

## The Influence of "Infoenterpropagainment"

*Exploring the Power of Political Satire as  
a Distinct Form of Political Humor*

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Over the past few decades, scholars in a wide variety of disciplines have noted a distinct change in the social landscape—the increasing tendency to combine “hard” information and entertainment. In 1984, Neil Postman argued that we were in danger of “amusing ourselves to death,” and that the fusion of information and entertainment, led by television, would diminish public dialogue and foster widespread indifference.<sup>1</sup> Although scholars have sometimes had difficulty agreeing on what defines so-called “soft news,” there is agreement on a few fundamental characteristics. Soft news tends to be personality driven, focuses on sensationalism and drama rather than facts, and conveys less public affairs information to its audience than hard news.<sup>2</sup> Nonetheless, soft news programs significantly alter public perceptions of candidates and political events.<sup>3</sup>

Existing scholarship has examined the soft news phenomenon by differentiating between various formats.<sup>4</sup> Thus, daytime talk shows (*Oprah*, *The View*), evening news magazines (*20/20*, *60 Minutes*), late night comedy programs (*The Late Show with David Letterman*, *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno*, *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*), radio call-in shows (*The Rush Limbaugh Show*), and morning news shows (*The Today Show*, *Good Morning America*) are treated as distinct manifestations of the same fundamental phenomenon.<sup>5</sup> While drawing distinctions based on the format of the program is often helpful, we will be well served by an effort to differentiate based on content as well.

For obvious reasons, I limit attention to those programs within the "political humor" genre. Obviously, some soft news like late night talk shows or *The Daily Show* is included, but today's political humor also includes a number of programs or formats that are generally ignored in studies of soft news and instead relegated to the arena of pure entertainment. Television programs like *The Simpsons*, *South Park*, *Chappelle's Show*, *Family Guy*, and *Futurama*, movies such as *Team America: World Police*, *Thank You for Smoking*, and *Silver City*, and online cartoons produced by JibJab and Mark Fiore are almost never included in studies of soft news. Yet they regularly contain political humor and use satirical methods to convey overtly political messages to their audience. In a 2004 interview with *Entertainment Weekly*, Jon Stewart (host of the popular *The Daily Show*) uses the apt phrase "info-enter-propa-gainment" to describe this new genre of popular culture.<sup>6</sup>

To understand the full impact of political humor, we must first start our inquiry by disabusing ourselves of the notion that all televised political humor is the same. Although all are humorous, air at night, and contain interview segments with well-known celebrities in politics and entertainment, *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* are not necessarily the equivalent to *The Late Show* or *The Tonight Show*. What differentiates them from other late night comedy programs is their use of satire to convey a coherent political message. Based on their content, we can expect that they will have far more in common with other satiric outlets than they do with shows that happen to air in the late evening.

Satire is not often considered an important form of political dialogue, but it serves many distinct and important roles in a democratic society: it encourages critical debate, sheds light on perceived wrongs within society and government, points out hypocrisy, and makes political criticism accessible to the average citizen. Satire is not unique in its aim, which is to expose wrongdoing and hypocrisies. Popular commentators in both print and broadcast media have a platform to express their critiques. Satire, however, is unique in its approach. By subtly exposing the audience to the critique, creating laughter, and using a combination of wit, humor, and playfulness to engage the audience, satire is *artful* political critique. In this way, satire is unlike other forms of political commentary. It is, however, an equally *important* forum for political commentary.<sup>7</sup>

To say, as A. O. Scott does in his review of *Team America: World Police*, that "we are living in a golden age of political satire" is an important observation.<sup>8</sup> Trey Parker and Matt Stone, the creators of *South Park* and the force behind *Team America*, have been quite successful with their politically charged social commentary masquerading as overly simplistic animation. Matt Groening, the creator of TV's *The Simpsons*, has certainly had an opportunity to inform viewers young and old of his political critiques week in and week out for over fifteen years. Most recently, the rise of Jon Stewart's *The Daily Show* as a popular source of political information for young voters certainly attracted the attention of the 2004 presidential candidates, eight of whom appeared on the program. JibJab Media, creators of a parody called *This Land!* (JibJab.com), reached millions of Internet users during the 2004 presidential election.<sup>9</sup> In short, satire is alive and well in modern American society.

Despite the fact that political satire is flourishing in virtually every medium of current American life and has achieved remarkable popular success, scholars who study satire seem to pay it little attention.<sup>10</sup> Similarly, political scientists have put a great deal of time and energy into studying the effects of popular culture, soft news, and political humor on voting behavior, but few have singled out satire as a distinct phenomenon. Conventional wisdom often relegates satire to its heydays in ancient Greece and Rome and seventeenth-century England and Ireland. But today's political satire is not your great-great-great-grandparents' satire. This is not the age of Aristophanes, nor of Pope, nor of Swift, nor even of Twain. It is, rather, the age of the Internet, mass media, and punk rock. These mediums have fundamentally altered the messages, meanings, and methods used by the satirist. So what effect is satire having in modern American society?

The remainder of this chapter focuses on modern political satire and the ways it differs from other forms of political humor in the methods popular satirical outlets use, and the effect on the audience.

### Satire: A Unique Pursuit

Satire has a long and varied history throughout human society. In early societies, a satirist was characterized as a type of magician, "one to be regarded with awe, with reverence and with fear."<sup>11</sup> Satirists were

thought to possess a gift to ward off evil by harnessing the magical powers of words: "the satire might be hurled at wicked individuals by name or at evil influences generally."<sup>12</sup> Even in ancient Greek and Roman societies, Robert Elliott argues that satirists were seen as suspicious individuals who held pseudo-magical powers (Plato proposed legal penalties for "magical incantations," which included satire).<sup>13</sup> The relationship between satirist and society is largely defined by this suspicion. Elliott writes

The magician has always and everywhere been the focus of strong and conflicting feelings on the part of his society. Insofar as he uses his great powers to enhance the well-being of society—defending it from its enemies, coercing the powers of nature into favorable performance, enriching the inner life of society through ritualistic ceremony, etc., he is honored and revered.... For the powers of the magician are only in a very limited sense amenable to social control; in them is potentiality for benefit, but also for danger, both social and personal. The magician is at once prop and threat to society and to each individual. Consequently, the relation of the magician to society is always colored by the ambivalent emotional attitudes generated by this knowledge. Clearly the situation of the satirist-magician is very similar. His satire may be incorporated into ritual...and thus contribute materially to the social cohesiveness which it is one of the functions of ritual to bring about.

Or it may be employed in straightforward and warlike defense of his tribe against threat from without.... But in other, and possibly more characteristic roles, the satirist becomes the object of fear and hate; as testimony we have many legends where the fear is expressed either directly or symbolically, and we have the evidence of ancient law.... The Roman Twelve Tables invoke the death penalty for defamatory and libelous verse (which was thought to be magically efficacious); and the Irish laws are full of specific injunctions against satire. These latter, however, distinguish between lawful and unlawful satire and provide rewards for "good" satire and punishments for "bad." Here are codified, in legal formulas, the ambivalent attitudes of a society toward its satirists.<sup>14</sup>

The role of the satirist changed, however. No longer was satire associated with magical power, but instead, it was looked upon as an aesthetic pursuit—a literary art form. Even with the introduction of the classical literary satire that has maintained the attention of literary scholars for centuries, "satire has never enjoyed a very high reputation with literary critics," and "the satirist has skated on the thin edge of censorship and legal retribution."<sup>15</sup>

Today's satirists serve a decidedly different social role, but satire as a form of political speech is as potent as ever. At heart, the role of the satirist remains the same—to attack a society for its "evils."

How, then, does satire differ from other forms of political critique or political humor?

To answer this question, one must first develop a definition of satire. This formulation has been notoriously difficult. Robert Elliott, among the most dedicated observers of satire, concluded in a 1962 essay that the "staggering diversity of forms, tones, and materials" precluded any single definition. This conclusion was seconded by Leonard Feinberg, in his 1968 article "Satire: The Inadequacy of Recent Definitions."<sup>16</sup> Instead, Elliott recommended an approach that would use familiar shared traits among works already designated as satire to arrive at a rubric that would allow the classification of future work. Using Elliott's recommendation, George Test has arrived at a set of shared traits that best captures the "spirit and art" of modern satire, in all its various forms. He argues

satire, whether literary or media-induced, rests on a substratum of ritual and folk behavior that continues to be present.... Restricting the study of satire to its literary manifestations has in effect cut off satire from its roots. Literary forms have not been able to confine or define satire, nor can satire be restricted by or to any other medium in which it occurs...no classification by genre or kind has ever succeeded in fully integrating these diverse forms [of satire] into a system.<sup>17</sup>

Test's four characteristics, which can be thought of as necessary but not sufficient, include aggression, play, laughter, and judgment. Although other forms of political critique or political humor may contain one or more of these characteristics (or, possibly, all of them), satire always contains all of them in some combination.<sup>18</sup> Each is considered in turn.

Aggression, or attack, is the most common trait of satire. The very intent of the satirist is critical here. Satire is specifically created as a means to attack perceived wrongs or ills within society. For this reason, it should come as no surprise that satirists have been described as "biting, snarling, railing, and carping, reviled as dogs, vipers, and other serpent-like creatures, beasts (of prey, of course), and (all-purpose) monsters."<sup>19</sup> The satirist, by creating satire, is attacking the people, institutions, and processes that populate the social system they inhabit. By using satire to diminish or discredit an individual, an idea, an argument, an institution, or any other target, the satirist is assuming a position of superiority and the satire itself is intended as a form of aggression to expose the problems. Aggression is at the very core of satire.

But satire is not just aggression—it is aggression combined with judgment. Satire must have a target. As a form of artistic expression, satire is, in itself, neutral.<sup>20</sup> When the artistic expression is focused on attacking a target, it necessarily must judge that target. This judgment is central to the spirit of satire—the critique must be intentional and focused. Test writes that “whether the target is vice or folly, absurdity or enemies of the state, the satirist is concerned with passing judgment.”<sup>21</sup> Alvin Kernan explains

Although there is always at least a suggestion of some kind of humane ideal in satire—it may in the blackest type of satire exist only as the unnamed opposite of the idiocy and villainy portrayed—this ideal is never heavily stressed, for in the satirist’s vision of the world decency is forever in a precarious position near the edge of extinction and the world is about to pass into eternal darkness. Consequently, every effort is made to emphasize the destroying ugliness and power of vice.<sup>22</sup>

Thus, satire must judge some aspect of society in a way that lends itself to correction. It has been argued that all satirists are, to a greater or lesser degree, optimists, seeking to fix society’s broken pieces. To do this, the satirist exposes and critiques something in a way that offers the audience a way to judge the society in which they live.

Aggression and judgment, however, can come in many forms. Every day, commentators and political figures attack people, ideas, arguments, institutions, or processes. One could turn on any number of television shows on a given night and see aggression and judgment (for example, try *The Bill O’Reilly Show*, *Hannity and Colmes*, *Hardball*, *The Rush Limbaugh Show*, or Air America radio). Political parties, interest groups, and candidates offer their combination of aggression and judgment in campaign commercials, public statements, and interview appearances. What differentiates satire, of course, is that the aggression and judgment are combined with play and elicit laughter from the audience.

Play is a central element to satire, as it provides the artful interaction between the satirist and her audience. Satire is clever, witty, and engaging. That play and aggression appear, on the face of it, to be incompatible does not diminish the importance of both to satire. By constructing a type of “game” with the audience, the satirist is able to pull the audience into the aggressive judgment that she is offering. The play of satire may take many forms, from actual game images, to wordplays, to the symbolic use of toys or childlike features to evoke playfulness, to clever and witty dialogue between characters.<sup>23</sup>

This intentional playfulness makes the attack something that generates laughter among the audience. This is what differentiates satire from other forms of pure attack. This laughter makes the attack more accessible to the audience, thus opening them to judgment that they may otherwise be unwilling to accept. Satirists have long accepted that

laughter has been an agent of change for the better in those who have shared the laughter. The laughter of ridicule or the truth coated with laughter shames the fool into changing his ways. Such a concept is at the heart of the belief in satire’s ability to reform those who have fallen into vice or folly...the laughter evoked by satire is rarely simple, sometimes strained, occasionally strange, capable of cutting both ways.<sup>24</sup>

In addition to these characteristics, however, I would add one additional trait of satire that I believe combines all of the above characteristics in a unique way—satire demands knowledge by the audience. Because of its playfulness, a consumer of satire must bring some level of knowledge to bear on his or her experience or risk being left out of the joke. In order to engage in the play set up by the satirist, the audience member must have some existing level of knowledge if he or she is to engage. To illustrate the importance of this pre-existing knowledge, consider Al Franken’s *Lies and the Lying Liars Who Tell Them*. It has been argued that Al Franken is one of today’s preeminent satirists. After all, his work would constitute a judgmental work of aggression designed to evoke laughter, and pieces of the book certainly demonstrate aspects of playfulness in the use of “naughty” phrases, over-the-top wordplays, logical inconsistencies, and game-like themes (take, for example, his deceptive visit to Bob Jones University with a research assistant posing as his prospective student “son”). So, is the book “satirical”?

My answer would be no. The reason is simple. It does not assume any prior knowledge on the part of the reader. This diminishes its capability to fully engage the reader in “play.” Good satire demands an informed audience to engage in the experience of the satire and arrive at the conclusions on their own. An ill-informed consumer of the satire is left out of the joke. Consider the oft-used example of the person who, after reading *Gulliver’s Travels*, went to find Lilliput on the map. In short, *Lies and the Lying Liars Who Tell Them* is too literal to be satire. It does not allow the reader to engage in the endeavor and draw out the judgments offered on his or her own terms.

This distinction is important because it points to an important point in today's political satire—satire is not the same as political humor. Although the two are often confused, satire is a unique pursuit.

### The Distinguishing Features of Satire

To say that satire is a unique form of political humor is not as self-evident as it may appear. Consider, for example, the fact that the satirical *The Daily Show* is so often lumped in with *The Late Show* and *The Tonight Show* in analyses of how political humor influences young voters.<sup>25</sup> When David Letterman makes a joke about George W. Bush or John Kerry, it can be aggressive and can contain implicit or explicit judgments about the personality or political platform of the candidate (usually the former). It may also be funny. But it is not satirical. In contrast, when *Saturday Night Live* parodies political debates, it requires that the viewer know something about the candidates to be fully effective (about their speech patterns or behavior in debates or policy positions). Without that prior knowledge, the skit is simply not as funny or as meaningful to the viewer.

Furthermore, satire is, by its very nature, offensive. Satire is intended to do more than make people laugh. It is also meant to critique the people who are laughing. As satirist Paul Krassner (editor of *The Realist*, a 1960s alternative magazine based in New York) wrote, "the ultimate target of satire should be its own audience."<sup>26</sup> Most political humor is aimed to entertain the audience by poking fun at outsiders—political candidates, government officials, or public figures. In contrast, satire's target is broader—it is meant to attack political institutions, society's foibles, or public vices.<sup>27</sup> Put simply, conventional political humor is often geared at making the audience laugh at others, while satire is designed to make the audience laugh at itself as well as others, therefore allowing the audience to realize a larger set of systemic faults. *The Colbert Report* (which follows *The Daily Show* on Comedy Central) is more than a random collection of funny jokes designed to make the audience laugh. Rather, it offers a coherent and consistent attack on political pundits generally and critiques the cult of personality that develops around today's more vocal political commentators.

The methods used by the satirist also differ from those used by the conventional comedian. One standard satirical method, anthropomorphism, has become common. By using animals to convey

human characteristics, the satirist can simplify the message and make extreme statements from an outsider's perspective.<sup>28</sup> Today's satirists often employ animation to the same effect. We all know people who vaguely resemble Homer Simpson in his naive simplicity (or stupidity) or *American Dad's* Stan Smith in his misplaced patriotism and masculinity. These animated characters can serve as "the dunce" or "the jester" who may represent the worst characteristics of human behavior or speak truth to power without the same repercussions that a human would encounter. In short, they are caricatures who can push boundaries in ways that human actors cannot because animated characters are removed enough from our reality to be true "outsiders."

In addition, satire often relies on utopian and dystopian conditions to point out perceived wrongs, a technique often used by *South Park* creators Trey Parker and Matt Stone. Consider an episode of *South Park* in which the teacher, Mr. Garrison, brings in "Mr. Slave" (who wears a black leather vest, boots, and a hat) as his "teacher's assistant" after learning that he could become rich by suing the school for discrimination if they punish him for being gay. After Garrison engages in blatantly graphic sexual behavior with Mr. Slave in front of a classroom of fourth graders, the kids complain to their parents who decry that the kids are exhibiting unacceptable intolerance. Eventually, the kids are sent to "tolerance camp," where they are put behind barbed wire fences and forced to fingerprint images of tolerance while being yelled at by a stern camp leader. Meanwhile, Mr. Garrison wins an award for being "Courageous Teacher of the Year."<sup>29</sup> By turning the ideal of tolerance into a dystopia of forced acceptance of over the top offensive behavior, Parker and Stone make their point clear.

In short, satire is unlike the conventional humor that is generally the subject of scholarly inquiry in both substance and method. As such, it deserves more focused attention as a unique form of political critique and political humor.

### Audience Reaction

In today's political environment, satire is thriving. *The Simpsons* (which is looking to become television's longest-running cartoon with 20 consecutive seasons in 2009), *South Park*, and *Family Guy*—all animated shows that include political, social, and religious satire on a regular basis—have all been named to a list of the top fifty TV

cartoons of all time (in fact, they were all in the top five, with *The Simpsons* at number one, *South Park* at number three, and *Family Guy* at number five).<sup>30</sup> Comedy Central's *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, a scathing satire of the American news media,<sup>31</sup> won two Emmy Awards in 2004. *Saturday Night Live* continues to top the list among older viewers who are looking for irreverent coverage of political campaigns. In addition, Jon Stewart's *America (The Book): A Citizen's Guide to Democracy Inaction*, a satire of American government textbooks, outsold every other book in 2005 with 1.9 million copies in print and has reportedly generated a new wave of proposals for similar books from conservatives who want to write satire about "comedians on the left."<sup>32</sup>

There is no doubt that satire was alive and well during the 2004 presidential election. And, there is no doubt that these satirical shows were targeted primarily at young audiences. More than any time in recent history, young voters now have a multitude of sources to look to when seeking political information and perspectives. Polls indicate that they are increasingly taking cues from these sources. So how does audience reaction to satire differ from reaction to other forms of political humor?

Research on the influence of so-called "soft news" is instructive in thinking about audience reaction to the various forms of political humor or satire. While hard news is driven by news first and entertainment second, soft news emphasizes entertainment as its primary goal and political information as an afterthought.<sup>33</sup> How do soft news programs influence the political knowledge of viewers or listeners?

There is ongoing debate about the impact of the new media on American voters. There has been widespread hand-wringing about the declining attention to so-called "hard news."<sup>34</sup> But there are also notable claims that this new emergence of soft news has positive consequences by tuning in those who would otherwise remain ignorant of political affairs. Christine Ridout argues that political talk shows enhance democracy precisely because they bypass the traditional news emphasis on process and strategy and instead allow a political dialogue about issues of interest to the voting public. She even goes so far as to say that talk shows allowed Clinton to alter the course of his campaign in 1992 by addressing substantive questions that were not being asked by the news organizations.<sup>35</sup> Matthew Baum has furthered this argument by claiming that entertainment-based talk shows help enhance political knowledge among those voters

who would otherwise not pay attention to news.<sup>36</sup> By reaching voters via entertainment, political information is conveyed to voters who otherwise would be completely uninformed, therefore enhancing the democratic process.

Beyond soft news, what influence do other forms of popular culture, specifically television and film, have on the electorate? There is little research examining the influence of film and television with political content. Among existing research, Miller and Reeves found that television characters had an impact in helping children define sex roles.<sup>37</sup> Meyer examined the influence of the 1970s TV show *All in the Family* and found that the program reinforced the political views of adult watchers, but had little if any impact on children.<sup>38</sup> Stanley Feldman and Lee Sigelman's 1985 study of the TV movie *The Day After* (1983), a fictitious account of a nuclear attack on the United States, found that the movie had no impact on political beliefs of viewers, although the discussions in the media that followed the movie did have the effect of influencing viewers' beliefs about nuclear war.<sup>39</sup> Michael Delli Carpini and Bruce Williams showed that messages about toxic waste in entertainment television influenced opinions about the issue as much as news coverage did.<sup>40</sup> More recently, David Barker's study of listeners of *The Rush Limbaugh Show* found that simply listening to the program increased voters' propensity to vote for Republicans in House, Senate, and presidential elections, independent of political ideology.<sup>41</sup>

Although past research provides some basis upon which to assess the influence of satire on its audience, it is incomplete for several reasons. First, existing literature tends to emphasize the format or medium rather than the content of the program. Although *The Daily Show* could be categorized as a talk show or even a soft news program, *The Simpsons* could not. Similarly, although *South Park* would be characterized as a popular TV program, the animated song parodies of JibJab.com would not. Second, most voters are exposed to satire without even knowing it. Watching *The Simpsons* or *South Park*, *Thank You for Smoking*, or *Wag the Dog* is typically not considered a "political" experience, although the messages conveyed are political in content. In addition, some voters regularly expose themselves to multiple forms of satire on a regular basis (often without recognizing it as satire). This would not happen with, say, talk shows or even a television movie about a nuclear attack. Therefore, simply acquiring information about voters' exposure to satire is a difficult

task. Third, the audience for satire is generally self-selected. Satire, in its effort to expose the faults of society, is likely to attract those who are already cynical about societal or political conditions, who then gravitate toward these satirical outlets precisely because they confirm their political views. Last, given my condition that satire should require political knowledge in order to "be in on the joke," it is entirely possible that someone could regularly be exposed to satire and simply not get the social critique because he or she does not understand. Millions tune in to watch *The Simpsons*, but it is entirely possible that many viewers do not pick up the more subtle satirical points made by Groening and the show writers.

What is the importance of satire in today's political environment? Consider that approximately one in five Americans report that they regularly get campaign news from comedy shows like Comedy Central's *The Daily Show* or NBC's *Saturday Night Live*. For Americans under thirty years of age, these shows are mentioned as sources for election news almost as often as daily newspapers or evening network news programs.<sup>42</sup> In a poll conducted in December 2003 and January 2004 by the Pew Internet & American Life Project, 21 percent of eighteen- to twenty-nine-year-olds report regularly getting campaign news from late night comedy shows, a 12 percent increase from 2000 (the percentage is particularly high for young men, 27 percent of whom report getting information from comedy programs, compared to 14 percent of young women). In addition, the programs provided these viewers new information, not simply repetition of information they already had—27 percent of all 18- to 29-year-old respondents say they learned things about the candidates and campaigns from comedy TV. The survey's summary of findings reports that "people who regularly learn about the election from entertainment programs whether young or not are poorly informed about campaign developments." Only 15 percent of eighteen- to twenty-nine-year-olds could identify which (Democratic primary) candidate was a general in the army or which had been majority leader of the House. Sixty-four percent of young voters reported that they "are not even somewhat interested in news about the Democratic primary campaigns."<sup>43</sup>

There are important distinctions to be made, however, between late night television talk shows. Not all "entertainment" shows are the same. Viewers of *The Daily Show* are more informed than viewers of other late night comedy shows, and more informed than those who watch network or cable news. In September 2004, the National Annenberg Election Survey released a report stating that young viewers of *The*

*Daily Show* "score higher on campaign knowledge than young people who do not watch the show, even when education, following politics, party identification, gender, viewing network news, reading the newspaper, watching cable news and getting campaign information on-line are taken into account."<sup>44</sup>

The survey, based on a six-question quiz, also reports that scores for viewers of Stewart's *Daily Show* were higher than scores from those who read a newspaper or watched network news four days a week. This creates an interesting puzzle. If young voters are apathetic, uninterested in politics, and ill-informed, how is it that (1) *The Daily Show* has maintained such a high level of popularity among these same voters, and (2) those who do watch the show are actually more knowledgeable than their peers who use more traditional sources like newspapers and network news? The answer is probably two-fold: first, viewers self-select, and those who have the knowledge to "be in on the joke" opt to watch *The Daily Show*; and second, the satirical elements of the show demand that viewers be more engaged in the experience of learning about politics.

*The Daily Show* has received widespread attention as of late. But other forms of political satire also appear to be reaching new voters. Jonathan Brown, in London's *The Independent*, writes that "U.S. political pundits have identified a new breed of 'South Park Republicans': twenty-something males who favour rampant libertarianism over liberal sensitivities."<sup>45</sup> In fact, Brian Anderson is so enamored with the new "South Park Conservatives" that he has used them as an icon of the growing ideological strength of the Republican Party in the world of entertainment.<sup>46</sup> Paul Cantor begins his analysis of the political themes that appear in *The Simpsons* with the following anecdote culled from a *Roll Call* report of the incident.

When Senator Charles Schumer (D-N.Y.) visited a high school in upstate New York in May 1999, he received an unexpected civics lesson from an unexpected source. Speaking on the timely subject of school violence, Senator Schumer praised the Brady Bill, which he helped sponsor, for its role in preventing crime. Rising to question the effectiveness of this effort at gun control, a student named Kevin Davis cited an example no doubt familiar to his classmates but unknown to the senator from New York: "It reminds me of a *Simpsons* episode. Homer wanted to get a gun but he had been in jail twice and in a mental institution. They label him as 'potentially dangerous.' So Homer asks what that means and the gun dealer says: 'It just means you need an extra week before you can get the gun.'"<sup>47</sup>

Cantor then offers the following by way of introducing his topic.



Without going into the pros and cons of gun control legislation, one can recognize in this incident how the Fox Network's cartoon series *The Simpsons* shapes the way Americans think, particularly the younger generation.... *The Simpsons* may seem like mindless entertainment to many, but in fact, it offers some of the most sophisticated comedy and satire ever to appear on American television. Over the years, the show has taken on many serious issues: nuclear power safety, environmentalism, immigration, gay rights, women in the military, and so on. Paradoxically, it is the farcical nature of the show that allows it to be serious in ways that many other television shows are not.<sup>48</sup>

Furthermore, there have been (limited) calls to use more satire as a way to engage students as they learn about American history and politics. James Norton has advocated the use of *The Onion* (the eminent online satirical newspaper) and Modern Humorist's *My First Presidential* in his only partially tongue-in-cheek "Modern-Day History Lessons."<sup>49</sup> In the essay, he argues that

Ideally, history education asks two questions. The first question is, "what are the facts?"...the second question is more interesting. "How did we discover these facts in the first place?" Attached to it are the supporting question of, "could there be other facts we're overlooking?" and "is it possible that these facts don't actually represent the era we're supposedly studying in the first place?" If history is going to remain relevant as a discipline, kids must be taught to be skeptical. There must be room for counter-history, even when it's not patriotic and causes students to question the way the American political system works—and has worked—for decades. In other words: We need to get kids asking and answering the second question.<sup>50</sup>

That satire can not only prompt political understanding but also generate critical thinking is something that deserves more attention, particularly in the study of new voters.

What can we conclude from all this? First, we need to recognize the importance of content as we continue to study the influence of entertainment and politics. Satirical content is unique in the world of political humor and should be treated as such. It is not enough to simply use the format of various media to make conclusions about their importance in the modern political environment. Instead, we need to take a closer look at the methods used and the messages conveyed. Second, it is a mistake to underestimate the power of "entertainment" as a genre. We need to expand our definition of political humor to include material that has traditionally been left out of our analysis. Political humor comes in any number of forms, some of which may masquerade as simple entertainment. It is a mistake to

ignore these forms if we truly want to understand the impact of humor on political attitudes. In short, we need to expand our definitions of political humor and we need to have a more nuanced approach that allows us to explore the distinctions within this new genre of "info-enter-propa-gainment."

## Notes

1. Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death* (New York: Penguin Press, 2005).
2. See, for example, Jody Baumgartner and Jonathan S. Morris, "The Daily Show Effect: Candidate Evaluations, Efficacy, and American Youth," *American Politics Research* 34 (2006): 341; Matthew A. Baum, "Soft News and Political Knowledge: Evidence or Absence or Absence of Evidence?," *Political Communication* 20 (2003): 173; Thomas E. Patterson, *Out of Order* (New York: Vintage Books, 2000); Kathleen Hall Jamieson and Paul Waldman, *The Press Effect: Politicians, Journalists, and the Stories That Shape the Political World* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2003).
3. Baumgartner and Morris, "The Daily Show Effect"; Matthew A. Baum, "Talking the Vote: Why Presidential Candidates Hit the Talk Show Circuit," *American Journal of Political Science* 49 (2005): 213–234; Jamieson and Waldman, *The Press Effect*; Patterson, *Out of Order*.
4. See, for example, Baum, "Soft News and Political Knowledge," 119–125.
5. Ibid.
6. Gregory Kirschling, "Friend & Faux," *Entertainment Weekly* (September 17, 2004), <http://www.ew.com/ew/article/0,,695301,00.html>.
7. I preface the remainder of this paper with an apology. Murray Davis quotes E. B. White, who said that "Humor can be dissected, as a frog can, but the thing dies in the process and the innards are discouraging to any but the pure scientific mind." Such is the case with satire. The beauty of satire as a form of political commentary comes in its ability to make us laugh, opening ourselves to a message that otherwise may not resonate with us. Sadly, this academic paper that considers satire as a form of political commentary will probably not make you laugh. See Murray S. Davis, *What's So Funny?: The Comic Conception of Culture and Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1993), 2.
8. A. O. Scott, "Moral Guidance from Class Clowns," *New York Times*, October 15, 2004, E1.
9. J. Patrick Coolican, "Read, Rinse, Repeat: Bipartisan Jab Is an Internet Sensation," *Houston Chronicle* (July 21, 2004), 01.



10. The vast majority of scholarship devoted to satire comes from literary scholars. It is likely that this field has been limited in recent years by the fact that satire is no longer an exclusively literary pursuit. In fact, no modern literary satire—beyond Jon Stewart's *America (The Book)*, which I would argue is not literary satire in the traditional sense—has achieved widespread popular or critical success.
11. Robert C. Elliott, "The Satirist and Society," in *Modern Satire*, ed. Alvin B. Kernan (New York: Harcourt, Brace, & World, 1962), 148.
12. Ibid.
13. Ibid., 151.
14. Ibid.
15. Ibid., 147, 152.
16. George A. Test, *Satire: Spirit and Art* (Tampa: University of South Florida Press, 1991), 7; see also Robert C. Elliott "The Definition of Satire: A Note on Method," *Yearbook on Comparative and General Literature* 11 (1962): 19; Leonard Feinberg, "Satire: The Inadequacy of Recent Definitions," *Genre* 1 (1968): 31–37.
17. Test, *Satire*, 9–10.
18. Ibid., 15.
19. Ibid.
20. Ibid., 27.
21. Ibid., 28.
22. Alvin B. Kernan, "A Theory of Satire," in *Modern Satire*, ed. Alvin B. Kernan (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1962), 168.
23. Test, *Satire*, 19–21.
24. Ibid., 24–26.
25. See, for example, Baumgartner and Morris, "The Daily Show Effect"; and Baum, "Soft News and Political Knowledge."
26. Paul Krassner, *Confessions of a Raving, Unconfined Nut: Misadventures in the Counter-Culture* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993), 144.
27. Jeffrey P. Jones, *Entertaining Politics: New Political Television and Civic Culture* (Lanham, MA: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), 10.
28. Ellen D. Leyburn, "Animal Stories," in *Satire: Modern Essays in Criticism*, ed. Ronald Paulson (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1971), 217–32.
29. See Brian C. Anderson, *South Park Conservatives: The Revolt Against Liberal Media Bias* (Washington, DC: Regnery, 2005), 78–80.
30. Jonathan Brown, "From Homer to Scooby Doo: Our Love Affair with the Cartoon," *Independent*, February 28, 2005, 12–13.
31. Although many consider *The Daily Show* a satire about political personalities, issues, and current events, it was conceived as a critique on the news media and continues to target the media. This misunderstanding

- may, in fact, make *The Daily Show* more effective in that the target of the critique is incidental to the information that it provides to young voters. This question is taken up later in the paper.
32. Bob Minzesheimer, "After 'America,' A Liberal Dose of Political Satire," *USA Today*, January 27, 2005, 5D.
33. Patterson, *Out of Order*; Barry A. Hollander, "The New News and the 1992 Presidential Campaign: Perceived Versus Actual Political Knowledge," *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly* 72 (1995): 786.
34. See, for example, Patterson, *Out of Order*; Hollander "The New News and the 1992 Presidential Campaign"; and Matthew R. Kerbel, *Remote and Controlled: Media Politics in a Cynical Age* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1999).
35. Christine F. Ridout, "News Coverage and Talk Shows in the 1992 Presidential Campaign," *PS: Political Science and Politics* 26 (1993): 715; see also Patterson, *Out of Order*.
36. Baum, "Soft News and Political Knowledge."
37. Mark M. Miller and Byron Reeves, "Dramatic TV Content and Children's Sex-Role Stereotypes," *Journal of Broadcasting* 20 (1976): 36.
38. Timothy Meyer, "Impact of 'All in the Family' on Children," *Journal of Broadcasting* 20 (1976): 23.
39. Stanley Feldman and Lee Sigelman, "The Political Impact of Prime-Time Television: 'The Day After,'" *The Journal of Politics* 47 (1985): 556.
40. Michael X. Delli Carpini and Bruce A. Williams, "Constructing Public Opinion: The Uses of Fictional and Non-fictional Television in Conversations about the Environment," in *The Psychology of Political Communication*, ed. Ann N. Crigler (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996), 160–166.
41. This research is particularly interesting for the topic of this paper because it has very similar features. The audience initially tunes in only for entertainment value or because a peer or family member is a regular listener (or watcher). But, even small amounts of exposure do seem to have an effect. David C. Barker, "Rushed Decisions: Political Talk Radio and Vote Choice 1994–1996," *The Journal of Politics* 61 (1999): 527.
42. "Cable and Internet Loom Large in Fragmented Political News Universe: Perceptions of Partisan Bias Seen as Growing, Especially by Democrats," *The Pew Research Center for the People & the Press*, January 11, 2004. <http://people-press.org/reports/pdf/200.pdf>.
43. Ibid.
44. National Annenberg Election Survey, "Daily Show Viewers Knowledgeable About Presidential Campaign," September 21, 2004. [http://www.annenbergpublicpolicycenter.org/naes/2004\\_03\\_late-night-knowledge-2\\_9-21\\_pr.pdf](http://www.annenbergpublicpolicycenter.org/naes/2004_03_late-night-knowledge-2_9-21_pr.pdf).

45. Brown, "From Homer to Scooby Doo."
46. Anderson, *South Park Conservatives*.
47. Paul A. Cantor, "The Simpsons: Atomistic Politics and the Nuclear Family," *Political Theory* 27 (1999): 734.
48. Ibid., 747.
49. James Norton has worked with the Al Franken show since 2004 and prior to that at the *Christian Science Monitor*. He is also the founder and editor of Flak Magazine (<http://www.flakmag.com>).
50. James Norton, "Modern-Day History Lessons," April 21, 2001. <http://flakmag.com/jim/resume/sampled3.html>.

## 2

## Serious Comedy

*Expanding the Boundaries of Political Discourse*

Geoffrey Baym

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.

Comedian Stephen Colbert on President George W. Bush<sup>1</sup>

I begin this chapter by quoting from the 2006 White House Correspondents Association dinner, that strange annual black-tie affair in which an odd assortment of power brokers, reporters, and celebrities gather with the president for a night of good-natured ridicule. This year, the keynote speaker was fake newsmen and pundit Stephen Colbert, who, standing only two seats away from Bush, unleashed a biting monologue on the president, accusing him, among other things, of responding to national tragedy with spectacle instead of substance, with publicity in place of policy. By all accounts, the president does not care much for criticism and those who disagree with him almost never get a seat at the same table. Yet here, in an unlikely venue and coming from a most unlikely source, was a serious challenge, a stinging critique clad in the guise of good humor.

Simultaneously funny and fierce, this was serious stuff—*serious comedy* perhaps—and as such it raises a set of important questions that we must consider if we hope to come to terms with the nature of contemporary political discourse. *Serious comedy* is a contradiction in terms. *Serious* implies weight and gravity, and a "serious matter" necessitates sober consideration. By contrast, *comedy* entails laughter

