegemony, see Stuart Hall, "Notes on Deconstructing 'the Popular'," in *People's History and Socialist Theory*, ed. Raphael Samuel (London: Routledge, 1981).
[5] Although this point will be discussed more fully in the humor chapter, I will be using the levels of humor described by Murray Davis to analyze disruptive humor. Murray Davis, *What's So Funny?: The Comic Conception of Culture and Society* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1993).

1960s to the post-network, multiplatform era of the 2010s, the various programs also reveal shifts in cultural and industrial production through the changing production, distribution, and exhibition of media. In his book on the history of the rerun, Derek Kompare argues that industrial contexts are an important aspect of a text, along with reception.[6] Addressing news parody chronologically allows for an analysis of shifts in production technology, such as the change from film cameras to digital video and the digital distribution of newswire footage, as well as larger structural changes within the industry (including cable television and online video distribution).

The five selected television programs share a degree of crosspollination, encouraging the understanding of individual programs as being in dialogue with previous news parody texts. Both *TW3* and Weekend Update debuted on NBC and shared several writers. *SNL* and *NNTN* likewise shared numerous writers and actors. Stephen Colbert actually developed his namesake reporter character on *TDS* before creating and transferring the role to his own program, which follows *TDS* on Comedy Central. Although there are no direct personnel connections between the two Comedy Central programs and the other shows, *TDS* head writer Ben Karlin has acknowledged the show's similarity to earlier examples of news parody.[7] Approaching the texts as a type of genre allows for comparison between programs already sharing certain creative influences.

In this study I use the term *genre* to describe these news parody programs, while recognizing the polysemic nature of the term. Traditional genre histories tend to begin with a selection of structurally similar texts, and then construct a narrative that accounts for

---

[6] Derek Kompare, *Rerun Nation: How Repeats Invented American Television* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2005). xii.
[7] Olivia Barker, "Look out, Jon Stewart," *USA Today*, November 1, 2004.

shifts between the texts. The analysis often follows an evolutionary model, where a genre develops and is refined, or the researcher connects shifts in generic texts with external factors.[8] In such works emphasis is placed on continuities and internal aspects of the texts over discontinuities and external cultural or political factors. Each of the news parody shows addressed in this study bear some structural similarities to each other and often engage identical topics, chiefly through making reference to the same exterior visual form: television news. However, I avoid making the case they should be viewed as an evolution or refining of any particular form. Nor am I claiming changes in the texts can always be assumed to mirror society. Instead, I argue these news parody programs have become discursively linked to one another through critical and popular writings and that by developing a *mutually* influential relationship with journalism, these programs likewise have entered into a debate of ideas and struggles to define journalism, what Pierre Bourdieu calls the journalistic field.[9]

As purely structuralist approaches to genre have fallen out of favor in television and film studies, alternatives have emerged that emphasize combining audience, industry, text, and other aspects of culture. [10] Rather than viewing texts as the exclusive definer of genre,

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[8] Although this is a general characterization, a number of genre studies with these assumptions also branch out into considerations of audience and industry. Some classic examples of this traditional approach include Thomas Schatz, *Hollywood Genre: Formulas, Filmmaking, and the Studio System* (New York, NY: Random House, 1981). Jane Feuer, "Genre Study and Television," in *Channels of Discourse, Reassembled* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1992).

[9] Pierre Bourdieu, "The Political Field, the Social Science Field, and the Journalistic Field," in *Bourdieu and the Journalistic Field*, ed. Rodney Benson and Erik Neveu (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2005).

[10] See, for example, the writings in Nick Browne, ed. *Refiguring American Film Genres* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1998). & Lincoln Geraghty and Mark Jancovich, eds., *The Shifting Definitions of Genre: Essays on Labeling Films, Television Shows and Media* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2007).

writers have increasingly argued that categories only make sense to texts circulating within culture. Jason Mittell offers one compelling alternative to traditional genre study by emphasizing discourse, arguing that genres are only constituted "through the creation, circulation, and reception of texts within cultural contexts."[11] Mittell shifts genre theory from structuralist approaches to discourse by incorporating Michel Foucault's concept of "genealogy."[12] Foucault rejects traditional concepts of history in his writings, instead tracing genealogies of knowledge, which focus on the shifting discourses and power relationships surrounding institutionalized fields of knowledge, such as mental illness or sexuality.[13] Foucault's approach emphasizes the overdetermined nature of history and how historical narratives become bases for claims about truth and power. Thus, genre becomes a discursive practice, linking texts through popular, industrial, and critical discourse.[14] By approaching news parody as a television genre and connecting the past to the present, the programs can be viewed as comprising a parallel alternative discourse about journalism outside the "official" voices usually sanctioned to participate in the journalistic field.

News Parody: Crossing the Disciplinary Divide

The abundance of recently published research about humor television and politics in the last decade can be broadly categorized along two main currents. On the one hand are

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[11] Jason Mittell, "A Cultural Approach to Television Genre Theory," *Cinema Journal* 40, no. 3 (2001). 8.
[12] ———, *Genre and Television: From Cop Shows to Cartoons in American Culture* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2004).12-15.
[13] See Michel Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York, NY: Pantheon Books, 1984).; ———, *Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. A.M. Sheridan Smith, Routledge Classics (London ; New York: Routledge, 2002).
[14] Mittell, *Genre and Television: From Cop Shows to Cartoons in American Culture*., 13

scholars primarily publishing in journalism outlets, such as those from the Association of Educators in Journalism and Mass Communication (AEJMC) and Broadcast Education Association (BEA). This work tends to be quantitative in nature and attempts to measure the influence of humor programs on politics. Their concern is generally whether humor programs result in a less informed populace and the effect of combining humor and news on the body politic.

The second strand of research comes from a more critical perspective connected with television studies. These articles tend to be qualitative and examine the appeal of certain programs, often *TDS* and *Colbert*. Methodology ranges from ethnography to semiotic and discourse analysis, but an underlying concern for most of this research is the recognition of both the potential and limitations of news parody for radical/substantive political critique.

These two approaches mirror a larger disciplinary divide between journalism (including television journalism) and television studies. There are obviously historic reasons for the parallel course of these disciplines. Journalism entered the academy as a field of inquiry in the first decade of the 20th century and accelerated during the 1920s and '30s, borrowing social-scientific methods.[15] By contrast, television studies struggled through the 1970s to define its object of study and ultimately came to be associated more with qualitative methods borrowed from film studies and cultural studies.[16] The

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[15] Robert W. McChesney, *The Problem of the Media: U.S. Communication Politics in the 21st Century* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2004). 60-66.; Michael Schudson, *Origins of the Ideal of Objectivity in the Professions: Studies in the History of American Journalism and American Law, 1830-1940* (New York, NY: Garland Publishing, 1990). Chapter 7.
[16] See, for instance, Horace Newcomb and Paul M. Hirsch, "Television as a Cultural Forum," *Quarterly Review of Film Studies* 8, no. 3 (1983). & Charlotte Brunsdon, "What Is the

"journalism" of television journalism has consistently trumped the "television" part of the equation, with few historic exceptions.[17] One goal of my research project is to encourage the further bridging of this divide between the two literatures, to bring television studies and journalism studies into greater contact. An underlying assumption of my work is that each field of inquiry can benefit from more cross-pollination, and that television studies and journalism research might mutually illuminate each other's blind spots.

News Parody as Journalism

The last major goal of this study is to firmly embed the genre of news parody within the broader field of journalism as an element that critiques and corrects current journalistic practice in America and incorporates journalistic methods to create a supplementary coverage of news. Traditional journalism studies assume comedy shows to be an object of study existing apart from mainstream news media. This division incorporates an underlying assumption that employees of comedy shows and journalists recognize this partition, and more importantly, that audiences likewise make such a distinction. Given studies that show audiences use comedy shows as a source of news this assumption is particularly perplexing. Still, researchers, especially from journalism and mass communication, tend to discursively separate comedy from journalism.

Television of Television Studies?," in *The Television Studies Book*, ed. Christine Geraghty and David Lusted (London: Arnold, 1998).

[17] For some rare examples of the convergence of television studies and journalism, see John Hartley, *Understanding News* (London: Methuen, 1982); John Fiske, *Television Culture* (London: Routledge, 1987); Richard Campbell, *60 Minutes and the News: A Mythology for Middle America* (Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1991); Jimmie Reeves and Richard Campbell, *Cracked Coverage: Television News, the Anti-Cocaine Crusade, and the Reagan Legacy* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1994); Todd Gitlin, *The Whole World Is Watching: Mass Media in the Making and Unmaking of the New Left*, 2nd ed. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003).

Moving existing debates in a new direction, I argue in this dissertation that news parody programs increasingly circulate within the same discursive realm as traditional news within what Bourdieu calls the "journalistic field."[18] Fields, for Bourdieu, refers to the contested space within which individuals struggle for position, as well as the social practices and participants within that particular field. Rather than argue whether news parody satisfies certain definitions or functions of journalism, this study makes the case that news parody programs participate within the journalistic field, although with varying positions and distribution of capital and power. Other television shows not identified as news have likewise historically circulated within the journalistic and political fields through scripted storylines, such as *Lou Grant* (1977-1982), *Murphy Brown* (1988-1998), and *The West Wing* (1999-2006). Contemporary news parody, however, embedded itself in the field through its constant engagement with questions of journalism and politics. In fact news parody functions as a type of alternative journalistic practice, in the same way as advocacy journalism—on the fringes of accepted practice, but within the same field. More recent programs such as *TDS* and *Colbert* participate more fully than previous shows, like *TW3* and *NNTN*, due to their increased cultural capital. Unlike genre, which focuses on the text and discourse about the text, field theory envisions the power relationships and social practices of a given field. I use both genre and field theory in researching news parody in order to interrogate the text and to move beyond the text to question how certain television shows interact with the larger journalistic field and the intersecting political field.

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[18] Bourdieu, "The Political Field, the Social Science Field, and the Journalistic Field."

Genre and the marketing of programming are two factors furthering the traditional division between comedy and news; however, there is also a rhetorical separation partially based in American journalism's reliance on objectivity and its historically uncomplicated assumptions about defining and ensuring it. Objectivity exists as an ideology singularly focused on the gathering and presentation of facts, unencumbered by the impossibility of removing information from the realm of opinion. Routines of reporting often lead to gathering opposing viewpoints and presenting conflicting accounts, as if the process removes reporter bias. Journalism adopted concepts of objectivity from the natural sciences in the early 20th century. Since that time, objectivity has become the structuring center within the larger discourse of journalism. Critics have argued at least since the McCarthy era that the limitations of the model of objectivity have damaged the media's ability to inform. This dissertation demonstrates how different iterations of news parody historically both challenged and, in some ways, replicated the failings of the American media's default tactics, including the concept of journalistic objectivity.

Review of Literature – Journalism Studies

The balkanization of journalism and television studies convinced me in the early parts of my work on this dissertation that at least two distinct reviews of literature would be necessary. First, I examine the writings of critical journalism studies and the major critiques of the American press illuminated by that field. The next section summarizes recent writings and contemporary perspectives on news parody.

Called the Fourth Estate, the public watchdog, in history and civics classrooms across America, the press is mythologized and nearly deified. The lessons elevate the

journalist to the role of freedom fighter: colonial printers waged a war of words for independence, the press was enshrined in the Bill of Rights, and reporters have brought down the powerful and mighty by illuminating wrongdoing. This historic importance of press freedom to a functioning democracy is one of the structuring myths of American history, along with other metanarratives like the "American Dream" of prosperity. Unfortunately, despite the unspoken assumption that a free press leads to freedom, few people across the political spectrum actually believe the press is adequately serving the public good, or even delivering accurate information.[19] This disconnect between press idealism and press reality is a central concern for journalism scholars. Rather than providing a rich debate on issues and ideas in society, the current state of journalism and politics has resulted in many citizens simply withdrawing and condemning both politicians and the press. This section outlines key assumptions about the role of journalism in America by surveying the literature on three key questions: What is news? Why does news matter? What is the role of the journalist? I then proceed to examine major specific criticisms of the contemporary media.

What is News?

Journalism 101 classes usually have several descriptions to convey the concept of news. News is the proverbial "what, when, where, why and how." News is a break from the everyday. News is "man bites dog." News is identified by the traditional elements of newsworthiness. These definitions are so conventionalized that in his basic history of

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[19] A 2009 Pew Survey, for instance, found the lowest public ranking of accuracy for the press in two decades. "Press Accuracy Rating Hits Two Decade Low," The Pew Research Center, http://people-press.org/report/543/.

news, Mitchell Stephens questionably proclaims concepts of news as historically and culturally universal.[20] However, not all news is considered equal. Dominant visions of news create value systems by which to judge whether texts are more or less *pure* in their adherence to this vision. As a result, the definition of news becomes an exclusionary tactic for rejecting certain texts not adhering to official codes, such as news parody.

Journalism scholars commonly divide stories into the seemingly naturalized categories of "hard" news and "soft" news.[21] Reporters assume explicit facts about public policy, economics, business, and other topics connected to preparing citizens to engage in representative democracy constitute the "valid" scope of journalism, what the industry calls hard news. Such coverage often emphasizes government and politicians in stories. By contrast, soft news focuses on entertainment, celebrities, emotional stories, human interest, in other words, news with no lasting impact that is devalued by journalism traditionalists. W. Lance Bennett points out how lines between soft and hard news can seem indistinguishable in actual practice. Crime, for instance, can be covered as hard or soft news, so Bennett suggest asking whether a story illuminates public-policy issues in order to differentiate.[22] Far from a merely descriptive categorical divide, many journalists view hard news as the core function of journalism, while soft news is seen as distracting filler at best and at worst, a betrayal of the true calling of the press.

Largely absent from the discussion of soft versus hard news is how setting up such a dichotomy normalizes a hierarchical assumption about the value of the tastes of one group

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[20] Mitchell Stephens, *A History of News*, 3rd ed. (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2007). Chapter 2.
[21] For example, see W. Lance Bennett, *The Politics of Illusion*, 8th ed. (White Plains, NY: Longman, 2008). 21-24.
[22] Ibid., 21.

over another. Bourdieu points out how the dominance of one set of taste preferences results from the accumulation of cultural capital by elites. [23] The seeming greater worth of hard news is naturalized and hides the underlying cultural logic such a distinction is based upon. In addition, the hard and soft divide unescapably taps into notions of gender and taste values. Traits coded as "feminine" within dominant culture, such as emotionalism and anti-intellectualism, become associated with the devalued category of soft news. Even the designation of "soft" evokes discourses about the feminine body, as opposed to the "hard," muscular male body. News directors act to protect citizens from themselves by minimizing their daily dose of soft, feminine news.

This distinction between hard and soft news is mirrored in a much older debate within the journalism field between the informational and entertainment roles of the press. Predating the period of "yellow journalism" at the end of the 19th century, the uneasy dance between titillating and educating goes back to the very beginnings of America.[24] The colonies' first multi-page newspaper, *Publik Occurrences Both Forreign and Domestick* (1690), carried both scathing reports of the actions of Native Americans connected to British troops and a rumor of the King of France's affair with his daughter-in-law.[25] Rather than coming down firmly on the side of entertainment or information, future publications continued to walk a line between the two extremes well into the incorporation of professional journalism standards in the 20th century. While distinctions of hard and soft

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[23] Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984).
[24] For discussions of pre-colonial types of entertainment stories, see Michael Schudson, *Discovering the News: A Social History of American Newspapers* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1978); Stephens, *A History of News*: Chapter 7.
[25] Benjamin Harris' approach to combining information and entertainment resulted, of course, in Boston immediately shutting down the paper and jailing Harris.

news are often used to identify story types, informational and entertainment functions are invoked as metacategories to describe specific news texts or even entire genres of texts. In keeping with the perceived inequality of the two categories, for news outlets to claim the mantle of "informational" is to claim legitimacy within the public arena and the field of news production.[26] By imposing this stark either/or categorization of news versus fluff, press advocates ignore the reality that all news outlets feature stories that might be popularly characterized as *both* entertainment *and* information. Robert Love contextualizes the blending of content by pointing out that salacious entertainment and out-right lies often mixed with journalism in mainstream newspapers of the 1800s and early-20th Century. Benjamin Day's moon reports and stories from the publishing wars of Hearst and Pulitzer saw no bright dividing line between soft and hard news, and in an era of public relations video news releases and government-paid columnists, rhetoric about the purity of news is both anti-historical and perhaps hopelessly optimistic.[27] Rather than act as if these categories are dichotomous, a more honest and probably useful way of framing the issue might be to examine how entertainment and information work simultaneously within a text as separate sliding scales. PBS host Jim Lehrer illustrated how the press has internalized this traditional divide when he told an audience, "I tell people all the time 'if you want to be entertained, go to the circus, don't watch *The NewsHour*.' I never want

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[26] Schudson also points out how the information model appealed more to the middle and upper classes, further legitimizing news outlets through the social power of their audience. Schudson, *Discovering the News: A Social History of American Newspapers*: 90.
[27] Robert Love, "Before Jon Stewart, The Truth About Fake News. Believe It.," *Columbia Journalism Review* (2007).

anybody to confuse the news with entertainment."[28] The puritanical attitude towards entertainment embodied in Lehrer's quote is often the reaction occasioned by claims that news parody might function as both entertainment *and* information. However, Lehrer's viewpoint ignores the embedding of journalism within culture, where functions of the news media extend to a variety of content not normally accepted as news.[29] In this study I argue exactly that news parody can at once cover news and also seek to maximize audience enjoyment.

Defining "news" would be unimportant if the stakes were not so high. An informed population is the backbone of a functioning democracy. Citizens are thought to only be able to safeguard their freedoms and make sound political decisions when they can receive news. Research supports some assumptions about the connection between news and political knowledge, showing a positive correlation between the two.[30] Despite the importance of news, one undeniable finding of journalism research is that overall news consumption has decreased—especially over the last three decades.[31] Television news

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[28] Jim Lehrer, "Guidelines for Journalism Professionals: A Broadcast Journalist's Views," in *The Politics of News: The News of Politics* ed. Doris A. Graber, Denis McQuail, and Pippa Norris (Washington, D.C.: CQ Press, 2008), 62.
[29] See Barbie Zelizer, "How Communication, Culture, and Critique Intersect in the Study of Journalism," *Communication, Culture & Critique* 1, no. 1 (2008): 88.
[30] Bennett, *The Politics of Illusion*: 2. Another study from Jamieson & Hardy found consuming news increases the likelihood of respondents correctly identifying true and false political claims. Kathleen Hall Jamieson and Bruce W. Hardy, "Unmasking Deception: The Function and Failures of the Press," in *The Politics of News: The News of Politics* ed. Doris A. Graber, Denis McQuail, and Pippa Norris (Washington, D.C.: CQ Press, 2008).
[31] See, for instance, Thomas Patterson, "Doing Well and Doing Good: How Soft News and Critical Journalism Are Shrinking the News Audience and Weakening Democracy—and What News Outlets Can Do About It," in *Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics, and Public Policy* (Harvard University, 2000).

watching peaked during the 1960s and '70s.[32] Newspaper readership continues to decline, and at a far greater rate than online news consumption has increased.[33] Jeremy Tunstall argues that American media companies were the dominant international force by 1947, but began a steady decline with the rise of homegrown media outlets in other parts of the world and an increasing perception of government propaganda in U. S. news reports.[34] The global loss of faith in American media hegemony mirrors the continual erosion of trust from the American public itself.

The Role of the Journalist

Reporters may still trot out the old maxim that the job of a journalist is to "comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable," but this populist sentiment contradicts the dominant role of the American press today. Rather than the tenacious muckraking the cliché would suggest, reporters for mainstream outlets have a standardized routine that often obscures who is afflicted and who is comfortable. Jack Fuller, utilizing the work of Walter Lippmann, summarizes the hallmarks of this "Standard Model of Professional Journalism" as "accuracy, disinterestedness in reporting, independence from the people and organizations reported upon or affected by the report, a mode of presentation sometimes called objective or neutral, and the clear labeling of what is fact and what is

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[32] Marcus Prior, *Post-Broadcast Democracy: How Media Choice Increases Inequality in Political Involvement and Polarizes Elections* (Cambridge, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2007). 256.
[33] "Newspapers Face a Challenging Calculus," The Pew Research Center, http://pewresearch.org/pubs/1133/decline-print-newspapers-increased-online-news.
[34] Jeremy Tunstall, *The Media Were American: U. S. Media in Decline* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2008). 70, 89-92.

opinion."[35] Polls consistently show a vast majority of reporters both accept and endorse this approach to reporting. For instance, 91% of U.S. journalists considered objectivity "very important" in one study, while 7 of 10 journalists in another survey agreed with the statement that they could "cover events in a disinterested and fair way."[36] The standard model of professional journalism is the process taught in universities across the United States and often is considered a hallmark of the American press.

Although major American media trade groups, such as the Society of Professional Journalists, endorse this dominant model of reporting, there is variance within the profession. While some critics, such as Robert McChesney and Noam Chomsky, characterize the media as monolithic and almost interchangeable, the variety of models for journalism and objectivity is growing, especially due to increasingly cheap methods of digital production and distribution.[37] Ultimately, journalists become mediators between the larger world and their audience—whether presenting news of government or Hollywood.

Doris A. Graber offers a useful structure for understanding the role of the reporter, using the terms "libertarian" versus "social responsibility" to describe two stances a reporter can adopt when covering a story.[38] The libertarian approach emphasizes distance,

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[35] Jack Fuller, *What Is Happening to News: The Information Explosion and the Crisis in Journalism* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2010). 12.
[36] Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel, *The Elements of Journalism: What Newspeople Should Know and the Public Should Expect* (New York, NY: Three Rivers Press, 2001). 47; Thomas E. Patterson, "Political Roles of the Journalist," in *The Politics of News: The News of Politics* ed. Doris A. Graber, Denis McQuail, and Pippa Norris (Washington, D.C.: CQ Press, 2008), 28.
[37] Robert W. McChesney, *Rich Media, Poor Democracy : Communication Politics in Dubious Times*, The History of Communication (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999); Noam Chomsky, *Media Control: The Spectacular Achievements of Propoganda*, 2nd ed. (New York, NY: Seven Stories Press, 2002).
[38] Doris A. Graber, *Mass Media & American Politics*, 7th ed. (Washington, DC: CQ Press, 2006).

observation, and a focus on increasing audience size. Graber uses the term "libertarian" to connect the professional, for-profit press with their routines, which are meant to ensure economic success and minimize political interference. By contrast, social-responsibility reporting advocates an active role for the journalist, in pursuit of a greater good—although a definition of "good" depends on underlying ideology.[39] Therefore, one way of describing news parody's coverage of politics is its reliance on a libertarian, or social-responsibility method of reporting. As described in the body of the study, shows like *TW3* and *TDS* create a criticism grounded in an advocacy of progressive politics, functioning in the non-objective journalistic method of libertarian reporters. Graber's recognition of economic and professional pressures on a reporter's stance towards newsgathering makes her model useful for a critical-analysis perspective.

The Problem of Objectivity

An underlying factor for both Graber and Patterson is how reporters view the concept of journalistic objectivity—whether the press see themselves as observers or teachers. Objectivity has become both a foundational goal for many American journalists and the central point of critique for its critics. Critics dismiss the concept as at best, unattainable, and at worst, willfully manipulative or tendentious. Still, despite assaults from seemingly all sides, objectivity remains the central ethos of the American journalistic system. Because many attacks on the media stem from its reliance on objectivity, I briefly summarize and historicize the concept before proceeding to an analysis and synthesis of other specific criticisms of the press.

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[39] Ibid., 21.

Although scholars disagree about *when* the concept of objectivity first appeared in American media, there is general consensus the press moved toward a more unified, professional approach to reporting between World War I and the Great Depression—an approach with its foundations in the ideal of objectivity. Journalists attempt to gather facts without presuppositions and assemble those facts to convey information gathered from external sources. Michael Schudson, who studies the press from a sociological perspective, claims that objectivity is not simply a method, but "a moral philosophy, a declaration of what kind of thinking one should engage in, in making moral decisions."[40] Schudson's view highlights the centrality of objectivity to the contemporary press—far from simply a work routine; it is the essence of modern journalism. But it *is* a routine—a *way* of gathering news—where official sources, verification, dispassionate language, focused topics, and policing of opinion create stories that purport to approach a higher level of *truth*.

A number of events combined in the 1920s to place objectivity at the center of American journalism, including public exhaustion with the excesses of yellow journalism and muckraking, the increasing professionalism of the press through trade organizations, and the establishment of journalism programs in universities. In 1923 the American Society of Newspaper Editors endorsed their "Canons of Journalism," which includes impartiality and the removal of bias from reporting. Journalism historians suggest other, underlying factors also contributed to the embrace of objectivity, including cultural shifts and economic factors.

A prevailing narrative of the rise of journalistic objectivity points to society's increasing faith in science and modernization. Barbara M. Kelly, for instance, claims

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[40] Schudson, *Discovering the News: A Social History of American Newspapers*: 8.

objectivity coincided with "a new faith in the existence of a pure truth unaffected by the trappings of power or belief," a turn towards science.[41] Making a more epistemological argument, Schudson sees the turn towards objectivity as an attempt to mask society's discontent following World War I, when "the worth of the democratic market society was itself radically questioned and its internal logic laid bare," leading to a general societal skepticism.[42] Science, democracy, and economics all failed to deliver on their promises, so for Schudson, objectivity amounted to a method for testing alleged facts that no longer seemed to hold their commanding veracity. Rather than objectivity leading to truth, the very process acknowledges truth's problematic status. The conflict between the scientific and journalistic version of objectivity is a favorite topic of contemporary news parody programs like *TDS* and *Colbert*. Fox News' appeals to objectivity through their "we report, you decide" tag line, yet the Comedy Central shows continually debunk this claim by airing frequent moments of partisanship by the cable news network.

Other researchers explain the appearance of objectivity as a response to industry pressures. Richard L. Kaplan describes how political parties provided financial support for newspapers after America's founding, during the "partisan press" era. Despite a turn toward advertising, Kaplan claims that newspapers continued to remain strongly allied with parties up until the turn of the 20th century, and that this relationship provided

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[41] Barbara M. Kelly, "Objectivity and the Trappings of Professionalism, 1900-1950," in *Fair & Balanced: A History of Journalistic Objectivity* ed. Steven R. Knowlton and Karen L. Freeman (Northport, AL: Vision Press, 2005), 154.
[42] Schudson, *Discovering the News: A Social History of American Newspapers*: 122.

newspapers with social legitimacy to participate in the public sphere.[43] Objectivity became a new justification for the press's role in public communication after losing party affiliation.

Kelly and McChesney also turn to economics to explain the professional shift towards objectivity; however, they claim an underlying power struggle was at the heart of the change. The proliferation of reporters and the growing size of newsrooms meant that publishers and editors had less direct control over news content. Kelly suggests objectivity was a way for owners to prevent individual reporters from including their beliefs in their reportage, while editors and publishers could still take to the editorial page to espouse their own.[44] Rather than an interior struggle for control, McChesney views the adoption of objectivity as a way for the media industry to create more autonomy from exterior forces, particularly the government.[45] From this perspective, the core of objectivity is a desire to insulate the media industry and media owners from criticism and potential regulatory action. If outlets are simply reporting factual truth, then it makes no difference what media cover a story, the corporate structured of the organization, where financing originates, or any other variables—because "truth is truth."

Contemporary discourse theory provides a theoretical framework to help understand why objectivity might actually damage journalistic efforts towards truth telling. Journalism, like any discourse, both limits and enables signifying practices. Journalism has

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[43] Richard L. Kaplan, *Politics and the American Press: The Rise of Objectivity, 1865-1920* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2002). 2.
[44] Kelly, "Objectivity and the Trappings of Professionalism, 1900-1950," 157. Objectivity has also been used as an exclusionary tactic to reinforce gender hierarchy. For instance, early journalism textbooks claimed women were too emotional to approach stories from an objective stance. See Maurine H. Beasley and Joseph A. Mirando, "Objectivity and Journalism Education," in *Fair & Balanced: A History of Journalistic Objectivity* ed. Steven R. Knowlton and Karen L. Freeman (Northport, AL: Vision Press, 2005).
[45] McChesney, *The Problem of the Media: U.S. Communication Politics in the 21st Century*: 64.

a set of pre-established signifying practices imbued with specific meaning within the linguistic/symbolic realm of journalism. Words such as "sources, officials and verification" stand in for established conventions structured by journalistic discourse. Theories of discourse create a lens for understanding how objectivity acts as a limiting factor on the whole system and how it ultimately dooms efforts to educate the public.

The pursuit of objectivity is bound up in the desire for the reporter to uncover unbiased truth. If the purpose of journalism is to educate the populace and empower them to take political action in their own interest, then it is assumed that reporters can best accomplish that goal by seeking truth without allegiance to power. Although this may be a lofty ambition, we immediately encounter two problems. First, such sentiments ignore the possibility that there is no "truth" unaffected by power relations and outside the realm of personal bias. Second, this aspiration to uncover truth stands in stark contrast to the media reality of how journalism is practiced in America.

Journalism, like all discursive fields, attempts to arrest the play of signification within the discourse and to close itself off as a system in order to finally say, "*this* is journalism," and to ultimately define all elements of the system. Within journalistic discourse, I argue that objectivity has become what Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe would call a *nodal point*, a concept that attempts to stop the play of signifiers and to structure the field of discursivity.[46] Such nodal points attempt to create a center for the system by temporarily fixing meaning; however, they actually reveal the absence of a center and the unstable character of the discursive system. In the case of journalism, objectivity is deployed to desperately hide the absent center: *politically neutral truth*.

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[46] Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (New York, NY: Verso, 1992). 112.

According to Laclau, the center of any system of signification is empty, with the system unable to produce the object required by its systematicity—at the center is an *empty signifier*.[47] In journalism, objective truth is the ultimate empty signifier—the system is structured around it, but it cannot exist. Objectivity, as a discursive construct, must do the ideological work of creating a facsimile of truth.

Journalists, like scientists, wish to approach facts without having them distorted by any intervening forces, thereby ignoring the always-already distorted form of these "facts." Foucault, among others, has argued that the very notion of truth is never unbiased. Foucault suggests "'truth' is linked in a circular relation with systems of power which produce and sustain it, and to effects of power which it induces and which extends it."[48] In other words, to define and label truth is to unavoidably be caught in a power-struggle, because truth is both a tool and product of power. As a nodal point, objectivity attempts to elide the lack of absolute truth in the system and to suture that lack. Journalists are taught that seeking objectivity will inevitably lead to a purer truth. However, rather than securing truth, as journalistic discourse insists, objectivity actually ends up signifying truth's absence from the system.

Contemporary Press Criticism

The academic field of journalism is incredibly rich and varied, running the gamut from positivist research growing out of uses and gratifications and agenda-setting to Marxist textual analysis. Although the spirit of American journalism is often celebrated

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[47] Ernesto Laclau, *Emancipation(s)* (London, England: Verso, 1996). 38-39.
[48] Michel Foucault, "Truth and Power," in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York, NY: Pantheon Books, 1984), 74.

within scholarship, McChesney points out that radical critique has been the dominant historic intellectual stance towards the actual functioning of American journalism.[49] This dissertation primarily intersects with scholarship being written by what might be called "critical journalism" scholars, specifically researchers utilizing political economy, discourse theory, and Pierre Bourdieu's field theory. These critical theoretical approaches view journalistic practice as particularly problematic, given the importance of the press in establishing an informed populace, while most writers in the field assume journalists should lean towards a social-responsibility model of journalism advocating for a greater good. General complaints include increased commercialism, laziness, abdication of responsibility to public relations and government entities, increased reliance on celebrity and entertainment news, a decline in investigative journalism, and an ever-intensifying focus on immediacy. Neil Henry, for instance, views the press as having betrayed its calling, and claims, "In key ways, journalistic corruption inflicts more significant damage to the fabric of a free society today than systemic dishonesty in most other institutions in American life."[50] Even though Henry is an extreme example, critical journalism studies traditionally does approach the issue of the American press from the perspective of changing structures and practices to create a *better* journalism more response to citizens. Critical journalism may encompass distinct theoretical traditions, but a number of common critiques of contemporary media emerge from these bodies of literature. In the following sections I synthesize these conversations to identify the kinds of problems plaguing American journalism, and also to form a foundation for how television news parody might

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[49] Robert W. McChesney, *The Political Economy of Media: Enduring Issues, Emerging Dilemmas* (New York, NY: Monthly Review Press, 2008). 70.
[50] Neil Henry, *American Carnival: Journalism under Siege in an Age of New Media* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2007). 41.

engage these issues and open up space for working through some problems facing television news in particular. Categories of criticism are broken into: the media industry and its structure, story development and perspective, journalistic construction of reality, and specific issues relating to television's formatting and presentation.

Media industry and structure

The most wide-reaching arguments about the state of American media focus on the structure and functioning of the industry as a whole. Scholars working within political economy argue that the current free-market, multinational organization of the media is at odds with a press meant to inform and safeguard freedoms. By tying news to advertising dollars, an environment is created where chasing audience members is the primary goal—so viewers can then be sold to advertisers.[51] As a result, news is primarily geared towards a younger, financially successful demographic, almost ensuring society's least powerful segments find little access to media or content that resonates, either in content or format.[52] Financial links to advertisers and parent media companies often create conflicts of interest, where following certain stories or contacts are encouraged or discouraged. As an example, when the Fox network was featuring the successful program *The X-Files*, the news division of the network regularly offered stories about aliens or the paranormal for local news programs to promote during the actual *X-Files* show. The stories were obviously created to

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[51] Such economic critiques are certainly not limited to political economics. Kovach & Rosenstiel, who are highly mainstream in terms of journalism scholarship, actually see some correlation between the manipulation of news for profit with the information control practiced by totalitarian regimes. Kovach and Rosenstiel, *The Elements of Journalism: What Newspeople Should Know and the Public Should Expect*: 11.

[52] For an interesting discussion of the effect of seeking younger demographics on television news content, see Graber, *Mass Media & American Politics*: 111-14.

try to hook viewers into continuing to watch, and to create synergy between the network entertainment program and local news affiliates. McChesney points out how conflicts of interest can silence the press. For instance, The Telecommunication Act of 1996, a sweeping bill with huge consequences for the major media companies, received virtually no news coverage, either of the congressional debate or the bill itself.[53] McChesney claims that the press regularly distorts or ignores stories with either the potential to influence their finances or to place restrictions upon their free-market model.[54]

Economics is also a factor in the continual declining budgets and staffing cuts in newsrooms across America. The drop in investigative reporting is among the most obvious effects of budget cuts. Research costs money and investigative journalism can become potentially sticky for multinational corporations with broad financial interests. Money can affect even the most basic of journalistic functions, as Lisa Finnegan shows in her analysis of news coverage after the 9/11 attacks, where she points to staffing cuts as one reason that many Bush-administration facts were never checked.[55] Financial pressures can also have less obvious effects, such as altering the behavior of journalists. The lack of employment contracts, low wages, and the need for higher education creates an economic structure with high entry barriers and low security, which discourages reporters from taking risks.[56] Linda Foley provides a concrete example of the problem of job security for reporters, discussing how a *Cincinnati Enquirer* reporter was first lauded and then fired after writing an investigative piece on the powerful, local Chiquita Brands International

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[53] McChesney, *The Problem of the Media: U.S. Communication Politics in the 21st Century*: 51-56.
[54] Ibid., 63.
[55] Lisa Finnegan, *No Questions Asked: News Coverage since 9/11* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2007). Chapter 7.
[56] Bourdieu, "The Political Field, the Social Science Field, and the Journalistic Field," 42-43.

produce company. The firing took place only two years after employees of the paper lost union representation that would have provided increased protection for the reporter.[57] Therefore, both hiring and operating budgets directly affect the quality of news being produced.

Another often-discussed problem with the current media structure relating to business pressures is the creation of an "echo chamber." Reporters become engrossed in the inside game of politics and also regularly check their competition for news items, resulting in a highly constrained, redundant set of topics. As a result, a small number of powerful media corporations and political figures wield immense power to set the news agenda. Some critics claim that mainstream news has almost become one single entity, covering similar if not identical stories. Bennett points out that Thomas Jefferson expected citizens would read partisan news, but from a variety of viewpoints, so they would be exposed to different ideas.[58] Today's media environment carries essentially identical ideas, just in different forms. One reason is an obsession with immediacy. Reporters feel obligated to release information almost immediately upon encountering it, often without taking time to check facts or contextualize. Journalists Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel refer to modern newsgathering as a "journalism of assertion," based on facts reporters find in other sources, rather than a "journalism of verification," where reporters find information themselves.[59] Even the Internet, which has created an opening for new voices and more expansive coverage, has also intensified certain mainstream routines, such as the obsession with

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[57] Linda Foley, "Media Reform from the inside Out: The Newspaper Guild-CWA," in *The Future of Media: Resistance and Reform in the 21st Century*, ed. Robert W. McChesney, Russell Newman, and Ben Scott (New York, NY: Seven Stories Press, 2005), 45.
[58] Bennett, *The Politics of Illusion*: 36.
[59] Kovach and Rosenstiel, *The Elements of Journalism: What Newspeople Should Know and the Public Should Expect*: 75-77.

speed. One study found new technology merely reinforced journalists' use of existing sources and mimicry of competitors, rather than altering practices.[60] The common content of mainstream news creates a narrow perspective, careful to replicate what other media already discuss.

A contributing factor to the lack of content variety could very well be a lack of diversity in the newsroom itself. Newsrooms suffer from abysmally narrow racial diversity. Former CNN reporter Bonne Anderson, in her book *News Flash*, describes being stunned by management's lack of knowledge about racial diversity and their apathy towards hiring non-white anchors and hosts.[61] A 2009 survey by the American Society of Newspaper Editors confirm Anderson's anecdotal account, finding 458 newspapers had no full-time employees of color *at all* on their staff, and that the overall percentage of minorities working at newspapers in America remains around 13%, drastically below the national census levels that show 25% of Americans identifying as non-white.[62] Of the journalists responding to a 2004 Pew Center poll, only 13% identified as racial minorities. In addition, females represented only 33% of respondents, while 94% graduated from college.[63] As these figures suggest, journalism remains a profession dominated by white, well-educated

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[60] Pablo J. Boczkowski, "Materiality and Mimicry," in *The Changing Faces of Journalism: Tabloidization, Technology, and Truthiness*, ed. Barbie Zelizer (London, England: Routledge, 2009).
[61] Bonnie Anderson, *News Flash: Journalism, Infotainment, and the Bottom-Line Business of Broadcast News* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2004). Chapter 3.
[62] "U.S. Newsroom Employment Declines," (2009), http://asne.org/article_view/smid/370/articleid/12.aspx. See also Lawrence T. McGill, "Newsroom Diversity: Meeting the Challenge.," *The Freedom Forum*(2000), http://www.freedomforum.org/publications/diversity/meetingthechallenge/meetingthechallenge.pdf.
[63] Cited in Graber, *Mass Media & American Politics*: 87.

men, correspondingly limited in vision and scope of experience, with predictable implications for worldview and assumptions.

The corporate and economic pressures of the American media system have created news outlets beholden to advertisers, and willing to sacrifice news depth and quality for greater shareholder profits. News parody, by contrast, offers its own commentary on the business of news, often mentioning the tangled economics and conflicts of interest in the media, such as a *TDS* story describing how CNBC host Jim Cramer appeared on other NBC properties to defend himself against criticism. However, news parody shows are embedded within the larger media economy, sustained through advertising and other financing. So, while news parody only rarely acknowledges its own compromises, the genre does shine a light on the industrial and economic structure of traditional journalism.

Story development and perspective

As a highly ritualized profession, journalism developed a workflow—routines of reporting meant to standardize their product and safeguard against bias. Bennett, who writes extensively on the norms created by the press, warns that "American journalism may have become trapped within an unworkable set of professional standards, with the result that the more objective or fair reporters try to be, the more official bias they introduce into the news."[64] The problem of abdicating control begins at the very first stage of story development and continues throughout the final edits of news reports.

Reporters who subscribe to prevailing standards of objectivity *look* for stories. In other words, news items tend to spring from events or "happenings." However, there is a

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[64] Bennett, *The Politics of Illusion*: 155., 155.

complex web of political, marketing, and public-relations players all attempting to gain attention and manipulate journalists. The volume of press releases, prepackaged video stories, reports, phone calls, informational dossiers, invitations to conferences, and other potential sources of "information" coming into a newsroom is staggering. Combined with the economic cutbacks and the pressures of consistently churning out increasing numbers of stories day after day, even the most hardened media critic can understand why reporters sometimes turn to these easy, already-existing story ideas. Depending on such sources often results in propaganda draped in the form of objective news. On the other hand, reporters need outside perspective, and contact with other professional fields to prevent journalism from becoming myopic and unresponsive to the public.[65]

Government agencies, especially, have become increasingly active and blatant in trying to shape the news agenda. In its first term, the Bush administration spent $254 million on outside public relations contracts, double what the second Clinton administration spent; that figure does not even account for actual administration employees committed to shaping the news.[66] Video news releases (VNRs) are a prime example of such activities, where public relations agencies create a pre-packaged "story" with a fake reporter. Newscasts can then drop VNRs into their coverage, appearing to originate from a local reporter. This process is especially problematic because some agencies pay content providers like CNN and Fox to distribute VNRs packaged with other wire stories to their affiliates—so local news stations may actually run VNRs without

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[65] Bourdieu, "The Political Field, the Social Science Field, and the Journalistic Field."; Michael Schudson, "Autonomy from What? ," in *Bourdieu and the Journalistic Field*, ed. Rodney Benson and Erik Neveu (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2005).
[66] David Barstow and Robin Stein, "Under Bush, a New Age of Prepackaged TV News," *New York Times*, March 13, 2005.

knowing the source of the report.[67] VNRs are only a small part of the manipulation efforts of the government. Another particularly egregious example occurred when the Bush administration planted a fake correspondent in the White House press corps to ask leading questions to government employees.[68] Jeff Gannon, the supposed representative of Talon News, was "outed" by the press, including *TDS*, which was amongst the first news outlets to question his credentials. Unfortunately, the incident hardly registered in mainstream news coverage, possibly due to the prevalence of similar government propaganda efforts. In reaction, some press critics advocate a return to emphasizing accountability by those in power, whether government or private, and call for a number of initiatives, such as greater accessibility to government information and public/private funding of news—suggestions inconceivable in today's partisan and secretive environment.[69]

The emphasis of reporters on objective story development encourages a focus on "happenings." Conceptually, this usually means physical occurrences, making the news event-driven, emphasizing observable phenomena. Bennett refers to this as the "documentary reporting practices" of journalists.[70] The field of vision is thought to be free from bias, or at least can be attributed to source bias. As a result, "eyewitness" accounts become the gold standard of reporting. An emphasis on the *seen* ultimately results in a lack of deeper analysis. Therefore, the very form of modern journalism develops an automatic

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[67] Finnegan describes how VNRs were picked up by local affiliates in coverage of 9/11 and the war on terror. Finnegan, *No Questions Asked: News Coverage since 9/11*: Chapter 7.
[68] The administration actually denied planting Gannon, but given his access, it seems unlikely Gannon worked totally independent of the White House.
[69] Leonard Downie Jr. and Michael Schudson, "The Reconstruction of American Journalism," *Columbia Journalism Review* (2009).
[70] Bennett, *The Politics of Illusion*: 192.

bias towards events and away from fundamental issues, policy debates, and the connections between events and larger societal debates.[71]

Either in tandem with or after developing story ideas, reporters begin the newsgathering process of talking with sources. These "newsmakers," such as politicians, government officials, business executives, and entertainers, already tend to wield agenda-setting power. A major factor in source credibility is the title of a person. Previous media exposure also counts towards credibility, further strengthening the previously discussed group-think mentality and echo chamber of the press. As a result, reporters seek out the same types of news sources, if not the exact same people. In their quest to appear unbiased, "news organizations default to authorities and officials as surrogates for objectivity."[72] Potential discourse around any particular news item becomes severely limited by only introducing the viewpoints of individuals already officially sanctioned to engage in the debate. Mainstream news lacks counter-voices. Watching reports during a Presidential election rarely yields any mention that third parties actually exist in America. In terms of demographics, a 2001 Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting study found network news dominated by sources that were white (92%), male (85%), and Republican (75%).[73] The absence of diversity in viewpoint mirrors the lack of individual diversity amongst news sources.

Journalists' dependence on official sources continues to be problematic as they begin the process of constructing a story for their particular medium. Reporters strive for

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[71] Schudson, *Discovering the News: A Social History of American Newspapers*: 184-85.
[72] Bennett, *The Politics of Illusion*: 185. See also McChesney, *The Problem of the Media: U.S. Communication Politics in the 21st Century*: 68-72.
[73] Peter Hart, "Media Bias: How to Spot It—and How to Fight It," in *The Future of Media: Resistance and Reform in the 21st Century*, ed. Robert W. McChesney, Russell Newman, and Ben Scott (New York, NY: Seven Stories Press, 2005), 52.

"balance." The concept itself does not inherently dictate an unquestioning presentation of source statements, but this is often exactly how journalists approach balance in practice. A topic within a story leads to interviews, usually divided into opposing viewpoints. For example, a bill that might affect abortion necessitates speaking to an individual who agrees with the constitutional right to choose and another person who disagrees. Their statements are then presented, often without any evaluation, and labeled "balanced coverage." Unfortunately, such a process allows spin, illogic, and outright lying, with the assumption that audiences can decide for themselves. Frighteningly, the more important the story, the less reporters are likely to challenge a source. The lead-up to the Iraq War is a perfect example of journalists being unwilling to show the courage (or too lazy) to challenge government claims, instead relying on Democratic officials who, likewise, refused to contest the Bush administration's statements. This approach to balance also tends to confer validity based merely on opposition. Bennett points out how Republicans have been able to use journalistic obsession with balance to create a political counterpoint to the scientific proof of global warming, despite overwhelming agreement by researchers.[74] Finnegan, in her analysis of post-9/11 coverage, argues, "Skeptical examination of information presented by officials is not biased reporting, but balanced reporting."[75] Unfortunately, press practice funnels a discussion into (the usually male-dominated) "he said/he said" and move on, refusing to evaluate statements or, often, even check facts.

Newswriting and presentational conventions create further problems for creating compelling journalism. Word selection is considered an important part of objective

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[74] Bennett, *The Politics of Illusion*: 109.
[75] Finnegan, *No Questions Asked: News Coverage since 9/11*: xviii.

reporting.[76] Reporters are taught to use "neutral" words – i.e. "say" instead of "shout" or "whimper"; this results in very broad terms without precise meaning, and often obscures important contextual clues about sources.[77] Verbs and adjectives are robbed of specificity, while legal and political jargon saturates news stories. Such jargon is often confusing to general audiences, and its use creates a language game further directing news towards those already in power.[78] Journalism participates in Washington's inside games and its use of arcane terms reflects this relationship.

Even journalism's reliance on traditional storytelling conventions results in unintended consequences for reporting. Human interest, as an element of newsworthiness, appeals to audiences. As a result, news items often become about individuals, rather than issues—so homelessness seems to be a problem for a specific person, rather than an institutional creation relating to economics, healthcare, and other aspects of society. Reporters dramatize *events* and emphasize *stories*.[79] Admittedly, stories are a dominant way of conveying information and ideology across cultures; however, storytelling often takes prominence over the news content. A focus on human interest also tends to discount larger issues in society, unless there is a "face" for the story. For example, the mainstream press virtually ignored the existence of AIDS until the death of Hollywood icon Rock Hudson. Even when a human-interest story does open the door to discussing societal

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[76] Patnode, Shaw & Knowleton identify words as the most basic of four levels of journalistic objectivity. Randall Patnode, Donald L. Shaw, and Steven R. Knowlton, "The 19th Century: The Evolution of Objectivity," in *Fair & Balanced: A History of Journalistic Objectivity* ed. Steven R. Knowlton and Karen L. Freeman (Northport, AL: Vision Press, 2005).
[77] Schudson, *Discovering the News: A Social History of American Newspapers*: 184-85.
[78] Murray Edelman, *Constructing the Political Spectacle* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1988). 98.
[79] See Bennett, *The Politics of Illusion*., 40-44.

problems, the breach is usually only temporary—as long as the audience is perceived to be interested in the precipitating personal story.

The tendency to discuss issues through the lens of human interest is indicative of a larger problem with the professional process of journalists: a lack of context in reporting. Continually focusing on events and drama, reporters often fail to connect individual stories with each other or larger debates. An administration falsifying facts is therefore presumptively treated as a one-time occurrence, rather than a continual effort to obfuscate events. Bennett refers to this lack of context as "fragmentation," and argues that "Unless the consumer has an existing interest or perspective on the subject, recalling facts from the news resembles a trivia game played alone."[80] Bennett's analogy dramatizes how news stories become scattered facts, decontextualized and mostly meaningless. The fear of seeming biased discourages reporters from making connections, leading to the false assumption that audiences will connect facts together, as if consumers can reliably play connect-the-dots when they are given one dot every couple of days. McChesney makes the claim that the partisan press was actually superior in this regard, placing stories within context, while "today's journalism is more likely to produce confusion than understanding and informed action."[81] Through this incorporation of objectivity, ambiguity becomes the defining characteristic of news content.[82]

The standards of journalism, from story selection through development to creation, utilize a cohesive set of practices—almost all of them supporting efforts to create objective accounts of the news. In practice, though, the pursuit of objectivity becomes self-sabotaging

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[80] Ibid., 65.
[81] McChesney, *The Problem of the Media: U.S. Communication Politics in the 21st Century*: 72.
[82] For further discussion of ambiguity and its role in news production, see Edelman, *Constructing the Political Spectacle*: 91.

by abdicating responsibility to sources without checking claims and then presenting information in a superficial and sometimes inaccurate format. By contrast, news parody creates a highly useful supplement to traditional news outlets by often rejecting objectivity and examining existing news for illogic and conventionally modern reporting habits that undermine the presumptions of its own objectivity. The genre takes stories from other news programs derived via journalistic ritual and interrogates them from a skeptic's perspective. Neither humor nor news parody presupposes a rejection of objectivity, though. As discussed in their respective chapters, both *TW3* and *SNL* were pressured by executives to adopt a kind of satirical objectivity, attempting to mix jokes between political parties. In both cases the programs entered a creative slump. Analysis of the programs in this study suggest news parody thrives when humor and critical criteria guide the selection of targets, and objectivity is left to traditional newscasts.

Journalistic construction of reality

The economics and routines of the journalistic enterprise are ultimately built on a worldview, an unspoken ideology reflected in all aspects of reporting. Journalists, along with the hierarchy of news divisions and media corporations, are obviously embedded in a culture and as a result pursue the task of reporting with certain assumptions. In *The German Ideology*, Karl Marx discusses how the owners of material production carry forth both material force and *intellectual* force, reproducing the dominant ideology.[83] American reporters live in a culture dominated by capitalism, democracy, monotheism (specifically Judeo-Christian), and other structures with assumptions about how the world operates,

[83] Karl Marx, "The German Ideology," in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company, 1978), 172.

and the point of view to which facts should be subject. Journalists are taught "proper" political ideas, and those assumptions are reflected *and reinforced* in their writing, where the form of the news story masks its underlying ideological content.[84] The methods of newsgathering discussed in the previous section automatically "introduce a distorted political perspective into the news, yet legitimize that perspective as broad and realistic."[85] So not only does journalism reflect an underlying cultural logic, it also reinforces this ideology and constructs a reality furthering it. In fact, Eric Darras points out that journalists who reproduce the system are usually the most rewarded within the profession, because they have "best assimilated the theodicies that support representative government and the social system as a whole."[86] One of the powers of ideology to reproduce itself is its appeal to "common sense," where complex arguments and rationales are masked and depoliticized as being unquestionable examples of straightforward logic.[87] News partakes of this cultural common sense and, thereby, ultimately supports the very power structures journalism purports to question.

In *Manufacturing Consent*, their landmark critique of the American media structure, Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky argue that instead of a passive, inadvertent inculcation of dominant ideology, the biased media system inevitably produces propaganda, rather than news. Under their model of media-content creation, news passes through multiple filters before reaching the public, and these filters function to ensure

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[84] Schudson, *Discovering the News: A Social History of American Newspapers*: 184.
[85] Bennett, *The Politics of Illusion*: 187.
[86] Eric Darras, "Media Consecration of the Political Order," in *Bourdieu and the Journalistic Field*, ed. Rodney Benson and Erik Neveu (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2005), 166.
[87] For more on common sense as ideological mask, see Antonio Gramsci, *The Antonio Gramsci Reader: Selected Writings 1916-1935*, ed. David Forgacs (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2000). 343-49.

news becomes propaganda before release. As one filter, fear supports the dominant ideology by making journalists afraid to step out of agreed-upon social constraints.[88] Fear has become an especially effective form of media control with the rise of conservative news outlets, such as Fox News and talk-radio hosts like Rush Limbaugh and Sean Hannity.[89] One example of the fear filter in operation is the upholding of social decorum and taste. Bennett points out how news articles never mentioned AIDS could be transmitted via anal sex for years after AIDS was first widely reported.[90] The only *possible* reason for such a severe oversight is the cultural taboo of discussing (or even acknowledging) anal sex in American society. Chomsky places the stakes of changing the media system in stark terms, writing that the media creates a "bewildered herd marginalized, directed elsewhere, terrified, screaming patriotic slogans, fearing for their lives."[91] Although the propaganda model has proved influential, it leaves little room for internal critique of the process. Like Postman, the inflexible assumptions of Chomsky leave no opening for any authentic voices from corporate media.

Offering a more complex relationship between press and ideology, Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemony leaves space for reconfiguration of power. Gramsci rejects the traditional Marxist relationship of base/superstructure and false consciousness in favor

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[88] Their book specifically address fear of communism, but history shows fear functions to support other dominant ideological stances as well. Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* (New York, NY: Pantheon Books, 2002). 29-31.

[89] For a discussion of the effects of conservative media over the last decade, see McChesney, *The Problem of the Media: U.S. Communication Politics in the 21st Century*: Chapter 3. Finnegan, *No Questions Asked: News Coverage since 9/11*. For a very well-theorized account of how talk radio functions to reinforce conservative beliefs, see David C. Barker, *Rushed to Judgment: Talk Radio, Persuasion, and American Political Behavior* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2002).

[90] Bennett, *The Politics of Illusion*: 191.

[91] Chomsky, *Media Control: The Spectacular Achievements of Propoganda*: 65.

of understanding ideology as an evolving cultural force that must be constantly reassembled for the ruling class to retain dominance. Since ideology must be reconstituted, there are openings for change.[92] Gramsci, through hegemony, indirectly opens up the potential for even corporate media, such as news parody, to potentially effect change. The cancellation of *Crossfire*, for example, showed how the constant criticism of Jon Stewart resulted in one media outlet moving away from blatantly confrontational news shows. Bourdieu, rather than viewing society purely through the lens of ideology, utilizes the concept of fields. In this context, fields are specialized spaces of knowledge where power relationships and norms struggle and conflict. Rather than viewing journalism as only partaking of an economic class struggle, field theory opens up the possibility of examining the intraclass struggles within journalism, as well as such intersecting fields as politics and the social sciences.[93] Bourdieu creates a space for imagining how news parody engages in a relationship within the journalistic field with other news voices and vies to shift the doxa of the field.

Television formatting and presentation

In a 1958 speech Edward R. Murrow said of television, “This instrument can teach, it can illuminate; yes, and it can even inspire. But it can do so only to the extent that humans are determined to use it to those ends.” Murrow’s speech, in front of the annual meeting of the Radio and Television News Director’s Association, eviscerated the assembled news directors for failing to accomplish this lofty goal. Murrow accused news programs of instead shilling for advertisers and skimming the surface of stories, proclaiming “television

[92] Gramsci, *The Antonio Gramsci Reader: Selected Writings 1916-1935*.
[93] Bourdieu, "The Political Field, the Social Science Field, and the Journalistic Field."

in the main insulates us from the realities of the world." [94] Rather than prompt a renewed sense of public service, the industry largely viewed the speech as a betrayal by someone who reaped the benefits of television.[95] Murrow's words seem absolutely prescient when compared to the current television news industry. The previously discussed criticisms of contemporary American journalism extend to "broadcast" news, but the televisual format also creates medium-specific critiques of news programs.

Television's focus on the moving image sets it apart from its print competitors (although this easy divide has certainly begun to crumble with media websites offering converged coverage) and also raises additional concerns. Images seem to carry more emotional weight, resulting in coverage based on the most extreme emotions of anger, fear, sadness, and elation. The primacy of the image for television news results in visual presentation with minimal context—after all, common parlance tells us "an image is worth a thousand words"—however, media critics, through semiotics, point out that the audience fills these images with meaning. In his discussion of photography, Roland Barthes reminds us "a photograph is always invisible: it is not it that we see."[96] In the same way, an audience is presented with video accompanying television news, but each viewer must fill in large gaps of information surrounding the images.

The very convention of using edited video can actually work against a story and take precedence over other content. Shots are presented in a fragmented style, with unclear

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[94] Edward R. Murrow, "1958 Speech to the RTNDA," Radio Television Digital News Association, http://www.rtnda.org/pages/media_items/edward-r.-murrow-speech998.php.

[95] For a fuller discussion of reaction to Murrow's speech, see Alexander Kendrick, *Prime Time: The Life of Edward R. Murrow* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown and Company, 1969). Chapter 10.

[96] Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York, NY: Hill & Wang, 1981). 6.

relationships between successive images. Shots have become even more rapid with the introduction of nonlinear editing systems. A recent study found shots in network news programs decreased from an average length of 5.3 seconds to 3.4 seconds between 1969 and 2005, and the length of time a soundbite subject appeared on screen plummeted from 31 seconds in 1969 to 4.3 seconds of screen time in 2005.[97] The same study also found a trend away from straight-cut editing towards montage, creating newscasts with a faster, more elaborate visual motif and more ambiguous meaning.

Gaye Tuchman, in an excellent early critique of the television news system, breaks down how the conventions of television storytelling (such as camera framing and perspective) combined with editing technique, are geared towards telling a normative narrative—within existing and accepted broadcast story constraints.[98] For example, when stations covered an Iraqi crowd helping Marines topple a statue of Saddam Hussein in 2003, framing of the image was kept tight in order to focus on faces and action—a standard visual-news technique. By keeping the point of view close, news coverage seemed to show a huge number of Iraqis populating the frame, when in fact a relatively small number of people stood in an almost empty square, surrounded by a throng of media. Through such processes seemingly unbiased aesthetic norms can easily alter the meaning of images and support ideological assumptions.

On-screen personalities "anchor" the disparate content to the news format and create a seemingly cohesive news program. Several writers point, however, out how the "personal" delivery of television news further limits its effect and decreases audience

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[97] Richard J. Schaefer and Tony J. Martinez III, "Trends in Network News Editing Strategies from 1969 through 2005," *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 53, no. 3 (2009).
[98] Gaye Tuchman, *Making News: A Study in the Construction of Reality* (New York, NY: Free Press, 1978).

investment. Stuart Allen describes how viewers are interpellated through an imaginary conversation with the newsreader into becoming a passive audience in a *seemingly* dialogic process, facilitated by a false rapport between anchor and viewer.[99] The appearance, style, and speech of the journalist create authority and immediacy meant to *proclaim* to the audience, not open discussion or debate. Margaret Morse actually compares network news anchors to personal representations of institutions like the president of the United States, "for the anchor represents not merely the news *per se*, or a particular network or corporate conglomerate that owns the network, or television as institution, or the public interest; rather, he represents the complex nexus of all of them."[100] News anchors, like the personifications of other powerful institutions, are among the few individuals with power to almost instantly initiate public discussions, furthering a power relationship in which the audience is interpellated as passive news consumers. News parody, through its satiric reworking of the exalted news anchor, becomes the perfect foil to this veneer of officialdom. Rather than project an impeachable air of power, the personalities of news parody either become trusted due to their very critique of pomposity and willingness to self-denigrate, like Chevy Chase or Jon Stewart, or because they ironically embrace the power of the anchor seat, like Stephen Colbert.

The above criticisms of the American journalistic system provide a foundation of comparison to discuss television news parody in relation to its source material. Parody programs fulfill, to varying degrees, the traditional calling of the press, while reimagining the role of the journalist. I argue for understanding these shows as useful correctives to

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[99] Stuart Allan, *News Culture*, 3rd ed. (Berkshire, England: Open University Press, 2010). 115-17.
[100] Margaret Morse, "News as Performance: The Image as an Event," in *The Television Studies Reader*, ed. Robert C. Allen and Annette Hill (London: Routledge, 2004), 213.

mainstream news programs based on their potential for illuminating and occasionally breaking out of the problematic areas of media structure, story development, reality construction, and television presentation.

Review of Literature – News Parody

News parody plays an especially important role in modern society by criticizing two of the most powerful and vocal institutions in American: politics and journalism. A number of writers have identified the strong connection between humor and American politics, with varying conclusions.[101] James E. Combs and Dan Nimmo argue that comedy is a necessary aspect of political analysis. According to such a perspective, news parody functions as *part* of a larger democratic process. Likewise, Constance Rourke, in her landmark study of American humor, discusses such writers as Mark Twain and Artemus Ward as "popular oracles" who call attention to society's abuses and stupidity. [102] News parody functions as the modern equivalent of Rourke's popular oracle, illuminating the absurd and the contemptible in a media-saturated society dominated by the repetitive voices of the journalism echo chamber.

Prior to the 1990s, very few scholars considered the political significance of entertainment television shows. Occasional discussions appeared about television shows

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[101]Both Boskin and Speier, for instance, dismiss the centrist nature of most political humor. Joseph Boskin, "American Political Humor: Touchables and Taboos," *International Political Science Review* 11, no. 4 (1990). Hans Speier and Robert Jackall, "Wit and Politics: An Essay on Laughter and Power," *American Journal of Sociology* 103(1998). Others, such as Nilsen and Combs & Nimmo are more optimistic. Don L. F. Nilson, "The Social Function of Political Humor," *Journal of Popular Culture* 24(1990). James Combs and Dan Nimmo, *The Comedy of Democracy* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1996).

[102] Constance Rourke, *American Humor: A Study of the National Character* (New York, NY: New York Review of Books, 1931). 177.

that engaged political issues, such as *All in the Family*, but most writers were dismissive, if not downright hostile towards any suggestion entertainment could usefully engage in politics (a notable exception would be criticisms of the racial and gender politics of television, where writers pointed out how television intentionally and unintentionally engaged in identity politics). Neal Postman offers the quintessential argument against the comingling of politics and television in his book *Amusing Ourselves to Death*.[103] Postman claims television requires politics to become show business as an essential aspect of the medium. In his view, television is incapable of creating the kind of serious public discourse required for an educated citizenry. Even Bourdieu, who might be expected to have more sympathy for a "low art," referred to television as "a threat to political life and democracy itself" in his speeches about the danger of television.[104]

Postman and Bourdieu exemplify a popular strain of scholarship assuming *any* television programming, whether labeled journalism or entertainment, detracts from *real* public discourse—usually assumed to be print or the spoken word. This type of totalizing critique of the medium appears less frequently amongst scholars writing within journalism and television studies. These fields traditionally separate "legitimate" television journalism from other types of programming. This results in a scholarly divide between journalism and television studies, where the latter rarely focused on newscasts (although news magazine shows did receive more attention). Instead, television studies has, understandably, both valorized and critiqued the everyday fare composing most of the viewing day. Early American television scholars attempted to define how the field differed

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[103] Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 1985).
[104] Pierre Bourdieu, *On Television*, trans. Priscilla Parkhurst Ferguson (New York: The New Press, 1998). 10.

from film studies and other areas of communication inquiry. As a result, television studies tended to textually focus on serial fictional programming, a format that seemed to define the medium. As a genre, news programming was largely ceded to journalism scholars.

Since 2000, this stark divide between news and entertainment programming became more permeable with a wide methodological and theoretical range of literature about *TDS* and, later, *Colbert*. Jeffrey Jones, for instance, has published numerous articles and several single authored and edited books on television political comedy and news parody. Researchers in the new millennium began examining two particular real-world trends: the migration of politicians from the interview desks of the major news networks to less formal, entertainment-oriented talk shows and an audience willing to get its news from non-traditional, entertainment programs. The 1992 American presidential election proved a watershed moment for politicians' crossing over to the entertainment world. Democratic nominee Bill Clinton famously played saxophone on *The Arsenio Hall Show*, following up with an appeared on MTV for a town-hall meeting with representatives of the channel's young demographic. What began as a slow trickle became a raging torrent during the 2000 and 2004 elections, as presidential hopefuls populated late-night and daytime talk shows and comedy programs such as *Saturday Night Live* and *TDS*. So at the same time traditional news programs incorporated more entertainment fare, politicians and news makers appeared more and more frequently on what had been considered purely entertainment shows. National polls suggested audiences were beginning to reject previous distinctions between entertainment and news cast a spotlight on this generic blending.

While it seems obvious audiences have probably been learning something about current events from nontraditional news programs throughout television's history, a

controversial 2000 poll by the Pew Research Center provided the data and motive for academics to begin seriously considering the issue in their research.[105] In that poll, almost half of the respondents under 30 reported at least occasionally learning about the current presidential campaign from late-night entertainment sources. A subsequent poll about the 2004 campaign found young people learned almost as frequently from comedy programs as from network news and daily newspapers.[106] The Pew polls set off a firestorm of hand wringing and controversy within the traditional media, who questioned whether young people were sufficiently informed to be active participants in democracy. Since 2000, researchers picked up on these trends and began to seriously consider the intersection of entertainment and journalism.

The importance of television entertainment programming within politics and journalism continues to grow as a topic of research in the new millennium. Major conversations in the field can be divided into four main conversations:

- How to define these programs and create a generic classification system encompassing the range of texts available?
- Who are the viewers of political entertainment programming, and what are their viewing habits?
- Are there correlations between the viewing of these programs and the political knowledge and behaviors of their viewers?

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[105] "Audience Fragmented and Skeptical: The Tough Job of Communication with Voters," The Pew Research Center, http://people-press.org/reports/pdf/46.pdf.
[106] "Cable and Internet Loom Large in Fragmented Political News Universe," The Pew Research Center, http://people-press.org/reports/pdf/200.pdf.

- How do we envisioning the relationship between political entertainment programming and traditional news shows?

Directly engaging the last question, this dissertation argues that television news and news parody circulate within the same discursive sphere, entering into conversation with each other. However, the issues raised by the first three questions form an important background for this study. Therefore, I briefly summarize the state of the first three conversations before providing an analysis of the news-versus-entertainment debate in relation to news parody.

Soft News and News Parody

As discussed in the critical-journalism section, the artificial division between hard and soft news is one of the foundations of both journalism education and practice. Traditionally, the hard/soft distinction was drawn to differentiate between content found in "legitimate" journalistic programming, where feature stories often mix with politics and spot news. Most journalism scholars have tended to treat soft news on newscasts as a necessary evil. Television survives through viewership, the argument goes, so some soft-news content may be necessary, just keep it to a minimum. Hard news is assumed to educate and prepare the public for civic engagement. Soft news, with its emphasis on the personal, creates entertainment and fails to attain the former's lofty goals. While emphasizing this divide on traditional newscasts, journalism scholars largely ignored the rise in the 1970s and '80s of what Matthew A. Baum has called the "soft news media,"

dismissing these shows as just entertainment programming.[107] *Entertainment Tonight*, *Hard Copy* and talk programs like the *Phil Donahue* and *Oprah Winfrey* shows, despite their emphasis on current topics and discussion of politics, likely seemed too far-removed from the format and solemn tone of newscasts or Sunday-morning news programs to be generically linked with traditional television journalism.

An increasing number of scholars question the divide between hard and soft news and suggest within the current media landscape, both the blending of content and a lack of audience discrimination between the two types of programming require a reevaluation of such partitions.[108] Stephen Harrington, for instance, rejects rigid divides and advocates a more inclusive approach to news going beyond questions of *who* produced it and *how* is it structured, and adds consideration of "for what purpose?" and "in whose interests?"[109] Applying these questions might better distinguish programs on 24-hour news stations devoted to advocacy, and also differentiate between such radically different news-entertainment shows as *TDS* and *A Current Affair*. Offering another perspective on a dichotomous definition of news, Kevin Glynn incorporates a perspective grounded in Bourdieu to show how television shows dismissed as tabloid offer an oppositional voice to mainstream news—a voice with more viewership grounded in popular aesthetics of emotion, shock, and sex, rather than the bourgeois acceptability of network and local

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[107] Matthew Baum, *Soft News Goes to War* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003).
[108] For a recent review of literature on hard and soft news, see Carsten Reinemann et al., "Hard and Soft News: A Review of Concepts, Operationalizations and Key Findings," *Journalism* 13, no. 2 (2011).
[109] Stephen Harrington, "Popular News in the 21st Century. Time for a New Critical Approach?," *Journalism* 9, no. 3 (2008): 278-79.

newscasts.[110] Such shows question the role of the professional journalist and their news coverage through their own mocking, transgressive reporting.

Baum remains one of the most important voices arguing for the inclusion of the soft-news media within traditional political science and journalism scholarship. Baum's definition of soft-news media, while still accepting the distinction, proves influential in recent scholarship. It includes three characteristics. First, the primary subject of these shows is soft-news content, including a focus on human-interest elements, drama and a lack of political-policy discussion. Second, the soft-news audience generally does not follow politics. Third, the main audience motivation for viewing is entertainment, rather than information.[111] His description acknowledges the importance of both program content and audience expectation in defining soft-news media; however, his definition is necessarily broad, to encourage political research on multiple types of entertainment programs.

Building on Baum's general description of soft-news media, R. Lance Holbert's typology of entertainment programming and politics represents the most exhaustive attempt to categorize soft-news shows.[112] Like Baum, Holbert bases his typology on content and audience expectations, identifying nine categories of entertainment television with political content. These include such divisions as situation comedy, reality and docudramas. Holbert groups the news parody programs I address in my study into a category of *traditional satire* that also includes the monologues of late-night talk shows. In his description of traditional satire, he notes that audiences expect the shows' humor to be

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[110] Kevin Glynn, *Tabloid Culture: Trash Taste, Popular Power, and the Transformation of American Television* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000).
[111] Baum, *Soft News Goes to War*: 6.
[112] R. Lance Holbert, "A Typology for the Study of Entertainment Television and Politics," *American Behavioral Scientist* 49(2005).

grounded in politics. Although I refine Holbert's category specifically to news parody, his work adds credence to the fact that these programs differ from the larger category of soft-news media.

Both Baum and Holbert, along with other authors, argue that academics need to take the soft-news media seriously, by applying the same type of serious research methods already used to study traditional journalistic media, rather than simply lamenting the increased blending of politics and entertainment. [113] Research into audiences of soft-news programs represents an important step forward in this process.

News Parody's Audience

The Pew Research Center for the People & the Press created the most consistent source of information in the new millennium on the audience watching entertainment programs as a source of news. As previously mentioned, a 2000 study about the presidential election found almost half of voters under 30 accessed some of their election news from late-night talk shows and over a third learned something from the general category of *comedy programs*.[114] In a subsequent 2004 poll, 21% of under-30 voters reported learning *regularly* about the presidential campaign from comedy television shows.[115] However, the same poll showed that respondents who regularly learned from

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[113] See, for instance, Paul Brewer and Xiaoxia Cao, "Candidate Appearances on Soft News Shows and Public Knowledge About Primary Campaigns," *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media* 50(2006); Lauren Feldman and Dannagal Goldthwaite Young, "Late-Night Comedy as a Gateway to Traditional News: An Analysis of Time Trends in News Attention among Late-Night Comedy Viewers During the 2004 Presidential Primaries," *Political Communication* 25(2008).
[114] "Audience Fragmented and Skeptical: The Tough Job of Communication with Voters".
[115] "Cable and Internet Loom Large in Fragmented Political News Universe".

comedy programs proved among the least likely to correctly identify two of the candidates. Such findings have led to concern over how viewers actually learn from political comedy.

Additional audience research supports the appeal of contemporary television news parody to young audiences and also suggests why the demographic may seek out such content. In one study, researchers formed focus groups of college students, and found that, although humor was the primary appeal of *TDS*, students considered the program to be high-quality journalism, and superior to mainstream newscasts in several respects.[116] Marco Calavita, employing in-depth interviews with young adults, found that this demographic expects satire and sarcasm in its media, meaning shows like *TDS* take on a familiar form.[117] Other writers suggest youth understand irony as an essential part of their culture; therefore, rather than producing cynicism, news parody provides a voice they can hear, especially when compared to the falseness they perceive in journalistic objectivity.[118] Diane Mutz, writing about the hand-wringing of journalists and journalism schools over the lack of news consumption by youth, partially shifts the blame back on the media. The quality of news content matters, she writes, but so does presentation—and programs like *TDS* offer compelling viewing for the young.[119]

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[116] Brandon Rottinghaus et al., ""It's Better Than Being Informed:" College-Aged Viewers of *The Daily Show*," in *Laughing Matters: Humor and American Politics in the Media Age*, ed. Jody Baumgartner and Jonathan Morris (New York, NY: Routledge, 2008).
[117] Marco Calavita, "Idealization, Inspiration, Irony: Popular Communication Tastes and Practices in the Individual Political Development of Generation X'ers," *Popular Communication* 2, no. 3 (2004).
[118] Richard Van Heertrum, "Irony and the News: Speaking through Cool to American Youth," in *The Stewart/Colbert Effect: Essays on the Real Impact of Fake News*, ed. Amarnath Amarasingam (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2011).
[119] Diana Mutz, "Leading Horses to Water: Confessions of a Daily Show Junkie," *Journalism & Mass Communication Educator* 59, no. 1 (2004).

In a later 2004 poll, the high media profile of *TDS* encouraged the Pew Center to specifically ask about *TDS* in its own research, dropping the *comedy program* category from its polls.[120] The poll made clear that *TDS* viewers were much more politically aware than the general comedy audience from the earlier 2004 poll. Regular viewers of *TDS* tied with viewers of *The O'Reilly Factor* as the fourth most knowledgeable news audience, scoring higher than daily-newspaper readers and network- and cable-news viewers. Later Pew research consistently shows the demographics of both *TDS* and *Colbert* lean heavily toward the 18-29 age group, and that regular viewers are generally well informed compared to consumers of other news outlets.[121]

The discrepancy between the Pew Center's findings on the knowledge of the audiences of general comedy shows versus watchers of *TDS* and *Colbert* further illuminate the problem of broadly grouping television news parody programs into the larger metacategory of "soft news." This problem returned in a 2003 study partially based on Pew data looking at audiences of MTV, late-night talk shows and comedy programs, and found the most likely groups to get political information from these sources were "news junkies" and young, white, lower-educated males. Researchers proclaimed their results "interesting" because the groups do not seem to have much in common.[122] Interesting though they may be, the results are more likely a product of grouping programs together

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[120] "News Audiences Increasingly Politicized".
[121] "Public Knowledge of Current Affairs Little Changed by News and Information Revolutions," The Pew Research Center, http://people-press.org/report/319/public-knowledge-of-current-affairs-little-changed-by-news-and-information-revolutions. "Americans Spending More Time Following the News," The Pew Research Center, http://people-press.org/report/?pageid=1792.
[122] Michael Parkin, Angela Bos, and Bas van Doorn, "Laughing, Learning, and Liking: The Effects of Entertainment-Based Media on American Politics," in *Annual meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association* (Chicago, IL 2003), 25.

with very little in common, other than not being traditional news programming. Russell L. Peterson, whose book *Strange Bedfellows* is highly dismissive of the potential of political humor on television in entertainment shows, recognizes a difference between news parody and other similar programs. He says *TDS* and *Colbert* stand out by tackling real political issues and helping audiences formulate political beliefs.[123] So, despite some researchers' decisions to conflate all late-night or political comedy, the program's approaches to humor differ radically.

My decision to focus exclusively on television news parody is at least in part an attempt to avoid the previous problem of large, unwieldy categories. Instead, I identify news parody as a genre, connecting it both to traditional, structural uses of the term and with more recent discursive approaches to genre.[124] Rick Altman argues for a semantic/syntactic approach to genre in his writings on film genre, considering similarities in such factors as iconography, themes, and characters; however, he also carefully acknowledges that genre is applied to texts *after* the fact.[125] They are not *a priori* categories, but constructed groupings. Jason Mittell goes a step further than Altman in his discussion of television genres, arguing that genre on the small screen should be theorized *primarily* as a discursive practice.[126] Interpretive communities discursively construct definitions of genre by the way audiences, critics, creators, and the popular press discuss groups of television shows. Although Mittell distances himself from Altman, their

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[123] Russell Peterson, *Strange Bedfellows: How Late-Night Comedy Turns Democracy into a Joke* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2008). 19-20.
[124] Yet another alternative, advocated by Zoë Druick, is to understand news parody from a Bakhtinian perspective of genre. Zoë Druick, "Dialogic Absurdity: TV News Parody as a Critique of Genre," *Television & New Media* 10, no. 3 (2009).
[125] Rick Altman, *The American Film Musical* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1987).
[126] Mittell, *Genre and Television: From Cop Shows to Cartoons in American Culture*: 16.

approaches ultimately seem more harmonious than discordant. As an historic analysis, this dissertation addresses several programs largely forgotten in both critical and popular writings. I connect them to a common genre by addressing their semantic and syntactic resemblances, as well as similarities in the discourses surrounding the shows.

Audience research into television political comedy highlights the problem with treating all comedy shows alike. At the same time, studies identify an audience for news parody that is young and politically knowledgeable and that assumes these programs have a connection to traditional journalism. The third strain of research into soft news explores the potential consequences of voters of all ages turning to news parody as actual sources of political information.

The Acquired Knowledge and Behavior of Political Comedy Viewers

The use of news parody programs as news sources, along with the comparative youth of their audiences, raised concern from researchers, especially those in journalism and political science. Music, film, television, and other cultural products inevitably play a role in the political socialization of youth, whether the audience grasps political concepts or not.[127] However, since the early-2000s, a growing body of research seeks to specifically assess televisual political comedy's effects on viewers. Several studies support an assumption that soft news generally provides less useful coverage for participatory democracy than traditional broadcast journalism, due to its focus on individual

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[127] For a discussion of the political influence of other media, see David J. Jackson, *Entertainment & Politics: The Influence of Pop Culture on Young Adult Socialization* (New York, NY: Peter Lang, 2002).

personalities over political issues.[128] While true that soft-news content overall generally emphasizes personality-driven comedy, research casts doubts on the amount voters primarily use these shows to formulate concepts of politicians.[129] Instead, programs often reinforce existing frames for public figures.[130] An expanding number of studies actually suggest positive outcomes from viewing late-night comedy and news parody.[131]

The paternalistic fears of young audiences eschewing traditional news media over political comedy emerge from a belief such programs convey no important information. However, study after study shows positive correlations between viewership of these shows and political knowledge, especially news parody. One study by Paul Brewer and Xiaoxia Cao found increased political awareness from the appearance of presidential candidates on late-night shows, while Dannagal Goldthwaite Young shows positive correlation between audience familiarity with caricatures of government officials and actual political

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[128] David Niven, S. Robert Lichter, and Daniel Amundson, "The Political Content of Late Night Comedy," *Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics* 8, no. 3 (2003); Patricia Moy, Michael Xenos, and Verena Hess, "Priming Effects of Late-Night Comedy," in *Annual Meeting of the International Communication Association* (New Orleans, LA 2004); Matthew Baum, "Talking the Vote: Why Presidential Candidates Hit the Talk Show Circuit," *American Journal of Political Science* 49, no. 2 (2005); David Niven, S. Robert Lichter, and Daniel Amundson, "Our First Cartoon President: Bill Clinton and the Politics of Late Night Comedy," in *Laughing Matters: Humor and American Politics in the Media Age*, ed. Jody Baumgartner and Jonathan Morris (New York, NY: Routledge, 2008).

[129] Dannagal Goldthwaite Young, "Late-Night Comedy in Election 2000: Its Influence on Candidate Trait Ratings and the Moderating Effects of Political Knowledge and Partisanship," *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 48(2004); ———, "Late-Night Comedy and the Salience of the Candidates' Caricatured Traits in the 2000 Election," *Mass Communication and Society* 9(2006).

[130] Michael Nitz et al., "Candidates as Comedy: Political Presidential-Humor on Late-Night Television Shows," in *The Millennium Election*, ed. Lynda Lee Kaid, et al. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2003).

[131] One study of Japanese candidates appearing on soft news programs found their appearances increased affinity amongst voters, suggesting the results of American studies may not hold true for viewers in other cultures. Masaki Taniguchi, "The Electoral Consequences of Candidate Appearances on Soft News Programs," *Political Communication* 28, no. 1 (2011).

knowledge, suggesting an effect from political-comedy shows on viewers who follow politics.[132] Several subsequent studies seek to provide a more nuanced view by examining audience demographics for programs like *TDS* and late-night comedy and connecting the data with political knowledge. Cao found higher gains in knowledge among youth and those with higher education, while actually noting a negative correlation for older and less-educated audience members.[133] Another analysis found the largest gains in knowledge came from viewers not regularly following politics.[134] More recently, researchers are testing this effect specifically with the viewership of *TDS* and finding the program correlates even more strongly with increased political knowledge than general political-comedy shows, especially among the least politically attentive viewers.[135] Watching *TDS* and *Colbert* also correlates with increased awareness of science and the environment, frequent news parody topics less covered by traditional media reports, and this effect was even more pronounced for less educated viewers.[136] One study also found Stewart's program primed audience members to gain knowledge from subsequent exposure to

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[132] Brewer and Cao, "Candidate Appearances on Soft News Shows and Public Knowledge About Primary Campaigns."; Young, "Late-Night Comedy and the Salience of the Candidates' Caricatured Traits in the 2000 Election."
[133] Xiaoxia Cao, "Political Comedy Shows and Knowledge About Primary Campaigns: The Moderating Effects of Age and Education," *Mass Communication and Society* 11(2008).
[134] Young Min Baek and Magdalena E. Wojcieszak, "Don't Expect Too Much! Learning from Late-Night Comedy and Knowledge Item Difficulty," *Communication Research* 36, no. 6 (2009).
[135] Michael A. Xenos and Amy B. Becker, "Moments of Zen: Effects of *The Daily Show* on Information Seeking and Political Learning," *Political Communication* 26, no. 3 (2009); Xiaoxia Cao, "Hearing It from Jon Stewart: The Impact of The Daily Show on Public Attentiveness to Politics," *International Journal of Public Opinion Research* 22, no. 1 (2010).
[136] Lauren Feldman, Anthony Leiserowitz, and Edward Maibach, "The Science of Satire: *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* as Sources of Public Attention to Science and the Environment," in *The Stewart/Colbert Effect: Essays on the Real Impact of Fake News*, ed. Amarnath Amarasingam (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2011).

traditional news sources.[137] The positive results should be tempered with caution, however. Gains in knowledge have been minimal, and in some cases, only the recall of very simple facts was tested. Another study incorporated viewing of *TDS* with traditional news sources and found that, although watching *TDS* resulted in some increase of information, other journalism outlets facilitated far more knowledge and audiences could recall that information for a longer period of time.[138] Other factors obviously can intervene as well, for instance, in one experiment viewer partisanship predicted viewer reactions to political figures more strongly than watching a clip from *TDS*.[139] Taken together, these studies definitely suggest that, if not replacements for traditional journalism, political comedies in general, and news parodies in particular, can have a positive impact on political knowledge.

Moving beyond simple message recall, research also suggests viewership of these television programs connect with real life political action. One study describes how viewing late-night comedy positively correlates with watching political debates, which then usually leads to participating in political discussions.[140] Because the audience presumably watches for entertainment, rather than political information, these outcomes are likely unintended positive consequences. Hoffman and Young separate off late-night talk shows from *TDS* and

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[137] Xenos and Becker, "Moments of Zen: Effects of *The Daily Show* on Information Seeking and Political Learning."
[138] Young Mie Kim and John Vishak, "Just Laugh! You Don't Need to Remember: The Effects of Entertainment Media on Political Information Acquisition and Information Processing in Political Judgement," *Journal of Communication* 58(2008).
[139] Michael A. Xenos, Patricia Moy, and Amy B. Becker, "Making Sense of *The Daily Show*: Understanding the Role of Partisan Heuristics in Political Comedy Effects," in *The Stewart/Colbert Effect: Essays on the Real Impact of Fake News*, ed. Amarnath Amarasingam (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2011).
[140] Kristen D. Landreville, R. Lance Holbert, and Heather L. LaMarre, "The Influence of Late-Night TV Comedy Viewing on Political Talk: A Moderated-Mediation Model," *The International Journal of Press/Politics* 15, no. 4 (2010).

Colbert to gauge whether political participation between the two audiences would differ.[141] The study found that both news parody and traditional newscast viewers were more likely to participate in politics, but with no apparent affect on late-night audiences, suggesting the humor of news parody may be qualitatively different. Other studies likewise show a connection between news parody and participation, including joining organizations, attending campaign events, and participating in political discussions.[142] Media-effects research of this nature can, of course, only point to possible relations in data, not prove cause and effect; however, audiences of news parody programs clearly engage in more political activity than the general viewing population.

A parallel body of research generates more skepticism about the political value of *TDS* and *Colbert*. Jody Baumgartner and Jonathan S. Morris published a number of articles raising concern that political comedy, especially *TDS*, contributes to a general cynicism about the political process in young audiences and negative views about politicians.[143] Another study found similar effects with journalism, where young viewer's perception of

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[141] Lindsay H. Hoffman and Dannagal G. Young, "Satire, Punch Lines, and the Nightly News: Untangling Media Effects on Political Participation," *Communication Research Reports* 28, no. 2 (2011).

[142] Xiaoxia Cao and Paul R. Brewer, "Political Comedy Shows and Public Participation in Politics," *International Journal of Public Opinion Research* 20, no. 1 (2008); Dannagal Goldthwaite Young and Sarah E. Esralew, "Jon Stewart a Heretic? Surely You Jest: Political Participation and Discussion among Viewers of Late-Night Comedy Programming," in *The Stewart/Colbert Effect: Essays on the Real Impact of Fake News*, ed. Amarnath Amarasingam (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2011).

[143] Jody Baumgartner and Jonathan Morris, "*The Daily Show* Effect: Candidate Evaluations, Efficacy, and the American Youth," *American Politics Research* 34(2006); Jody Baumgartner, "Humor on the Next Frontier: Youth, Online Political Humor, and the 'Jib-Jab' Effect," *Social Science Computer Review* 25(2007). Jody C. Baumgartner, Jonathan S. Morris, and Natasha L. Walth, "The Fey Effect: Young Adults, Political Humor, and Perceptions of Sarah Palin in the 2008 Presidential Election Campaign," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 76, no. 1 (2012).

television news decreased when viewed along with *TDS*.[144] Heavy viewing of *TDS* results in audiences believing they are more politically aware than their peers, raising concerns from Baumgartner and Morris, who found little significant difference in political knowledge between audience members who view *TDS* more than other news sources and non-*TDS* viewers.[145] In a separate experiment using *Colbert*, the two researchers also raise questions about the political value of the comedy, reporting that test subjects had difficulty decoding Colbert's irony, and that critical jokes actually *increased* affinity for Bush and the Republicans, despite the program's political criticisms. Although Baumgartner and Morris admit regular *Colbert* viewers are likely more politically savvy, they caution "Colbert's satire seems to confuse some young viewers."[146] Overall, their research tends to paint a negative view of news parody, warning scholars to "exercise some caution before concluding that Jon Stewart is the savior of democracy in the new millennium."[147]

Baumgartner and Morris' concern about the cynicism of American youth mirrors a broader cultural image of disengaged young adults—a construct invoked by Fox News host Bill O'Reilly when he referred to viewers of *TDS* as "stoned slackers" and "dopey kids" when

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[144] R. Lance Holbert et al., "Primacy Effects of *The Daily Show* and National TV News Viewing: Young Viewers, Political Gratification, and Internal Political Self-Efficacy," *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 51(2007).
[145] Baumgartner and Morris, "*The Daily Show* Effect: Candidate Evaluations, Efficacy, and the American Youth."; Jody C. Baumgartner and Jonathan S. Morris, "Stoned Slackers or Super Citizens? *The Daily Show* Viewing and Political Engagement of Young Adults," in *The Stewart/Colbert Effect: Essays on the Real Impact of Fake News*, ed. Amarnath Amarasingam (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2011).
[146] Jody Baumgartner and Jonathan Morris, "One "Nation" under Stephen? The Effects of *The Colbert Report* on American Youth," *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 52, no. 4 (2008): 634.
[147] Baumgartner and Morris, "Stoned Slackers or Super Citizens? *The Daily Show* Viewing and Political Engagement of Young Adults," 77.

interviewing Stewart.[148] Research shows news parody programs *do* have an influence on young viewers; however, as previously mentioned, O'Reilly's audience actually tied with *TDS* in a Pew Poll testing political facts.[149] Baumgartner and Morris add to the body of knowledge about comedy and politics, but their studies often focus on first-time viewers and recall of specific information. Other research using different methods complicates and, in some instances, contradicts some of the gloomier findings. Polk, Young, and Holbert, rather than testing simply for recall, examined the relations between the influence of *TDS* and the audience members' own political efficacy, their perception of whether their political participation has impact, affected the influence of *TDS*.[150] Their findings reveal a more nuanced relationship, where viewers with higher efficacy engaged in more critical thought about politics after watching *TDS*, while lower efficacy correlated with less political reflection. Another study shows correlation between political engagement and viewing of both traditional news *and* late-night television.[151] The research also tracked political cynicism using a more nuanced definition of the term and found no connection with viewing either news parody or late-night comedy, contradicting Baumgartner and Morris. Further calling into question a link between news parody and cynicism, Amy Becker

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[148] *The O'Reilly Factor*, September 17, 2004.
[149]Jay D. Hmielowski, R. Lance Holbert, and Jayeon Lee, "Predicting the Consumption of Political TV Satire: Affinity for Political Humor, *The Daily Show*, and *The Colbert Report*," *Communication Monographs* 78, no. 1 (2011); Douglas K. Peterson, "The Colbert Bump and The Facebook Follow-through for Generation Snark: A Test and Extension of The Ajzen's Theory of Planned Behavior for 2012," *Journal of Management Research* 4, no. 3 (2012); "News Audiences Increasingly Politicized".
[150] Jeremy Polk, Dannagal G. Young, and R. Lance Holbert, "Humor Complexity and Political Influence: An Elaboration Likelihood Approach to the Effects of Humor Type in *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*," *Atlantic Journal of Communication* 17, no. 4 (2009).
[151] Lindsay H. Hoffman and Tiffany L. Thomson, "The Effect of Television Viewing on Adolescents' Civic Participation: Political Efficacy as a Mediating Mechanism," *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 53, no. 1 (2009).

compared a range of political humor, both online and televised, and found positive correlations between late-night comedy and political trust and sense of efficacy, leading her to proclaim, "the more young people expose themselves to news content—whether serious or funny in orientation—the more encouraging the picture for American democracy."[152] (Although critics like Bennett suggest fostering a blind trust in politics may not be cause for celebration.) Often lost in the debate, especially amongst professional journalists, is the fact that youth are not ignorant of genre. In an overwrought article from the *LA Times*, critic Howard Rosenberg questioned whether young viewers "can't distinguish actual newscasts from entertainment shows that impersonate newscasts for yucks?"[153] Both research and a modicum of respect for America's youth clearly suggests the answer is "yes," young audiences *do* differentiate between traditional news and news parody.[154] Contemporary viewers are both well aware of traditional news conventions and the use of satire, irony, and parody in modern media.[155] Media-effects researchers and journalists need to credit young viewers with more agency.

The methods used in reaching some of the more skeptical findings about the political value of entertainment have also been called into question. Michael Baum offers a highly compelling counter-argument to such studies, pointing out that survey questions are

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[152] Amy B. Becker, "Political Humor as Democratic Relief? The Effects of Exposure to Comedy and Straight News on Trust and Efficacy," *Atlantic Journal of Communication* 19, no. 5 (2011): 247.
[153] Howard Rosenberg, "The Fact Is, the Joke Is the News," *Broadcasting & Cable* 44, no. 134 (2004).
[154] Amy B. Becker, Michael A. Xenos, and Don J. Waisanen, "Sizing up *The Daily Show*: Audience Perceptions of Political Comedy Programming," *Atlantic Journal of Communication* 18, no. 3 (2010).
[155] Aaron Hess, "Breaking News: A Postmodern Rhetorical Analysis of *The Daily Show*," in *The Daily Show and Rhetoric: Arguments, Issues, and Strategies*, ed. Trischa Goodnow (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2011).

usually geared towards hard news, which receives less coverage by political-entertainment programs, and that studies usually test for retention of small details. Memorization of facts, as Baum notes, is not the sole indicator for whether a viewer has learned something.[156] For instance, *TDS* provided sustained coverage of American difficulties in post-war Iraq. Viewers may have learned about the state of the country and America's problems there without being able to name a military commander or a city in Iraq. Testing for current events trivia is not the same as testing for an awareness of news events.

In his discussion of learning from late-night comedy, Jeffrey Jones turns the traditional question on its head by asking, "so what if young people get all their knowledge from *TDS*?"[157] He compares a day of news coverage by both CNN and *TDS*, and shows how viewers of the parody program actually learned more about news events covered by both programs. Jones's observation raises another issue specifically with some studies of news parody: the assumption that being cynical about politics and the media is counterintuitive to a healthy democracy. Given the dismal state of both journalism and political debate, perhaps being cynical is exactly the appropriate response for audiences, a point explored by television studies and journalism criticism.

Straight News vs. Comedic News

Jones's article comparing CNN and *TDS* gets to the heart of the last category of research into the convergence of entertainment, politics, and journalism I discuss: writers investigating the relationships between news parody and traditional television news.

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[156] Baum, *Soft News Goes to War*: 178.
[157] Jeffrey P. Jones, ""Fake" News Versus "Real" News as Sources of Political Information: *The Daily Show* and Postmodern Political Reality," in *Politicotainment: Television's Take on the Real*, ed. Kristina Reigert (New York, NY: Peter Lang, 2007).

Rather than assuming news parody is separate and inadequate in comparison to mainstream newscasts, a growing number of researchers argue for treating contemporary shows like *TDS* and *Colbert* as a type of journalism, or journalism supplement, that often provides superior coverage to traditional television news. The Pew Polls and other studies already suggest some audiences connect news parody with traditional journalism.[158] In one study, a comparison of network news and *TDS* found each had the same amount of substance in their campaign coverage, further supporting erosion between the boundaries of news parody and mainstream news.[159] A year-long study of *TDS* by the Project for Excellence in Journalism likewise found their news agenda very similar to cable news, focusing mostly on national politics.[160] Steve Gennaro also compares *TDS* to cable news, pointing out 24-hour news channels continue to focus more on entertainment, while news parody increasingly takes on actual domestic and international policy issues, swapping topics between what were previously considered separate programming worlds.[161] I extend the argument that news parody operates as a form of journalism, specifically focusing on how practices of journalistic objectivity have weakened the ability of journalists to inform the public and opened spaces for news parody to provide more in-depth coverage than mainstream newscasts.

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[158] For one example, see Rottinghaus et al., ""It's Better Than Being Informed:" College-Aged Viewers of *The Daily Show*."
[159] Julia Fox, Glory Koloen, and Volkan Sahin, "No Joke: A Comparison of Substance in *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* and Broadcasting Network Television Coverage of the 2004 Presidential Election Campaign," *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 51(2007).
[160] "Journalism, Satire or Just Laughs? "The Daily Show with Jon Stewart," Examined," Project for Excellence in Journalism, http://www.journalism.org/sites/journalism.org/files/Daily%20Show%20PDF_3.pdf.
[161] Steve Gennaro, "*The Daily Show*: The Face of American News in 2005," *Kritikos* 2, no. 4 (2005).

When I began investigating this project almost ten years ago very few articles advocated news parody as serious political discourse, much less as serious journalism. Since that time a wave of publications, including several edited books,[162] have appeared to offer compelling analysis and frameworks for understanding TDS and *Colbert*. One approach has been to focus on the humor and rhetorical strategies used in the shows, analyzing or categorizing their strategies of critique.[163] Some have addressed specific devices or modes of presentation, such as irony, parody, or mimesis. Others provide a typology for how humor is deployed, examining specific segments and types of jokes.

An even larger number of studies discuss more generally how each program engages in political and media criticism through a particular lens, calling into question unspoken assumptions, demystifying wordplay, sending up modes of presentation, and engaging in active dialogue with journalism and politics.[164] These works vary widely in

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[162] Jason Holt, ed. *The Daily Show and Philosophy* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2007); Jody Baumgartner and Jonathan Morris, eds., *Laughing Matters: Humor and American Politics in the Media Age* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2008); Jonathan Gray, Jeffrey P. Jones, and Ethan Thompson, eds., *Satire TV: Politics and Comedy in the Post-Network Era* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2009); Amarnath Amarasingam, ed. *The Stewart/Colbert Effect: Essays on the Real Impact of Fake News* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2011); Trischa Goodnow, ed. *The Daily Show and Rhetoric: Arguments, Issues, and Strategies* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2011).

[163] Kevin S. Decker, "Stephen Colbert, Irony, and Speaking Truthiness to Power," in *The Daily Show and Philosophy*, ed. Jason Holt (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2007); Elliot Gaines, "The Narrative Semiotics of *The Daily Show*," *Semiotica* 166, no. 1 (2007); Ana Kothe, "When Fake Is More Real: Of Fools, Parody, and *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*," *Americana* 6, no. 2 (2007); Amber Day, "And Now...The News? Mimesis and the Real in *The Daily Show*," in *Satire TV: Politics and Comedy in the Post-Network Era*, ed. Jonathan Gray, Jeffrey Jones, and Ethan Thompson (New York: New York University Press, 2009).

[164] Geoffrey Baym, "*The Daily Show*: Discursive Integration and the Reinvention of Political Journalism," *Political Communication* 22, no. 3 (2005); Aaron McKain, "Not Necessarily Not the News: Gatekeeping, Remediation, and *The Daily Show*," *Journal of American Culture* 28(2005); Geoffrey Baym, "Crafting New Communicative Models in the Televisual Sphere: Political Interviews on *The Daily Show*," *The Communication Review* 10(2007); Liam P. Dempsey, "*The Daily Show*'s Exposé of Political Rhetoric " in *The Daily Show and Philosophy*,

scope and disciplinary perspective. A number provide close textual analysis of key political themes. Others examine political interventions of news parody, how they engage rhetoric and the political field, the presence of politicians on the programs, and the appearance of Stewart and Colbert at political events. Still another strain of research analyzes the shows' critique of journalism, including such topics as the structural and visual mimicking of broadcast news, criticism of dominant news ideology and practice, and specific interventions into media, such as Stewart's highly publicized skewering of CNN's *Crossfire* program and *Mad Money* host Jim Cramer. One study raises a cautionary voice, showing through framing analysis that although *TDS* engages in political and media critique, humor

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ed. Jason Holt (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2007); Michael Gettings, "The Fake, the False, and the Fictional: *The Daily Show* as News Source," in *The Daily Show and Philosophy*, ed. Jason Holt (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2007); Rachel Sotos, "The Fake News as the Fifth Estate," in *The Daily Show and Philosophy*, ed. Jason Holt (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2007); Geoffrey Baym, "Stephen Colbert's Parody of the Postmodern," in *Satire TV: Politics and Comedy in the Post-Network Era*, ed. Jonathan Gray, Jeffrey Jones, and Ethan Thompson (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2009); Joanne Morreale, "Jon Stewart and *The Daily Show*: I Thought You Were Going to Be Funny!," in *Satire TV: Politics and Comedy in the Post-Network Era*, ed. Jonathan Gray, Jeffrey Jones, and Ethan Thompson (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2009); Don J. Waisanen, "A Citizen's Guides to Democracy Inaction: Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert's Comic Rhetorical Criticism," *Southern Communication Journal* 74, no. 2 (2009); Mark K. McBeth and Randy S. Clemons, "Is Fake News the Real News? The Significance of Stewart and Colbert for Democratic Discourse, Politics, and Policy," in *The Stewart/Colbert Effect: Essays on the Real Impact of Fake News*, ed. Amarnath Amarasingam (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2011); Chad Painter and Louis Hodges, "Mocking the News: How *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* Holds Traditional Broadcast News Accountable," *Journal of Mass Media Ethics* 25, no. 4 (2010); Julia R. Fox, "Wise Fools: Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert as Modern-Day Jesters in the American Court," in *The Stewart/Colbert Effect: Essays on the Real Impact of Fake News*, ed. Amarnath Amarasingam (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2011); John W. Self, "The (Not-So) Laughable Political Argument: A Close-Textual Analysis of *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*," in *The Daily Show and Rhetoric: Arguments, Issues, and Strategies*, ed. Trischa Goodnow (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2011); Ian Reilly, "Satirical Fake News and/as American Political Discourse," *The Journal of American Culture* 35, no. 3 (2012).

is their primary concern.[165] Despite each study's central focus, virtually all of these writings engage aspects of text, politics, and journalism when writing about *TDS* and *Colbert*, creating a nuanced body of work highlighting the critical interventions of the programs.

Several writers go beyond simply treating news parody as critique and suggest these programs function *as journalism*.[166] My perspective of the news parody genre operating as a corrective and supplement to traditional journalism aligns with these authors, and justifies specific treatment of their work below. However, by conceptualizing news parody as circulating within the same journalistic field as the traditional media a new frame emerges for understanding their activity. Beyond simply engaging in journalistic activity, I argue these programs *fully participate* through contributing and responding to the discourses of the field. Bourdieu describes how the journalistic field overlaps with the political field, allowing news parody entry into political discourse as well.[167] Although programs like *TDS* and *Colbert* may not be considered journalism in the same way as mainstream news, their standing within the journalistic and political fields elides that division.

Geoffrey Baym is one of the most prolific scholars on the topic of *TDS* and *Colbert*, having published multiple articles and a book on the topic. His earliest writing approaches

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[165] Penina Wiesman, "We Frame to Please: A Preliminary Examination of *The Daily Show*'s Use of Frames," in *The Daily Show and Rhetoric: Arguments, Issues, and Strategies*, ed. Trischa Goodnow (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2011).
[166] Gennaro, "*The Daily Show*: The Face of American News in 2005."; Kristen Heflin, "Laughter Helps Interpret the News," *Television Quarterly* 36, no. 3/4 (2006); Geoffrey Baym, *From Cronkite to Colbert: The Evolution of Broadcast News* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2010); Jeffrey P. Jones, *Entertaining Politics: Satiric Television and Political Engagement*, 2nd ed. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2010); Amber Day, *Satire and Dissent: Interventions in Contemporary Political Debate* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2011); Joseph Faina, "Public Journalism Is a Joke: The Case for Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert," *Journalism* 14, no. 4 (2012).
[167] Bourdieu, "The Political Field, the Social Science Field, and the Journalistic Field."

TDS as an experiment in journalism that stays truer to the traditional goals associated with the fourth estate than most mainstream sources. He argues that formerly separate discourses, such as journalism and entertainment, have combined, becoming almost undifferentiated in culture and allowing for the development of a program like *TDS* that blends discourses, in a way that he calls "discursive integration."[168] In his more recent book, *From Cronkite to Colbert: The Evolution of Broadcast News*, Baym situates the emergence of *TDS* and *Colbert* as a product of the post-network era and the potential next step in television journalism. He identifies three historic paradigms for television news and anchors. The "residual" model harkens back to traditionalist news anchors who entered the business in the 1950s and '60s, such as Walter Cronkite. The multi-channel era produced a new breed of journalist—a product of the increasing convergence of advertising and corporate-driven news formatting, anchors like Brian Williams who reflect the current "dominant" anchor model. Finally, Baym refers to Stewart and Colbert as representing an "emergent paradigm of hybrid media that blends news and entertainment in unprecedented ways," situating the news parody anchors as examples of increasingly accepted (and sought out) alternative models of journalism.[169] Along with his multiple other writings, Baym provides a framework that supplements my vision of news parody as part of the journalistic field, suggesting how the practices and ways of knowing advocated through the program's humorous approach essentially constitute an emerging practice within the field.

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[168] Baym, "*The Daily Show*: Discursive Integration and the Reinvention of Political Journalism," 261-62.
[169] ———, *From Cronkite to Colbert: The Evolution of Broadcast News*: 5.

Like Baym, Amber Day recognizes the eroding (or perhaps erod*ed*) boundaries between traditional newscasts and what she refers to as "parodic news," a category she addresses using *TDS* and *Colbert*, as well as several Canadian shows. She offers insightful analysis of the programs and their functions within the current media landscape; however, Day also makes the odd and ahistorical decision to identify parodic news as "an emergent genre," arguing it differs fundamentally from previous programs like *TW3* and *SNL* (*NNTN* never receives a mention*)*.[170] She bases this distinction on the use of actual news footage in more recent shows and the appearance of politicians on the programs. This myopic perspective divorces the Comedy Central programs from a rich history of news parody. While I agree *TDS* and *Colbert* represent a transition with the past, treating them as a new emergent genre discourages bringing them into conversation with past programs in order to consider why the newer shows are so successful. Yes, previous shows incorporated more of a variety format and tended to focus on political personalities, but these earlier programs influenced *TDS* and *Colbert*. Examining parallels and reformulations of the mise-en-scène across the history of the genre illustrates how each program adopted aspects of television news from their particular historic eras and also innovated from earlier news parody shows. My methodology of historicizing the genre also allows consideration of how changes in the industry and surrounding culture shifted from virtually dooming *TW3* in the 1960s to celebrating the activities of Stewart and Colbert in the new millennium. Day also questions the assumption that *TDS* and *Colbert* function as actual news, arguing their separation *from* news is central to appealing to their audience: "They are not attempting to

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[170] Day, *Satire and Dissent: Interventions in Contemporary Political Debate*: 5, 45-54.

become another incarnation of the existing real, but to hold the real up for scrutiny."[171] Due to this distinction, Day considers parodic news, along with satiric documentaries and ironic internet activism more as political interventions and additions to the public sphere than traditional journalism.[172] While her generic distinction is interesting, it also seems too grounded in structuralist categorization; Bourdieu's concept of overlapping political and journalistic fields offers a more constructive way to discuss news parody's actions as *both* political speech and journalistic activity.[173]

In the first edition of his book *Entertaining Politics*, Jeffrey Jones takes up the comparison of political-comedy shows with network and cable news.[174] He notes the similarities between the two, but makes a bold claim about the extra importance of comedy programming: that they can reach audiences uninterested in network and cable newscasts. Rather than directly engage the question of whether audiences learn more from traditional news, Jones makes the savvy observation that additional participants might be brought into politics through these nontraditional news routes. In subsequent research, young people have supported this hypothesis, reporting that such shows introduce them to more news than they would otherwise view.[175] Additional studies have found that viewing late-night comedy programs is actually complementary to watching traditional news, not a

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[171] Ibid., 85.
[172] Ibid., Chapter 3.
[173] To be fair, it is unclear whether Day is merely reflecting the viewpoint of the industrial creators of the programs, the audience, or herself in distancing parodic news from traditional news. Her writings indicate an opposition to simple categorization, suggesting she is less clear-cut on this distinction.
[174] Jeffrey P. Jones, *Entertaining Politics: New Political Television and Civic Culture* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2005).
[175] Rottinghaus et al., ""It's Better Than Being Informed:" College-Aged Viewers of *The Daily Show*."

substitution.[176] Most researchers examining what young people learn from entertainment programs seem to take for granted that news parody is an audience's sole source of information. Jones and other researchers call this dichotomous thinking into question.

Since the publication of *Entertaining Politics,* Jones has become a leading scholar on satiric television comedy, publishing numerous articles and chapters about *TDS*, *Colbert*, and "satiric news," including a major revision to his first book. Aligning with Baym, Jones approaches satiric news as a type of journalism and questions whether it could be "another way of producing useful, informative, or meaningful materials with just as much value to citizens as that provided by television news?"[177] He suggests the fake could constitute an alternative method of reporting. Jones' multiple other writings interrogate how *TDS* and *Colbert* utilize the fake as a journalistic mode. Jones approaches *TDS* and *Colbert* from a broader perspective of genre, situating them contemporary political comedy talk shows like those of Bill Maher and Dennis Miller. My approach provides an alternative, but not conflicting method for understanding current news parody show both as an historic genre and as full participants in the journalistic field.

Along with the numerous optimistic studies framing news parody as effective interventions into political and media discourse, there are also cautionary voices about the shows themselves. Aaron McKain, in one of the first research articles about *TDS*, recognizes that news parody creates an opening to critique mainstream news, an opening that *TDS* has

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[176] Dannagal Goldthwaite Young and Russell Tisinger, "Dispelling Late-Night Myths: News Consumption among Late-Night Comedy Viewers and the Predictors of Exposure to Various Late-Night Shows," *International Journal of Press/Politics* 11(2006); Feldman and Young, "Late-Night Comedy as a Gateway to Traditional News: An Analysis of Time Trends in News Attention among Late-Night Comedy Viewers During the 2004 Presidential Primaries."
[177] Jones, *Entertaining Politics: Satiric Television and Political Engagement*: xi.

been quite effective at filling.[178] However, McKain also crucially points out that *TDS*'s parodic form creates limitations because of its reliance on external source material. For instance, when creating a report on events in Iraq, the parody program is mostly dependent on raw footage and information assembled by mainstream news sources and then distributed through wire services. Even though the original source material is limited to limits writers and editors for *TDS*. McKain offers important cautionary questions about the limitations of news parody.

I previously discussed writers, such as Baumgartner and Morris, who raise fears that news parody may create a sense of youth cynicism and political disengagement. On the extreme side of that argument, rhetoricians Roderick P. Hart and E. Johanna Hartelius connect Jon Stewart with ancient Cynics and accuse him of dismantling the political system for his viewers while offering no corresponding construct of a potentially worthwhile system. They claim that, "each night, he saps his audience's sense of political possibility" and ultimately "produces inertia."[179] In two rejoinders to the article, Robert Hariman and W. Lance Bennett both defend *TDS*, arguing Hart and Hartelius fall into the trap of assuming comedy cannot also inspire, and of defending a golden age of journalism that no longer exists.[180] Making similar claims to Hart and Hartelius, Lisa Colletta claims news parody merely reinforces power structures, rather than challenging them—through their

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[178] McKain, "Not Necessarily Not the News: Gatekeeping, Remediation, and *The Daily Show*."
[179] Roderick P. Hart and Johanna Hartelius, "The Political Sins of Jon Stewart," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 24, no. 3 (2007): 263-64.
[180] W. Lance Bennett, "Relief in Hard Times: A Defense of Jon Stewart's Comedy in an Age of Cynicism," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 24, no. 3 (2007); Robert Hariman, "In Defense of Jon Stewart," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 24, no. 3 (2007).

humor "turning everything into one big meta-joke."[181] Colletta, invoking Postman-like logic, claims that if the shows' humor were effective, viewers would actually stop watching television, although this is clearly not the goal of their satire. As discussed in the chapter on post-network news parody, Stewart constantly appeals for better, more responsible journalism. Hart and Hartelius complain that *TDS* makes statements by politicians "seem absurd," but of course that *is* the point.[182] Politicians regularly craft absurd discourse and traditional news organizations, invoking dominant concepts of objectivity, refuse to acknowledge their absurdity, creating an opening for Stewart's commentary. While dissenting viewpoints about the potential reconstituting effects of news parody absolutely need to be acknowledged and discussed, wholesale rejection of the genre's value lands few blows that do not also apply to news media across the board.

In conclusion, current research on entertainment in journalism and politics has exploded since the 2000 Pew poll, but with a curious absence of historical questions. The current popularity and high media profile of *TDS* and *Colbert* have attracted the most attention recently, but these programs did not suddenly appear without generic predecessors. This study historicizes news parody by bringing contemporary iterations into conversation with previous shows in order to compare shifting formats, humor and formal elements, as well as extending current research into news parody as a type of journalism by considering how the genre has shifted into the political and journalistic fields.

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[181] Lisa Colletta, "Political Satire and Postmodern Irony in the Age of Stephen Colbert and Jon Stewart," *Journal of Popular Culture* 42, no. 5 (2009).
[182] Hart and Hartelius, "The Political Sins of Jon Stewart," 265.

Methodology

In tracing shifting iterations of television news parody, I incorporate three interrelated approaches to media history: close textual analysis, discourse analysis, and genre analysis. Each procedure focuses on a different level of the text. My research includes primary texts of existing and commercially available news parody programs, as well as archival viewing of shows like *TW3* and *NNTN* and original scripts. I also incorporate secondary sources from traditional scholarship, industry trade publications, and mainstream television, print, and online coverage.

I performed close textual analysis on each program, choosing episodes either through selective or convenience samples. *TW3* proved the most challenging text to view. There are no complete NBC archives of the program, but one episode was located at the University of Southern California (UCLA), along with an attempted 1980's reboot. Four other episodes were viewed at the Paley Center for Media (Paley). All episodes of Weekend Update were viewed from the first five seasons of *SNL*, which are available as DVD sets. Select 1980's Weekend Update segments were also viewed at Paley. Only one special videotape "best of" collection of *NNTN* is currently available. However, multiple episodes were viewed at UCLA and Paley. In addition, UCLA holds the script archives for early HBO programming, so I was also able to review scripts from the show. Having been a regular viewer of both *TDS* and *Colbert* since they first launched, I was able to choose examples from my knowledge of the program, personal recordings of the shows, and clips accessible through their websites.

My analysis of these shows focus on their humor, the structural and visual similarities to news, the role of the anchor, and coverage of presidential politics. In

watching each show, I documented their general use of humor, their targets, and how each program utilized counter-hegemonic and assimilative humor. In particular, I focused on their political humor in relation to U.S. presidents as embodiments of political doxa. I also compare the structure and presentation of news parody to news programs at their time of production, in order to evaluate the varying levels and use of parody, including how actors embody the role of the news anchor. Changing technology was also analyzed to evaluate how decreasing costs of technology allowed programs to better mimic mainstream news programs.[183] These factors were considered both internally, within shows, as well as between programs.

Theoretically, this study is grounded in viewing media as discourse. Media texts engage in larger cultural discussions, constructing their own meanings while engaging and furthering existing discourses. My concept of discourse is grounded in the works of Ernesto Laclau and Michel Foucault, as a system of "signifying sequences in which meaning is constantly renegotiated" and which both limits and enables other signifying practices.[184] Such a perspective assumes that journalism creates and extends power and functions in society as part of multiple discourses. As Donald Matheson writes, discourse analysis "seek[s] not just to understand how language works in society, but in whose interests and with what effects on the world that is constructed by language."[185] Language in this context is not limited to the verbal realm, but to a full range of semiotic expression.

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[183] Like Hilmes, I claim technology is an important consideration for explaining television history, even if technological determinism as a totalizing theory is inadequate. Michele Hilmes, *The Television History Book* (London, England: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003). 4.
[184] Jacob Torfing, *New Theories of Discourse: Laclau, Mouffe, and Žižek* (Oxford, England: Blackwell Publishers, 1999). 85.
[185] Donald Matheson, *Media Discourses* (Berkshire, England: Open University Press, 2005). 12.

As part of the discourse analysis of this project, I examine a number of secondary sources in order to gain an understanding of how news parody has historically been understood within the existing culture, especially in relation to traditional journalism. The level of dependence on secondary sources for each program was partially dictated by need and also by usefulness. Research on programs such as *TW3*, where there are minimal primary texts available, relied more heavily on discourse analysis than more recent news parody programs. Potential sources for discourse analysis included the popular press, such as *The New York Times*, trade publications, such as *Variety* and *Broadcast and Cable*, and alternative publications, such as *Rolling Stone*.

The last methodology incorporated in this dissertation is genre analysis. As mentioned above, I primarily draw on the works of Altman and Mittell to show how treating these television programs as a genre both historically connects them and creates a context for evaluating shifting critiques of journalism.[186] Models of genre have expanded beyond the traditional strategy of grouping innate qualities of a corpus, combining structural considerations with factors outside the text.[187] My analysis compares how different programs share semantic and syntactic commonalities with each other and their parodied source material, and why differences emerge. While generic structure still has value as a topic of study, Gary G. Edgerton and Brian G. Rose, in their edited book on television genres, note that genre is increasingly recognized to be a *process*, and is "viewed as part of a much broader system of signification that derives meanings from the

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[186] Altman, *The American Film Musical*; Mittell, *Genre and Television: From Cop Shows to Cartoons in American Culture*.
[187] Gehring provides an excellent example of this work in his book on film parody. Wes D. Gehring, *Parody as Film Genre: "Never Give a Saga an Even Break"* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1999).

interrelationship between an assortment of creative, technological, industrial, institutional, and reception-related practices."[188] Through textual and discursive analysis of these shows and their surrounding discourse, I argue for news parody as a discursive television genre *and* discuss the interlocking aspects of genre, including surrounding discourses and shifts in technology and industrial norms. Adopting Bourdieu's field theory further enriches my consideration of genre by connecting news parody to the discourse of its parodied source. While news parody belongs to a genre, the programs also interact with other media texts through the journalistic field.

Incorporating the three methodologies of textual, discourse, and genre analysis provides a complementary approach addressing multiple aspects of culture. While discourse is a primary focus, this approach also fits into a cultural studies tradition, which assumes these texts are embedded and must be situated within the larger cultural field.

Chapter Outline

The structure of this dissertation is a chronological examination of the five news parody texts previously identified. Beginning with a brief chapter on humor theory in order to establish the terms and humor concepts behind the dissertation, the following chapters proceed to each focus on a specific decade with case studies for each. So, for instance, even though Weekend Update has existed from the 1970s into the present, the chapter addressing this text will primarily focus on its establishment in the first half of the initial

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[188] Gary R. Edgerton and Brian G. Rose, "Introduction: Television Genres in Transition," in *Thinking Outside the Box: A Contemporary Television Genre Reader*, ed. Gary R. Edgerton and Brian G. Rose (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2005), 7. For another interesting edited book on new directions in genre, see Geraghty and Jancovich, *The Shifting Definitions of Genre: Essays on Labeling Films, Television Shows and Media*.

decade. The exception is the 1990s, when *The Daily Show* originated. Because the first iteration of the program so strongly aligns with *NNTN*, and both shows aired during the multi-channel era of television, I address the Craig Kilburn days of *The Daily Show* in the same chapter as *NNTN*. Likewise, *TDS* and *Colbert* are discussed in the final chapter as part of the post-network era.

Humor and its Subversive Potential

Chapter 1 synthesizes and clarifies the relationship between different types of humor and their potential use as critical political tools. Humor theory exists as a cross-discipline concern, generating multiple viewpoints based on disciplinary perspective. Examining the key humor strategies of satire, parody, and pastiche, I describe how the news parody genre participates in all three and examine primary arguments for the liberatory and hegemonic potentials of each strategy. As a genre, news parody primarily emphasizes the visual and structural simulation of newscasts, foregrounding the programs primarily as parody.

That Was the Week That Was and the Limits of 1960s Political Comedy

A case study of the NBC program *TW3* follows in Chapter2. Although structured more like a humorous variety program than modern news parody, all of *TW3*'s content focused on topical humor, mirroring the content of news reports at the time. Fake anchors at desks tossed between sketches, songs, or even puppets, and read satirical news articles, sometimes with a camera focused on a newspaper picture. Even the puppets and singing were news-related, such as an Emmy-winning "hand ballet" about the Berlin Wall. Critics at

the time considered it groundbreaking for American television, both in format and in its liberal politics, and questioned whether audiences would have the stomach for sharp political and topical satire.[189] As one of the first widely recognized news-comedy programs on network television, *TW3* offers insight into early reception of the genre, and provides an ultimately unsuccessful vision for subsuming news parody within a larger variety program. With less than two seasons before its cancellation, the show's short lifespan also encourages an analysis of how and why its humor and politics failed to resonate with mid-1960's American audiences.

TW3 reflected an American primetime network sensibility; appearing firmly in the industrial time period Amanda Lotz identifies as the "network era" of American television, where show creators only had three network options for national distribution.[190] The show tried to appeal to specialized audiences looking for edgy political humor while simultaneously steering away from offending the mass audience—in the end failing in both goals. In attempting to poke fun at institutions still entrenched in society, *TW3* quickly found the limits of contemporary humor. Pierre Bourdieu uses the term *doxa* to describe acceptable thought and speech within society.[191] By attempting to cling tight to the line between humor inside and outside doxa, *TW3* ultimately found itself attacked by conservative politicians, abandoned by network executives, and after cancellation, barely missed by audiences hoping for more stinging satire. The demise of the program illustrates

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[189] For instance, Todd Gitlin characterized the show as one of the "most irreverent, politically liberal, and convention-subverting programs on the air." Todd Gitlin, *Inside Prime Time* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2000). 51.
[190] Amanda Lotz, *The Television Will Be Revolutionized* (New York, NY: New York University, 2007). 7-12.
[191] Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1977). 164-171.

how the genre and American culture would change to allow a growing acceptance of news parody.

Weekend Update: Moving News Parody to Late Night

Chapter three analyzes the first five years of the Weekend Update segment of *SNL*, which first aired in 1975 and continues to run on NBC. Although embedded within an 90-minute program, the news parody segment is the only consistent recurring feature in the body of the show and became a highly popular self-contained segment with as much popular recognition as *SNL* itself.[192] By isolating its news parody and creating a dedicated news space, the segment innovated the structure of the genre for future programs. Weekend Update also incorporated trends in television news at the time, encouraging comparisons with its newscast contemporaries. Unlike *TW3*, that used a simple desk to suggest a newscast, Weekend Update featured a sustained parody of 1970s network and local news, with an "official" news space, a single anchor or news team at a desk, a defined background with ticking clock, and over-the-shoulder graphics. As the longest-running example of television news parody, Weekend Update is a highly significant text that both influenced subsequent programs and became a point of popular comparison with *TDS* and *Colbert* during the 2000s.

Weekend Update provided much more cutting political commentary than *TW3*. While sometimes sophomoric, the segment's political humor often rose to challenge politicians by attacking their policies and implications of their statements. This chapter

[192] While acknowledging that *SNL* itself has regularly featured political satire apart from Weekend Update that certainly contextualizes the news segment within the overall comedy of the program, other parts of the show do not attempt to parody newscasts.

examines Weekend Update's innovations of news parody form, its shift to late night programming, and also questions how culture and the television industry shifted in the space of ten years to allow *SNL*'s brand of news parody to thrive.

Not Necessarily the News and News Parody in the Multi-Channel Era

Chapter four focuses on a case study of the HBO series *NNTN* and how the expansion of distribution and exhibition in the multi-channel era created new opportunities for news parody. *NNTN* benefited from the ability to narrowcast to the smaller HBO audience without having to worry about pleasing advertisers or running afoul of the FCC. The show foregrounds its connection with news parody through its title and predominant setting at a news desk with anchors reading fake stories. Like *TW3*, however, the news segments repeatedly gives way to sketch comedy and commercial parodies. Perhaps the most shocking aspect of *NNTN*, given its content *carte blanche* from HBO, is its *lack* of shock, combining humor, news, and politics into a timid and largely inoffensive format.

The news parody content of *NNTN* was largely tied to its use of newsfeed footage. Unlike *TW3* or Weekend Update, *NNTN* replicated television news' most recognizable feature: the combined use of footage and audio to tell a story. Despite characterization of the program as edgy satire, the availability of news footage actually encouraged writers to limit a lot of the show's humor to the level of visual pun, by merely combining unrelated footage, with no critical edge to the jokes. As a result, I characterize *NNTN*'s approach more as news pastiche than news parody. Moments of satiric criticism emerge, but the dominant mode of the program is a fascination and delight in playing with form without critical intent. In this way, *NNTN* seems to be a product of the consensus politics of the 1980s, as

political hegemony attempted to suture over the political fracturing of the country in the 60s and 70s. *NNTN* attempted to tread a careful line between satire and safety in a decade where the limits of speech were suddenly contracting.

News Parody in the Post-Network Era: Comedy Central's Invasion of the Journalistic Field

Two programs have dominated the new millennium of news parody: Comedy Central's *TDS* and *Colbert*. In chapter four I analyze these two shows, highlighting their similarities and differences as parallel structures that utilize slightly different humor strategies to formulate two alternative types of news parody. With the advent of these two shows, news parody became full participants in the journalistic sphere with their hosts and humor integrated into mainstream journalism, just as the programs also featured prominent journalists and newsmakers. With this shift, news parody turned its critical eye on the news media itself as much as the newsmakers, illuminating many of the previously discussed criticisms of the press. *TDS* and *Colbert* not only parody the structure, language, and other aspects of news, it also deconstructs the logic and usefulness of the entire news reporting routine. By rejecting any underlying objective stance to their coverage, the Comedy Central shows call conventional news into question, ultimately creating both a critique of journalism and fashioning own coverage of the news within the journalistic and political fields.

On *TDS* Jon Stewart parodies the seemingly infallible news anchor through self-deprecating humor, but his enactment of the role is more complex. On the one hand, Stewart calls into question the authority of news anchors, but he simultaneously attempts to assume the traditional journalistic role of speaking truth to power through a complex

mixing of sincerity and outrage. Stephen Colbert, by contrast, embraces all the pomposity and self-aggrandizement of news anchors and mixes in the partisan certainty of cable news personalities, creating an ironic celebration of the most over-the-top aspects of contemporary anchors.

Almost from their beginning, *TDS* and *Colbert* have benefitted from the additional viewing practices and distribution models of the post-millennial television age Lotz has dubbed the "post-network era."[193] The appointment viewing of the network and multi-channel age has given way to easy-to-use time-shifting hardware, such as DVRs, and additional devices to view programming distributed on the Internet at anytime, including computers and mobile devices like smart phones. The audiences of these news parody programs seem to embrace the new consumption patterns, additional content, and interactivity of the post-network era.

TDS and *Colbert* reconfigured the news parody format, creating sustained programs that move seamlessly from news parody to news interview, keeping their critical focus from beginning to end. The humor harnessed by each host also incorporates more of Davis' higher levels of sociological humor, regularly deconstructing the ideology of common sense and of power structures in society. The programs' style of complex, insightful and hard-hitting humor allows them to claim legitimacy within the political and journalistic fields and to struggle for hegemonic reconfiguration.

The dissertation ends with a concluding chapter synthesizing the five primary texts and how findings relate to contemporary issues within modern journalism. Additional texts from the multi-channel era are considered in light of the analysis of *TDS* and *Colbert*. I also

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[193] Lotz, *The Television Will Be Revolutionized*. 15-19.

outline potential for future research in this area and discuss how online and mobile video platforms for television raise the possibility in the future for moving image news parody removed from the living room television.

CHAPTER ONE: HUMOR AND ITS SUBVERSIVE POTENTIAL

As a genre, news parody touches on a number of bodies of scholarly work. The introduction outlines the state of journalism studies and research specifically on news parody. However, in order to discuss how the genre operates within different discourses, an underlying sense of what it means for these shows to be considered "comedic" is necessary. This chapter synthesizes the diverse, multi-disciplinary field of humor theory, especially relating to parody. While television is limited to the 20th and emerging 21st centuries, discussions of humor date back to antiquity. Aristotle wrote about comedy in his *Poetics*, calling it one of the four basic genres, and supposedly devoted a lost second book to the subject. [194] Plato addresses satire in *Gorgias*. Aristophanes is known for the many comedies he wrote. Since at least the time of the ancient Greek philosophers, writers have attempted to define what makes us laugh and why.

Historically, humor's tendency to cut across disciplinary divides has been the major stumbling block in developing a unified theory of humor. Laughter seems to be a fundamental part of what makes us human. Constance Rourke even called it a governing aspect of American character.[195] Whenever writers attempt to unlock comedy's mystery, they bring their own unique perspectives and questions to the discussion. Each discipline asks how humor interacts with the topics in *its* field of study and therefore each discipline forms an internal dialogue about humor, cut off from other perspectives. Every discussion is pre-structured by the philosophical perspective of the writer. For instance, Paul E. McGhee's research into the development of humor in children is highly regarded in

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[194] Aristotle and G. F. Else, *Aristotle: Poetics* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1967).
[195] Rourke, *American Humor: A Study of the National Character*: 11.

psychological views of humor, but is largely ignored by theorists writing about humor and literature.[196] Jan Hokenson highlights this incongruence when she writes, "The idea of comedy is agonistic insofar as each viewpoint seeks to correct elementary and entrenched errors in all the others, as it pushes or glides its way into their paths."[197] As a result, no general consensus emerges on even the terms of discussing humor, much less an accepted body of theory. Before addressing specific strategies in use by news parody, I focus on several major works that address humor overall for a generalized perspective on the potential for humor as a weapon of political critique.

Humor as Critique

Due to the fractured state of humor theory, writers addressing humor as a general concept generally proceed in one of two directions: categorization or synthesis. Structuralist accounts type humor by genres, characters, or even individual jokes, while synthesis studies create theoretical timelines of humor, usually advocating for one perspective over another. Categories can be useful in working through specific jokes or texts, however their application to society and humor is usually limited. A notable exception is Murray Davis' typology of humor, *What's So Funny?*, which links humor to its social and cultural uses.[198] In his book, Davis incorporates a sociological perspective, dividing humor into four levels—each level increasing the potential for disruption of larger systems. The first level is linguistic humor that occurs due to ambiguous language or word

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[196] Paul McGhee, *Humor, Its Origin and Development* (San Francisco, CA: W. H. Freeman and Company, 1979).
[197] Jan Hokenson, *The Idea of Comedy: History, Theory, Critique* (Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses, 2006). 16.
[198] Davis, *What's So Funny?: The Comic Conception of Culture and Society*.

play. These puns question language systems, rather than social or cultural systems. The second level is logical humor that links terms through an irrational relationship, causing an audience to question relationships on a higher level. Anthropological humor is the third level. Jokes in this category call into question metanarratives by questioning their underlying logic. For instance, Davis discusses how a decrease in religious faith in the first third of the 20th Century resulted in increased jokes about God and angels.[199] His final level is humor and society, which is the main focus of his writings.

Jokes that operate on the final level of humor and society destabilize the expectations of social units. Borrowing from sociology, Davis explains that economics, politics, family and culture form the basic social units and that society expects these units to have competency, authority, and compatibility. Humor can be used to show the incongruence between these units and how competing claims invalidate other parts of the system. To make the claim that news parody is of importance, then, the humor must do more than merely make puns. Davis's division between levels of humor offers an interesting way of describing the relative stakes of comedy—in other words, how much does a type of humor challenge the status quo? One recent article actually makes the case for using contemporary news parody programs pedagogically in order to introduce students to comedic sociological perspective.[200] In this study I incorporate Davis' typology as a primary method of evaluating the disruption potential of news parody humor.

While Davis grounds his categories in sociology, Lance Olsen divides humor theory into two impulses. *Microhumor* theory explains jokes, while *macrohumor* engages what

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[199] Ibid., 109.
[200] Shawn Chandler Bingham and Alexander A. Hernandez, ""Laughing Matters": The Comedian as Social Observer, Teacher, and Conduit of the Sociological Perspective," *Teaching Sociology* 37, no. 4 (2009).

Olsen calls "the comic vision," which is the attitudes and values of humor.[201] He further divides microhumor into three historical explanations for why a joke is funny. One of the most popular perspectives is incongruity theory, which views humor as the result of a subverted audience expectation. Davis attributes the incongruity model to Immanuel Kant, and argues that incongruity was a major shift in humor theory that moved from looking at the object or joke, and instead turned towards the person who finds humor, moving from the objective to the subjective.[202] Likewise, the other two microhumor explanations also focus on audience. One answer, often associated with Thomas Hobbes, is that humor allows us to feel superior to others, while Sigmund Freud suggested that humor acts as a relief. Other writers who focus on creating a synthesis of humor theory have historically traced these three microhumor perspectives.

Hokenson's *The Idea of Comedy: History, Theory, Critique* offers an ideal example of synthesis, providing an in-depth discussion of the development of comedic theory.[203] From the ancient Greeks, such as Aristotle and Plato, Hokenson brings the state of the field up through poststructuralism and its concern with humor's ability to challenge society. She traces 20th century concepts of humor along two main lines. The first assumes humor is about the social world; it helps us to cope with and to criticize the social. Although others had discussed the social dimensions of humor before, Hokenson largely credits this perspective to Friedrich Nietzsche, who viewed laughter as a corrective to the social.[204] The second strain emphasizes the individual and the unconscious aspect of humor. Sigmund

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[201] Lance Olsen, *Circus of the Mind in Motion: Postmodernism and the Comic Vision* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 1990). 20-22.
[202] Davis, *What's So Funny?: The Comic Conception of Culture and Society*: 11.
[203] Hokenson, *The Idea of Comedy: History, Theory, Critique*.
[204] Ibid., 44.

Freud's *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious* is the most obvious influence on this perspective.[205] Published in 1905, Freud's work was the first to consider how humor works at the level of the subconscious and to attempt to categorize some of these functions.

Hokenson argues that Freudian theory became split during the 20th century into what she calls the "dominant archetypal" and "populist" views of humor. The dominant-archetypal perspective assumes comedy is rooted in social norms and that it upholds norms. We laugh at people who fall outside the norms, feeling superior. In this way, humor upholds the status quo. In terms of news parody, the original *The Daily Show* most closely matches this archetypal perspective, featuring comedy packages about odd people and their beliefs. The frat boy style humor encourages the audience to laugh at the socially awkward and cultural outliers. By contrast, the populist view approaches comedy as a tool for social change and merges Freudian theory with Nietzsche's ideas. An example is the Marxist writings of James Feibleman, who views humor as part of the revolutionary principle and wrote that "the corrosive effect of humor eats away the solemnity of accepted evaluation," forcing us to reevaluate society.[206] As discussed in individual chapters, this type of humor that encourages questioning authority is more in line with the traditional efforts of news parody programs and reflects the dominant perspective of the shows I analyze.

Olsen incorporates a populist frame into his analysis of humor and its potential for radicalism under postmodernity. Olsen argues that postmodern humor is not historically bounded—it accelerated during the 20th century, but postmodern humor existed prior to

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[205] Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, trans. James Strachey (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1960).
[206] James Kern Feibleman, *In Praise of Comedy (Reissue)* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1962). 182.

the era. While humor can either reinforce social norms or question them, Olsen argues that postmodern humor exists to "disarm pomposity and power" and that its creator "becomes [an] aesthetic and metaphysical terrorist."[207] Unlike the approaches that came before, postmodern humor is defined by its textual openness. Rather than nihilism, Olsen sees both a dark and a light in this style of humor, an emptiness that, once revealed, can be filled: "while [absences] may signal the possibility of *de*struction, they also signal the possibility for *con*struction, a radical freedom, a renewed sense of potential."[208] Rather than being grounded in an unquestioned Truth, postmodern humor sees both negative and positive perspectives. I find similarities between Olson's discussion of postmodern humor and *Colbert*'s use of irony. The multiple layers of meaning created by the program's parody, satire, and irony make its humor more open and up to individual audience interpretation.

Olsen applies his theories to the novel and traces the rise of postmodern humor to the 1960s. He then argues that this type of humor receded during the 1970s and '80s, but predicts another period of subversion at the end of the 1990s.[209] In an article about British satire television shows, Stephen Wagg makes a similar argument that true alternative comedy on 1970s and '80s British television became commodified by the 1990s.[210] Both Olsen and Wagg fall into a trap of making sweeping proclamations about cultural trends based on their present status, a maneuver that seems short sighted. Hokenson, writing during the 2000s, disputes the idea that such populist humor has waned. She writes that we now live in a "transmodern" age, where humorists "seem to be dealing more fully than

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[207] Olsen, *Circus of the Mind in Motion: Postmodernism and the Comic Vision*: 18.
[208] Ibid., 19.
[209] Ibid., 148.
[210] Stephen Wagg, "Everything Else Is Propaganda: The Politics of Alternative Comedy," in *The Social Faces of Humor: Practices and Issues*, ed. George E. C. Paton, Chris Powell, and Stephen Wagg (Aldershot, Hants.: Arena, 1996).

their immediate predecessors…with the greater history of the interrelations between aesthetics and ethics in comedy," and where laughter can "advance the human being toward greater freedom and deeper knowledge of societies and selves."[211] Even if Olsen and Wagg's arguments are correct that "certified" postmodern humor took a hiatus from mainstream novels and British television (which seems debatable), its spirit continued in other cultural forms in the last several decades of the 20th century. The post-Reagan era of the 1980s and early-1990s did seem to contract doxa, a shift reflected in American popular culture. However, I show how early news parody programs and the post-network shows tap into exactly this style of critical postmodern humor, with varying degrees of radicalism.

All three of these writers, Davis, Hokenson and Olsen, come from drastically different perspectives with often-conflicting assumptions about humor. However, they all each tread common ground in their discussion of humor's potential for critiquing society. Whether envisioned as "populist," "humor and society," or "postmodern," each author identifies how humor illuminates and questions structures and personalities in society. This aspect of humor is the central focus of my work. While other theoretical humor material is incorporated, Davis's sociological perspective and the liberating potential of populist humor are the primary theoretical touchstone in this dissertation.

Parody and Satire

News parody reflects the sensibility of the populist view of humor through its critique of politics and general events. However, it also integrates two specific strategies of humor into its format: parody and satire. Like humor itself, both parody and satire have a

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[211] Hokenson, *The Idea of Comedy: History, Theory, Critique*: 249.

long theoretical histories, mostly grounded in literature. Davis notes a tendency to conflate parody and satire toward the end of the 20th century and literature from the past reflects general confusion of the terms.[212] Older definitions relate satire to reality and parody to the mediated realm, but in a hypermediated world these distinctions seem less relevant. Contemporary theorists of humor seem mostly agreed on distinctions between the two labels.

Satire is often discussed as a literary or media genre, although there are linguistic applications of the term as well. In general, satire is humor used to shame or critique in order to illuminate and motivate change. The humor of satire is intimately linked with its purpose. Paul Simpson argues that rather than a genre, satire is best understood as "a discursive practice that does things *to* and *with* genres of discourse."[213] In other words, satire operates across genres as a discursive mode. The satiric context consists of the author (satirist), the audience, and the satirized, although the satirized are not invited into the process. Satire requires the audience to connect the work to the external world and to general discourse about the satirized subject. For instance, Weekend Update reports that President Ford created his own campaign slogan: "If he's so dumb, how comes he's president?" Viewers access specific knowledge about the president and his public image to decode the satire, as well as knowledge of the norms of campaign advertising. Like this example of satirizing Ford, whether satire is conceived as discourse or genre, it is agreed that satire is *always* negative in its intent. However, different writers have conceptualized satire's relationship to parody in multiple ways.

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[212] Davis, *What's So Funny?: The Comic Conception of Culture and Society*: 95.
[213] Paul Simpson, *On the Discourse of Satire: Toward a Stylistic Model of Satirical Humor* (Philadelphia, PN: John Benjamins Publishing Co. , 2003). 8.

Satire comments *upon* a subject. Parody, by contrast, is defined by *imitating* a subject. It is humor based on borrowing from an existing sign system. Margaret Rose, writing on the history of parody, defines it as "*the comic refunctioning of preformed linguistic or artistic material*."[214] The style and content of a work identify it as parody, as well as its reception by an audience. Parody creates at least three levels of meaning: signification borrowed from the original parodied source, the creation of its own parodic context, and new meaning forged from a union of the two. In other words, the parody of *TDS* is not necessarily its actual form and content, but its form and content altered by the audience connecting it with traditional newscasts. From its literary origins, the use of parody exploded over the course of the 20th century, in tandem with the rapid growth of visual and audio arts. Linda Hutcheon calls parody "one of the major modes of formal and thematic construction of texts" during the 20th Century.[215] Virtually every popular musical, television, or film genre of the decade quickly met with its parodic double. Although there is a general recognition that the explosion of mass media during the 20th century accelerated the use of parody, Mikhail Bakhtin points out there has never been a genre without its accompanying parody—that the oldest, straightforward, "serious" genres were always closely followed by their humorous doppelgangers.[216]

One point of departure among writers on parody has been the stance of parodic texts towards their parodied works. Do all parodies criticize? Simon Dentith, for example, encapsulates both parody's focus on form and mimicry, and its potentially subversive

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[214] Margaret Rose, *Parody: Ancient, Modern, and Post-Modern* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1993). 52.
[215] Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody: The Teachings of Twentieth-Century Art Forms* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000). 2.
[216]Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, trans. Caryl Emerson & Michael Holquist (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1981). 53.

political uses in his definition of the term: "any cultural practice which provides a relatively polemical allusive imitation of another cultural product or practice."[217] In *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*, Freud likewise links parody to a critical mode and claims such works are "directed against people and objects which lay claim to authority and respect."[218] Other writers reject the idea that parody must scorn its source material.[219] In fact, Simpson argues that when parody does feature this kind of critical edge, it becomes satire. Simpson views satire as a subsuming metacategory of humor; however, there are less totalizing ways of conceptualizing the relationship between parody and satire.

Rather than viewing types of humor as discrete categories, some writers have advocated for treating parody and satire as overlapping terms.[220] In describing this relationship, Hutcheon utilizes a Venn diagram to show how parody, irony and satire are each distinct forms that stand on their own, but often overlap and combine.[221] So according to Hutcheon, a parody can be satiric and/or ironic, but does not *have* to be. In my discussion of Colbert, for example, I mention how he continues to employ parody and satire, but moves closer to irony dominating his mode of address.

Theorists of postmodernism such as Fredric Jameson actually claim that parody devoid of satire typifies postmodern media and becomes *another* textual form. Rather than parody, Jameson labels these texts "pastiche." He characterizes pastiche as "amputated of

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[217] Simon Dentith, *Parody* (London, England: Routledge, 2000). 9.
[218] Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*: 248.
[219] See, for instance, Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody: The Teachings of Twentieth-Century Art Forms*; Rose, *Parody: Ancient, Modern, and Post-Modern*; Simpson, *On the Discourse of Satire: Toward a Stylistic Model of Satirical Humor*.
[220] Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody: The Teachings of Twentieth-Century Art Forms*; Roger J. Kreuz and Richard M. Roberts, "On Satire and Parody: The Importance of Being Ironic," *Metaphor and Symbolic Activity* 8, no. 2 (1993).
[221] Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody: The Teachings of Twentieth-Century Art Forms*: 56.

the satiric impulse, devoid of laughter…blank parody."[222] Pastiche exists as an endless circulation of borrowed sign systems, and although humor may be attached, a critical spirit is absent. A prime example of pastiche is the films of Jason Friedberg and Aaron Seltzer, who wrote a string of movies during the 2000s, including *Scary Movie* and its sequels, which are meant to be humorous reworkings of existing films. Friedberg's and Seltzer's works are not generally considered satiric, though; instead they attempt to create humor merely by recontextualizing the best-known scenes of other films—mimicry, rather than criticism; pastiche, rather than parody. Although some authors have dismissed *TDS* and *Colbert* as pastiche,[223] I argue the programs are correctly identified as satiric parody, and incorporate the stylistics and content of the parodied subjects into their critique of politics and media.

As described above, different critics define parody, satire, and pastiche in different ways. Some view parody as the opposite of pastiche; others suggest pastiche is a subcategory of parody. Still others claim parody is a type of satire. In this study, I use the term *parody* to describe texts that imitate other sources and through satire, critically question their norms and construction. I separate pastiche from parody, defining pastiche as a replication of forms without the satirical, critical impulse. So, as I discuss in later chapters, *TDS* parodies news by replicating the form of journalism while satirically revealing its own hypocrisy and concessions to the powerful, but *NNTN* mostly creates pastiche that plays with form and image, but without underlying critique.

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[222] Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, 9th ed. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001). 17.
[223] Colletta, "Political Satire and Postmodern Irony in the Age of Stephen Colbert and Jon Stewart."

The Critical Uses of Parody

Historically, many of the best-known works of parody have been of the satiric type. As a result, a number of writers have engaged the question of whether parody functions merely as entertainment, or whether it can play a socially progressive role in public debate. Although I claim the satiric spirit is integral to parody, a number of writers discount the potential for parody to effect change or create positive results with its humor.

Parody has occasionally been denied serious contemplation purely due to its dependence on other texts, with some literary scholars dismissing it as a parasitic genre with no lasting effect. Dentith, however, points out that such a broad brush would dismiss all art. There is no original *ur*-text without dependence on other forms.[224] This approach conveniently ignores parody's potential for engaging social change by condemning it based on its very form.

A number of contemporary theorists likewise deny the value of parody by arguing that the form has no real broader effect on society besides generating humor. In her book, Rose includes a chart showing many postmodern or poststructuralist theorists who view parody from a negative perspective or dismiss contemporary parody as mere pastiche; it includes such influential thinkers as Jameson, Jürgen Habermas, Jean Baudrillard, Jean-François Lyotard and E. Ann Kaplan.[225] Baudrillard and Slavoj Žižek offer particularly dismissive accounts of the potential for parody to effect change. Baudrillard claims that the death of systems only revive the system; in fact, the threat of death is required by the

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[224] Dentith, *Parody*: 189.
[225] Rose, *Parody: Ancient, Modern, and Post-Modern*: 198-205.

system.[226] For Baudrillard, parody as a late-stage aspect of generic systems only plays a role in reconstituting systems of power. Žižek argues that when we think popular culture is subverting the system and mocking the ruling ideology, we are actually becoming even more trapped within the system.[227] Parody pokes fun at, but also relies on and strengthens, the system. For instance, Žižek dismisses American radical politics as a challenge to hegemony that never achieves its aims, but "becomes endless mocking parody and provocation."[228] From this perspective, parody only *appears* to create spaces of resistance and the potential for change, making it perhaps more dangerous than the status quo. One problem with such arguments is they demand a whole-scale destruction of a system to qualify as effective. Shifts in hegemony or isolated effects, such as the cancellation of CNN's *Crossfire* after Jon Stewart's withering deconstruction of the show, are discounted as temporary results that reinvigorate the system in the long term, leaving no hope for any positive change.

Dentith offers perhaps the most even-handed discussion of parody's potential for disruption by pointing out that parody's value can only be judged by its actual use in context: "There is no general politics of parody; you cannot decide in advance whether it seeks to contain the new or to deflate the old. Equally, at the level of popular culture, no general decisions can be made in advance about the cultural value of parody."[229] The strategy itself holds the possibility of questioning power; the particular use decides

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[226] Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1994). 24.
[227] Slavoj Žižek, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real!* (New York, NY: Verso, 2002). 71.
[228] Ibid., 101.
[229] Dentith, *Parody*: 185.

whether parody disrupts or merely reconstitutes.[230] There exists within parody the *potential* for subversion, but the producers of the text have to activate that potential.

One of the most influential contemporary frameworks for discussing the liberatory effects of humor in society is Bahktin's concept of the carnival. Some writers have minimized Bahktin's interest in parody and its connection to carnival; however, there are several instances in his writing where Bahktin specifically connects the carnival spirit to parody.[231] In medieval Europe, the carnival referred to a specific time of the year, authorized by authority, when aspects of society became inverted; the low were allowed to laugh at the powerful, and even religion was subject to ridiculing humor. Carnival provided an outlet for humor and pleasure during a time of rigid class structure and somber observance. Bahktin connects the seriousness encouraged by the medieval church and state to the constant oppression of ordinary people: "As a spokesman of power, seriousness terrorized, demanded, and forbade."[232] By contrast, carnival opened up spaces for resistance and "working out, in a concretely sensuous, half-real and half-play-acted form, a *new mode of interrelationship between individuals*, counterposed to the all-powerful, socio-hierarchical relationships of noncarnival life."[233] Carnival brought people into dialogue that would have normally been forbidden by social structure, and imagined a world without the stifling rules imposed on society. Laws and traditions were subject not only to questioning,

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[230] Kate Kenny, "'The Performative Surprise': Parody, Documentary and Critique," *Culture and Organization* 15, no. 2 (2009).
[231] See Rose, *Parody: Ancient, Modern, and Post-Modern*: 180.
[232] Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1984). 94.
[233] ———, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, trans. Carl Emerson (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1985). 123.

but to ridicule. The imagination was freed, if only temporarily, to envision alternative social arrangements.

Bahktin sees this same dialogic spirit of carnival in what he calls the carnivalized literary genres, which include parody.[234] Just as carnival opened up communication between peoples, "parody is an intentional dialogized hybrid. Within it, languages and styles actively and mutually illuminate one another."[235] Parody blends genres and modes of writing and forces them to interact, creating the potential to break out of traditional generic and cultural boundaries in the same way carnival opens up social and cultural boundaries.[236] Bahktin refers to parody as a "double-voiced discourse," meaning the parody is directed back at the original referent, but also towards an additional extra-textual discourse. These discourses clash and create openings.[237]

Bahktin regards parody more as a mode of writing than a genre. He identifies parody as belonging to "a special extra-generic or inter-generic world" of literature that "provide[s] the corrective of laughter and criticism" to existing genres and "force[s] men to experience beneath these categories a different and contradictory reality that is otherwise not captured in them."[238] Bahktin's view of parody incorporates the critical stance commonly associated with satire, and also specifically connects parody to a critique of power relationships in society.

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[234] Ibid., 127.
[235] ———, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*: 76.
[236] Hariman likewise identifies a connection between parody and carnival and an opening up of space for criticism of the limits of public speech. Robert Hariman, "Political Parody and Public Culture," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 94, no. 3 (2008).
[237] Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*: 185-86.
[238] ———, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*: 59.

Bahktin exalts the literary parodies of the Renaissance, especially those of François Rabelais and Miguel de Cervantes, arguing that they embody the mocking spirit of carnival. However, writing during the first half of the twentieth century, the literary critic is dismissive of contemporary parody and its ability to engage in social change. For Bahktin, the liberatory potential of the carnival and carnivalesque parody is linked to its ambiguous, leveling laughter—*all* are mocked during carnival.[239] There is no person or institution off limits—even the comics themselves are not above the fray. According to Bahktin, this ambivalence is precisely what has been lost in modern parody. Although Renaissance literature practiced degradation with the ability to renew and create dialogue, he claims contemporary parody possesses a "solely negative character and is deprived of regenerating ambivalence."[240] I think it is important that Bahktin wrote this condemnation during the time period of World War II, and that he was specifically engaging formal literary parody. A reevaluation of Bahktin's criticism of modern parody seems in order, especially given the explosion of satiric parody during the last half of the 20th century and the rise of new forms of mass communication during the same time period. *TDS* especially seems to participate in the kind of mocking renewal Bahktin refers to. Far from nihilistic, Stewart's presentation suggests an advocacy for journalistic renewal, and a more vigorous and insightful coverage of public policy.

Although Bahktin's concept of the carnival has been highly influential, there have been critics of its application by media scholars. Umberto Eco, for example, argues that carnival is about a *desire* for liberation, but that we should not confuse this desire with

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[239] ———, *Rabelais and His World*: 12.
[240] Ibid., 21.

actual liberation.[241] In fact, Eco points out that rather than engaging in the break down of social order, comedy and carnival *reinforce* that order. He calls them "*authorized* transgression" that "represent[s] paramount examples of law reinforcement. They remind us of the existence of the rule."[242] Eco does not necessarily dispute Bahktin's notion of carnival, but instead argues that rather than liberating, humor can aspire to undermine the law while at the same time reminding us of the law's presence. This seemingly contradictory aspect of parody is also recognized by Hutcheon, who writes that parody renews as it destroys.[243] Although these moments of critique and renewal are possible, Eco still warns that they are exceedingly rare, especially in corporate media.[244]

The foundation of humor theory established in this section forms the backdrop for my discussion of humor within news parody texts. Like Dentith, I view parody as a function of its use. Structuralist evaluations of parody as "liberatory or not" ignore context, especially reception, and overly simplify the complexity of a text. Arthur Asa Berger reminds us that *all* humor has a political dimension and has a place as a revolutionary tool.[245] In fact, political humor often engages a new audience untouched by traditional political discourse, leading Robert Hariman to claim parody as the "core modality" for contemporary political humor, making it "essential for an engaged, sustainable, democratic public culture."[246] In this dissertation, I assume parody *can* partake of the carnivalesque and illuminate aspects in society, but there is always a danger that laughter is masking the

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[241] Umberto Eco, "The Frames of Comic 'Freedom'," in *Carnival!*, ed. Thomas Sebeok (Berlin, Germany: Moulton Publishers, 1984), 3.
[242] Ibid., 6.
[243] Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody: The Teachings of Twentieth-Century Art Forms*: 115.
[244] Eco, "The Frames of Comic 'Freedom'," 8.
[245] Arthur Asa Berger, "The Politics of Laughter," in *The Social Faces of Humor: Practices and Issues*, ed. George Paton, Chris Powell, and Stephen Wagg (Aldershot, Hants.: Arena, 1996).
[246] Hariman, "Political Parody and Public Culture."

problem. However, all criticism runs the risk of being subverted and reconstituting existing systems, making parody no less potentially ineffectual than other forms.

In my analysis of texts, I incorporate a combination of humor theories. My primary focus is on populist forms of humor, drawing upon Davis's sociological levels of humor as a useful categorization to analyze the disruptive potential for the comedy in different television shows.[247] My analysis also touches on each program's parodic state and whether the humor is mere pastiche or more in the spirit of subversive carnivalesque humor.

[247] Davis, *What's So Funny?: The Comic Conception of Culture and Society*.

CHAPTER TWO: *THAT WAS THE WEEK THAT WAS* AND THE LIMITS OF 1960S POLITICAL COMEDY

In 1967, musing over the past two decades of American television, CBS program chief Perry Lafferty proclaimed that viewers "don't want to be intellectually stimulated and they don't want to be educated; they want to bury their problems in the 23-inch screen."[248] To back his claim, Lafferty pointed to previous failed attempts by networks to target sophisticated viewers, such as NBC's *TW3*. Lafferty's claim is one of many rationales the television industry developed to account for the cancellation of the program, which debuted to critical praise and enthusiastic audience reception. Other post-mortems after the show's cancellation pointed to ratings, political pressure, and network apathy. All of these factors undoubtedly contributed to the demise of *TW3*, but its primary difficulties were structural and cultural. *TW3* attempted to parody newscasts as a part-time premise, mixing multiple forms of topical humor together, creating a lack of structural consistency for the program that failed to resonate with audiences. The humor of the program, although tame by today's standards, seemed overly acerbic and confrontational for an entertainment show at the time, polarizing audiences.[249] Less than ten years after its demise, far harder-hitting news parody emerged on the same channel, but into a changed cultural landscape eager to bring the powerful down to the level of comedy.

TW3 debuted as a midseason replacement on NBC in January of 1964, after a well-received pilot, and ran for fifty episodes before its cancellation at the end of the 1964-65 season. Although the program is mostly forgotten in writing about 1960s American

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[248] Dave Kaufman, "Lafferty: Public Demands TV Dream World; Cites Drop in Show Presentations," *Daily Variety*, July 27, 1967.
[249] Hal Erickson, *"From Beautiful Downtown Burbank": A Critical History of Rowan and Martin's Laugh in, 1968-1973* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2000). 37.

television, *TW3* is notable as America's first and only regular prime-time network series to devote significant time to news parody. The show's short one-and-a-half season lifespan yielded a surplus of drama and controversy. This chapter examines the development and shifting fortunes of the program, and analyzes its enactment of news parody during the heyday of the network era of television.

TW3 was an American import of a BBC program by the same name. The British *TW3* aired during 1962 and 1963, becoming one of the most talked-about programs in the BBC's history. The program appeared in the middle of the British satire boom of the late 1950s and '60s, hitting England like a brick to the head.[250] Headed up by producer Nat Sherrin and writer and actor David Frost, *TW3* offered satiric evaluations of politics and society that were more sustained, fearless, and occasionally vicious than any previous BBC program.[251] The usually stone-faced state television system developed the program both to tap into the success of satire in Britain and to attempt to take back some of the entertainment-oriented audience from ITV, its commercial competitor. Because ITV primarily re-broadcast American network programs, *TW3* provided hip satire with a local flavor the BBC hoped would pull in audiences. The show proved a hit, with 10-12 million regular weekly

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[250] For more on the satire boom and the British *TW3*, see Jerry Palmer, *The Logic of the Absurd: On Film and Television* (London, England: British Film Institute, 1987); Jeffrey S. Miller, *Something Completely Different: British Television and American Culture* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2000); Humphrey Carpenter, *A Great Big Silly Grin: The British Satire Boom of the 1960s* (New York, NY: Public Affairs, 2002); Stephen Wagg, "Comedy, Politics and Permissiveness: The 'Satire Boom' and Its Inheritance," *Contemporary Politics* 8, no. 4 (2002); Keith Suter, "The British Satirical Revolution," *Contemporary Review* 285, no. 1664 (2004).

[251] A *New York Times* article, for instance, called the program "the most controversial show in British television history." Sydney Gruson, "B.B.C. Satire Show to Take Breather," *New York Times*, May 2, 1963.

viewers.[252] However, *TW3*'s success brought as much controversy as accolades to the broadcaster. Television comedy about the Royal Family, Parliament, and the Pope proved equally as shocking as funny, and *TW3* became the topic of organized complaints and parliamentary arguments. A victim of its own success, *TW3* was cancelled by the BBC, who claimed it would be too difficult for the show to be impartial during the upcoming 1964 general elections. There was little doubt, however, that the network looked forward to silencing the storm of controversy the show had fueled. The last episode of the British *TW3* appeared just two weeks before the American version of the show started regularly airing in a nation with a drastically different cultural context.

While Britain was experiencing its "satire boom" in the late 1950s and early 1960s, American popular culture continued an uneasy dance with social humor. The 1950s have often been characterized as an almost mirthless period in America, with McCarthyism and Cold War rhetoric taken as characteristic. However, scholars like Ethan Thompson and Stephen E. Kercher make compelling cases that parody and satire were quite successful with subcultures in America during the 1950s, and even extended into mainstream media on occasion.[253] Comedians performing what was called "sick humor" became club regulars, making jokes about religion, sex, and other formerly taboo topics. A number of these "sick comics," such as Lenny Bruce, Mort Sahl, Tom Lehrer, and Don Adams, were able to spin their routines into successful record albums and television talk-show appearances.[254] The

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[252] Clive Barnes, "Britain's 'TWTWTW'," *New York Times*, September 22, 1963.
[253] Ethan Thompson, *Parody and Taste in Postwar American Television Culture* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2011); Stephen Kercher, *Revel with a Cause: Liberal Satire in Postwar America* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2006).
[254] For more on sick humor, see Tony Hendra, *Going Too Far* (New York, NY: Dolphin Book, 1987). Vwadek P. Marciniak, *Politics, Humor and the Counterculture: Laughter in the Age of Decay* (New York, NY: Peter Lang, 2008). Chapter 2.

emergence and success of *Mad* magazine offers another example of satiric humor during this seeming decade of consensus. While young readers and college students often delighted in *Mad*'s critical humor, Thompson describes how some readers actually sent letters to the FBI, asking if the humor magazine was un-American.[255] Even if there was no "boom," satire in America certainly existed as an alternative practice that sometimes erupted within more traditional texts. Thompson makes a compelling argument that the rise of parody and other satiric humor during the 1950s was a reaction to the popularity and increasing commercialism of American media. Humor critical of middle-class media tastes helped to negotiate audience's dissatisfaction with media and to also create the illusion of a cultural hierarchy within popular culture, with satire and parody being treated as the high culture of devalued forms.[256]

Moving into the 1960s, television seemed to be the medium most out of touch with changes in American culture. Sitcoms and family-oriented shows dominated the dial, creating a bizarre juxtaposition between network programming and network news. Coverage of racial violence, the expanding war in Vietnam, riots, and assassinations depicted a nation in social upheaval, while also debunking the myth of national consensus. Prime time on the three television networks continued to depict a mythic America of small towns free of crime, nuclear patriarchal families, and bright futures ahead, ignoring real-life events in the world. In her book *The Way We Never Were*, Stephanie Coontz describes how representations of the 1950s and '60s generate a false nostalgia for an American

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[255] Thompson, *Parody and Taste in Postwar American Television Culture*. 45
[256] Ibid. 146

experience that never existed.[257] As the most popular medium of its time, television bears a disproportional responsibility for propagating this myth. The network line-up for 1963 seemed to provide more of the same for viewers. Several new series debuted, such as *The Patty Duke Show* and *Petticoat Junction*, while Nielsen favorites like *The Beverly Hillbillies* and *Bonanza* continued their popular runs. In a September speech to the American Women in Radio and Television, FCC Chair E. William Henry chided the industry for avoiding controversial issues and thus producing mostly bland programming.[258] Only months later, NBC took up the gauntlet laid down by Henry, adapting *TW3* for American audiences.

Audience and Critical Reception

The British success of *TW3* spawned a number of imitators and spin-offs before and during the run of the American version of the show. The Canadian *This Hour Has Seven Days* (1964-1966) and the Australian *The Mavis Bramston Show* (1964-1968) were each popular series inspired by the BBC program. Adapting British satire for American audiences proved more difficult in a commercial environment. Local stations WNEW in New York and WTTG in Washington were among the first to attempt a *TW3*-style program for American television with the program *What's Going On Here*, featuring the British "Beyond the Fringe" comedy troupe. The initial May 1963 broadcast received positive reception and *Variety* claimed that if the show was signed for a series, "it could justifiably be hailed as the most outrageous, audacious and sacrilegious entry on American TV." In the same *Variety* review, however, the writer predicted the program was just as likely to be a one-time

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[257] Stephanie Coontz, *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1992).
[258] "FCC's Henry: 'If Dig You Must (on Controversy) We'll Back You," *Weekly Variety*, September 25, 1963.

"gesture of bravado whose consequences frightened its creators and patrons."[259] That fear proved prescient, as WNEW was unable to find sponsors for subsequent episodes of *What's Going On Here*, and abandoned the concept.[260]

In the summer of 1963, press stories began reporting the BBC had sold the American rights for *TW3* to Leland Hayward Production, and that NBC was negotiating to carry the program. Critics familiar with the BBC program voiced surprise and doubt that American networks and advertisers would support the no-holds-barred satire characteristic of the British program. *New York Times*' critic Val Adams, for instance, assumed the networks would automatically reject a program with such specialized content and audience appeal.[261] Producer Leland Hayward, who had made his name in Broadway and film production, attempted to prime audiences and also tamp down expectations in his press interviews. A story in *Variety* quotes Hayward as saying, "of course we won't be able to go as far [in humor] as they do in London."[262] Yet in other reports, Hayward emphasizes the show as groundbreaking for American television. So, from the earliest press coverage, the creative team of the American *TW3* engaged in an uneasy dance of attempting to capitalize on the cutting-edge humor of the BBC show, while also reassuring prospective networks and advertisers that the humor would still be within the bounds of American taste.

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[259] Herm, "What's Going on Here," *Weekly Variety*, May 15, 1963.
[260] Another attempt at topical satire on WNEW, *The Establishment*, likewise failed later the same year
[261] Val Adams, "News of TV and Radio," *New York Times*, June 16, 1963.
[262] Jack Hellman, "Light and Airy," *Daily Variety*, September 25, 1963.

The one-hour pilot episode of NBC's *TW3* debuted on November 10, 1963 to high critical expectations.[263] The program was scheduled on a Sunday at 10 pm, against CBS's voyeuristic powerhouse *Candid Camera* (1960-1967) and the ABC show *Laughs For Sale* (1963-1964). Reviews for the pilot were generally positive, especially for a Mike Nichols and Elaine May skit about the high costs of funerals. However, most writers seemed to be reviewing the *potential future* of the program, more than the content of the pilot. While *Variety* gushed that "sacred cows are milked for laughs," *New York Times* critic Jack Gould was more cautionary.[264] Gould welcomed the appearance of topical humor on American television, but reported *TW3*'s "general level of wit was never particularly inspired."[265] *Washington Post* critic Rick Du Brow was likewise hopeful that a satire program could add to the quality of television and endorsed making the program a series, but complained that *TW3*'s actors were too playful in their presentation. Despite the use of humor, Du Brow reminds his readers that "satire is basically serious business, and at its heart is not kidding…what we need now is not the tickling of tweezers but the swinging of hatchets."[266] These reviews reflect a discourse that runs through subsequent coverage of *TW3*, where writers want to celebrate smart comedy on television, and want to see the show succeed. However, critics became increasingly disillusioned with *TW3*'s ability to deliver on its promise of cutting-edge humor.[267]

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[263] *That Was the Week That Was*, Pilot. Paley Center for Media - Catalog ID T78:0228. November 10, 1963.
[264] Helm, "That Was the Week That Was," *Daily Variety*, November 12, 1963.
[265] Jack Gould, ""That Was The Week That Was"," *New York Times*, November 11, 1963.
[266] Rick Du Brow, "3TW Experiment Should Be a Series," *Washington Post*, November 13, 1963.
[267] American audiences got their first and last taste of the British *TW3* several weeks later, when NBC aired a special episode of the British program eulogizing President Kennedy following his assassination. The program broke its satiric format to celebrate Kennedy and

NBC picked up *TW3* as a midseason replacement series for the failed show *Harry's Girls* (1963-1964). The first regular season of the American *TW3* aired on January 10, 1964, only two weeks after the final episode of the BBC program. NBC scheduled the show in the 9:30 Friday nighttime slot, leading in to the highly rated *Jack Paar Show* (1962-1965). Despite high hopes, the first regular episode of *TW3* was almost unanimously a critical letdown. Jack Gould pronounced the overall show "pretty thin and trite," and *Variety* reviewers said that despite some high points, the episode was "as humdrum and pedestrian as [the pilot] was delightfully impudent."[268] The next several episodes in January received more favorable coverage and emphasized the influence of British *TW3* cast member David Frost, who was signed for several episodes of the American program. Critics gave special recognition to a sequence in the January 24th episode that paired the song *Smoke Gets in Your Eyes* with images of cigarettes, X-rays, and cancerous lungs.[269] After the first several episodes of the series, reviews continued to sour on the program and expressed their wish for *TW3* to take more risks.

Waning reviews and ratings led to several changes for the program before it returned to the air for the 1964-65 television season. With the exception of "*TW3* girl" Nancy Ames and Phyllis Newman, the entire cast was replaced and David Frost was hired as a regular cast member. The content of the show was also revised, with the intention of seeming more politically even-handed and minimizing offense. Producer Marshall Jamison resigned from the program in protest over the proposed changes, and was replaced by

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grieve for the loss of his progressive politics. The tape was flown to America and aired on November 24, 1963.

[268] Jack Gould, "TV: 'That Was Week That Was' Returns to N.B.C.," *New York Times*, January 11, 1964; Helm, "That Was the Week That Was," *Daily Variety*, January 13, 1964; Rose, ""That Was the Week That Was"," *Weekly Variety*, January 15, 1964.

[269] Jack Gould, "TV: Finding the Target," *New York Times*, January 25, 1964.

Herb Sergent. Although NBC signed the program for another season, the network moved *TW3* to Tuesday night at 9:30, placing it against the popular *Petticoat Junction* on CBS and the highly anticipated *Peyton Place* on ABC. Although network executives still publicly supported the show, the scheduling decision was an unspoken sign that *TW3* was unlikely to last long on the network.

The 1964 season began with three of the first four episodes preempted by ad buys from the Republican National Committee. Despite some outrage over the preemptions, critics immediately began panning the new season. Gould writes that the season premiere was "neither witty nor funny, only embarrassing in its persistent clumsiness and poor taste."[270] In response to criticism, *TW3* writer Gerald Gardner lamented that sophisticated viewers want satire but have unrealistic expectations, and claimed the program at least offered an alternative to mainstream television.[271] His defense was unsuccessful. The program finally began airing regularly in mid-November, but by the beginning of 1965 NBC had already announced its cancellation. The program ended its run on May 4. Coverage of the show's demise tried to analyze why it was unsuccessful, while also offering some positive comments for a show that many critics wanted to like. Ultimately, post-mortems failed to vindicate the show against the complaints of acrimonious reviewers disappointed in the show's inability to live up to its own promise.

TW3 as Proto-News Parody

In comparison to more recent programs like *TDS* and *Colbert*, *TW3* now seems less news parody than a hybrid between comedic news and a variety show. However, the

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[270] ———, "TV: Tasteless Satire," *New York Times*, September 30, 1964.
[271] "Lament of 'TW3' Writer; 'Save Us from Friends'," *Weekly Variety*, December 13, 1964.

program's emphasis on topical humor and the use of news parody as a linking device between sketches encouraged critics to connect the program with television news. The show originally opened with a voice-over announcement of "Live from New York," and in the second season added the title of the program to its vocal introduction. On each episode, the announcement was followed by a musical summary of the week's news sung by Nancy Ames, interspersed with faux newsreaders presenting satirical news reports.

For example, in the first regular-season episode Ames sings, "On Sunday Goldwater met the press, to make his own State of the Union address. Monday the GOP struck back." Cut to Henry Morgan as anchor, reading a news story about the activities of other Republican presidential candidates. The beginning of the report sounds serious and sets up viewer expectation for a conventional news item, but then finishes with the laugh line, "there's a strong underground movement for Richard Nixon," as the visual cuts to a photo of Nixon in a mine, wearing a miner's helmet. The spoken and visual pun of "struck back/miner helmet/underground" typifies how the show frequently plays at the linguistic level of humor; Nixon becomes the butt of a joke, but one without any discernable message behind it. The news item lasts for less than 20-seconds before cutting back to Ames for several repeats of song verse/news report/song verse, before she finishes the musical number around three minutes into the program, singing the show title, "That was the week that was!"[272]

Following the opening song and news segment of each episode, newsreaders give the equivalent of top headlines before settling into a mix of news reports, extended skits, and musical commentary. Unlike contemporary variety programs, however, *TW3* focused

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[272] *That Was the Week That Was*, Episode 1. Paley Center for Media - Catalog ID T78:0257. January 10, 1964.

virtually all its energies on topical subjects. Whether they were parodying a news report or performing a skit, both were ultimately commentaries on items in the news. Often, skits, songs and news parody were almost indistinguishable from each other. For instance, Elliott Reid stands at a news desk where he begins a story about Democrats meeting to discuss running mates for President Johnson. Reid continues the story as he walks from the desk to a backdrop of the White House, suddenly shifting character to that of a Democratic campaign planner, and proceeds to discuss strategy with Henry Morgan. Morgan ultimately decides President Johnson needs a "Northern, liberal, isolationist who is an unmarried, atheist, alcoholic" as a running mate, to fill in his weaknesses. Reid responds by deadpanning, "Which one?"[273] The joke satirizes both the American public's irreconcilable demands for candidates and the political parties' use of polling to appeal to voters. Like a host's stand-up on a traditional variety show, *TW3*'s frequent mixing of satiric style utilized direct news parody both as a satiric device and as a fulcrum to transition between disparate presentational styles.

Although the content was always topical, specific sketches sometimes satirized general trends more than actual news items. One of the most well-remembered *TW3* sketches featured a skit from Nichols and May. Mike Nichols attempts to make funeral arrangements for a loved one, only to be nickeled and dimed by Elaine May for "extras" such as a casket, a hearse, and burial. The skit is introduced through a mention of President Kennedy hearing a sermon on extravagant funerals and reference to a recent book on the cost of funerals; however, the humor itself is much less topical than situational.[274] Likewise, a later sketch featuring David Frost as an orchestral director creating a symphony out of

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[273] *That Was the Week That Was*, Pilot. November 10, 1963.
[274] Ibid.

the sounds of modern warfare alludes to increasing military conflict, but a specific news event is not invoked by the humor.[275]

The allotment of time between straight news parody and other comic elements varied based on the episode, but *TW3* always began the program with a song and fake news reports and then structured the remaining program around multiple sometimes-short, sometimes-extended segments of broadcast news parody. To analyze the show's incorporation of news parody, I focus on how *TW3* mimicked the visual language and content of television news and suggest the program can be best viewed as a prototype for subsequent television shows incorporating news parody.

Emerging News Style

TW3 debuted on American television just over a year after CBS launched the first nightly, half-hour network news program.[276] Although the *CBS Evening News* was the first to expand its coverage, news had been a part of television since the early days of broadcasting. NBC debuted *The Esso Newsreel*, a 10-15 minute news segment, in 1947, and CBS followed suit with *The CBS-TV News* the next year. By the early 1960s, television had incorporated a vocabulary, structure, and aesthetic for broadcast news. Writers and organizations such as the Radio Television News Director's Association (RTNDA) published materials attempting to outline accepted journalistic practices, as well as technical

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[275] Paul Gardner, "Frost to Remain for More 'T.W.3'," *New York Times*, February 3, 1964.
[276] The *CBS Evening News* became the first nighttime half hour network news program on September 2, 1963, expanding from its previous 15-minute format, but retaining Walter Cronkite at the anchor desk.

specifications for newscasts.[277] In 1964, the RTNDA held a Newsfilm Standards Conference in New York City to attempt to codify prevailing knowledge and practices of broadcast news organizations; this was followed by additional regional conferences. The resulting written reports provide an overview of news practices and covers a wide range of topics, from technical questions about what cameras to use and when sound and color film should be shot, to the structure and staffing of newsrooms.[278]

The prevalence and acceptance of norms for television news, such as those in the RTNDA documents, allowed *TW3* to parody newscasts with the assumption that the audience would instantly recognize references to common news conventions. Single anchors that both read stories and appeared in prepackaged reports or interview segments were the norm for most stations, with occasional on-screen appearances by other reporters. The newsdesk, where the central anchor either stood or sat, provided the visual focus of news programs. The newsdesk was often placed within an environment that suggested news activity, with icons of reporting such as typewriters, clocks, phones, and sometimes television technology. George Corrin, the staff scenic designer for ABC during the mid-1960s, argued news sets should make the reader aware that the station has all the devices for reporting news.[279] The on-set journalistic trappings were ultimately a visual claim to legitimacy by the news agency.

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[277] See, for instance, CBS News, *Television News Reporting* (New York, NY: McGraw-Hill Book Company, Inc., 1958); Leo Willette, *So You're Gonna Shoot Newsfilm* (Detroit, MI: Inland Press, 1960).
[278] The Radio Television News Director Association and Time-Life Broadcast Inc., ed. *Television Newsfilm Standards Manual* (New York, NY: Time-Life Broadcast, 1964).
[279] George Corrin, "Make News Come Alive by Visual Means," in *The Newsroom and the Newscast*, ed. The Radio Television News Director Association and Time-Life Broadcast Inc. (New York, NY: Time-Life Broadcast, 1966).

While the anchor at "his" desk was an ever-present feature of 1960s newscasts, the centerpiece of every show was "newsfilm." The optimal visual was location footage of a news event, although interviews were an acceptable alternative and necessary addition. Television news self-consciously battled both to establish itself as a viable medium for delivering news, and as a supplement, if not competitor, to newspaper and radio. Newsfilm was an essential strategy of differentiation from these competing media. Network newscasts mixed together a variety of available film formats, including color and black and white, as well as silent and sound. News value was an important consideration in ordering the rundown for a newscast, but the apportionment of available newsfilm also influenced what stories would be covered and their priority in the sequencing.[280] In lieu of footage, newscasts incorporated a variety of other visuals to supplement their coverage, including photos and graphics such as charts and logos. By borrowing common structural conventions such as setting and news visuals, *TW3* encouraged comparison with television news, despite its satiric presentational mode and variety-show format.

Foregrounding *TW3* as News Parody

The publicity surrounding NBC's *TW3* emphasized its topicality. Even if viewers had never heard of the BBC version, the name of the program, press discussions, and advertisements created a decoding context for audiences. In discussing the hype surrounding contemporary media rollouts, Jonathan Gray argues that such "paratexts" create audience expectations used to decode new television programs before their

[280] CBS News, for example, encouraged stretching out footage over the course of the newscast to retain viewer interest. CBS News, *Television News Reporting*: 109-10.

release.[281] Publicity for the new program primed audiences to understand *TW3* as a topical program, as would the frequent press coverage of the BBC program. American audiences new to *TW3* were encouraged to compare the program with television's primary source of topical information: newscasts.

The program immediately addresses news topics through its opening song, and also establishes the centrality of a "news space" through the musical number. Opening with Ames singing in front of a *TW3* logo design, the show repeatedly cuts away to actors at a desk, delivering short news-oriented snippets in the manner and structure of broadcast-news stories. Like newscasts, *TW3* structured its entire program around the desk as a common news space to link the varied visual and narrative styles of the rest of the show. The actual desk changed over the course of the program, from a stand-up desk similar to the kind used by ABC's Peter Jennings in his years following *TW3*, to the familiar seated desk favored by CBS for Walter Cronkite.

The news space itself was defined totally by the incorporation of the static desk, where stories could be read. Unlike the parody programs after it, *TW3* did not attempt to totally copy the contemporary visual *mise-en-scène* of television news, with its claims to authority through clocks, typewriters, and other professional signifiers. Instead, the parody show established an open news space that seamlessly transitioned to the rest of the studio. Situated on a large sound stage, the news desk had no accompanying false walls or props, although at the very end of the series a logo wall was incorporated into the overall stage. Occasionally during transitions, the show would cut to long shots revealing multiple sets

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[281] Jonathan Gray, "Television Previews and the Meaning of Hype," *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 11, no. 1 (2008).

together on the stage, including the news desk.[282] Sets used for other skits would either be rolled in or simply left for the remainder of the show. Based on available episodes, most sets merely sketched a setting, such as having books on a desk for an office or a screened backdrop of the White House to represent Washington. In the same way, the news desk provided a visual constant for the show as a whole, with minimal detail. Emphasis was on the content.

Just as *TW3* mimicked the visual structure of broadcast news, so it also borrowed story-presentation formats from contemporary newscasts. During the news segments, and even during some of the topical skits, *TW3* incorporated dominant story structures based on the type, presence, or absence of visuals, further framing the program as news parody. At a time when many of these presentational strategies were being formalized, *TW3* self-consciously strove for the same of kind of visual variety viewers would expect from traditional news outlets.

By the time *TW3* debuted, newsfilm was the gold standard for television journalism. Moving images were preferred, but still images were considered better than a story read by the anchor. *TW3* used newsfilm in a number of ways that seem commonplace now, especially in the age of YouTube and mashups; however, as the first network news parody program, the show's creative team was innovating visual humor that would become commonplace by the 1970s. The program took advantage of the availability of both sound and silent newsfilm, both of which were readily available from such syndicators as CBS, Telenews, and United Press Movietone. Silent footage allowed anchors to read over the

[282] The technique of revealing sets is actually a shared device of both newscasts and variety programs. Revealing nondiegetic space or laying bare the artifice, while violating traditional film and television aesthetics, is commonly incorporated into both of these television formats, creating a point of visual overlap.

visuals, providing commentary on the images. For instance, one episode includes a newsreel segment with images of the renovated New York Mets stadium. Announcers describe the improvements to the ball field and then wraps with the lament, "now if [the stadium] only had a ball team." The baseball story is followed by a pointed political critique that uses footage of the Senate debate on civil-rights legislation. Reading over the footage, the announcer observes, "In seventeen days of civil rights marathon, our Senators have racked up 1,676,000 words. Abraham Lincoln said it the right way in only 616 words—the Emancipation Proclamation."[283] In this example, the moving images act to justify the written story. In reality, the footage is not essential to telling the story; it is barely supplementary. Just as the mere presence of newsfilm could justify a story on a newscast at the time, *TW3* used footage in the same way, as both an impetus for a story and as an integral aesthetic for televisual presentation.

The recontextualization of sound newsfilm was another popular strategy of *TW3* for their news parody segments. Existing interviews or public statements were reordered, edited with other sound footage, or interspersed with new material to satirize public figures—usually politicians. The pilot episode features a news conference that juxtaposes actual newsfilm of President Kennedy walking to a podium and engaging in a press conference with original footage of cast members posing as reporters and asking fake questions. The results, of course, recontextualize Kennedy's original answers by creating humorous set-ups by the cast. This particular segment seemed enthusiastically received by the audience based on thunderous applause, perhaps indicating its novelty in structure if

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[283] *That Was the Week That Was*, Episode 13. Paley Center for Media - Catalog ID T78:0256 April 17, 1964.

not content.[284] The humor in the faux press conference touches more on general humor than government policy, but the method of interspersing original footage with existing newsfilm allowed *TW3* to become active participants in a debate with politicians, a method more elaborately and viciously employed by such contemporary news parody programs as *TDS* and *Colbert*.

Adding new footage was one way of generating a conversation with existing newsfilm. *TW3* also used editing to recontextualize multiple sound clips. In one example, Nancy Ames reads a story about Republicans trying to change their image, and then suggests the party could host a topical humor show on television. Cut to an introduction for "That Was the Party That Was," followed by newsfilm of GOP stalwarts such as Barry Goldwater and Richard Nixon telling tepid jokes with laughter edited between.[285] By linking together dire attempts at humor by two prominent Republicans, the show both positioned the GOP as out of step with *TW3*'s audience, and took one of many parting shots at the party after suffering numerous preemptions.

Like newscasts of its era, *TW3* sought to use newsfilm, but the amount of timely footage was limited by both processing time and distribution methods of syndicators. Network-news operations either had to create their own development facilities or make prearranged deals for securing footage (some news operations were also experimenting with videotape as a way of cutting costs and quickening the turn-around time from capture to broadcast). Most news operations in the 1960s were still heavily supplementing their visuals with still photos. The cheapest method was to shoot still images on an easel in

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[284] *That Was the Week That Was*, Pilot. November 10, 1963.
[285] *That Was the Week That Was*, Episode 48. Paley Center for Media - Catalog ID T78:0262. April 20, 1965.

studio. For better quality, stations would use a "telop," or teloptican, a device that allowed for the loading of several photos that could be flipped from picture to picture, and then directly imported into the video system without a camera.[286] *TW3* used a large number of still images during production of a normal program, making use of both easels and telops during production, further parodying the style of broadcast news.

Still images were employed to varying purpose by *TW3*. Sometimes they were the source of humor, while other times they played a merely supporting role, adorning a story that could have otherwise been delivered purely with words. A favorite method of the show was to use a picture as a kind of visual pun, setting up expectations with a word or phrase that opens multiple meanings and then subverting audience expectations through the accompanying visual. The earlier-referenced picture of Nixon in a miner's helmet from episode 1 follows the verbal set-up that an "underground movement" is seeking his nomination.[287] In the pilot, when discussing the potential for a dark-horse presidential candidate, a picture of an actual dark horse pops up.[288] The writers of the show would also use photos of politicians as if they were reacting to stories. On the same episode, a photo of Kennedy holding his nose immediately follows a claim that President Kennedy has finally expressed his opinion on Barry Goldwater. Later in the show, a report that Eisenhower will support whomever the Republicans nominate in 1964 is followed by a reading of potential candidate names with an accompanying image of Eisenhower looking variously sad, ashamed, holding his nose, facing backwards, etc., as if reacting to each GOP hopeful.

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[286] For more on the use of pictures and graphics in news production during the late-1950s and early '60s, see Ted Siller, Ted White, and Hal Trekel, *Television and Radio News* (New York, NY: The Macmillan Company, 1960). 116-18.
[287] *That Was the Week That Was*, Episode 1. January 10, 1964.
[288] *That Was the Week That Was*, Pilot. November 10, 1963.

Criticism and humor are created through the juxtapositioning of visuals with the journalist's delivery of the story. Although visuals create the humor in these examples, pictures were also used to enhance already comic pieces. For example, Stanley Grover presents a political rundown using the same style and vernacular as a sports reporter. Highlights about different politicians are accompanied by their faces imposed on actual baseball trading cards, replacing the athletes' faces. A joke about Richard Nixon being able to play, "left, center, or right, depending on which way the wind blows," is reinforced by an accompanying image of Nixon's "baseball card."[289] The show's writers deftly integrated images into comic presentation as both a parody of news style and a source of additional humor.

At other times, still images play a structural role within the larger program, providing a visual break from the faces of talent while also incorporating people and places being discussed. Frost reports that the state of Virginia is running two African-American candidates in elections, incorporating a *New York Times* story and headline directly from the newspaper, obviously on an easel.[290] There is no direct reference to the newspaper clipping; the image only serves to create a new visual and to correlate the *TW3* story with actual news being reported by the media. Similarly, a story about Malcolm X is accompanied by a close-up image of the civil rights leader's face, providing no additional information other than an image to connect with the name.[291] Approaching pictures as a mere *addition* to a story, rather than as *part of* the story mimicked the practice of network newscasts, which often apportioned still images to stories merely to minimize long

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[289] *That Was the Week That Was*, Episode 13. April 17, 1964.
[290] *That Was the Week That Was*, Episode 48. April 20, 1965.
[291] *That Was the Week That Was*, Episode 13. April 17, 1964.

stretches of anchors on-screen. Despite the success of photojournalism as an alternative journalistic practice, television continued to choose fairly mundane still images that reinforced the written story, a process reflected in *TW3*.

Structurally, *TW3* presents itself as a genre blend, incorporating aspects of variety programs and their vaudevillian predecessors, but self-consciously mixing this structure with extended sequences of parodies of broadcast news. The visual and presentation grammar of the program was mixed with popular press and promotional materials that constantly highlighted *TW3*'s connection with news, privileging its interpretation as mainly a parody. The use of newsreaders to "anchor" stories was an equally important part of this process, and encouraged viewer comparison with contemporary newscasts.

Too Many People and Not Enough Set: Anchor Problems on *TW3*

To mimic the style of television news, it was essential *TW3* replicate the central feature of the network newscast: the anchor. From the time Douglas Edwards began hosting the CBS nightly newscast in 1948, the networks labored to build their premier journalism shows around individual personalities. On the one hand, anchors were considered public figures who should embody the essence of watchdog journalism and function on behalf of the citizens. Yet at the same time the television corporations carefully watched ratings to determine whether their anchors were attracting enough viewers. The anchors seemed to belong to both public and network. Margaret Morse argues that the news anchor represents a complex web of news, industry, and public interest, wielding the ability to publicly speak and nominate topics in a way usually reserved for national

leaders.[292] This power was already evident by the time *TW3* took to the airwaves, with all three networks vying for rating dominance and the cultural legitimacy those ratings reflected.

1960s network news was dominated by CBS and NBC. The team of Chet Huntley and David Brinkley were the ratings leaders throughout most of the decade with NBC's *The Huntley-Brinkley Report*. At one point, the program actually commanded an 84% audience share.[293] CBS offered strong competition, after replacing Douglas Edwards with Walter Cronkite in 1963. By the end of the decade Cronkite surpassed *The Huntley-Brinkley Report* in the ratings.[294] ABC lagged behind the other networks throughout the 1960s, with a number of journalists filling and then being cast out of the anchor seat. During the production of *TW3*, Ron Cochran anchored the ABC newscast. These anchors were contemporary examples of the most exalted post in television news, and their style and presentations became the bedrock for *TW3*'s and subsequent news parody shows' satire.

With the exception of Huntley and Brinkley, the networks built their programs around one *man* being the visual gatekeeper. By contrast, on *TW3* virtually every on-screen personality eventually took a turn at the anchor desk. If the program wanted to copy the look of newscasts, why not incorporate the single anchor, its major defining feature? The cross-genre nature of the program offers one likely reason. The news parody was sprinkled throughout the program, not sectioned off—a structure *SNL* adopted with Weekend Update. The ensemble cast participated in every part of the program. As a result, *TW3* featured female anchors on primetime before any of the actual network newscasts, perhaps

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[292] Morse, "News as Performance: The Image as an Event," 213.
[293] Jeff Alan and James M. Lane, *Anchoring America: The Changing Face of Network News* (Chicago, IL: Bonus Books, 2003). 90.
[294] Ibid., 117.

another unintended, further layer of critique. Although Nancy Ames was originally limited to musical numbers, she filled the anchor role by *TW3*'s second season.

Biographies of network news anchors tend to emphasize their role as journalists over their mere on-screen presentation of the news. The most obvious reason is to combat assumptions that anchors are merely actors—Ron Burgundy mindlessly repeating teleprompted scripts. From the beginning of television journalism, news organizations attempted to squelch the perception of newscaster as actor. A reporting book published by CBS extols the anchor as a "master reporter" whose "hours off the air are spent thinking, reading, and doing."[295] In reality, however, most viewers of news are likely unaware or at least unsure of the actual duties of the news anchor beyond the desk. Even a recent textbook on television reporting emphasizes the anchor as journalist, but then goes on to call anchoring "part reading and part performance."[296] Although journalistic ability and First Amendment idealism may help reporters rise in the broadcast ranks, on-air performance is undoubtedly the defining aspect of news anchors, and of whether they will find ratings success.[297]

In the previous section on the formatting of *TW3*, I describe how the program attempted to closely mimic many of the visual and structural aspect of network newscasts. In comparison, the program's cast was less successful in replicating the presence of network anchors. Performance defined Cronkite and his contemporaries; both their actual

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[295] CBS News, *Television News Reporting*: 132.
[296] Nancy Reardon, *On Camera: How to Report, Anchor & Interview* (Burlington, MA: Focal Press, 2006). 173.
[297] Audiences are not limited to newscasts in their evaluations or impressions of news anchors. Surrounding discourses, such as publicity, criticism, and news parody itself, are as important, if not more so, than an anchor's performance on a newscast in forming public perceptions. However, here I am focusing on the on-air role of the anchor.

delivery through commanding voices and limited body language and whether they "looked" the part and projected a combination of authority and trustworthiness. *TW3* replicated the professional dress and simple appearance that defined the anchor, but the actors were unable to limit themselves to the tightly controlled emotions and body movements already connected with broadcast news.

News anchoring is a type of non-naturalistic acting, where performance is built around disavowing a role, removing emotion, and disconnecting from the audience; the challenge was too much for a cast of comedians used to pushing boundaries and accentuating odd behaviors for laughs. The live audience and ensemble cast also worked against parodying the stoic, non-expressive style of the anchor. Henry Fonda, who starred in the pilot episode of *TW3* and served as the primary anchor, came closest to assuming a traditional anchor persona. Fonda's delivery is authoritative and subdued, although vocal inflections are more pronounced than the ideal anchor delivery. This variation in tone is especially evident during transitions between stories. For instance, between an interview with the Senate cleaning woman and a skit on great political speeches, Fonda delivers the line, "Mrs. Fletcher may be looking ahead, but others are looking back." Rather than keeping an even tone, Fonda incorporates an optimistic lilt in the second half of the sentence.[298] There are also moments of faint smiles and acknowledgement of the studio audience. Fonda's performance brought accolades from reviewers and indeed, his delivery was the closest traditional parody of news presentation on *TW3*. The regular season, absent Fonda, featured multiple cast members performing for the audience and themselves.

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[298] *That Was the Week That Was*, Pilot. November 10, 1963.

The most noticeable departure on *TW3* from the norms of anchoring occurs when the cast plays to the audience, and this manifests in multiple ways. Sometimes the actors create a confessional delivery, creating a sense of dialogue with the television viewer. On the first regular-season episode Henry Morgan shares anchoring duties, but provides most of the delivery. After the singing/headline opening, Morgan announces the show is back as a regular-season program and warns, "to those who wrote in to say they hated our pilot show [pauses, removes glasses and starts to chuckle], wait'll you see this one."[299] Morgan's performance displays a willingness to drop pretense—not the kind of postmodern awareness common in contemporary parody, but more of *TW3*'s inability or unwillingness to distinguish its generic blend of news parody and sketch comedy. Network anchors interpolate their audience through creating a one-sided dialogue; however, their presentation is tightly controlled to limit audience ownership of the conversation.[300] On *TW3*, the same actors who read the news instantly morph into different characters as they shift to skits, resulting in noncommittal performances where the cast members never truly embody their temporary roles, either on the news desk or in a skit.

While the anchors on *TW3* only occasionally acknowledge television viewers, they constantly play to their studio audience. Larry Storch, in a guest appearance, anchors a story that Malcolm X is calling for a Maoist movement in America, commenting afterwards with great enthusiasm and anger, "No Malcolm X, what this country needs is an ex-Malcolm," followed quickly by an extended nod of his head, seemingly both as an

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[299] *That Was the Week That Was*, Episode 1. January 10, 1964.
[300] For more on the role of the news anchor in constructing the audience, see Allan, *News Culture*: 115-17.

affirmative gesture and almost as a bow to the applauding audience.[301] In addition to violating anchor norms, the content of the joke reflects how the politics of *TW3*, although progressive for the time, were still safely within the mainstream. Like stand-up comedians and vaudevillians before them, the actors on the program instantly responded to their live audience, delivering smiles, pointing and gesturing towards them, and scanning across the studio space with their eyes. Such nonverbal cues are strenuously discouraged on the traditional anchor desk. At the time, CBS recommended keeping eyes forward, sitting straight, and utilizing "an interested and serious noncommittal expression."[302] *TW3*'s actors failed to keep "in character" while presenting the news, a problem that subsequent news parody programs found various ways of negotiating.

News presentation during the second season of *TW3* seemed to make more attempts at stoicism—with varying success. The smaller cast size certainly contributed to greater consistency, as did the presence of David Frost in the role of lead anchor. Frost, a primary writer and actor on the BBC version of *TW3*, brought a more reserved British style of delivery, speaking more quickly and with less fluctuation in tone. However, Frost was also more verbose, launching into lengthy criticism with fewer supporting visuals. On one show, sounding more like a commentator than anchor, Frost delivers a four-minute on-air diatribe about population explosion, with barely any laughs, seemingly leaving the audience unsure whether the story is meant to be humorous or merely didactic.[303] Television anchors in the early years of the medium, such as Murrow, enhanced their reporting with commentary, but by the 1960s the networks insisted on straight facts from

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[301] *That Was the Week That Was*, Episode 13. April 17, 1964.
[302] CBS News, *Television News Reporting*: 161-63.
[303] *That Was the Week That Was*, Episode 48. April 20, 1965.

the anchor desk. TW3 follows the opposite trajectory; the cast delivered straight news stories during the first season, allowing the humor to flow from joining conflicting information, and the second season included more straight verbal critique from Frost. Nancy Ames and Buck Henry regularly joined Frost; the two were likewise more subdued behind the anchor desk (although Ames and Henry occasionally portrayed slightly frantic in-the-field reporters as well). Stylistically, the cast in the second season more closely imitated the delivery and carefully controlled actions of network anchors; however, Frost's British accent played against the "nowhere USA" diction of national anchors who were partially chosen for their lack of regional dialect.

The genre-blend format of *TW3* limited the cast's ability to create a sustained parody of network newscast. This tension is perhaps most evident in their failure to incorporate the basic presentational style of news anchors. The problem stems from the combination of two diverging traditions: comedy and news. The common verbal and nonverbal delivery of the comedian is the opposite of the expectations of the news anchor. The most jarring aspect of *TW3*'s parodic anchor is the rejection of a traditional anchor's most valuable commodity: sincerity. The public expects a sense that the anchors *care* about the community and the news they present. However, the whole point of news parody is to make fun of expectations, often through irony. So the overtly humorous anchor often specifically says something sardonic or ironic—the antithesis of sincerity. As will be discussed in a later chapter, the great success of *The Daily Show* may be partially attributed to Jon Stewart's ability to negotiate the tension between sincerity and satire.

Presidential Coverage

Journalism's place as the Fourth Estate in American society emphasizes coverage of government and public policy, so it seems almost a foregone conclusion that news parody would devote substantial time to the president. *TW3*'s pilot episode appeared only twelve days before the assassination of John F. Kennedy, creating a potential dilemma for the show when it started as a regular-season series: was the country ready for political comedy in the wake of the national tragedy? A similar situation would face *The Daily Show* and other comedy outlets after the September 11, 2001 attacks. Although media outlets trod lightly post-9/11, *TW3* showed no signs of altering their presidential humor between the pilot and the regular season.

From the beginning, *TW3* revealed its liberal ideological leanings. Its satiric target was more frequently and more viciously the Republicans. The pilot episode prominently featured Kennedy in only two stories. In one Fonda leads a story saying that Kennedy finally expressed his opinion about GOP presidential hopeful Barry Goldwater, then cuts to a photo of the president holding his nose as he speaks with Goldwater. The humor in this piece is squarely focused on Goldwater, with no satiric implications for Kennedy. As the Republican frontrunner, Goldwater received steady attacks throughout the run of the program. In a skit later in the pilot, footage of the aforementioned Kennedy press conference is interspersed with studio footage of *TW3* cast members asking fake questions.[304] Although subsequent news parody programs take advantage of the fake question/real answer structure to criticize politicians, *TW3* creates inoffensive non-sequiturs maligning neither the President nor his policies. However, even this innocuous

[304] *That Was the Week That Was*, Pilot. November 10, 1963.

humor generated complaints from viewers.[305] Kennedy's popularity amongst liberals and the optimism he represented almost discouraged writers from treating him harshly. Kennedy's replacement was, however, another matter.

Producer Leland Hayward reportedly warned his staff to go easy on President Johnson, due to his difficult situation of having to step up to the presidency, and also because of uncertainty about how the audience might react in the wake of the assassination.[306] The writers and cast of the program were not nearly as accommodating, providing a consistent diet of personal and policy jabs at the new President. The humor was not as dismissive or scathing as the satire pointed at Republicans, but *TW3* found a balance in its first season of tossing jokes down both sides of the political aisle, allowing them to claim nonpartisanship, whether true or not.

The first regular-season episode featured several stories and skits poking fun at Johnson. The humor never seems mean-spirited or pointed though, leading a Variety reviewer to complain that simply making political jokes does not equal performing political satire.[307] The most pointed jab attacks Johnson for his seeming lack of ideological consistency and unwillingness to define himself to the public. Elliott Reid reports on Johnson's State of the Union Address, where he "promised to buy more security and fight more poverty with less money than ever before." The story leads into an Audrey Meadows song in front of a White House backdrop, lampooning LBJ's tendency to promise something to everyone. She croons that everyone likes Johnson: "People for segregation like Lyndon,

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[305] Kercher, *Revel with a Cause: Liberal Satire in Postwar America*: 368.
[306] Interview with writer Robert Emmett, reported in ibid., 376-77.
[307] Rose, ""That Was the Week That Was"."

people for miscegenation like Lyndon…nobody's mad at LBJ [pause] today!"[308] Although the presidential humor was cautious at first, *TW3* soon extended its range of humor to overtly satirizing American policy and the president personally, including American involvement in Vietnam and its inconsistent Latin American policy. A story about Brazilian elections segues to Larry Storch providing a slideshow lecture explaining Johnson's policy of sending money both to suppressive non-communist regimes, and to communist regimes in hopes of encouraging them to reject communism: "in short, everyone in Latin America gets US money except him" [a picture of Fidel Castro fills the screen].[309] By the end of the first season, criticism of the president declined as Hayward prepared to revamp the show for the fall of 1964.

The second season featured considerably less political news, instead following Hayward's desire for the show to appeal to a broader range of viewers through more varied topical humor and shorter segments.[310] As a result, less time is devoted to LBJ and more to celebrities and popular culture. The shift in focus brought the ire of fans and critics alike; *Variety* complained that the new season was "more like topical gags than biting satire" and accused the writers of seeming more like routine comedy writers than "angry or slightly crazed young men."[311] Reviewers for *The New York Times* simply ignored the show for most of the season.

Most of the show's harshest political humor in the second season was reserved for the Republicans—presumably a combination of the writers' politics and the GOP's repeated

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[308] *That Was the Week That Was*, Episode 1. January 10, 1964.
[309] *That Was the Week That Was*, Episode 13. April 17, 1964.
[310] Bill Greeley, "'Gotta Be More Witty Than Mean' Keys Hayward Revamp for 'TW3'," *Weekly Variety*, July 8, 1964.
[311] Les, "That Was the Week That Was," *Weekly Variety*, October 7, 1964.

preemption of the program. The committee to re-elect Johnson had actually purchased regular ad time on a *TW3* episode, which prevented Republicans from buying the full time slot and preempting *TW3* yet again. Coverage of the battle over *TW3*'s repeated preemptions took on political overtones, cast as a fight between the Republicans and Democrats.[312] Although less numerous, jokes aimed at both sides of the political aisle seemed more vicious on existing second-season episodes, especially when delivered in David Frost's quick, staccato delivery, which made the jokes seem matter-of-fact rather than punch lines the viewer should pause and take in. Frost delivered one of the show's final political quips on the last episode, announcing "Try to remember that after tonight, any TV news about President Johnson or the Congress that sounds perfectly ridiculous to you is not meant as a joke."[313] Overall, *TW3* emerged into its first season with some serious presidential satire that, although not sustained, tackled some of the more controversial issues of its time. During its short second season, network meddling resulted in less sharp humor.

Critical Uses of Humor in *TW3*

During its production, television critics engaged in a constant debate about the merits and effectiveness of *TW3*'s humor. The program seems to have never totally pleased anyone in that regard. A critic would laud certain skits and then dismiss the overall trajectory of the show within the same review, revealing a profound disappointment

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[312] The controversy led David Frost to tell reporters the show would be a better buy for Democrats because of all the *former* Republicans in *TW3*'s audience. "Behind-the-Scene TV Confrontation for Demos & GOP," *Weekly Variety*, September 23, 1964.
[313] *That Was the Week That Was*, Episode 50. Paley Center for Media - Catalog ID T78:0131. May 4, 1965.

among critics wishing for more sustained satire.[314] As recurring programs, all television shows are subject to discourses that question their current state of quality ("jumping the shark" remains a current favorite phrase for framing this debate); however, *TW3* never seemed to reach equilibrium. There was never general accord on the show's brilliance or failing—only hope that *TW3* would get better. In retrospect, the show undeniably achieves moments of daring satire for its cultural setting, while at the same time presenting plenty of unremarkable content that is short on wit and originality.

As discussed more fully below, meddling from advertisers, network executives, and the show's producer all helped to shape the content that would appear on *TW3*. Writers faced impossibly conflicting pressures to create edgy satire, stay nonpartisan, and avoid appearing mean, all while broadening the show's audience. Despite such incongruent instructions, the program's staff successfully tackled many of the most controversial topics of the day, including civil rights, nuclear weapons, and Vietnam, and often questioned underlying ideological constructs in the process. In terms of its content, *TW3* pushed contemporary boundaries and extended debates already occurring in less visible areas of American society.

Throughout *TW3*'s run, humor is often turned towards mainstream American life and the consensuses that characterized it. In one of the more daring examples, headlines about America's return to morality, read by Henry Fonda, lead into an "on the street" interview about the strides of American churches, with Gene Hackman playing a reverend. While the interview ostensibly is discussing a renewal in faith, the dialogue drips with

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[314] Letters from *TW3*'s audience reveal a parallel frustration with the show's uneven content. See Kercher, *Revel with a Cause: Liberal Satire in Postwar America*: Chapters 10 & 11.

irony, as Hackman tells the reporter his church "is on the verge of becoming a real part of the community." The skit dramatizes the estrangement between American society and its institutions, further reinforced when the imaginary town's mayor shows up and encourages citizens to bribe police for better services. The story, presented in the style of a news headline and live interview, rips away the veneer of "everytown, America" and highlights the inconsistencies embodied in ideologies of trust in government and religion. Hackman delivers the most devastating line of the skit when he reports that small sins are on the increase, such as stealing Bibles from hotel rooms. He pauses and then continues, "I can't imagine why?"[315] The line delivered few audience laughs, and seems especially transgressive—suggesting that Bibles have such little value in modern society they are not even worth stealing. The line of dialogue stands out as highly subversive for the time of production, and is one of several jokes during the show's run critiquing the role and significance of religion.

Such stark moments of transgression are admittedly infrequent. Much of *TW3*'s content was very traditional comedy fare; however, the program stands out from its contemporaries precisely for these daring moments where the show pushes out of doxa and dares to interrogate conventional wisdom. For instance, the program highlighted the struggle for civil rights in several episodes, a topic that network entertainment programs avoided at the time. In the opening segment of the pilot, an African-American man answers the phone at the White House. Soviet Premiere Nikita Khrushchev asks, unsuccessfully, first for Kennedy, then Johnson, and then Bobby Kennedy, before finally asking, "Well, who is

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[315] *That Was the Week That Was*, Pilot. November 10, 1963.

running the country?" The African American actor, to raucous laughter, replies, "*We* are!"[316] The short bit reportedly spawned several letters of complaint from offended white viewers.[317] Despite the racial humor, one study found a majority of Southern viewers enjoyed the pilot.[318] As criticism of segregation continued, however, some Southern affiliates began blacking out *TW3*.[319]

Racism was a consistent target for the show's satire. In a second-season episode David Frost reports on news coverage of the first African-American candidates for offices in Virginia. Frost wryly notes, "Negroes have been run there before: run out of town, run up hill, run into the ground."[320] The line of dialogue dares to recognize out loud how small reports of racial progress did not suture over the historic and contemporary abuse of African-Americans in the 1960s. Opponents of civil rights were regularly presented as buffoons, as in a sketch on the May 8, 1964 show featuring Alan Alda, Stanley Grover and Sandy Baron as segregationist plumbers. *Variety* complained the skit "had the kind of vituperation that backfires" and was simply too mean, a frequent criticism of the show and a recognition that television still had strict boundaries of decorum at the time.[321] As with much of *TW3*'s content, the staff's support for civil rights is very much in line with liberal ideology of the era and political views found in other media outlets beyond television. In fact, the growth of liberal humor may be one reason critics were hesitant to fully embrace *TW3*, as the show's brand of satire was less daring and confrontational than stand-up

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[316] Ibid.
[317] ———, *Revel with a Cause: Liberal Satire in Postwar America*: 368.
[318] "Southern Conservatives Don't Mind Being Ribbed; a Survey to Prove It," *Weekly Variety*, November 20, 1963.
[319] Dave Kaufman, "TV 'Chicken', Beefs Henry; Silliphant Changes Mind," *Daily Variety*, May 25, 1966.
[320] *That Was the Week That Was*, Episode 48. April 20, 1965.
[321] Bill, "That Was the Week That Was," *Weekly Variety*, May 13, 1964.

comedians like Lenny Bruce, or than nonmainstream publications such as *Mad* magazine. As a result, *TW3* was not adequately rewarded for the risks it took in bringing satire to the nation's most mainstream medium and pushing the boundaries of acceptable topics for television.

Like most comedy, *TW3* engages in varying levels of humor, from simple wordplay to more complex social critique. The program repeatedly reaches the highest level of critical humor identified by Murray Davis, where jokes question social categories and structures. Although the extent and effectiveness of its satire can be argued, *TW3* displayed a willingness to occasionally question the role of traditional institutions in American society. As previous examples show, a great deal of humor revolved around the political system and America's inability to elect forward-thinking candidates, as well as the bickering of Democrats and Republicans. Although political jokes could be superficial, directed at personality traits or appearance, *TW3* repeatedly took politicians to task for being ineffectual and representing their own interests, suggesting the problems were endemic to the system rather than isolated incidents. In that regard, *TW3* can be seen as a direct ancestor of *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report*.

Military strategy, such as the domino theory, was also criticized; however, jokes about the armed forces and military actions were always directed at politicians and top commanders, like Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, rather than everyday soldiers. For example, on the final show David Frost predicts the news for the rest of the year, reporting that the only remaining troops in America will be sent to Bolivia.[322] Rather than questioning specific *military actions*, such as increased bombing in Vietnam, the joke

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[322] *That Was the Week That Was*, Episode 50. May 4, 1965.

revolves around the *political decision* to constantly deploy troops around the world in order to support American interests.

TW3 as Journalism

By questioning ingrained structures like the military, government, religion, race, and the patriarchal family, *TW3* attempted to participate in discourses where it had no status. The major success of news parody in the 2000s, like Weekend Update and the Comedy Central programs, has been its incorporation into the journalistic and political fields of discourse. Today, mainstream journalism outlets report on and refer to news parody at the same time they attempt to disavow the genre. In the 1960s, coverage of *TW3* was isolated to entertainment news, unless viewers were complaining about content. A rare exception was a *Newsweek* article about the growing bribery and ethics scandal surrounding Johnson advisor Bobby Baker. The article begins by briefly describing a *TW3* skit on the scandal, illustrating the problem for Johnson if even entertainment shows are connecting the president with the Senate's investigation of Baker.[323] Such mentions of the program in news coverage were rare and fleeting, and there was no consideration of any potential journalistic function of parody. Although the boundaries of journalism had always been more permeable than the profession would admit, television comedy was still too far outside the norm of presentational style.[324] However, a lack of acceptance by the profession is not the determining factor in whether *TW3* was actually pursuing journalistic goals.

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[323] "The White House 'Week That Was'," *Newsweek*, February 3, 1964.
[324] The television aspect of *TW3* may have been more important than its humorous mode of presentation in totally severing it from the journalistic field. After all, editorial writers and political cartoonist regularly used humor in their writing.

A recurring theme in my evaluation of *TW3* is the unevenness of its material. As one of the first American television shows to attempt news parody, it had few models to follow. Obviously, the British version of the program influenced the American *TW3*. However, Hayward was adamant his show would avoid the kinds of controversies and political baggage that plagued the BBC program. Alisdair Milne, the executive producer of the British *TW3*, insists his staff regarded the show *as journalism*, and complained that the American version was just show business.[325] Milne seemed to be genuinely outraged that the NBC show focused more on creating comedy than editorializing on the news. In watching the BBC show, there is a sense the performers see themselves as active participants in the events they cover and bring to their viewers, whereas the American actors watch and comment on the news *with* their audience. There is an interesting correlation between the distanced stance of NBC's *TW3* towards the subject of its comedy and American journalism's own role as dispassionate observer. As Jeffrey Miller notes, different cultural sensibilities—especially regarding humor—explain some shifts between the British and American versions of the show.[326] Another potential factor, missed by Miller, could be each program's source materials. If each version of *TW3* presents itself as news parody, then the shows create meaning through interplay with a mimicked sign system: television news. If so, some differences between the two versions of *TW3* could be attributable to varying journalistic practices in American and British culture. The BBC program is more confrontational than the American and more willing to engage in

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[325] "British Producer Laments: TV News Needs Bit of Wit," *Weekly Variety*, December 4, 1963.

[326] Jeffrey S. Miller provides an excellent comparison between the two versions of *TW3* and the inability of the NBC show to translate the British sensibility of the original in his book on British television's influence in America. Miller, *Something Completely Different: British Television and American Culture*: 113-23.

humorous political commentary for its own sake, rather than as a set up for jokes about more general topics.

Even though the NBC program never seemed to consider itself journalism, its brand of satire ultimately overlapped some of the goals of American journalism, albeit in an almost accidental fashion. *TW3* at least minimally engaged in three of the six traditional journalistic functions Michael Schudson identifies in his work: analysis, mobilization, and social empathy.[327] The humor on the program often operated by creating alternate frameworks for understanding news, analyzing items through varying lenses. For example, the reconvening of Congress occasioned a description of how the legislative process works, using a poster of the human body's digestive system labeled "The Body Politic." A doctor then elaborates how bills became "watered down with saliva and acid" before going through the semicolon and becoming obstructed in the Rules Committee, where various legislation, such as civil rights, is still stuck.[328] Perhaps this is not the kind of frameworks for analysis Schudson imagined, but the best humor on *TW3* does open the potential for reconsidering political information and other news.

One of the more controversial functions of journalism in America is its ability to mobilize audiences through advocating for certain perspectives and actions. Although less directly than editorial pages, *TW3* did attempt to raise awareness and advocate on behalf of liberal political policies of the time. Its previously discussed civil-rights humor always carried the underlying message that opposition to the legislation (and support of segregation) was not only wrong, but inherently racist. The show consistently criticized

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[327] Michael Schudson, *Why Democracies Need an Unlovable Press* (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2009). 11-26.
[328] *That Was the Week That Was*, Episode 1. January 10, 1964.

politicians who were at odds with legislation supporting liberal policies. When French President Charles de Gaulle objected to a nuclear test-ban treaty, the program featured a singing impersonator in de Gaulle's signature uniform crooning, "Let the fallout fall where it may."[329] Although support for policies may have been more implied than direct, *TW3* encouraged its audience to view current events from a 1960s liberal perspective.

At its best, journalism can tell the stories of society's disenfranchised and less advantaged, encouraging social empathy. Only very minimal moments of true social empathy appeared on *TW3*, though; instead, the show focused more on providing unflattering portrayals of those in power. Its coverage of race relations and other stories, like Vietnam, did attempt to offer some alternative perspective on different groups. The February 14, 1964 episode featured a skit about the then-accelerating troubles in Vietnam, in it, an Army sergeant attempts to train a Vietnamese peasant in the use of a rifle. To the anger of the American, the peasant attempts to use the bayonet as a hoe. Eventually, the peasant figures out its use and stabs the sergeant so he can go back to weaving.[330] Of course, no "real" voice is being presented; the skit is written and performed by white Americans. Still, *TW3* did encourage *some* reflection on the situations facing disempowered groups, which outstripped other entertainment programs of its day.

TW3's contributions to journalism at the time were admittedly meager. The program was caught in a double bind of network and advertiser content control and a lack of cultural capital to participate in the journalistic field. Perhaps its greatest accomplishment was creating a parody of the practices and presentational styles of American broadcast journalism that critiqued the profession itself—a practice continued

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[329] *That Was the Week That Was*, Pilot. November 10, 1963.
[330] Skit described in Kercher, *Revel with a Cause: Liberal Satire in Postwar America*: 377.

by subsequent news parody programs. *TW3* joked about the frequency of news bulletins, the horse-race coverage of elections and networks racing to name victors on election night. The nonsensical "Person on the Street" (POS) interview, with the corresponding intrepid "roving reporter," enabled by lighter-weight news cameras, became a target of the program on its final episodes. One segment features Nancy Ames performing three different POS interviews in a row. First, she stops Buck Henry on a set made to look like Washington D.C. to get the view from everyday Americans. Henry is fed up with politics and eventually identifies himself as a war hawk, pacifist, and communist, a telling commentary on America's own schizophrenic political beliefs and the dubious information that emerges from the random street interview. Later in the same show, Ames knocks on the door of a Chicago housewife, played by Pat Englund, to interview her about Vietnam. Englund, displaying Americans' lack of interest in events, suggests the country should switch its support to the North Vietnamese, who seem to be winning. In the last interview, Ames tries to interview a fellow roving reporter (also played by Henry) who instead attempts to interview her.[331] Althought such criticism might not have left a mark on journalistic practice at the time, *TW3* inaugurated a satiric evaluation of broadcast coverage that has carried over with much greater effect to contemporary news parody shows.

It is emphatically unlikely that *TW3* writers and editors consciously sought to practice journalism; however, authorial intent is never the end of a text's meaning. By engaging television news through parody, the program satisfied some of the basic functions of journalism, as well as offering a critical reassessment of certain practices, such as roving reporters. The journalism was neither sustained nor consistently insightful, and certainly

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[331] *That Was the Week That Was*, Episode 50. May 4, 1965.

was not the primary consideration of the producers. Hayward never suggested *TW3* was actually engaged in news reporting, and his frequent changes to the show demonstrate he was driven by the dictates of the television market, not concepts of journalistic integrity.

News Parody in the Network Era

The appearance of a topical, satirical program was an anomaly for American primetime television in the early 1960s. Some late-night programs such as *Tonight* featured satiric material, but there was nothing like *TW3* on the networks at the time, especially a show so consistently aligned with liberal politics. Television programs would occasionally weave social commentary into storylines, such as an episode of *Bonanza* tackling racism, and there were attempts to schedule programs with a progressive agenda, such as the CBS drama *East Side/West Side*; however, network support of socially conscience content was infrequent at best.[332] NBC's decision to pick up *TW3* still seems surprising, given the potential risk of the material and the controversies the BBC program already faced. Amanda Lotz has called the period from 1952, when the FCC began approving licenses after the freeze, to the 1980s the "network era" of television.[333] During this time the three broadcast networks ABC, CBS, and NBC dominated the industry. If a producer wanted content to reach a national audience, there were only three options; as a result, the networks could negotiate favorable terms, causing production companies to shoulder the initial cost of making a program. In addition to the networks, advertisers also wielded

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[332] For more discussion of American television and social commentary during the 1960s, see Bodroghkozy, *Groove Tube: Sixties Television and the Youth Rebellion*; LeRoy Ashby, *With Amusement for All: A History of American Popular Culture since 1830* (Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 2006). 357-65.
[333] Lotz, *The Television Will Be Revolutionized*: 9-12.

immense power. The single-sponsor model of radio jumped to the new medium of television, along with radio's best shows. Sponsors and networks originally vied for control of content before the industry settled into the magazine-advertising method of selling spots to multiple sponsors up front.[334] The networks took back control of their programming, although producers like Hayward were still essentially beholden to both advertisers and network executives. News coverage and public statements by Hayward demonstrate the difficulty of producing news parody during the heyday of the network era.

Advertisers were a constant worry for Hayward from the start. When NBC negotiated to carry *TW3* after the strength of the pilot, it was picked as a mid-season replacement for the failed *Harry's Girl*, which was presented by Colgate. The company sponsored the time slot, and so could choose the show's replacement. Colgate opted to relinquish its rights, after passing on *TW3* as "too controversial."[335] NBC seemed to draw a line in the sand as a larger effort to take back control of its programming schedule. Even though there were still open spots on the program, the network went ahead and scheduled *TW3* to debut in January. Advertising executives warned that the very qualities that made the show successful in Britain would keep American advertisers from signing up, but watchband maker Speidel, Clairol, and several other companies booked two-thirds of the spots on the program's season debut.[336] Despite *TW3*'s consistent third-place showing

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[334] For more on the power struggles between networks and advertisers in television's early days, see William Boddy, *Fifties Television: The Industry and Its Critics* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1990). 93-99." Lawrence R. Samuel, *Brought to You By: Postwar Television Advertising and the American Dream* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2001).
[335] "'TW3' Too Hot, Colgate Sez No," *Weekly Variety*, November 27, 1963; "Colgate Brushes Timeslot as NBC-TV Replaces 'Girls' with 'The Week That Was'," *Daily Variety*, December 4, 1963.
[336] George Rosen, "Kintner: 'We'll Take Charge'," *Weekly Variety*, December 11, 1963.

during its first season, the program eventually sold out all of its spots due to the relatively low cost of its advertising rates. Over halfway through the first season, though, Speidel was the only sponsor willing to commit to the next.[337]

After receiving sponsorship, *TW3* also had to constantly worry over potentially offending advertisers. Most censorship did not come from direct sponsor demands; rather, it came either directly from the network or through the show's writers pre-censoring themselves by not pursuing jokes and topics that might raise hackles.[338] Only two major dust-ups between the show and its advertisers made its way to the press. During the second episode of the program, an aforementioned news report on the link between smoking and cancer transitions into images of lung X-rays, people smoking, doctors performing surgery, and hospital patients, combined with the song *Smoke Gets in Your Eyes*. The Brown and Williamson Tobacco Company threatened to pull its 60-second ad if the network did not pull the segment. NBC surprisingly allowed the program to keep the sketch, and the advertiser made good on the threat to pull its spot.[339] Brown and Williamson pulled ads from two additional shows during the first season over jokes about smoking.[340] The next controversy erupted over a news story in the premiere of the second season that reported the Catholic Church was creating a group for married men, and that although priests still could not marry, the Vatican said nothing about going steady. Speidel executives received complaints from Catholic customers and quickly demanded Hayward

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[337] Bill Greeley, "'That Was the Cast That Was' as NBC Plans Fresh Show for Fall," *Weekly Variety*, April 22, 1964.
[338] Advertisers also did, on occasion, directly communicate with Hayward about potential directions and strategies for the show. Kercher, *Revel with a Cause: Liberal Satire in Postwar America*: 381.
[339] The segment was an audience favorite and was repeated on the last episode of the program. "'T.W.3' Smoking Spoof Gets in Sponsor's Eye," *New York Times*, January 24, 1964.
[340] Greeley, "'Gotta Be More Witty Than Mean' Keys Hayward Revamp for 'TW3'."

issue an apology. The producer responded with the public statement: "I can understand why some may have found the reference inappropriate and we are sorry to have offended them."[341] While the BBC program was free from the economic pressures of advertising, the American *TW3* was attempting marketable satire to a broad audience while striving to avoid offending corporate interests. To make matters worse, the program fell victim to a proxy advertising war between the Democrats and Republicans leading into the 1964 presidential elections.

On the evening of September 22, 1964, rather than the second season premiere of *TW3*, NBC viewers were "treated" to a 30-minute program featuring GOP candidate Barry Goldwater and former President Dwight D. Eisenhower. An attempt to preempt the next week failed because the Democrats had already purchased a 30-second ad; however, the Republicans purchased the time slot for all the remaining weeks up until the election.[342] As a result, the second episode of the season was preempted all the way to November 10th. Although Republicans never publically acknowledged a desire to silence the show, the ad buys were perceived as a GOP strategy to harness the power of advertising to control content without actually having to support the program.[343]

Throughout the run of *TW3*, the program also had to constantly deal with the power of the network to censor and cajole. During the second-season preemptions, Hayward reportedly threatened to send letters to newspapers accusing the Republicans of trying to block jokes about Goldwater, bringing a swift response from NBC that it "advised strongly

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[341] Val Adams, "N.B.C. Apologizes to 'T.W.3' Sponsor," *New York Times*, October 3, 1964.
[342] "Behind-the-Scene TV Confrontation for Demos & GOP."
[343] Even if Republicans refused to acknowledge the strategy, the television press still took the party to task for trying to censor the program. See, for instance, Hal Humphrey, "GOP Sabotaging TW3 Satire?," *Los Angeles Times*, October 30, 1964.

against the tirade."[344] The network specifically claimed that such an action would compromise the show's objectivity, perhaps latently acknowledging the program's journalistic activity. From the beginning, NBC made it clear *TW3*'s news parody should operate under the same code of non-bias as traditional newscasts, and Hayward obliged by repeatedly emphasizing the program would be objective in its satire. As discussed in the introduction, objectivity in journalism was coming under increased scrutiny at the time, following the press's timid responses to the McCarthy hearings and segregation.[345] Still, objectivity continued to be the defining characteristic of American journalism and structured the routines of reporting, leading to common approaches for gathering and reporting news.[346] Both NBC and Hayward likely appealed to objectivity for some of the same reasons as journalists—including to insulate the show and network from accusations of bias and the financial repercussions that could accompany such a perception.

As the first season leaned more and more heavily on Republicans targets, Hayward made special efforts to enforce an image of impartiality. The producer gave *TW3* writers reminders to switch out the victims of its humor, so if jokes were made about Goldwater one week, Hayward expected writers to look elsewhere the following week.[347] Applying objectivity to comedy seemed an odd combination for some reviewers. One wrote that certain politicians made themselves targets of humor by their stances and that, "good satire

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[344] Bill Greeley, "TV's 'Undesirable' Ad Clients: Demos & GOP Pose Headaches," *Weekly Variety*, September 30, 1964.
[345] David R. Davies, "The Challenges of Civil Rights and Joseph Mccarthy," in *Fair & Balanced: A History of Journalistic Objectivity* ed. Steven R. Knowlton and Karen L. Freeman (Northport, AL: Vision Press, 2005).
[346] See, for instance, Bennett, *The Politics of Illusion*: 191-92.
[347] Greeley, "'Gotta Be More Witty Than Mean' Keys Hayward Revamp for 'TW3'."

doesn't pick its marks by any foolish concept of balance."[348] Leading into the second season, Hayward was so concerned about potential political controversy that he told reporters they would increase the number of jokes about foreign countries, because "domestic topics are touchier."[349]

Although both Hayward and NBC advertised the network's hands-off approach to *TW3*, reports from network and program staff reveal Hayward was under constant pressure to tone down content and avoid some controversial topics. Network representatives attended show rehearsals and closely oversaw production of the program, and NBC executive Ed Friendly reportedly coaxed Hayward into making decisions amenable to the network.[350] In a *Variety* interview, Nancy Ames further supports reports of network interference, claiming that NBC approved every word of scripts and forbade ad-libbing. Ames reported that the cast wanted to perform edgier material, but was constantly told it might offend different groups and they should "mind their own business."[351]

By the time *TW3* entered its second season, the network had all but given up on its success. Producer Marshall Jamison objected to plans by NBC and Hayward to soften the program's satire and appeal to broader audiences, and was forced off the program. The cast and crew were narrowed down to a smaller core group and Herb Sargent replaced Jamison as producer.[352] NBC signaled its indifference to the show when the network gave in to Jack Paar, who wanted to extend his program to 90 minutes, and switched *TW3* from Friday to

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[348] Bill, "That Was the Week That Was."
[349] Paul Gardner, "'Week That Was' Won't Stay as Is Next Season," *New York Times*, July 10, 1964.
[350] Reported in Kercher, *Revel with a Cause: Liberal Satire in Postwar America*: 384.
[351] Dave Kaufman, "Report Sponsor Sensitivity Weakens 'Week That Was'," *Daily Variety*, April 1, 1964.
[352] "Jamison Exits 'TW3' in Hassle," *Weekly Variety*, June 17, 1964.

Tuesday nights. Although *TW3* lagged behind its competitors in ratings, its audience was loyal, and as Jeffrey S. Miller points out, the decision to schedule a show called *That Was the Week That Was* early in the week seems illogical.[353] One critic dubbed Tuesday at 9:30 the "least enviable timeslot" and another writer suggested the switch was the equivalent of placing *TW3* "on the sacrificial block."[354] As expected, *TW3* stayed at third in the ratings, with tepid numbers, and after only nine episodes of the new season NBC formally announced it would cancel the show in April.

The power of advertisers and NBC during the network era forced *TW3* to play its satire safer than later news parody programs. Another byproduct of the limited distribution options for television programs was the necessity for any network show to target a national, homogenous audience. Certain broad demographics such as women and children could be targeted, but not the kind of narrowcasting that emerged during the multi-channel era of television, with cable and satellite. Despite a dedicated audience, *TW3*'s numbers could not sustain a prime-time network program in the 1960s. After the cancellation was announced, an NBC source told *The Washington Post* that the network expected the program to appeal to a limited audience, but the share of even that smaller segment was insufficient to keep *TW3* on the air.[355]

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[353] Jeffrey S. Miller, "What Closes on Saturday Night," in *NBC: America's Network*, ed. Michele Hilmes (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2007), 198.
[354] Les, "That Was the Week That Was."; Greeley, "TV's 'Undesirable' Ad Clients: Demos & GOP Pose Headaches."
[355] "The Week That Wasn't," *Washington Post*, May 8, 1965.

Conclusions

The actors and staff of *TW3* made a valiant effort to bring satire and news parody to American television, but the project was likely doomed from its start. The program was an ill fit for commercial primetime, both in content and appeal. Audiences and critics seeking savvy satire found themselves frustrated by *TW3*'s milquetoast approach, while interferences from network executives and advertisers pushed the show to be as hesitant and bland in its humor as possible. The very structure of television's economics and management during the network era prohibited simulating the approach the BBC's *TW3* found so successful with its audience. Had NBC, Hayward, and the era's advertising and economic conditions allowed the program to pursue the same kind of humor as the BBC program, *TW3* may well have found the "limited audience" NBC was supposedly targeting. The cancellation of the British *TW3* and the Canadian *TW3* spinoff *This Hour Has Seven Days* both brought swift condemnations from audiences and some politicians. In comparison, press coverage of NBC's decision to cancel the program approached the story as if *TW3* were already dead and the network had just decided to find a burial plot.

TW3 was attempting to break new ground at a time when television may have been *the* most conservative medium in the nation. By the beginning of the 1970s, the networks began to program shows more reflective of America's changing culture, but when *TW3* was being produced, entertainment programming was still largely stuck in a rarified 1950s concept of the nation.[356] Despite its uneven humor, the program was one of the few to

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[356] I want to be sure not to overstate the progress of television in the 1970s. While much of the programming remained conservative in its approach, the networks became much more willing to address topics previously ignored, such as nontraditional family structures and social problems, because audiences *wanted* more content reflecting reality, as reflected in

critique mainstream values and conventional wisdom at a time when television executives saw little to gain from controversy, except angry advertisers.

As an alternative form of journalism, *TW3* likewise seems unsuccessful. Even if the show had created a more sustained and informative critique of the news, its journalistic success, like its ratings, were partially subject to contemporary forces beyond its control. In addition to these, the program suffered from all of the shortcomings that inherently plague the news parody genre, such as its reliance on already-existing press accounts and the agenda-setting abilities of traditional journalism. However, *TW3* emerged into a media environment where television journalists were still fighting their own battle for legitimacy. Publications by the RTNDA and CBS defensively argued that television reporters *are* journalists—not just technicians or actors, which reflects a bias against television reporters in the profession.[357] Television news lacked cultural capital in the journalism field because of both its newness and its connection to the visual over the written. Coverage of the Kennedy assassination helped its case, but it would be later in the decade, covering Southern violence and Vietnam, when network news became an indispensable part of the journalistic milieu. Clearly, if the network newscasts themselves were still considered suspect, no self-respecting journalist was going to consider whether a *parody* of those newscasts might be raising legitimate questions about politics and society. By the mid-1970s, when *SNL* went on the air, news agencies could not help but recognize how the show's constant portrayal of a bumbling Gerald Ford helped shape public perception of the

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the immense success of *All in the Family*—not because the networks were pursuing a social agenda.

[357] The Radio Television News Director Association and Time-Life Broadcast Inc., *Television Newsfilm Standards Manual*; CBS News, *Television News Reporting*.

president.[358] Had *TW3* debuted a decade later, especially in a post-Watergate culture, the show might have had more opportunity to influence culture and at least minimally engage in the discourse of journalism.

Despite its struggles and ultimate cancellation, the greatest success of *TW3* was its influence on subsequent satire and news parody programs and the lessons learned. The program seemed to show that the pressures of a primetime network program are at odds with the appeal of the news parody genre. Whether this is true or not, with few exceptions the networks have stayed away from primetime shows emphasizing news parody.[359] Later programs moved to late-night and (eventually) cable outlets to find a more specialized audience, making *TW3*'s two shortened seasons the nation's longest run of prime-time network news parody.

Several people involved with *TW3* continued to pursue news parody, furthering the influence of the program. Herb Sargent, who produced the second season of *TW3*, went on to write for *SNL*, specifically helping to create the Weekend Update segment of the program. Sargent made a failed 1976 attempt to revive *TW3* after *SNL*'s successful debut, and again tried to create a primetime news parody program with the short-lived *The News Is the News*. David Frost also participated in an attempt to remake *TW3*, this time in the '80s, starring opposite Anne Bancroft. Actor Buck Henry went on to host and make guest appearances on *SNL* multiple times in the early days of the program.

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[358] For an extended analysis of *SNL*'s Presidential portrayals, see John Matviko, "Television Satire and the Presidency: The Case of *Saturday Night Live*," in *Hollywood's White House: The American Presidency in Film and History*, ed. Peter Rollins and John O'Connor (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2003).
[359] These later attempts in the 1970s and '80s are discussed in Chapter 4.

Later news parody show also seemed to learn from *TW3*'s jumbled mix of variety-show format, which was faulted by some critics. The constant digressions of sketch comedy worked against *TW3* constructing a consistent parody of network news. After all, newscasts have one of the most highly structured television formats, and repeatedly shifting actors back and forth between playing news anchors and characters in other skits and songs interrupts the immersion required for effective parody. *TW3*'s format also prevented the program from establishing a set "news space" to mimic the set design and props the networks had established for their nightly news. By interspersing skits, the news parody was limited in its scope. The syntax of individual *story* could still be copied, but the overall look and sobriety of the news *program* could only be suggested.

Subsequent television shows established clearer lines to delineate news parody from other segments. When creators of ABC's *Laugh-In* decided to include some news parody in their program, they created a self-contained sequence called "*Laugh-In* Looks at the News." *SNL* established the definitive approach to news parody presented within a variety format by creating its Weekend Update as its own segment with totally separate news space. HBO's *Not Necessarily the News* turned TW3's formula around by structuring the entire program around a news set and rolling in pre-edited sketches. In creating a parody of television news, it became to seem more fitting for a show to "stay in character" by extending the parody, rather than shifting formats. More recent shows, especially, seem to have learned this lesson, combining news parody with news interviews as on *TDS* and *Colbert*, establishing 30-minute sustained news parody formats.

CHAPTER THREE: WEEKEND UPDATE: MOVING NEWS PARODY TO LATE NIGHT

A decade after *TW3* exploded onto American airwaves and quickly fizzled out, the longest-running news parody segment in television history debuted, again on NBC. *SNL* and its Weekend Update segment proved immensely popular with both audiences and critics. Although only ten years had passed from 1965 to 1975, the landscape of popular culture had shifted in favor of edgy comedy looking to cut national leaders down to size. The remnants of television's "golden age," such as *I Love Lucy* and *Red Skelton*, were long absent from the dial, as was CBS's successful mid-60s rural programs such as *Andy Griffith* and *Green Acres*, replaced with programs attempting to tackle contemporary issues, including *M*A*S*H*, *All in the Family*, and *Maude*. Assassinations, Vietnam, Watergate, and other national traumas combined with movements demanding greater equality, forcing shifts in ideological hegemony that were reflected in changing popular tastes. *SNL* emerged into a very different culture than *TW3* left; one dramatic indicator of this shift is how conservative politicians attempted to preempt *TW3*, while in contrast, Gerald Ford, the sitting Republican president, made a cameo appearance on *SNL* during its first season.

However, changes in the cultural milieu can only account for so much of the success of *SNL* and Weekend Update during their first five seasons. In this chapter, I examine how during the 1970s, Weekend Update effectively created a separate generic space for news parody to flourish, and how the segment went beyond simple mimicry of news formatting to critique not only newsmakers, but also broadcast journalists and their methods, participating in the larger journalistic field. Discourses surrounding Weekend Update accelerated comparisons to traditional journalism in the 21st century, often grouping it with *TDS* and *Colbert* as a type of entertainment-oriented news. However, even in its

infancy Weekend Update generated some concerns about potential confusion with traditional news, as its satire became water-cooler talk for politicians and journalists.[360] Its inroads into the traditional journalism field began during these formative seasons.

From the time *TW3* left the air to the creation of *SNL*, political humor gained momentum and to some degree acceptance in mainstream culture. On television, several shows attempted to keep political humor alive while navigating the murky waters of network control. In the late 1960s, *The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour* (1967-1969) ran afoul of the same type of network fears that sank *TW3*. Through sketch comedy directed at politicians, race relations, and Vietnam, as well as their choice of musical acts connected to the counterculture, Tom and Dick Smothers consistently squared off with CBS executives and censors, which resulted in cancellation after only three seasons.[361] When Dan Rowan and Dick Martin developed *Rowan and Martin's Laugh-In* for NBC in 1968, the sketch comedy pushed the limits, but never ended up in the kind of bitter network feud the Smothers Brothers experienced, and lasted until 1973. *Laugh-In* even regularly featured a news segment called both "The Rowan and Martin Report" and "*Laugh-In* Looks at the News." Although the news segment allowed for more straightforward political commentary than the rest of the program, the segment was purely stand-up comedy and sketches about

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[360] Les Brown, "Notes: Is the Zany Newscast a Threat to the Real Thing?," *New York Times*, June 20, 1976. Aaron Reincheld, ""Saturday Night Live" and Weekend Update: The Formative Years of Comedy News Dissemination," *Journalism History* 31, no. 4 (2006): 192.
[361] For more on the *Smothers Brothers* and their conflict with CBS, see Steven Alan Carr, "On the Edge of Tastelessness: CBS, the Smothers Brothers and the Struggle for Control," *Cinema Journal* 31, no. 4 (1992). Aniko Bodroghkozy, "The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour and the 1960s Youth Rebellion," in *The Revolution Wasn't Televised: Sixties Television and Social Conflict*, ed. Lynn Spigel and Michael Curtain (New York, NY: Routledge, 1997); *Smothered - The Censorship Struggles of the Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour*, 2003; David Bianculli, *Dangerously Funny: The Uncensored Story of The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour* (New York, NY: Touchstone, 2009).

the news, not a parody of network newscasts.[362] When *SNL* began, some critics actually linked the program's tendency to push the limits of network television with *Laugh-In* and *TW3*.[363]

In other media, such as film, publishing, and the recording industry, political satire was likewise on the rise.[364] In theaters, films like *Blazing Saddles* (1974) and *MASH* (1970) found success marrying humor and politics. In 1970 *National Lampoon* magazine began publishing its own brand of parody. "*Nat Lamp*," as it became known, found success among college students, peaking with a publication of 900,000 in the mid-'70s.[365] Over the course of the decade, *National Lampoon* expanded its humor brand to include radio programs and films. A number of *SNL* writers and cast members worked for *National Lampoon*, including Michael O'Donoghue, Bill Murray, John Belushi, and Gilda Radner. Comedians like George Carlin and Richard Pryor brought their stand-up routines of cultural criticism to record stores and concert halls, and also eventually became involved with *SNL* as hosts. The program benefited from the cross-pollination of humor during the 1970s, picking up performers and writers from other successful media. When *SNL* debuted, the program was more of a compendium of contemporary directions in humor and was mostly groundbreaking because of being featured on television, perhaps the tamest medium at the time.

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[362] Dan Rowan mentions that the segment's "news of the future" especially allowed him to engage in more direct social commentary. Scott Humiston, "The Rowan Report," *Sarasota Herald-Tribune*, July 9, 1978.
[363] Peter Andrews, "'Saturday Night' Never Plays It Safe," *New York Times*, February 29, 1976.
[364] For more on counter-culture humor, see Hendra, *Going Too Far*.
[365] Joey Green, "Last Laughs," *Rolling Stone*, September 29, 1983.

The Development of *SNL* and Weekend Update

In 1974, NBC hired Dick Ebersol to create weekend late-night programming. Saturday and Sunday night usually featured reruns of *The Tonight Show Starring Johnny Carson*, but Carson decided to keep his old programs so he could air them when he wanted time off during the week. Rather than giving the time slot back to its affiliates, NBC chose to invest money in potential replacement programming.[366] Ebersol sought out Lorne Michaels, who had written for *Laugh-In* and some Lily Tomlin specials, to develop a late-night program. The network was especially interested in targeting young people, and early promotions for *SNL* played up the show's potential for edgy comedy. A month before the program debuted, Ebersol told reporters the late-night time spot would make *SNL* "free of primetime restraints, [they] can experiment with new forms as well as new fades [sic]."[367] From its first episode, *SNL* became the talk of the entertainment industry and of the young crowd NBC was hoping to attract.[368] Writers aligned the program with a young, hip demographic through drug and sex references, and its consistent bashing of conservative politics. *SNL* was a huge success, averaging a 6.6 rating and 23 share its first season. The program was frequently referred to as NBC's biggest hit of the 1975 season—a particularly dismal one for prime-time shows, with one reviewer calling *SNL* "the most significant and welcome TV development of the year."[369] With the network in last place for ratings, the

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[366] Tom Shales and James Andrew Miller, *Live from New York: An Uncensored History of Saturday Night Live* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown and Company, 2002). 3-4.
[367] "NBC Late-Night 'Saturday' to Showcase New Talent," *Daily Variety*, September 15, 1975.
[368] The show actually debuted with the title *Saturday Night*, because Howard Cosell was already hosting an ABC variety program called *Saturday Night Live*. Cosell's program only lasted five months; so NBC renamed their show in 1977.
[369] John O'Connor, "The '75 Season - a Few Nuggets Amid the Dross," *New York Times*, Dec. 28, 1975, 1975.

program represented a bright spot executives hoped to capitalize on, wanting "to capture the contemporary appeal of the show during primetime."[370]

From the earliest incarnations of *SNL*, Michaels planned to include a news parody segment. Michaels had earlier worked on the Canadian program *The Hart and Lorne Terrific Hour* (1970-1971), which featured a recurring news parody sketch. He repeated the idea when pitching *SNL* to the network. After Watergate and the hours of television time devoted to coverage of the scandal, Michaels says audiences "were very familiar with news and news anchors and how the news was presented."[371] For Michaels, the entire show would be a meta-reference to television conventions and would at least satirize those conventions, if not outright parody them. He reportedly told Ebersol in their first meeting, " I want to do a show for the generation that grew up on television."[372] Michaels tapped former *TW3* and *Tonight Show* writer Herb Sargent and newcomer Alan Zweibel as the main writers for Weekend Update, although other writers would regularly submit jokes for the segment. The coverage of late-'60s and early-'70s riots, assassinations, marches, and government scandals made television news one of the most familiar genres on the small screen for that generation, and Weekend Update would aim its parody at all of network news' familiar conventions.

Over the first five seasons of *SNL*, Weekend Update remained surprisingly consistent in terms of its structure, with only a couple of anchoring and set changes. Although it began with a single anchor, the segment eventually featured an entire news

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[370] Dave Kaufman, "NBC Set Sept. 27 Start Date for '76-77 Season to Give Producers More Time," *Daily Variety*, December 11, 1975.
[371] Reincheld, ""Saturday Night Live" and Weekend Update: The Formative Years of Comedy News Dissemination," 192.
[372] Doug Hill and Jeff Weingrad, *Saturday Night: A Backstage History of Saturday Night Live* (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1987). 18.

team by the end of the decade, and incorporated a broader vocabulary of television-news references. Before the show's debut, Michaels reportedly planned to anchor the segment himself, but grew concerned about potential conflicts from having to act as both producer and talent.[373] Instead, following a screen test Michaels assigned former *Smothers Brothers* writer Chevy Chase to the anchor desk.[374] Chase acted as the sole anchor for the first season of Weekend Update, although other actors regularly appeared as supporting cast. Laraine Newman portrayed a roving reporter who would conduct faux-live shots from a separate set. Jane Curtin occasionally appeared to deliver editorial statements, usually as Chase silently mocked her. Gilda Radner debuted her memorable Emily Latella character, known for confusing words and inadvertently delivering commentary on "presidential erections" and "the deaf penalty." Other cast members showed up periodically, but there was no doubt that Chase *was* Weekend Update in the inaugural season of the show. Thanks to the news parody segment and his frequent pratfalls as Gerald Ford, Chase quickly became the biggest star on *SNL*.[375] The first season established the structure for Weekend Update, including its placement within the line up around midnight (partially to keep viewers watching) and the inclusion of a fake commercial spot, which broke the segment into two parts. The segment also more than doubled in length over the course of the first season, eventually taking up almost nine minutes of the program.

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[373] Reincheld, ""Saturday Night Live" and Weekend Update: The Formative Years of Comedy News Dissemination," 191.
[374] Tom Burke, "Saturday Night," *Rolling Stone*, July 15, 1976, 72.
[375] In fact, Chase became one of the most talked about stars in all of television during his first year on the show, even being named the funniest man in America by *New York Magazine*. Jeff Greenfield, "He's Chevy Chase and You're Not, and He's TV's Hot New Comedy Star," *New York Magazine*, December 22, 1975. His popularity and his negotiation of a one-year contract allowed him to set off on his own during the second season of *SNL*, with NBC giving Chase his own short-lived primetime variety show in 1977.

Chase continued to anchor Weekend Update when season two began, although Curtin filled in for the second and third episode after Chase injured himself in the season opener. Curtin took over the anchor desk permanently after Chase's 1976 departure, with Newman continuing occasional remote reports. The structure of the segment changed little. New cast member Bill Murray and Radner's Emily Latella character provided infrequent commentaries, but overall, fewer cast members appeared on Weekend Update in its second season.

The segment's format was shaken up in season three with the introduction of a Weekend Update "news team." Curtin and Dan Aykroyd acted as co-anchors, with Murray as an entertainment critic. In the first episode Garrett Morris provided sports and John Belushi appeared on desk as a special correspondent, while Newman reprised her roving-reporter role.[376] The segment seems rushed and disjointed, and the cast is trimmed by the second episode of the season, with only Curtin, Aykroyd, and Murray remaining as regulars. Newman made occasional appearances via live remotes throughout the season, and Radner introduced her new commentator, Roseanne Roseannadanna. Other players appeared sporadically as special reporters and commentators. The ad break is removed, expanding the news parody content, and fake sponsor announcements were added during the opening bumper.

Murray replaced Aykroyd as co-anchor in season four and several new recurring characters were added to the mix. Garrett Morris' introduced the highly stereotyped Hispanic ex-baseball player/sportscaster, Chico Escuela. Comedian Don Novello also began appearing on the show during season four as the fictional priest Father Guido Sarducci.

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[376] *Saturday Night Live*, Episode 53. December 10, 1977.

Most of Novello's *SNL* appearances were as part of the Weekend Update segment, credited as the gossip columnist and music critic for *The Vatican Enquirer*. Radner's Roseanne Roseannadanna continued as a regular commentator as well.

In season five, Weekend Update continued with the same structure, retaining Curtin and Murray. The departure of Belushi and Aykroyd, however, resulted in a number of writers being added as irregular cast members. As a result, writer Al Franken, who only had minor appearances on the show, became a recurring character on Weekend Update—first as a science editor and then as a commentator, famously advocating for the 1980s to be the "Al Franken Decade." Newman made a couple of last appearances as a reporter and the characters of Sarducci and Escuela continued from the previous season. Harry Shearer, who was hired for the 1979 season as a writer and cast member, attempted to create a new sports-reporter persona named "The Vicker," but only appears twice.

Since the departure of the original "Not Ready For Primetime Players" (as the cast of the first five seasons were called), Weekend Update continued to be an integral part of the identity and appeal of *SNL*. The segment changed names for the sixth season, after the departure of the cast and producer Lorne Michaels. The renamed "SNL Newsbreak" and subsequent "Saturday Night News" are considered the dark days of the segment, with frequent anchor and formatting changes throughout the 1980s. However, Michaels's return to the helm of *SNL* for the 1986 season saw a return of popularity for the segment, which now featured Dennis Miller at the anchor desk. Since the 2000 election, Weekend Update has regained its status as an insightful critic of contemporary politics and "must see" television for politicians and cultural critics. The segment's success is partially due to the innovative format developed during *SNL*'s early years.

Structuring News Parody on Saturday Night

Earlier programs like *TW3* and *Laugh-In* provided inspiration for Michaels and other *SNL* staff, but Weekend Update represented a total revamp of news satire. Unlike *TW3*, where news presentation was scattered throughout, with songs and skits in-between, *SNL* crafted a cohesive news parody, where the structure and presentation was as much a part of the humor as the scripted lines. True parody is based on an imitation of style.[377] In *Reading Television*, John Fiske and John Hartley discuss the aesthetic codes of television and how they work on both denotative and connotative levels to create audience expectation and meaning.[378] This, of course, is one of the elements of genre. On a formal level, we know we are watching a soap opera because of its *mise en scène* and method of production, and we as an audience adjust our expectations based on those codes. The more elaborate mimicry of news style in Weekend Update set it apart within the structure of *SNL*, tied closer to its source material of news than the surrounding skits. By carving out a special segment dedicated to news, *SNL* established a show-within-a-show, and provided time for the audience to immerse themselves weekly in the style of television journalism through sustained, rather than halting parody. The program divorced news parody from sketch comedy, making Weekend Update truer to its parodied text.

The segment was a veritable catalog of the visual and spoken grammar and syntax of television news in the 1970s. As the decade moved along, Weekend Update introduced small changes in style to more accurately replicate newscasts. As Jeremy Butler has written,

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[377] *SNL* has been adept at other types of parody as well. For an interesting discussion of the program's commercial parodies see Alan J. Bush, Victoria Bush, and Gregory W. Boller, "Social Criticisms Reflected in TV Commercial Parodies: The Influence of Popular Culture on Advertising," *Journal of Current Issues & Research in Advertising* 16, no. 1 (1994).
[378] John Fiske and John Hartley, *Reading Television*, 2nd ed. (New York, NY: Routledge, 2005). 43-44.

television style encompasses a broad range of elements, including editing, camera placement, and even methods of persuasion.[379] One obvious aspect of visual style is set design, and the ever-evolving news set of Weekend Update offers a highly salient example of how the segment used variations in style to replicate different approaches to news.

Set Design

When Chase began anchoring in 1975, the Weekend Update set was minimalistic—a sketch of an actual newsroom. He was seated at a simple anchor desk with wood paneling on the bottom affixed with a slightly larger gray piece atop, set in front of a gray wall, sponge painted to give it more texture. A simple gray sign on the wall above the desk read "Weekend Update," with its letters slightly angled to reflect the "on the move" immediacy of newscasts (Figure 3.1). A black phone sat on the desk. When graphics were called for, an angled shot of the desk revealed a crude cutout meant to look like a monitor, where images were keyed (the process of filling an isolated section of a video signal with another video signal, Figure 3.2). However, unlike *TW3*, which jumped from desk to desk, Weekend Update created its own diegetic space and limited the segment to that news space. This was a major innovation of Weekend Update, creating a tightly controlled diegetic space separated from the rest of the studio, and with many of the visual trappings of broadcast news at the time. Even when "live reports" were obviously taking place on another set, the cameras never reveal the artifice. The isolated space was a major element in establishing the news style they were trying to parody.

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[379] Jeremy Butler, *Television Style* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2010).

In episode eight of the first season, the set gets a slight revamp.[380] A lighter gray, marbled look for both the wall and entire anchor desk gives a brighter, more contemporary feel. Even the sign on the wall is repainted with the same color scheme. The original, small desk is replaced with an L-shaped desk with Chase positioned at the bend, and the Weekend Update logo in cut Styrofoam letters across the middle of the desk. Rather than a larger top, the desk now had a clean, indented gap between top and bottom, accentuating the overall angled, updated look and creating the illusion of a separate top (Figure 3.3). The changes resulted in a more modern, professional appearance for the remainder of the season. Both of these initial set designs copied the familiar network look of a news desk with minimal decorations, from which a single authority figure would hand down the news. The segment even used an audio track of a teletype machine playing underneath the main audio to reinforce the trappings of journalistic power. This set remained in place throughout the remainder of season one and continued to be used for season two.

In 1977, the premiere of the third season of *SNL* inaugurated a redesigned look and structure for Weekend Update. Copying a format increasingly favored by local news, the segment adopted an "eyewitness" news-team approach. The eyewitness style emphasized the concept of a news "family," with male and female anchors, weather and sports coverage, and reporters appearing on set and then tossing to video packages.[381] The redesign drew praise from a Variety reviewer, who singled out Weekend Update as one of

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[380] *Saturday Night Live*, Episode 8. December 20, 1975.
[381] An emphasis on video was another common feature of the eyewitness format; however, Weekend Update continued to make sparing use of actual pre-shot video. For more on the eyewitness format, see Craig Allen, "Eyewitness News," in *Encyclopedia of Television News*, ed. Michael D. Murray (Phoenix, AZ: The Oryx Press, 1999).

the best changes for the new season.[382] The simple, more stoic greys and logos were replaced with warm blues and high-energy visuals. An open V-shaped desk with Aykroyd and Curtin on either side allowed for the seating of additional talent beside the two primary anchors. The lower portion of the desk was a similar marble gray to the previous set, while the top of the desk had a professional glossy wood appearance. The new desk reinforced the news-team feel, allowing reporters to sit right next to Curtin and Aykroyd to create a sense of shared intimacy.

The background wall represented a major visual shift, with a gray lower section and bright blue middle with "Weekend Update" running across the length of the wall in multiple columns, populating the entire background with letters. This visual repetition of the background wall was in line with local news sets at the time of production, which increasingly used the name of news shows to market journalism as a channel "product." A tiered upper section of the wall incorporated both the blue and gray and provided a columnesque feel, adding a look of slick professionalism to the overall design (Figures 3.4 and 3.5). The black telephone remained on the desk, providing a visual constant as shots tossed between anchors. The set originally lacked a monitor area to key visuals; instead, images were chromakeyed (where a specific color is removed from a video image and replaced with another image) directly behind the anchors, either taking up the whole background, or only leaving part of the background black (Figure 3.6). The irregular approach to news graphic presentation looks odd, with the wall reading Weekend Update appearing or disappearing from behind the anchor based on the use of graphics. Chromakeying anchors into newsfilm was actually in vogue with some stations at the time;

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[382] "Saturday Night Live," *Weekly Variety*, September 28, 1977.

however, *SNL* producers moved away from chromakey on the main set.[383] By the seventh episode of the season, a fake monitor for graphics was added between Curtin and Aykroyd.[384] A plain, blocky Weekend Update logo was painted across the front of the desk at the same time (Figure 3.7). Overall, the changes in season three moved the segment's parody closer to the emerging phenomenon of local "action" news teams than network newscasts, which were still dominated by individual anchors.

The news-team concept continued during seasons four and five of the show, but the set changed from a sleek, blue, modern look to a more traditional design. Most of the set and the anchor desk used a natural, light wood veneer with accents of silver strips. The desk changed from the pointed "V" design to a much boxier look with two sides angled inward, where a middle section extends out towards the wall and ends with a monitor screen just above. Icons of journalistic authority are scattered about the walls, including a map of the Earth behind either side of the desk and three clocks on each side next to the map. The clocks add both a look of professionalism (many news sets utilized them) and understated humor, as each clock has the name of a city in the Northeastern United States over it, all set to the same time. Over the monitor in the center of the set a plain Weekend Update logo overlaps a cutout of a globe, further invoking common visual tropes of television news (Figure 3.8). This redesigned set remained in use until the mass departure of the original cast members at the end of season five.

Decisions to reconstruct and alter production sets cost time and money. Such moves had to be motivated by changes in format or other practical reasons. In the case of

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[383] Vernon Stone and Bruce Hinson, *Television Newsfilm Techniques* (New York, NY: Communication Arts Books, 1974). 91-92.
[384] *Saturday Night Live*, Episode 53. December 10, 1977.

Weekend Update, set changes were meant to copy the visual style of television news. Drastic redesigns were accompanied by alterations in the segment's format. The first season connected its news parody with the solo anchor and the subdued look of network newscasts. By season three, the set began to replicate the more modern, sleek, and extravagant appearance of top-market local news and the eyewitness style, leading to a revision in the last two seasons toward a more professional, subdued interpretation of the news-team concept. The creation of privileged diegetic space for the newscast was one of the major influential aspects of Weekend Update, and one way in which its news parody differed from *TW3* and *Laugh-In*.

News Visual

As discussed in the previous chapter, the incorporation of news visuals has been an essential aspect of newscast style since the late 1950s. By the 1970s newscasts were dominated by moving images, partially thanks to the continued development of videotape. The new video format offered cost savings, much lighter camera gear, and perhaps most importantly, provided the fastest available turnaround from shooting to air. For instance, news organizations learned their lesson when Henry Kissinger's ill-fated 1972 proclamation that "peace is at hand" in Vietnam made it onto CBS in 25 minutes because the crew was using videotape; this beat the other networks by hours, who had to wait to develop their film.[385] The dominance of moving images on newscasts makes it seem especially strange that Weekend Update contained very few stories accompanied by external video. Over the course of five seasons, only about 15 stories featured pre-shot

[385] C. Robert Paulson, *Eng/Field Production Handbook* (New York, NY: Broadcast Management/Engineerting, 1976).

video. When video was included, the stories often made extensive use of the footage, which tended to dominate the length of the segment. For instance, the only use of pre-shot footage in season one is a mock basketball game between singer Paul Simon and NBA player Connie Hawkins. The story lasts almost seven minutes—well over half of the total segment. Other video stories were spread about equally over the next four seasons.

Length was one reason writers might have chosen to shy away from incorporating video. Cost might have been another reason. The show had the ability to borrow footage from NBC News, but writers reportedly worried that using the news division's video in a controversial way might prevent future use by *SNL*.[386] The other option would have been video wire services, but video was much more expensive than services for photo and copy. By the 1980s and *NNTN*, video was easily and cheaply available. As a result, future news parody programs relied heavily on footage.

One way around such barriers was to use old, less expensive video. Several stories utilized canned and licensed film with anchors providing inappropriate narration for the images, such as a medical story about the development of the blood-clot medication hemomycin. Garrett Morris, the show's "science editor," looks in a microscope to see the effects of the drug. Cut to video of an old Mighty Mouse cartoon, meant to represent cells in the body, as Morris provides details on how hemomycin works.[387] This type of joke usually depended on films in the public domain, or ones that should have been relatively cheap to secure the rights for use. The only timely news footage was used by Weekend Update in season three. A group calling themselves the "gay bakers" hit outspoken opponent of gay rights, Anita Bryant, with a pie at a press conference. The show played footage from the

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[386] Hill and Weingrad, *Saturday Night: A Backstage History of Saturday Night Live*: 280.
[387] *Saturday Night Live*, Episode 59. March 11, 1978.

incident. Bryant and her anti-equality activities were a favorite punching bag for the show, so the footage must have been especially gratifying for the staff, and justified going to the trouble of procuring the footage.[388] Following the video, Curtin reports that Bryant had a good sense of humor about the attack, and will let her husband date the assailant.

Although video footage was used sparingly, photos were a constant source for humor. *SNL* used the Associated Press and United Press International wire services both as inspiration and to add to the humor of a story.[389] Weekend Update's use of photos was remarkably similar to *TW3*. Some photos were simply used to add a visual element. For instance, a story about the possible exhumation of Lee Harvey Oswald leads to a fake quote from potential presidential candidate Ted Kennedy, saying, "If it's not Oswald, I'm not running." A picture of first Oswald and then Kennedy is shown over Curtin's shoulder.

Awkward photos of politicians or celebrities became building blocks for entire stories. A famous photo of Patty Hearst wielding a machine gun in front of a Symbionese Liberation Army symbol accompanies a story about Hearst moving back into her parent's house and redecorating her room, making it appear that she has just painted the symbol and is holding a machine gun in her childhood home.[390] In another picture, Federal Reserve Chair Paul Volcker props his head on his hand, while holding a cigar with the same hand, prompting a story about Volcker's ability to smoke through his forehead.[391] A year after Carter takes office, a photo of his mother is shown, where the presidential matron appears to have her hand over Jimmy Carter's crotch. Curtin reads a story about Carter's struggles

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[388] *Saturday Night Live*, Episode 49. October 15, 1977.
[389] Reincheld, ""Saturday Night Live" and Weekend Update: The Formative Years of Comedy News Dissemination," 193.
[390] *Saturday Night Live*, Episode 33. November 27, 1976.
[391] *Saturday Night Live*, Episode 90. November 10, 1979.

in office and concludes with the pun that Miss Lillian feels like, "he's still growing in his job."[392] In this type of use, the photos themselves became the actual subject of the joke and the verbal structure is built around the visual.

Some of the best jokes came from topical stories covering real news that were then punctuated by photos. Often, the image is unrelated to the actual story. For example, a picture of a Klansman dressed in white robes accompanies a story about Vice President Spiro Agnew attending a masquerade party. Chase then adds that Agnew is "shown here before he picked a costume."[393] Following the Three Mile Island nuclear accident, a photo of three blindfolded men tied to posts with Arabic writing is identified as the executives most responsible for the nuclear meltdown. They were supposedly tried and executed. Curtin ends the story saying officials "would've electrocuted the men, but they couldn't afford the electricity."[394] After Ted Kennedy decided to run in the 1980 presidential election, an image of a car going off a bridge with a throng of onlookers ran with a story saying Kennedy decided to recreate the Chappaquiddick accident to finally clear himself, "unfortunately new doubts were raised when the press had to wait nearly ten hours for the senator to appear and answer questions."[395] At other times, photos connected with the subject of the news are recontextualized by story details. For instance, a story about Carter winning the 1976 election ends with the camera cutting to a shot of Curtin and an over-the-shoulder graphic of former President Gerald Ford amid a sea of people with only his head visible. Curtin ends the story saying; "Students are shown here parading through the streets of Washington with the head of Gerry Ford, who they decapitated as a warning to Jimmy

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[392] *Saturday Night Live*, Episode 50. October 29, 1977.
[393] *Saturday Night Live*, Episode 22. May 29, 1976.
[394] *Saturday Night Live*, Episode 83. April 14, 1979.
[395] *Saturday Night Live*, Episode 91. November 17, 1979.

Carter that he better watch himself."[396] In these examples, the photos are the linchpins of the joke—the visual is integral both to the humor and to successfully parodying television news.

In another nod to the visual style of 1970s news, Weekend Update makes extensive use of graphics and the expanded technology available to a network program shooting in studio. Guest interviews and reporters, especially Newman, were often placed in front of chromakey screens to make it look as if they were on live remotes, a tactic also utilized by correspondents on *TDS*. Supposedly at Cape Canaveral, Newman reports on efforts to send nuclear waste into outer space as a missile launches and blows up behind her.[397] Graphics were fairly simple and crude in the first several seasons of the show, usually simply words on backgrounds. In the same episode, Chase offers a look back at 1975, literally turning around and gazing at the white number "1975" against a black background on the monitor. The show appeared to begin using more professional titling equipment in later seasons, incorporating color and combining text and graphics. During the third season, for example, the segment covers a teenager's murder trial, where the defense attorney argued that the teen learned to be violent from watching the show *Kojak*. The story was accompanied with a color over-the-shoulder graphic of a gavel banging on a television, with a split down the middle of the television. Text underneath the image reads "T.V. on Trial."[398] Beginning with the second episode of the fifth season, coverage of presidential politics was repeatedly punctuated by a "Campaign Preview '79" logo with a static American flag overlapped by

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[396] *Saturday Night Live*, Episode 31. November 13, 1976.
[397] *Saturday Night Live*, Episode 8. December 20, 1975.
[398] *Saturday Night Live*, Episode 48. October 8, 1977.

"80."[399] The titling of news stories via graphics was accelerating in local news at the time, eventually leading to the full outright "branding" of news stories so often seen on current twenty-four hour news channels. In a critique of news style, the show also mocked the increasing use of artist's renderings in television news. Rather than professional sketches, Weekend Update's artwork often consisted of crude stick figures, like a child's drawings. Coverage of a Muhammad Ali boxing match featured a sequence of crayon figures, with Curtin narrating the details of the fight.[400]

News Tropes

Beyond the visual elements, Weekend Update parodied a range of other news tropes. Like TW3, the live performance of *SNL* reinforced Weekend Update's similarity to television news, helping to create a similar feel. The program was the first live entertainment show produced by NBC in a decade, and the immediacy and imperfections only helped the segment's parody. The idea of immediacy and being live is so integral to news style that when the pre-taped and edited *Not Necessarily the News* appeared on HBO in the 1980s, the lack of "liveness" worked against the cable show's ability to replicate news style. One aspect of being live that was increasingly used in news-team environments was "happy talk," the innocuous (and sometimes vapid) conversations anchors have when transitioning between segments or sometimes even between stories. Weekend Update happy talk featured bizarrely inappropriate reactions and non-sequiturs. After Aykroyd delivers a medical story warning that hospitals recommend being more aggressive with fevers, he turns to Curtin and says, "You know, my grandma used to say swallow a cold and

[399] *Saturday Night Live*, Episode 88. October 20, 1979.
[400] *Saturday Night Live*, Episode 27. October 2, 1976.

take a chainsaw to a fever." Curtin responds with "So did mine," and returns to reading the news.[401] In the same newscast, after a story about the anniversary of Galileo's death, Aykroyd comments, "Smart man, that Galileo!" "Indeed he was Dan," follows Curtin. The inane comments of Weekend Update's anchors perfectly capture the forced and awkward conversations played out at news desks across America, where happy talk is sometimes even noted within scripts. The brief asides become a commentary on the lack of value or even intelligence in the planned inclusion of such material by professional news organizations.

The repetition of certain broadcast-news tropes likewise reinforced the segment's connection to news. The peculiar phrasings of broadcast news is one easily identified aspect of news style. The use of headlines or datelines at the top of a story is one example, such as when Chase starts a story with, "Tragedy this week" or "Dateline: New York!" Despite the emphasis on conversational language in writing, many news organizations still clung to this kind of vernacular from the early days of radio broadcasting. The use of news bulletins in radio also made the jump to television, where breaking stories were handed live to anchors, a process Weekend Update actually replicated. Writers were so concerned with referencing the latest news that they would watch the eleven o'clock newscasts and literally write until the last minute, occasionally finishing stories while under the Weekend Update desk and handing them up to the anchors to read while on the air.[402] Weekend Update took the bulletin to a new level in season three, with Gilda Radner dancing onto the set wearing an NBC logo, with only her legs exposed.[403] The "dancing N" appeared several

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[401] *Saturday Night Live*, Episode 48. October 8, 1977.
[402] Shales and Miller, *Live from New York: An Uncensored History of Saturday Night Live*: 61.
[403] *Saturday Night Live*, Episode 48. October 8, 1977.

times during the season with a bulletin taped to its side, requiring Aykroyd and Curtin to lunge over the news desk, trying to grab the bulletin. (Figure 3.9) The joke worked on at least two levels, poking fun at the news bulletin idea and at NBC's recently redesigned $1 million logo.[404]

Another trope borrowed from newscasts was the on-air correction. When traditional news organizations made a significant mistake, they would read corrections on air (a rarity in today's news culture). Weekend Update followed suit, using common television transitions such as "A correction to a story from last week." However, the anchor would always apologize for something Weekend Update never reported, often followed by totally unrelated information that was supposedly for clarification. For instance, Curtin apologizes for a story that Supreme Court Justice Warren Burger won the 1958 Kentucky Derby (which they never reporter) and then goes on to clarify, "what we meant to say was that Tom Snyder is one of a pair of Siamese twins."[405] The fake corrections were a common feature on the segment and stand out from most of the other material, given their frequent nonsensical structure and lack of news-related humor, meant only to parody an established stylistic of newscasts.

The multiple methods of simulating television news style through set design, use of visuals, and recurring tropes, as well as Weekend Update's separation from the surrounding *SNL* sketches, produced a more consistent version of news parody than any programs which had come before. Beyond simply mimicking the look, though, these elements themselves served as parody—calling into question the logic behind their use in

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[404] The show had made fun of the redesigned NBC logo on an earlier episode also. *Saturday Night Live*, Episode 9. January 10, 1976.
[405] *Saturday Night Live*, Episode 38. February 26, 1977.

television news and mocking the conventions of the genre, an approach incorporated by the multiple cast members who anchored Weekend Update over its first five seasons.

I'm a News Parody Anchor—and You're Not

Like the traditional network newscast, Weekend Update was originally built around one person: the anchor. Weekend Update's anchors are the public voice and personality of the segment and in return have often received disproportionate attention from the press and public compared to other *SNL* talent. The publicity boost for anchors can partially be attributed to the show's producer. Before *SNL* ever aired, Michaels insisted that Chase use his own name for the segment. Rather than a feeble "Walter Crankcase" copy of an iconic anchor, Michaels planned for "the news" itself to be the subject of the humor and insisted that anchors play themselves.[406] Of course, each person who takes the desk enacts the actor's own concept of an anchor, but Michaels encouraged the cast not to use fake voices or go beyond minimal artifice.

Chevy Chase – Defining the Role

For many viewers who grew up on *SNL*, Chevy Chase is remembered as *the* anchor of Weekend Update. In reality, his tenure on the segment was among the shortest, barely outlasting the disastrous early-'80s cast members Charles Rocket (1980-81) and Brian Doyle-Murray (1981-82). The major difference, of course, is that Chase first defined the role on Weekend Update and then left the show voluntarily on his own terms.

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[406] Hill and Weingrad, *Saturday Night: A Backstage History of Saturday Night Live*: 132.

The first several episodes of *SNL* saw Chase attempting to become comfortable with his anchor persona. His inexperience in front of the camera led to a breakdown in the carefully orchestrated dance that usually exists between camera and newscaster, who deftly turns from one camera to another. Instead, during the first several episodes Chase frequently became confused during camera changes, fumbled lines, and generally appeared fidgety, unsure of what to do with his hands. Weekend Update began with announcer Don Pardo introducing the segment, adding credibility as a disembodied "voice of God," while Chase talked on the phone, caught in the middle of sexually suggestive conversations that often slipped past network censors. As the comedian quickly hung up the phone, the actual reading of the news commenced.

Although the phone shtick remained part of the opening while Chase was on the desk, the tendency on Weekend Update over the course of the first season was towards replicating news conventions. Rather than basking in laughter, Chase began arranging scripts on the desk during times of audience applause and otherwise attempted to stay more in character as the stoic newsman. By the fourth episode, he adapted a network persona and also debuted what would become his signature opening, "I'm Chevy Chase, and you're not."[407] The pompous phrase was adapted from New York WABC anchor Roger Grimsby, who would open the local news with, "I'm Roger Grimsby, and here now the news."[408] The phrase seemed to fit perfectly, copying the exalted position of anchors who deliver news as if from on high. Chase would later tire of the repetitive opening and create other nonsensical extensions to the tagline, such as "I'm Chevy Chase and you, you're

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[407] *Saturday Night Live*, Episode 4. November 8, 1975.
[408] ———, *Saturday Night: A Backstage History of Saturday Night Live*: 132.

merely a statistic" or "I'm Chevy Chase and you can't."[409] At the start of the season Chase's style leaned towards a comic delivery similar to the *TW3* cast. However, he quickly began reining in his tendency to overemphasize vocal delivery and body movements. Nods and darting eyes surveying audience reactions became less frequent, in favor of a traditional anchor's focus on the camera and minimal movement. Chase developed a solemn vocal delivery that he would sometimes put to use specifically to deliver nonsense. After one news story, he turns to the camera and fervently intones a spiritual "Joshua fit the battle of Jericho, Jericho, Jericho. Joshua fit the battle of Jericho & the walls came tumbling down. More on that later."[410] Chase grew in the same way as traditional anchors, better able to control his voice and actions.

Staying true to Michael's instructions, though, Chase never totally lost himself in the anchor role. He retained a slightly self-satisfied manner, smiling more than anchors are wont, and sometimes calling attention to mistakes or jokes that were falling flat by crumpling up and tossing scripts, or saying tongue twisters like "toy boat." His presentation always seemed good-natured, though, reacting in an almost childlike or naïve fashion. In their history of the early era of *SNL*, Doug Hill and Jeff Weingrad describe how, "even if a joke wasn't working, [Chase] had a way of looking knowingly at viewers with an eyebrow raised that was utterly disarming."[411] Logically, such behavior should have called attention to the constructed parody, but Chase's cocksure serenity in the face of stumbling blocks actually worked to smooth over and retain the façade. He loved the role, and as a writer, Chase enjoyed working with both the short form of the news stories and the immediacy of

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[409] *Saturday Night Live*, Episode 14. February 21, 1976; *Saturday Night Live*, Episode 18. April 24, 1976.
[410] *Saturday Night Live*, Episode 28. October 16, 1976.
[411] ———, *Saturday Night: A Backstage History of Saturday Night Live*: 132.

the jokes, saying, "you can't dawdle with parody."[412] Even when mocking others, as he often did with guest commentators at the desk such as Curtin and Henry, his taunts were behind their backs, like a child. Critics have written (both positively and negatively) about Chase's self-confidence, but his unflappability on screen actually mirrors the expected authority of a network anchor. The odd combination of innocence and authority exuded by his anchor persona has definite similarities to Jon Stewart, and may help to explain the popularity of both. The combination also helped to make Chase a convincing parody of the *role* played by John Chancellor and Walter Cronkite, who both sought trust and intimacy from audiences.

Jane Curtin – the Real Face of Weekend Update

For the five years spanning the original Not Ready For Prime Time Players, Jane Curtin was the most consistent face of Weekend Update, anchoring all but four episodes of seasons two through five. After filling in for an injured Chase, she took over anchoring duties as of the November 13, 1976 episode. The transition was awkward; Curtin was known for specializing in "straight" roles on the comedy show, and largely adopted the same approach to Update. She presented herself as a professional, no-nonsense journalist, serious about the content and emotionally neutral, as objective anchors are encouraged to be. Once she settled into the role, it worked. Her faux seriousness made her the straight person for the joke embedded in the script, much like Stephen Colbert, who would take the formula to a whole new level. However, Curtin's early days on the anchor desk were

[412] Rowland Barber, "Is Chevy Chase Immune to Phenomenitis?," *New York Times*, May 1, 1977.

reportedly difficult. Unlike Chase, who wrote much of the segment himself, Curtin was unhappy with a lot of the scripts being written for her, especially their constant sexism.[413]

Curtin barely missed out on becoming the first female network-news anchor, even if it was only on a comedy program. A month earlier, Barbara Walters became the first woman to anchor a network newscast, sharing the desk with Harry Reasoner on the *ABC Evening News*. Like Walters, Curtin was faced with the sexism and patriarchy of the television industry. When Chase returned to temporarily take back the anchor position following his injury, he thanked Curtin for filling in and announced she would be a regular contributor to Weekend Update, saying, "Much has been said about the pros and cons of a woman anchoring the national news. There's certainly no question in my mind about the validity of women in any so-called traditional male roles." Curtin thanks Chase and then delivers a hard-hitting report on fluorocarbons; in response, Chase leans back and begins making faces and taunting her.[414] Demonstrating that *SNL*'s satire was not always progressive, the joke mocks women's demands for equal rights in the workplace. The segment was an opening salvo against Curtin, who would continue to struggle to be taken seriously as Chase's replacement.

For the first several newscasts she anchored, the writers kept the break between Pardo's introduction and the headlines. At first, Curtin continued to answer the phone and field calls for Chase's love interest. This shifted to her character being unaware the show was beginning and engaging in stereotyped behavior such as putting on perfume, taking birth control, filling out a magazine sex quiz, etc. The break is finally eliminated when Curtin began immediately following Pardo with her own authoritative introduction, "I'm

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[413] Hill and Weingrad, *Saturday Night: A Backstage History of Saturday Night Live*: 247-48.
[414] *Saturday Night Live*, Episode 29. October 23, 1976.

Jane Curtin, here now the news." At the end of January, she finally addresses the specter of Chase, saying viewers' letters have been coming in complaining that Weekend Update has gone downhill and that the network is pressuring to have someone else take over the anchor desk. Curtin counters with, "I just assumed it was responsible journalism you wanted, not sex. I gave you more credit than that [pause] but I was wrong. What can I say besides [ripping open her blouse to reveal her bra underneath] try these on for size, Connie Chung! If it's thrills you want, it's raw thrill you'll get!" The audience breaks into applause as Curtin begins reading the news with her shirt halfway open.[415] She reportedly regretted doing the bit, but the writers continued to push her sexuality as a source of humor for the rest of the season.[416] Only weeks later she starts the newscast by saying that she's wearing black mesh stockings and leather boots, "but let's talk about my panties for one second, shall we? They're mesh—black mesh string bikini. I love them. You would too. I wish I had them on right now. They're in my laundry basket—at home."[417] At times the writing seemed to conflict with the character Curtin was developing on screen. As a result, she fell victim to other types of stereotyped writing.[418] She seemed to push back against the writing at times, calling attention to jokes that failed by commenting on them or giving over-enthusiastic laughs.

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[415] *Saturday Night Live*, Episode 37. January 29, 1977.
[416] ———, *Saturday Night: A Backstage History of Saturday Night Live*: 248.
[417] *Saturday Night Live*, Episode 40. March 19, 1977.
[418] While wanting to address the sexism of the writing, I also do not want to remove Curtin's agency as an actor. In accounts of *SNL*, there are repeated discussions of actors rejecting or requesting changes to scripts. In addition, some report that Curtin was considered the strongest negotiator in the cast and, thus, was sent to represent the talent for contract terms. So, although Curtin has discussed the difficulty of working within the patriarchy of *SNL* she did have choices. ———, *Saturday Night: A Backstage History of Saturday Night Live*: 247.

In trying to play the role of straight professional, Curtin could also come off as cold and unfeeling. Playing into this role, her scripted interactions with most correspondents present her as a humorless, mean authoritarian. Radner's Emily Latella character repeatedly played off this stereotype of Curtin. Whereas Chase would calmly and kindly correct Latella's mistakes, Curtin would warn her to get it right, leading to the gentle Latella calmly calling Curtin a "bitch." In season three, when Aykroyd and Curtin mimic a point-counterpoint segment, Aykroyd finally gives voice to the other aspect of Curtin the writers were creating by repeatedly referring to her as "Jane, you ignorant slut." These dueling accusations, embedded within the larger cultural context of sexual control through labeling women with such terms as "bitch" or "slut," made it very difficult for Curtin to emerge as either a likeable or strong character within the second season of Weekend Update.

The following years established Curtin's anchor as a less extreme version of her initial season. The sex jokes became less frequent and less demeaning. She continued her professional demeanor, but also could have lighter moments. Having additional actors on the anchor desk undoubtedly helped Curtin, as humor could be drawn from their interactions, rather than her sole presence. She was still the straight person for many jokes and that meant sometimes having to play the heavy, such as when Murray questions why news is so different from entertainment coverage or reeling in Roseanne Roseannadanna's discussion of eye crust. On the other hand, Curtin also acted as the progressive voice in the Point-Counterpoint segment to Aykroyd's conservative commentator, advocating the positions usually supported by the cast. During seasons three through five, she established a compelling character, reading the news with authority while also furthering the comedy of others through her role. Unlike most of the cast, Curtin really had no signature

characters, so her anchoring on Weekend Update may be the most defining aspect of her time on *SNL*.

The Other Guy(s) – Aykroyd and Murray as Co-Anchor

Aykroyd and Murray round out the main anchoring team, with Aykroyd co-anchoring with Curtin in season three and Murray taking over co-anchor in seasons four and five. When Aykroyd began anchoring, he played the role very straight, imitating the limited movements of network anchors and even greying his temples at the beginning of the season. He seemed uncomfortable on the desk at first, pausing and making mistakes, but became more at ease in the role as the season progressed. When the point-counterpoint feature debuted towards the end of the season, Aykroyd would take extreme positions on topics that obviously conflicted with the sensibilities and audience of the program. Using a style later emulated by Colbert, Aykroyd's ironic commentary damned his viewpoint through calculatedly self-parodying praise. He was reportedly never truly happy playing himself on screen, and was relieved when Murray took over anchor duties.[419] Season four opened with the explanation that Aykroyd was now the station manager, but he frequently returned to Weekend Update to reprise his conservative role, delivering commentaries in a segment called "Strictly Speaking" or opposite Curtin in point-counterpoint.

When Murray took over anchoring duties for season four, he had already made frequent appearances on Weekend Update as an entertainment correspondent. Murray played with the stereotype of Hollywood gossip reporters, addressing the audience and co-

[419] Ibid., 234.

workers informally, casually telling them in an overly-familiar way, "I love you guys, no, get out of here, I mean it," and referring to celebrities by nicknames, as if he fostered a deep friendship with them. Since Murray's character already existed in the world of Weekend Update, the writers felt the need to transition him into a news-anchor role when the fourth season began. This serial aspect of Weekend Update sets it apart from the rest of *SNL*, which mostly embraced the discrete, continuity-free nature of sketch comedy. Instead, writers took care to keep repeating characters internally consistent. When Murray begins season four he portrays an entertainment reporter befuddled by the complexities of actual news, but within a couple of episodes he tamps down the over-the–top persona and develops a more subdued version that ramps up the cheesiness during celebrity interviews, and plays it more straight when reading traditional news.

The varied representations of anchors in these first seasons of Weekend Update mirror existing tensions in journalism at the time, as the "old guard" of news anchors, many of whom had cut their teeth in radio, were retiring and being replaced by young, attractive newsreaders meant to bring in ratings. Curtin and Aykroyd played their roles mostly straight, acting as news-seasoned journalists presenting information with the same attempt at professionalism exhibited by the network anchors, while Chase and Murray appeared to have less knowledge of the news and to exist more as entertaining presenters, amiable local newscasters having fun while reading the day's events. Writing in the late 1960s, one observer bemoaned that often an anchor was chosen "by virtue of his stage presence, his authoritative voice, his delivery skills or his looks."[420] With the growth of the eyewitness format and advertising consultants, local news began to resemble the

[420] I. E. Fang, *Television News: Writing, Editing, Filming, Broadcasting* (New York, NY: Communication Arts Books, 1968). 30.

entertainment world. Ron Powers, in his scathing critique of news in the 1970s, accuses anchors of ignorance regarding their role in democracy and of merely being celebrities: "There is very little feeling of real partnership with the viewer, only a vague condescension."[421] The different actors on Weekend Update, through their roles, entered into this debate about news presentation at the same time they were paroding the authority, substance, and style of television anchors. Their criticism of journalists was often indirect and between the lines, but as the next section shows, there was much less subtlety to the humor pointed at politicians.

Presidential News Parody Coverage in the Post-Watergate Era

In his overview of *SNL*'s satire of presidents, John Matviko notes that it was relatively rare to find television making fun of the President during the 1970s.[422] Late-night comedians such as Johnny Carson would lob softball jokes with good humor, but actually confrontational humor, much less presidential satire on the networks was virtually non-existent. In its first season, *SNL* focused most of its humor on sex, drugs, and politics, and the Weekend Update segment followed suit. Thanks to the collaborative nature of the program's writing, the political sketch comedy of the show informed and reinforced the political humor of Weekend Update. Taken as a whole, *SNL* constructed a fairly cohesive progressive political discourse in its comedy, with the majority of its attacks on conservative politicians and viewpoints.

Throughout *SNL*'s more than three decades on the air, most of its political satire has ridiculed politicians on a personal level, rather than focusing on policies. A number of

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[421] Ron Powers, *The Newscasters* (New York, NY: St. Martin's Press, 1977). 13.
[422] Matviko, "Television Satire and the Presidency: The Case of *Saturday Night Live*," 336.

studies have shown that topical comedy shows and other soft news programs emphasize political personalities.[423] Joseph Boskin, repeating a common criticism that includes such shows, condemns the way political humor tends to obscure power by focusing on individual politicians at the expense of actual political structures and actions.[424] Weekend Update falls victim to this tendency even more than the rest of the program. Mimicking the news briefs of broadcast television, jokes on the segment are short and move between wildly divergent topics, making sustained topical satire difficult—a problem solved by *TDS* and *Colbert*'s singular focus on news. My analysis of Weekend Update's presidential humor confirms that writers mostly shied away from critiquing specific policies, possibly because audiences were less likely to get the humor, or perhaps other types of jokes were simply easier to write.

Although Boskin is correct that humor about individual politicians is less politically useful than humor aimed at social structures, not all such jokes of the former type are the same. Humor about political players *can* be more or less destabilizing, based on whether the critique is purely personal, or reflective of commonly held political views and strategies. For instance, the first season of Weekend Update featured a number of jokes about whether Ronald Reagan colored his hair. By contrast, following the death of the brutal Spanish dictator Francisco Franco, the show repeated an actual quote from Richard Nixon, who called Franco a loyal ally of the U.S. and said he "earned worldwide respect for Spain through firmness and fairness." Juxtaposed against the quote is a picture of Franco and Adolf Hitler giving a fascist salute together, undercutting the substance of Nixon's

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[423] See for instance, Moy, Xenos, and Hess, "Priming Effects of Late-Night Comedy." Baum, "Talking the Vote: Why Presidential Candidates Hit the Talk Show Circuit."
[424] Boskin, "American Political Humor: Touchables and Taboos," 475.

statement.[425] Ridiculing the dishonesty and historical revisionism of Nixon's eulogy of Franco differs substantially from merely making fun of Reagan's appearance. Both jokes are ultimately about individual action, but as my analysis of presidential humor will show, Weekend Update's satire covered a broad range, veering from the substantive to the facile.

Gerald Ford's Accidental Presidency

A comedic television show could have hardly asked for a more primed audience for political humor than 1975 America. The show appeared on television just over a year after Nixon resigned the presidency in shame. His successor, Gerald Ford, became president without a vote (and without the large base of support that comes from running for election) and then alienated many voters by pardoning Nixon.[426] The young audience *SNL* aimed for was already predisposed to view conservative politicians with a mix of disdain and irreverence, so the program's satire of politicians, and specifically Ford, proved quite popular.

In its first season on the air, *SNL* defined the presidency of Ford for its viewers. Despite Ford's past as a college athlete and multi-term representative (including eight years as Republican Minority Leader), the show portrayed the president as clumsy and dimwitted—a caricature that stuck in popular culture. The writers were obviously inspired by Ford's visit to Austria in June of 1975 (just prior to *SNL*'s debut), where Ford fell down a wet staircase departing Air Force One and then tripped twice more during the European

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[425] *Saturday Night Live*, Episode 6. November 22, 1975.
[426] Ford's approval rating dipped from 71% to 50% following the pardon and hovered around that mark for the remainder of his presidency. Charles Franklin, "Gerald R. Ford and Presidential Approval," Pollster.com, http://www.pollster.com/blogs/gerald_r_ford_and_presidential.php?nr=1.

visit. Throughout Chase's time at *SNL* he regularly portrayed Ford in skits, falling off of podiums and committing other physical gaffes such as holding a full glass of water up to his ear, mistaking it for a phone. Although subsequent actors on SNL tried to copy the speech and appearance of contemporary presidents, Chase spoke in his own voice, and instead of imitating Ford's appearance or mannerisms let the physical and verbal comedy elicit the laughs. Chase and the other writers extended their stereotype of an unintelligent and clumsy Ford in Weekend Update's coverage of the president.

Every Weekend Update in the first season of the show, with the exception of episode 12, featured jokes about Ford, and subsequent seasons kept the president as a favorite punch line, even after his 1976 electoral defeat. The majority of the laughs in season one came from the show's already-established depiction of Ford's clumsiness. One common joke structure in early episodes had Ford accidentally hurting himself, only to have "alert Secret Service agents" wrestle an object or person to the ground. Variously, agents were reported to have subdued a little girl with flowers, a fork, a handkerchief, a car, and even Ford's own thumb. This depiction dovetailed perfectly with *SNL*'s general treatment of the president.

Weekend Update writers especially enjoyed combining fake quotes from the President with actual news items, making Ford appear ignorant and confused. Following a report that the CIA was involved in assassination plots of nine foreign leaders, Ford reportedly says, "Boy, I'm sure glad I'm not foreign!"[427] In a story about the upcoming presidential primaries, Ford supposedly says that in addition to winning the primaries, he

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[427] *Saturday Night Live*, Episode 6. November 22, 1975.

will also win the "secondaries."[428] Heading into the 1976 election, polls showed Jimmy Carter tied with Ford. Coverage of the poll includes a real quote from Carter, dismissing the importance of polls, followed by a quote from Ford taken out of context and presented as a *non sequitur* response: "The Poles are an independent and autonomous people and I don't believe they consider themselves to be under Soviet domination."[429] The show's depiction stuck in the public mind and is often discussed as part of Ford's legacy and a potential factor in his losing run for the White House in 1976.[430]

Perhaps the most discussed episode of season one featured Ford press secretary Ron Nessen as guest host. Chase appeared at the 1975 Radio and Television Correspondents dinner opposite Ford, with the president laughing at the comedian's over-the-top, clumsy imitation. The dinner convinced Nessen, a former NBC News correspondent, to accept an invitation to host *SNL*, thinking that playing along with the show might mitigate some of their criticism of the President—a major mistake on Nessen's part.[431] Knowing the president would be watching, the writers reportedly took advantage of Nessen's appearance to push the limits of the show, writing in a fake ad for douches and setting one skit in a men's bathroom.

The evening Nessen hosted, Weekend Update began with Chase's normal tagline, "I'm Chevy Chase and you're not," only to be followed by pre-shot film of Ford saying, "I'm Gerald Ford and you're not." Ford's stiff attempt to play along with the gag became co-opted by *SNL,* as Chase continued "that late-breaking story just out of Washington. Doctors

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[428] *Saturday Night Live*, Episode 14. February 21, 1976.
[429] *Saturday Night Live*, Episode 29. October 23, 1976.
[430] Yanek Mieczkowski, *Gerald Ford and the Challenges of the 1970s* (Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky 2005). 52-53.
[431] Hill and Weingrad, *Saturday Night: A Backstage History of Saturday Night Live*: 178-89.

say the president is almost completely over his identity crisis, but should continue the therapy daily."[432] Repeatedly throughout the show, Nessen's attempts to use *SNL* for political gain backfire to make him and Ford the butt of jokes. Later in the newscast, Chase tosses to Newman, who introduces Nessen as press secretary for the late Generalissimo Francisco Franco (playing off a recurring joke about the deceased Spanish dictator). In the interview Nessen downplays Franco's death and emphasizes that the former leader's condition is stable. The skit is almost painful to watch, as Nessen merely reinforces what many in the country already believed—that the job of the press secretary is to lie for the president. A number of reporters took Nessen and the White House to task for their involvement with the show. *Variety* called the appearance "politically unwise" and said "sober political observers will have to question [White House] judgment."[433] Most of the mail received by the White House was reportedly critical of the administration's involvement with the program, describing *SNL* as objectionable.[434] The show's writers used the controversy as a springboard for jokes on the next episode, reporting Ford is under fire from conservatives for appearing on *SNL*. In the story, Ford is reportedly asked whether his involvement made him look stupid, replying, "Nonsense, pass the soup to my face please."[435] In reflections about his guest-host stint, Nessen says he underestimated how vicious the humor might get, mistakenly thinking the show's comedy would be more in line with Bob Hope or Johnny Carson's playful teasing. Talking about Chase's portrayal of Ford, Nessen writes, "there was no gentle ribbing, no well-intended satire, no good-natured

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[432] *Saturday Night Live*, Episode 17. April 17, 1976.
[433] Mick, "Saturday Night," *Weekly Variety*, April 21, 1976.
[434] Peter M. Robinson, *The Dance of the Comedians: The People, the President, and the Performance of Political Standup Comedy in America* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2010). 200.
[435] *Saturday Night Live*, Episode 18. April 24, 1976.

spoofing. A lot if it was nasty, and all of it was designed to denigrate Ford."[436] Nessen thought he could use the show for Ford's gain, but ultimately regretted trying to tame satire for political purposes.

Criticism of Nessen's appearance was also directed at the show itself. Some writers accused *SNL* of selling out and becoming too cozy with the political establishment. John O'Connor of the *New York Times* complained that having Ford and Nessen on the show reduced the satire to "a symbiotic routine between the Establishment and its court jesters. Far from being outrageous, it is reassuring. Far from being naughty, it is a resounding endorsement."[437] Other politicians seemed to learn a lesson from Nessen and stayed away from the show until the 1980s, making O'Connor's warning seem overly alarmist. Although Ford jokes would endure, Weekend Update delivered its parting shot to the President in the last episode before the 1976 election. A fake Ford commercial had Aykroyd imitating Carter and talking about how he lusts in his heart, juxtaposed with images of women in bathing suits. Following the Ford ad, a fake Carter commercial, rather than delivering a funny retort, simply featured Ford's full speech pardoning Nixon, with images of the two together.[438] Writers reportedly wanted to be sure the public remembered the pardon going into the election, feeling the press had underplayed Ford's actions.[439] Losing the 1976 election did little to insulate the former president from *SNL*'s wit. Ford remained a favorite punch line for the next four years, removing any question about the show's political leanings, especially given *SNL*'s relatively tame treatment of Carter.

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[436] Ron Nessen, *Making the News, Taking the News: From NBC to the Ford White House* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2011). 197-98.
[437] John O'Connor, "TV Review; NBC 'Saturday Night' Meets Ford People," *New York Times*, April 19, 1976.
[438] *Saturday Night Live*, Episode 30. October 30, 1976.
[439] Hill and Weingrad, *Saturday Night: A Backstage History of Saturday Night Live*: 183.

Jimmy Carter and Half-Hearted Satire

While Weekend Update seemed to relish personal attacks on Ford, Carter was often cast as a well-intentioned lightweight with a lovable, dysfunctional family. Despite raging inflation, oil shortages, and economic instability, the first three years of Carter's presidency featured less stinging satire by writers, and more goofy wisecracks. Visual puns were the dominant format for Carter jokes, using photos that seemed awkward or suggestive, and providing an outrageous backstory. For instance, a photo of Carter and a young girl, with Carter's hand reaching around her upper torso, accompanies a story about Carter visiting the Bronx, where "he got a feel for that neighborhood."[440] The writers seemed to enjoy poking fun at the Carter clan more than the actual President. Opportunistic brother Billy, perhaps best remembered for marketing his own brand of beer, received frequent mention, as did Carter's somewhat awkward, preteen daughter Amy. A story about Carter's first year in office read by Curtin perfectly illustrates the show's amusement with the First Family:

> His best friend, Bert Lance, has been accused of questionable banking practices. His son, Chip, is having marital problems. His brother, Billy, is a beer-drinking clown. His mother, Lillian, is a wrestling groupie. His White House Staff Chief, Hamilton Jordan, is getting a divorce. His sister, Ruth Carter Stapleton, is associating with Larry Flynt, a known pornographer; but to be fair, let's look at the brighter side. His daughter Amy's nurse is a convicted murderer. It restores ones faith, doesn't it?[441]

What President Carter lacked in easily mocked traits, his family gave in abundance. As a result, the President shared the satiric stage. Writers paid less attention to Carter than his predecessor and never developed the same kind of defining caricature as Ford.

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[440] *Saturday Night Live*, Episode 48. October 8, 1977.
[441] *Saturday Night Live*, Episode 55. January 21, 1978.

Carter's lack of guile seems to be the most often-mocked aspect of the President during his first several years in office. In a rare instance of a guest host appearing during Weekend Update, Ruth Gordon plays Carter's mother, Miss Lillian, giving a live interview to reporter Newman after the inauguration. Gordon, as Miss Lillian, recalls how Jimmy told her as a child that he would never tell a lie, continuing, "It was at that very moment, I said to myself, 'Lily, if he can sell that crap to his own mother, he can make anybody believe it.'"[442] This final line from Gordon is almost drowned out by audience laughter—suggesting *SNL* writers tapped into existing doubt about Carter's squeaky-clean image.

During the show's first four season, jokes about Carter tended to be softballs; writers ridiculed his family and personality, leaving policy mostly untouched. By the end of the fifth season, leading up to the 1980 election, the show started to focus more on Carter's weakness as a leader, especially in light of the 1979 Iranian revolution and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Despite *SNL* writers' obvious disdain for Republican nominee Ronald Reagan, Carter's ineffectual responses to growing unrest in the world resulted in more pointed sarcasm and satire from Weekend Update. For instance, Carter's announcement that the United States would boycott the 1980 Olympics in Moscow in response to the Afghan conflict was derided as a merely symbolic gesture towards an actual war. One story reports that the Russian Olympic Committee, shamed by Carter's speech, has decided to boycott their own games.[443] In another report Carter warns that if the Soviets attempt to take the Iranian oil fields, "the US will also be forced to boycott the 1980 Miss Universe pageant this June."[444] The Iranian hostage situation received similar

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[442] *Saturday Night Live*, Episode 36. January 22, 1977.
[443] *Saturday Night Live*, Episode 104. May 10, 1980.
[444] *Saturday Night Live*, Episode 102. April 12, 1980.

treatment, especially after the administration's failed rescue attempt in April 1980. A week before the botched rescue, a story about the opening of America's first embassy in Zimbabwe describes how Carter included a gym, kitchen and beds "for the comfort of employees held hostage for any length of time."[445] The next episode reports that Secretary of State Edmund Muskie plans to resign over another planned rescue attempt, but Carter is asking him to postpone his resignation "until next week's attempt fails."[446] Sadly, the Not Ready For Primetime Players and many of the show's writers left at the end of season five, leaving the actual election to be covered by a less experienced, less satire-oriented, and less funny cast in season six.

Weekend Update's coverage of presidents Ford and Carter during the show's first five seasons perfectly reflects the dominant politics of the show. The conservative Ford received often-vicious personal attacks, and more pointed critique of his actual actions and policies (such as his pardoning of Nixon). In comparison, Carter's treatment seemed more similar in approach to Johnny Carson's humor, ribbing the president but delivering stories with a wink, rather than a fist. As the country grew increasingly disillusioned with Carter, writers also began to focus more on his policy failings, at least as they related to contemporary events, such as the Iranian hostage crisis. Although the segment devoted most of its time to the personality and blunders of presidents, there are frequent moments of insightful satire aimed at undercutting official voices and exposing the incongruities of government policies. Its use of news parody as a platform for questioning politicians sets Weekend Update apart from other television shows trafficking in topical comedy during the 1970s, sometimes leading to attacks from more traditional viewers.

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[445] *Saturday Night Live*, Episode 103. April 19, 1980.
[446] *Saturday Night Live*, Episode 104. May 10, 1980.

Weekend Update as Journalism

Contemporary reviews of *SNL* often either applauded or condemned the show for its edgy brand of humor and choice of topics. Typifying the negative response, *The New York Times*' Richard Whelan lambasted writers and actors for being emblematic of a new era of comedians—middle-class, sophomoric, and self-indulgent. He accused the crew of placing themselves above the subjects of their humor and opined about feeling "unclean" after watching, "let down, guilty, depressed at having enjoyed the shallowness of the humor."[447] His reaction reflects how *SNL* was outpacing other humor programs in the 1970s in its willingness to address taboo topics and poke fun at even the most exalted public figures. In terms of news parody, Weekend Update represented a break from *TW3*'s much more sedate, observational approach. More so than the earlier program, Weekend Update regularly critiqued established cultural conventions and illuminated logical incongruities in social structures, thus taking part in humor aimed at society, which Murray Davis identifies as the highest and most destabilizing level of humor.[448]

Humor also shifted onto journalists themselves with Weekend Update, participating more in the journalistic field than its predecessor and wielding some limited standing to engage in political and journalistic discourse. At the time, the boundaries of official news were much less permeable than today; however, the show's creators viewed *SNL* as an intervention into politics. Michaels wanted Weekend Update to have an actual political

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[447] Richard Whelan, "Cruelty Vs. Compassion among the Comics," *New York Times*, Oct. 7, 1977.
[448] Davis, *What's So Funny?: The Comic Conception of Culture and Society*: 149-60.

voice and to educate in its satire.[449] For *SNL*'s target audience, the program would have influenced their opinions on news and potentially played an agenda-setting role. Michaels is very clear that in the early years of the program, messages were specifically geared for hip, young audiences, saying, "if viewers are in the least square, dense or inattentive, fuck 'em."[450] By trying to craft such a highly specialized audience, one not catered to by traditional news outlets, Weekend Update positioned itself as an educational and political voice relevant to its viewers, precisely because to some extent the show wished to mold them into an audience to whom it would be relevant. Amber Day and Ethan Thompson seem to dispute this interpretation of the segment as politically satiric, claiming that during this era Weekend Update "made no explicit critical statements about the media or the political landscape as a whole."[451] However, it seems clear that the aggregate of the segment, the discourse created about politics and the media episode after episode, speak much more powerfully as a critique than any explicit individual statement.

Viewed as a supplement to dominant news sources, Weekend Update's most valuable contribution was its willingness to deconstruct official voices. The segment frequently reported findings and statements from government sources, only to use satirical methods to expose their implications or flaws. The earlier example of Nixon's praise of Franco is one example. In season four, Murray reports General William Westmoreland's claims that medical advances made during the war in Vietnam have saved more lives than those killed in the conflict. To illuminate the ridiculous reasoning of the military leader,

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[449] Reincheld, ""Saturday Night Live" and Weekend Update: The Formative Years of Comedy News Dissemination," 191.
[450] Burke, "Saturday Night," 34.
[451] Amber Day and Ethan Thompson, "Live from New York, It's the Fake News! *Saturday Night Live* and the (Non)Politics of Parody," *Popular Communication* 10(2012): 174.

Murray ends the story by saying, "The Pentagon has recommended that the United States immediately begin World War III in the hope of wiping out all disease."[452] This structure of reporting actual news items, only to comment on and clarify them, actually fulfills an analytic role, one of the fundamental functions of journalism, and one that has often been left aside in the quest for strict objectivity.[453] During controversy over South Africa's investigation into the death of anti-apartheid activist Steven Biko, who died in police custody, Weekend Update aired several reports highlighting the lies and misdirection the government was feeding the press. South African officials claimed Biko died of a hunger strike, despite massive injuries to his head. Curtin reports that the CIA appealed to South Africa for help reinvestigating the death of John F. Kennedy: "Their findings? John Kennedy died of natural causes. His head wounds were self-inflicted. Thank God, now we have the answers Dan!" Aykroyd responds, "I'll say Jane!"[454] The ridiculous premise of Kennedy killing himself, combined with the anchor's faux seriousness and then relief, mocks the fraud of South African officials, and displays a skepticism of official voices some mainstream news outlets were losing.

Weekend Update took special delight in destabilizing social structures around identity politics, although Curtin's treatment at the anchor desk highlights the program's own hypocrisy at times. Regressive concepts of gender, race, religion, and class were all frequently attacked through the segment's satire. During season two, black cast member Garrett Morris is sent to report live from the "Black Governor Conference," finding only an empty ballroom. Morris reports there are no black governors, with Curtin responding, "We

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[452] *Saturday Night Live*, Episode 74. December 9, 1978.
[453] Schudson, *Why Democracies Need an Unlovable Press*: 16-17.
[454] *Saturday Night Live*, Episode 53. December 10, 1977.

were all wondering when you'd catch on to our little joke. Have fun next week when we send you to the conference on black popes."[455] Here, social critique is created through a parody of a live news report, rather than the most frequent route, where criticism springs from an actual news item, such as the actions of politicians. In one example, writers heaped scorn upon California Senator H. I. Hayakawa, who advocated raising gas prices, after he claimed in an actual quote, "The poor don't need gas, because they're not working."[456] The following week, after Hayakawa was caught napping during a treaty briefing, Curtin presents a fictitious quote from the Senator: "I need my sleep. Poor people don't need sleep because they aren't working and they don't get tired."[457] By not only highlighting dismissive and offensive statements of those in power, but extending and analyzing their logic, Weekend Update was a powerful supplement for audiences to the traditional news voices of the 1970s.

Another tactic of Weekend Update writers was to combine contemporary topics, creating a deeper level of critique by their juxtaposition. For instance, abortion and the unequal treatment of the poor are combined in a story highlighting the Supreme Court's ruling to uphold a ban on Medicaid money being used for abortions. Curtin reports, "The Court ruled that a fetus becomes a human being at three months if the parents earn $15 thousand or more a year, and at one month if the parents earn less."[458] The audience begins clapping, forcing Curtin to pause before her next story. By placing the ruling within the context of economics, the story extracts how access to abortion, while a right, is still inaccessible for some based on economics.

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[455] *Saturday Night Live*, Episode 40. March 19, 1977.
[456] *Saturday Night Live*, Episode 85. May 19, 1979.
[457] *Saturday Night Live*, Episode 86. May 26, 1979.
[458] *Saturday Night Live*, Episode 49. October 15, 1977.

The show often received complaints because of its frequent attacks on religion, especially Catholicism. After *SNL* was named one of the 15 worst programs by the Catholic Archdiocese, Murray reports that the Catholic Church turned up fifth on *SNL*'s list of worst religions.[459] In seasons four and five, the character of Father Guido Sarducci, the supposed Vatican gossip columnist, became a pretext for frequent jabs at Church policies and the actual pope. In another example of combining topics in their satire, writers tackle the issues of religion and gender in a single story after a Vatican report proclaimed that women do not look like Christ, and therefore cannot be priests. The story spins off to a sidebar that claims, "Colonel Sanders reports he won't employee anyone who doesn't look like a chicken."[460] Davis points out how conflating the sacred world with the ordinary is a specific humor strategy that acts to destabilize social units by either elevating the mundane or, in this instance, bringing the exalted (Catholicism) down to the level of the mundane (fast food).[461] This strategy of logical extension is a favorite *SNL* method of creating humor, especially when it comes to the illogic of inequality.

Writers' relationships with social topics were often complicated and conflicting; they might damn politicians for offensive statements, only to fall into their own stereotyping through representations on the show. Weekend Update regularly hit politicians hard for racist or racially insensitive comments. Democratic presidential candidate George Wallace was consistently derided for his support of segregation. Most of the Wallace jokes either alluded to his earlier blatant racism or mocked his use of a wheelchair (the former Alabama governor was severely injured in a 1972 assassination

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[459] *Saturday Night Live*, Episode 91. November 17, 1979.
[460] *Saturday Night Live*, Episode 37. January 29, 1977.
[461] Davis, *What's So Funny?: The Comic Conception of Culture and Society*: 207.

attempt). One news story that combining both subjects reports that Wallace will "roll ahead" in his quest for the presidency and claims "his physical disabilities have never and will never prevent him from continuing a determined policy of bigotry and right-wing extremism at home and unflagging ignorance on the foreign front."[462] In another example, Weekend Update, like all news organizations at the time, reported on Secretary of Agriculture Earl Butz's 1976 resignation over a racist joke, telling colleagues that "coloreds" are only looking for good sex, comfortable shoes, and a warm place to use the bathroom.[463] To keep the outrage (and humor) going, writers added that Butz apologized to Senator Edward Brook, who is black, by sending him a bale of cotton and hair straightener. Later in the newscast, a story on Muhammad Ali's announced retirement attributed a fictitious quote to the boxer, saying, "He looks forward to a future of good sex, comfortable shoes, and a warm place to go to the bathroom."[464] Although the show continued to extend criticism of Butz, the condemnation remained isolated to the politician, rather than condemning a society that freely shares racist jokes. So, even though criticism of racial comments was often woven into coverage on the segment, criticism usually remained on the level of the individual, rather than institutional.

Stereotyping and dismissive jokes about identity within Weekend Update sometimes undercut attempts to use satire for progressive politics. One popular recurring character from the original *SNL* cast was Garrett Morris's baseball player-turned-sportscaster Chico Escuela. Appearing in seasons four and five, Escuela was a stereotype of Latino athletes. Supposedly hailing from the Dominican Republic, he spoke severely broken

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[462] *Saturday Night Live*, Episode 5. November 15, 1975.
[463] Like most news organizations, *SNL* declined to use the actual quote from Butz due to his use of profanity.
[464] *Saturday Night Live*, Episode 27. October 2, 1976.

English, often responded with his catchphrase, "Baseball been berry, berry good to me," and called Jane Curtin, "Hane." While humor sometimes extends stereotypes to critique them, such as in *Blazing Saddles*, Escuela operated purely as the butt of the joke, with no broader ethnic implications. The same can be said for multiple other instances of racial and gender humor, such as a story featuring a picture of a black man with a large radio up to his head. Murray claims the man had found the fallen satellite SATCOM 3 and quotes him as saying: "I ain't giving this sucker back to nobody!"[465] *SNL*, both in its sketch humor and Weekend Update, found itself walking a line between advocating for liberal issues on the one hand, and still wanting to tap into stereotypes merely to generate laughs on the other.

Sexuality was the one issue writers of Weekend Update never bothered to question through their humor, instead opting to denigrate and minimize gay and lesbian concerns. In the most egregious example, the segment covered the 1978 assassination of San Francisco Alderman Harvey Milk, the first openly gay man to be elected in California. Supposedly reporting live from San Francisco's Chinatown, Newman narrates over footage of a Chinese communist rally, saying, "Milk, a homosexual, was especially popular here in predominately gay Chinatown." Showing images from the massive communist gathering, Newman reports that 300,000 homosexuals from the community marched. The coverage belittles Milk's death and, as if to leave no question whether they are playing gay rights for laughs, Newman finishes the story saying, "Next week Chinatown will be celebrating the Chinese New Year, ushering in, ironically enough, the year of the fist."[466] NBC later issued an apology for the story after San Francisco affiliate KRON-TV was picketed and received

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[465] *Saturday Night Live*, Episode 93. December 15, 1979.
[466] *Saturday Night Live*, Episode 73. December 2, 1978.

letters of complaint about the story.[467] Other public figures who crossed binary concepts of sexuality also received mocking treatment from Weekend Update for stepping outside established boundaries. Only two episodes before the coverage of Milk's assassination, the show reported that Elton John was in the hospital: "John, an admitted bisexual, had been complaining of an aching prostate gland and menstrual cramps."[468] This story was one of many aimed at the singer after he publicly acknowledged his sexuality. Suffering similar treatment, Dr. Renée Richards, who underwent sex reassignment surgery, was mocked for wanting to play tennis in the US Open. The show reported that a book about her life would be called "Tennis Without Balls," eliciting uproarious laughter and applause from the audience.[469] Perhaps unsurprisingly, given the largely male writing pool for the segment, virtually all of the anti-gay humor was directed towards people society identified as men. The writers reflect the Othered status, even amongst many political progressives, of gay men in the 1970s and the generally conservative tendency of humor to continue to ridicule groups outside of power.

Despite its offensive jokes about queer issues and instances of condescending humor directed at other groups, Weekend Update still offered a bold, sarcastic voice for liberal politics on primetime, and attempted, with varying success, to use its humor to critique dominant ideology and oppressive social structures. Its constant engagement with items in the news rearticulated those stories, questioning the official voices attempting to shape news items and sometimes the underlying premise of the questions they raised. Like *TW3*, Weekend Update used satire to comment, but by creating a self-contained news

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[467] "'*Saturday Night Live*' Irks San Franciscans," *Broadcasting*, December 11, 1978.
[468] *Saturday Night Live*, Episode 71. November 11, 1978.
[469] *Saturday Night Live*, Episode 25. September 18, 1976.

segment closely modeled on newscast structure (and perhaps through simple longevity), the segment ended up both commenting on and becoming a type of news itself. In terms of the news parody genre, one of Weekend Update's biggest contributions was extending its critique to the journalistic enterprise itself.

Critique of Journalism

In 1977, one of the giants of broadcast journalism was unceremoniously forced into retirement. Eric Sevareid, who started his broadcasting career with Edward R. Murrow at CBS during World War II, left CBS due to the network's mandatory age-65 retirement policy. Weekend Update took Sevareid's last broadcast on the network as an opportunity to criticize journalism in general and news anchors specifically. Curtin introduces Murray, playing the CBS veteran, made up with greying hair and doing his best Sevareid imitation. In a hilarious bit, Murray, with the reserve and officiousness of the real Sevareid, complains about television viewers' lack of literacy and inability to follow the awkward speech patterns of veteran broadcast journalists steeped in radio delivery. Summing up the conflicting styles of old and new broadcasters, Murray says:

> What is at question is my relative viability as a television journalist. Some argue that I often make perfect sense, illuminating subtle nuances of conjecture upon the great problems of the day. Others would argue the opposite, that my use of tired syntax and sentence structure, coupled with a staccato & often sing-song delivery, make these editorials incomprehensible and an exercise in futility, like so many grains of sand against the tides of the oceans. I have no strong argument with either proposition.[470]

Murray's brilliantly delivered commentary makes fun of both the over-literary writing of older broadcasters and the elementary-level style of contemporary journalists. By the mid-

[470] *Saturday Night Live*, Episode 53. December 10, 1977.

'70s, Sevareid's delivery was increasingly anachronistic. A book undertaken with the RTNDA reminds aspiring broadcast journalists to "save your convoluted sentences and erudite works for term papers."[471] While news agencies were rejecting the practices of the old guard, though, there was equal criticism of the dumbing-down of journalism. Weekend Update waded into such debates by going beyond the stories covered in the news to the actual newsmakers and methods of journalism.

Playing on the exalted status of such anchors as Walter Cronkite, the segment used humor to knock self-important news personalities off their perches. Curtin frequently made suggestive comments about Cronkite, treating him as a news star and sex symbol. In a story about Egyptian President Anwar Sadat's visit to Israel, the writers invoke the CBS anchor by mentioning that on the plane are "some of the most prestigious journalists, including NBC's John Chancellor, CBS's Walter Cronkite, and *Screw Magazine*'s Al Goldstein."[472] As previously discussed, Weekend Update frequently utilized this type of humor structure, encouraging audiences to reevaluate subjects like journalists by comparing them to topics of different cultural worth, in this case the publisher of a pornographic magazine. Earlier topical satire programs had largely left the press alone, but Weekend Update regularly commented on television reporters, both through the content of stories and the creation of the segment's recurring characters.

The growing use of correspondents and on-set specialty anchors was increasingly satirized beginning in the third season, as the format adopted the Eyewitness News style. John Belushi's sometimes-drug crazed, sometimes-enraged correspondent repeatedly appears, originally as a weather forecaster, but later providing commentary that quickly

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[471] Stone and Hinson, *Television Newsfilm Techniques*: 143.
[472] *Saturday Night Live*, Episode 52. November 19, 1977.

degenerates into personal stories and abusive attacks on Curtin. The already-discussed stereotyped character of Chico Escuela also operated as a critique of athlete-turned-sports reporters, with no knowledge of news and little ability to communicate. Radner's Roseanne Roseannadanna appears as a science correspondent who digresses into tales of disgusting bodily behaviors. Radner envisioned the character as a reaction to the male-dominated profession, a newswoman who is totally comfortable and sure of herself—even when talking about eye crust. Roseanne was the opposite of women on newscasts who always seemed under pressure to be perfect or risk losing their jobs, such as Curtin's anchor persona.[473] Along with the main anchors and other, less established characters, the news personalities populating Weekend Update mocked television journalists and satirized trends both past and present.

Bill Murray offered an especially trenchant criticism of the growing shift toward infotainment in the news industry with his Hollywood insider reporter, who first appeared in season three. Only the year before, ABC News President William Sheehan had warned broadcasters about mixing entertainment and journalism, saying, "The line between show-biz flair and making the news interesting must not be crossed."[474] However, in 1975, the year before those remarks, ABC debuted the infotainment powerhouse *Good Morning America*. A commentary on the trend, Murray's character oozed ignorance and false sincerity. The entertainment reporter Murray created was rooted in his hatred of critics and their false intimacy with the subjects of their reports.[475] Murray spent season three conducting interviews with fake celebrities and commenting on new films. The satire

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[473] Roy Blount Jr., "The Many Faces of Gilda," *Rolling Stone*, April 20, 1978, 46, 48.
[474] "All Candidates but Mr. Ford Say They'll Participate in TV Debate," *Broadcasting*, July 7, 1976.
[475] David Felton, "Bill Murray: Maniac for All Seasons," *Rolling Stone*, April 20, 1978, 29.

becomes much more pointed in season four when he replaced Aykroyd on the anchor desk. After Curtin introduces Murray as her new co-anchor, saying he will "report the news with credibility and dignity," Murray continues to act like an entertainment reporter, saying "I love you, no I mean it." He begins a story on Beirut only to begin talking with the audience like a six-year-old trying to understand global politics: "The Jews and Egyptians are trying to be good, but the Syrians won't let 'em. We have nothing like this in show business…You do the hard news and you learn a lot about people, wow!" Moving to the next story about Congress sustaining a veto over President Carter, Murray suddenly stops and incredulously implores, "Who cares? There are people being killed in Lebanon!"[476] The joke works on multiple levels—as a critique of infotainment and, on a deeper level, questioning the erratic content of newscasts and the importance placed on political stories in comparison to the violence and suffering across the world. Within a couple of episodes, Murray plays down the ignorant-critic role while anchoring the main part of the news and saves his more over-the-top persona for celebrity interviews and special occasions, such as his repeated shtick of singing "Happy Birthday" to the busts of historic figures. By initially feigning ignorance about news and events, Murray's character created some stinging moments of commentary on news practice, reinforcing the segments already-acerbic attitude about television news.

Through its satire, Weekend Update succeeded in questioning journalistic practices, as well as mocking the reporter's claims to professionalism. In her time at the anchor desk, Curtin repeatedly invokes objectivity and journalistic ethics, damning both with intentionally self-revealing praise. In browbeating Radner's Emily Latella character, who forever transposed editorial topics, Curtin complains, "You're ruining Update's credibility

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[476] *Saturday Night Live*, Episode 67. October 7, 1978.

as responsible journalists!"[477] Curtin ironically voices concern about ethics and journalism's high calling throughout her time on the anchor desk, at the same time that the subtext of Weekend Update ridicules the profession.

Just as in jokes aimed at objectivity, Weekend Update satirizes a host of broadcast-news idiosyncrasies and journalistic assumptions. Media critics often discuss the narrow scope and insider politics of news organizations. Pierre Bourdieu writes about this aspect of the journalistic field as "an egoistic closing-in" that results from a field's becoming too autonomous from other fields.[478] As news became more standardized and insular, this tendency increases. Michael Schudson, also addressing this limitation, points out that unlike other disciplines such as science, journalism has no means "for policing its own intellectual narrowness," no external peer-review or testable findings.[479] Even ombudsmen, who exist to provide an independent voice (and who are becoming exceedingly rare), focus more on fact-checking and bias and generally hail from the same pool of individuals as other journalists, with the same basic assumptions and perspectives about news. On Weekend Update, anchors comment on the narrowly accepted scope of news. Jane Curtin reports about a rabbi's suggestion that Jewishness should extend to children of Jewish fathers, not just mothers. Following the story, Curtin says, "Well, this story represents the most frequent use of the word Jewish in any one story in the history of TV news; another first for Weekend Update!"[480] Played for laughs, the joke provides an unsubtle critique of journalism's dedication to dominant ideological topics—in this case

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[477] *Saturday Night Live*, Episode 39. March 12, 1977.
[478] Bourdieu, "The Political Field, the Social Science Field, and the Journalistic Field," 45.
[479] Schudson, "Autonomy from What? ," 219.
[480] *Saturday Night Live*, Episode 92. December 8, 1979.

religion, where stories are predominantly about Christianity and the concerns of other faiths are considered too specialized for coverage.

The press's fascination with and frequent use of polls and statistics is another practice regularly mocked by the segment, such as by presenting uncontextualized numerical results. In the first season of *SNL,* Chase reads a story reporting, "National Bureau of Statistics released the following numbers from a five-year study: 62 percent, 5 percent, and 37 percent."[481] The story ends there, with no clue as to the meaning of the numbers; the joke exaggerates the press's tendency to focus on raw numbers rather than analysis. Humor about polls increased during the 1980 election season and the fascination with the presidential horserace. Multiple episodes in season five featured stories with graphics comparing likely candidates and primary opponents. Polling is attributed to a firm called "Glickman," and the stories show the fictitious namesake of the polling company as competing with actual candidates; for instance, one poll shows Carter with 30% support among likely voters, Ted Kennedy at 32%, and Glickman at 38%.[482] The stories sound exactly like the normal election poll that "update" newscasts adore, with only slight exaggeration or misdirection that highlights their lack of news value.

The segment also satirizes broadcast news' relationship with its audience; its dependency upon viewers on the one hand, and its condescending stance towards them on the other. Combining commentary on audiences and polls, a number of stories during season four compare the public's knowledge about useless trivia with actual world events. For instance, Murray reports that a new NBC poll finds 41 percent of Americans know you can set flatulence alight, while only 23 percent can name the new religious leader of Iran.

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[481] *Saturday Night Live*, Episode 20. May 15, 1976.
[482] *Saturday Night Live*, Episode 91. November 17, 1979.

The story is accompanied with an over-the-shoulder graphic listing: "Flatulence—41%, Khomeini—23%."[483] The ignorance of the potential audience satirized in this story is a constant concern for real journalists, who must try to attract viewers. Anchors, especially Curtin, frequently mention ratings in "ad libbed" commentary after stories. In one example, after "the dancing N" news bulletin taps through the set, Curtin asks Aykroyd to dance, eliciting his response, "What about our credibility?" Curtin answers, "What about our ratings?" People want to be entertained!" Aykroyd concedes, "Well, that's true. If people don't watch us, we're out of work. OK, let's dance!" The two then don straw hats, pull out canes, and tap with "the dancing N."[484] The uneasy dance between the two becomes a perfect metaphor for the journalist's awkward attempts to balance entertaining and educating the audience.

Probably the most consistent source of humor about journalism on the show also tapped in to one of the more recent trends in news. Long considered a prestige factor for local television stations, as well as partial fulfillment for its public-services requirements, local news was changing in the early days of *SNL*. Once upon a time television broadcasters expected to lose money on journalism, but during the 1970s local stations turned to popularized formats, consultants, and advertising departments to reinvigorate their newscasts and turn them into money-makers—one of the few growth areas for broadcasters.[485] Weekend Update played with this trend towards the commercialization of news, although often in a subdued way. Throughout season one and most of season two, Weekend Update was divided into two blocks with a commercial-parody break inbetween.

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[483] *Saturday Night Live*, Episode 79. February 24, 1979.
[484] *Saturday Night Live*, Episode 51. November 12, 1977.
[485] Powers, *The Newscasters*: 29-32.

The formatting worked especially well because it parodied the actual structure of television news, contorting itself around the most important content—advertisements. About a third of the way through season three, the segment again included jokes about the intersection of news and commerce. Beginning with a tease of a story, announcer Don Pardo introduces Weekend Update and says the show is sponsored by a specific company, changing the business name each week. The actual content of the sponsor announcement is always a verbal pun, such as the show being brought to viewers by, "Pussywhip, the first dessert topping for cats." However, the recurring sponsorship joke highlights the constant intrusion of commercialization into journalism, especially in contemporary local news.

By mocking the journalists themselves, Weekend Update added a missing facet to news parody and also deepened its roots as an alternative form of news. The segment commented on newsmakers, but also the reporters and anchors themselves, encouraging a dialogue with the audience about the process of news, rather than the "official voice" presentational style that broadcast had utilized since its birth. The segment was self-reflexive, calling attention to its own construction but also to the unnatural construction of all broadcast news, and the artificial selection and prioritization of what counts as news. Later news parody shows like *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* borrow heavily from Weekend Update's mix of topical humor and journalism satire.

Late Night News Parody in the Network Era

SNL emerged in a television environment where networks still dominated the airwaves. Cable television slowly increased in viability during the middle to late 1970s with favorable copyright decisions, new FCC leadership, and the creation of pay-cable channels

and superstations, but their influence was still weak, with only 15 million subscribers and cable penetration under 20 percent.[486] In the next decade cable subscriptions surged, but for the moment the networks were in control, despite efforts by the Federal Communication Commission (FCC) to curtail their power. In 1970 the FCC deployed two policies to encourage new voices in television and to break up the dominance of the Big Three. The Financial Interest and Syndication Rules (Fin-Syn as they were called) barred the networks from owning their own primetime programming and also limited their interest in the syndicated programming they aired. Along with the Prime Time Access Rule (PTAR), which decreased primetime to three hours a night, Fin-Syn was the FCC's attempt to jump-start local and non-network syndicated shows. After initially fighting the new policies, NBC finally agreed to settle a Justice Department antitrust lawsuit in 1976, allowing the network to produce 2.5 hours of prime-time content each week, 8 hours of daytime and 11 hours of fringe, with those fringe hours including the NBC-produced *SNL*.[487]

Despite the uneven power relationship between *SNL* and network executives, the success of the show led to considerable latitude for Michaels and his writers. NBC fell into a ratings slump in the mid-'70s, but *SNL* represented a rare bright spot in its programming schedule. The network trailed CBS and ABC every year from 1975-79; however, episodes of the late-night program were reaping financial rewards. NBC made around $8 million in profits from the show in 1979.[488] In addition, an hour-long "Best of *Saturday Night Live*"

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[486] Patrick R. Parsons, *Blue Skies: A History of Cable Television* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2008). 366.
[487] "NBC Breaks Rank on Suit, Settles with Justice," *Broadcasting*, November 22, 1976.
[488] Jack Loftus, "NBC's Day-Night Profits: The $$ from the Shows," *Weekly Variety*, May 14, 1980.

entered the prime-time lineup the same year, with estimated profits of $134,000 per episode.[489] *SNL* was considered such a success that NBC utilized a closed-circuit Weekend Update newscast to preview its next season's upcoming shows to affiliates.[490] Unlike *TW3*, which received regular interference from the network and advertisers, *SNL* was allowed to play to its audience, even if executives might not get the joke.

The edgy humor of the television show promised advertising executives access to a highly sought-after young, hip, and culturally influential audience, but also opened the agencies' clients up to potential scandal from the show's humor. Advertisers mostly understood the nature of the show, however, so rather than pulling commercials from episodes as with *TW3*, advertising executives focused on policing the placement of ads within the show, alert to possibly unfortunate juxtapositions with *SNL* skits. Advertising representatives attended dress rehearsals to scout for such problems. To accommodate them, NBC placed commercials on multiple reels, rather than the normal single reel, enabling last-minute movements in ad placement.[491]

Hyping the show before its debut, Dick Eberson claimed the program would be, "free of primetime restraints," meaning that greater latitude would be given to writers because of its late-night time slot and intended target audiences.[492] However, as an NBC-produced program, *SNL* still had to deal with NBC's Broadcast Standards department, otherwise known as the network censors. Unlike *TW3*, political pressure was minimal; the

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[489] ———, "NBC Primetime Profits: The $$ from the Shows," *Weekly Variety*, April 30, 1980. The "Best of" program was originally planned for syndication, but syndicators refused to abide by NBC's caveat that the program not run after 11pm.
[490] "NBC Yuks It up with Affils," *Weekly Variety*, December 13, 1978. Interestingly, the network had used *TW3* in a similar way, having cast members perform a mock newscast for affiliates at the National Association of Broadcasters convention in 1964.
[491] Hill and Weingrad, *Saturday Night: A Backstage History of Saturday Night Live*: 167-68.
[492] "NBC Late-Night 'Saturday' to Showcase New Talent."

show's writers say that sex and religion were much bigger concerns for NBC, including the stories on Weekend Update.[493] Michaels became legendary among his staff for doggedly fighting censors, finding new and inventive ways of pushing the already-expanded limits given by the network. One tactic was to convince the censor to see sketches in dress rehearsal, trying to show that the material was less offensive or funnier than it seemed in the script. He was persistent in his appeals as well, going up the chain of command as far as possible to get the go-ahead. If all else failed, Michaels was not above taking advantage of *SNL*'s live format, instructing actors to change lines during dress rehearsal, or to have them revert back to the original script once on the air.[494] He was not above extortion either, quitting the show on more than one occasion until he got what he wanted.[495] Still, there were times the network would not relent. For instance, Standards warned the show not to mention the Jonestown massacre after the story became public in November 1978. Tom Davis went ahead and wrote a Weekend Update story in defiance, even pulling an AP photo to use; however, the censors tossed the story.[496] The fact that NBC put up with the power plays by Michaels and others on the show illustrates both the success of *SNL* and the uncertainty of the network, trailing its competitors and increasingly watched by the FCC and Justice Department for potential monopoly activity.

The limits of comedy during the waning of the network era became quickly delineated, though, when Weekend Update satirized the head of NBC. Fred Silverman took

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[493] Reincheld, ""Saturday Night Live" and Weekend Update: The Formative Years of Comedy News Dissemination," 194.
[494] Hill and Weingrad, *Saturday Night: A Backstage History of Saturday Night Live*. Chapter 15 recounts the show's battle with network censors.
[495] Shales and Miller, *Live from New York: An Uncensored History of Saturday Night Live*: 62, 65.
[496] Tom Davis, *Thirty-Nine Years of Short-Term Memory Loss* (New York, NY: Grove Press, 2009). 149.

over as president of the network in 1978, leaving a successful stint at ABC that included signing off on a number of popular shows. By contrast, his tenure at NBC was marred by just as many high-profile failures, resulting in several jokes from Weekend Update. On one episode, Curtin reported Silverman had tragically collapsed after watching the premiere of *Hello Larry*, a show now legendary for being among the worst on television.[497] Later during the same network season, the show announced that President Carter, fresh from his Middle East peace conference, would next be trying to create an NBC programming strategy.[498] Such jabs at the network were tolerated until it became personal. In one of his "Al Franken Decade" editorials during season five, social-sciences commentator Al Franken complains about having to ride in taxis. He then goes on to complain that Silverman gets a limousine, saying, "Here's a guy who's a total and unequivocal failure! The guy's been here two years, and he hasn't done diddly squat, and he gets a limo." His rant continues with charts of the top television shows, none of which are NBC programs, and eventually instructs the audience to send postcards to Silverman demanding a limo for Franken. The comedian insists the ploy will work because Silverman is "timid, indecisive and easily pressured—he's weak!"[499] Silverman reportedly called the control room only a minute after the piece ended. The network president took it as a personal attack, essentially ending the then-ongoing negotiations to try to keep Michaels involved with the show for another season. In addition, Franken, who wrote Silverman a palpably insincere apology, no longer was considered as a potential producer for *SNL*'s next season. The flare-up amounted to a

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[497] *Saturday Night Live*, Episode 76. January 27, 1979.
[498] *Saturday Night Live*, Episode 81. March 17, 1979.
[499] *Saturday Night Live*, Episode 104. May 10, 1980.

(largely mutual) breaking point between NBC and the original *SNL* cast and writers.[500] The next fall, Michaels was approached by NBC to produce a live, one-hour Weekend Update special to air the week before the 1980 presidential election. Most of the original *SNL* cast had signed on, but Silverman—perhaps out of fear of offending the politicians or perhaps as a final parting shot—cancelled the show in favor of a Bob Hope and Smothers Brothers special.[501]

Conclusions

As Michaels and company departed *SNL* the television industry itself was on the precipice of radical change. Newly introduced videocassette recorders, cable expansion and soon a new competitor in the form of the Fox Network would change the business and content of television during the 1980s, and herald the transition to the multi-channel era of television. *SNL* would also change, moving into the most troubled period in its history with a new executive producer, cast, and writers, and a mandate to somehow recreate the original, while making it different.

In just over a decade, television news parody had made the jump from its troubled beginnings on *TW3* to the longest-running sketch comedy show on television. Expanding boundaries in the culture had undoubtedly created a more fertile reception for Weekend Update, as had changes with the network and advertisers. Perhaps the most important difference, though, was the time slot. Moved out of primetime and into the late night-fringe, where affiliates had more choices about whether to carry the show and financial expectations were lower, news parody thrived as an essential and consistent part of *SNL*.

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[500] Hill and Weingrad, *Saturday Night: A Backstage History of Saturday Night Live*: 371-76.
[501] Ibid., 379-80.

Even though safe harbor had yet to be established when the show began, the late time slot also helped to insulate them against charges of indecency (although plenty of critics and religious groups argued this point).

Weekend Update innovated with news parody by creating a separate space, insulated from the rest of the program, with a beginning and end, and with a small set of recurring anchors and characters. As a result, the segment more closely mimicked actual television news, creating a more sustained parody than *TW3* and also allowing the writers and cast to provide more depth to their satire of the news and journalists. The segment's success should have provided a road map for comedy shows moving into the new decade; however, as I will examine in the next chapter, that was not the case.

Figure 3.1 – *SNL* Season 1 Set

Figure 3.2 – *SNL* Season 1 Keyed Image

Figure 3.3 – *SNL* Season 1 Set Redesign

Figure 3.4 – *SNL* Season 3 Set (Wide View)

Figure 3.5 – *SNL* Season 3 Set

Figure 3.6 – *SNL* Season 3 Chromakey

Figure 3.7 – *SNL* Season 3 Set Redesign

Figure 3.8 - *SNL* Season 4 Set

Figure 3.9 – NBC "Dancing N"

CHAPTER FOUR: *NOT NECESSARILY THE NEWS* AND NEWS PARODY IN THE MULTI-CHANNEL ERA

1980 was the final season for the original *SNL* cast and creative personnel. *SNL*'s immediate plummet in quality and laughs for the next several seasons of the new decade mirrored television's own struggle to adapt to a changing industry landscape. NBC's revamped program faced network challenges to its dominance of late-night comedy, including ABC's *Fridays* and its own *SCTV*; however, the real competitor for both *SNL* and network programming in general was the rapid expansion of cable.

The explosion of cable channels in the 1980s, new technologies such as the VCR and remote control, and the industrial changes of media conglomeration brought on by deregulation resulted in upheaval within an industry that the three networks had dominated virtually from television's beginning. Lotz refers to this shift moving into the 1980s as the beginning of the "multi-channel era" of television, typified by greater choices for audiences and more control over viewing technology.[502] There was no instantaneous unshackling of the power of the three networks, but over the course of the 1980s and '90s, an ever-expanding channel line-up and growing subscription base created viable cable alternatives for program creators and audiences, as well as new broadcast outlets in the form of the upstart networks FOX, WB, and UPN. Offering alternative financing arrangements, potentially looser censorship, and an opening of the programming bottleneck of the network era, cable channels slowly became another outlet for program creators.

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[502] Lotz, *The Television Will Be Revolutionized*: 12-15.

The longest-running cable news parody program of the multi-channel era appeared on one of the industry's earliest and most successful cable channels, HBO. The station began operations in the early 1970s and had become cable's top pay channel by the 1980s. Although movies accounted for the channel's primary programming strategy, films were heavily mixed with sports and comedy specials. In 1983, HBO expanded its comedy offerings with the regularly scheduled news parody program *NNTN*. Despite running seven seasons, *NNTN* exists as a virtual footnote in television history, with only brief mentions of the show in mainstream and scholarly writing. A chapter in *The Essential HBO Reader* about HBO's contributions to comedy only offers a single paragraph about *NNTN*, summarizing its cultural contribution with the "sniglet" feature.[503] The paragraph mirrors the show's forgotten status in television studies. However, by its final season *NNTN* had won more cable ACE awards than any other show, and was the first scripted, recurring program on pay cable. The lack of attention paid to its success undoubtedly reflects more on the overall low quality of original cable programming during the 1980s, and a resulting general lack of interest in early cable programming.[504] Like its predecessors, *NNTN* combined sketch comedy with news parody, but it reverted to *TW3*'s model of making news the central feature of the program and continuously returning the action to a news set to link its disparate material. To call the program "uneven" would be overly kind, but *NNTN* still

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[503] Bambi Haggins and Amanda D. Lotz, "At Home on the Cutting Edge," in *The Essential HBO Reader*, ed. Gary R. Edgerton and Jeffrey P. Jones (Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 2008), 161. "Sniglets" was a popular feature of the show, where cast member Rich Hall presented imaginary words that should be in the dictionary. The segment led to a series of Sniglet books and to name recognition for Hall.

[504] Megan Mullen provides an excellent overview of the different programming strategies of cable channels during the multi-channel era, although with limited discussion of specific shows. Megan Mullen, *The Rise of Cable Programming in the United States: Revolution or Evolution?* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2003).

occasionally receives kind mention by critics. My family was an early adopter of cable, and I had similar nostalgia for the show before heading to the archives for research. Unfortunately, time has not been kind to *NNTN*. Its humor, like its format, is awkward and unfocused, its politics meek, its satire mostly toothless. Like cable programming itself in the 1980s, *NNTN* offered an alternative to network fare but guaranteed no consistent quality.

This chapter focuses on news parody programs during the multi-channel era, primarily *NNTN*, which ran from 1983-90. *NNTN* creates a point of comparison between network efforts at news parody and early cable attempts to develop the genre. *NNTN* will be contrasted with ABC's short-lived show *Fridays* (1980-1982), which featured "The Friday Edition" news segment, as well as Weekend Update during this time period, and NBC's mid-decade attempt to revive *TW3*. The chapter ends with a discussion of *The Daily Show*, which was hosted by Craig Kilborn from 1996-1998, and emerged shortly before the rise of the Internet and transition to the post-network era of television. *NNTN* and Kilborn's *The Daily Show* bookend news parody during the multi-channel era, spanning the early 1980s cable explosion to the rapid competition of the late 1990s.

HBO and the Transition to the Multi-Channel Era

Cable television took a long time to reach its eventual form before the heady days of growth in the 1980s. In its earliest incarnations, cable existed as an alternative distribution method for television, offering a form of shared antenna for communities without broadcast reception. From the 1950s through the late '70s, cable was a service no one necessarily *wanted*, but one they *needed* in order to get over-the-air content. However, legislators and media critics saw the potential for cable to offer an actual alternative to

traditional broadcasters. The time period of 1968-74 is sometimes called the "Blue Sky" era of cable, partially because of optimistic attitudes that the industry might begin producing a larger array of programming that could serve specialized and minority audiences.[505] Favorable outcomes to several court cases and improved political support resulted in rapid growth, but although the industry flourished during the 1980s, the dream of a programming renaissance never fully developed. Most of the content produced by cable during the multi-channel era was simply retreads of existing network fare meant to target the largest possible audience. Megan Mullen points out that cable stations were essentially "nothing more than independent broadcast stations whose signals had been uplinked to satellite"—perhaps with a slightly more narrow focus, but with little to differentiate its programming from that of traditional broadcasters.[506]

It was during the Blue Sky era that the first successful pay-television channel was launched. HBO, a joint effort between Sterling Manhattan Cable and Time, Inc, began operations in 1971 with a programming line-up of local sports and other events combined with a smattering of films. HBO's beginning years were precarious, actually losing subscribers during its first full year of operations. George Mair, who wrote an early history of the company, referred to HBO as, "the almost accidental company… facing stiff competition in the marketplace, it was beleaguered by its competitors, overregulated by the government, and unloved by its own parent, Time Inc.," who actually considered folding the channel's operations.[507] One early problem for the company was convincing cable systems to sell HBO as an extra service. Cable companies were used to signing up

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[505] For more on the Blue Sky era, see ———, *Television in the Multichannel Age: A Brief History of Cable Television* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2008). 85-87.
[506] ———, *The Rise of Cable Programming in the United States: Revolution or Evolution?*: 95.
[507] George Mair, *Inside HBO* (New York, NY: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1988). 21.

subscribers without access to broadcast signals, not marketing optional content. HBO convinced systems of the value of their service by incorporating a flat subscription fee to simplify bookkeeping and sharing revenue with cable operators.[508] Perhaps the biggest factor in HBO's success in the latter part of the 1970s was its early adoption of satellites for signal distribution. The company's competitors mostly used hardwired cable or physical media to get content to cable providers, but HBO originally distributed its signal via microwave. As a result, when RCA launched Satcom I in 1974, HBO was poised to easily move its operations from microwave to satellite. The channel paid dearly to license satellite time from RCA, but it would be years before HBO's competitors were able to follow suit. The live cablecast of the Muhammed Ali-Joe Frazier "Thrilla in Manila" boxing match in October 1975 became the channel's showcase for its new delivery system and proved a major success. By the end of 1975, HBO subscriptions increased 500%, from 30,000 to 287,199—largely credited to the satellite system.[509]

The FCC was another major factor in HBO's success during the late 1970s. The regulatory agency established rules dating back to 1968 that severely limited the content pay television could carry. Many sporting events and films had moratoriums until a specific number of years had passed, and some content, such as serialized television shows, were outright banned. The FCC overturned these onerous rules in 1977, partially thawing the chilly relationship between HBO and Hollywood.[510] Subsequent years led to continual jockeying of positions between the channel and the major film studios, leading HBO to sign

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[508] Ibid., 11-12.
[509] Ibid., 26.
[510] Mullen, *Television in the Multichannel Age: A Brief History of Cable Television*: 116.

exclusive contracts with some studios for cable rights, and to also develop its own film financing and production agreements as a bulwark against Hollywood's power.

HBO's programming strategy evolved partially in reaction to its uneasy relationship with the studios. From the early days of the channel, movies formed the core identity of HBO, but executives consistently used sports, concerts, and, later, stand up comedy specials to differentiate its content. HBO also began ramping up its own original programming. One example was the series *Flashback*, a low-budget show based on real historic events, and a forerunner of the kind of documentaries favored by the History Channel. In the early 1980s HBO's original shows were in no danger of competing with the networks—but that was never the point. Rather than attracting subscribers, these programs were more supplementary—taking the place of "B movies" Hollywood was more than happy to license to HBO. In fact, the channel made a conscious effort in 1983 to cut back on its film dependence, as the studios were increasingly playing hardball with their best offerings.[511] Seen in this light, the original programming that emerged in the early 1980s on HBO was less about branding or increasing subscribers than it was about programming diversification, and it had the added benefit of being relatively cheap. In his extensive history of the cable industry, Patrick R. Parsons points out that the economics of programming was an essential question for the health of early cable channels. For instance, CBS Cable overinvested in its programming and lost out to more frugal channels like CNN.[512] HBO smartly used its economic assets to invest in film production, pressure the

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[511] Mair, *Inside HBO*: 72.
[512] Parsons, *Blue Skies: A History of Cable Television*: 523.

studios, and create its own alternative offerings, with the news parody program *NNTN* part of this initial wave of programs.[513]

In 1983 both HBO and its chief pay-cable competitor Showtime made a push to produce recurring shows. HBO planned to spend $60 million over two years to expand its programming, prompting one entertainment reporter to claim the new programming represented "a quiet revolution within the television entertainment industry."[514] Besides *NNTN*, over 1983-84 the channel also launched the children's show *Fraggle Rock*, mystery anthology *The Hitchhiker*, *Maximum Security*, a prison drama, and the comedy show *The Investigators*. Michael Fuchs, who led the company through much of the '80s, tried to emphasize the difference between their shows and the broadcast networks, calling network programs "artificial" and saying, "What we're doing is trying to provide a little more of an edge, with subject matter that is a little more authentic."[515] Fuchs's pronouncement was perfectly in line with Christopher Anderson's evaluation of HBO's branding techniques during this time period. Unlike the 1990s and 2000s, when HBO was attempting to develop a relationship with subscribers based on must-watch serial content like *Oz*, *The Sopranos*, and *Six Feet Under*, HBO during the 1980s and early '90s positioned itself as a luxury brand within the low culture of television, a channel-wide alternative.[516] Throughout the 1980s, Fuchs positioned the channel against both the networks and Hollywood, playing up the questionable claim that HBO's films and recurring programs

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[513] Examples of HBO's efforts to invest in film during this time include its partnership with Columbia Studios and CBS in forming Tri-Star, as well as its creation of Silver Screen Partners.
[514] Sally Bedell, "Pay TV Challenges Networks," *New York Times*, April 3, 1983.
[515] Ibid.
[516] Christopher Anderson, "Producing an Aristocracy of Culture in American Television," in *The Essenial HBO Reader*, ed. Gary R. Edgerton and Jeffrey P. Jones (Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 2008), 30.

more consistently delve into controversial topics. Even if much of the content barely deviated from traditional television, simply playing up the difference was important for the channel. As Tony Kelso points out, because the channel is subscriber, rather than advertising driven, HBO *must* take more risks simply to attract new customers.[517] However, throughout the 1980s those risks were carefully managed, barely suggesting the kind of innovative programming that would emerge in the 1990s when their strategy moved from luxury to sophistication. So, when Fuchs said in the 1980s that HBO "dig[s] more deeply into more mature, more intelligent programming," such statements can be retrospectively interpreted more as marketing than reality.[518]

The Development of NNTN

When *NNTN* debuted on HBO its visual style certainly *seemed* fresh, and even innovative. The heavily edited program broke with many of the traditions established by earlier network news parody shows. Producer John Moffitt had developed a *SNL* competitor for ABC called *Fridays*, which also included a news parody segment. Moffitt was having difficulty finding news footage he could use on the show and went to the Cannes Television Festival looking for a source. What he found was the BBC-produced topical sketch series *Not the Nine O'Clock News* (1979-1982). The BBC program was cutting-edge comedy in Britain at the time, prompting comparisons to the original, British *TW3*. *Not the Nine O'clock News* was essentially a sketch comedy program like *SNL*; however, the program borrowed *TW3*'s concept of continually returning to a "metashow"—as if once a

[517] Tony Kelso, "And Now No Word from Our Sponsor," in *It's Not TV: Watching HBO in the Post-Television Era*, ed. Marc Leverette, Brian L. Ott, and Cara Louise Buckley (New York, NY: Routledge, 2008).
[518] Ann Hodges, "HBO Pushes for Quality Programs," *Houston Chronicle*, October 15, 1985.

sketch or prerecorded sequence ended, the viewer was returned to a show in progress, such as a news program or talk show. *Not the Nine O'Clock News*' made infrequent use of news parody, sometimes incorporating an anchor and other times eschewing news-style presentation for entire episodes. The program focused more on satirizing television as a whole, rather than limiting its scope to a single genre. One of the British show's major innovations was its consistent mixing of news footage with original material, such as juxtapositioning an actual shot of Margaret Thatcher looking down during a news conference, with a shot of a female cast member's nails being painted, making it appear the Prime Minister was painting her nails while fielding press questions. While other shows experimented with mixing news and original footage in the 1960s and '70s, *Not the Nine O'Clock News* made this type of visual joke a hallmark of their format and often strung recontextualized footage together into extended montages. *NNTN*'s producers followed suit with their show, frequently using reedited news montages, but structuring their entire program around the format of television news.

Moffitt, along with co-producer Pat Tourk Lee, snapped up the American rights for *Not the Nine O'clock News*; however, they were leery of developing the show for the broadcast networks. Moffitt had grown tired of dealing with ABC's continual interference with *Fridays* and ABC seemed uninterested in the idea anyway. Moffitt decided to pitch his new show to HBO, which wanted to expand its original offerings.[519] HBO ordered six episodes as a tryout, and *NNTN* debuted in January of 1983 in a half-hour format and ran for four years before moving to sporadic one-hour specials. Unlike the British version, Moffitt honed in on news as the primary visual style, and incorporated *Not the Nine O'Clock*

[519] Jerry Buck, "Satiric Show on HBO Ends Blues over News," *Houston Chronicle*, January 20, 1986.

News' fast-paced use of news footage. Both the audience and critical reception for *NNTN* was uneven. The program was consistently hailed by the cable industry, winning the most ACE Awards of any program during the 1980s. The longevity of the program during a time of cable experimentation and the generally weak competition the show faced may have been the main reason for the awards more than the actual quality of the program. In reality, viewership was never very high. For example, in January 1984 *NNTN* ranked fourth in terms of audience for original HBO programming, behind the top-rated *Fraggle Rock*, *All the Rivers Run* (a licensed miniseries) and a *Best of Consumer Reports* special.[520] Because many television writers at the time declined to even review cable programming, critical response was infrequent, but what responses appeared were usually tepid. *New York Times* writer John O'Connor delivers a typical response, saying the humor is "inevitably uneven, but there are enough on-target routines to merit further encouragement."[521] One of the biggest challenges for the show was HBO's haphazard scheduling, frequently changing time slots and days. As the decade wore on, *NNTN* continued to recycle its central concept with few shifts in form or content. By the time O'Connor wrote another review of the show four years later, his optimism had turned to weariness, saying the show "can claim far fewer hits than misses. Halfway through the hour, the pileup of jokes begins to take on the queasy aspects of a fatal auto pileup on some busy highway going nowhere."[522]

It took another two years before HBO executives agreed with O'Connor's diagnosis, dictating that Moffitt recast and reformat *NNTN*. An interview with Michael Fuchs makes it clear the relaunch was one final attempt to generate renewed interest in the show before

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[520] "HBO Dispenses Its Own Ratings Report," *Broadcasting*, March 12, 1984.
[521] John J. O'Connor, "TV: News Spoof on HBO," *New York Times*, May 26, 1983.
[522] John O'Connor, "TV Views: 'Not Necessarily the Media' on HBO," *New York Times*, August 18, 1987.

cancellation.[523] There is an uncanny parallel between the framing of *NNTN*'s revamp by its producers and the discourse surrounding NBC's decision to shift direction between *TW3*'s first and second seasons in 1964. In both cases, executives assured audiences their reworked shows would be edgier and funnier, with neither living up to the hype. *NNTN* finally received a regular time slot, and the program began taping on the same day it aired, allowing for the most up-to-date content. However, the 1989 relaunch received even worse reviews than the original version. *Newsday* writer David Friedman summarized the response, pointing out that with political satire "some things don't get better. They just get older."[524] The attempted reboot became *NNTN*'s last season, marking the end of a program that spanned the formative programming years of HBO and the cable industry.

NNTN and the Formatting of Post-Production News Parody

Previous chapters have discussed the strange relationship between politicians and earlier news parody programs. The shows elicited a mix of fascination and fear as political figures contemplated being the target of satire or, worst of all, being ignored completely. *TW3* was the talk of the capital for days after it aired—who got skewered? Who got airtime? Likewise, *SNL* was must-see satire that amused and infuriated the political elite. By contrast, no one really seemed to care about *NNTN*.

The story of its official launch could be taken as a portent. George Mair, HBO's newly hired chief public relations counsel at the time, tells the story of how network executives set up a special screening of *NNTN* for members of Congress before its official debut. Mair

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[523] Steve Weinstein, "Ample Targets for the New 'Not Necessarily the News'," *Los Angeles Times*, May 24, 1989.
[524] David Friedman, "Satire Is What Closes on Saturday Night," *Newsday*, June 20, 1989.

says he told HBO that the location of the event was too far away from Capitol Hill and that Monday was a poor choice, because most politicians would be out of town. Then, to top it off, the day before the special screening a United States Marines barracks was bombed in Beirut, killing 231 soldiers. HBO went ahead with the event anyway, with no members of Congress in attendance.[525] From its beginning, the program seemed to exist in a different universe from Washington politics, barely scratching the surface and only incorporating the most obvious of political puns and players. The lack of depth to its political humor seemed to limit the potential for *NNTN* to cross over and engage in the journalistic or political field, unlike its NBC predecessors.

Despite HBO's success, pay-cable penetration was still small in comparison to network television. HBO ruled the pay-channel universe entering the 1980s, with 70% of pay channel subscribers, and by the time *NNTN* went on the air they had a total of 13.5 million subscribers.[526] That was still less than a third of all cable subscribers, though, and many times fewer than the over-the-air audience. Although the show's pay-channel origins decreased its potential influence, the creators' formatting decisions and unwillingness to consistently engage in true political satire also limited *NNTN*'s ability to enact a more journalistic version of news parody. This section examines both these issues, first by discussing the structure of the show and its incorporation of news elements, including the role of anchors, and then through an analysis of its political and news humor.

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[525] Mair, *Inside HBO*: 183-84.
[526] Ibid., 47, 107.

The Formatting of NNTN – Back to Variety

Out of all the shows discussed in this dissertation, *NNTN* veers the farthest from the concept of news parody I have laid out. The show's opening immediately contextualizes it more as a comedy show with a news parody shell than a sustained effort to replicate and satirize broadcast journalism. The opening combines news footage with images of the six original cast members, creating the illusion they are interacting with the footage. For example, Anne Bloom fires a slingshot, followed by footage of a rocket crashing to the ground. These individual vignettes are linked together with audio of Eric Clapton's fast-paced, fret-spanning slide guitar from the song "Motherless Children" and a laugh track, creating an upbeat and energetic pace for the opening that works against linking the show with news. Because television openings help to create audience expectation and frames of interpretation, *NNTN* producers primed viewers to expect comedy, but not "necessarily" news. Weekend Update utilized a traditional news opening to play against expectations, and *TW3* utilized a weekly song referring to contemporary politics and events to connect their presentational style to news content. *NNTN*, instead, offered decontextualized and generic footage with traditional slapstick comedy and puns, foregrounding its primary identity as a sketch/variety show. Although the opening would change in subsequent years to make the actors appear more "newsy," fast-paced rock music and laughs continued to set the pace.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, one of the most effective innovations of Weekend Update was sectioning off its news parody into a self-contained segment, couching the entire sequence in news style. Moffitt followed Weekend Update's lead in developing the "Friday Edition" news segment for *Fridays*, but then decided to intermingle

news parody with other comedy segments in formatting *NNTN*. Perhaps the change was an opportunity to start fresh after trying to compete at late night with *SNL*, but the structure of *NNTN* actually hearkens back to *TW3*'s awkward mélange of news, contemporary subject sketches and commercial parodies. Also like *TW3*, the cable program utilized its numerous cast members in all types of productions, meaning that an actor would appear in an advertisement for "Normal K" cereal, and then immediately reappear at an anchor desk. During the next newsbreak another person would be reporting, and so on, with no clearly-defined "news personalities." As a result, many of the problems *TW3* contended with because of its blended format are replicated in *NNTN*.

The most defining stylistic quality of the HBO show and the one that most sets it apart from other news parody programs both before and after, is its pre-produced, highly edited presentation. *TW3* and *SNL* made liveness an essential aspect of their style. Even *TDS* and *Colbert* seem to strive to have as much live-to-tape content as possible. *NNTN*, instead, assembled mostly pre-shot content in front of a studio audience, with talent linking that content together. For example, a brief sports report by Rich Hall shot on a desk in studio cuts to an edited sight gag where a baby stroller has its wheels stolen; this then cuts to a fake *This Week with David Brinkley* commercial, followed by a string of edited news footage, and then finally returns to an anchor desk before going back to pre-taped content. Besides altering the live dynamic of previous news parody, the format leaves much less time at the anchor desk or with traditional news reports. The pace is also extremely fast, making constant use of newsfeed, licensed reels, and original, pre-shot footage. The frenetic style is reminiscent of beginners playing with their first tape-to-tape editor, flipping the shuttle control back and forth, amused by changes in tape direction and speed. One sports

segment actually plays a tape backward for humor, first making it look as if a dog is going in reverse and then as if water is coming off a runner and back into a garden hose.[527] In these moments *NNTN* seems to devolve into a kind of "videotape of attractions," with the creators taking delight in the kind of Méliès-esque fun the technology allowed.[528] As a viewer of the show myself during the 1980s, I recall its delight in video as the defining aspect of *NNTN* that stayed with me. Much of its appeal and humor simply came from editing serious and comical content together.

NNTN obviously attempted to present itself primarily as news parody, given its title, but the frequent use of the anchor desk as a structuring device is what most links the program to other news parody shows. The news set of *NNTN* inherently evokes network news. One of the benefits of having pre-taped segments was the creation of a roomier, working newsroom environment for the set. A somewhat nondescript, angular anchor desk with overlapping top sits in front of multiple desks in the middleground and a wall of monitors in the background, giving the set more depth than Weekend Update was ever been able to create in its more cramped studio quarters. In the early years of *NNTN*, a false wall stuck out behind the desk, screen right, with a filing cabinet extending out from behind the wall slightly. The organization and business-like atmosphere created by the file cabinet is reinforced by the multiple desks angled in the middle of the set, sometimes with other "news staff" working behind the anchor. Reporters write and shuffle their papers, a sign that the quest of the journalist never ends, even during the newscast. The monitors on the

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[527] *Not Necessarily the News*, 6th Annual Cable Ace Awards Entry. Paley Center for Media - Catalog ID B:32995. 1983.
[528] Adapted from Gunning's influential concept of the cinema of attractions. Tom Gunning, "The Cinema of Attraction: Early Film, Its Spectator and the Avant-Garde," *Wide Angle* 6, no. 2 (1986).

back wall all tune to different images, suggesting a newsroom connected to the world via satellite and microwave, displaying multiple sources of "first-hand" footage. A pastel, muted yellow and pink color scheme is replaced in the mid-1980s by light blues and grays, and by the incorporation of the NNTN logo into the set design. During extended sequences, an official title graphic comes on screen at the beginning of news segments, with the anchor shifted to one side and a title such as "The Nightly News With Bob Charles" sharing the screen with the anchor. The title font uses a typewriter-style with long serifs, very similar in appearance to the font used by CBS News in the 1980s (both NBC and ABC had moved to a cleaner, more modern font by that time). The obligatory audio of a teletype machine was an ever-present feature of the news segment, further linking it to traditional newscasts.

The news segments on *NNTN* included virtually every cast member on the show. Stewart Pankin appeared most often, and might be referred to as the show's "lead anchor." However, he shared the desk with other personalities. As a result, multiple anchors would sometimes appear at the same time, occupying both the middle of the desk and one of the bends on the side. A wall-mounted monitor that was usually off screen could be framed in the shot to talk with reporters who were supposed to be on location. The development of news space and consistent formatting within the news segment was stymied by the brief and haphazard integration of on-set news.

Like *TW3*, *NNTN* weaved news-oriented content with other types of skits and puns. Its accelerated pace made it more of a bewildering mix, though. Although often reflecting news form and content, *NNTN* diverged so much in its topics that the program became more of a commentary on television culture in general. While playing up topicality, news, and politics, Moffitt also acknowledged this expansive perspective of the show's humor:

"It's about what people are talking about….It's what's on people's minds. Changes in the way people dress, what's the popular music, whatever's hot."[529] As a result, the more news-oriented content is not only mixed with entertainment parody and visual jokes, but also linked via montage. An advertisement for the fake television show "Still the Cleavers" portrays Beaver and Wally coming downstairs to eat breakfast with Black Panther leader Eldridge Cleaver, dressed in sunglasses and beret. Later in the show, a skit where a man tries to rob a diner turns into a commercial for Bounty, and in a montage of news items a hearse door closes to reveal a bumper sticker that says, "My Other Car is an Ambulance." All of the content seamlessly moves from joke to joke, with no structuring organization.

Stylistically, *NNTN* shares similarities with 1980s television content that has been labeled postmodern. The rapid pace, self-awareness, and fascination with technology find affinities with *Max Headroom* and the style of presentation being developed on MTV. The format seems especially well suited for maximizing the largest number of jokes per episode, which was an obvious consideration for the show. Montage allowed for the compression of material into just the gag, with no need to transition between bits, creating strings of quick visual jokes. The sheer number of discernable segments is dramatized when looking over *NNTN* scripts, where each bit is separated out so that associated talent, audio, and video sources can be noted. Episode One includes 33 discrete segments, not including slates, titles, and the show opening.[530] Episode 2 includes 40 such segments.[531] The majority of these items are very short; in Episode 1 there are 19 bits under thirty-

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[529] Buck, "Satiric Show on HBO Ends Blues over News."
[530] *Not Necessarily the News*, Episode 1 Script. UCLA Performing Arts Archive Collection - Collection 79. January, 1983.
[531] *Not Necessarily the News*, Episode 2 Script. UCLA Performing Arts Archive Collection - Collection 79. February, 1983.

seconds and 27 in Episode 2. In fact, most early episodes only had one or two segments over two minutes, and those were usually either snigglets or sometimes an extended movie trailer. Critics frequently mentioned the pace of jokes, although not always as a positive. John O'Connor accused the show of striving for quantity over quality, saying "In the craft of hit-or-miss comedy, the kind that flings dozens of jokes at you in the expectation that a few may actually connect, few series have been more energetically determined than Not Necessarily the News."[532] His backhand compliment highlights the inconsistent quality of the show's material and in fact volume was a definite strategy for the show's writers. Anne Bloom, who was one of the original cast members, told a reporter, "The good thing about our show is that nothing is very long—so if it stinks its over real fast."[533] By trying to throw as many jokes out as fast as possible, the humor tended to run together, conflating moments of news parody with its other modes of comedy.

Mimicking the News

Isolating *NNTN*'s news parody independently of from other content is challenging due to the editing techniques and machine-gun delivery of the show. In evaluating this aspect of the program, I include not only time spent on the anchor desk, but also the use of news-oriented footage within the traditional structure of a television news story. Like the program's other content, the short length of news elements is a unique aspect of *NNTN*'s news parody. Rather than extended segments of anchor/story/anchor, most of the time spent on the desk is framed around "news bulletins" or "updates." This fragmented

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[532] O'Connor, "TV Views: 'Not Necessarily the Media' on HBO."
[533] Steve Schneider, "Cable TV Notes; a Zany Troupe Parodies the Year," *New York Times*, December 22, 1985.

presentation of news played upon local news operations' strategy of "breaking in" to regular programming to provide information about immediate events or, sometimes, merely to preview and drive traffic to their newscasts. This practice was actually rare for the networks and usually only reserved for major news. Even with the creation of CNN in 1980 and its sister station Headline News in 1982, television journalism still commonly structured itself around 30-minute runtimes, delivered in blocks with commercial breaks. *NNTN*'s stop/start, break-in, update method of news delivery is actually much more in line with contemporary 24-hour news networks and their constant emphasis on the *next* big event. Even when *NNTN* anchors report on multiple stories from the news desk, segments hardly ever extend beyond two-minutes, quickly moving on to another joke.

Another way the cable show broke with previous news parody norms was its extensive dependence on footage. Both *TW3* and Weekend Update almost exclusively utilized photographs when incorporating primary news visuals, despite the primacy of moving images in real national and local newscasts. *NNTN* still used still images, but often by themselves, rather than with an anchor sitting at a desk. The humor mined from photographs mirrors the strategies of previous news parody, usually juxtaposing a picture with another incongruent visual or reinterpreting the context of the original image. On one episode, a "NNTN News Bulletin" graphic with audio of a teletype is followed by a picture of a Klu Klux Klan cross burning, accompanied by the voice-over, "The new members of the president's revamped commission on civil rights gave interviews to the press last night at a White House barbeque."[534] The program's inclusion of photographs, though, paled in comparison to the amount of footage used in each episode.

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[534] *Not Necessarily the News*, 6th Annual Cable Ace Awards Entry. 1983.

In my previous description of *NNTN*'s development, I noted that Moffitt had originally been looking for a source of footage for *Fridays* program when he happened upon *Not the Nine O'Clock News*. Obviously, Moffitt had planned to expand the use of footage in his productions even before creating *NNTN*. The program reflected *Not the Nine O'Clock News*' video-heavy sensibility, as well as the increasingly easy availability of footage in an age of stock videotape and news-agency satellite distribution. Scripts show that *NNTN* used multiple sources for video and suggest they also had an internal library, perhaps of previously used footage. Jokes often originated from timely newsfilm taken from video feeds, such as real video of Soviet tanks leaving Afghanistan, followed by fake footage of a sign welcoming people to the U.S.S.R. and reminding them to "buckle up."[535] Other times, writers would craft jokes for which footage then had to be found. Episode 8 includes a sketch about the United States sending comedy advisors to El Salvador to help with jokes. The script for the episode notes that "footage of paratroopers landing in Central American Type Terrain" will have to be ordered.[536] Like *TW3*, the HBO program sometimes found it difficult to convince traditional news organizations to make footage available. CNN at one time licensed video to the show, but the news network cut off *NNTN* after a CNN interview between Jane Fonda and Ted Turner was redubbed into a sex talk.[537] The dust-up likely had more to do with Turner's notoriously thin skin than with making any stand for journalistic integrity. Still, for a show structured around borrowed footage, *NNTN* had to be mindful of maintaining its relationship with video sources.

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[535] *Not Necessarily the News*, Episode 71. UCLA Film & Television Archive - Catalog ID T41297. May 24, 1989.
[536] *Not Necessarily the News*, Episode 8 Script. UCLA Performing Arts Archive Collection - Collection 79. August, 1983.
[537] John Moffitt, "Not Necessarily the News," *Electronic Media* 21, no. 43 (2002).

A lot of video became incorporated into larger montages, inspired by *Not the Nine O'Clock News*' formatting. Strings of five to ten jokes were edited together, often linked by upbeat canned music that would shift from being the dominant audio and then recede into the background if voice-over was needed for a gag. As mentioned, news items were embedded into these montages and were just as likely to be followed by a pure sight gag as by another news-related joke. Footage was used as more or less stand-alone jokes too, and incorporated into news desk segments. Whether within a montage or placed into the show in another way, writers tended to use identical strategies in generating humor from the footage.

One of *NNTN*'s most common techniques for turning video into a joke was to combine it with other images to create an imaginary interchange between footage, similar to the juxtaposed content in the opening segment. Sometimes video is added to newsfilm, such as when Nancy Reagan is shown on the White House lawn being given birthday balloons by well-wishers. The clip is followed by original NNTN footage of red shoes being lifted off the ground to make it look as if Reagan has become airborne.[538] In a segment incredibly similar to *TW3*'s fake news conference with Kennedy from the NBC show's pilot episode, a press briefing with Ronald Reagan is interspliced with NNTN video of fake reporters asking questions, making the President's answers sound nonsensical.[539] Other times, actual news footage is edited together without original video to create humor simply through the juxtaposition of incongruent material. For example, a video of Senator Jesse Helms saying "The opera isn't over 'til the fat lady sings" is followed by footage of the

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[538] *Not Necessarily the News*, Episode 35. UCLA Film & Television Archive - Catalog ID T42098. 1985.
[539] *Not Necessarily the Year in Review*, Paley Center for Media - Catalog ID T87:0052. December 15, 1984.

heavyset House Speaker Tip O'Neill, with opera audio dubbed in.[540] The very first segment of *NNTN*'s inaugural show similarly combined two different pieces of news footage with additional audio. Images of the funeral procession of Soviet Premier Leonid Brezhnev are narrated, as if covered live, by Danny Breen, Audrie Neenan and Stuart Pankin. The three deliver hushed and reverent commentary about the funeral until Pankin, with rising excitement, reports, "Wait…now all eyes are on something else in the distance. Yes, yes, here he comes. [Funeral images suddenly change to footage of a large Thanksgiving Day-type parade as giant balloons drift down the street] Here comes Bullwinkle!"[541] All of the bits are short and, even when combining footage, very linear—in other words, there is no intricate editing to create sustained interplay between footage, such as *TDS* juxtaposition of soundbites. The joke comes from the immediate incongruence and then moves on to a new attempt at humor.

Even more frequently, audio is simply added to news footage to create the illusion of reaction. Nancy Reagan mills about on a beach in one episode, while audio of a drowning Stuart Pankin desperately calling for help plays over the shot. The video then cuts to Ronald Reagan on the beach laughing; making it appear the first couple is ignoring Pankin's pleas.[542] The program enjoyed taking advantage of having an ex-movie star in the White House by occasionally using clips of Reagan's films and adding original audio dubs. One episode begins with the audio, "From the Western White House," (as if going live to a press conference) and then cuts to a black and white movie clip of Reagan entering an old west

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[540] *Not Necessarily the News*, Episode 2. Paley Center for Media - Catalog ID B:13629. February, 1983.
[541] *Not Necessarily the News*, Episode 1. Paley Center for Media - Catalog ID B:04681. January, 1983.
[542] Ibid.

saloon. A man looks up from a card table and Danny Breen's edited audio says "Mr. President, I'm poor and unemployed, what am I going to do?" Reagan lunges and hits the man while saying "shut up!"[543] The same strategy also worked on the anchor desk, with reporters introducing a story and then narrating over unrelated news footage or drastically decontextualizing images. In an uncharacteristically satiric example, Pankin reads a fake story about the 5000th anniversary of the biblical battle of David and Goliath, reporting that in a recent reenactment the Palestinians played David and the Israelis were Goliath. The report is accompanied by images of Palestinians hurling rocks at Israeli troops and the Isreali military clubbing Palestinians.[544] The presentational style of news items was heavily dependent on editing and remained mostly consistent through the first six seasons of the program.

The 1989 reboot of *NNTN* resulted in both a stylistic and substantive change, creating a new parody structure much more similar to Weekend Update or even *The Daily Show*. One drastic shift was shooting each episode live to tape the day it aired, moving away from the highly edited format for which the program was known. As a result of the live environment, the production style more closely mimicked standard news, including keying over-the-shoulder graphics and using camera zooms to isolate anchors, rather than cutting cameras. The first episode after the reformatting reflects the difficulty the technical staff had shifting to a live environment; several technical slip-ups appear, such as allowing tapes to freeze on screen before switching back to anchors.[545] Along with the production method, *NNTN* also scaled down its actors. Just as *TW3* decreased its on-air talent in an attempt to

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[543] *Not Necessarily the News*, Episode 2. February, 1983.
[544] *Not Necessarily the News*, Episode 68 Script. UCLA Performing Arts Archive Collection - Collection 79. April, 1989.
[545] *Not Necessarily the News*, Episode 71. May 24, 1989.

reboot, so *NNTN* went from a large rotating cast to two main anchors with several supporting cast members providing special reports and commentary. Only Lucy Webb remained on air from the previous cast, and only as a "featured" player. Like Weekend Update, the opening of the program mirrors a traditional broadcast-news trope of keying the show title over a wide shot of the news desk, revealing some of the surrounding studio space. The opening was one of many changes spurred by the live production style.

Although the format of the program changed, humor strategies remained mostly consistent with *NNTN*'s previous incarnation. Just like the earlier Reagan press conference example, the reboot used footage from an actual interview with Vice-President Dan Quayle and his wife. Rather than shoot faked footage of reporters asking questions, though, the newer *NNTN* had anchor Tom Parks ask questions live from the desk in order to create a faux interview that portrays Quayle as an intellectual lightweight.[546] Presaging a dominant aspect of *TDS*'s style, the reboot also incorporated pre-edited special reports from a small team of reporters. One recurring feature was "The Rosen Report," in which Richard Rosen gives extended coverage to news items with a twist, such as the problem of New York City housing. Rosen reports on residents being "overhoused," showing footage of opulent dwellings in the city and discussing the terrible burden of large homes.[547] Creators structured the rebooted *NNTN* like a newscast, with definable blocks and commercial parodies and other gags to provide "breaks" between blocks, very similar to Weekend Update in its early days. The reboot of *NNTN* was essentially an attempt to create a sustained 30-minute news parody program; however, the change appeared to be too late for HBO, which cancelled *NNTN* the following year.

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[546] Ibid.
[547] Ibid.

Anchors as Actors

In one of his final interviews before the cancellation of *NNTN*, Moffitt reflected on the show's overall lack of success. One particular problem the producer identified, with some regret, was the decision to cast talent in multiple roles, rather than having actors specifically portray anchors or other parts.[548] Moffitt lamented that because actors were always shifting roles, "there was no audience identification with our people. [NNTN] never achieved an audience following."[549] This approach to casting may have hurt not only ratings, but also the program's ability to create a credible anchor persona for its actors. Virtually every cast member prior to the 1989 reboot appeared as both journalist and part of the repertory cast for other types of comedy segments. Perhaps once or twice an episode, there would be a segment lasting several minutes where actors simulated a broadcast-news structure. More often, though, anchor appearances lasted only seconds, and were limited to quick news updates or introductions of other material, thereby exacerbating the problem of not connecting actors to their roles as anchors. Although Jane Curtin and Bill Murray appeared in other skits for *SNL*, their sustained time at the Weekend Update anchor desk solidified those newscast characters—an opportunity severely limited for *NNTN*'s cast by the manic structure of the show.

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[548] Although Moffitt never mentions *Saturday Night Live*, the NBC show was adept at creating recurring roles that became closely identified with particular actors, including the Weekend Update anchors. Given his previous show, *Friday*, and its competition with *SNL*, it certainly seems possible Moffitt may have been comparing *NNTN* with its network competitor.

[549] Jerry Buck, "'Not Necessarily the News'; Sending up the News; Its Satire Is Uncensored; Highly Honored," *Washington Post*, July 16, 1989.

Although all the cast members took their time on the anchor desk, Stuart Pankin seemed to be the favorite go-to, essentially functioning as a lead anchor. In most of the extended (meaning 2-3 minute) news parody sequences, Pankin at least made an appearance on desk. His role is even more central on special episodes; for instance, in the 1984 Year in Review show Pankin is explicitly given the central anchor role, with Lucy Webb covering entertainment and Mitchell Laurance as sports anchor. Pankin's performance on *NNTN* is striking for its lack of verisimilitude in comparison to actual news anchors. Much as *NNTN* itself is structured similarly to *TW3*, Pankin also seems to take a page from *TW3*'s actors in depending more on the set design and news content to clue the audience into the parody than on his own portrayal of a news anchor. In marathon viewings of *NNTN*, Pankin's tendencies to overact and otherwise betray the "anchorman" conceit is glaring. In an almost direct rejection of basic newscast style, Pankin overemphasizes movements, overenunciates words, condescendingly laughs at others, amuses himself in overt moments of self-awareness, and generally chews the news set up every time he appears. His presentational style is pure comedy, eschewing the distanced, limited reactions that were long the hallmark of television news anchors and the most effective news satirists.[550] The same year *NNTN* debuted, Peter Jennings took over the anchor desk for ABC News. Jennings had fulfilled various roles for the network-news division since the 1960s, and embodied the anchor persona of the era, described as being "celebrated for a cool, intellectual style. He avoids the pitfalls of overt emotion and its evil

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[550] As an example of this news anchor style, see Kimberly Meltzer, *TV News Anchors and Journalistic Traditions: How Journalists Adapt to Technology* (New York, NY: Peter Lang, 2010). 82-87.

twin, cynicism."[551] Pankin could scarcely be more different than Jennings and his network contemporaries. In some ways, *NNTN* seemed to increasingly imitate the 24-hour news channel CNN, which debuted in 1980. However, even CNN's anchors at the time, like Lou Waters, adopted the dispassionate and physically reserved dominant style of anchoring. Pankin's approach on the desk worked against the imitation of traditional news style, constantly foregrounding the comedy over the news parody.

Perhaps replicating the broadcast journalism world too well, *NNTN*'s racial diversity in its talent line-up was nonexistent. Although occasional guest stars, such as *Night Court*'s Marsha Warfield, make one-shot appearances, the lack of diversity in the main cast and featured players is astounding. Especially at a time when broadcast networks were at least attempting to address a visual lack of diversity (while still ignoring diversity at the upper echelons of corporate power), *NNTN* missed yet another opportunity to create a dialogue with its supposed source material.

The program moved to a more traditional news-anchor approach with the 1989 restructuring, and the addition of co-anchors Annabelle Gurwitch and Tom Parks. Taking a page from Weekend Update, the two also used their real names on air, rejecting the fake on-air personas created for anchors in previous years. Gurwitch and Parks replicate the presentational style of traditional news much more closely than previous *NNTN* talent ever did. They each play up the emotionless and slightly vapid stereotypes of newsreaders, leading one critic to lash out at the fake news team. *Newsday* critic David Friedman objected to Gurwitch's stereotyped portrayal of women in the news, saying she "reeks of misogyny and does a grave disservice to the truth." He offhandedly dismisses Parks as a

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[551] Alan and Lane, *Anchoring America: The Changing Face of Network News*: 243.

rip-off of *SNL*'s Dennis Miller, without the charm.[552] Friedman seems to have missed the irony, taking issue with their satiric enactment of the anchor role. In reality, the pair fell squarely within a presentational mode established earlier by Weekend Update's anchors: mirror dominant news style, while occasionally overemphasizing the norms, and let the material generate the comedy. *NNTN*'s cancellation cut short the possibility that the new format and anchors might eventually connect with audiences. For the vast majority of its run, *NNTN*'s anchors adapted a style ill suited to a program attempting to foreground itself as news parody. Whether in acting or writing, the program struggled to develop a vision of humor that actually critiqued contemporary newscasts.

News Parody or News Pastiche?

From the beginning of this chapter I have presented *NNTN* as news parody. My categorization is based on treating news parody as a discursive genre, with the HBO program often talked about in comparison to *TW3* and Weekend Update, and occasionally discussed as a precursor of *TDS* and *Colbert*. In terms of discourse, *NNTN* definitely circulates within the same realm as these other show, so it makes sense to talk about them as a common body of work often referenced together or at least frequently compared. Despite my own fond teenage memories of watching the program in the early days of cable subscription, and the vague moments of hilarity that circulated in my hazy recollections of the program, my more recent archival viewing of *NNTN* forced an uncomfortable conclusion: the HBO show offers very little true satire of either news or newsmakers, and instead presents itself more as an homage to emerging television style.

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[552] Friedman, "Satire Is What Closes on Saturday Night."

As previously mentioned, *NNTN*'s style borrows from the production practices of postmodern television. John Fiske, writing about MTV, describes how the combination of images within the often-loosely structured narratives of music videos partakes of this same postmodern style, calling it "a recycling of images that wrenches them out of the original context that enabled them to make sense and reduces them to free-floating signifiers whose only signification is that they are free."[553] In a similar way, *NNTN* presents its viewers with a mélange of references ripped from their original popular-culture context (such as advertisements, logos, catch phrases, etc.) and combined into a flow of signifiers. Fiske connects this television style to Mikhail Bahktin's liberating concept of carnival, offering a hopeful, although perhaps dated, perspective. Focusing on humor in postmodern media, Lance Olsen likewise celebrates the way radical comedy destroys concepts under postmodernity, thereby allowing renewal.[554] However, in evaluating the use of *NNTN*'s postmodern style and humor, there is little radical or destructive to be found. Instead, the show seems more a celebration of form that rarely questions journalism, politics, or society with a satiric spirit, and certainly offers no alternative "better" solution. Fredric Jameson's notion of pastiche seems more applicable than Bahktin or Olsen. As discussed in the chapter on humor, for Jameson postmodern parody had become largely stripped of its critical roots, instead participating in a play of signification without purpose.[555] In comparison to traditional concepts of parody, *NNTN* seems closer to news pastiche, delighting in the play of visual and structural similarity, but ultimately lacking deeper criticism of method or substance.

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[553] John Fiske, *Television Culture*, 2nd ed. (New York, NY: Routledge, 2011). 252.
[554] Olsen, *Circus of the Mind in Motion: Postmodernism and the Comic Vision*: 19.
[555] Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*: 17.

The bar for *NNTN*'s humor remained consistently low. Co-producer Pat Tourk Lee once told a reporter, "As long as we can find some message, anything is up for grabs."[556] His statement reflects the lack of cohesiveness and comic vision that both previous and later news parody programs would display. *NNTN* is mired in the most basic forms of humor. Using Murray Davis's concept of progressively destabilizing humor, the HBO program is generally restricted to the lowest two levels: the linguistic and the logical. Rarely does it ever break out in order to use humor to question either fundamental categories or social structures.[557] Puns and incongruence dominate.

In the late 1980s, media critics coined the term "infotainment" to describe a shifting news landscape.[558] Driven by ratings and the swing from news as station prestige to news as advertising commodity, infotainment described a journalism less concerned with traditional Fourth Estate topics like politics and civics, and more focused on celebrities, features, and conflict. Some news programs even attempted to incorporate modified aspects of postmodern style. *NNTN* seems to be primarily a pastiche of the trend towards infotainment, although incorporating more satiric perspectives on occasion. While the show most consistently mimicked the style of network newscasts or CNN, it would often include short skits structured like various soft-news programs, such as *Good Morning America* or *Entertainment Tonight*. In one example, a group of vapid reports discuss international politics on "The Morning Edition," displaying no actual knowledge of the issues: "More advisors in El Salvador? Boy, they sure need a lot of advice down there!"[559]

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[556] Weinstein, "Ample Targets for the New 'Not Necessarily the News'."
[557] Davis, *What's So Funny?: The Comic Conception of Culture and Society*.
[558] Daya Kishan Thussu, *News as Entertainment: The Rise of Global Infotainment* (London: Sage, 2007). 7-8.
[559] *Not Necessarily the News*, Episode 8 Script. August, 1983.

On another segment called "The Random Report," Pankin begins sentences and then consults items of chance to complete each thought. Introducing himself with "I'm Bob Charles with [he pauses to spin a wheel with multiple words, landing on news] with the news." He continues with "Congress approved a new [pulls ball out of jar] budget appropriation bill."[560] While the comedy is hardly cutting, such skits do foreground the blending of entertainment with news occurring during the 1980s.

Infotainment's emphasis on self-promotion and spot news stories also became topics for the show's humor. The rapidly accelerated news cycle that came with the quest for ratings and 24-hour news networks resulted in excessive coverage, with *NNTN* often poking fun at this over-emphasis on timeliness. Special report "break-ins" frequently popped up with great fanfare, only to offer minor bits of information. On the first episode a sports report is interrupted by the sounds of a teletype, a "special report" graphic and a voice over, "We interrupt this program for a special bulletin. Here's Rich Hall at the news desk." Hall appears on screen looking confused and verbally stumbles before saying, "No, I'm sorry. Nothing to report. Sorry." The announcer then tosses back to the sports program.[561] In the first episode of the 1989 reboot, the news show continually cuts to reporter Joe Guppy, who is reporting live from Hawaii on the deathwatch for former Philippine president Ferdinand Marcos. Every time the show cuts to Guppy, he enthusiastically encourages viewers to stay tuned, because Marcos is "still near death!"[562] This emphasis on death and crime over larger social issues is perfectly satirized when Pankin interrupts a report by Danny Breen about the nation's poor, saying, "Like the rest of

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[560] *Not Necessarily the News*, Episode 36. UCLA Film & Television Archive - Catalog ID T42098. 1985.
[561] *Not Necessarily the News*, Episode 1. January, 1983.
[562] *Not Necessarily the News*, Episode 71. May 24, 1989.

the nation, we've lost interest."[563] The ceaseless barrage of jokes thrown at the screen overshadows such moments of true critique, quickly slipping back into pastiche as *NNTN* recreates television style without commentary.

The topic of sexism in journalism offers an interesting point of comparison between the pastiche incorporated into *NNTN* as opposed to the parody of Weekend Update. As outlined in the previous chapter, Jane Curtin's anchor character often was belittled and sexualized by male newscasters, but had agency and a voice. While sometimes playing into stereotypes, Curtin also retaliated and fought back, creating a conflicted persona. *NNTN*, by contrast, presents hyperbolic instances of causal sexism, but without any follow-up to comment or clarify. On the 1984 Year in Review episode Pankin introduces Anne Bloom's character in his most condescending voice: "And now, with a brief report, [speaking as an aside with the audience] that I hope won't take too much time away from more important matters, [chuckling] we go to cute, perky Frosty Kimmelman, with a piece of fluff on women in 1984, and I'd like to add my personal thanks to the little lady—the coffee's been great all year long!" She thanks him for the introduction and Pankin pats her hand, saying, "No problem sweetheart, just keep it short." Bloom begins a report on the state of women in society, but after less than a minute Pankin suddenly puts his arm around her and asks in a sing-songy voice, "Honey, is this over yet? I've got a major story." Obviously Pankin is overplaying the part, creating humor through exaggeration, but there is no actual critique of his sexism. Bloom meekly finishes so Pankin can read his story, reflecting how sexism in journalist was most commonly addressed by *NNTN*, raising the topic and letting it drop,

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[563] *Not Necessarily the Year in Review*, December 15, 1984.

only rarely even suggesting a stand or point of view. This ambiguous approach to its journalistic humor was also replicated in jokes about presidents and politicians.

Pastiche of Politics

Even before *NNTN* went on the air, executives played up the show as an edgy comedy, unafraid to step on toes and tackle newsmakers. The reality was much more tepid. Writers and producers seemed conflicted over whether to be a news comedy show touching on politics or a news parody show satirizing newsmakers from a consistent ideological position. In a 1985 interview, then-HBO Chairman Michael Fuchs claimed the program was "the only political satire on American TV today," reflecting the network's desire to at least present the show as oppositional.[564] Yet only a couple of years later Moffett is softening their image, claiming *NNTN* is doing "responsible satire," illuminating already-existing ridiculous instances, and trying to entertain, because "you can't preach."[565] Framing the show's reboot less than a year later, Moffett then claims their "live-to-tape" format will "really help us to be more biting, to really get in there and be sharp with all our barbs."[566] Fuchs's and Moffett's comments reflect the clashing pressures on the program. Network and show executives seemed caught in a noncommittal dance between actually wanting the show to function as true political satire and a desire to avoid the kind of audience backlash that satire can create. By trying to occupy a middle ground, I believe the show ultimately failed to strongly connect to audiences.

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[564] Hodges, "HBO Pushes for Quality Programs."
[565] Eleanor Blau, "TV Notes: Culling 'Not News'," *New York Times*, June 16, 1988.
[566] Weinstein, "Ample Targets for the New 'Not Necessarily the News'."

Both satire and parody function to "comment upon," existing as a reaction to events, stances, even persons. Past and future news parody programs mostly lean towards liberal politics, although shifting along various places on the political continuum. *NNTN* 's most damning problem was its lack of a core, consistent ideological stance from which satire could emerge. Instead, its politics, like its commentary on journalism, produces a pastiche of observational comedy about politics, rather than an oppositional concept of "better" politics. One example that stands out occurred during the reboot of the program, after the 1989 killing of Chinese students in Tiananmen Square. Tom Parks begins the show with a traditional anchor intro and says news has been hard to get from Beijing; however, their correspondent was able to send a report. He then reaches under the desk and pulls out a fortune cookie, breaking it open and reading, "You are greatly admired by those around you." The camera then zooms in to frame him with an over-the-shoulder graphic of student demonstrators in China.[567] In the story, Parks reports, "China has issued the most severe crackdown yet on student demonstrators—all dorm privileges have been cancelled, and the student pub has been closed indefinitely." Annabelle Gurwitch takes the next story, a sidebar reporting Hollywood already has a musical underway about the protests called "Can't Stop the People," accompanied by video of troops marching to MGM-style music.[568] The incredibly unsympathetic and cynical tone of the segment is remarkable, essentially treating the story as if Chinese officials just gave a slap on the wrist to misbehaving students, rather than deploying heavy weapons of war to massacre civilians protesting for political change. Rather than moral outrage, the program responds with the same smug

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[567] Over-the-shoulder graphics appeared with the reboot, copying traditional live newscast style. Interestingly, earlier episodes rarely used them, perhaps because they were switching so fast between stories.
[568] *Not Necessarily the News*, Episode 71. May 24, 1989.

attitude applied to politicians caught in a sexual affair. Such a response would be unimaginable by other news parody programs, which might have underplayed the event's importance, but would inevitably have directed their attacks at Chinese officials.[569] The coverage is emblematic of *NNTN*'s pastiche approach, applying humor indiscriminately, with no critical core or deeper message—a method constantly utilized in covering presidential politics in the 1980s.

Almost the entire run of *NNTN* took place with Ronald Reagan in the White House, a time when despite heated political differences, popular culture seemed to reflect consensus politics with Reagan at its core. In her book on 1980s television, Jane Feuer reminds us that programming was more ideologically complex than critics suggested at the time; however, even when shows attempted to take on aspects of Reaganism, they often extended underlying ideologies of the era.[570] *NNTN* constantly referenced Reagan, but usually in a more good-natured, poking fun way, rather than attacking his policies or positions, consistent with pastiche. While the humor may be weak, the HBO show was still one of the rare programs willing to joke about Reagan. *Late Night with David Letterman* writer Steve O'Donnell suggests that audiences had become jaded after the "orgy of political humor about Watergate and Gerald Ford," and television responded by largely avoiding presidential humor during the Reagan-era.[571] Network executives may have also feared a political backlash. The year before *NNTN* debuted, many believed Reagan had won a major symbolic battle over his detractors in the entertainment industry with the cancellation of

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[569] Although it would be interesting to compare coverage, *Saturday Night Live* had just ended its season shortly before Tiananmen Square, so Weekend Update did not cover the tragedy.
[570] Jane Feuer, *Seeing through the Eighties* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995). 150.
[571] Steven D. Stark, "Once a TV Staple, Political Comedy Is in Short Supply," *New York Times*, March 1, 1987.

Lou Grant. The show's star, Ed Asner, questioned Reagan's policies and spoke out for progressive politics at a time of rising conservative power, resulting in a firestorm of controversy and CBS's cancellation of the show.[572] The public-relations victory reinforced Reagan's fighting male image, especially on the heels of recovering from his 1981 assassination attempt. Susan Jeffords writes of how Reagan became connected to the male hard-bodied action film heroes of the 1980s; his defeat of the soft-bodied, liberal Ed Asner on television fit perfectly with this emerging discourse surrounding the president.[573]

As the '80s and Reagan presidency continued, the boundaries of discourse on popular television seemed to narrow, yet *not discussing* the president on a program dedicated to making fun of the news was simply impossible. Every episode featured video of Reagan, making it at least *seem* that *NNTN* regularly made fun of him. Actress Anne Bloom even reports that show personnel called Reagan their "sixth cast member."[574] Many reviews of *NNTN* mention that the president gets played for laughs and one writer even notes that the political right is more often the focus of jokes on the program.[575] Of course, Reagan *was* the president. His appointments, overwhelmingly conservative, ran the executive branch and Republicans controlled the Senate for most of the decade. Republican presidents had even appointed most of the Supreme Court too. Although Democrats controlled the House, *NNTN* wrote jokes about a government mostly controlled by the GOP;

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[572] For more on the *Lou Grant* controversy, see Paul Kerr, "Drama at MTM: *Lou Grant* and *Hill Street Blues*," in *MTM 'Quality Television'*, ed. Jane Feuer, Paul Kerr, and Tise Vahimagi (London: BFI Publishing, 1984), 134-47; Gitlin, *Inside Prime Time*: 3-11.
[573] For Jeffords discussion of how the assassination attempt played into Reagan's body image, see Susan Jeffords, *Hard Bodies: Hollywood Masculinity in the Reagan Era* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1993). 29-30.
[574] Schneider, "Cable TV Notes; a Zany Troupe Parodies the Year."
[575] Walter Goodman, "HBO's 'Not Necessarily the News'," *New York Times*, July 2, 1987.

as a result, the volume of jokes about conservative says much less about the program's politics than the substance and type of humor they employed in those jokes.

Like many comedy programs, *NNTN* played primarily upon Reagan's personality, rather than really addressing his policies. Jokes often playfully made him look forgetful or oblivious, dovetailing with mainstream discussions about his age. These were usually rendered through adding audio or juxtaposing clips. For instance, Nancy Reagan is shown with headphones and asks if everyone got "the things for their ears." Cut to a shot of the president with headphones sitting on his face, saying "What?"[576] On another show Reagan is throwing a ball to his dog Lucky. Cut to footage of Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev sitting and waiting, as if the president has forgotten their meeting.[577] Moffett claimed at one time, "We feel there are no holds barred when it comes to the Administration or any big names in the news."[578] This sentiment seems drastically overblown though, with a lack of satiric impulse. In general, the show actually played into Reagan's own "aw shucks" style of wit. In his book on humor and the presidency, Peter Robinson discusses how Reagan used humor to silence and disarm his detractors, and how the president "simultaneously embodied the showman president and the comic-heroic everyman."[579] *NNTN*'s pastiche often simply reinforced this strategy that, in some ways, set up opponents to underestimate Reagan. The show's copious use of Reagan footage also probably served as a boon for the administration. As mentioned in the introduction, Reagan's press team was reportedly pleased when newscasts used video of the president, even if the story was negative,

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[576] *Not Necessarily the News*, Episode 41. UCLA Film & Television Archive - Catalog ID T42098. 1985.
[577] *Not Necessarily the News*, Episode 2. February, 1983.
[578] Schneider, "Cable TV Notes; a Zany Troupe Parodies the Year."
[579] Robinson, *The Dance of the Comedians: The People, the President, and the Performance of Political Standup Comedy in America*: 206.

because the positives of the visual would trump the story content.[580] At the end of *NNTN*'s first episode, after the credits, a graphic reads: "The producers of "Not Necessarily the News" would like to thank Milton Friedman, David Stockman, Congressman Jack Kemp, and President Reagan for their help in keeping people at home, out of work, and in need of laughter. Stay the course."[581] Reagan may have been just as grateful to *NNTN* for their coverage and repeated use of his presidential visuals.

While the show by and large kept a playful attitude with the president, in line with its pastiche style, there are some moments of more genuine satire, many of which are significantly subtler than the show's normal humor. In a promotion for an upcoming special report on hospital overcrowding, Rich Hall walks into a bathroom where doctors are performing surgeries. Cutaways show an EKG printing onto toilet paper and a patient whose head is bandaged with a towel still attached to the wall roller. Reporting from the bathroom, Hall says, "Reaganomics has acted like a rusty scalpel and cut services back, to cause chronic understaffing. The answer to the problem? [Halls opens a stall door to find Pankin operating on a patient] Sorry. [Hall turns back to camera] Find out on an upcoming special report."[582] The skit stands out from *NNTN*'s normal fare because the line is no pun or set-up for some type of visual joke. There is actual critique, although brief, of Reagan's economic policies included within the broader visual joke on hospital overcrowding. In another example, video of Reagan is preceded by a pointed condemnation of his Teflon presidency. Lucy Webb reports on the 1984 year-end show that, "One of the big stories was how the president was able to emerge untarnished by the failures of his administration."

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[580] Hedrick Smith, *The Power Game: How Washington Works* (New York, NY: Random House, 1988). 408-09.
[581] *Not Necessarily the News*, Episode 1 Script. January, 1983.
[582] *Not Necessarily the News*, Episode 2. February, 1983.

Cut to cast members dressed as military personnel with Webb asking, "Who is responsible for American military failures?" Each points to another until the camera cuts to footage of Reagan, who then points his finger at someone off camera.[583]

On the same episode, *NNTN* incorporates a humor strategy often employed by *TDS* and *Colbert* of letting individuals damn themselves with their own words, using Reagan's ridiculous public statements about the United States' invasion of Grenada. After showing footage of the press conference, video cuts to Anne Bloom as a reporter asking why, other than producing nutmeg, Grenada is important. The show rolls Reagan's famous comments linking the island with a communist plot to steal Christmas: "Number one, Grenada does produce more nutmeg than any other place on Earth. Number two, the Soviets and the Cubans are trying to take Grenada. Number three, you can't have Christmas, or you can't make eggnog without nutmeg. Number four, you can't have Christmas without eggnog. Number five, the Soviets and the Cubans were trying to steal Christmas." Cut to Bloom and other reports looking confused, and then to Pankin on the anchor desk similarly tilting his head, trying to understand Reagan's logic.[584] To be fair, the president's comments were actually paraphrasing a letter he reportedly received from an army pilot who was attempting to humorously link nutmeg with the island's political significance.[585] The nonsensical logic of the quote, however, seemed to perfectly fit with Reagan's ability to project consistent conviction regardless of his words' content. Often called "the great communicator," the president tended to connect with audience emotions, even when the stories were actually lifted from his old movie plots.

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[583] *Not Necessarily the Year in Review*, December 15, 1984.
[584] Ibid.
[585] Michael Schaller, *Reckoning with Reagan: America and Its President in the 1980s* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1992). 144.

From the relatively small pool of critical presidential jokes on *NNTN*, perhaps the most sustained topic was the xenophobic rhetoric of the Reagan administration. The president's constitutive speeches often attempted to reclaim the greatness of Americans by separating off groups who wanted to "keep America weak." Communists topped the list, but most of the major social moments of the '60s and '70s, such as feminism, gay rights, and civil rights, were also treated as misguided if not unpatriotic. As with most of the show, *NNTN*'s critique of Reagan's views usually incorporated video. In one example, footage of repairs to the Statue of Liberty cuts away to a sign reading, "No Tired. No Poor. No Huddled Masses. President Ronald Reagan."[586] In an even more pointed instance mentioned previously, the new racism of 1980s conservatism comes under fire with an NNTN News Bulletin. A still image of a Ku Klux Klan cross-burning is labeled as the president's civil-rights commission.[587] In a third example, the administration's refusal to stand up against apartheid is addressed by using one of Reagan's old western films. As a man approaches Reagan in the movie, an audio dub plays: "Mr. President, I just can't support South Africa." Reagan grabs the cowboy and punches him several times. "I'm sorry, but it's a racist government." Reagan starts to hit him again until the cowboy falls to his knees saying, "Okay. Maybe you're right." Reagan kicks him and the scene ends.[588] Although these examples reflect a fairly pointed criticism of Reagan, they also illustrate how *NNTN* depended on video to question the presidency. For the most part, on-screen talent rarely critiqued Reagan or took stances on his policies through their own voices, instead using footage as a buffer or merely staying at the level of pastiche. As a result, the politics of these

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[586] *Not Necessarily the News*, Episode 41. 1985.
[587] *Not Necessarily the News*, 6th Annual Cable Ace Awards Entry. 1983.
[588] *Not Necessarily the News*, Episode 2. February, 1983.

brief visual moments of satire are disconnected from *NNTN*'s cast, whereas David Frost, Jon Stewart, Stephen Colbert, and certain Weekend Update hosts are strongly connected with particular political outlooks.

The show's discourse on Reagan diverged into conflicting accounts of the president, usually depicting him as an amiable, somewhat clueless old man, and less frequently presenting him in a more critical frame as a heartless, crafty politician. These seemingly dichotomous images of Reagan could also be found within broader culture, where the president deftly navigated news coverage to present a strong, nationalistic image softened by homespun wisdom and self-deprecating humor. He was the first to use television as a primary tool of the presidency to both cajole and connect, becoming, in the words of Robert Denton, "a much better actor as president on television than he ever was in Hollywood."[589] As a result, *NNTN*'s coverage resonated with existing presentational frames for Reagan.

In contrast, *SNL* provided a brilliant commentary on the subject in the 1986 skit "President Reagan: Mastermind." Finishing an interview with a reporter, Reagan (played by Phil Hartman) claims total ignorance about the Iran-Contra affair. As soon as the journalist leaves the room, Reagan's entire demeanor changes, calling in his cabinet and issuing rapid-fire orders on a minute level to supply arms, launder money, bribe agencies, and drug opponents. He suddenly returns to his singsong delivery and simplistic speech pattern for a photo-op with a girl scout and then quickly returns to issuing orders once the child is out of the room.[590] Hartman's instantaneous transformation between the two extremes supports one of the strongest criticisms of Reagan during his presidency: that his public persona was

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[589] Robert E. Denton, Jr., *The Primetime Presidency of Ronald Reagan: The Era of the Television Presidency* (New York, NY: Praeger Publishers, 1988). 71-72. Denton provides a compelling argument that Reagan was the first "true" television president.
[590] *Saturday Night Live*, Episode 219. December 6, 1986.

simply a continuation of his acting career, and that Reagan was actually duplicitous with the American people and not the public face he tried to present. However, *NNTN* never attempted to connect the two Reagan personas, remaining content with its dominant mode of political pastiche and only occasionally sneaking in jokes with more substance.

For the brief period of time it was on the air during the George H. W. Bush presidency, *NNTN*'s coverage was even less insightful and biting than during Reagan's two terms. Perhaps Bush's own lack of a strong public image made it more difficult for joke-writers to emphasize particular qualities. The rebooted 1989-90 season mostly treated the Bush administration as ineffectual, the president himself as lacking a personality, and—along with every other comedian in America—Vice-President Dan Quayle as an idiot. Beyond simple personality-based humor, though, there was little content about the administration. A commentary from Will Durst on the first 100 days of the Bush administration offers the simple: "So far, he's done nothing!"[591] On another episode Tom Parks promises the news team will break in with special coverage if the Bush administration does *anything*.[592] Overall, presidential humor during the last season was even more unremarkable than in previous years, and even though the show occasionally delivered on-target, critical hits at Reagan and other politicians, the sheer barrage of jokes about inconsequential matters dwarfed those moments of actual satire.

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[591] *Not Necessarily the News*, Episode 71. May 24, 1989.
[592] *Not Necessarily the News*, Episode 72. UCLA Film & Television Archive - Catalog ID T41297. 1989.

Problems and Possibilities of News Parody in the Multi-Channel Era

Despite its lengthy run of seven seasons and multiple cable awards, *NNTN* ultimately occupied a precarious space of being a little-watched pay channel program without a dedicated audience. The show would have undoubtedly been cancelled had it appeared on a broadcast channel, or even later in HBO's programming development. However, as one of the first programs on the network, *NNTN* benefited from initial name recognition, low relative cost, and HBO's need for programming it could control. In many ways, *NNTN* ran afoul of the same comedy problems as *TW3,* safe content and formatting.

NNTN's cautious approach to political humor reflected a core problem for the show. On the one hand was the format, topical comedy. Yet on the other hand executives clearly placed limits on the show, taking few political chances and minimizing the risk of offending audiences. The two directives seem irreconcilable. While continuing to emphasize HBO's lack of censorship, Moffitt still seemed hesitant to create controversy. His concept of "responsible satire" structured the program and he makes it clear in interviews that *NNTN* holds back on more touchy issues. In one example, he claims they were "more delicate" in their coverage of Tiananmen Square, but what he actually discusses is their coverage of Bush's *reaction* to the massacre—not the actual event.[593] Rather than blasting Bush for his tepid response that he had "deep regret" over the killings, writers made a joke that deep regret falls just short of "total regret." Interestingly, in the same article the reporter points out that *NNTN* rarely makes fun of its corporate owners, barely mentioning the Time-Warner merger or a failed attempt by Paramount to take over Time. This hesitancy to step

[593] Buck, "'Not Necessarily the News'; Sending up the News; Its Satire Is Uncensored; Highly Honored."

on toes and push the limits hurt *NNTN*'s attempt to provide compelling news parody, and ultimately shoved the program more towards pastiche.

As one of the network's earliest shows, *NNTN* was designed to show what programming in the multi-channel era could be, especially on a pay channel. From the beginning of *NNTN* both Moffitt and Fuchs emphasized a lack of restraint. Moffitt even reports that when he was producing *Fridays*, he was "warned by ABC not to go that heavy on Reagan. We had to be careful not to overdo it."[594] By contrast, he claimed there were no censorship problems with HBO, saying they can use profanity on the show and even suggesting that the network is open to nudity. That much is true, with the program occasionally weaving in "shit" and "fuck." However, transgressive language did not produce transgressive satire. *NNTN*'s writers utilized their freedom from FCC indecency standards, but seemed more hesitant to push the bar on politics and social issues. By contrast, some of HBO's other programs really were innovating in comparison to network programming, addressing AIDS and other topics the Big Three broadcast networks eschewed.

The fate of *NNTN* likely reflects the timing of the program. In the 1980s and early '90s HBO fashioned itself as a luxury brand, attempting to appeal to Reagan-era yuppies as a signifier of status. Only half a decade after the cancellation of *NNTN*, HBO adopted its new slogan, "It's Not TV. It's HBO," suggesting the quality was in the content, not just the appearance of the brand. The network began developing its image as the primary purveyor of risky "quality " programming, fostering serial content to elicit habitual viewing.[595] The rise of a more liberal and accepting professional managerial class and the educated elite in the 90s became a larger demographic for HBO and its programming. Had the program

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[594] Bedell, "Pay TV Challenges Networks."
[595] Anderson, "Producing an Aristocracy of Culture in American Television," 30.

appeared a decade later the network likely would have pushing Moffitt to take more risks. Ironically, after being cancelled from ABC for making controversial remarks about 9/11, Bill Maher moved to HBO, the same channel that had produced such cautious political discourse in the 1980s.

Another problem *NNTN* shared with *TW3* was its erratic formatting. Despite the incorporation of postmodern visual aesthetics at the time, the drastic shift in focus and style, from presidential politics to popular advertisements to non-topical sight gags, allows no breathing room, no opportunity to orient. The lack of commercial breaks due to its pay-cable exhibition only exacerbates the problem. In the 1970s Raymond Williams redefined the form of television content for media studies with his concept of "flow." Rather than television consisting of programs, Williams points out that the continual interruptions composed of program, ad, news break, program, ad, etc.—this *flow* of information—is the actual experience of television viewing.[596] The rapid stream of images *NNTN* presents to viewers ends up constituting its own flow, with discrete blocks or sequences, missing essential orienting aspects of programming that viewers had learned to expect. As a result, the nonstandard stylistics and conflicted content work against the cohesiveness of the program. Instead of isolating its news parody, as *SNL* had successfully tried, it went back to *TW3*'s method of mixing content. In one of the final reviews of the show, the 30-minute format is singled out as a major problem for *NNTN* and contrasted with Weekend Update, saying, "The big risk about doing a 30-minute show satirizing a newscast is that it might end up just as dull and silly as the newscast it wants to satirize."[597] The statement is a

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[596] Raymond Williams, *Television: Technology and Cultural Form* (London: Routledge, 1974). 86-96.
[597] Friedman, "Satire Is What Closes on Saturday Night."

fitting epitaph for *NNTN* and a reminder that the program was both discursively grouped with Weekend Update and forever in its shadow, or at least the shadows of the NBC segment's heyday.

Network News Parody in the Multi-Channel Era

SNL greeted the 1980s with a new cast and executive producer, and dismal ratings. The writers, actors and creative personnel who launched the show and kept it one of the most relevant programs on television for five seasons were gone. The sixth season introduced a new cast, writers, and an executive producer, Jean Doumanian, who ended up shouldering most of the blame for the show's drop in esteem and viewership. After a respectable opening to the season, every subsequent episode lost viewers. Critics excoriated the new season, leading to a siege mentality and constant rumors the network might change the show's cast or leadership. One writer told *Variety*, "Now I know what Hitler's bunker must've felt like during the last days of the Third Reich."[598] Joe Piscopo, the only breakout cast member of the season, felt trapped: "You just knew that this was America's favorite television show, and yet here we were, taking it right into the toilet."[599] As bad as the skits were, Weekend Update seemed even worse. Cast member Charles Rocket took over the anchor desk, bringing a smug, self-obsessed style that either ignored or rejected efforts of previous *SNL* actors who tried to emulate newsreaders when hosting the segment. Perhaps surprisingly, Rocket had actually worked in journalism, both as reporter and anchor, for several small-town television stations. He was one of the first cast

[598] John Dempsey, "NBC's 'Saturday Night Live' Just Ain't," *Daily Variety*, December 17, 1980.
[599] Shales and Miller, *Live from New York: An Uncensored History of Saturday Night Live*: 198.

members picked by Doumanian, who expected Rocket to be her first star. Rocket self-consciously mugged for the camera, blowing kisses, raising his eyebrows, and generally acting incredibly pleased with himself, even if the audience was not. Doug Hill and Jeff Weingrad, in their book on the early days of *SNL*, discuss how audiences barely responded to Rocket and how long studio silences "made Update truly chilling to watch."[600] For the most part, jokes on the segment tended to be more juvenile and satiric than shocking. Writers regularly complained that Doumanian shifted the show's overall humor towards puns and visuals and away from dark or edgy humor.[601] Weekend Update largely fell in line with this perspective, although there were moments of more subversive material, such as a story on the 1980 Republican election landslide. Rocket reports citizens should all expect a turn to the right, outlining how "Six Klansmen were acquitted of murder last week. Ten gays were machine-gunned in the streets of New York, and when a Michigan high-school girl wore this slit skirt in a homecoming parade [cut to image], eggs were thrown at her house and funeral wreaths were scattered on her parents' lawn. Looks like a nationwide return to traditional American values and morality!"[602] Such jokes were exceedingly rare; in fact, writers groused that advocating progressive politics often resulted in jokes or entire sketches being pulled, and that Doumanian objected to liberal bits she thought were "propagandistic and preachy."[603] The dismal season was mercifully cut short by a writer's strike, but not before Doumanian and Rocket were both fired after Rocket muttered the word "fuck" during a closing "Who Shot J.R.?" sketch.

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[600] Hill and Weingrad, *Saturday Night: A Backstage History of Saturday Night Live*: 420.
[601] Ibid., 402.
[602] *Saturday Night Live*, Episode 108. November 11, 1980.
[603] Dempsey, "NBC's 'Saturday Night Live' Just Ain't."

Dick Ebersol, who hired Lorne Michaels to create *SNL*, took over as executive producer between 1981-1985 and decided to break with the past, twice renaming the Weekend Update segment, and frequently switching out talent at the anchor desk. Brian Doyle-Murray, sometimes accompanied by Mary Gross, hosted the newly named "SNL NewsBreak" during the seventh season. Doyle-Murray attempted to play a more traditional, bland anchor role, paralleling much of the toothless humor during the season. Commentaries by Eddie Murphy and appearances by Piscopo, as both Ted Koppel and a sportscaster, were the only real bright spots. Subsequent seasons saw the now-renamed "Saturday Night News" change hands from Brad Hall for part of a season to a rotating staff, until Christopher Guest finished out 1984-85. For the next, eleventh season, Lorne Michaels returned as executive producer for the program, bringing consistency to the news parody segment for the first time since his departure.

In general, Michael's returning season proved problematic, with a young cast unable to jell. Newcomer Dennis Miller's regular appearances on Weekend Update (the segment went back to its original name) proved one of the most popular features. As a result, despite other personnel changes, Miller remained both on the program and at the anchor desk until 1991, becoming the face of *SNL*'s fake news for a new generation of viewers. Like his contemporaries on *NNTN*, Miller seemed to be unconstrained by the need for verisimilitude, incorporating a self-aware, postmodern style of delivery that carved out a new type of news parody delivery. He was not ironic in a Stephen Colbert way, but whereas previous Weekend Update anchors mostly played their role straight and allowed the jokes to be the focus, Miller was unapologetically "in" on the joke with the audience. After the 1986 refusal by France to allow the use of its airspace to bomb Libya, Miller begins an

episode with "Welcome to all, unless you happen to be French and then you can just go to hell. [audience applauds] Time for a boycott folks. I'll never kiss with my tongue again [laughter and pause], unless of course the situation demands it."[604] The delivery typifies Miller's lack of distance from the audience. In their article on Weekend Update, Amber Day and Ethan Thompson also note this pattern, discussing Miller's odd positioning as both actor and viewer surrogate, and how he "regularly commented on his own delivery and chided or congratulated the audience on their reactions to the jokes."[605] Miller was memorable, but divisive, transitioning the segment to a much more infotainment visual style and largely walking a mainstream political line.

Rather than emulate Miller's narcissistic delivery, future Weekend Update hosts mostly attempted to return to the more traditional anchor role, or at least a less-stylized version. Both Kevin Nealon (1991-94) and Colin Quinn (1998-2000) were low key, inoffensive choices, especially in comparison to Norm Macdonald, who anchored from 1994-97. Macdonald attempted to keep Miller's self–awareness, without letting the audience in on the joke. He began his newscasts with the wry "I'm Norm Macdonald, and now the fake news." Macdonald and writer Jim Downey took over Weekend Update, refashioning the segment away from traditional news and more towards celebrity. Macdonald viewed Weekend Update as *his* segment and was not very interested in news. He was even less interested in whether the audience understood or got the humor, saying he would have preferred to have no dress rehearsal for testing jokes so that "I could just do the jokes that *I* thought were funny, because I have more faith in me and Jim than I did in

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[604] *Saturday Night Live*, Episode 210. April 19, 1986.
[605] Day and Thompson, "Live from New York, It's the Fake News! *Saturday Night Live* and the (Non)Politics of Parody."

any audience. I just like doing jokes I like, and if the audience doesn't like them, then they're wrong, not me."[606] As a result, audiences widely diverged on the quality of Weekend Update under Macdonald, and he was eventually taken off the desk. With the advent of the post-network era of television, new anchors Tina Fey and Jimmy Fallon shared Weekend Update and ushered in a new relevance, as discussed in the next chapter.

Although Miller created the most memorable persona from the multi-channel era of Weekend Update, perhaps the most brilliant piece of *SNL* news parody actually came from a sketch—not the usual fake news segment. In 1983 two sequential episodes of *SNL* each featured an extended news parody segment on the fictional assassination of Eddie Murphy's recurring Little Rascals' character Buckwheat. Both skits feature Joe Piscopo portraying ABC anchor and *Nightline* host Ted Koppel reporting the event, as if live from the anchor desk, in an obvious parody of network news' excessive coverage of Ronald Reagan's assassination attempt two years earlier. After "breaking in," Piscopo announces Buckwheat has been shot and rolls pre-recorded footage of Murphy's character exiting the 30 Rock building and suddenly being gunned down as he moves towards a limousine, mimicking footage networks aired of Reagan approaching the presidential motorcade as shots rang out. News outlets such as *Nightline* repeatedly rolled footage of the attempted presidential assassination into their coverage, sometime showing it in slow motion or narrating the images. Creating comedy through excess, the first *SNL* skit took every opportunity to reshow footage of Buckwheat's shooting, airing it five times during the almost six-minute skit. In addition, the segment takes jabs at the increasing commercialization and branding of news by repeatedly sprinkling in mentions of imaginary

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[606] Shales and Miller, *Live from New York: An Uncensored History of Saturday Night Live*: 430.

sponsor Texxon. At one point the segment cuts to a still image of Buckwheat with the ABC news music and the text, "Buckwheat Dead: America Mourns." Crossfade to the Texxon logo and the voice over, "Brought to you by Texxon; life goes on and Texxon is there."[607] The following week's program continued coverage with Buckwheat's killer (also played by Eddie Murphy) assassinated as police move him after a court appearance, evoking Jack Ruby's killing of Lee Harvey Oswald on live television. Piscopo signs off from the last report saying, "We'll be here tomorrow night and every night as long as this senseless killing continues."[608] The segments are brilliant parodies of *Nightline* and other news agencies' fascination with violence, immediacy, and increasing entanglement with corporate sponsors, coming at a time when the Weekend Update segment itself was sliding towards irrelevancy.

As *SNL* and Weekend Update limped through the early 1980s, NBC made several attempts to expand their news parody programming. *SCTV* (1981-1983), a program the network imported from Canadian broadcasting, incorporated a fake news report into their overall parody of television broadcasting. The segment made fun of news formatting, but created fake stories without any connection to topical events, playing more with form than substance. NBC tried to move the program into primetime, but producers balked at the stricter decency standards and took *SCTV* to cable. Following the show's departure, NBC hired *SNL* and *TW3* alum Herb Sargent to produce a summer replacement primetime news parody program called *The News is the News* (1983). The program disappeared shortly after its first show, with *Variety* saying, the "mundane material made it mostly a primetime

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[607] *Saturday Night Live*, Episode 154. March 12, 1983.
[608] *Saturday Night Live*, Episode 155. March 19, 1983.

shambles."[609] NBC had earlier attempted to restart primetime news parody by reviving *TW3* in 1976 with a pilot called *That Was the Year That Was,* but viewers and critics panned the show. It was even called, "sort of a toothless Saturday Night Live," illustrating how even primetime audiences expected more cutting-edge humor by that point.[610] Television executives attempted to revive *TW3* once again, though, in 1985—this time with rival network ABC.

Original *TW3* actor and writer David Frost and film star Anne Bancroft hosted the hour-long Sunday 8pm ABC broadcast, with Sargent producing. The show was a pilot for a planned regular series, but was so dismal no more episodes were ever shot. Sargent reworked the original format to make *TW3* much more of a traditional variety program, with lots of sketch comedy and the feel of big time network specials, with emphasis on audience accessibility, glitz, and musical cues. The stage design borrowed from '70s variety programs like *Donny and Marie*, with large movable platforms and lots of lights and color. Any visual link to broadcast news is almost entirely absent, except a brief segment imagining network news if Ted Turner succeeds in taking over CBS. Instead, the show emphasized set pieces for skits and stand up comedy, with lots of red curtains and mixed color palettes. Political humor stagnates at the level of crude, childish laughs. Rather than offer satiric jabs at Reagan and British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's policies, for instance, a skit with look-alike puppets merely devolves into the two marionettes kissing in the throws of passion. Perhaps tellingly, the most biting satire in the show is reserved for liberals, with Frost singing a song making fun of how liberals, "forgive Jane Fonda for being

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[609] Bok., "The News Is the News," *Weekly Variety*, June 22, 1983.
[610] Daku., "That Was the Year That Was," *Weekly Variety*, December 29, 1976.

in Hanoi, but not in *Barbarella*."[611] The show's laughs mostly came from the actors themselves, with cutaways revealing listlessly clapping audience members. Really, the only connection to the original program, besides the name, is the participation of Frost and Sargent—the humor and content of the reboot bear more relation to the awkward all-star variety programs favored by networks in the '80s than NBC's 1960's *TW3*. Reviews of the pilot were horrible, with one writer calling the program, "a generally witless fiasco."[612] ABC cancelled plans to produce a full season.

Comedy Central Emerges

The same year HBO decided to cancel *NNTN*, a new cable channel appeared which would become a powerhouse for news parody entering the new millennium. Comedy Central formed from two separate failed attempts to start up all-comedy channels: HBO's The Comedy Channel and Viacom's HA! merged, forming a new channel with eclectic humor programming that consisted of stand up, edited highlights of shows, and low cost films. By the mid-1990s, Comedy Central found breakout hits in *Politically Incorrect* and *Mystery Science Theater 3000*, both of which went to other networks in 1996. Comedy Central president and CEO Doug Herzag signed *The Daily Show* to become the new centerpiece program for the network. *The Daily Show* marketing presented it as news parody, in the tradition of Weekend Update, however, the original version of the show, hosted by Craig Kilborn, fashioned itself more as a parody of tabloid infotainment programs like *Entertainment Tonight* and *Extra*. The program was a success for Comedy

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[611] *That Was the Week That Was*, Pilot. UCLA Film & Television Archive - Catalog ID T74134. April 21, 1985.
[612] ———, "That Was the Week That Was," *Daily Variety*, April 23, 1985.

Central, but received wildly divergent reviews, either hailing it as innovative or dismissing it as childish. The show focused less on politics than celebrity and entertainment news, creating comedy more similar to late night hosts like David Letterman and Conan O'Brien than previous news parody programming. Rather than making fun of those in power, *The Daily Show* often displayed a mean-spirited humor aimed at everyday people, using ambush interviews to mock people's ignorance or hold their beliefs up to ridicule. The sophomoric tone was worsened by Kilborn's style on the anchor desk.

Kilborn, like the show itself, proved divisive. More sportscaster than journalist, he approached his task with knowing self-amusement. A former ESPN anchor and college basketball player, Kilborn cultivated a comedic sexist frat-boy persona, and often clashed with creators/writers Lizz Winstead and Madeleine Smithberg, who wanted the show to have a sharper political edge. These clashes often spilled over into the press. *Esquire* called the show Emmy-worthy and characterized Kilborn's performance as "an odd mix of arrogance and good-natured cluelessness [that] brings to mind a young Ted Baxter."[613] On the opposite pole, *Rolling Stone* writer Rob Sheffield held Kilborn up as an icon of everything wrong with basic cable programming in the mid-90s: "Craig Kilborn *is* cable. He's shallow, pretty, always winking and teasing—a dumb blond who fronts as though he's in on the joke, although he's even dumber than he pretends to be."[614] Despite Sheffield's opinion, Kilborn apparently appealed to a broad enough audience for CBS to hire him away to replace the retiring Tom Snyder for their *Late, Late Show*. Kilborn's move simply

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[613] J. Bargmann, "Dreamland: Although Ted Baxter-Ish Anchor Craig Kilborn May Not Alway Get the Jokes, His Daily Show on Comedy Central Is the Smartest Thing on TV," *Esquire*, 1998, 41.
[614] Rob Sheffield, "Scratching the Niche," *Rolling Stone*, November 17, 1998, 65.

solidified how little difference there was between the program's brand of news parody and the everyday topical humor of all the other late-night network hosts.

News parody in the multi-channel era mostly limped along, with brief moments of innovation buried under bland, mainstream entertainment. The genre remained in the public consciousness both through the longevity of *NNTN* and Weekend Update, and through network attempts to revive a prime-time version. However, the controversy of *TW3* and the influence and esteem of Weekend Update during the 1970s were absent. Programs struggled to define themselves in the era of Reaganomics, turning more towards depoliticized pastiche than parody, avoiding political controversy and audience offense.

The open anchor desk of *TDS* set the stage for a new era of news parody, where several programs confounded media watchers by discursively crossing over into the journalistic field, merging comedy with news in a compelling mix of political commentary, absurdist humor, and journalism criticism. Jon Stewart's 1998 accession to *TDS* anchor desk occurred roughly around another paradigm shift in the television industry. Increasing integration between computers and television, on-demand audience expectations, and alternative distribution models transitioned the industry out of the multi-channel era into what Lotz calls the post-network era of television.[615] Although no bright lines exist between the two periods (and not all parts of the industry changed in the same ways or at the same moment), Lotz generally identifies the shift as occurring around the turn of the 21st century. In terms of news parody, the post-network era brought new visibility spurred by steaming video, political blogs and social media, as well as cutting edge-satire that skewered journalist and politician alike.

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[615] Lotz, *The Television Will Be Revolutionized*: 16-19.

CHAPTER FIVE: NEWS PARODY IN THE POST-NETWORK ERA

The day after America's 2006 congressional midterm elections, President George W. Bush announced the resignation of Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld. Despite widespread criticism of Rumsfeld, the move surprised the American press because only one week earlier Bush insisted Rumsfeld would remain in his cabinet until 2008. NBC and ABC news offered the strongest criticism of Bush's duplicity, saying the president "misled" reporters. CBS labeled his previous statement a "fib." Neither CNN nor Fox News bothered to mention Bush's earlier statement. Reporters almost uniformly ignored Bush's duplicity in their coverage, other than to intimate the president had changed his mind. It took Jon Stewart, anchor for Comedy Central's *TDS*, to plainly label what had occurred: a lie. The night after Rumsfeld's resignation, *TDS* played a clip from a White House press conference where Bush explained he only told reporters Rumsfeld would stay in order to keep from politicizing the decision. Stewart, doing his oft-repeated Bush impersonation, followed the clip by explaining, "Don't you see? Don't you get it? I was only lying for my own good."[616] By the mid-2000s the political commentary of news parody had moved way beyond anything attempted in preceding decades. The pastiche and toothless delight in playing only with form and technology prominent during the 1980s gave way to programs actively engaging both politicians and the media—calling them to task, holding them accountable to their own words, commenting on the substance of discourse, not merely personalities; in short, news parody began to function *as* journalism.

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[616] *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, Episode 11142. November 9, 2006. The episode numbers of both *TDS* and *Colbert* correspond to their own internal numbering and do not reflect the exact number of programs produced at that time.

As described in the introduction to this dissertation, *TDS* served as a focal point for conversations about the seeming cross-pollination between news and entertainment on television in the new millennium. Shortly after the reformatting of the program under Stewart accolades began accumulating, but not merely for its humor. The program's coverage of the 2000 presidential election won an Emmy from the television industry and a Peabody Award, given for accomplishments in broadcast *journalism*. Generally enthusiastic discussions of *TDS* continued to circulate in popular press discourse leading up to the release of a 2004 Pew Poll showing young people were increasingly turning to late-night comedy shows for their news over traditional sources.[617] Controversy erupted, with many representatives of the press raising concerns about uneducated and disconnected youth turning to entertainment for news, and the potential effects on democracy. A follow-up study from Pew quickly challenged dominant narratives by showing viewers of *TDS* and the spin-off program *Colbert* were amongst the most knowledgeable news consumers, scoring alongside audiences for major newspaper websites, PBS's *NewsHour*, and Fox News' *O'Reilly Factor*.[618] Often lost, both in press discussions and media-effects research, is the potential function of news parody not as a *replacement* for traditional journalism, but as a supplement and a corrective. In this chapter I explore how *TDS* and *Colbert* emerged in the post-network era of television, tapping into a shifting industrial landscape and popularizing an altered model of news parody for a new millennium. Following the format of previous chapters, I examine how each program developed its own format and then consider how together they approach presidential politics, critique the news media, and create an

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[617] "News Audiences Increasingly Politicized".
[618] "Public Knowledge of Current Affairs Little Changed by News and Information Revolutions".

alternative journalistic practice grounded in humor. Although the programs differ in their format and style, *TDS* and *Colbert* partake in the same project of political and press criticism; therefore, analyzing them together allows for greater consideration of their shared outlook and more in-depth comparison of their methods of inquiry.

Before discussing the actual news parody programs, I wish to ground them in the industry context of the new millennium, shifting from the multi-channel to post-network era of television. As described at the end of the previous chapter, the Craig Kilborn *Daily Show* was developed for and programmed on the cable channel Comedy Central. In the mid- to late-1990s the channel grew quickly in prominence, effectively branding itself and taking advantage of new media synergy. Comedy Central became the default home for youth-oriented, edgy comedy on cable, predating the Cartoon Network's "Adult Swim" and other eventual competitors in the 2000s. The success of such programs as *Mystery Science Theater 3000*, *Politically Incorrect*, and *Win Ben Stein's Money* created a foundation the Kilborn version of *The Daily Show* built on; however, the station catapulted to controversy and cultural relevance with the debut of the animated series *South Park* in 1997. The cartoon's success increased demand for the channel, and the following year Comedy Central surpassed 50% market penetration, making it available on most expanded cable packages. By the time Jon Stewart took over the anchor desk and integrated his name into the title of *TDS*, Comedy Central's had established their bona fides as *the* place for young comedy.

TDS also benefitted from Comedy Central's early incorporation of the Internet as a medium for extending its brand. At a time when most Americans were not online, the station developed games and downloads relating to its most popular shows. In the latter

half of the 1990s, adults using the Internet grew from 14% in 1995 to 46% by 2000.[619] A disproportionate number of those users were young adults, with 65% of ages 18-24 and 24-29 with Internet access in 2000.[620] College campuses offered some of the fastest access speeds at the time, and the original *South Park* featurette "The Spirit of Christmas" became a college download sensation before the actual show even debuted. Comedy Central took advantage of the technology available to its target audience, creating simple games for *South Park*, *Win Ben Stein's Money* and even a "five questions" game for the Kilborn *Daily Show*. The station's extension of its content to other media, such as digital, is emblematic of the post-network era activities extending television beyond the confines of appointment viewing on a traditional television screen—developments integral to the growth of *TDS*'s popularity.

Re-Establishing *The Daily Show*, Now with Jon Stewart

With the departure of Craig Kilborn to host CBS's *The Late, Late Show*, executives for *TDS* needed a replacement. Jon Stewart rose to prominence in the early 1990s, but his career seemed to be on the decline before being tapped for the Comedy Central program. Stewart's television career began at MTV with several programs connecting him to young viewers. Hosting chores for *Short Attention Span Theater* (1990-1992) and *You Wrote It, You Watch It* (1993) spun off to his own hip talk show, *The Jon Stewart Show* (1993-1995). Its success on MTV led to Paramount Television picking the program up for syndication as

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[619] Kathryn Zickuhr and Aaron Smith, "Internet Adoption over Time," Pew Internet & American Life Project, http://www.pewinternet.org/Reports/2012/Digital-differences/Main-Report/Internet-adoption-over-time.aspx.
[620] Amanda Lenhart, "Who's Not Online," Pew Internet & American Life Project, http://pewinternet.org/Reports/2000/Whos-Not-Online/Report/Part-1.aspx.

a replacement for Arsenio Hall's talk show, but poor ratings doomed *The Jon Stewart Show* after its first year in syndication. Stewart developed a favorable celebrity persona from these programs that followed him to *TDS*. Early press coverage uses adjectives like "hip," "cheeky," and "fresh," and play up his approachability and likeability. After the cancellation of his talk show Stewart was frequently mentioned as a potential replacement for Tom Snyder, Garry Shandling, Larry Sanders, and several other talkers, creating an "almost host, but never chosen" narrative. A 1997 article in a television trade publication even features Stewart as one of several "falling stars" in the industry.[621] Coinciding with the release of his book *Naked Pictures of Famous People*, Stewart's selection to take over the helm of *TDS* in late 1998 created a "comeback" storyline for Stewart in the press, helping to fuel interest in the show.

Going beyond mere cosmetics, the replacement of Kilborn marked a fairly rapid shift in the tone and humor of *TDS*. Stewart took over as host, also writing and co-producing (later executive-producing); however, he repored massive resistance early on to his vision of more politically charged satire, an obstacle eventually overcome as old staff left.[622] The year after Stewart came on board, Ben Karlin and David Javerbaum brought their experience from the newspaper parody *The Onion* to TDS as writers, with Karlin eventually sharing executive-producer credits with Stewart. The shift in personnel resulted in a retooled show with less celebrity focus and fewer jokes aimed at everyday citizens. Instead, the humor became more political and the style of its parody blended network and cable newscasts. The "Indecision 2000" coverage of the Bush-Gore presidential election brought

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[621] Joe Schlosser, "Falling Stars," *Broadcasting & Cable*, August 4, 1997.
[622] Sharilyn Johnson, "Jon Stewart Almost Quit Daily Show over 'Asshole' Coworkers," *Third Beat Magazine*, http://www.third-beat.com/2012/12/10/jon-stewart-almost-quit-daily-show-asshole-coworkers-and-secrets-revealed-conversation-stephen-colbert/.

new attention to the program from political reporters, rather than the usual celebrity and entertainment writers. Stewart was often referred to in the traditional newscast vernacular as an "anchor," instead of being called a "host." Part of the show's perceived legitimacy came from hiring former Republican presidential candidate Bob Dole as a political commentator during the campaign, blending entertainment and politics in unprecedented ways. As mentioned, the efforts led to multiple awards, as well as a 43% increase in ratings.

The program's response to the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks brought additional attention and accolades to *TDS*. Like most television entertainment, *TDS* chose to go on hiatus in the days immediately following 9/11, airing reruns. On September 20 the show went back on the air, opening not with music or graphics, but with Stewart silently seated at the anchor desk. He told the audience, "They said to get back to work. And there were no jobs available for a man in the fetal position, under his desk, crying, which I gladly would have taken."[623] His emotional, nine-minute monologue, unsuccessfully holding back tears at times, brought praise from the media. *Politically Incorrect*'s Bill Maher, by comparison, tested and found the limits of political satire after 9/11 when, agreeing with a guest who said the perpetrators of the terrorist attacks were not cowards, Maher called America's use of cruise missiles "cowardly." Commentators immediately condemned the host for his remarks and Maher quickly apologized; however, criticism only increased, with White House Press Secretary Ari Fleischer policing doxa, saying the incident is a "reminder to all Americans that they need to watch what they say, watch what they do, and that this is not a time for remarks like that. It never is."[624] ABC cancelled the program the following

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[623] *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, Episode 6030. September 20, 2001.
[624] Ari Fleischer, "Press Briefing," White House, http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010926-5.html. Some have claimed

June, with the cancellation widely seen as a response to Maher's public comments.[625] Stewart struck an emotional yet conciliatory tone that resonated with the public's emotions. *Rolling Stone's* coverage was emblematic of the reception, calling Stewart's speech "a four-hankie monologue that hit all the right notes."[626] In the months following 9/11 Stewart, along with outlets like *The Onion*, moved into a more critical mode, raising questions traditional media outlets tended to ignore. Writing about comedy's post-9/11 response, Paul Achter commends these parodies as "a way of reflecting on what had happened and, perhaps more importantly, why."[627] Stewart began to be sought out by other journalists for his views, appearing in 2002 on such shows as CNN's *Inside Politics* and ABC's *Nightline*. Subsequent years brought him into high-profile conflict with cable news hosts from two networks, first with CNN's *Crossfire* and several years later MSNBC's Jim Cramer. I cover each incident in more detail below. His attack on the media articulated in these two encounters form an important backdrop for understanding *TDS* as an intervention into journalism—moving beyond simple critique to envision a more robust, independent press.

Fleischer's comments were meant in a broader context, not only referring to Maher, but also racist characterizations in the wake of the attacks. See Andrew Alexander, "A White House Spokesman's 'Urban Myth'," *Washington Post*, http://articles.washingtonpost.com/2009-05-24/opinions/36839111_1_ari-fleischer-bill-maher-john-cooksey.

[625] Jones, *Entertaining Politics: New Political Television and Civic Culture*: 80-84.

[626] "The Daily Show," *Rolling Stone*, 2001.

[627] Paul Achter, "Comedy in Unfunny Times: News Parody and Carnival after 9/11," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 25, no. 3 (2008).

Style and Format in *The Daily Show*'s Parody

In comparison with previous news parody programs, *TDS*'s greatest formatting innovation is the blending of segmented news parody, in the tradition of Weekend Update with the talk-show format. Separated into news blocks, the program usually features at least two (sometimes three) blocks of news parody, followed by an interview segment and then a brief closing segment. Over the years, the news blocks have become more cohesive, featuring fewer, more in-depth stories, and often thematically connecting stories within a block, a strategy borrowed from traditional newscasts. The format is highly successful in creating an extended news parody show. Previous programs like *TW3* and *NNTN* diluted their attempts at parody by incorporating skits and fake commercials, while Weekend Update successfully cordoned off itself into a short, dedicated segment. Under Craig Kilborn*, The Daily Show*'s incorporation of the interview segment seemed awkward, as if the news parody had finished and now an interview would happen. The Stewart incarnation of the show quickly moved away from celebrity interviews in its early days to newsmakers, journalists, and commentators who could extend the news topics already in play, as Table 5.1 shows. As a result, the interviews extend the journalistic aspect of the news parody into a different format—television talk—rather than creating a rupture in the transition.

Set design

The set design for *TDS* reflects a cable-news sensibility, especially in more recent years. Blue has always been the primary color for most of its history, along with red and white accents, obviously connecting it to its focus on American politics. The original set,

with its dark wood accents and wall of small monitors, has long since been replaced. Now maps, globes, and other traditional trappings of television news and its connection to official forms of knowledge appear behind Stewart—originally as static images on background flats, but now in the form of motion graphics and multiple, sometimes overlapping screens and tickers, similar to the aesthetics of cable news. The firm hired for the show's 2007 set makeover also designed sets for *Good Morning America*, ABC's *World News Tonight*, and CNN's *Piers Morgan Tonight*, bringing a very contemporary news feel. The set design is dynamic, utilizing a 46-inch flat screen to display motion graphics and images, virtual newsroom backgrounds, a world map, a four-foot globe with an integrated ticker hanging above the desk, and more than 560 color LED fixtures.[628] The studio space is expanded through digital screens of journalistic iconography dominating the set. The lack of an adjacent physical newsroom, so important in traditional news sets, is forgotten amidst the swirl of virtual activity. (Figures 5.1 and 5.2). The anchor desk is the centerpiece of the set, and its use is highly standardized. Correspondents appear on set seated screen right, allowing dialogue with Stewart following a package or news story. Screen left is reserved for the featured guest interview, originally occupied by a couch angled towards the desk, but in full view of the audience, in the style of late-night talk shows. In 2006 a chair on the edge of the desk replaced the couch, generating a look more akin to an on-set news interview, with the guest positioned within the news space. The new set for *TDS* was part of an overall visual redesign leaning even more heavily on graphics.

During the news parody blocks of *TDS*, Stewart is surrounded by a dizzying array of graphic elements. With Stewart off-centered screen right, the other side of the screen is

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[628] Marian Sandberg, "Daily Dose - Comedy Central's The Daily Show Has a Brand New Set," *Live Design*, http://livedesignonline.com/venues/daily-dose.

usually occupied by motion graphic beds, producing moving visuals that are then overlaid with pictures or composite images, themselves further overlaid by lower-third titles with their own graphic beds. The multiple layers of graphics replicate a cable-news look, with lots of information occupying screen space. (Figure 5.3) Not coincidentally, some members of the *TDS* graphics team worked previously in news. Art director July Lopez designed graphics for MSNBC and *NBC Nightly News* before joining the show, and designer Vic Fina came from CNN. A team of four designers and a producer create all the graphics using industry-standard tools on deadline, sometimes adding new elements literally minutes before show taping. In an interview, Lopez discusses how 15 minutes before tape time for an episode, two new images were ordered to accompany stories, one of Hillary Clinton wearing a pantsuit covered with NASCAR-style logos and another of Hillary morphing into Bill Clinton.[629] Operating under the same imperative of timeliness, *TDS* is subject to pressures similar to those of traditional newscasts; but their writers have to keep up with media coverage, rather than newsgathering. The dynamic graphics and images of the set establish the centrality of visuals in the program, including the extensive use of video within news parody segments.

Use of news footage

The use of actual news footage is an essential element of *TDS*, further removing it from its Weekend Update contemporary. One of the reasons Amber Day sets *TDS* off from previous news parody programs is its use of news footage, incorporating real journalistic

[629] Jim Hanas, "And That's the Way It Isn't," *Print Magazine*, October, 2008, 52.

content into its mimicry of form.[630] While I contend the program does not represent a *total* break with the past, *TDS* undeniably reformulated the use of footage in news parody. Producers of *NNTN* essentially structured the entire show around actual newsfilm; however, the footage was always decontextualized, joined with unconnected footage, redubbed with audio, and with any alteration that might produce a joke about the clip itself, but rarely with any connection to political events. By contrast, *TDS* almost always keeps footage in context, focusing on the story or the substance of the video. Whereas *NNTN* subscribed to newsfeeds to generate fodder for their jokes, *TDS* benefits from a broad array of digital feeds, stock-footage sources, Internet clips, and the ability to capture live broadcasts for later use. Rather than humor being the only factor in selection, clips satisfy many of the basic newsworthy elements journalists seek: prominence, conflict, impact, timeliness, etc. On *NNTN*, an image appears and is quickly replaced by another image, moving rapidly from one joke to another. *TDS* often subjects a clip to interrogation; in fact, Jeffrey Jones uses the analogy of a prosecutor to describe how the program assembles footage to interrogate multiple witnesses, cross-examine, summarize evidence, and create a closing statement.[631] Arguments both spring from and incorporate video. For instance, images of Tea Party organizers unpacking boxes with a million bags of tea intended to be used in a protest is then questioned by Stewart: "Let me get this straight. To protest wasteful spending, you bought a million tea bags? Are you protesting taxes or irony?"[632] Footage is also packaged together to illustrate trends or to compare coverage of events that then become the subject of commentary. Unlike *NNTN*, video used in *TDS* either

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[630] Day, "And Now...The News? Mimesis and the Real in *The Daily Show*," 85; ———, *Satire and Dissent: Interventions in Contemporary Political Debate*: 54.
[631] Jones, *Entertaining Politics: Satiric Television and Political Engagement*: 116-28.
[632] *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, Episode 14050. April 15, 2009.

adds to a conversation or provides a jumping-off point to deconstruct the actions or logic behind the clip.

Sound bites, as a specialized type of video clip, are used in similar ways to other news footage. Isolated statements become the subject of discussion or are connected to events. However, as a show interested in expanding political discourse, *TDS* ironically contends with the limited availability of in-depth discussions, forced to depend on the existing sound bites carried by the networks they monitor. Newscasts have become notorious for using shorter and shorter speaking clips, down to an average length of 4.3 seconds in 2005, creating short utterances removed from context.[633] More news organizations are taking advantage of digital distribution to post raw interviews and news feeds frequently carry entire statements and press conferences, while channels like CSPAN provide unedited congressional hearings, so there are now sources outside of the limited sound bites of newscasts. However, this creates a "feast or famine" situation for regular news viewers—a problem *TDS* frequently engages by editing sound-bite montages, mashing up statements from the same individual or a group of newsmakers.

Although used for varying applications, these sound-bite montages seem to primarily fall into three common strategies, each creating the illusion of dialogue by linking statements. Especially useful for congressional hearings and extended political events, one method is to combine statements from various political actors to tease out the logic behind their political-speak. For instance, following Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's appearance in front of a House committee on the 2012 Benghazi consulate attack, the program presents

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[633] By comparison, the average television news soundbite lasted 31 seconds in 1969. Schaefer and Martinez III, "Trends in Network News Editing Strategies from 1969 through 2005."

a series of statements by Republican lawmakers essentially asking the same questions over and over, hoping to have their statement be selected for a sound bite by traditional news media covering the hearing. *TDS* also includes a montage of Democratic House members commending Clinton, with Stewart following up by referring to their "questioning" as "ass-licky."[634] By isolating and unifying statements from the hours-long C-SPAN coverage without feeling constrained to objectively regurgitate political sound bites, *TDS* revealed the political theater of the hearings.

The sound-bite culture of news, the emphasis on immediacy, and the fear of seeming partisan often discourage news organizations from connecting statements by a source with previous utterances; however, *TDS* frequently edits longitudinal montages of one politician or media figure's statements over time to illuminate hypocrisy or logical fallacies. In one extended segment on the show, Fox News personality Bill O'Reilly is shown in a montage repeatedly advocating for the privacy rights of celebrities over several years. O'Reilly's strong repudiation of paparazzi tactics juxtaposes with a subsequent montage composed of historic *O'Reilly Factor* ambush interviews with lesser-known media personalities being interrogated as they walk outside to get mail, load their children in vehicles, or board public transportation. Using the raw evidence produced across multiple years of the cable news program, Stewart damns O'Reilly with his own words and actions, summing up the segment in O'Reilly's voice with "Coming up on the *Factor*: cognitive dissonance and why I don't experience it."[635] Such longitudinal montages provide a highly effective strategy for holding politicians and media personalities responsible for logical and moral consistency in the face of shifting political pressures.

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[634] *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, Episode 18050. January 24, 2013.
[635] *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, Episode 14022. February 10, 2009.

In its quest to offer deeper analysis of politics and media culture, *TDS* also assembles sound bites to create thematic montages of prevailing wisdom or discourse about news topics. This process connects voices from across a range of sources and outlooks, raising questions about conventional wisdom and sometimes even deconstructing political language. After the retirement of Supreme Court Justice David Souter, President Obama presented his criteria for nominating a replacement, including "empathy." Conservative commentators latched on to the phrase and *TDS* presented a montage of voices (many unsurprisingly from Fox News) condemning empathy as a code word for "judicial activism." Stewart offered his own interpretation of conservative buzzwords by noting "activist judge is a code word for pro-choice….They're helping us break the code with a code. Is this an episode of *Lost*?"[636] In the morass of conventional news coverage of partisan outrage and individual political drama, synthesis rarely appears. *TDS*'s thematic montages offer a method of connecting dominant discourses in order to question and interrogate their logic and hidden motivations. *TDS*'s critical project and parody of the news extends beyond the cosmetic to include presentational routines as well.

Historically, network and cable newscasts incorporate numerous other news contributors beyond the anchor(s), both to harness individual expertise and credibility and also to foster the image of a team of journalists extending beyond the boundaries of the television frame. Reporters and correspondents assist newsreaders in conveying information and providing analysis and commentary. *TDS* mimics this dynamic using several on-air correspondents who supplement and interact with Stewart through

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[636] *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, Episode 14060. May 4, 2009.

traditional news-presentational style.[637] Usually at least once per episode a correspondent files a news package covering a particular issue. In the early days of the program packages featured stories about the bizarre and silly, such as Steve Carell reporting on a man who spent $18,000 on chest hair; however, under Stewart and Karlin topics slowly turned away from news of the weird towards politics.[638] In comparison to Stewart's presentation, correspondent packages tend to be more lighthearted and ironic in tone, with reporters treating the ridiculous earnestly and discounting the importance of the serious. Mixing the exalted and the profane is a traditional maneuver of satire, and the packages highlight this aspect through the quirky, unaware correspondents. Jason Jones, for instance, offered a report after Arizona State University (ASU) chose not to give President Obama an honorary degree as their commencement speaker, saying his legacy was still in the future. Most of the package revolved around stereotypical drunken ASU students offering vapid commentary about Obama, producing a thinly veiled commentary on the quality of the school's education and also calling into question the concept of the honorary degree. Moving into deeper social satire, Jones interviewed former Canadian Prime Minister Kim Campbell, who served in office four months and yet received an honorary doctorate from ASU. Campbell, defending the degree, noted she was the first woman Prime Minister of Canada and the first woman defense minister of a NATO nation. Jones plays along in feigned agreement, saying she "bests Obama two firsts to one."[639] Clearly moving away from the entertainment style focus of the early days of the program, packages are more

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[637] Currently *TDS* has six correspondents, most of which have been with the show for multiple years. Several former correspondents spun off from *TDS* to careers in television and film, most notably Steve Carell, Ed Helms, Mo Rocca, and, of course, Stephen Colbert.
[638] *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, Episode 4069. December 8, 1999.
[639] *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, Episode 14065. May 12, 2009.

biting and produce serious political and social satire. Correspondents also add to the program and its parody of news by frequently appearing on set opposite Stewart and in fake live shots, each of which will be discussed in more detail below.

TDS, more than any preceding news parody programs, offers a true stylistic and visual parallel with broadcast and cable news. A combination of increasing budget (due to the show's success) and the lowered costs of technology enable an imitation of professional news space in studio and elaborate incorporation of footage from a large number of sources. Combined with the presentational structure of Stewart and the additional correspondents, the program spends its first several blocks engaged in the look, structure and—as will be discussed—practices of television news.

The Partisan News Parody of *The Colbert Report*

While *TDS* offers a general parody of broadcast and cable newscasts, its spin-off *Colbert* structures its humor around a particular style of cable show, and even an individual host. *Colbert* began airing in the mid-2000s, at a time when partisan cable news programs flourished in the wake of 9/11 and the so-called war on terror. The divisive politics of the time increasingly convinced viewers to seek out information from their own political perspective, with Fox News and MSNBC personalities benefiting the most from partisan rancor. These personality-driven news shows set their own politically informed agendas and, rather than featuring additional contributors, funnel almost all reports exclusively through the hosts, who evaluate the news and proclaim their own interpretation of events. Modeled specifically on Fox News' *The O'Reilly Factor*, *Colbert* imitates the look, style, and rhetoric of these partisan cable-news programs. Stephen Colbert originally developed his

character on *TDS*. Remaining on the show after the departure of Kilborn, Colbert adapted and thrived under the new humor direction fostered by Stewart and Karlin. Colbert created a correspondent character as a burlesque of a conservative commentator, egocentric and totally secure in his own knowledge; yet in news packages and opposite Stewart, his true ignorance is apparent. As the Bush presidency continued its policies the Colbert persona became an ardent defender of conservative values and politicians, indicting them with the character's idiocy. In 2005 Colbert, Stewart, and Karlin spun the character off into his own program, following *TDS* nightly on Comedy Central.

Colbert successfully developed the character into a full-fledged host, earning some positive coverage and leading to his selection to host the 2006 White House Correspondents Dinner. Colbert's speech at the event catapulted him into the public eye. Standing in a room with the president, first lady, national politicians, and some of the most powerful members of the press, Colbert delivered a vicious rebuke of press coverage of the Bush White House and criticism of the president's policies and underlying philosophy of governance within a congenial shell of irony. At an event that often celebrates the cozy relationship between the press and those in power, Colbert's character shamed both sides. The speech brought condemnation from many politicians and mainstream journalists, who considered the rhetoric rude, but Colbert's actual audience of television and Internet viewers applauded his honesty and made the speech one of the most-watched clips of the year. A wave of press coverage and increased public visibility followed the speech, and viewership of *Colbert* jumped by over a third shortly after the event. With the Correspondent's Dinner, Colbert made a conscious decision to utilize his persona on the public stage, essentially creating a kind of performance art while conducting actual press

interviews as Stephen Colbert, the real person. In subsequent years Colbert continued to extend the character beyond the screen, announcing a run for the presidency in 2007, attempting only to get on the ballot in South Carolina, where he grew up. Initially planning to run as both a Republican and Democrat, he dropped his candidacy to a single party after learning it would cost $35,000 to run on the GOP ballot. Colbert's stunt actually garnered some attention from the press when he appeared on a number of shows to hype his new book and instead received repeated questions about his "run for the presidency."[640] The Democratic Party in South Carolina eventually rejected his application, fearing his candidacy could affect the presidential vote. Colbert again blurred the lines in 2011 when he requested the Federal Election Commission sign off on a media exception to allow him to create a Super PAC to raise money for political spending. Treating each new project as an extension of his show, Colbert the reported on the process, ripping back the curtain on the more arcane aspects of the intertwined political and financial world and revealing the often-outrageous lack of oversight of political groups. Colbert announced he would form an exploratory committee to run for president in 2012, but eventually cast his support behind Republican candidate Herman Cain, who had already dropped out of the race, telling South Carolinians that a vote for Cain was a vote for Colbert. Cain received just over 1% of the GOP vote in the state. Like contemporary television itself, Colbert emerges beyond the screen, blending real life with the televisual. The program *Colbert* copies many visual features from *TDS*, but structures the entire show around the Colbert character's larger-than-life ego.

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[640] Heather Osborne-Thompson, "Tracing the "Fake" Candidate in American Television Comedy," in *Satire TV: Politics and Comedy in the Post-Network Era*, ed. Jonathan Gray, Jeffrey P. Jones, and Ethan Thompson (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2009), 79.

The rundown of *Colbert* mimics *TDS*, usually featuring two blocks of news followed by an interview segment and a final segment ending the show. All aspects of the news blocks revolve around Colbert, though. There are no correspondents or packages, other than Colbert's occasional interview of members of Congress. The news segments still integrate footage and sound bites into news blocks, but to a much lesser extent than *TDS*. Colbert, after all, *is* the news on his program. Sound bites or footage tend to initiate the host's commentary, rather than functioning as an extension of discussion. A quick Lou Dobbs clip from Fox News, for instance, introduces concern that Secretary of Defense nominee Chuck Hagel may have received funds from a group that ultimately never existed called "Friends of Hamas," initiating Colbert's commentary.[641] His interaction with sound bites and their use within the show is not drastically different from Stewart's; however, like the partisan personality cable programs being parodied, the focus is always on Colbert and what *he* thinks, resulting in less footage and more host commentary. The program remains just as graphics-rich as *TDS*, with multiple layers of computer-generated images usually occupying the screen with Colbert and frequent over-the-shoulder and other stills. In the most recent redesign, the left side of the screen is dominated by a row of opaque arced stars moving across a red and blue background with a rotating capital C as a graphics bed. A flag motif with undulating stars and stripes runs behind full-page graphics, such as newspaper images. Just as with *TDS*, the program's graphics accentuate the set design, credibly imitating the visual style of cable news.

Colbert's basic set layout remains mostly the same since its 2005 debut, divided between news space and interview space. On the news side, called "The Eagle's Nest," a

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[641] *The Colbert Report*, Episode 9065. February 21, 2013.

partial wrap-around desk in the shape of a "C" surrounds Colbert. The 2010 redesign added a virtual rotating "C" to the front of the desk. Three large screens behind Colbert allow changing motion graphics, with video columns in between, creating even more spaces for graphics. To either side of the screens are the "Shelves of Honor" display items accumulated by the host over the course of the show, as well as books and photos. The design reinforces the Colbert persona—his unquestioning patriotism, love of capitalism, and ego. He specifically rejected using traditional video monitors displaying news feeds and sources of news on the wall, saying, "I *am* the source."[642] As Colbert is the ultimate authority on the show, all elements of the set converge towards his head at the anchor desk, much as Jesus is centered in Da Vinci's *Last Supper*. Side-by-side with The Eagle's Nest, a separate interview area features a desk and two chairs with a background monitor. A hearth stands to one side, with a portrait of Colbert standing at the hearth. Over the hearth in the painting, another portrait hangs, and then yet another, creating multiple images embedded in the one portrait. Each year the portrait is updated to include new awards and other ego-gratification; however, Colbert reminds the audience: "This isn't just a portrait of me. It's a portrait of you, in the form of me. And I have to say, you look great."[643] The set creates a rich sign system that semiotically supports and extends the megalomaniacally narcissistic character created by Colbert.

Like the personality-driven cable news programs on which *Colbert* is based, regular segments hosted by the anchor replace reporter packages and news presentations from correspondents. Special guests might temporarily appear at the anchor desk for a brief

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[642] Nathan Rabin, "Stephen Colbert," *The Onion A.V. Club*, http://www.avclub.com/articles/stephen-colbert,13970/.
[643] *The Colbert Report*, Episode 9026. November 15, 2012.

discussion, but they are outside officials and experts, not cast members. The recurring segments allow Colbert to present extended rants, condemning public figures or actions and sometimes praising politicians or media personalities. Of course, the Colbert character's advocacy always carries a double-voice, often ironically damning with its transparently misplaced praise. His most frequent segment, "The Word," always begins with Colbert addressing one particular issue or action, shown as text on the opposite side of the screen. As Colbert continues his arguments, the text begins to question and challenge Colbert's statements, creating a dialogue between actor and graphic. Structurally similar to segments like *O'Reilly Factor*'s "Talking Points Memo," The Word's presentation upends a common trope of news-personality shows, where the hosts will proclaim their opinions as truths, reinforced by short graphics or bullet points occupying a third of the screen. The text on The Word constantly undercuts Colbert's voice, though. Parodying this visual strategy highlights the way text commonly replaces actual logic to reinforce partisan viewpoints.

Colbert features a number of other recurring segments valorizing or criticizing newsmakers, much like cable news hosts. The "Alpha Dog of the Week" salutes, as he states on one episode, "the men or lady-men who have the biggest balls in these U. S. of A.s." Colbert actually presents outrageous behavior by those he names "Alpha Dogs," such as Virginia Senate Republicans, who waited until a black lawmaker left town to attend President Obama's inauguration and then passed redistricting that consolidated minority voting in one district—on Martin Luther King Jr.'s birthday.[644] So, like much of the satire on *Colbert*, the seemingly celebratory segment implicitly condemns the actions of officials.

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[644] *The Colbert Report*, Episode 9049. January 23, 2013.

Another segment, "Tip of the Hat/Wag of the Finger" presents a string of brief commentary on issues. Former Pope Benedict XVI earns a wag of the finger for allowing the installation of solar panels at the Vatican because, according to Colbert, "God does not care about the environment." Colbert then gives a tip of the hat to Marvel Comics for placing the host on the cover of Spider-Man as a presidential candidate, but quickly follows with a wag of the finger because in the Marvel Universe, Colbert won the popular vote only to lose to Obama in the Electoral College.[645] Many of the most outspoken cable-news personalities utilize repeat segments to drift off into editorializing about specific people or issues. *Countdown with Keith Olbermann* had "Worst Person in the World," and *O'Reilly Factor* incorporates a host of similar features, such as "Pinheads and Patriots." The segments on Colbert, while parodying the Olbermanns and O'Reillys of cable news, also replicate their logic, passing judgment with an added layer of irony.

Both *Colbert* and *TDS* reflect a more successful model for news parody in comparison to previous television shows in the genre. The combination of news segments with mostly news-oriented interviews creates a more synthesized, sustained format, without the digressions and content shifts prevalent in sketch comedy or variety shows. The visual presentations also facilitate a stronger tie to their source material, made possible through the decreased cost of technology. As described above, *Colbert* and *TDS* share structural similarities, but their actual content diverges, due to the different targets of their parody (*TDS* as network or cable newscast and *Colbert* as cable-news personality). The two comic strategies manifest most plainly in the different presentational styles of Colbert and Stewart at the anchor desk. In the next section, I describe how Stewart utilizes

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[645] *The Colbert Report*, Episode 4148. November 13, 2008.

sincerity, self-effacement, and his Jewish background to craft an image of authenticity, allowing him to operate as a type of truth-teller. Colbert's character, by contrast, is defined by narcissism and irony, creating an uncertainty and textual openness to his program.

Jon Stewart as Modern Anchor – The Most Trusted Name in News?

In 2009 Jon Stewart won a poll in which *Time* magazine asked Americans to choose their most trusted newscaster, taking 49% of the vote. NBC's Brian Williams was the runner-up with 29%. Two years earlier, Stewart tied for fourth place with Tom Brokaw, Brian Williams, and Anderson Cooper for the most admired news figures.[646] Although the value (and validity) of such popularity contests is limited, they reflect the positive public image Stewart developed while anchoring *TDS*. Stewart's enactment of the anchor role dramatically diverges from previous news parody personalities, as well as from colleague Stephen Colbert. In this section, I examine the image cultivated by Stewart and how he breaks out of the traditional nonpartisan anchor role while minimizing backlash against his political and media critiques.

When Stewart replaced Kilborn on the anchor desk of *TDS*, a choice had to be made whether to extend the former's previous media persona adopted on programs like *The Jon Stewart Show*, or conform to the role vacated by Kilborn, as a snarky, elitist, and entertainment-oriented host. Stewart chose to build on his existing image as funny, satiric, and quick-witted, yet sincere and authentic. I want to be clear that when discussing Stewart, I refer to his celebrity persona. As opposed to the case with film stars, the kind of everyday repeat viewing endemic to television generates the illusion of proximity with

[646] "Today's Journalists Less Prominent: Fewer Widely Admired Than 20 Years Ago," The Pew Research Center, http://people-press.org/reports/pdf/309.pdf.

televisual celebrities.[647] As a result, audiences often perceive these actors as presenting their "real selves," rather than playing a role; as a result, most viewers probably perceive Stewart the media interviewee, Stewart the host of *TDS*, Stewart the (mostly failed) film actor, and Stewart the actual person as one and the same. This seems to be a central aspect of Stewart's appeals—a lack of duplicity and image-making. Part of Stewart's authenticity springs from the belief he is *not* playing a role, that he is merely being himself.

As discussed in earlier chapters, news anchors commonly embody a type of dispassionate, removed style, presenting the facts without judgment, as oracles of truth. Historically, Jane Curtin most closely paralleled this professional, no-nonsense approach of all the personalities discussed in earlier sections of this study. Other anchors, like Chevy Chase and *NNTN*'s Stuart Pankin, played their role straight, but then suddenly veered out of character with stand-up comic style, exaggerated facial expressions, and goofy body language. In those moments the humor of the programs no longer focused on the content or presentation of news; instead, Chase and Pankin either placed themselves as the center of the comedy or directed the humor at another actor, such as Chase's mocking of Curtin during Weekend Update. In either case the news parody ground to a halt, replaced by empty physical comedy and self-aggrandizement. Stewart's defining quality as a comedic news anchor is his ability to navigate a narrow passage between authoritative news anchor and physically expressive comedy. Throughout the news blocks of each episode, Stewart seamlessly shifts from *presenting* the news with seriousness and reserve to *reacting* to the news, yelling and wildly flailing, and then transitioning back to anchor, all without breaking the presentational flow. Stewart prevents a rupture in the diegetic news space by always

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[647] Graeme Turner, *Understanding Celebrity* (London, England: Sage Publications, 2004). 15.

keeping the humor in service to satire. Moments of comedic emotion and reaction comment on the news and become part of the show's critique of events. After the 2008 presidential elections *TDS* aired a sound bite from president-elect Obama reminding everyone that Bush was still the president. The clip cuts back to Stewart, who mockingly repeats Obama's statement in a voice dripping with irony, punctuated by Stewart literally saying "wink, wink" as he offers the physical gesture.[648] As in this example, Stewart breaks out of the role of unemotional news presenter to evaluate and comment on the substance of content, smoothing over the disruption of moving from anchor to critic.

Stewart's frequent moments of physical comedy, when he breaks out of the reserved stasis expected from anchors, reinforces the host's persona while furthering the program's critical mode. Jonathan Gray suggests that satirists like Stewart remove themselves from expected limitations on political and media speech as a way of embodying genuine audience emotions: "they curse, they rant, they fume, and so forth…their mode of discourse is more mundane and everyday."[649] Stewart frequently uses profanity for effect, content barred from traditional journalism and broadcast stations. For instance, after a conservative commentator claimed the 1990s assault-weapons ban failed, Stewart reacts, "You know what they say, if at first you don't succeed, fuck it."[650] The profanity is "bleeped," but still plainly discernible. In another example, covering a meeting of the United Nations, Stewart humorously claimed Obama quoted Gandhi as saying, "I came here to fast and kick

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[648] *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, Episode 13146. November 11, 2008.
[649] Jonathan Gray, *Television Entertainment* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2008). 148.
[650] *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, Episode 18040. January 8, 2013.

ass and I'm all out of no food!"[651] In these moments, Stewart identifies with the audience by speaking in nonofficial language.

While reacting *for* the audience, Stewart also reinforces his image of sincerity when he segues from the anchor role into respondent. A disingenuous political sound bite cuts back to Stewart rubbing his eyes in disbelief, exaggeratingly rotating both wrists. At other times he waves his arms about in anger or dismissal. Despite the editorializing, Stewart maintains an air of sincerity, seeming truly surprised, shocked, or dismayed by statements or events—despite the obvious scripting of such moments. In one especially emotional example following the 2008 election, *TDS* presents its recurring feature highlighting the activities of Vice-President Dick Cheney, "You Don't Know Dick." Covering a PBS interview with Cheney (one of the few non-Fox News interviews of his eight-year tenure), the program plays a clip of Jim Lehrer asking Cheney about the president and vice-president's role in foreseeing economic crises. Cheney curtly responds, "Did you see it coming, Jim? You're an expert." Cutting back, Stewart hunches over the desk in wide-eyed surprise and meekly whispers, "This whole thing has been Jim Lehrer's fault?" Clips of the PBS interview continue with Lehrer attempting to pin Cheney down for any responsibility over his eight years, finally asking Cheney if the miscalculation of the Iraqi people's response to the American invasion contributed to the chaos after the fall of Saddam Hussein. Cheney responds, "I can't say that. I can't link those two particular points." A quick cut-back and Stewart screams, while throwing his head back with both hands affixed. He then lunges towards the camera and rapidly, yet tersely, responds:

> You can't link those two? You linked Saddam Hussein and 9/11! You were the link master! You were Art Linkletter, Linky Tuscadero, Link from *The Mod Squad*,

[651] *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, Episode 17157. September 27, 2012.

> Abraham Linkage! [audience breaks out into applause and cheers] But that mystifies you? Well, I guess if we expect a man who's kept alive by IV drips of panda tears and angel blood to understand cause and effect, we still *just don't know dick*![652]

Stewart's outrage and anger seem genuine as an extension of the political beliefs and expectations advocated by years of *TDS* coverage. Rather than mere partisanship, Stewart taps into a kind of political and media idealism, reacting to the failure of politicians to live up to the potential for representative democracy. In physically reacting to his outrage, Stewart invokes pathos, but he also taps into an ethos established night after night on the program. Using Aristotelian concepts of *ethos*, Jonathan Barbur and Trischa Goodnow describe how *TDS* exhibits goodwill towards its audience and good temper, not allowing the humor to become overly acerbic.[653] While emerging from the various aspects of the show itself, this ethos comes primarily from Stewart's actions both on and off the program.

As discussed in the review of literature, numerous critics assail *TDS* as cynical merely due to its use of irony; however, Stewart's complex image is built on an almost wide-eyed innocence and belief that politics and the media serve a useful function. The program's critique emerges from a utopian vision of political discourse so absent in the political and journalistic fields. Tapping into a Habermasian concept of the public sphere, Stewart's rhetoric envisions the equality of all to speak, not just those in power, and the media's responsibility to facilitate that process. Stewart also emphasizes the responsibility for all to speak truthfully and hold those in the public trust especially accountable. Counterintuitively, his use of irony actually reinforces his authenticity. He often feigns ignorance and presumes ethical behavior from public leaders, only to have his utopian

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[652] *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, Episode 14009. January 19, 2009.
[653] Jonathan E. Barbur and Trischa Goodnow, "The *Arete* of Amusement: An Aristotelian Perspective on the Ethos of *The Daily Show*," in *The Daily Show and Rhetoric: Arguments, Issues, and Strategies*, ed. Trischa Goodnow (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2011).

assumptions smashed by the reality of the news. In one repeated strategy, Stewart will utter something unbelievable with self-knowing exaggeration in order to illustrate a situation could always be worse. So, in talking about the record profits of Goldman Sachs only a year after a government bailout, he says, "To pull that off, you'd think the Treasury Secretary who designed the bailout use to be Goldman's CEO," laughing to himself at the implausibility. Stewart then raises a hand to the IFB in his ear, as if receiving a message from an invisible producer, responding, "You, really, he was? Hank Paulson literally left Goldman Sachs to take the Treasury job?" Stewart then repeats the shtick several more times during the story, his hopes for accountability and ethics in the financial sector repeatedly dashed.[654] The idealism and sincerity of Stewart's character is further developed by his interactions with the show's correspondents. On traditional news programs reporters appear on set to provide further context for stories they cover, answering the news anchor's often pre-scripted questions. On *TDS* correspondents usually take extreme and illogical positions, challenging the normal omnipotence of the anchor. The ensuing interactions further develop Stewart as a voice of reason next to the irrational comments from correspondents. Michael Gettings discusses how the dialogue between Stewart and correspondents help viewers discern the actual message of *TDS* from its ironic statements, with reporters presenting hyperbolic language obviously meant to be rejected.[655] Media controversy followed after comedian Wanda Sykes's edgy performance at the 2009 White House Correspondents Dinner where, amongst other statements, she suggested Rush Limbaugh should be waterboarded as a terrorist. *TDS* used the manufactured outrage from conservatives to actually debate terrorism and torture. Stewart

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[654] *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, Episode 14050. April 15, 2009.
[655] Gettings, "The Fake, the False, and the Fictional: *The Daily Show* as News Source," 20-21.

questioned whether Sykes went too far; could she have been less aggressive and still gotten her message across? Correspondent John Oliver defended her act with the same language advocates of torture use, saying her jokes must have been approved at the highest level and "although not pleasant, they are effective." The situation called for her style of humor, Oliver argued, because "This was a pressure situation. The clock was ticking. She was responsible for the light entertainment of a thousand people eating dinner."[656] Oliver's transference of the logic of torture to defending Sykes' jokes defamiliarizes the argument, calling underlying assumptions about torture into question and making Stewart's cautious responses sound all the more sane by comparison. An idealistic willingness to speak out often results in celebrity accusations of false piety and egocentrism; neither charge is usually levied at Stewart, though. Along with his sincerity, the host also effectively disarms critics through his self-deprecation, a strategy often invoked when mentioning his Jewish identity.

Jon Stewart as "Cool Jew"

In his history of Jewish humor in America, Lawrence Epstein writes about the rise of new Jewish comedians during the 1970s and 80s, artists like Al Franken, Andy Kaufman, and Richard Belzer, who mined satire and political humor.[657] Stewart came of age as an entertainer during this era, incorporating the same sensibility, and says that like most comedians, his early material revolved around his background, including being Jewish.[658] In his early years the comedian potentially felt the need for some assimilation, changing his

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[656] *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, Episode 14064. May 11, 2009.
[657] Lawrence J. Epstein, *The Haunted Smile: The Story of Jewish Comedians in America* (New York, NY: Public Affairs, 2001). 231-39.
[658] *Jon Stewart: The Most Trusted Name in Fake News*, Fresh Air. October 4, 2010.

name from the more ethnic-sounding Jon Stuart Leibowitz. However, several authors identify Stewart as emblematic of what Amy Becker calls the "New Jewish Revolution," a cultural shift in the new millennium where Jewish identity is celebrated as cool, more hipster than outsider.[659] Stewart frequently invokes his Jewish identity on *TDS*, weaving his past and culture into his smart political commentary, creating what one writer calls a "'Borscht Belt Meets Ivy League' sensibility."[660] Jewish humor has a strong history of challenging authority, whether through the physical anarchy of the Marx Brothers or Lenny Bruce's cross-cultural taboos. Stewart taps into this tradition, reflecting "a Jewish sensibility in the way he blends optimism and hopefulness with a strong sense of irony and a certain cynicism about current events."[661] In his role as *TDS* host, he actively cultivates his Jewish identity.

Throughout the history of television, Jewish actors wove references to their heritage into their performance. Milton Berle frequently dropped Yiddish words into his dialogue and other shows would mention foods, holidays, or rituals that would resonate with a Jewish audience. The strategy signaled a character or actor's Jewish identity without specifically mentioning it on air.[662] Like past celebrities, Stewart often makes reference to Jewish culture, but he also specifically mentions his own identity both in the news segments and during interviews. Stewart sprinkles Yiddish words into reports, calling

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[659] Simcha Weinstein, *Shtick Shift: Jewish Humor in the 21st Century* (Fort Lee, NJ: Barricade Books, 2008). Chapter 4; Amy B. Becker, "Riding the Wave of the New Jew Revolution: Watching The Daily Show with Jews for Jon Stewart," in *International Communications Association* (Chicago, IL 2009).
[660] Weinstein, *Shtick Shift: Jewish Humor in the 21st Century*: 86.
[661] Becker, "Riding the Wave of the New Jew Revolution: Watching The Daily Show with Jews for Jon Stewart," 11-12.
[662] Krieger discusses how such Jewish signals operate in *Seinfeld*. Rosalin Krieger, ""Does He Actually Say the Word Jewish?"--Jewish Representation in *Seinfeld*," *Journal for Cultural Research* 7, no. 4 (2003): 388.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu "bubby" or hilariously questioning Michele Bachmann's use of the word "chutzpah" in reference to President Obama. He mentions Jewish holidays and America's general lack of knowledge about Jewish tradition. Daily show writer Rob Kutner says Stewart is not an observant Jew, but he "feels comfortable relating openly to the fact he is Jewish. It gives him an idiom, a frame of reference."[663] The many Jewish references used on the show continue to reconstitute this frame for Stewart and also connect him with some traditional Jewish humor strategies, such as self-deprecation.

Covering a 2010 controversy over plans to place a Muslim community center near ground zero in New York City, *TDS* presents a montage of conservative politicians and commentators discussing how far away the center should stay from ground zero. The final media personality suggests, "Why not the Upper West Side in Woody Allen's building?" Stewart responds with a look of disbelief, incredulously restating "Woody Allen? Woody Allen? That's your go-to out-of-touch, New York, liberal Jew reference? What, are they asking to build a mosque in 1976?" He continues in a sing-song voice, "New York, out-of touch, liberal Jew? Hello? I'm right here."[664] Equating himself with Woody Allen works for the joke, but unlike Allen's persona, commonly referred to as a "nebbish," Stewart is forceful and successful, strong qualities the satirist tries to mitigate. Like Jack Benny before him, Stewart embraces a tradition of self-deprecation, referencing his shortness, greying hair, and lack of sexual appeal. Previewing an interview with military expert Craig Milany, who wrote the book *The Unforgiving Minute*, Stewart comments the book is "apparently

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[663] Richard Rabkin, "The Daily Show with Rob Kutner," *Jewlarious*, http://www.aish.com/j/f/48942146.html.
[664] *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, Episode 15100. August 10, 2010.

about my wedding night."[665] These self-deprecating jokes soften the potential negatives of Stewart's strong opinions, mastery of facts, and partisan leanings. As a result, emphasizing his own shortcomings helps to retain his positive connotations and sincerity. Due to this public persona, the host has become an influential participant and commentator in the journalistic field, enabling him to operate as a kind of teller of truth.

Parrhesia and Parody

Writers like Roderick Hart and Johanna Hartelius accuse Stewart of damaging democracy and producing inertia amongst his audience, accusing him of being a postmodernist cynic.[666] However, as I have argued, Stewart and *TDS* do not produce a nihilist critique damning any effort of the press or politics, nor a simple partisan message. In that way, perhaps the message *is* more postmodern, refusing to dichotomize parties, politicians, and media outlets simply as good or bad, but questioning the normal terms of evaluation in these fields. In his role as anchor of *TDS* Stewart speaks not only to his citizen audience, but also to media professionals and, to a lesser extent, politicians themselves. In a series of lectures Michel Foucault offered his perspective on the ancient Greek concept of *parrhesia* as a type of truth telling. The goal of *parrhesia* "is not to speak the truth to someone else, but has the function of *criticism*," either of the speaker or the audience.[667] I argue Stewart acts as *parrhesiastes* to the media, enunciating unpleasant truths and ripping away the underlying logics of dominant American journalism. The *parrhesiastes* is defined by courage, for in speaking truth there is a risk. For ancient Greeks the risk of *parrhesia* was

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[665] *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, Episode 14034. March 10, 2009.
[666] Hart and Hartelius, "The Political Sins of Jon Stewart."
[667] Michel Foucault, *Fearless Speech* (Los Angeles, CA: Semiotext(e), 2001).

death; however Foucault claims that the *parrhesiastes* no longer necessarily risks such high stakes.[668] In modern society, when humorists engage in *parrhesia* they risk removal from public discourse, such as the response to Bill Maher's statements after 9/11. As *TDS* continues to circulate in the journalistic and political fields, Stewart's risks in speaking truth certainly increase. Being engaged in public debate means that an ill-conceived statement could lead to attacks from the media, or Stewart could lose legitimation, with journalists ignoring him or refusing to appear on the show. Foucault describes how the *parrhesiastes* is necessary, because all people (especially the media) flatter themselves and need a truth-teller to offer critique.[669]

Several years before his lectures on *parrhesia*, Foucault wrote an article also dealing with speaking truth and the function of the intellectual. Traditionally, the intellectual spoke for universal concerns; however, Foucault saw the emergence of what he called "specific intellectuals," persons who carry discursive power within their field. Residing in a specific class, the specific intellectual engages in their particular work and life, carrying the "specificity of the politics of truth in our societies."[670] This specific intellectual operates within a particular field, creating the possibility for more radical action.[671] Stewart, through his acceptance by the media and ability to speak to traditional journalistic outlets, functions as a specific intellectual to the media. It may seem odd for Foucault, who spoke of truth as being an establishment of power, to discuss truth-telling; however, he defines truth in this instance as "a system of ordered procedures for the production, regulation, distribution

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[668] Ibid., 13-15.
[669] Ibid., 135.
[670] ———, "The Political Function of the Intellectual," *Radical Philosophy*, no. 17 (1977): 13.
[671] For clarification, "field" here is used as a professional field, not the field theory of Pierre Bourdieu.

and circulation of statements."[672] The specific individual seeks to rupture that system, to "emancipate" truth from the situation in which it is embedded, to illuminate the process. Satire seems to be a highly useful tool to accomplish this goal, introducing absurdity to the normally ordered, seamless process of replicating truth.

In speaking as part of the media Stewart questions routines and representational process, asking for a *better* journalism. Following the first election of President Obama, in a segment called "Baracknophobia," *TDS* presents a montage of media puns discussing increased gun sales, using phrases like "booming business," "explosive sales number," and "Americans fired up." Stewart follows, gleefully raising his hand and declaring, "I've got one! I've got one! These sales numbers could accidentally kill someone you care about." He stops, reflects, and looks down at his script quizzically before continuing dryly, "It's funny cause it's true."[673] Far from merely generating humor, the juxtaposed comments point out the lack of serious coverage the media gives the story and actually delves into the potentially sobering consequences. Following the shooting at an Aurora, Colorado movie theater in 2012, discussions about gun violence were quickly waved aside by politicians and conservative media pundits, with barely any pushback from journalists. After airing a montage of media personalities saying now is not the time to discuss gun control, Stewart launches into a thoughtful commentary on *why* the media must foster deeper conversations:

> So you're telling me it's too soon to even have a conversation about it? You're telling me that to discuss the epidemic of gun violence in this country, for that, there is a waiting period? Yeah, I guess you'd hate to go into a conversation about guns all hotheaded, say something impulsively you'll never be able to take back. Look, this is the time to talk about *all* of it. Everything should be on the table, anything that could

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[672] Foucault, "The Political Function of the Intellectual," 14.
[673] *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, Episode 13148. November 13, 2008.

> possibly mitigate these terrible events. I'm not saying gun control would do it. I'm just saying it's gotta be part of the conversation. I mean, is there anything we *can* talk about that shows this country's problem-solving mechanism is not irrevocably damaged? [Quick Fox News clip asking if costumes should be banned from movie theaters] All right. Didn't realize, all right, I stand corrected. Problem solved.

Although playing to the audience, Stewart is speaking directly to the media. He speaks from his position as media personality, pleading for a better journalistic practice that embraces the public sphere. His rhetoric is constructive, not destructive. Repeat viewing makes plain Stewart believes in the press and its ability to hold those in power responsible. His *parrhesia* attempts to remind the media of that calling.

Stewart's discourse also encourages his audience to reflect on processes of truth. Jonathan Gray makes the interesting distinction that, rather than stating truth, Stewart's mode of comedy encourages the viewer to establish his or her own truth.[674] I agree with Gray to some extent and suggest that Stewart functions as a facilitator, rhetorically constituting his audience as collaborators in the program's critical project. Stewart often engages in conversational direct address with the viewer, breaking out of the traditional authoritative anchor role and fostering the illusion of intimacy, by leaning in and speaking to the audience (both in studio and mediated). A common transitional device to move into this mode of address is Stewart's invitation to "meet me at camera three," when he turns to a different camera to speak more in depth to a particular newsmaker or personality. In reality, his speech is always directed at the audience (since the newsmaker is unlikely to view the program) and meant to influence their perception of the story being covered. In 2009 *TDS* aired a clip of Representative Michele Bachmann telling Fox News personality Sean Hannity the government would place young people in "re-education camps," with

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[674] Gray, *Television Entertainment*: 150-51.

Hannity responding that Bachmann will continue to be attacked because she fights tyranny. Stewart then asked them to meet him at camera three, saying "I think you might be confusing tyranny with losing…when the guy that you disagree with gets elected, he's probably going to do things you disagree with. He could cut taxes on the wealthy, remove government's oversight capability, invade a country that you thought shouldn't be invaded. That's not tyranny—that's democracy. See, now you're in the minority. It's supposed to taste like a shit taco."[675] His comments reject partisan demonization of opponents purely over disagreement in political philosophy, reminding viewers that elections inevitably result in political consequences. Through this process Stewart continues to foster an image of sincerity and a willingness to look beyond differences in opinion to deeper structures. Writing about the program's interview segment, Kelly Wilz argues that Stewart generates constructive discourse in line with agonistic democracy, that he "encourages responses, enters the engagement with a level of humility, and is willing to be 'changed' in his views."[676] This openness perfectly complements Stewart's complex anchor persona, defining him as a strong, intelligent advocate for political and media responsibility, yet with a sincere and self-effacing presentational style. The *TDS* host offered a perfect point of deviation when Stephen Colbert developed his on-screen character.

Stephen Colbert and Ironic Confusion

Predating Stewart on *TDS*, Colbert experienced the program's shift from entertainment-oriented to news-oriented program from the perspective of a field reporter,

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[675] *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, Episode 14046. April 7, 2009.
[676] Kelly Wilz, "Models of Democratic Deliberation: Pharmacodynamic Agonism in *The Daily Show*," in *The Daily Show and Rhetoric: Arguments, Issues, and Strategies*, ed. Trischa Goodnow (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2011), 84.

with Colbert's pieces moving from news of the strange to political topics. While his reporter persona usually played the straight man, the "Stephen Colbert" host character evolved over the first several years of Stewart's tenure to become the egocentric, idiotic prophet of conservatism he currently portrays. Developed as the counterpoint to Stewart's thoughtful sincerity, Colbert became the lead correspondent for *TDS*, advocating extreme conservative positions and spewing hyperbole for Stewart to countermand. With the 2005 launch of *Colbert*, the character solidified into a parody of self-important cable hosts, speaking boldly with little information and even less self-awareness. He began a recent show with "I am a humble man—and I would shout that from the mountain top."[677] Regular viewers of *Colbert* know the Colbert character is an act. However, Colbert weaves aspects of his real-life biography into the mix; for instance, both Colbert and "Colbert" were raised in South Carolina and each is Catholic. As a result, there is some confusion over how much of the Colbert character is an act and how much is real.[678] When appearing on the program or at a public event, such as a Congressional hearing or a rally, Colbert stays in character, refusing to acknowledge the act. During media interviews, however, Colbert the person emerges and provides important context for his character. When asked in a *60 Minutes* interview whether the *Colbert* host is smart, proud, or stupid, the satirist responds, "I think of him as a well-intentioned, poorly informed, high-status idiot."[679] The "well-intentioned" part seems especially important, because it allows the character to potentially be viewed as a subject of pity—his politics are not necessarily mean, just ill-conceived and unreflective.

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[677] *The Colbert Report*, Episode 8155. September 27, 2012.
[678] K. A. Wisniewski, "It's All About the Meme: The Art of the Interview and the Insatiable Ego of the Colbert Bump," in *The Stewart/Colbert Effect: Essays on the Real Impact of Fake News*, ed. Amarnath Amarasingam (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2011), 170.
[679] *60 Minutes*, April 30, 2006.

Both the character and program *Colbert* specifically copy Fox News' host Bill O'Reilly, whom Colbert refers to as "Papa Bear." As one of the longest-running and most consistently popular shows on 24-hour news, O'Reilly makes an obvious target for parody, also offering a cohesive personality to play off. Beginning as *The O'Reilly Report* in 1996, launched the same year as the conservative news channel, the program was renamed *O'Reilly Report* in 1998. The program remains one of the most-watched programs on the most-viewed cable news channel, largely due to its polarizing host. One study about the *O'Reilly Factor* describes the host's persona as "Honest, working class roots, the courage to speak truth to power, a commitment to truth and facts over ideology and spin."[680] Colbert claims to actually admire O'Reilly's hosting and rhetorical abilities, even if not agreeing with his politics.[681] In a rare in-character interview on *O'Reilly Factor*, Colbert says he emulates the Fox host on Comedy Central, reminding O'Reilly that emulation means no money is owed.[682] Colbert's parody of O'Reilly takes the conservative's qualities to their extremes. The act obviously criticizes the Fox News show specifically, but it extends its reach, as Jeffrey Jones points out, to become a parody of an entire genre of late-night cable yelling shows not limited to one person or even one network.[683] The characteristics of Colbert, however, focus mostly on conservative targets.

From the very opening of *Colbert*, American exceptionalism and patriotism are invoked. Audio of a screaming eagle kicks off the program, followed by headlines and an opening replete with patriotic imagery: an American flag-festooned bald eagle flies across

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[680] Matthew Norton, "A Structural Hermeneutics of *The O'Reilly Factor*," *Theory & Society* 40, no. 3 (2011): 325.
[681] Maureen Dowd, "America's Anchors," *Rolling Stone*, November 16, 2006.
[682] *The O'Reilly Factor*, January 18, 2007.
[683] Jones, *Entertaining Politics: Satiric Television and Political Engagement*: 186.

the screen, as an image of Colbert, arms outstretched, is surrounded by god terms: "authority," "power," "patriot," "honorable," "strong," "originalist," "star-spangled," "self-evident," and the Colbert-altered "me pluribus unum." Colbert disappears only to run back on screen, grabbing and literally waving the American flag. Geoffrey Baym calls Colbert's antics "spectacle scripted for the stage," and his larger-than-life opening helps establish that spectacle.[684] The red, white, and blue graphics accent the color scheme of the set, screaming "U.S.A.," just as the audience occasionally does. Bill Bergeron, who created the original opening for the show, says the design team closely reviewed the graphics of both O'Reilly and MSNBC's *Scarborough Country* (2003-2007) when deciding on *Colbert*'s visual style. Colbert's character defines his love for America with no exceptions, positioning the character as a kind of unthinking patriot. After calling America the greatest country in the world, Colbert launches into an attack on *Newsweek* for ranking the United States eleventh on the list of best countries, saying the ranking is "based on useless criteria. The criteria is education, quality of life, and health."[685] Colbert often mocks the jingoistic attitudes of other hosts by endorsing their arguments, such as when Sean Hannity calls America, "the greatest, best country God has ever given man on the face of the Earth." Colbert walks through an extended Venn diagram to show how Hannity could arrive at such a statement, and then tells viewers Hannity must love America almost as much as he does.[686] The blind patriotism of the character goes hand and hand with his political viewpoint.

Like O'Reilly and other Fox News hosts, Colbert's character advocates a brand of "common sense" conservative populism on his show, where the rest of the media are

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[684] Baym, *From Cronkite to Colbert: The Evolution of Broadcast News*: 130.
[685] *The Colbert Report*, Episode 6104. August 17, 2010.
[686] *The Colbert Report*, Episode 4082. June 19, 2008.

liberal extremists waging war against good, God-fearing Americans. In the wake of the 2012 Newtown school shooting, Colbert warned that, "the media's morbid obsession with the tens of thousands of people who are killed every year with guns is just part of the media's anti-gun agenda."[687] Since the elite are positioned against "Real America," information is not to be trusted because, as Colbert said at the 2006 White House Correspondents' Dinner, "reality has a well-known liberal bias."[688] This perspective is captured in the word he now-famously introduced on his very first episode of *Colbert*: "truthiness." Promising to speak plainly to his audience, Colbert says he is no fan of dictionaries and references books, who might say truthiness is not a word: "they're elitist." He continues, "I don't trust books; they're all fact and no heart, and that's exactly what's pulling our country apart today…We're divided between those who think with their head and those who know with their heart." Referring to President George W. Bush, Colbert talks about how Bush doesn't need to think because "he feels the truth" and then tells his audience that although they may not trust their gut yet, "you will, with my help…Anyone can *read* the news *to* you. I promise to *feel* the news *at* you." Discussing the word in an interview, Colbert points to the concept of truthiness as a major stumbling block that "is tearing apart our country," and laments the decline of facts over perceptions.[689] When no one can be swayed by facts, then there is no common ground for debate and partisanship creates its own internal logic. Colbert the character simply refuses to acknowledge facts, thereby avoiding any need for debate.[690]

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[687] *The Colbert Report*, Episode 9066. February 25, 2013.
[688] *White House Correspondents' Association Dinner*, April 29, 2006.
[689] Rabin, "Stephen Colbert".
[690] Baym, "Stephen Colbert's Parody of the Postmodern," 137.

The Colbert character, in creating his own reality, also makes himself infallible. Not only does he refuse to acknowledge conflicting facts, he also never admits mistakes. If footage fails to roll, he draws a picture or acts as if he suddenly changed his mind and no longer wants the video.[691] The 2008 live election special became a difficult scenario for Colbert to navigate in character, as Obama won state after state. Each McCain loss sent the Colbert character further into a state of denial, blaming plumbers for not voting and then later accusing hockey dads of not pulling their weight. As Stewart calls the election for Obama, Colbert presages Karl Rove's 2012 Fox News meltdown, saying "maybe, maybe," but then enthusiastically declares "McCain can still pull this thing out" before slipping on dark glasses and headphones.[692] The safety of the adoring Colbert audience offers an easier stage to stay in character and never admit defeat.

From his very first episode, Colbert cultivated a relationship of confederacy with his audience, inviting them to play along with the gag. Most nights the audience chants "Stephen, Stephen" following the opening, creating a raucous din of approval that accentuates the character's own self-promotion. Playing the populist (and imitating Fox News hosts like Hannity), Colbert calls his audience "The Colbert Nation," placing himself center stage. He repeatedly invokes populist language extolling the voice of the people, but always brings the attention back to himself. For instance, after filing with the SEC Colbert gave a press conference outside the agency, saying, "I am here to represent your voice, so please quiet down, so we can all hear what you have to say with my mouth."[693] Physically, he presents himself as a traditional news anchor with a serious demeanor, intense eye

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[691] Rabin, "Stephen Colbert".
[692] *Indecision 2008 - America's Choice Live Election Special*, November 4, 2008.
[693] *Colbert: 'Re-Becoming' the Nation We Always Were*, Fresh Air. October 4, 2012.

contact with the viewer, and less body movement than Stewart. While he will occasionally break character and attempt to kiss an over-the-shoulder graphic or engage in some physical silliness, such moments are exceptions. While playing the straight anchor to the viewers, he also engages his studio audience and reacts to them—although in character. Just as he refuses to admit mistakes, he also willingly misinterprets audience reaction to align with the Colbert character's perception. During a segment of "The Word," Colbert says Rush Limbaugh was "praising Obama for being so conniving he makes Lex Luthor look like a candy striper." The text to the side of Colbert changes to say, "Same candy striper who supplies Rush with Oxycontin," eliciting laughs and applause from the audience. Colbert, acting oblivious to the real direction of audience praises and wanting to act as if supporting Limbaugh, comments, "I *am* making a good point, aren't I?"[694] The ignorance, the politics, the extremism, all these elements constituting the Colbert character require decoding by the audience—an ability to discern irony and reconstitute the message with that awareness. Colbert's reliance on irony creates a different type of news parody from *TDS* and makes Colbert's anchor persona much more complex than Stewart's.

The Presentational Complexity of Irony

From the beginning headlines to the sign-off, every episode of *Colbert* traffics in irony. His presentational mode is insincerity; even if Colbert does actually agree with one of his statements, the audience is left wondering. Stewart constitutes his identity of sincerity and ethos primarily through satire. Although irony is a weapon he employs, satire is his primary mode of humor within the news parody. In the same way, Colbert uses satire, but

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[694] *The Colbert Report*, Episode 4155. December 3, 2008.

always within an ironic shell. Irony is a mode of creating comedy by saying the exact opposite of what is meant. As mentioned in the introduction, Hutcheon conceives of irony, parody, and satire as overlapping circles.[695] Stewart and Colbert use all three, but Colbert falls more within irony and parody, while Stewart occupies a space closer to satire and parody. These separate means of presentation result in very different news parody programs, and greater acceptance for Stewart within the journalistic and political fields. Interacting with Colbert's character creates more risk by being forced into either agreeing with or being attacked by outrageous comments, unable to shame or pin down the host. *Colbert*'s use of irony raises concerns from some media critics who suggest audiences may not see beyond the face value of the program's message.

Two studies demonstrate the complexity of audience perceptions of irony. Jody Baumgartner and Jonathan Morris, who have conducted numerous studies on humor programming and politics, found that viewing clips from *Colbert* actually increased young viewer's affinity for President George W. Bush and Republicans. The test subjects seemed unable to decode *Colbert*'s irony, suggesting viewers might actually take away the exact opposite message from the one intended. The study only used short clips from the show and test subjects unfamiliar with *Colbert*, so the authors suggest regular viewers would likely have less problems understanding the program's criticism.[696] Another study examined whether political affiliations affected viewer's interpretations of *Colbert*, finding similarly complex results. Audiences found selected clips humorous, regardless of political ideology; however, liberals perceived his humor as satiric, while conservatives believed

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[695] Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody: The Teachings of Twentieth-Century Art Forms*: 55-56.
[696] Baumgartner and Morris, "One "Nation" under Stephen? The Effects of *The Colbert Report* on American Youth."

Colbert was being genuinely critical of liberals.[697] These concerns about television viewer's misinterpretations of irony go back at least to the 1970s, when researchers found similar results with audiences watching *All in the Family*. Viewers who identified with Archie Bunker's bigoted views were less likely to identify statements as ironic.[698] The double-voice of irony always risks not being detected. *Colbert*'s use of parody creates an even more layered text.

Both the look and content of *Colbert* mimic conservative news programs to such an extent that at least one researcher suggests they appear almost identical. Lisa Colletta compares the coverage of two stories about race from *Colbert* and *O'Reilly Factor*, and finds the results troubling. Their strategies "are identical: reference to anecdote not facts, appeals to emotion rather than reason, use of "everyman" language and syntax (including a racial slur), and the spinning of a probably racist agenda into something that appears caring and courageous."[699] She argues the parody, taken out of context, becomes indistinguishable from the original and each runs the risk of merely confirming an audience member's pre-disposed beliefs.[700] Like the previous studies, Colletta raises an important note of warning: viewers unaware of personality-driven political programs or of the Colbert persona run the risk of misinterpreting the message. However, she offers no proof this regularly occurs, and I remain unconvinced. Like any other genre, repeat viewing and increased familiarity with a genre's conventions reward audiences. Colbert's fear of bears

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[697] Heather L. LaMarre, Kristen D. Landreville, and Michael A. Beam, "The Irony of Satire: Political Ideology and the Motivation to See What You Want to See in *The Colbert Report*," *International Journal of Press/Politics* 14, no. 2 (2009).
[698] Neil Vidmar and Milton Rokeach, "Archie Bunker's Bigotry: A Study in Selective Perception and Exposure," *Journal of Communication* 24, no. 1 (1974).
[699] Colletta, "Political Satire and Postmodern Irony in the Age of Stephen Colbert and Jon Stewart," 862.
[700] Ibid., 863.

is likely to leave viewers mystified until it takes on greater meaning through repeated use. While not wanting to merely sweep aside these concerns over irony, I do suggest some researchers give too little credit to audiences, especially young ones, who consistently engage in ironic internet memes and other sources of humor. In fact, the double-voiced nature of irony produces a different kind of critique of truth from Stewart.

While Colbert seems to always be speaking the "untruth" of his beliefs, the play of irony creates an openness to the text. He utters a statement with insincerity that he must disagree with, so what *does* he mean? Kevin Decker suggests the Colbert persona lacks any true center and therefore his irony forces viewers to examine their own ideas in comparison.[701] Rather than, like Stewart, advocating a Habermas-style public sphere, Colbert's seems closer to Foucault's genealogical process of questioning the very categories produced by culture. While interviewing Maryland Representative Donna Edwards, Colbert notes her district is the first majority African-American suburban congressional district. He then follows up, "I don't see race. I've evolved beyond that. I just pretend everybody's white and it's all good." Edwards then says Colbert's strategy would not work for her because she is black. Colbert stoically responds, "But I didn't know that until you told me. You see how you're the problem?"[702] Is Colbert commenting on his character's dependence on truthiness to create reality? Is the joke a commentary on Obama and post-racial utopianism? Does the sequence revisit the "colorblind" new racism of the 1980s? Is it merely absurdist? The answer to all these questions is "yes." Whereas Stewart's repeated appearances on *TDS* solidify the core of his utopian idea for political and media discourse, frequent viewing of *Colbert* only leaves the same question—what does Colbert believe and

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[701] Decker, "Stephen Colbert, Irony, and Speaking Truthiness to Power," 242-43.
[702] *The Colbert Report*, Episode 9098. May 7, 2013.

is there an idealist vision underlying his comedy? Another writer suggests this very polysemy opens up the program for different types of audiences to make sense of the stories covered by the show. For instance, viewers can applaud his patriotism while still rejecting conservative dogma.[703] This openness is a hallmark of the postmodern humor described by Olsen, and its use of irony.[704] The indeterminate stances can be reconfigured by savvy audiences while reflecting on their own desires and expectations for the public sphere. Admittedly, not every viewer would be expected to so actively engage the program, but its ironic form does open it up to the opportunity.

The Colbert persona represents a conflicted presence at the anchor desk, and thus at the center of *Colbert*. On the one hand, he brilliantly caricatures a conservative political host, shifting all aspects to their extremes: nationalist, ultraconservative, religiously dogmatic, and profoundly uninformed. Yet his ironic mode turns all of these qualities on their head. He sincerely delivers the news as he sees it to his audience, denying the statements as they are uttered. Despite their drastic difference in presentation and strategy, *Colbert* and *TDS* engage the same subjects, often creating two voices of criticism resonating together.

Presidential Politics

Prior to the 2000 presidential election, most political coverage from *TDS* under Stewart was indistinguishable from the political pastiche of *NNTN*. Sex jokes, redubbed footage, and awkward photos offered humor, but little actual critique of the government,

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[703] Wisniewski, "It's All About the Meme: The Art of the Interview and the Insatiable Ego of the Colbert Bump."
[704] Olsen, *Circus of the Mind in Motion: Postmodernism and the Comic Vision*: 18.

much less its policies. The previously discussed shift in content accelerated with *TDS*'s "Indecision 2000" coverage, thereafter placing presidential and national politics at the top of its news agenda. The presidency received attention from both Weekend Update and *NNTN*, but nowhere near the sustained focus of the Comedy Central programs. Due to their appearance four nights a week, *TDS* and *Colbert* create a deeper and more sustained criticism of the political process as a whole, not limited to just the presidency. This depth is a major difference from previous news parody programs that aired weekly (or even more infrequently). Over the last two-term presidencies the Comedy Central shows established representational strategies for Presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama. Conventional wisdom and a number of commentators accuse the programs of emphasizing partisanship in their coverage, favoring liberal policies and politicians; however, studies reveal a more complex dynamic.

Partisanship can, of course, be measured in a variety of ways. One content analysis looking at the time *TDS* devoted to coverage of presidential primaries leading up to the 2008 election found mostly equal airtime given to the two major parties. Once McCain became the presumptive favorite for the GOP, coverage tilted in favor of the Democrats as the battle between Obama and Hillary Clinton continued. In other words, *TDS*'s coverage roughly equaled the newsworthiness of each party's nomination process, shifting to more reporting on the Democrats after the Republicans locked in their pick. Interestingly, the study actually found more jokes about the Democrats and the media during the time period studied than about Republicans, although the content of the jokes were not analyzed.[705] Another study by the Pew Center Project for Excellence in Journalism found similar equity

[705] Ryan Lee Teten, "Mouthpiece of the Liberal Left? Jon Stewart and *The Daily Show*'s "Real" Coverage of Election 2008," *Public Integrity* 14, no. 1 (2011).

in terms of the politics of guests appearing on *TDS*; however, they reported harsher treatment of conservatives versus liberals.[706] The difference in partisan jokes is confirmed by an earlier *TDS* analysis, conducted during the 2004 elections. That study found a higher number of jokes about the GOP and reported those jokes were more substantive, while humor about Democrats tended to be based on physical appearance. In addition, the study also compared attitudes of viewers, finding that watching *TDS* resulted in more negative perceptions of Bush and Cheney, but no effect on opinions of the Democratic challengers.[707] With Bush running for a second term, researchers admit Republicans were more likely to be criticized as the governing party; however, the results could be interpreted as a partisan attitude from the program.

Stewart and others involved in *TDS* deny charges of partisanship, claiming humor as their primary concern. In an early interview Ben Karlin says, "We always cut to the funny." Stewart backs him up, but emphasizes the critical nature of the humor, "What we go after are not actual policies, but the façade *behind* them."[708] The timing of *TDS* likely increased perceptions of partisanship. The program's rise in political content and popularity coincided with eight years of conservative governance under Bush, defining the outlook of the program in opposition to the administration. As I show below, both *TDS* and *Colbert* continued to hold politicians accountable under President Obama; however, viewers would be hard pressed to argue the coverage is parallel. The progressive outlook of each program leads to assumptions about freedom of speech, economic equality, and other ideological

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[706] "Journalism, Satire or Just Laughs? "The Daily Show with Jon Stewart," Examined", 20.
[707] Jonathan Morris, "*The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* and Audience Attitude Change During the 2004 Party Conventions," *Political Behavior* 31(2009).
[708] Marshall Sella, "The Stiff Guy Vs. The Dumb Guy," *New York Times Magazine*, September 24, 2000, 77.

positions that obviously affect coverage at every level, from gatekeeping to framing. However, political outlook does not neatly align with Democrats and Republicans. Jeffrey Jones offers a more compelling framework by looking beyond simple partisanship to examine the guiding principles the show embodies.[709] *TDS* and *Colbert* focus more on revealing hypocrisy and illusion *across* politics than on forwarding a specific political agenda. *Quality* of discourse, both from the media and politicians, takes center stage and sets the tone for their coverage.

W – the Punchline: News Parody and Conservative Politics

Coverage of the 2000 presidential election left little doubt where *TDS* would take its comedy if Bush were to win the White House. In the same article emphasizing the show's nonpartisanship, Ben Karlin reflected on the Republican nominee, saying "this is just a clear case of one candidate being inferior to the other….It's so obvious he's wrong in every way."[710] Karlin's statement reflects the general tone of *TDS* toward Bush across the campaign and even into his presidency. The night the Supreme Court settled the election by awarding Florida's votes to Bush, *TDS* led first with the Court's action, then covered Al Gore's concession with extended sound bites, and, finally, got to Bush. Supposedly introducing video of Bush's reaction to Gore's speech, the show then rolls video of Yosemite Sam shooting himself into the air with two guns pointed at the ground. Part of Bush's actual speech then rolls, discussing how the election of Thomas Jefferson took multiple ballots. Stewart, speaking for Bush and with an image of Sherman Hemsley over his shoulder, continues, "Me, I'm not even *George* Jefferson." The dialogue with Bush's video continues:

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[709] Jones, *Entertaining Politics: Satiric Television and Political Engagement*: 111.
[710] Sella, "The Stiff Guy Vs. The Dumb Guy," 77.

BUSH: I was not elected to serve one party.

STEWART: You were not elected.

BUSH: I have something else to ask you, to ask every American. I ask for you to pray for this great nation.

STEWART: [speaking softly] We're way ahead of ya'.

Stewart transitions to correspondent Mo Rocca, green-screened in front of the Texas capital, who reports, "Bush was ecstatic that he helped put his father back in the White House. Minutes later, after learning it was he that would be president, Bush was surprised and then appalled at the thought of having to sleep with his mother."[711] Tapping into the dominant comedic mode at the time, *TDS* presented Bush as unintelligent, unsophisticated, and childlike. In future years this portrayal would continue to resonate, but with the invasion of Iraq, the so-called war on terror, and attacks on civil liberties, the show's coverage of Bush became more heated, treating him less like a man-child and more like a dangerously ignorant and potentially devious leader.

Following 9/11 Bush experienced incredible support from both the public and traditional media. *TDS* continued to question certain policy decisions, but coverage of Bush was less aggressive than before the attacks. Bush's first State of the Union address only garnered a couple of easy jokes. The program played Bush's opening statement "As we gather here tonight, our nation is at war, our economy is in recession, and the civilized world faces unprecedented dangers." Stewart followed with, "And that's just my first year."[712] Foreign policy, such as Bush's reference to the Axis of Evil, barely ranked a mention. Stewart and Colbert did engage in a dialogue warning that Bush's economic plans

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[711] *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, Episode 5072. December 13, 2000.
[712] *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, Episode 6090. January 30, 2002.

would lead to large deficits; however, focus was on policy, not the president himself. With America's steady march to war in Iraq a year after 9/11, *TDS* devoted increased coverage to international concern over America's military plans and the lack of any proof of weapons of mass destruction.

The following year, after the invasion of Iraq, Stewart expressed concern over the tone of public discourse and the increasing inability to ask questions or voice any dissent with the administration without being attacked as unpatriotic. Stewart claims that "Tonight, we're going to have an honest, open debate between the president of the United States and the one man we believe has the insight and cojones to stand up to him." Stewart then, in a masterfully edited sequence, moderates a debate between the 2002 President Bush and Governor Bush from two years earlier when he was running for president, with Governor Bush disagreeing with statements from the contemporary president. The debate sometimes uses split screen to make it seem as if the two Bushes are reacting to each other. In one example, the president states, "We will tear down the apparatus of terror and we will help you to build a new Iraq that is prosperous and free." Governor Bush responds, "I don't think our troops ought to be used for what's called nation-building." In the absence of real dialogue, and timidity from the traditional press in asking hard questions, the segment stands out for holding the president accountable for his policy shifts.

Over the remainder of Bush's presidency, both *TDS* and *Colbert* continued to cover the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan at a time when many mainstream news sources were no longer devoting as much space to the conflicts. Bruce Williams and Michael Delli Carpini point out how the shows were able to show support for American troops, while continuing

to critique the administration's handling of the war.[713] *TDS* correspondent Rob Riggle and Colbert even visited troops in Iraq.

True to his character, Colbert supported Bush with irony from the very beginning of his television show, tying his admiration for truthiness directly to the president. Standing up for Bush amidst concern over policies towards torturing detainees, Colbert points to Bush's statement that his administration is acting within the law. Colbert then points out, "If we're doing it, it's legal, okay? Torture is illegal, ergo—and that's Latin for bite me—we do not torture. So, Senator McCain, stop trying to take our right away to do it, because it doesn't exist."[714] Colbert runs with Bush's logic, making it all the more absurd. Throughout Bush's second term Colbert advocates the conservative policies of the administration and takes their rationales to illogical extremes. In a later controversy over the firing of United States attorneys, the administration stipulated former counsel Harriet Miers and political advisor Karl Rove could only be questioned in private interviews without oaths or transcripts. Colbert praised Bush for compromising and noted, "See, the president's just trying to save the country from another painful perjury trial!"[715]

Colbert's appearance at the 2006 White House Correspondents Dinner proved to be his ultimate commentary on the Bush presidency. Refusing to offer the usual silly, yet polite jokes for which the event is known, Colbert unleashed a scathingly ironic speech on the president, leaving everyone looking uncomfortable. Standing just a couple of feet from Bush, Colbert declared:

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[713] Bruce A. Williams and Michael X. Delli Carpini, *After Broadcast News: Media Regimes, Democracy, and the New Information Environment* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2011). 275.
[714] *The Colbert Report*, Episode 1014. November 8, 2005.
[715] *The Colbert Report*, Episode 3039. March 21, 2007.

> I stand by this man. I stand by this man because he stands for things. Not only for things, he stands *on* things. Things like aircraft carriers and rubble and recently flooded city squares. And that sends a strong message, that no matter what happens to America, she will always rebound with the most powerfully staged photo ops in the world….The greatest thing about this man is he's steady. You know where he stands. He believes the same thing Wednesday that he believed on Monday, no matter what happened Tuesday. Events can change; this man's beliefs never will.[716]

Just as much a target of Colbert's humor as the president, the mainstream press barely covered Colbert's appearance, but the speech went viral, becoming an Internet sensation.[717] Colbert presented the president as out-of-touch and inflexible, an image already constructed nightly on *Colbert* and *TDS*.

In the waning days of Bush's second term, *TDS* coverage continued to focus on Bush's actions and policies, especially in the president's "reflective" comments on his legacy. *World News Tonight*'s Charles Gibson asked the president if there was an "uh-oh moment" in his presidency. Stewart, in outrage, responds "An uh-oh moment? Why do we have to talk to this jackass like he's four? When did foolhardy war and an economic collapse become uh-oh moments?"[718] In these so-called exit interviews, Stewart repeatedly expresses outrage both at the tepid questions and Bush's responses. Covering Bush's farewell address, *TDS* played a clip of the president: "You may not agree with some of the tough decisions I had made, but I hope you can agree that I was willing to make the tough decisions." Stewart, in his frequently used imitation, mimics Bush, saying, "The things that I did may have been catastrophically wrong, but I think we can all agree I did do them."[719]

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[716] *White House Correspondents' Association Dinner*, April 29, 2006.
[717] For analysis of Colbert's speech, see Jones, *Entertaining Politics: Satiric Television and Political Engagement*: 80-83; Day, *Satire and Dissent: Interventions in Contemporary Political Debate*: 80-81.
[718] *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, Episode 13155. December 3, 2008.
[719] *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, Episode 14009. January 19, 2009.

TDS and *Colbert* overwhelmingly generated negative coverage of President Bush while in office, as demonstrated here. Whether partisanship played a primary role is open to interpretation. Like Jones, I view the coverage more as the inevitable satirical clash with power. Satire always targets those in control, and not only was Bush president, but the expansion of powers given to and taken by him after 9/11 only increased the potential for satire. The Bush administration's repeated inventions of facts and incorporation of the logic of truthiness also created plenty of opportunities for playing conflicting sound bites.[720] Due to their increased influence, both programs helped to define Bush in the American consciousness. Unsurprisingly, Bush has yet to accept repeated invitations to be a guest on either show.

Hoping for Change: News Parody Coverage of Obama

Unlike his predecessor, Barack Obama appeared as a guest on the *TDS* multiple times both before and after becoming president. Less than two weeks before the 2008 election Stewart hosted Obama via satellite. Following the cheers of the audience the host noted, "Our audience, very excited sir. Clearly our show, not a swing show." Like the *TDS* interview of John Kerry four years earlier, Stewart asked easy questions of the candidate about campaign activities and strategy, even asking Obama to respond to conservative fears about an Obama presidency.[721] The program obviously offered a friendly venue for a Democratic nominee to excite young viewers already likely to lean progressive. Initial *TDS* coverage of Obama as both candidate and president tended to be accommodating, giving

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[720] For more on Bush and truthiness, see Frank Rich, *The Greatest Story Ever Sold: The Decline and Fall of Truth in Bush's America* (New York, NY: The Penguin Press, 2006).
[721] *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, Episode 13140. October 29, 2008.

him the benefit of the doubt, and presenting him as a welcome alternative to the McCain/Palin ticket.

As a news parody program, humor obviously has to be part of the coverage. Leading up to the election and in the early days of the administration, most of *TDS*'s humor revolved around Obama as an open text and inflated rhetoric about Obama as the candidate of change. While covering the Democratic National Convention, *TDS* presented a fake Obama nominating film supposedly leaked to the program called "Barack Obama: He Completes Us." The feature distills varies discourses about Obama into a condensed code of signifiers. Opening with black-and-white images of conflict, partisanship, and a burning American flag, a narrator introduces America as a country torn apart, but "a hero will come." Shifting to the full-color opening sunrise from Disney's *The Lion King*, complete with instantly recognizable tribal chants, the film interweaves enthusiastic comments about Obama with the Disney scene of Simba's introduction on top of Pride Rock. The music builds and Rafiki lifts the lion cub to reveal an animated Barack Obama face on Simba's body, transitioning suddenly to the nominating film's title. Immediately, the film ties Obama to an American fairy tale set in Africa, invoking the candidate's mixed cultural heritage and also ascribing a mythic quality to Obama's success. In terms of semiotics, the first scene could be interpreted multiple ways, invoking an almost messianic quality and presenting the candidate's success as a "too good to be true" type of fairy tale. The film continues, borrowing heavily from the presentational style of history documentaries, using animations, Ken Burns photo effects, and fake archival footage (showing Raj from *What's Happening!!* as a teenage Obama). The candidate's history is presented as the reconciliation of conflicts: white and black, Christian and Muslim, land mammal and sea creature, with the

narrative ultimately suggesting Obama will help the nation overcome all its divisions. The film plays up his lack of political experience, showing a sketch of colonial legislators with Obama's face photoshopped onto the main speaker and then layering newspaper pull quotes about mundane pieces of legislation over the image. The narration dramatically reports on his "historic" career in the Illinois legislature, having served "two-thirds of one decade." After describing his rise in the Democratic party, a montage of unity follows, showing Popeye and Bluto playing, a dog licking a cat, Seinfeld and Newman shaking hands, and other over-the-top images of reconciliation. "Now. At the precipice of a new age, one man seems ready-enoughish to lead. One man who will once more unite the world." As the film ends, the continents on a spinning globe come together to form Obama's face.[722] While not necessarily a negative piece, the film satirically exaggerates discourses about hope, change, post-racialism, and the hype surrounding a largely untested political candidate. Humor about Obama on *TDS* commonly wove in this sense of caution and disbelief—not rejecting these discourses, but approaching the nominee as an open text that voters were filling with their own hopes and desires.

Exaggerations about Obama continued after his election, with the *TDS* post-election special adding a new segment, "Greatness Watch: Road to Rushmore" with a graphic of the president-elect's face added to Mt. Rushmore. A montage of cable news' ridiculously in-depth coverage of Obama's plane flight from Chicago to the nation's capital, subsequent limousine ride to the White House, and meeting with President Bush sets up the coverage, with pundits interpreting the body language of the two men in ridiculous detail. *TDS* follows with a discussion from "The Best Fucking Roundtable Ever," composed of Stewart

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[722] *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, Episode 13109. August 28, 2008.

and correspondents Samantha Bee, Jason Jones, and Aasif Mandvi discussing the "twenty-second" clip of the meeting between the president and president-elect. Bee says she was struck by "the grandeur of the man in the moment making history (while slow motion video of the greeting rolls). Just look at the way the president-elect grasped his predecessor's hand—swift, precise, breathtaking, thumb over fingers, interlocking. If he continues to greet world leaders with this kind of handshake, history may well judge him to be the greatest president of all time." Mandvi disagrees and dismisses the handshake, but points to Obama's portico walk with Bush, "A healthy, young black man striding beside a decrepit, barely-ambulatory white man. A historical tableau that I've entitled 'Driving Mr. Daisy.'" Bee agrees, saying "It's clear now that black people are the master race."[723] The segment criticizes the media's over-analysis of insignificant detail, but also continues to play on the over-hyping of Obama. However, the satire is focused on the media and American people as the actual target of the humor. Doubts about Obama are raised, but responsibility for overblown rhetoric is not really attributed to the president-elect.

Subsequent years brought tougher coverage of Obama from *TDS* and more bipartisan reproach for Congress. The politics of the show continue to lean progressive, and as a result their criticisms of Obama never reach the kind of sustained, vehement objections leveled at Bush. One of *TDS*'s main lines of satire against Obama has been where he continued Bush-era policies, opening a gap between campaign rhetoric and presidential actions. After Obama lodged complaints against earmarks when running in 2008, Stewart predicts the president is sure to veto a spending bill stuffed with pork-barrel spending,

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[723] *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, Episode 13146. November 11, 2008.

only to be followed by video of Obama signing the bill.[724] The program often pointedly criticizes the administration's secrecy, after Obama ran for the office promising increased government transparency. Stewart dives into a spirited condemnation of the president's policies after Obama refuses to release images of prisoner abuse. A clip of Obama plays, with the president saying such photos would "flame anti-American opinion and put our troops in greater danger." Stewart points out the irony of Obama's statement, that torturing prisoners to keep America safe creates pictures that would make the nation unsafe and then asks, "Is there any line we still will not cross?" The program cuts to coverage about a soldier who translates Arabic being dismissed from the military because he is gay. Stewart responds in outrage, "So it was okay to waterboard a guy over eighty times, but God forbid the guy who can understand what that prick was saying has a boyfriend!' More media coverage follows, explaining that despite supporting the rights of gay soldiers, the president will not intervene in any cases. Stewart then reminds viewers to always "check the fine print," as they cut to an image of Obama giving a speech with a "Yes We Can" sign on the podium and then shows a close up of the sign, with a tiny phrase underneath: "But that doesn't necessarily mean we're going to."[725] Passionate moments of condemnation like this are much fewer than in the Bush era, but they reveal a general disappointment among many progressives who feel that Obama failed to live up to their desires for a more responsive and transparent government.

Response to Obama's election from *Colbert* has been predictable, given the show's ironic conservative mode. Post-election, the program described how Kenya declared a state holiday and showed other nations celebrated Obama's election. Playing his character,

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[724] *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, Episode 14035. March 11, 2009.
[725] *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, Episode 14067. May 14, 2009.

Colbert condemns the international response, minimizing the historic nature of the election and saying America already honors all presidents on President's Day under the founder's original plans, "with a half-off sale at J.C. Penney."[726] The report plays into conservative complaints about Obama's international appeal. Tapping into his previously established "color-blindness," Colbert condemned any mention of the historic nature of Obama's election, accusing Democrats of being secret racists and only voting for Obama to get him out of the Senate: "Notice how they give him his own separate, but equal branch of government."[727] The show parallels some of *TDS*'s criticisms—for instance, Obama's failure to adopt policies he campaigned on; however, Colbert's mode of imitating O'Reilly and other cable-news personalities also links his humor to prevailing conservative rhetoric.

Following Obama's election, in an out-of-character interview on *Fresh Air*, Colbert says he saw new trends in the messaging of right-wing pundits. Conservatives claim America was ripped away by liberals and has to be restored: "There's been this sense that you mustn't criticize America because it's perfect. But then again, America is in the toilet and we have to fix it. This strange paradox: America is perfect, and we must fix it."[728] Adopting this position from conservatives and taking it to extremes, Colbert's character argues "real Americans" must take back the nation, using his show to highlight the most divisive personalities taking this position, like Glenn Beck and Michele Bachmann, undercutting the argument.

Criticism of Obama often functions to both challenge conservative claims and to defend the president. Following the killing of Osama bin Laden and GOP complaints of

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[726] *The Colbert Report*, Episode 4145. November 6, 2008.
[727] *The Colbert Report*, Episode 5001. January 5, 2009.
[728] *Colbert: 'Re-Becoming' the Nation We Always Were*, Fresh Air. October 4, 2012.

Obama taking credit, Colbert condemned the president for being in office at the time of the raid, and thus politicizing it. He then complains, "This president is so desperate for a bump in the polls to push his agenda, that he took the easy road of killing the world's most wanted man."[729] By limiting the program to the replication and parody of conservative cable programs that relentlessly attack Obama, *Colbert* actually creates more consistently supportive coverage of Obama than *TDS*, although encased within its ironic framework.

In examining the coverage of the last two presidents by *TDS* and *Colbert*, conclusions could be drawn about the programs' partisanship. Bush certainly received harsher treatment from both shows. Dismissive of Bush from the beginning, early *TDS* coverage of his presidency focused criticism on his policies, rather than his character, presenting the president as an out-of-his-league, well-meaning idiot. By his second term, though, stories increasingly ascribed more agency and responsibility to the president, directing their satire at his motives as well as his agenda. *Colbert* took the latter route with its ironic blessings of Bush, presenting him as ideological and inflexible. Coverage of Obama mostly stays away from character attacks. Rather than impugning his motives, the programs call attention to the disconnect between his rhetoric and actions. The political reporting on both programs defies easy categorizations, though. More so than presidents or even political parties, the two news parody programs target a lack of humility and public integrity from the powerful, broadening their focus to include a vast array of elected and non-elected officials: staffers, lobbyists, business leaders, etc. *TDS* and *Colbert* attempt to expose the broken aspects of America's political, economic, and social systems. They break away from the almost single-minded political importance other news parody programs have placed on presidents.

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[729] *The Colbert Report*, Episode 7058. May 5, 2010.

Previous programs, appearing less frequently, like Weekend Update, focused on presidents as the most easily recognizable figure in the news cycle. While continuing to follow the presidency, the Comedy Central shows, appearing four nights per week, create broader, more sustained news parody.

Killing the Messengers: News Parody as a Media Corrective

The Pew Center's most recent report on the state of the news media outlined how deep cuts in personnel and funding over the last decade severely reduced reporting across traditional media. In television, local news content decreased, CNN story packages fell by half over a five-year period, and live coverage of events on cable news decreased by 30%. Summarizing the fallout, the study warns, "This adds up to a news industry that is more undermanned and unprepared to uncover stories, dig deep into emerging ones or to question information put into its hands."[730] Decreasing resources for covering news is only the latest hit for an industry already suffering from a weakened relationship with its audience. Television news, especially cable, increasingly turned its back on traditional public policy coverage and investigative news during the post-network era, opting for ratings-driven tragedies and scandals, inexpensive pundit roundtables, infotainment, and public relations-driven stories. Audience trust fell to an all-time low in 2012, with 56% of the public believing the information from major news organizations, down from 71% ten years earlier.[731] Another study found only 29% of Americans agreed that the media usually

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[730] "The State of the News Media 2012," The Pew Research Center's Project for Excellence in Journalism, http://stateofthemedia.org/2013/overview-5/.
[731] "Further Decline in Credibility Ratings for Most News Organizations," Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, http://www.people-press.org/2012/08/16/further-decline-in-credibility-ratings-for-most-news-organizations/1/.

has facts correct.[732] The United States now has more media outlets than ever before with the rise of the Internet, but citizens trust what they see and hear less. *TDS* and *Colbert* developed during acceleration of these shifts, fashioning themselves as critics of the state of the media, but also as correctives and supplements. Rather than trying to tear down modern journalism, as some have suggested, these news parody programs actually attempt to revitalize traditional media efforts through criticism.

As outlined in the introduction, one of the most frequently identified problems with modern journalism is its constrained view of objectivity. While the desire for an "unbiased" press may seem like an appealing idea, in practice objectivity has instead become an oppressive, naturalized structure incorporated into a routine focused on insulating reporters from claims of bias. Journalists shy away from asking hard questions. They allow politicians to set the news agenda and often lack the fierce voice necessary to question the political framing and selection of information. In short, the journalists' fear of seeming subjective effectively prevents them from functioning as watchdog.

A critique of journalistic objectivity is one of the major projects of both *TDS* and *Colbert*. By trying to focus on facts to the exclusion of analysis and perspective, many journalists inevitably fall prey to the rhetoric and machinations of politicians and power structures in society. Writing in the 1920s, Walter Lippman argued that news and truth can overlap at times, but only for brief moments; otherwise, reporting is about uncertainty and personal perspective.[733] News parody programs, rather than being afraid, embrace this uncertainty as a mode of inquiry. Their coverage seeks to produce more discussion of a

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[732] "Press Accuracy Rating Hits Two Decade Low".
[733] Walter Lippman, *Public Opinion* (Toronto, Canada: Collier-Macmillian Canada, Ltd., 1965). 226.

given event, rather than cut off discussion by proclaiming truth. In interviews Stewart seems to commiserate with the plight of journalists, "if they feel like they express any moral authority or judgment, which is what you would imagine is editorial control, that they will be vilified."[734] However, at the same time Stewart holds the press accountable for their craft and demands more courage from the media. Colbert's concept of truthiness operates as the flipside of extreme objectivity, setting up absolute truth against unproven belief. The expansion of news sources over the last two decades led to more variety in journalism, with some news outlets embracing ideological perspectives, although, like Fox News, not always plainly acknowledging their partisanship. More partisan media, like Fox News and MSNBC, actually share a commonality with news parody: each feature more stories *about* the press than the networks.[735] *Columbia Review of Journalism*'s Michael Hoyt suggests both Fox News and *TDS* (and, by extension, *Colbert*) can be viewed as "reactions to distorted objectivity."[736] The Comedy Central programs advocate an idealist view of journalism and satirically point out the areas where the press falls short.

Structural Criticisms of Television News

In earlier sections on the news parody of *TDS* and *Colbert*, I described how they mimic the look and presentational style of television news; network and cable news on the one hand, and personality-driven partisan news shows on the other. In this section I briefly highlight how the programs' imitation of news *mise-en-scène* functions as a critique of the

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[734] *Jon Stewart: The Most Trusted Name in Fake News*, Fresh Air. October 4, 2010.
[735] David Wise and Paul R. Brewer, "News About News in a Presidential Primary Campaign: Press Metacoverage on Evening News, Political Talk, and Political Comedy Programs," *Atlantic Journal of Communication* 18, no. 3 (2010).
[736] Warren St. John, "The Week That Wasn't," *New York Times*, October 3, 2004.

use of style in television's journalistic enterprise. Immense effort is exerted to create the appearance of contemporary news on both programs. Simple strategies, such as on-camera anchor framing, two shots, and transitional cuts borrow the semiotics of contemporary news to create a persuasive mirror image.[737] Graphics also offer a rich source for satire in themselves.

Since the early 1990s the growth of compositing and graphics software, combined with the move towards digital switchers and workflow in studio control rooms, has drastically increased the complexity and volume of graphics incorporated into newscasts. Simple over-the-shoulder graphics retrieved from a still store gave way to video servers with motion beds, layered images, bottom thirds, logos and a vast array of other dynamic images occupying screen space with anchors. *TDS* seems to especially delight in overcrowding the screen with graphics. Contemporary television news developed multiple graphics strategies, including the creation of thematic graphics to visually link story elements together, and branding graphics to identify segments as part of the news program or station identity.[738] *TDS* and *Colbert* copy many of these tactics, such as creating common graphics for repeat segments like "The Word" on *Colbert* and *TDS*'s continual coverage of the invasion of Iraq, dubbed "Mess O'Potamia."

Often the graphics of the two Comedy Central programs are almost indistinguishable from actual news images, set apart only through textual puns. A complex

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[737] For more detail about the mimicking of news style on *TDS*, see Lawrence J. Mullen, "Visual Aspects of *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*," in *The Daily Show and Rhetoric: Arguments, Issues, and Strategies*, ed. Trischa Goodnow (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2011).

[738] C. A. Tuggle, Forrest Carr, and Suzanne Huffman, *Broadcast News Handbook: Writing, Reporting, and Producting in the Age of Social Media*, 5th ed. (New York, NY: McGraw-Hill, 2011). 118-19.

composite image accompanies the aforementioned story about the Obama administration denying access to photos of torture. Set apart from the graphic bed in a box, an image of a detainee being led by two soldiers layers over the CIA seal, the Capitol dome, and an American flag. The punch line, rendered in text underneath, reads "Moral Kombat" in the logo of the 1990's videogame *Mortal Kombat* (Figure 5.4).[739] The graphic accompanies the main story, but serves as a self-contained joke, playing with the familiar form of news graphics. Vic Fina, a graphics designer for *TDS* actually describes how his first assignment for the show was creating a parody of art he had previously created at CNN before leaving the network. At the 24-hour news channel, a graphic about the execution of Saddam Hussein read "Hanging Hussein"; at *TDS* the language changed to the only-slightly more flippant "Autocratic Asphyxiation."[740] Sometimes images are edited to include or remove information in order to generate humor, such as the example of adding NASCAR-style advertisement to Hillary Clinton's pantsuit. As Lawrence Mullen points out, this type of image manipulation is forbidden in mainstream news, but lends itself as a further satiric strategy in news parody.[741]

The more extravagant technological trappings of television news also invite parody. From the earliest days of microwaves and satellites, news programs fixated on the live shot. Although often used with the flimsiest of excuses (do we need to see a reporter outside a building supply store as a tropical storm bears down?), stations emphasize "on the scene," live coverage. *TDS* regularly chromakeys correspondents in front of supposed live locations as they stand in the studio. Amber Day points out that one of the audience pleasures of the

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[739] *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, Episode 14067. May 14, 2009.
[740] Hanas, "And That's the Way It Isn't," 54.
[741] Mullen, "Visual Aspects of *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*," 179-81.

program is an awareness of how *TDS* imitates the news. Repeat viewers are fully aware that live reports are faked, enjoying not only the parody, but the poorly constructed illusion.[742] Covering the White House Correspondence Dinner in May, John Oliver stands in front of a hotel with a Christmas tree outside as Stewart laughs and comments on the lovely decorations.[743] The holiday adornments instantly give away that the footage is old and, therefore, not live. Elections especially bring out the technophilia of news stations and their attempts to bring increasingly expensive and useless methods of presenting personalities and election returns. After the 2008 election, *TDS* included a special segment on such news toys simply titled "Why?" After showing a montage of virtual sets, touch screens, a map of the United States painted on an ice rink, and other crimes against simplicity, the reel ends with CNN presenting a reporter as a hologram and Stewart, commenting, as if working for CNN, "We could've just had your image crystal clear on one of those ten-foot high, HD plasma screens we have all around the studio, but I like this weird unbelievably distracting *Mortal Kombat* videogame thing we decide to do."[744] The news parody programs satirize the visual style of television news by taking representational strategies to their extreme and criticizing the all-too-frequent emphasis of appearance of the news over its content.

News Routine

The humor of *TDS* and *Colbert* expands beyond their parody of presentational style to include satire of the highly routinized newsgathering and reporting process. News continually replicates itself, leading to story "shells," developed over decades and filled

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[742] Day, "And Now...The News? Mimesis and the Real in *The Daily Show*," 88.
[743] *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, Episode 14064. May 11, 2009.
[744] *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, Episode 13144. November 8, 2008.

with current information. At some point a journalist wrote the original presidential campaign as horse race story, but subsequent coverage replicates the storytelling mode, creating simulacra, copies without an original.[745] Beyond its presentational mode, the entire process of newsgathering operates under its own logic and routines. Discussing the 2006 White House Correspondents Dinner, Robert Tally, Jr. suggests Colbert's speech received so little coverage specifically because it revealed the assembled press as "simulacra of simulacra," journalists unaware of their own fake standing.[746] Colbert reminded the media of the way journalism now works: "The President makes decisions. He's the decider. The press secretary announces those decisions, and you people of the press type those decisions down. Make, announce, type." Since they no longer practice journalism, Colbert then suggested members of the press could use their free time to "Write that novel you got kicking around in your head. You know, the one about the intrepid Washington reporter with the courage to stand up to the administration? You know, fiction!"[747] Colbert, embodying the role of satirist, reminded the press how they fail to live up to their own calling: a call for action met with silence. Through parody, these shows delight in stripping away the veneer from news, in revealing its own constructed nature and underlying "common sense" logic.

Veteran news anchor David Brinkley once said, "The one function that TV news performs very well is that when there is no news, we give it to you with the same emphasis

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[745] Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*: 21-22.
[746] Robert T. Tally, Jr., "I Am the Mainstream Media (and So Can You!)," in *The Stewart/Colbert Effect: Essays on the Real Impact of Fake News*, ed. Amarnath Amarasingam (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2011), 160.
[747] *White House Correspondents' Association Dinner*, April 29, 2006.

as if there were."[748] Brinkley's quote highlights a major downfall of the media industry, especially television—the "news hole," the free time in a broadcast (absent commercial breaks and bumpers) that must be filled. On 15- and then 30-minute network newscasts the problem occasionally arose. With the move to 24-hour media and the constant fight for exclusive coverage, newsworthiness dove into a tailspin. One of the most frequent topics of current news parody programs is the media's sensationalism of the everyday: extensive coverage of inconsequential events and the media's self-generation of news. After months of coverage of the American embassy attack in Benghazi, Libya, three so-called whistleblowers were expected to testify in front of a House committee. *Colbert* aired a montage of Fox News coverage anticipating the testimony and discussing potential information that might be revealed before finishing the clip with Chris Wallace admitting that journalists have no idea what the content of the testimony will be. Colbert followed with, "This is the best possible kind of political story. We have no idea what's in it and it's going to be explosive! [making hand motions of an explosion] It's the Taco Bell of breaking news!" The joke specifically highlights the network's self-generation of news. Talking heads spend hours speculating about testimony they expect to occur, but with no actual information details. Decreasing emphasis on impact as a news value and fewer filters on ethical propriety lead to the kind of story *TDS* covered after Obama's first election: his daughters' first day of school in the nation's capital. Stewart introduces the story, saying "As the economy continues to struggle and the Middle East continues to burn, there was big news yesterday out of Washington." A montage of news clips follows showing the girls on their way to school, discussions about a doll hanging off the kid's backpacks, and even a

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[748] Donald A. Ritchie, *Reporting from Washington: The History of the Washington Press Corps* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, Inc., 2005). 192.

graphic with their food choices for lunch. With Sasha's face pressed up against the glass of the SUV driving them to school, a reporter says, "The first day of school is stressful." Cut back to Stewart looking stone-faced, who responds, "I don't think that's first day of school stress. That's, 'Mommy, there are so many cameras. Am I integrating this school?'"[749] Both *Colbert* and *TDS* regularly feature such excesses from television news. Through their selection of satire topics, the programs criticize traditional news for devoting too much attention to inconsequential fluff and political insider debates, advocating for a more relevant concept of newsworthiness.

In the previous example, the lack of impact of the stories seemed to be the major topic of humor; however, the news parody programs also regularly highlight journalism's over-emphasis on immediacy. Cable news outlets, especially, cut away from regular programming at the first sign that tragedy or scandal might occur. Following news of an international drug bust, Stewart reminds viewers they "should never ever, ever feel comfortable or safe, as we were reminded yesterday by those vigilant sentries that are the 24-hour news networks." *TDS* cuts to a montage of cable news offering extensive coverage from the day before of three "breaking stories": a suspicious package at the White House, another package at a transit center, and a gunman supposedly sighted on a building. Despite hours of reporting, none of them were actual threats to public safety.[750] In another example, only days before the 2008 presidential elections, MSNBC and Fox News cut away from live coverage of a major speech by Obama in order to follow a police chase of a white van in South Florida for a full hour.[751] In these examples, *TDS* takes television news to task

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[749] *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, Episode 14003. January 7, 2009.
[750] *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, Episode 11039. March 23, 2006.
[751] *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, Episode 13140. October 29, 2008.

for emphasizing immediacy over actual impact and analysis. Action takes precedence with many news outlets choosing the visual aspect of breaking news, with police and emergency vehicles.

The Comedy Central programs' more general and consistent critiques of the media occasionally morph into specific attacks on news programs and individuals, with cable programming the prime target.[752] One of the earliest and most celebrated confrontations occurred on the former CNN program *Crossfire*. Emblematic of partisan yelling as talk show, *Crossfire* featured conservative Tucker Carlson and liberal Paul Begala bickering about politics. In 2004 Stewart appeared on the show and immediately began questioning the very structure of *Crossfire*, encouraging the hosts to use their program to generate useful discourse about politics. His complaints reinforced jokes previously made on *TDS* about *Crossfire*'s lack of journalistic integrity. Refusing to be sidetracked by questions about current politics, Stewart pressed his attack, tell the hosts that, regarding *Crossfire*, "it's not so much that it's bad, as it's hurting America." Stewart then points out how such shows become part of political strategy, calling the hosts partisan hacks and discounting the value of the discussions they create. When Begala tries to defend their format as presenting useful discourse, Stewart responds, "But that's like saying pro wrestling is a show about athletic competition." Despite repeated attempts to bait Stewart into discussing the newly released *TDS* book or to talk about the humor of specific politicians, the satirist continued to redirect the interview towards the failure of *Crossfire* to provide useful political

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[752] Hess examines the relationship between *TDS* and cable news using several case studies. Hess, "Purifying Laughter: Carnivalesque Self-Parody as Argument Scheme in *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*."

discussion.[753] Stewart's appearance went viral, endlessly dissected and retransmitted by the media. His criticism seemed to resonate with audiences, and several months later CNN cancelled the program, partly in response to Stewart's appearance.[754] The pleas for civil discourse to enrich the public sphere regularly resurface from both Stewart and Colbert (although Colbert uses his ironic method of argument) in their vision for a "better journalism," along with pleas for responsible coverage of politics and business.

Following the meltdown of financial markets and companies in the late 2000s, *TDS* focused its coverage on business journalism. Its general attack against the major players in the markets turned to the media covering them, specifically CNBC, in March of 2009. Rick Santelli, after attacking Obama for wanting to help bail out homeowners, pulled out of a planned interview with Stewart. *TDS* responded with eight minutes of footage and commentary, juxtaposing CNBC personalities' financial advice with facts showing how devastating taking their advice would be. For instance, a montage of CNBC personalities enthusiastically endorsing Bear Sterns, is followed by a graphic stating, "Bear Sterns went under six days later." Over and over the program shows how following the advice of the financial network would be catastrophic. Ending the segment, Stewart shows CNBC host Karl Quintanilla interviewing Allen Stanford, a man who was later discovered to have been stealing billions of dollars from investors in a Ponzi scheme.

> STEWART: Come on CNBC's Carl Quintanilla, you got one of the biggest white-collar criminals in history live on the air. Don't let him get off the hook!
>
> QUINTANILLA: Before we let you go…

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[753] *Crossfire*, October 15, 2004.
[754] Bill Carter, "CNN Will Cancel 'Crossfire' and Cut Ties to Commentator," *New York Times*, October 16, 2005.

STEWART: Here it comes, the million-dollar question!

QUINTANILLA: Is it fun being a billionaire?

STANFORD: Well…yes, yes, I have to say it is fun being a billionaire.

STEWART: Fuck you! You know, between the two of 'em, I can't decide which one of those guys I'd rather see in jail![755]

Stewart's withering attack on the journalistic malfeasance of CNBC quickly became a hot topic in the media. CNBC *Mad Money* host Jim Cramer took to the airwaves across several NBC platforms to dismiss *TDS* and Stewart, and to argue clips were taken out of context, in a move he no doubt quickly regretted. Stewart responded by devoting a segment exclusively to Cramer's complaint that *TDS* took his advice to buy Bear Sterns out of context. The program combines a range of clips from the time period in question, showing Cramer not only endorsed purchasing Bear Sterns stock, but holding onto it as the meltdown neared. As the feud continued, Cramer eventually appeared on *TDS* as a guest, subjecting himself to an entire episode of tough questioning.[756] Cramer acted with as much humility as he could muster. Stewart, rolling clip after clip, followed up with statements like, "I can't reconcile the brilliance and knowledge that you have of the intricacies of the market with the crazy bullshit I see you do every night." While refusing to let him off the hook, *TDS* host acknowledges Cramer has become the face of a larger problem, but accuses the media of being complicit in the inside games of the finance industry, "I understand you

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[755] *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, Episode 14031. March 4, 2009.

[756] For discussion of Jim Cramer's attempts to repair his image during and after *TDS* coverage, see Nicholas Browning, ""Mad Money" Madness: Jim Cramer's Image Restoration Effort," *Public Relations Review* 37, no. 2 (2011); Josh Compton, "Cramer Vs. (Jon Stewart's Characterization of) Cramer: Image Repair Rhetoric, Late Night Political Humor, and *The Daily Show*," in *The Daily Show and Rhetoric: Arguments, Issues, and Strategies*, ed. Trischa Goodnow (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2011).

want to make finance entertaining, but it's not a fucking game….I can't tell you how angry that makes me."[757] The fallout from *TDS*'s coverage of the finance media mostly stopped with Cramer and CNBC; however, their actual critique extended to lawmakers and the president, with a regular feature called "Clusterf#@k to the Poor House." Jeffrey Jones points to the show's overall coverage of the economic recession, including the Cramer battle, as emblematic of the kind of journalism news parody can provide.[758] Although the financial media took the spotlight on *TDS* for a period of time during the recession, the consistent favorite media target for both Stewart and *Colbert* remains conservative icon Fox News.

Fox News and Its Parody of Journalism

In his book *Television and American Culture*, Jason Mittell points out a number of similarities between *TDS* and Fox News. Both rose to prominence during roughly the same time period, each appeals to niche audiences—older suburban and rural views for Fox, and younger, urban audiences with the Comedy Central program—and each produce a brand of news meant to entertain and appeal to emotions.[759] So, in many ways, Fox News and *TDS* exist as parallel entities, attracting audiences dissatisfied with current mainstream objective journalism. For *TDS* and *Colbert*, however, Fox News represents the greatest threat to media, embodying the concept of truthiness by presenting lies and blind partisanship *as* objective—"fair and balanced." Colbert says discrediting the mainstream

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[757] *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, Episode 14036. March 12, 2009.
[758] Jeffrey P. Jones, "More Than "Fart Noises and Funny Faces": *The Daily Show*'s Coverage of the US Recession," *Popular Communication* 8, no. 3 (2010).
[759] Jason Mittell, *Television and American Culture* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2010). 144-46.

press is essential for the right wing, "because a press that has validity is a press that has authority. And as soon as there's any authority to what the press says, you question the authority of the government."[760] Baym and Jeffrey Jones seem to agree, accusing Fox News of participating in a broader effort on the political right to challenge existing ways of knowing and define their own truth.[761] Fox News exists as an alternative, "conservative approved" media outlet, existing to discount the press and challenge government from its own ideological perspective. *TDS* and *Colbert* regularly criticize Fox News coverage and dissect their partisan strategies.

Especially since Obama's election, glaring moments of Fox partisanship appear regularly. In one of multiple stories leading up to the 2008 election, *TDS* presented a montage of Fox personalities questioning whether Obama really leads polls, interspliced with mentions of Jeremiah Wright and Bill Ayers, ending with a reporter asking a number of people who they plan to vote for. After each person says "Obama," the report turns to the camera and explains, "The key is not who they like, the key is who they're going to vote for." Cut back to a smirking Stewart, who says, "Fox News: the world is unfair, and we're becoming mentally unbalanced."[762] After the election, in a segment called "Baracknophobia," Stewart outlines how gun sales are rising and details other paranoid responses to the new president, then questions, "Where's all the fear coming from?" Multiple over-the-shoulder images come up on screen with Stewart sniffing each one and then discounting them, first Skeletor's Snake Mountain and then the Eye of Sauron. Finally the Fox News logo appears and Stewart immediately starts fanning his nose and exclaims,

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[760] Rabin, "Stephen Colbert".
[761] Jeffrey P. Jones and Geoffrey Baym, "A Dialogue on Satire News and the Crises of Truth in Postmodern Political Television," *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 34, no. 3 (2010): 285.
[762] *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, Episode 13129. October 9, 2008.

"Good lord! Not silent, but clearly deadly!" The program then shows a montage of Fox personalities talking about Obama being sure to endorse socialism, encourage radicals, silence dissent, etc.[763] The program regularly rips away the "We report, you decide" tagline of the network and establishes how the network constructs the news in order to manipulate reaction.

One of the most conspicuous indicators of the partisanship Fox News denies is their repeated endorsement of conservative groups through publicity and material support. Both *TDS* and *Colbert* regularly satirized Fox host Glenn Beck, especially Beck's decision to create "grassroots," staged demonstrations for conservative politics. In launching his "9-12 project," advocating conservative ideals, Beck claimed his fantasy had come true. Colbert follows a clip of Beck's announcement, asking, "The fantasy where a hysterical Glenn Beck tells his audience of desperate shut-ins through tears and spittle that vague unnamed enemies have failed them and that it's time to take angry action?" The show continues with clips of Beck, eventually cryptically saying, "Truth is, they don't surround us. We surround them." Colbert follows up, "Who are 'them'? 'Them's' the ones we're surrounding. And we? We're the voices in Glenn's head telling him to get us to take back what is rightfully ours."[764] Colbert actually seems to find it hard to stay in character during such extreme rhetoric, endorsing Beck on the one hand, but also going beyond irony to more openly mock him. In similar coverage, during Tax Day protests in 2009, *TDS* repeatedly showed how despite Fox denials, the network helped organize and promote demonstrations, even placing the network name in front of the event on graphics, like a corporate sponsor.

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[763] *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, Episode 13148. November 13, 2008.
[764] *The Colbert Report*, Episode 5042. March 31, 2009.

Beyond simply showing moments of partisan coverage, the news parody shows also highlight Fox News' political hypocrisy, comparing how coverage of an event changes depending on the political moment. The network's switch in priorities between the 2012 Republican and Democratic national conventions presented plenty of opportunities for satire with a segment called "Last Week/This Week." *TDS* presents Fox clips from the GOP convention with correspondents downplaying the importance of party platforms, followed by repeated discussions on the channel about the absence of God in the DNC platform. In another example, Fox pundits accuse the rest of the media of playing up social issues during the Republican event, inevitably juxtaposed with Fox doing the same during the Democratic convention.[765] In another example from *TDS*, Fox News Money anchor Lou Dobbs endorses Mitt Romney's suggestion to defund Sesame Street to save $8 million. The clip is edited with Dobbs's earlier dismissal of Obama's idea to cut $4 billion in tax breaks for big oil, with the commentator calling the saving "inconsequential." Responding to the Sesame Street controversy, Stewart says, "I see; so Fox News is upset that empty-headed puppets are trying to brainwash and indoctrinate Americans?...Perhaps you could sue them. The charge would be copyright infringement."[766] While political differences help inspire the enmity *TDS* and *Stewart* display for Fox News, the network's journalistic methods are the real target. Just like their criticisms of the rest of the media, the news parody programs focus on divisive discourse, hypocrisy, inaccuracies, the inconsequential, and the devotion to broadcast-news conventional wisdom. The conservative network simply offers low-hanging fruit for such satire.

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[765] *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, Episode 17150. September 7, 2012.
[766] *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, Episode 18005. October 8, 2012.

News Parody as Journalism

After a decade of reporting for NPR, Andrea Seabrook left the radio network and traditional journalism, saying she was sick of being lied to by politicians and covering political theater instead of real news. Seabrook says she began to see the media as being part of the problem: "As a journalist, when you walk into that and pretend that it's a functioning system, or at least decide you're going to cover it as such, it plays right in. It allows those lawmakers to use manipulative language, stretched truth, untruths to communicate through you."[767] After leaving NPR, Seabrook continued to report via podcast, one of a growing number of alternative journalistic formats with fewer constraints than traditional media. Like podcasting, news parody offers an alternative reporting method that allows discussion of political theater without fear of being accused of bias. Both *TDS* and *Colbert* embrace the potential of news parody as a journalistic practice.

An increasing number of scholars and journalists make similar claims about news parody. Kristen Helfin calls *TDS* "an ombudsman that calls attention to the successes and failings of democracy."[768] Joanne Morreale applauds the show and says its coverage can "foster critical thinking and invite evaluation of aspects of the social and political world that might otherwise remain unquestioned."[769] Geoffrey Baym envisions both programs as an emergent model for journalism, an alternative to the dominant network and cable model.[770] Although, as detailed above, such sentiments are not unanimous, there is a

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[767] *On the Media*, August 24, 2012.
[768] Heflin, "Laughter Helps Interpret the News," 26.
[769] Morreale, "Jon Stewart and *The Daily Show*: I Thought You Were Going to Be Funny!," 107.
[770] Baym, *From Cronkite to Colbert: The Evolution of Broadcast News*.

growing consensus that these programs at least contribute to the journalistic enterprise, if not fulfilling all the traditional functions of the news media.

One compelling reason for treating *TDS* and *Colbert* as journalism is their discursive positioning. As discussed in the introduction, Pierre Bourdieu uses field theory to describe how language operates within certain specialized realms, vying for power within fields of knowledge. Bourdieu envisions the journalistic field as intersecting with both the political and social-sciences fields, with the journalistic field both affecting and being affected by those other fields.[771] The two news parody programs continue to accumulate cultural capital within the journalistic and political fields, integrating themselves into the discourse of the professions.

Journalists have written about past news parody programs, especially Weekend Update, which continues to receive attention; however, it does not approach the amount or type of coverage *TDS* and *Colbert* garner. One of the major differences is the way Stewart and Colbert are sought out by the media to provide *commentary*. Their views are not limited to comedy; they function as cultural critics, commenting especially upon the journalistic and political fields. Amber Day sees the same process at work, noting "it seems clear that their work functions as political speech in and of itself, affecting the direction of public discourse while elevating the parodists to the level of legitimate political experts."[772]Even their satire weaves itself into traditional news, with programs such as ABC's *This Week* running a segment called "The Sunday Funnies" that frequently features clips from the two Comedy Central programs. In addition to being distributed internationally, since 2002 a special 30-minute recap of *TDS* called "*The Daily Show: Global*

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[771] Bourdieu, "The Political Field, the Social Science Field, and the Journalistic Field."
[772] Day, *Satire and Dissent: Interventions in Contemporary Political Debate*: 81.

Edition" airs on CNN's international channel on the weekends. *TDS* correspondent Mo Rocca even left the program in 2003 and went to work covering presidential elections and providing commentary for NBC News, *CBS News Sunday Morning,* MSNBC's *Countdown with Keith Olbermann*, and *The Tonight Show*, using the quirky humor he established as part of his persona on *TDS*. These various examples of the crosspollination between news parody and traditional television news provide *TDS* and *Colbert* with what Bourdieu calls "functional capital." Established institutions already wielding power within a field can convey functional capital to others by treating them as valid contributors. As a result, every time journalistic entities treat the news parody shows as participants within the journalistic and political field, the more cultural capital they accumulate. In addition, the hosts themselves also continue to legitimate their participation in these fields by accruing both personal capital and professional capital.[773]

In addition to Stewart and Colbert being invited into participation in the journalistic field, individuals primarily identified with the journalistic and political fields regularly appear on the Comedy Central programs, further validating *TDS* and *Colbert*'s participation. As previously shown, *TDS* quickly expanded from entertainment-oriented guests to political and media figures after Stewart took over the anchor desk. By 2004 the program became a sought-after outlet for politicians and political authors.[774] A growing number of presidential hopefuls have appeared on *TDS*: John Edwards announced his run on the show in 2003 and John Kerry appeared as the Democratic nominee for president in 2004, as did Obama multiple times, both before and after gaining the presidency. John McCain appeared

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[773] Pierre Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, trans. Gino Raymond and Matthew Adamson (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991). 194-96.
[774] See Ann Marie Kerwin, "The Oprah of the Beltway Set," *Advertising Age*, 2005; Betsy Rothstein, "Jon Who? The Daily What?," *The Hill*, September 21, 2005.

several times during his run for the GOP nomination in 2000 and before becoming the 2008 nominee. The timing of political guest spots varies. Republicans usually appear on the show when trying to secure their nomination (with Mitt Romney being a notable hold-out), while Democrats appear throughout the election cycle (with Obama even scheduling appearances for mid-term elections). *Colbert* definitely differs in this respect, with politicians much less likely to appear on his program, a phenomenon I address in discussing their interview segments below.

Traditional journalists also regularly appear on *TDS* and *Colbert*, usually as guests but also as part of *TDS*'s news packages. As far back as 2000, longtime ABC News anchor Peter Jennings gave Stewart a behind-the-scenes tour of the Republican National Convention, joking with him throughout.[775] In 2007 network anchors Brian Williams and Ted Koppel both lent their "giant heads" to provide Stewart with sarcastic commentary on the show.[776] Several CNN personalities have assisted with comedic skits, including John King, who threatened *TDS* correspondent John Oliver with his all-powerful touch-screen technology, and Anderson Cooper, who hosted a fake "Puppedential Debate" meant to help the Obamas choose a dog for the White House.[777] Increasingly, media figures appear on the show both to discuss important issues of journalism and politics, and to present themselves as everyday people who can participate in the joke. In multiple interviews, press figures from traditional network anchors to alternative outlets praise Colbert and Stewart, further discursively placing them within the same field.

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[775] *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, Episode 5015. August 4, 2000.
[776] Baym uses their appearance on the program as an interesting jumping off point to discuss the varying approaches of the three anchors to journalism. Baym, *From Cronkite to Colbert: The Evolution of Broadcast News*: 1-6.
[777] *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, Episode 13150. November 18, 2008; *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, Episode 14001. January 5, 2009.

Beyond simply being valid participants in the journalistic field, *TDS* and *Colbert* also engage in practices of journalism. In the following sections I outline how the programs function *as* journalism through adding context to news stories, engaging in news interviews, and furthering journalistic discourse outside of the programs themselves.

Journalistic Strategies

One of the most frequent criticisms of the American press today is its presentation of information without adequate context. Mitchell Stephens, writing about journalism in the internet age, discusses the current glut of online news outlets, but points out what audiences need is "thoughtful, incisive attempts to divine the significance of events," with television being the worst at providing this type of "wisdom."[778] Robert McChesney conflates this lack of context with current practices of objectivity, arguing reporters increasingly shy away from connecting facts and statements and even evaluating them out of fear of seeming biased: "it is increasingly rare that reporters bother to determine who is telling the truth when official sources disagree on the facts."[779] Combined with journalism's tendency to privilege official voices, the routines of reporting create a kind of "iron cage of objectivity."[780] Within this cage, reporters are explicitly discouraged from evaluating claims to truth. Instead, the system depends on the capitalistic construct of the marketplace of

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[778] Mitchell Stephens, "Beyond News," *Columbia Journalism Review* (2007): 35.
[779] McChesney, *The Problem of the Media: U.S. Communication Politics in the 21st Century*: 82.
[780] I adapt this idea from sociologist Max Weber's phrase "iron cage of modernity." Weber wrote about how creeping bureaucracy and rationalization trap individuals within a world of rules. Similarly, journalists who truly want to reveal power relationships and criticize those in power are disciplined by the discourse of objectivity and unable to truly speak truth from within this field. For more on Weber's writings about bureaucracy see Max Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1978). Chapter 11.

ideas, where the audience is expected to consume news reports and then evaluate truth claims themselves, with very little basis for comparison. In discussing television news, Mark Poster condemns its "montage of isolated data" masquerading as objectivity.[781] This is the explicit point of such marketing phrases as Fox News' "We report, you decide." Audiences are fed uncontextualized, unquestioned, conflicting "facts" and expected to form opinions on complex matters that can affect their material living conditions.

In their commentary on news and journalism, *TDS* and *Colbert* primarily use stories already circulating in the news. John Self discusses how *TDS*, even though it borrows from existing material, creates "presence," recirculating ideas or arguments in a new structure.[782] However, beyond creating presence, the news parody shows also expound on the news, creating greater context. Treating the programs as a type of "public journalism," which envisions journalism as a public service empowering citizens, Joseph Faina identifies three ways their coverage goes beyond current television news: identifying the actual problem in an issue, illustrating how choices have consequences, and being aware of how stories are framed.[783] Engagement in these strategies often goes beyond traditional objective reporting. In this next section I highlight how the programs create their own type of journalistic activity by taking the discourses created by news media and reworking them through multiple strategies, including providing context through additional information, highlighting hypocrisy, demystifying government and business, and questioning the logic and language behind political discourse.

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[781] Mark Poster, "Baudrillard and TV Ads," in *The Mode of Information: Poststructuralism and Social Context* (The University of Chicago Press, 1990), 82.
[782] Self, "The (Not-So) Laughable Political Argument: A Close-Textual Analysis of *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*," 70-71.
[783] Faina, "Public Journalism Is a Joke: The Case for Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert," 549-51.

Contextualizing the news

TDS and *Colbert* often take stories and add additional information that, once considered, either makes the story less sensational or even negates the dominant narrative or major source for the story. In 2006, The Justice Department held a press conference covered by major news organizations about the Columbian drug organization known as FARC. *NBC Nightly News* covered the story using file footage supplied by the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) of raids and drugs, reporting, "three of the ringleaders are in custody, but most of the others indicted are fugitives."[784] The 37-second story gives the impression of a major raid, saying 50 people were indicted. *TDS* provides much greater context by rejecting the narrative created by the DEA and highlighting the disparity between the huge media event and the actual announcement: "50 drug traffickers were indicted. There's only one problem: we only caught three of the guys and they're in Columbia awaiting extradition. The other 47 are at large, protected by heavily armed loyalists. And we haven't actually seized any of the cocaine. Other than that, let's call a press conference!"[785] *Nightly News*' focus on the indictments and use of file footage present the illusion they are covering arrests or the seizure of drugs, rather than an announcement. By contrast, *TDS* reveals the lack of news value and political posturing of the government agency.

Sometimes commentary adds quick information that drastically alters the meaning of news. Following the 2008 election of President Obama, *Colbert* airs a montage of news clips with lawmakers (mostly Republicans) and media commentators insisting that

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[784] *NBC Nightly News*, March 22, 2006.
[785] *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, Episode 11039. March 23, 2006.

Obama's election was no liberal landslide or mandate. Colbert's character ironically agrees with the montage, stating, "That is right. The largest majority in 20 years, 349 electoral votes—that is not a mandate." With just one quick sentence, Colbert reminds viewers that despite reports to the contrary, current politics rarely get any closer to a mandate than the numbers generated in Obama's win. Likewise, *TDS* skewers media organization for endlessly playing Hillary Clinton's statement regarding the attack in Benghazi, when she told a congressional committee, "Was it because of a protest or was it because of guys out for a walk one night who decided they would go kill some Americans? What difference at this point does it make?" Pundits attacked the statement, calling her dismissive of the deaths of Americans, but Stewart brought context to the statement by continuing to play the clip, when she says, "It is our job to figure out what happened and do everything we can to prevent it from ever happening again." Stewart follows, "Damn you next line! Damn you to hell!"[786] Sweeping aside the political posturing, *TDS* shows there is no actual story about the statement once placed within context. Political outrage depended on an out-of-context quote.

The programs also add perspective through the aforementioned juxtapositioning of soundbites via montage. In one especially interesting example, GOP presidential candidate John McCain announced the suspension of his campaign in September of 2008, ostensibly in order to help fix the economy. The decision received considerable attention from the press, but no outlet provided as complete coverage as *TDS*, who looked at the course of events before and after the announcement to compare what actually happened. First, they show a clip of McCain after a plunge in the Dow, claiming the fundamentals of the economy

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[786] *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, Episode 18050. January 24, 2013.

are strong on September 15. That is followed by McCain calling for the chairman of the FEC to be fired by the president on September 21 (Stewart mentions the president does not actually have the power to fire the FEC chair). A clip from the next day shows McCain saying he received a three-page document outlining the government bailout plan. Then, the following day, September 23, McCain claims he has not seen the plan in writing, prompting the comment from Stewart, "You said on Monday you just got it. It's three pages and that was Tuesday." In the next statement from the following day, McCain says he will suspend his campaign and go to Washington to help find a solution. Stewart reacts, "The only man who can compulsively overreact to something ten days old!" After a montage of news reactions to McCain's announcement, *TDS* then starts tracking McCain's movements:

> [McCain] suspended his campaign. Blew off his interview with David Letterman, and rushed back to a different CBS building to an interview with Katie Couric. But then he left to rush back to a delicious dinner in New York. But then, still, he left to rush back to a New York hotel for a good night's sleep. But then, he rushed off to a hotel, also in New York, where he gave a speech to the Clinton Global Initiative in New York. And then, because of the grave condition of this situation, returned for a possible Senate vote for the first time since April 6, and as his plane landed in Washington, DC a mere 22 hours after his initial New York announcement. I mean, for God's sake, you could've walked there in that time! This announcement greeted him at baggage claim.

The program cuts to coverage from MSNBC of a bi-partisan bailout plan. Cut back to Stewart, who screams, "Fuck! So, to sum up, the net effect of John McCain suspending his presidential campaign? Angering David Lettermen."[787] Coverage by the news networks, especially during campaign seasons, focuses on the latest developments and often fails to connect events. This particular example makes plain the political calculations of McCain's decision and the bizarre sequences of events before and after—details left unexplored and unreported by the major news agencies.

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[787] *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, Episode 13121. September 25, 2008.

There are also times *TDS*, through its correspondent packages, can actually follow up on stories and engage in newsgathering itself, breaking out of the mode of depending on other media outlets. Following the 2008 presidential conventions, the program reported on a story few other media outlets considered covering in the race-horse politics of the year. Republican vice-presidential nominee Sarah Palin dismissed Obama's experience as a community organizer during the GOP convention, saying her job as the former mayor of the small Alaskan town Wasilla was similar to community organizing, except she had "actual responsibilities." Correspondent Jason Jones went to Wasilla and filed several reports, including one where he attempted to discover what the responsibilities of the mayor might be. Jones talked with the current mayor of Wasilla, Dianne M. Keller. After Keller insists that being the mayor prepares a person to be vice-president, Jones asks her about various aspects of her job, only to discover Wasilla has no fire department, no school system, or any social services. Asked what her day is like, Keller can only come up with daily staff meetings at ten in the morning and signing checks on Thursdays.[788] Baym mentions Jones's report as one of many follow-up stories the program conducted on Palin's dismissal of Obama's community organizing.[789] *TDS* story holds Palin's convention applause line up to scrutiny and, by placing it into context, reveals its lack of credibility.

Damning them with their own words

Despite the prevalence of soundbites on television news, objective journalism tends to be hesitant to hold public officials accountable when they contradict themselves. Historically, investigative journalists use irony as a critical strategy to show, through a

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[788] *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, Episode 13134. October 20, 2008.
[789] Baym, *From Cronkite to Colbert: The Evolution of Broadcast News*: 101-03.

source's own words, an official's hypocrisy. These moments of irony in investigative pieces then quickly give way back to an approved, objective presentational style of reporting.[790] News parody, however, can offer extended exploration of hypocritical moments, essentially using a source's own words to "call bullshit" without immediately glossing over the revelation with forced objectivity. Longitudinal montages were discussed earlier in this chapter as one way of highlighting hypocrisy, but the programs can also simply use single sound bites or remind viewers of earlier statements to point out inconsistencies too.

During President Obama's first budget battle after taking office, Senate Democrats threatened to use a process called "reconciliation" to keep Republicans from filibustering the budget. *TDS* ran video of New Hampshire Senator Judd Gregg railing against the use of reconciliation, claiming it was unprecedented. Stewart then questions whether Gregg had the same belief when Republicans used reconciliation to pass a budget under President Bush, showing a clip of Gregg saying "Is there something wrong with majority rules? I don't think so!" Stewart responds, "I *will* think so!" *TSA* quickly follows up by also showing Democratic hypocrisy, with Nancy Pelosi flip-flopping in the other direction after complaining about the reconciliation process in 2005.[791] Not only does the story serve as a bipartisan attack on two lawmakers, its deeper purpose is to question the normal political flow of changing opinions based on which party is in power. Politicians agree with arcane government processes when convenient for their party, and suddenly change their rhetoric with shifts in power. The story reveals the overall disingenuousness of political discourse,

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[790] James S. Ettema and Theodore L. Glasser, *Custodians of Conscience* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1998).
[791] *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, Episode 14043. April 1, 2009.

with impassioned opinions from lawmakers only applying to the current two-year election cycle (if that long).

In another example, *Colbert* compares actions with past statements when former conservative Supreme Court nominee Robert Bork files a lawsuit against Yale University. Bork sued the school for $1 million in damages after falling while stepping onto a dais. Colbert reminds viewers Bork consistently spoke out against personal-injury lawsuits and the need for tort reform, and then names Bork his "Alpha Dog of the Week," saying, "It takes a strong man to look in the face of his own written opinions and say, 'Well, if everyone else is doing it, time for daddy to take a slice!' I say in the case of *Principles* v. *Wallet*, Bork is about to have one million witnesses in his defense."[792] Although media outlets covered the Bork case, they failed (or were unwilling) to point out the disconnect between the lawsuit and the former judge's alleged beliefs.

In a similar example, *TDS* covered conservative reaction to the revelation the Obama White House held morning phone calls with liberal groups. After clips of former Vice-President Dick Cheney and Bush Chief of Staff Karl Rove making the rounds of morning talk shows criticizing Obama, Stewart points out Rove regularly spoke with conservative groups like Grover Norquist's anti-tax organization and Focus on the Family while in the White House. Stewart suddenly gasps with false concern, covering his mouth, before proclaiming, "Oh my God, I know what's happening here. Dick Cheney and Karl Rove, once two of the most powerful men in this country, are now suffering from Balzheimers Disease. [Shaking his head and acting as if holding back tears] Why didn't I see it before? Balzheimers is a terrible illness that attacks the memory and gives its victims *the balls* to

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[792] *The Colbert Report*, Episode 3082. June 19, 2007.

attack others for things they themselves made a career of."[793] Just as investigative journalists make use of contradictory statements, these news parody programs compare, juxtapose, and remind viewers of the inconsistency of political figures, calling bullshit, in the best journalistic sense, on hypocritical officials.

Demystifying government and business

Public institutions increasingly emphasize their own complexity, both in structure and language, inflating their own importance within the bureaucratic system and creating a screen of technical jargon that obscures their inner workings from everyday citizens. From the early days of *TDS*, Stewart attempted to tackle the inner workings of these systems through satire and to even illuminate the process as times. In one interview the host explains, "I think that very clearly government and corporations have set up a system that is purposefully obtuse, that is very hard to penetrate."[794] *TDS* provides numerous examples of creating meaningful reports meant to demystify structures and educate viewers.

The economic crisis of the late 2000s offered a major opportunity for the programs to lift the veil from the complex and normally hidden world of finances. In one report, *TDS* correspondent Samantha Bee introduces what promises to be a light-hearted feature package called "The Money Honey Bee with Samantha Bee." Beginning the report in a bee costume, she interviews numerous successful investors who made money shortselling, a strategy where an investor bets company stock will decrease in value. Laughing investors describe huge profits as Bee joins in, chuckling and pointing out how such profits represent

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[793] *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, Episode 14054. April 22, 2009.
[794] Eric Schlosser, "The Kids Are All Right," *Columbia Journalism Review* 41, no. 5 (2003): 29.

untold numbers of workers losing their jobs.[795] While the report makes shortsellers look bad, more importantly it describes a prevalent financial strategy and how a small group of investors can benefit from activities that ultimately damage the larger economy.

Stewart's showdown with Jim Cramer and MSNBC performed a similar function, casting light on the recesses of financial markets and the norms of unethical (if not illegal) behaviors. Ryan McGeough points out how Stewart continually forced Cramer into speaking in everyday language during his interview. Cramer, attempting to dismiss concerns, continually tried to find cover in the impenetrable discourse of the financial sector, but Stewart successfully engaged him both in that technical field and in broader public-sphere discourse.[796] As previously mentioned, *TDS* offered frequent and sustained coverage of the financial markets, sifting through its arcane structure and revealing the normally hidden players behind the curtain.

Colbert also offered insightful and educational reports relating to finance during the continued crisis. In one segment the host discusses high-frequency computer trading and how algorithms used by such computers can manipulate the overall market. One particular algorithm was potentially designed to slow down other traders. After covering the story of increased computer trading, Colbert brings financial author Christopher Steiner to the desk as an expert commentator and discusses the many drawbacks and dangerous scenarios computer trading creates.[797] Rather than limiting the story to one occurrence of

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[795] *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, Episode 14037. March 16, 2009.
[796] Ryan McGeough, "The Voice of the People: Jon Sewart, Public Argument, and Political Satire," in *The Daily Show and Rhetoric: Arguments, Issues, and Strategies*, ed. Trischa Goodnow (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2011).
[797] *The Colbert Report*, Episode 9025. November 14, 2012.

manipulation, the segment springboards into a deeper discussion of the little-known risks of financial automation.

As these examples attest, *TDS* and *Colbert* added voice to other media outlets attempting to go beyond political legislation and stock-market performance to the underlying economic behaviors that led to and threatened to extend the crisis. Like exemplary works of journalism, such as *The New York Times*' "The Reckoning" series, news parody shows bucked the trend of financial cheerleading and attempted to decode the financial markets and their effects on everyday citizens. Television, especially cable news, often failed to follow up on the markets beyond immediate events, simply assuming that Wall Street's interests align with the American people's.[798] While the economic crisis offers one particular example of how news parody can move beyond objectivity to attempt to demystify structures in society, government is also a major topic, with frequent reports on laws, legislative procedures, campaign finance, and other complex and obscure topics.

Challenging official voices

Journalism's role as a recorder of important events tends to result in the most powerful government and private-industry officials disproportionately accounting for the majority of voices reflected in the media. Reporters' tendency to seek out officials "sanctioned" to comment is a criticism of the press discussed above. As a parody of newscasts, *TDS* and *Colbert* recreate the lack of diverse voices by selecting sound bites from the already-preselected clips run by other media. A major difference, though, is the way the

[798] For a discussion of cable news' support for capitalism, as well as patriotism, see Toby Miller, "Bank Tellers and Flag Wavers: Cable News in the United States," in *Cable Visions: Television Beyond Broadcasting*, ed. Sarah Banet-Weiser, Cynthia Chris, and Anthony Freitas (New York: NYU Press, 2007).

news parody programs subject soundbites to various types of inquiry. By selecting embarrassing soundbites, deconstructing language, and questioning logic the programs reevaluates truths claims and the standing of newsmakers.

In one of the first research articles published about *TDS*, Aaron McKain discusses how the program "disrupts government officials' cultivated images of assurance and knowledge" by using footage that traditional news media reject.[799] Video editors learn to select brief moments of images and audio in order to tell the news story. Awkward silences and verbal gaffes are usually left out for two reasons: first, standards of objectivity suggest using embarrassing moments would have to be absolutely integral to the story or their use might constitute editorializing; second, the most valuable commodity for television is time, and editing out such moments allows for more concise storytelling. However, removing embarrassing moments creates a different kind of misrepresentation, the illusion that newsmakers are more polished and authoritative than in reality.

During the era of G. W. Bush's presidency, awkward phrases, dumb looks, and fumbling silences abounded. In Bush's first debate with Democratic presidential nominee John Kerry, Bush responds to a question on national-security priorities by saying, "This is a global effort. We're facing a…a [looks down] group of folks [pause] who have such hatred in their heart." Stewart responds, "Group of folks? We're facing a group of folks? A group of folks is what you run into at the Olive Garden."[800] Such inarticulate moments can definitely be played merely for cheap laughs, but these news parody shows tend to follow up and connect moments to political actions and policies. Following the nomination of Sarah Palin

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[799] McKain, "Not Necessarily Not the News: Gatekeeping, Remediation, and *The Daily Show*," 419.
[800] *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, Episode 9040. September 30, 2004.

for Vice-President in 2008, media outlets complained she only appeared for interviews on friendly news outlets, such as Fox News' Sean Hannity. Stewart showed extensive clips from her interview with Hannity, making fun of her phrasing and eventually comparing the line of questioning with the format for infomercials. He then questions why a political party would fear placing its nominee on television, quickly following with a clip of Democratic nominee Joe Biden saying that FDR went on television when the stock market crashed. Biden, of course, conflated three different moments in history, since FDR's election followed the stock-market crash and predated television by many years later.[801] Although Palin remained the primary target, including Biden's mistakes casts doubt on both candidates and questions the primarily political strategies of choosing a running mate.

Just as participants in technical fields like finance utilize language to create a cloud of impenetrability, so do politicians and others in the political field utilize linguistic shorthand, political "common sense," and euphemisms to obscure their stances and convey ideological concepts without explicitly stating them. Don Waisanen identifies the rhetorical strategy of satirical specificity in *TDS* and *Colbert*'s demystification of language, where grand concepts, or "ideographs," become linked with specific everyday concepts to "expose abstractions that public actors employ to gloss over the important details of policies and political actions."[802] During the 2008 presidential campaign, John McCain attempted to defuse a politically thorny problem after a woman at a town-hall meeting said Obama is an Arab. While attempting to shut down the woman's bigoted and mistaken assumptions, McCain's response was perhaps equally telling: "No ma'am, he's a decent family man." In

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[801] *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, Episode 13118. September 18, 2008.
[802] Waisanen, "A Citizen's Guides to Democracy Inaction: Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert's Comic Rhetorical Criticism."

response, *TDS* correspondent Aasif Mandvi, who is often identified as the show's "Muslim Correspondent," comments on McCain's statement. Mandvi points out, as if educating the public on a little-known fact, that the identifiers "Arab" and "decent man" are not mutually exclusive: "There's no mathematical reason why someone of Arab descent could not, somehow, also love his family." However, Mandvi admits the unison of the two terms is purely theoretical, "I don't know of any cases. Not in the America I live in."[803] The commentary reveals the assumptions behind McCain's response: No ma'am, Obama is not Arab = he is a decent family man and, therefore, not Arab.

Several research projects specifically cite *TDS* and *Colbert*'s treatment of race as especially compelling evidence of their journalistic potential. Rather than falling into dominant rhetoric of race as an essentialized concept, the programs conceptualize race as more fluid and often point out its social construction.[804] The candidacy and election of President Obama created a pivotal opportunity to discuss and interrogate concepts of race. For instance, in the aforementioned nomination video for Obama on *TDS,* his mixed-race heritage is used to destabilize categories and humorously position him as the embodiment of multiple cultural dichotomies. During the campaign, the racial rhetoric of Obama's former pastor, Reverend Jeremiah Wright, resulted in considerable media coverage and outrage from conservative commentators. Examining coverage of the Wright controversy, one study showed test subjects traditional news stories along with *Colbert* and *TDS*. Viewers reported that the news parody programs provided more complex coverage of race

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[803] *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, Episode 13131. October 14, 2008.
[804] Christopher J. Gilbert and Jonathan P. Rossing, "Trumping Tropes with Jokes: *The Daily Show* 'Plays the Race Card'," *Western Journal of Communication* 77, no. 1 (2013).

than traditional media.[805] In a separate analysis of *TDS* segments about Reverend Wright, researchers show how the program provided much broader frames of analysis, and revealed the political and ideological assumptions behind the story, creating a richer source of information than mainstream news coverage.[806]

In questioning the language and assumptions of newsmakers, the programs call into doubt the underlying logic of their statements. Plans to build a Muslim community center several blocks from ground zero in New York City brought swift outrage from politicians and community organizations, claiming a "mosque" would be built "at ground zero." *TDS* coverage points out the inaccuracies in the claims of pundits, and also shows a clip with former Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich rejecting appeals to religious liberty in support of the building, saying that Saudi Arabia has no churches or synagogues. Stewart, decoding Gingrich's logic, responds, "Exactly! Why should we as Americans have higher standards of religious liberty than Saudi Arabia! It makes no sense!" He then follows up by mentioning Republicans' close ties to Saudi Arabia. Expanding from the original press reporters about a proposed building, the report lays bare the bigotry behind the current focus of outrage. Ultimately, Gingrich's argument hinges on a worldview: Islam is a *foreign* religion associated with the Middle East in the American imagination and, thus, America has no reason to treat Muslims any better than Christians and Jews are treated by Arab nations. Rather than adopting the prevalent practice of reporting two sides of an issue with equal emphasis, *TDS* exposes the ideological assumptions underlying the story itself.

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[805] McBeth and Clemons, "Is Fake News the Real News? The Significance of Stewart and Colbert for Democratic Discourse, Politics, and Policy."
[806] Stephanie M. Purtle and Timothy R. Steffensmeier, "*The Daily Show* and Barack Obama's Comic Critique of Whiteness: An Intersection of Popular and Political Rhetoric," in *The Daily Show and Rhetoric: Arguments, Issues, and Strategies*, ed. Trischa Goodnow (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2011).

No individual segment accomplishes this goal of deconstructing political logic more than *Colbert*'s "The Word." The segment's creation of dialogue between the spoken and the written makes it one of the most consistently analyzed and rhetorically destabilizing moments on either program.[807] Colbert spends the majority of time as the sole voice on the program, responding in irony to clips of newsmakers. The Word, as Baym describes, "turns monologue into dialogue, inviting its audience to critically deconstruct the sensibilities of the monologue's literal content."[808] Beginning with a phrase currently in the news, Colbert offers his own conservative analysis of the words and philosophy behind them, only to be disputed throughout his diatribe by the appearance of text on the right side of the screen, sharing authority and the screen.

Several months before the 2008 presidential election, candidate Obama called McCain's proposals "putting lipstick on a pig," to suggest the policies were the same as President Bush's. The McCain campaign quickly issued statements suggesting Obama's statement referred to running mate Sarah Palin, because she referred to lipstick in her nomination acceptance speech. In response, Colbert incorporates the "lipstick on a pig" quote into a long The Word segment about the GOP nominees. Flanked by an image of Obama, Colbert launches into an attack on the Democratic hopeful, while critiquing the logic of the McCain campaign: "You bastard! Might I remind you Senator Obama, that McCain's running mate is Sarah Palin. Palin is from Alaska. Alaska's second largest city is Fairbanks. Douglas Fairbanks was a silent movie star. Stars burn hydrogen into helium.

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[807] See, for instance, Jones, *Entertaining Politics: Satiric Television and Political Engagement*: 195-99; Priscilla Marie Meddaugh, "Bakhtin, Colbert, and the Center of Discourse: Is There No "Truthiness" in Humor?," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 27, no. 4 (2010): 380-82.
[808] Baym, "Stephen Colbert's Parody of the Postmodern," 131.

Breathing helium makes your voice high. High voices belong to women. Women wear lipstick. Ergo, you called Sarah Palin a pig! You sir, are sexist!" In response to the assertion, Obama's picture on the opposite side of the screen changes to the words, "By the transitive power of bulls**t." Colbert then sweeps aside the fact that McCain used the same phrase earlier in the campaign: "How dare you question McCain's use of a common aphorism! That man spent five and a half years as a P.O.W.! He didn't have lipstick or a pig!" The text changes to "Though used to have a conscience."[809] As Robert Hariman points out, parody operates by "exceeding tacit limits on expression—the appropriate, the rational," in order to expose the hidden limits.[810] The interplay between the Colbert character's hyperbolic assertions of the McCain campaign's logic, combined with the critical commentary on the other side of the screen, creates compound satire, at once presenting his own illogical extreme version of conservative outrage and directly negating Colbert's logic, undercutting Republican outrage from two directions. Combining the written and visual also creates a more complex message. Rachel Sotos refers to the segment as "political wisdom in the form of an elegant literary vignette," nodding to the importance of text in the presentation.[811] The Word consistently uses this two-pronged approach to destabilize and expose political discourse and its ideological foundations.

Through these various and interweaving strategies of adding detail, revealing hypocrisy, demystifying business and government, and questioning the logic and language of political discourse, *TDS* and *Colbert* provide context for news stories. Functioning as supplements to traditional journalism, the programs report additional information to

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[809] *The Colbert Report*, Episode 4115. September 15, 2008.
[810] Hariman, "Political Parody and Public Culture," 251.
[811] Sotos, "The Fake News as the Fifth Estate," 33.

clarify and enhance comprehension of stories already reported in the media. However, news parody can also generate its own type of reporting, such as Jason Jones's trip to Wasilla. Although the programs primarily depend on existing coverage, they can function in a newsgathering role, just as other media outlets. In fact, the interview segments of the two shows consistently generate new information about public affairs issues, executing the same function as political talk shows like *Meet the Press*.

Leaving Parody Behind: The Interview Segment as Journalism

In their book on news interviews, Steven Clayman and John Heritage envision the interview as a "course of interaction" leading to an unfolding conversation. Individual questions break out into dialogue, with successive questions taking into account previous answers.[812] The interviews hosted by Colbert and Stewart fit into the model described by Clayman and Heritage, although residing on the fringe, as the news parody segments attempt to balance journalistic inquiry with the need to generate humor. Unlike late-night comedy programs, though, the political content of the parody segments is extended into the interviews. Baym argues the news parody interview segment "has become a central node in the national, mediated political conversation."[813] Both programs offer a major contribution to journalism by expanding the usually limited voices heard on news programs in a more democratic, public-sphere model. Rather than only devoting time to elected or officially sanctioned individuals, guests range from the powerful to the little heard, creating "an unpredictable, eclectic mixture, one that spans from the familiar to the avant-garde" and

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[812] Steven Clayman and John Heritage, *The News Interview: Journalists and Public Figures on the Air* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2002). 13.
[813] Baym, "Crafting New Communicative Models in the Televisual Sphere: Political Interviews on *The Daily Show*," 94.

offering consideration to those not usually given a platform.[814] Professors, other public intellectuals, and non-mainstream journalists regularly appear on the program to offer insight and debate major issues, along with elected politicians, world leaders, and national-press members.

Interview segments on *TDS* and *Colbert* reject the traditional objective mode of the mainstream press. They use a mix of adversarial and defensible questioning strategies to create a dialogue. Defensible questioning attempts to remain neutral and attributes questions to others, such as when Stewart uses phrases as "Your critics say" or "Some have said." Adversarial questioning emerges from the interlocutor and forces the interview subject to directly answer the host, rejecting the objective frame.[815] The two styles do not necessarily correlate with politics—adversarial questioning is just as likely to be used on progressives as conservatives.

Stewart's interview style creates more open dialogue, embracing his public sphere optimism. Some journalists have derided Stewart's approach, such as *Crossfire* host Tucker Carlson, who attempted to taunt the satirist over his "softball" interview of John Kerry. Stewart deflected responsibility back to Carlson, but Williams and Carpini argue that Stewart should have stood up for his interview process as a way of creating conversation—a valid alternative to the partisan shouting currently dominating cable news.[816] Admittedly, Stewart's questioning of major political (and Democratic) figures, such as Bill Clinton,

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[814] Ibid., 98.
[815] For more on these interview styles, see Clayman and Heritage, *The News Interview: Journalists and Public Figures on the Air*: Chapters 5 & 6.
[816] Bruce A. Williams and Michael X. Delli Carpini, "Real Ethical Concerns and Fake News: *The Daily Show* and the Challenge of the New Media Environment," in *The Stewart/Colbert Effect: Essays on the Real Impact of Fake News*, ed. Amarnath Amarasingam (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2011), 190-91.

Barack Obama, and John Kerry, features significantly fewer challenging questions than members of Congress or journalistic; however, *TDS* often does expand political discourse and challenge guests to define their stances.

In his book on the press and the Vietnam War, Daniel Hallin introduced his concept of the spheres of journalistic discourse to describe how objectivity is incorporated into press coverage. Hallin described three concentric circles, with the "sphere of consensus" in the middle, describing the issues on which society seemingly agrees and therefore remain unquestioned, such as gender division and private-property rights. Around that circle is the "sphere of legitimate controversy," encapsulating topics normally discussed by politicians and the press, where diverging opinions are considered worthy of debate. Surrounding that is the "sphere of deviance," which includes issues outside the normal bounds of debate; so more extreme advocacy journalism, rejecting objectivity, resides in this sphere.[817] On *TDS*, Stewart regularly moves from the sphere of legitimate controversy to the sphere of consensus, attempting to question common-sense viewpoints and their underlying ideology. For example, when conservative commentator and former presidential candidate Mike Huckabee appeared on the program, Stewart engages him in a thoughtful debate on the limits of government and on gay marriage. Huckabee attempts to claim Biblical authority against gay marriage, while also rhetorically framing himself as "pro-marriage," only to have Stewart point out that polygamy is Biblical. Stewart challenges the foundation of Huckabee's argument by questioning why his guest would be against more people choosing marriage, pointing out that married gay couples help validate marriage as an

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[817] Daniel C. Hallin, *The Uncensored War* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, Ltd., 1989). 116-18.

institution.[818] The interview is fascinating both for the substance of the topics under discussion, as well as the respectful tone and the give-and-take of the conversation.

Retaining his ironic persona, Colbert's interviews create a more complex interaction. The conservative character "Colbert" attacks liberal guests with arguments easily swept aside, providing openings for the guests to defend their views while dismissing conservative perspectives. Interviewing MSNBC host Rachel Maddow after Obama's reelection, Colbert rises to the defense of Romney, saying Hurricane Sandy obviously lost him the election and "everyone knows what causes hurricanes: gay people," providing an opening for Maddow to discuss Republican rationales for losing.[819] By contrast, Colbert impugns conservatives by agreeing with them. As Baym describes Colbert's conservative interviews: "While he poses as a friend to play the foil, Colbert's false praise masks a deeper antagonism that forces the exchange into a form of dialectical tension."[820] When Republican South Carolina Governor Nikki Haley appears on his show to discuss her book *Can't Is Not an Option*, Colbert segues from the title with, "How is 'can't' not an option, because as a conservative I believe 'can't' is a way of life? You can't come into my country and you cannot get married if you're gay." He then accuses her of being an "anchor baby," because Haley's parents immigrated to America. After she mentions that unemployment is down in South Carolina for the seventh month in a row, Colbert insists the state's economy has nothing to do with Obama, both raising the question of whether

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[818] *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, Episode 13158. December 9, 2008.
[819] *The Colbert Report*, Episode 9022. November 8, 2012.
[820] Baym, *From Cronkite to Colbert: The Evolution of Broadcast News*: 135.

Obama *does* deserve part of the credit, and also exposing Republican claims that GOP governors are successful *despite* federal policies.[821]

The potential drawbacks to engaging in Colbert's double-voiced interviews results in a thinner selection of national politicians for the show, both for the studio interviews and the recurring "Better Know a District" segment, where interviews between members of the House of Representatives and Colbert are edited into a package. Conservatives are especially hard to book, even during campaign seasons.[822] When the show began, Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee chair Rahm Emanuel warned members of Congress not to appear on the program, believing Colbert's presentational style created more potential risk than benefit. The Better Know a District segment, due to the editing and more intimate setting outside of a large studio, does often make members of Congress appear foolish. For instance, Georgia Republican Congressman Phil Gingrey was convinced to allow Colbert to "give him a Van Dyke" during the segment. It turned out that Colbert's request referred to the facial hair, and Gingrey accommodatingly wore a fake beard for the ending of the interview, with Colbert thanking him "for returning dignity to the democratic process."[823] Gingrey's attempt to seem like a good sport and increase his name recognition through the interview also resulted in the Congressman appearing less than professional, highlighting the kind of risk a Colbert appearance carries. The news parody host is fond of touting what he calls "The Colbert Bump," claiming that appearances on his show translate

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[821] *The Colbert Report*, Episode 8079. April 3, 2012.
[822] *Colbert: 'Re-Becoming' the Nation We Always Were*, Fresh Air. October 4, 2012.
[823] *The Colbert Report*, Episode 2054. April 26, 2006.

into greater popularity for his guests.[824] Analysis of his political guests showed slight short-term effects on fundraising; however, the effects depended on political affiliation, with some positive gains for Democrats and negative results for Republicans.[825] The more complex ironic tone of Colbert's character complicates the usual publicity interview appearance for politicians looking for a speaking platform.

Interview segments on both programs provide another method of newsgathering and journalistic practice. Commentary on news transitions into news interview, where the hosts can fact-find, seek clarification on positions, bring lesser-known voices into the journalistic field, and voice points of view outside of the sphere of legitimate controversy. Increasingly, the news parody hosts continue to generate journalistic content through their actions off the set of their Comedy Central programs.

Outside the Studio: Performance Art as Journalism

Far beyond any other previous news parody anchors, Stewart and Colbert are identified as speakers on journalism and politics. The two satirists turned to public events in recent years, engaging in a type of performance art that extends their persona and public-sphere projects from the screens into real-life spectacles. Stewart's appearance on *Crossfire* was the first major indicator he could wield rhetorical power outside the confines

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[824] Colbert started using the phrase after John Hall won a New York House seat in 2006, following an appearance on *Colbert*. Hall's opponent declined an invitation to appear on the show.

[825] James H. Fowler, "The Colbert Bump in Campaign Donations: More Truthful Than Truthy," *PS: Political Science & Politics* 41, no. 3 (2008).

of *TDS* studio.[826] Colbert, after getting his own show, increasingly participated in extending his character to real-life events.

Co-opting the usually cozy and bland White House Correspondents Dinner in 2006, Colbert ignored precedent and acted as if the event were merely a night at the anchor desk, taking jabs at the real people seated around him, rather than the normal edited sound bites. As previously mentioned, the assembled elite were not his real audience; Colbert played to television and online viewers who might encounter the speech, and especially the burgeoning Colbert Nation who normally watched his program. The speech functioned *as* journalism, raising real issues of presidential power and media timidity. It ironically aired on C-SPAN, a government cable channel. As writers have mentioned, one of the powerful journalistic functions of such an event is that audience members normally less engaged with politics in the media can be pulled into a discussion of events and policies.[827]

Colbert began generating his own opportunities for journalistic performance art in subsequent years. His 2008 run for the presidency raised questions about the difficulty and costs of getting on the ballot in just one state. Pushing Democrats to deny him the ability to run in South Carolina, Colbert revealed the political power structure limiting election choices in a democracy. His appearance on a Viacom channel and sponsorship by Doritos also created the opportunity to discuss the role of press advocacy and corporate money in

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[826] For analysis of the *Crossfire* appearance, see Megan Boler and Stephen Turpin, "*The Daily Show* and *Crossfire*: Satire and Sincerity as Truth to Power," in *Digital Media and Democracy: Tactics in Hard Times*, ed. Megan Boler (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2008).
[827] Jonathan Gray, Jeffrey P. Jones, and Ethan Thompson, "The State of Satire, the Satire of State," in *Satire TV: Politics and Comedy in the Post-Network Era*, ed. Jonathan Gray, Jeffrey P. Jones, and Ethan Thompson (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2009).

elections.[828] Colbert's later decision to create a Super PAC and his subsequent appearance in front of the FEC led to numerous news reports, both on his program and within the traditional and alternative media, about the role of money in campaigns and why laws about campaign financing matter.[829] The satirist says such excursions into the real-life world of politics offer opportunities to illuminate the process: "I like playing political games to see what really happens in them."[830] The process operates as a form of investigative journalism, revealing the hidden world of politics by walking through it.

In 2010 Stewart and Colbert joined forces for the "Rally to Restore Sanity and/or Fear," a public event on the National Mall meant to parody Fox News host Glenn Beck's "Restoring Honor" rally. The two hosts, in character from their shows, presented dueling visions of political speech, creating social critique on the public stage. At one point, Stewart invites Cat Stevens to sing "Peace Train," while Ozzy Osbourne is asked to perform "Crazy Train" by Colbert, with each host repeatedly interrupting the two songs. The two musicians represent the sanity and fear, respectively, in the title of the event. Ronald Placone and Michael Tumolo view the battle of songs as a microcosm of the event itself: "Instead of hearing the songs out and judging them on their merits, as a metaphor for deliberating in good faith, we are thrust into a cacophony of indistinguishable noise."[831] The "collision" of the two trains mirrors the kind of political voices dominating public speech.

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[828] For an examination of these legal questions, see Clifford Jones, "The Stephen Colbert Problem: The Media Exemption for Corporate Political Advocacy and the "Hall to the Cheese Stephen Colbert Nacho Cheese Doritos 2008 Presidential Campaign Coverage"," *University of Florida Journal of Law & Public Policy* 19, no. 2 (2008).
[829] R. Sam Garrett, "Seriously Funny: Understanding Campaign Finance Policy through the Colbert Super PAC," *St. Louis University Law Journal* 56, no. 3 (2012).
[830] *Meet the Press*, October 14, 2012.
[831] Ronald A. Placone and Michael Tumolo, "Interrupting the Machine: Cynic Comedy in the "Rally for Sanity and/or Fear"," *Journal of Contemporary Rhetoric* 1, no. 1 (2011).

While functioning as a commentary on the lack of civil discourse, the rally also highlighted the post-Obama obsession with Tea Party rallies and the spectacle of political outrage. Guy Debord viewed spectacle as action without reason, with "All *real* activity having been forcibly channeled into the global construction of the spectacle."[832] The Tea Party exists as a commodity of political belief, with their fears, loose concepts, and the spectacle of their gatherings, complete with costumes. One study of the event referred to the rally as "critique through spectacle *of spectacle*," pointing out how the rally existed purely as an excuse to have a rally, with the hosts making no direct requests for action.[833] The spectacle called attention to its own construction as spectacle.

By extending their criticisms beyond the confines of their respective television shows, Colbert and Stewart engage in performance art that furthers their critical message. Through that process, they continue to interrogate norms of political speech, political process, and journalistic routines, creating discourse that circulates within the journalistic field and functions as civic reporting. The rally, in particular, allowed the hosts to engage their audience as fellow citizens, not simply viewers, and also gave individuals the opportunity to participate in the performance art by attending, making signs, dressing up, etc.[834]

Along with others, like Baym, I make the case that *TDS* and *Colbert* function *as* a type of journalism, in addition to their critiques of the media; however, both Colbert and Stewart

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[832] Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Ken Knabb (London, England: Rebel Press, 2006). 27.
[833] Art Herbig and Aaron Hess, "Convergent Critical Rhetoric at the "Rally to Restore Sanity": Exploring the Intersection of Rhetoric, Ethnography, and Documentary Production," *Communication Studies* 63, no. 3 (2012): 282.
[834] Jeffrey P. Jones, Geoffrey Baym, and Amber Day, "Mr. Stewart and Mr. Colbert Go to Washington: Television Satirists Outside the Box," *Social Research* 79, no. 1 (2012): 41.

repeatedly deny occupying the role of journalist. In his appearance on *Crossfire* Stewart attacks the hosts, but Tucker Carlson attempts to turn the mirror back on Stewart, accusing the satirist of asking easy questions to John Kerry. Rather than defend himself, Stewart attempts to remove himself from the journalistic field, saying, "You're on CNN. The show that leads into me is puppets making crank phone calls."[835] Similarly, when challenged by Bill O'Reilly on why *TDS* never discusses positive events in Iraq, Stewart responds, "We're not a news organization."[836] In an interview with NPR's Terry Gross, Stewart explains that he considers *TDS* analysis rather than journalism because, "we don't fact-check and we don't look at context because of any journalistic criterion that we feel has to be met." Stewart seems to be self-serving and disingenuous in his response, rejecting the responsibly of publically recognizing the role his program plays and wanting to have it both ways. Likewise, Colbert has explicitly denied being a journalist, saying, "I do not imagine I'm a newsman."[837] Repeated denials from the hosts could reflect an unwillingness to make the challenging case that journalism can exist outside dominant media practices, but their claims seem more likely to function as simple insulation, protecting them from accusations of taking themselves too seriously and from having to defend their journalistic practice. Rather than denying the programs function as journalism, the hosts should seize the opportunity to forge an alternative vision, enunciating their concepts of a more public sphere-oriented journalism.

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[835] *Crossfire*, October 15, 2004.
[836] *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, Episode 13148. November 13, 2008.
[837] *Meet the Press*, October 14, 2012.

Conclusions on Post-Network News Parody

This analysis of *TDS* and *Colbert* approaches the programs as active participants in the journalistic and political fields, functioning both as correctives and supplements to mainstream journalism. The shows undeniably replicate some problematic aspects of current media practice, though. Their reliance on existing media for much of their source material becomes more problematic as cuts in budgets and staffing actually constrain what might be available for them to satirize.[838] Some research has shown the programs can replicate inaccuracies by repeating claims from other media sources without fact-checking, suggesting news parody should create their own ethical criteria.[839] Although the programs engage in criticism of media, they also partake in the same commercialized media structure, under Viacom, one of the most powerful media companies in the world. Furthermore, the interview segments do create journalistic discourse, but their guests also tend to appear on the shows to promote new books or films. While participating in a critique of the journalistic media system and its practices, it would be incredibly naive to neglect to mention that the programs also support and reconstitute that very system.

The Comedy Central programs constitute a rearticulation of previous iterations of the news parody genre. Rather than integrating news-style content with other forms of sketch or topical comedy, *TDS* and *Colbert* form blocks of news parody, closely simulating the look of broadcast and cable news through contemporary technology. These newer

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[838] Robert W. McChesney, "Introduction," in *The Stewart/Colbert Effect: Essays on the Real Impact of Fake News*, ed. Amarnath Amarasingam (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2011), 2.
[839] Williams and Carpini, "Real Ethical Concerns and Fake News: *The Daily Show* and the Challenge of the New Media Environment."

programs fill out their half hour with news interviews that extend their critical mode. In addition, their focus on national public-affairs news, rather than personality-driven and entertainment topics, creates a formula for news parody more likely to discursively crossover into the journalistic field.

Developing during the post-network era of television, the two programs are further set apart from others in the genre by benefitting from multiplatforming and active fan communities. Distribution in the early 2000s was limited to broadcast or physical media for almost all television series. *TDS* was an early online success, with short clips that could be successfully streamed with the limited network speeds of the day. Unlike narrative programming, the clips could be appreciated even when removed from the context of the episode. As Baym notes, both *TDS* and *Colbert* are perfectly positioned to be repurposed across multiple platforms.[840] After the launch of YouTube, *TDS* clips frequently appeared on the site, prompting Viacom to issue take-down notices for all their content. Comedy Central originally attempted to compete with YouTube by launching their own failed online channel called "Motherload," but moved toward individual homepages for the two programs. Content from the two shows can now be viewed on the cable channel, downloaded via iTunes and other services, streamed from their individual home pages from the earliest episodes forward, or embedded as links on social media. The short nature of the content and the way the program is divided into easily viewable clips make it perfect for Internet sharing. While time is the most valuable commodity in the traditional television business, the virtually limitless storage for digital content allows both programs

[840] Baym, *From Cronkite to Colbert: The Evolution of Broadcast News*: 148.

to extend their interview segments. After wrapping the interview on television, each host continues the discussion, with additional content appearing on their websites.

The growth of Internet use in the post-network era also created new opportunities for connecting with television fans, assisting both news parody programs in fostering community and a dedicated following. John Hartley discusses how television generates a new kind of identity formation, set not in location, race, or other traditional cultural concepts, but creating a kind of "republic of television."[841] The dedicated audiences of these Comedy Central programs constitute a much more active sub-category of this larger viewing republic, with many viewers directly connecting with the hosts and other fans. Colbert's carefully cultivated concept of "The Colbert Nation" feeds into this dedicated fan base. Jeffrey Jones points out how Colbert's fans operate as further parody of right-wing political hosts and their rabid fan communities.[842] Both programs foster a kind of insider mentality through repeat jokes, such as Stewart's past tendency to shorten the name of any long organization to "NAMBLA." Writers also flatter the audiences of the two shows by incorporating high culture or Internet culture, making the audience "in on the joke." For instance, both shows often mention astrophysicist Neil deGrasse Tyson, and *Colbert* even requested Poet Laureate Robert Pinsky write a prom-proposal poem and read it on the show (with the audience going wild for the poet, as if he were a rock star). Colbert also invites his audiences to participate online, such as through several different "Green Screen Challenges," where viewers could download video, replace the background, and then upload their video to the Colbert Nation site. One video featured Colbert fighting with a light saber; another included John McCain and invited the audience to make the politician

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[841] John Hartley, *Television Truths* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2008). 96-125.
[842] Jones, *Entertaining Politics: Satiric Television and Political Engagement*: 226-27.

more exciting. All of these various activities invite viewers to participate in fan activities beyond nightly viewing, harnessing digital, two-way technologies and new channels of communication (including social media) to foster an audience of savvy, politically engaged viewers aware of both the shortcomings of traditional journalism and the potential for its reconstitution.

Table 5.1: The Daily Show Media and Political Guests By Year (1999-2005)
The process of identifying guests as media and/or political is inherently subjective. I tried to balance identifying *why* personalities were famous with the context of their appearance. Therefore, although Madeleine Albright appeared following the release of her book, she is primarily known as a political figure. Janeane Garofalo, although known as a comedian, appeared just before the 2004 election as a media personality from the progressive radio network Air America, justifying identifying her as media.

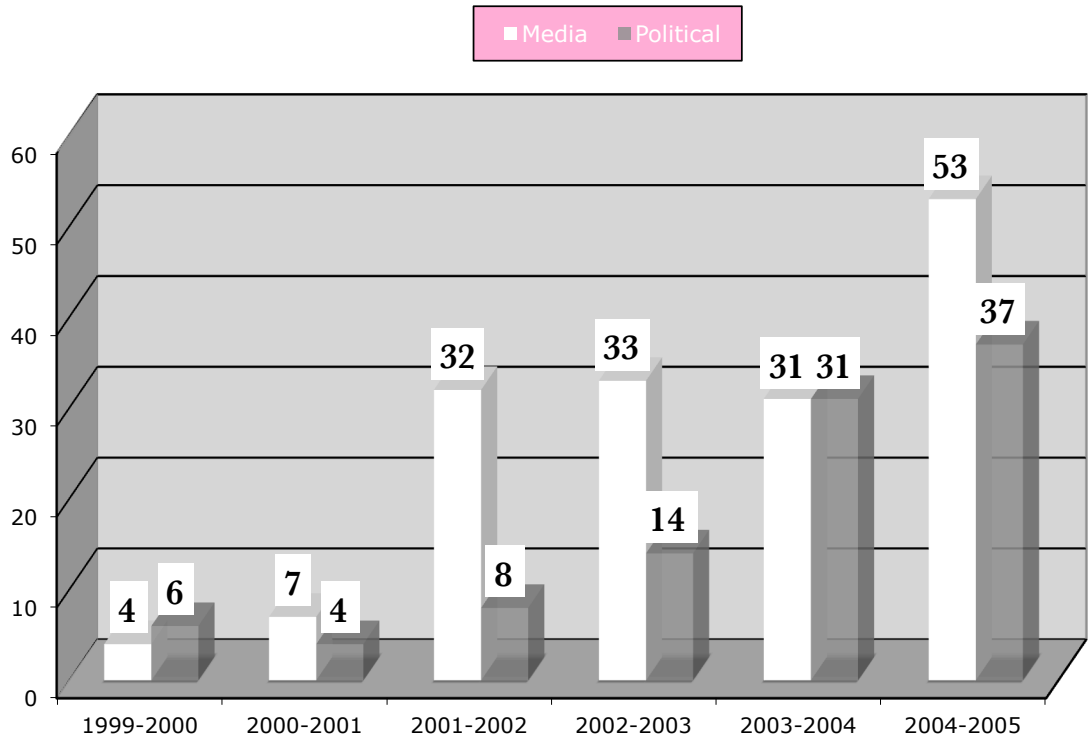

Figure 5.1 – The Daily Show Set Main View

Figure 5.2 – The Daily Show Set Side View

Figure 5.3 – The Daily Show Graphics

Figure 5.4 – The Daily Show "Moral Kombat"

CONCLUSION

Over the last fifty years, news parody on national American television transformed from a cautious, besieged and short-lived phenomenon to cutting-edge satire, firmly within the mainstream and wielding considerable cultural influence. While retreating from network primetime to late-night time slots and cable channels, the genre thrived, experimenting and reinventing itself. Given the development of the genre, one could be tempted to use "evolution" to describe shifts between programs; however, the metaphor would be poorly applied. The shows discussed in this dissertation emerged in the wake of their predecessors, but their creators were likely less concerned with differentiation from the past than resonance with the present. Cultural products are always embedded within their historic time, so shifts in doxa and discourse also influence the possibilities of each program. In this conclusion, I summarize the transition of news parody over the preceding decades, focusing on its style and format, anchor presentation, presidential politics, and humor, as well as outlining other news parody activities and future directions for the genre.

Shifts in News Parody

Each new program brings variation to the genre of news parody. The formats and approaches vary greatly over the last five decades. Structurally, programs seemed to struggle with striking the right balance of news parody with other content. The haphazard mix of skits, stand-up, commercial parodies, and news bits created generic confusion for *TW3*, an issue *NNTN* replicated in its frenetically edited format. Subsequent programs like *Laugh-In* attempted to create discrete moments of news satire, but without actually replicating the look of newscasts. Weekend Update solved the problem of marrying sketch

comedy with news parody by sectioning itself off from *SNL*, and the Comedy Central programs moved to a more cohesive, unified news parody *program* by adding news interviews to the parody. Problems with replicating broadcast style mainly stemmed from the expensive technology and lack of resources in the '60s and '70s, with *NNTN* emerging at a time of easy video availability and decreasing technological cost. By the 2000s, news parody shows were virtually indistinguishable from network and cable newscasts in terms of set, graphics, and video availability, creating a much stronger parody through the direct replication of style.

Even more than the format and look, news parody programs continually revised the role of the anchor, often in response to shifts in traditional television news. *TW3*'s first season produced an ensemble of anchors utilizing a comedian-style delivery. The second season gave way to David Frost's reserved British commentary, although both approaches ultimately failed to resonate with audiences. By contrast, *SNL* closely followed broadcast trends, moving from solo anchor to dual anchors to a news-team approach. The mocking presentational style of Chevy Chase transitioned to stereotypes of television journalists on Weekend Update with Jane Curtin playing a hard-hitting newswoman, Dan Aykroyd an acerbic traditionalist, and Bill Murray an entertainment/features reporter. As subsequent *SNL* talent struggled to find their voice on the anchor desk, *NNTN*'s Stuart Pankin seemed to take a page from *TW3*, playing the anchor as comedian, smugly breaking character to laugh along with the audience. Pankin's approach, along with the mixed format of the program, ultimately worked against sustaining a presentation of news parody. Stewart, through a complex celebrity persona, successfully bridges the gap between satirist and fake anchor by seamlessly transitioning from news reading with traditional reserve to

commentating with emotion and seeming authenticity. Colbert continues in the tradition of Weekend Update by establishing a persona based on current trends in television news, adopting the partisan voice of a conservative commentator. All the parodic anchors bring a different persona to their show; however, Stewart and Colbert stand out as comedians in a way that is indivisible from their anchor role. Unlike *SNL*, where actors appear on Weekend Update and other skits, the Comedy Central anchors define and are defined by their respective shows.

The coverage of presidential politics on each program suggests not only the writers' and executives' willingness to satirize public officials, but also partisan leanings and the state of political hegemony at the time of production. Although the satire of *TW3* seems tame by today's standards, discourse surround the show suggest their humor was perceived as quite biting and risky. Conservative politicians received harsher treatment than progressives, but jokes still tended to center on personality rather than policy. By the time Weekend Update began, cultural upheaval and past political betrayals opened the door to more personal attacks on Ford and Carter, also expanding to their policies and specific actions. Weekend Update reserved its most pointed criticisms for Ford and other Republicans; however, after initial leeway for Carter, the writers increasingly portrayed the Democratic leader as ineffectual. The 1980s and *NNTN* reflected the consensus politics of the Reagan era. Treating the conservative politician with a wink and a smile, most of the HBO program's jokes focused more on incongruently edited clips and harmless personality jabs than presidential performance or policies. *TDS* and *Colbert* embraced expanded boundaries for political satire in the post-network era, combining personal critiques of presidents with in-depth policy discussion and deconstruction of presidential rhetoric.

Their singular focus on news parody and frequent airing (four nights a week) also provide more time and opportunity to address specific issues and to link their presidential coverage into a larger thematic critique. As with other news parody programs, conservatives remain the most frequent target, but the Comedy Central programs primarily focus their satire on the actions of the presidency rather than purely partisan concerns.

Humor throughout the history of television news parody veers from the juvenile to the insightful, often within the very same episode. All of the programs analyzed in this study utilize humor in everything from its most unrefined to safest formats. Linguistic or visual puns are the stock in trade of the genre. Differences in each program arise with consideration of Davis's higher orders of humor. For its time, *TW3* offered fairly sophisticated humor that most frequently incorporated linguistic and logical humor. While not necessarily destabilizing, the NBC program did occasionally question dominant social constructs such as race and the role of the military—topics off the table for entertainment shows of the era. Such moments were infrequent, but now seem ahead of their time, when less than five years later *Laugh-In* would refer to many of the same issues with barely a raised eyebrow from television executives. Weekend Update extended news parody's use of humor to critique both newsmakers and journalists as well. While regularly playing on the linguistic level, the *SNL* newscast also took advantage of expanding doxa to increasingly incorporate humor that disrupts "common sense" assertions about metanarratives and social units. Such humor was brief, like most of the jokes on the weekly segment, but frequent. The segment's humor helped define *SNL* during its first five years as a program willing to push back against the boundaries of discourse. *NNTN*'s primary mode of pastiche replicated the postmodern fascination with the mimicry of style, but largely without a

satiric impulse. Moments of insightful and politically charged humor emerged, but became quickly subsumed within the fast-paced, disconnected style of the program. *TDS* embraced satiric parody, merging a focus on form with a critical impulse. The Comedy Central show accesses multiple levels of humor, but spends considerable time discussing how institutions fail to live up to their ideals, especially in the political and journalistic fields, and ultimately questions their assumptions. *Colbert* shifts its parody from primarily satire to irony, destabilizing political assumptions through textual openness and encouraging audiences to interpret the humor for themselves. Each program reflects the renegotiations of hegemony and how the limits of humor expanded and contracted over the last fifty years, both taking advantage of openings to push the boundaries, and operating within consensus through their version of news parody.

News Parody for a New Millennium

Although *TDS* and *Colbert* have become the most celebrated and culturally significant news parody programs so far during the post-network era, other shows emerged or continued. In addition, the Internet became an alternative distribution channel, freeing television news parody from the confines of the broadcast/cable industry.

From the rotating anchor chairs of the 1990s, Weekend Update entered the new millennium with stability and a return to two anchors on the desk. Jimmy Fallon and Tina Fey began anchoring in 2000. After Fallon's departure in 2004, Amy Poehler shared the desk with Fey, and Seth Meyers later replaced Fey. From 2008, the program returned to a single anchor with Meyers at the desk. Weekend Update benefitted from these periods of overlap, but familiar faces remained to anchor the news segment. Culturally, the highly

charged partisan era of George W. Bush's presidency seemed to reinvigorate *SNL*. The 2000 election became a boon, with *SNL* featuring consistent political humor about the two candidates. Research shows the program helped to reinforce already-popular concepts about the candidates' traits: Gore as stiff and too verbose, and Bush as clueless.[843] In the 2000 and 2004 election years, journalists paid more attention to the show's satire, writing about *SNL*'s criticism and giving *SNL*'s humor some entry into the journalistic field. The anchor team of Fey & Poehler, the first dual female team for Weekend Update, focused much more on political stories and took the segment back to its more politically progressive roots. It was Sarah Palin's selection as the Republican vice-presidential nominee that became a break-out moment for the program in the 2000s, with Fey returning to the program to imitate Palin. In the first skit with Fey as Palin, Fey famously claimed, "I can see Russia from my house!" The clip was re-aired so many times that voters started to wrongly attribute the quote to the real Palin. Fey's appearances and the show's overall coverage of the campaign increased *SNL*'s viewership by 50% over the previous year, with their satire resonating with the public and the press.[844] Palin herself actually appeared on Weekend Update on one episode, attempting to harness the increased popularity of the show. The effort failed. Research shows that watching *SNL*'s coverage of Palin resulted in a drop in support beyond the more general decrease Palin was already experiencing.[845] Since 2000, both *SNL* and Weekend Update experienced a surge in cultural relevance and press coverage of their political satire, especially during campaign seasons.

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[843] Chris Smith and Ben Voth, "The Role of Humor in Political Argument: How 'Strategery' and 'Lockboxes' Changed a Political Campaign," *Argumentation and Advocacy* 39(2002).
[844] Rebecca Dana, "SNL Rides High on Campaign Satire," *Wall Street Journal*, October 6, 2008.
[845] Baumgartner, Morris, and Walth, "The Fey Effect: Young Adults, Political Humor, and Perceptions of Sarah Palin in the 2008 Presidential Election Campaign."

Like *TDS*, *SNL*'s political satire found increased viewership on the Internet, sharing the platform with native digital programming.

The satirical newspaper and website *The Onion* is an essential part of the larger news parody ecosystem, although one beyond the scope of this research project. Beginning as a print paper in 1988, *The Onion* launched its own website in 1996, becoming a must-view site for comedy and political satire. Imitating the peculiar structure and syntax of print journalism, writers skewer the press, politicians, and the American public, mixing irony, satire, and parody. Unlike *TDS* and *Colbert*, *The Onion* actually creates fake stories with satirical implications rather than focusing on existing news. Like journalists, *The Onion* writers research their topics to mix reality with absurdity.[846] In 2007, the website extended their brand by launching the *Onion News Network* (ONN), creating video clips that were originally streamed from their website and available as podcasts. The company hired 15 employees and invested $1 million, creating a virtual newsroom environment for anchors.[847] *ONN* styled itself after common cable news formats. The IFC cable network picked up *ONN* in an effort to expand its original programming at the beginning of 2011 and renewed the program for 2011-2012, but cancelled before a third season. Although *The Onion* still posts video package clips, the *ONN* brand and the concept of anchored news parody no longer seem to be an active part of their strategy. Perhaps transferring the multiplatform strategy of television online is less problematic than going in the other direction. Audiences already used to watching *ONN* clips on demand perhaps found less of

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[846] Kathryn S. Wenner, "Peeling *The Onion*," *American Journalism Review* (2002): 53.
[847] "Press 'Play' for Satire," *Wall Street Journal*, http://online.wsj.com/public/article/SB117459985897745975-mETUwZECHpnJSRMSyaQqQUA9x8A_20070421.html?mod=tff_main_tff_top.

a reason to engage in appointment viewing on an expanded-tier cable station. However, even established broadcast entities failed to replicate Comedy Central's success.

In 2007 Fox News launched its own attempt at news parody, *The ½ Hour News Hour*, created by *24* co-creator Joel Surnow and designed to be a conservative version of *TDS*. Rather than imitating news format, the program was more akin to *TW3*, with stand-up commentary and political sketches, rather than news packages and an anchor to link content. In its short run, the program attracted such conservative stalwarts as Rush Limbaugh, Dennis Miller, and Ann Coulter. Despite strong initial numbers for its premiere, with 1.5 million viewers, curiosity quickly turned to lack of interest and the program was cancelled after just seventeen episodes.[848] The program was conservative in an overt, calculated, determinative fashion that did not correspond to the more organically arising liberalism of *TDS*. Talent lacked the perceived sincerity of Jon Stewart, offering instead a revolving door of conservative talk stock-villains: global-warming researchers, atheists, apologists for American power, Muslims, etc. In one of their news parody skits, for instance, anchors read off the Arabic-sounding names of terrorism suspects and report that police are unable to speculate on why the bombing took place or what their motivations were. The audience laughs, perhaps because in the world of Fox News, Middle Eastern and terrorist are interchangeable. Writing about *The ½ Hour News Hour*, Geoffrey Baym points out the network seemed to totally misunderstand the spirit of political parody: "If the power of parody lies in its ability to offer a form of resistance, a counter-weight to discourses of hegemony, *½ Hour* instead functioned as an agency of hegemony, using

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[848] Michael Learmonth, "Satire Scores for Fox News Net," *Variety*, http://variety.com/2007/scene/news/satire-scores-for-fox-news-net-1117959928/

comedy in support of institutional power and its political-economic agenda."[849] The failure of conservative news parody (or at least its only major attempt) definitely seems connected to a fundamental miscalculation that satiric humor and parody can serve any ideological goal, whether supporting dominant power structure or attempting to undercut them. However, beyond the strategic mismatch, the airwaves and cable systems are already flooded with mocking conservative media, dismissive of progressive values and continually setting up straw-man arguments from their opponents in a peculiar style of didactic humor. In essence, Rush Limbaugh already produces news parody, both intentionally and unintentionally.

The failure of *ONN* and *½ Hour News Hour* could signal oversaturation for news parody in the television marketplace with the Comedy Central programs and Weekend Update. New and successful entries could obviously arise; however, it is likelier that economics of online distribution and the increased commingling of news and humor mean that visual news parody is expanding in other directions.

The Future of News Parody

Undoubtedly, *TDS* and *Colbert* will end their runs—either through the loss of their eponymous hosts, or due to shifts in culture or industry. In fact, Jon Stewart handed the anchoring reigns of *TDS* to correspondent John Oliver for four months in the summer of 2013 so Stewart could direct a film (a non-comedic one at that), suggesting at least a temporary desire to expand beyond anchoring. Although the popularity of the Comedy

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[849] Geoffrey Baym, "Rush Limbaugh with a Laugh-Track: The (Thankfully) Short Life of the *1/2 Hour News Hour*," *Cinema Journal* 51, no. 4 (2012): 177.

Central programs could shift to a new television show, changes in viewing habits may make Internet news parody the main competitors for Stewart and Colbert.

Increasingly turning to mobile platforms and social media as their primary means of consuming and selecting content, the young audiences targeted by news parody demand media creators keep up with technological trends. While appointment viewing continues to decline, audiences now occupy their interstitial time, or moments between activities, with mobile media consumption.[850] So far, *TDS* and *Colbert* have successfully navigated the expanding boundaries of media in the post-network era. Mobile applications for both programs stream select content from the shows, although neither exclusive content nor full episodes are available. One group of researchers suggest that social media enables new types of opinion leaders, especially satirists with technical skills.[851] Colbert and Stewart (as well as *The Onion*) seem to currently occupy this space through Facebook posts, Twitter feeds, and frequent sharing from individuals and media sites, but the rapid shift of mobile media opens the doors for other competitors. The recent introduction of micro-vlogging application Vine, which facilitates the sharing and embedding of six-second videos, opens the door for a return to the type of brief news parody content *NNTN* excelled at creating. Ironically, the small chunks of content that enabled *TDS* and *Colbert* to become so widely viewed online may now be too long for the next potential trend in mobile video.

The programs also increasingly compete with user-created parody and satire, which can often react quicker. After Mitt Romney made his infamous "binders full of women"

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[850] John Dimmick, John Christian Feaster, and Gregory J. Hoplamazian, "News in the Interstices: The Niches of Mobile Media in Space and Time," *New Media & Society* 13, no. 1 (2011).
[851] Victoria L. Crittenden, Lucas M. Hopkins, and J. M. Simmons, "Satirists as Opinion Leaders: Is Social Media Redefining Roles?," *Journal of Public Affairs* 11, no. 3 (2011).

comment during a presidential debate, Twitter feeds sprang to life with ironic and sarcastic tweets. Even Amazon product reviews for Avery binders became a site for satire as online humorists penned extended evaluations of the suitability of particular binders for women. All this too place before Stewart or Colbert could even get on the air to comment.

The previous chapter on news parody in the post-network era emphasized the crossover of contemporary news media into the journalistic and political fields. The process has been two-way, though. With the continual validation of the news coverage of *TDS* and *Colbert*, a parallel trend emerged of traditional news programs attempting to harness humor while retaining their standing as "official news sources." As one example, CNN created a political talk show hosted by comedian D. L. Hughley in 2008 called *D.L. Hughley Breaks the News*. The program lasted less than half a year, and during its run garnered brief moments of controversy, but mostly reaped confusion over the odd mismatch of Hughley's acerbic style, the attempt to include some actual news content, and its appearance on CNN, the cable news network most associated with traditional news. A much more successful blend appeared on MSNBC with the *Rachel Maddow Show*. Also beginning in 2008, the program has been characterized as a reversal of Stewart and Colbert with Maddow covering news and engaging in news talk with sarcasm and humor, all from the standpoint of a self-defined traditional newsperson.[852] With such cross-pollination continuing, the supposed line between journalism and news parody becomes increasingly hard to identify or justify.

In the fifty years since *TW3* appeared on NBC, news parody has moved from outside the realm of journalism into the same discursive field and, now has begun to merge with

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[852] Alissa Quart, "The Sarcastic Times: For Rachel Maddow and the Other Ironic Anchors, Absurdity Is Serious Stuff," *Columbia Journalism Review* (2009).

the industry itself, swapping personnel and sharing content. In *Understanding Popular Culture*, John Fiske writes, "popular culture is progressive, not revolutionary." [853] Television, especially, must partake of the everyday aesthetics and sensibilities of the mainstream in order to retain popularity, but its appeal to the mainstream does not negate a potential for disruption. The history of news parody reflects this progressive tendency, slowly calling attention to the excesses and absurdity of both television journalism and political discourse, and insinuating itself into that very process. In more recent years news parody has produced some direct results: the cancellation of *Crossfire,* for instance, or the passage of a bill to fund health care for 9/11 responders following an entire episode of *TDS* devoted to Republican attempts to filibuster the bill.[854] More so, news parody fostered a greater sense of skepticism towards politicians and the media from its audiences and greater self-awareness from journalists. In these ways, news parody has indeed produced revolution through the progression of the genre.

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[853] John Fiske, *Understanding Popular Culture* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2007). 161.
[854] For coverage of Stewart's role in the passage of the bill see Bill Carter and Brian Stelter, "In 'Daily Show' Role on 9/11 Bill, Echoes of Murrow," *New York Times*, http://www.nytimes.com/2010/12/27/business/media/27stewart.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0.

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