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No Laughing Matter: Failures of Satire During the 2016 Presidential Election

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No Laughing Matter: Failures of Satire During the 2016 Presidential Election

Abstract

The 2016 presidential election was so full of unusual characters and unprecedented scandals, that media outlets, from the nightly news to late-night, had to adjust to this new normal in politics. Indeed, not even the jokesters on the handful of political satire shows on television were immune to the necessary changes that all the media had to take in covering Donald Trump. Given how many people tuned into to these shows each week, it is no surprise that the role that political satire television may have played in the election results was fodder for those giving post-election hot takes. Many think pieces asserted that political satire shows may have had a hand in normalizing the candidacy of Donald Trump, while others suggested that perhaps satire is one of the best ways to resist a Trump candidacy, and later presidency. That dichotomy is the impetus for this paper, which seeks to specifically analyze the ways in which certain satirists and their television outlets may have normalized or resisted Trump, and how those two opposing views fit into the larger discussion of both media effects research, and the historical relevance of satire as a key component to a functioning democracy.

Keywords

satire, media effects, morality, donald trump, humor, politics

Subject Categories

American Popular Culture | Critical and Cultural Studies | Mass Communication | Other Film and Media Studies | Social Influence and Political Communication | Television

No Laughing Matter: Failures of Satire During the 2016 Presidential Election

An Honors Thesis by

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University of New Hampshire

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Department of Communication

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ABSTRACT

NO LAUGHING MATTER: FAILURES OF SATIRE DURING THE 2016

PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

MAY 2018

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Advised by: Professor Michael Soha

The 2016 presidential election was so full of unusual characters and unprecedented scandals, that media outlets, from the nightly news to late-night, had to adjust to this new normal in politics. Indeed, not even the jokesters on the handful of political satire shows on television were immune to the necessary changes that all the media had to take in covering Donald Trump. Given how many people tuned into to these shows each week, it is no surprise that the role that political satire television may have played in the election results was fodder for those giving post-election hot takes. Many think pieces asserted that political satire shows may have had a hand in normalizing the candidacy of Donald Trump, while others suggested that perhaps satire is one of the best ways to resist a Trump candidacy, and later presidency. That dichotomy is the impetus for this paper, which seeks to specifically analyze the ways in which certain satirists and their television outlets may have normalized or resisted Trump, and how those two opposing views fit into the larger discussion of both media effects research, and the historical relevance of satire as a key component to a functioning democracy.

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Introduction

On May 1, 2011, the internet was ablaze with reports from the festivities of The White House Correspondents' Dinner, held the night before. The annual event is an opportunity for journalists, politicians, and the celebrity elite to rub shoulders, and is traditionally attended by the president. The 2011 Dinner was hosted by Seth Meyers, then the Head Writer of *Saturday Night Live*, and next-day coverage suggested that most attendees were pleased with Meyers' act, as well as President Obama's attempt at roasting his political friends and foes (Grove, 2011). One attendee of the Dinner who appeared to be less than thrilled, however, was Donald Trump.

It is common to be joked about at the WHC Dinner. Power players, political and otherwise, are fair game for both the host and the president. Given that Trump had spent the weeks prior to the Dinner questioning President Obama's credentials and prompting the "birther" movement, the president did not hold back. Those who saw Trump at the dinner noted that he was displeased at best; some later commented that perhaps this was the night that Donald Trump resolved himself to running for president (FRONTLINE PBS | Official, 2016).

In retrospect, it should have been quite telling that a joke, of all things, was oft-floated as the impetus for the campaign of the current president, Donald Trump.

Of course, it is impossible to pinpoint the exact reasons why Donald Trump ran for president, unless you are Trump himself. However, this scenario was just one of many circumstances that point to the way in which the line between satire and politics has become increasingly blurred. In the simplest terms, the goal of this thesis paper is to examine how the satire-politics relationship began, and how it reached a point of critical mass during the 2016 Presidential Election.

There was a deluge of Monday morning quarterbacking post-election, as each side wondered where they went right or wrong. It was likely in a necessary act of catharsis after a decidedly unpredictable and negatively-tinged campaign cycle that the finger-pointing started. Many fingers, as it were, pointed to satire in an effort to explain the election. The focus of my research is to better understand the role that satire may have played: did it help normalize candidate Trump, or did it act as a tool of resistance against his campaign?

In regards to my first question, the literature does seem to support satire's ability to normalize candidates, or bring them down from a level of power to that of the masses (Jones, Brewer & Young, 2016; Smith & Voth, 2002; Billig, 2005). Moreover, satire specifically on late-night television gives candidates a platform to be involved in that humanizing process themselves—and remind the viewer that they are “in” on the joke (Duffy & Page, 2013). Generally, this can be aligned with the idea of all press is good press: it may be better to be joked about than not discussed at all. However, this also brings up the question of moral obligation: Do satirists and their media networks *have* to engage with politics? And if so, must their engagement be anything more than how they may engage with any other cultural topic? While this will not be discussed until after attempting to answer my research questions, moral obligation (or lack thereof) is an important thread that underlies this research.

The question of moral obligation is even more visible in considering whether satire, and satirists, were (and continue to be) the most viable tool of resistance in countering the Trump campaign, and later presidency. The use of satirical late-night television as a source of news for voters has been on the rise since the early-aughts (National Annenberg Election Survey, 2004; Pew Research Center 2014; Pew Research Center 2016). Scholars suggest a number of reasons

for this trend, such as the fact that these satirical shows are oftentimes just as likely to be as substantial (as far as news content goes) as traditional news sources (Fox, Koloen, & Sahin, 2007; Holbert, Lambe, Dudo, & Carlton, 2007), as well as these shows being considered by some as legitimate sources of journalism (Baym, 2005; McKain 2005). If one is operating in this satire-is-journalism context, then satirists ought to be reporting with the same fervor and truth-seeking as their more “traditional” counterparts. And given that “good” journalism was hard to find during the election (Patterson, 2016), that makes the work of satirists like John Oliver, Samantha Bee, Trevor Noah, Seth Meyers, and Stephen Colbert, all the more vital.

While media effects will be explored more in-depth within the literature review, it is important to note that the aforementioned questions are two sides of the same coin: satire either helps political discourse, or satire harms political discourse. Regardless, this assumes that satire has any power at all. The research is varied, but there is support that satire tends to have mixed effects that sometimes cancel one another out, creating little overall effect. Thus, a third question must be proposed, despite not being substantially covered in the popular press: Did satire play any role in the election?

With all of that in mind, the objectives of my research are as follows:

- I. To present a comprehensive history of political satire’s role in American electoral politics, with a focus on the previous two decades;
- II. To establish what functions political satire serves, and examine how those functions may relate to the role satire played in the 2016 election;
- III. To analyze examples of televised political satire (and related popular press items) from the 2016 election cycle to assess three primary questions:

- A. Did satire, and satirists, help normalize Donald Trump and his campaign?
 - B. Did satire, and satirists, act as a viable tool of resistance in countering the Trump campaign, and later presidency?
 - C. Did satire, and satirists, played any role in the election?
- IV. To determine whether satirists have any moral obligation to present, and take a stance on, politically-oriented material in the first place.

My research drew primarily from three venues: scholarly literature on political satire and humor effects; video clips from late-night shows, such as *Full Frontal with Samantha Bee*; *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver*; *Late Night with Seth Meyers*; *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert*; *The Tonight Show starring Jimmy Fallon*; and *Saturday Night Live*; and popular press works from publications such as *The Atlantic*; *The New Yorker*; *The New York Times*; *The Guardian*; *Wired*; and *TIME Magazine*.

It is important to note that, given that scholarly articles take immense time, there was no published work discussing the satire-politics relationship during the 2016 election specifically at the time of this research. That fact in and of itself provides the relevance for this research. Beyond that, however, this is a relevant topic because if satire's role in the news landscape continues on this upward trend as a source of knowledge, then it ought to have equitable coverage in the literature like the news media has.

The literature review will not only review the necessary terms—such as satire, parody, Juvenalian, Horatian, etc.—but also situate the history of satire as one that is deeply entwined with the history of a functioning democracy. Moreover, the functions of satire will be identified. The body and discussion sections of the paper will cover the three potential roles that satire may

have played, with specific emphasis on satire's normalization of Trump. Lastly, the conclusion will situate my findings within the larger conversation about satire and moral obligation.

Literature Review

The Nature of Satire

Before digging into the history of political satire, it is important to tease apart the various terms used to describe it. It isn't as simple as just "satire"—satire can be Horatian or Juvenalian, it can overlap with parody and irony, it can be humorous (or not). Moreover, the words are often used interchangeably (and sometimes, incorrectly), especially in popular press writings. Thus, a review of terms will be helpful prior to moving forward.

Satire is a fickle genre. Despite being confined to the written word for much of modern history, analysts, literary and otherwise, struggled to identify satire's essential characteristics, and where it fit in the larger scheme of literature (Test, 1991). As such, there was a need for some sort of working definition, and Test (1991) suggested that scholars identify satire through four characteristics: aggression, play, laughter, and judgment. Any satirical example can emphasize one characteristic over the other, but all must be present in some form. Additionally, Test (1991) insisted that satirical acts and expressions do not exist in a vacuum—rather, they are influenced by social environment and culture.

And though Test (1991) asserts that no one characteristic takes precedence over another, he does say that one can be seen as the "activator" of the satire itself:

Satire as an artistic expression is neutral. It is aggression waiting for a target; it is laughter waiting for a stimulant; it is play waiting for a game. The ingredient that activates and directs the elements comes alive itself with a satirist making a judgment,

turning satire into a weapon, blunt or penetrating, combining judgment with the other elements in a unique mix. (p. 27-28)

It is this passage of judgment that sets satire apart from other forms of humor, like parody and farce. Kreuz & Roberts (1993) agree that satire passes judgment, making a commentary on society, while parody does not require the commentary as a necessity.

Within satire, though, there is classification. Satire is typically classified as either¹ Juvenalian—characterized by biting commentary and insults—or Horatian—characterized by a focus on amusement over attack (Colletta, 2009; Hill, 2013). Regardless of the nature of the satire, however, Colletta (2009) notes that in satire, “the primary objective is to improve human beings and our institutions. Satire is therefore a hopeful genre; it suggests progress and the betterment of society, and it suggests that the arts can light the path of progress” (p. 860). This situates satire as more than just comedy, but rather an art form that can help steer the country’s moral compass. Overall, this alludes to the larger role that satire plays within democratic society.

Political Satire History

With that in mind, the role of satire is one that has been remarked upon throughout the history of democratic society itself. Hall (2015) finds the roots of satire in the Old Comedies of Aristophanes. The playwright’s comedies did not glorify heroes, gods, or earthly rulers—instead, it insulted society’s well-known citizens, mocking everything from their facial features to their bathroom habits. Hall notes that the goal of Aristophanes’ work was to separate true political advocates from the frauds—only the strongest, most well-meaning politicians could withstand being skewered by Aristophanes. The legacy of Aristophanes has continued since, as productions

¹ A third “common” type of satire is Menippean, but this is primarily literary in nature, and thus not applicable to the larger discussion of the type of satire found on late-night television.

of his plays have been used as decisive statements in times of political turmoil: from translations of *Lysistrata* used by British Suffragettes, to an Afrikaans adaption of *The Birds*, staged in protest of apartheid (Hall, 2015).

In (relatively) more recent times, satire was found at the heart of much of the work of François Rabelais, a Renaissance writer and humorist. In his detailed history of Rabelais, entitled *Rabelais and his World*, Russian critic and philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin (1984) believes that Rabelais' greatest contributions were those made to the discussion of folk humor. Folk humor was characterized in Rabelais' works through ritual spectacles (such as carnivals, pageants, and feasts), verbal parody, and various genres of billingsgate, or coarse language. Moreover, Rabelais focused on presenting bodies in “grotesque realism”—lowering the human body to place where it can be laughed at. This type of comedy had a leveling effect, in which public figures usually seen as “above” the common man could be mocked. From that, it can be said that today's political satire is certainly in the image of Rabelaisian folk humor: satirists work to “level” politicians, often through use of spectacle, physical/bodily humor, parody, and sometimes-crude language.

Of course, the focus of this paper is on the political satire of modern, US politics, so a look at recent history is also beneficial. While John F. Kennedy was the first presidential candidate to appear on late-night television, as a guest on Jack Paar's iteration of *The Tonight Show*, it was not until then-Governor of Arkansas, Bill Clinton, appeared on *The Arsenio Hall Show* (along with a number of other “non-traditional” outlets like MTV and daytime talk shows) that scholars began taking note of the impact of politicians appearing on television previously relegated to entertainment matter (Flanagan, 2017; Young, 2004).

Since then, appearances on shows considered to be “less serious” than the news media has been a staple for politicians looking to connect with their potential voters. From a standpoint of humor specifically, however, candidates have been known to use techniques similar to comedians while on the campaign trail for decades. Nilsen (1990) suggests a number of reasons for the usage of political humor by the candidates themselves: it may provide them with an inbond, be used to make a point, or defuse tense situations. These are the sort of techniques that come in handy when candidates appear in the requisite self-mocking sketch on *Saturday Night Live* in performative authenticity.

Political satire, however, has more often been produced by comedians and critics rather than candidates, and done through the usage of very different techniques. Political satire runs the gamut in style, from late-night talk shows like *The Tonight Show*, sketch shows like *Saturday Night Live*, “fake news” shows like *The Daily Show*, and punditry-oriented shows like *Last Week Tonight*. Within each show, even, the “target” or method of satirical attack will vary. Satirists may focus on the physical appearance or stereotypes of political figures (Matthes & Rauchfleisch, 2013), previous political foibles (Smith & Voth, 2002), candidate viability and electability (Jones et al., 2016), criticisms pointed towards the mainstream news media (McKain, 2005), and policy issues/candidate stances (Baym, 2005). Again, across the shows that fall under the “political satire” umbrella, satirical techniques can range just as much as topic of choice: satirists have been known to use parody, especially parody of genre seen in “fake news”-style shows (Baym, 2005; McKain 2005) and parody of candidates typical of *Saturday Night Live* (Duffy & Page, 2013; Matthes & Rauchfleisch, 2013; Smith & Voth, 2002). Beyond that, however, satire can present as the typical set-up and punchline routine of a late night monologue,

as seen on shows like *The Late Show* or can mimic investigative journalism techniques, as seen in the relatively more confrontational form of *Full Frontal with Samantha Bee*.

These shows, however, would be nowhere without people watching them. The Pew Center, along with other research institutions such as the Annenberg Public Policy Center, have noted the continuous rise in viewership of this genre of television shows. (National Annenberg Election Survey, 2004; Pew Research Center 2014). As of 2012, roughly 12% of Americans regularly got their news from satirical shows, with another 19% occasionally getting their news from them as well (Pew Research Center 2012). Moreover, Pew (2012) was able to show that viewers were actually more likely to tune into these shows in the lead-up to an election. As of January, 2016, 1 in 4 American adults were using late-night satire shows for their election news (Pew Research Center 2016). While this does not speak to the percentage of viewers who got news from these shows as the 2016 general election got closer, if the previous upward trend in viewership as an election nears holds steady, it is likely that at least 4 in 10 American adults were tuning in.

Functions of Political Satire

Though viewership is still relatively niche, it is worth considering *why* viewers have been pulled to these shows more and more often. Through the extant literature, four functions appear to be most prominent: teaching, discipline/ridicule, news-gathering, and democratic practice.

Satire for Teaching

Bingham & Hernandez (2009) make the most succinct argument for how satire functions as a teaching tool for a general audience, likely because they themselves are professors who have used satire in their classes. In the confines of their classroom, the researchers discovered that

after using clips in an Introductory Sociology class, students had higher exam scores and semester grades than their control class (Bingham & Hernandez, 2009). Additionally, their satire-infused class had higher retention rates, and students reported feeling more comfortable and able to engage with the course material in comparison to their control class (Bingham & Hernandez, 2009).

However, Bingham & Hernandez (2009) suggest that, beyond just their classroom, political satire shows can essentially operate as an open classroom, teaching to willing students—in this case, the audiences that tune in. These shows, the authors assert, can help viewers identify the various norms, institutions and processes of government—and perhaps more importantly, show their viewers the contrast when these norms, institutions, and processes are not functioning properly or being violated (Bingham & Hernandez, 2009).

Hill (2013) addresses a similar benefit in developing her “normative theory of satire.” Hill (2013) identifies one of the ideal functions of political satire as a way to illuminate the different perspectives or lenses that citizens might not get from typical political messaging. In this way, the satirist is tasked with calling attention to the dichotomy between the lived experience in democracy, and the ideal experience of what a democracy could be. They do this through acting as teachers to those willing to listen.

Satire for Discipline and Ridicule

The argument for satire’s role in a disciplinary capacity is likely as old as satire itself. Just as the plays of Aristophanes mocked Grecian politicians, so to do today’s political satirists participate in the mockery of those on the political stage with great fervor. Rabelais’ discussion of folk humor highlighted the ability for laughter to both “degrade and materialize” (Bakhtin,

1984, p. 20). Comedy in a broad sense can be used to lambaste all that is unjust, and in turn create a better world in its place.

In regards to humor theory, Meyer (2000) states that one of the rhetorical functions of humor can be to ridicule the Other, while reinforcing one's own group affiliation. Additionally, humor can serve as an enforcement of norms, as the folly of a satirical target requires a reminder that they have committed a sociocultural transgression (Meyer, 2000). Nilsen (1990) agrees that political satirists specifically engage in disciplinary humor to expose chauvinism, ineptitude, oppression, and pretentiousness of politicians.

Billig (2005) highlights that disciplinary humor can secondarily fulfill a pleasure function, as the satirist as well as the audience often enjoys the act of calling out the mistakes of others. Similar to Meyer, Billig (2005) believes that disciplinary humor can reinforce in-group affiliation, as all join in to laugh at the mockery of others and lightly remind the transgressor the norms of correctness. With that being said, Billig (2005) is careful to delineate this type of humor from what he calls "rebellious humor." This is essentially disciplinary humor with immensely more bite, and seeks to mock the powerful above all else. Rebellious humor operates *outside* of the cultural norms that it simultaneously seeks to point out to the transgressor. Here, the satirist speaks for the audience, daring to say that which they wouldn't. This is the *modus operandi* for many of the political satirists today, as well as for then-candidate Donald Trump while he was on the campaign trail (as will be elaborated upon later).

Satire for News-gathering

If the number of viewers who tune into political satire shows in increasing numbers speak to any of satire's functions, it would likely be that of news-gathering. Fox et al.(2007) were able

to show in their study that satire shows like *The Daily Show* were roughly equal to network news broadcasts in providing substantial news content in any given episode. Moreover, the content on these shows was more likely to spend more time per episode covering the election than network news (Fox et al., 2007). Additionally, Young & Hoffman (2012) were able to illustrate in their study that those who watch political satire had significantly higher current events knowledge after watching versus those who did not watch.

Beyond that, some scholars have argued that the role political satire shows play in news-gathering calls for a redefining of the news altogether. Because of the structure of many cable satire shows (like *The Daily Show*, or *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver*), despite being in the genre of “fake news”, the shows are not beholden to many of the structural impositions of mainstream news shows. McKain (2005) argues that satire shows do not have to rely on providing the “fair and balanced” take that network and cable news shows are known for. The work of seeming impartial above all else is sometimes problematic, as traditional news shows are required to give equal coverage in a point-counterpoint format that can, at times, give credence to unpopular or fringe ideas—something which critics would call “false balance.”

A similar issue in the news media today (again, not applicable to satire) is false equivalency, which is when issues like campaign or candidate scandals are covered with equal weight in the news. An example of this from the election would be the coverage of Hillary Clinton’s use of a private email server during her tenure as Secretary of State as equally grave as Donald Trump’s self-confessed tendencies towards sexual harassment in the now-infamous *Access Hollywood* tape. Striving for this sort of equal coverage during the 2016 presidential election was analyzed by the Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics, and Public Policy, as they

discovered that traditional news sources often created false equivalencies between candidate scandals or qualifications that may have confused voters (Patterson, 2016). The issues of false balance and false equivalency provide a good enough reason for political satire shows in the first place, as their able to operate outside of traditional news structure and dare to air the content or opinions that wouldn't fit into a "fair and balanced" newscast.

Baym (2005) argues a similar point, asserting that shows like *The Daily Show* participate in a kind of "alternative journalism" wherein satirists are not constrained by a commitment to objectivity in voicing their own opinions. While broadcast and cable news anchors will traditionally air a political sound bite that has been edited and clarified, satirists often air clips in their entirety, interacting with the clip and providing a textual reading for the audience (Baym, 2005). The shows are dialogue-centered, in which political actors are interrogated and engaged with, even in soundbite form. That's why Baym (2005) argues that these shows are essential in speaking truth to power, as traditional news sources structurally cannot.

Satire as a Democratic Practice

It is not just coincidental that the birth of satire happened in the same place as the birth of democracy--Ancient Greece. Hariman (2008) insists that satire is an integral piece within the realm of modern communication, standing in concert with rhetoric and eloquence. Satire, and parody specifically, engage in the work of "leveling," similar to Rabelaisian folk humor, in that it lowers those with authority downward to a place that the common man can at once laugh and criticize it (Hariman, 2008). While political humor does not remove or attempt to fix the transgressions of authoritarians, it lays bare the powerful's vulnerabilities and fallibility

(Hariman, 2008). Satire recreates authority in its own image, thereby removing authority's innate power, and making acts of resistance (another key piece of democracy) much more accessible.

Hill (2009) also speaks to satire's innately democratic features. The satirist, she asserts, ought to represent "embodied opposition" as they call attention to the voices of those who are marginalized by certain political acts. This is especially true in times of political turbulence, during which the satirist has a duty to speak for those outside the mainstream (Hill, 2009).

Political satire scholars agreed upon this relationship between satire and resistance, as discussed at the P6 Symposium at the Annenberg Public Policy Center (Young, Holbert, & Jamieson, 2014). The P6 Symposium was a meeting for a select group of political satire scholars and producers to discuss how satire can be a positive force in democracy. There, they designed a core set of practices (hence, P6) for satire to adhere to; one of their practices was that political satire ought to identify a "call to action" for viewers in times when resistance has become necessary (Young, Holbert, & Jamieson, 2014).

Lee & Jang (2017) take an altogether different approach in considering satire and democracy. Their study found that viewing political satire would generate certain emotions (specifically fear, anger, and worry) that would in turn provoke interpersonal talk, though the same could not be said for viewing conventional news (Lee & Jang, 2017). This type of interpersonal talk, the authors argue, is essential in a productive deliberative democracy, as it fosters debate (Lee & Jang, 2017).

Satirical Effects Research

Satire has a Normalizing Effect

Most studies that have asked the question of how satire can normalize a candidate (or even, be used as an advantage by a candidate) make use of framing theory. Frames allow for the message to be interpreted in a certain way, making certain aspects of reality more salient and apt for comparison (Duffy & Page, 2013; Jones et al., 2016). The way that a satirist frames their target is going to then inform how the audience perceives that target.

While virtually all satire will frame politicians with a sense of mockery, the specific topic at hand (such as, focusing on a politician's personality versus focusing on a politician's stance on policy) may impact how the candidate themselves comes off. This recalls whether the satire will be disciplinary or rebellious, or Horatian or Juvenalian. In this way, one satirist may give a slap on the wrist and laugh *with* you, while another may give a punch in the gut and laugh *at* you.

Duffy & Page (2013) found that when satirists frame their mockery around a candidate's personality, physicality, and manners of speaking--all of which are relatively trivial in comparison to actual policy stance--the target politician comes out more humanized. Duffy & Page (2013) even identify the possibility that because politicians know that they'll be discussed or parodied through political satire shows, they put on a certain type of performance when appearing publically. With their performance under their control, politicians are able to shift the narrative towards personality rather than policy, knowing it will result in a lighter satirical touch (Duffy & Page, 2013).

In a content analysis study, Smith & Voth (2002) illustrated this person-focused, soft-touch of satire. In considering the role that *Saturday Night Live* had during the 2000 presidential

election between George W. Bush and Al Gore, the researchers found that the candidates were mocked in a way to call their mistakes to their own attention without malice (Smith & Voth, 2002). Additionally, by inviting candidates to appear on *SNL*, the show gave them a platform to remedy these mistakes and laugh at themselves--thus allowing the candidates come off as more human, and redeemed from their own foibles (Smith & Voth, 2002).

Satire has a Resistance Effect

Political satire scholars do seem to support the possibility that satire could have a resistance effect (that is, act as part of a larger resistance movement to a certain politician or policy matter) in a hypothetical sense (see Baym, 2005; Hariman, 2008; Hill, 2013; Lee & Jang, 2017). However, there appears to be little research into this hypothesis manifesting in real life, and also brings up the question of how this “effect” could even be measured.

The research of Cao & Brewer (2008) is able to effectively, though indirectly, measure this hypothesis. They attempted to find whether political satire shows had a positive relationship with political participation, which I am asserting could be used as a proxy for the “resistance effect.” Through their study, the researchers found that viewing political comedy was positively associated with attending a campaign event, and joining a political organization (Cao & Brewer, 2008). With that being said, they do note that the effects found were not drastic.

Similarly, Hoffman & Thomson (2009) found that among adolescents, viewing late-night political comedy increases their own internal political efficacy, which in turn increases the likelihood of civic participation. Hoffman & Young (2011) were also able to show a relationship between watching these shows and civic participation, as mediated by internal political efficacy, but with one caveat: the effect was only present after respondents watched shows that are solely

devoted to political satire (such as *The Daily Show*), rather than shows that contain political satire, but aren't focused on it (such as *The Tonight Show*). This suggests that it may not even be appropriate in all cases to group all late-night comedy together, but rather separate the talk-show style from the more traditional, fake news style.

Satire has Little/No Effect

The effects of satire are, at best, difficult to prove. Nabi, Moyer-Gusé, & Byrne (2007) are often cited as showing this most clearly.² Satire, and humorous messages in general are comprehended in such a way that impacts argument scrutiny, and motivation processing. Nabi et al. (2007) were able to show that these two routes of processing work in tandem with one another: the humor in satire increases processing motivation, as viewers pay closer attention to the message, while also decreasing counterarguing of the messages validity. However, Nabi et al. (2007) found that this processing was essentially nullified by what they called the “discounting cue,” or reminder that the satire is “just a joke” and thus cannot be taken seriously. With that in mind, any discussion of satire effects must be taken with a grain of salt.

Did Satire Help Normalize Trump?

The role that satire may have played in normalizing some of the more fringe or ostentatious views of Trump as a candidate was fodder for many a think piece. Nearly all of the popular press writers seemed to agree that the 2016 election cycle was certainly of a different color than cycles past, and thus satirists, comedians, and writers rooms were struggling to adjust or merely keep up.

² See also Baumgartner & Morris, 2006; Boukes, Boomgaarden, Moorman, & De Vreese, 2015; LaMarre & Walther, 2013; LaMarre, Landreville, Young, & Gilkerson, 2014; Mathes & Rauchfleisch, 2013; Young, 2004; Young, 2008

At first, specifically in the early days of the election when Trump was just one of over a dozen candidates, his antics were the sort of material that a comic would kill for. However, as the crowded debate stage thinned out, and Trump was the only one left standing entering the general election, some satirists got wise to the fact that Trump could not be “joked” about in the same way that candidates had in years past. Many writers tried to put their finger on what *exactly* it was that caused even some of the most biting comic material to bounce off of him: Richard Zoglin (2016), of *Time*, suggested Trump was “immunize[d]” from satire, while *The New Yorker*’s Ian Crouch (2016) asserted that Trump was “impervious to comedy,” and James Poniewozik (2016) of the *New York Times* stated that Trump’s candidacy had created a “conundrum” for political satirists.

Because Trump was not susceptible to the normal political satire fare that had worked in elections past, cultural critics wondered how, if at all, satirists could joke about the candidate, especially when Trump himself seemed to be using elements of satire within his own campaign. Emily Nussbaum (2017) asked in *The New Yorker*, “How do you fight an enemy who’s just kidding?” speaking to the countless times that satirists and many of the American people wondered if perhaps certain statements of the candidate were all a joke, or some sort of longform performance art. Poniewozik (2016) echoed this, asking “How do you spoof a candidate who treats campaigning like a roast?” But it was *The Guardian*’s Elise Czajkowski (2016b) that didn’t mince words in asking “How do you best a grown man who brags that he’ll rely on his own ‘very good brain’ for policy advice?”

Given the difficulty, for whatever reason, that effectively satirizing Trump seemed to prove, it is not shocking that some shows, like Conan O’Brien’s eponymous late-night show on

TBS, or British entertainer James Corden's iteration of *The Late Late Show*, stayed out of the political fray entirely. They exhibited neutrality by not discussing politics at all, which meant that these shows were largely left out of the wave of criticism against satire post-election. Instead, it was the two shows that also attempted neutrality, while simultaneously giving Trump a platform and letting him "in" on the joke, that bore the brunt of the "satire normalized Trump" criticism: *Saturday Night Live*, and *The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon*.

Saturday Night Live

Saturday Night Live has been a pop culture touchstone since it began in 1975. Moreover, it has served as a rite of passage for the modern politician to be mocked on the show, as well as to appear on it themselves since President Gerald Ford appeared in a taped cameo in early-1976 (Uhrmacher & Schaul, 2015). The election cycle, and politics in general, has always been a ripe source of content for the sketch show, as exemplified by the fact that 11 of the top 13 most impersonated public figures on the show are all politicians who were either elected president or ran for president (Uhrmacher & Schaul, 2015).

In terms of style, the tone of *SNL*'s political coverage has typically erred on the side of Horatian satire, playfully calling out the foibles and personality quirks of politicians without a general sense of malice behind it. *SNL* is an equal opportunity satire machine, mocking across traditional party lines and levels of government. In this same vein of equal opportunity, *SNL* has historically acted as a platform for politicians to laugh at themselves, as is seen in the sheer number of candidates who have appeared on the show since its inception.

Scholars point out that *SNL* has often (perhaps, inadvertently) worked to humanize candidates (Duffy & Page, 2013; Smith & Voth, 2002). The typical politics-centric sketch on

SNL tends to rely on the Rabelaisian, burlesque features of satire, as impersonators seek to embody politicians in appearance, mannerisms, and communication style while paying less attention to policy positions or qualifications for office. This invocation of the body above all else has the effect of degrading the politician to the level of the general audience in an accessible manner, but does not degrade to the point of ridicule: there is always the sense of laughing *with*, not laughing *at*. This has consistently been a strength of *SNL*, as exemplified by the praise cast member Kate McKinnon, and guest star Alec Baldwin, received during the later phases of the campaign for their portrayals of Hillary Clinton, and Donald Trump, respectively--both performers won Emmy Awards for their work on the show's 42nd season. Former Secretary Clinton herself responded positively both portrayals on the show, stating that McKinnon plays "a better me than I am," and that Baldwin's Trump was a "perfect" depiction of the President's "expression and the body language of it all" (Blistein, 2017). This focus on the body is no accident--embodying such traits have always been a must for *SNL*'s most valuable impersonators. With that being said, however, it must be asked whether pure impersonation and burlesque mockery goes far enough in illustrating the true spirit of satire, if that mockery appears to be devoid of some underlying thread of social criticism and consciousness.

This speaks to much of the criticism that *SNL* received in and around the election cycle. While the show garnered its highest ratings in eight years during the October leading up to the election (Stedman, 2016), indicating its popularity with the general public, the program's inability to go far enough, or at least farther than it had in previous, decidedly more standard election cycles, stoked some disapproval from cultural and media critics. Brian Raftery (2016), of *Wired*, asserted that in McKinnon's Clinton and Baldwin's Trump, the material "always

looked for the most obvious takeaway from each event, and hammered away at them accordingly.”

A focus on the “obvious” makes sense—it is in *SNL*’s interest to appeal to the broadest audience possible, and one way of doing that is through focusing on the jokes most easily understood by the largest amount of people. The show is, after all, on a major broadcast network, and does not have the luxury of some of its satirical peers on cable in entertaining positions or comedy styles that may turn off the average viewer. This can be seen as satire’s answer to the fair and balanced objectivity that most mainstream news programs try to employ. In an attempt to remain relatively neutral (and thus retain viewership), the program must feature impersonations and guest spots of politicians from across the spectrum—regardless of whether their appearance on the show represents the legitimate viewpoints of the show’s cast, crew, and creators.

Former cast member (and Donald Trump impersonator) Taran Killam spoke about this to *Vanity Fair*, stating that the show—and Lorne Michaels as the show’s creator and longtime executive producer—often tries to “play to both sides. Play to the masses, play to whatever the popular opinion is” (Robinson, 2017). That sort equal-opportunity treatment *SNL* provides politicians has been key to the show’s success in the past, as those who tuned in to the show in the previous election cycle without an incumbent in 2008 were probably as likely to see Tina Fey’s Sarah Palin as they were Fred Armisen’s Barack Obama, or even an appearance from Senator John McCain himself. However, at least in the eyes of some critics, that sort of objectivity, while perhaps appropriate when the candidates for president were your “typical” seasoned politician, was not the correct approach during an election cycle with a candidate unlike any who had come before them.

The idea that an unusual candidate also must be satirized unusually was one that may have come to fruition on some shows (as discussed in the following section), but *SNL* was not one of them—at least, not until it was too late to perhaps even matter. That is, when the show attempted somewhat of a course-correction with their Trump mockery by replacing Darrell Hammond (who had been impersonating Trump on the show for over a decade) with Baldwin’s award-worthy performance, some critics could not help but recall that nearly a year to the day prior to the 2016 election, Donald Trump himself hosted the show.

Trump’s 2015 hosting stint was not his first—he had hosted once prior, in 2004, following the success of *The Apprentice*, and had appeared as himself during the show’s 15th-anniversary special (Itzkoff, 2017a). Moreover, Trump as a character had been a mainstay on the show since Phil Hartman first played him in 1988 (Itzkoff, 2017a). However, this was the first *SNL* appearance since Trump’s official campaign announcement, in which he proclaimed that Mexicans were “rapists”—after which, as Itzkoff (2017a) notes, NBC (which airs *SNL*) officially cut business ties with Trump, and replaced him as the host of the *Celebrity Apprentice*. Thus, it doesn’t appear the decision for Trump to host came from anyone higher up in the company than Lorne Michaels himself.

The fact that Michaels, and by proxy, the rest of the *SNL* cast and crew, chose to give a platform to someone whose views were growing more outlandish seemingly by the day (though it is worth noting that Trump had a history of what may be construed as racist or bigoted views, since his days as a real estate developer in the 1970s and 1980s), was irresponsible in the eyes of some critics. *The New Yorker*’s Amy Davidson Sorkin commented on the levity of the Trump episode, stating:

The show didn't, in any truly cutting way, make fun of Trump: it make fun of Trump voters, or at least the people it imagined them to be. Instead of looking for the weakness in the Republican front-runner, the show looked for the weak characters drawn to him. It's not clear how much is gained, even in the interests of humor, by simply expanding the circle of people called losers in this race, and leaving it at that. (2015)

Moreover, it left somewhat of a stain on *SNL*'s later attempts to course-correct through Trump mockery, considering how recently they had let Trump in on the joke. *SNL* never atoned for its sins, so to speak, but rather let the Trump episode fade from the memory of their general audience. Former cast member Taran Killam called that change of tone an example of *SNL*'s "hypocrisy," asserting that the episode Trump hosted "normalized him" and "[made] it O.K. for him to be part of the conversation" (Robinson, 2017). *Wired*'s Angela Watercutter (2016) also suggested that *SNL* "had some explaining to do," in light of their relatively favorable treatment of Trump during the 41st season (which, unlike the Emmy-winning season 42, took place completely during the Trump candidacy), and overall "anemic" political material.

And what of this normalization that Killam and others seem to suggest? Michaels believes those sort of statements come from a place of forgetting that the audience themselves has the ability to form their own opinions around politics, regardless of who is hosting *SNL*, saying that it would be impossible to even do a show like *SNL* if the only people on it were those Michaels endorsed personally (Itzkoff, 2017b). Of course, this speaks to media effects, and that Trump's 2015 hosting stint would have some sort of "magic bullet" effect on the audience is a misnomer. However, it also seems to forget the definite effect it has on Trump's psyche, at least

in roughly the month leading up to the election, and the months since, with *The New Yorker's* Ian Crouch (2017) stating that *SNL* is “more essential to the culture than ever, not because it is necessarily funnier than during its best seasons (though it *has* been very funny) but because it has had the rapt attention of an American President.” That the President himself, along with millions of other Americans, consider *SNL* to be required watching, speaks to the undeniable power that the show has as a platform.

The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon

If *SNL* exemplified the phrase, “too little, too late,” Fallon’s political comedy was perhaps an unintentionally prescient rendering of the phrase “too soon,” as the late-night host treated Trump as just another famous haircut to lightly tease, while altogether ignoring the candidate’s more repugnant actions and opinions—which, in retrospect, many (including Fallon himself) look back at with dismay.

Jimmy Fallon got his television start on *SNL* in 1998, and just over a decade later took over from Conan O’Brien to host the latest incarnation of *Late Night*. He found quick success, garnering an Emmy nod just two years into the show, at the exclusion of historically heavy-hitters like David Letterman and Jay Leno (Carter, 2011). Soon enough, Fallon succeeded Leno as the host of *The Tonight Show* in 2014, with Lorne Michaels at the helm as the show’s executive producer.

Fallon is, by nature, a fun-and-games oriented late-night host. Building upon the tone set at *Late Night*, Fallon doubled-down on his good-natured demeanor as the host of *The Tonight Show*, getting celebrities to act silly and at times, make fools out of themselves, in clips of the show that would often go viral. From accompanying Madonna on her hit “Holiday” by using

classroom instruments, to playing beer pong with Betty White, Fallon had a knack for infusing immense amounts of levity into a genre already based primarily around *having fun*.

That Fallon wants to make his viewers laugh, would be an understatement. His goal for *The Tonight Show* was to create a television experience in which “you go to bed with a smile on your face and you have sweet dreams” (Itzkoff, 2017b). In essence, he sought to create a late-night utopia on *The Tonight Show*, where viewers could take a break from the day’s politics and crises—allowing them to wind down for the day, instead of riling them up. Fallon still insists that the best way to achieve this is through “his all-around entertainer’s skills and down-the-middle tastes” that *The New York Time*’s Dave Itzkoff (2017b) says is what Fallon has “built his brand on.”

Trump appeared on *The Tonight Show* twice during the election cycle--once in September 2015, when the nomination for the Republican candidacy was still anyone’s game, and again a year later, in September of 2016, when Trump was just mere weeks from clinching the general election. During their first exchange, *The Atlantic*’s Caitlin Flanagan (2017) notes the instant chemistry the two had, with “Fallon as straight man, Trump as the same Trump he’s been on television and radio shows for more than three decades.” At the top of the show, Trump even indulged Fallon in doing a skit, in which Fallon played Trump preparing for his interview (in a dressing room bedecked in portraits of Trump, no less), as the real Donald played Fallon’s reflection, as if in a mirror. This was, for all intents and purposes, the same Trump that appeared two months later on *SNL*—his bigoted views more covert than later in the campaign, his outlandish promises not yet announced, and his ability to snag the Republican nomination was still in question.

However, when Trump appeared on *The Tonight Show* a year later, things were different. As Flanagan (2017) notes, “Now Trump was the Republican nominee, and his bag of tricks—inciting violence in crowds, threatening religious tests, calling the press a pack of liars—was no longer so amusing.” Given the immensity of Fallon’s platform at the time— millions of viewers, and the number-one choice in late night for audiences (Koblin, 2017)—he was in a unique position to take Trump to task in a face-to-face way that many of his cable counterparts would likely never get the opportunity to do. Instead, Fallon took the opportunity to do something, as he said, was not especially “presidential”—he messed up Trump’s infamous hair.

Reactions to the hair touse seen ‘round the world, as it were, were stark, both immediately and since. Former Obama speechwriter Jon Lovett tweeted “This photo will be in history books and the caption will not be about how Jimmy Fallon is such a fun nice guy” (Flanagan, 2017). *The Atlantic’s* Caitlin Flanagan said the following in her article, “How late-night comedy fueled the rise of Trump”:

By then Trump had exhibited enough ugly and norm-breaking behavior to have made treating him as a lovable bridge-and-tunnel celebrity straight out of Queens circa 1975—President Crazy Eddie, President Tom Carvel—beyond the pale. Trump had already revealed himself to be a dangerous person; perhaps the best thing that can be said about the man is that he let America know exactly what it would be getting if he were elected. It was a huge mistake on Fallon’s part, one he has been paying for ever since—his ratings have not recovered from it. (2017)

Similarly, another writer for *The Atlantic*, David Sims (2016) called the interview an “embarrassment,” where Fallon looked “as if he’s pretending to steal dollars from his mom’s

purse” while fluffing Trump’s famous ‘do. But it was *Variety*’s Sonia Saraiya whose post-game criticism was most insightful, saying,

Fallon has never been a particularly incisive questioner, but allowing Trump to get away with 15 minutes of national airtime as fuzzy as a stuffed animal leads the rest of us to wonder: Who wouldn’t Fallon interview with such fawning, giggly acceptance? Where would he draw the line? And if, as is possible for this people-pleasing comedian, there is no such person he’d say no to, no situation in which he’d draw the line—then how long will it take before American audiences lose all their faith in him, as an honest person they can watch every night? (2016)

But beyond just think pieces, or hot takes on Twitter, the backlash of the interview seems to have manifested most prominently in Fallon’s drop in ratings, as alluded to by Flanagan. In the year-plus since the election, viewers for *The Tonight Show* plummeted, from roughly 3.3 million viewers in the Fall of 2016, to only 2.6 million viewers in the Fall of 2017 (Koblin, 2017). This 21-percent decline in viewership caused Fallon to lose his top spot in the late-night game to cable fake-news veteran Stephen Colbert’s *The Late Show* on CBS, and is increasingly unsteady in the number-two slot as ABC’s *Jimmy Kimmel Live!* continues to gain viewers as Kimmel orients himself towards more political material.

Some have insisted that to have done anything *but* touse Trump’s hair would have been out of character for him. After all, he made a name for himself specifically as a late-night host who wouldn’t alienate viewers. Most critics, in discussing Fallon, acknowledge that he isn’t going to be the type of hosts that challenges his viewers—at least not in any way that doesn’t involve them throwing a ping pong ball into a cup (see Flanagan, 2017; Itzkoff, 2017b; Saraiya.

2016; Sims, 2016). Fallon himself has said that he “didn’t do it to humanize him,” but instead was somewhat trying to do the opposite, saying “I almost did it to minimize him. I didn’t think that would be a compliment” (Itzkoff, 2017b). Fallon’s former *SNL Weekend Update* co-anchor Tina Fey agrees, saying “Jimmy is not a political comedian, so it would be very phony of him to go out and do long political joke rants just because that’s what some people want” (Itzkoff, 2017). In essence, being political would go against Fallon’s personal vision for a show that gives “sweet dreams.”

And that middle-of-the-road, lightly-tease-everyone-so-as-to-alienate-no-one is the same tactic *SNL* used as well, as was discussed above. However, Fallon differs from *SNL* in two ways here: he never attempted to course-correct, or even reckon with Trump’s rise and whatever miniscule role that interview may have played; and that he himself is an individual. Yes, Lorne Michaels is the producer of *The Tonight Show*, and Fallon surely has to answer to him, as well as executives at NBC, but for all intents and purposes, the buck stops with him. The players on *SNL* engaged with Trump because it was written into their scripts, and completely out of their control; Fallon engaged with Trump—and engaged with him in that very particular way—because he wanted to.

The power of the individual comedian is different than that of a scripted ensemble show. In Meghan Garber’s (2015) article for *The Atlantic*, entitled “How comedians became public intellectuals,” she traces the way that many mainstream comics have embodied the true spirit of satire in the past few years through essentially engaging in cultural criticism via the technique of comedy. The comedians, she says, are the “people who use laughter as a lubricant for cultural conversations—to help us to talk about the things that needed to be talked about.” Combined

with the power of the internet, and the increasing ability to create niche television programming, comedians have become Garber's titular "public intellectuals," who we as viewers can rely upon to give it to us straight without the sometimes-problematic tenets of objectivity that traditional journalists use. This article seems like a take on Megan Hill's (2013) ideal functions of political satire, in which satirists fill the need that journalists cannot in seeking the truth and dispensing it to the audience. But while Fallon technically has the platform of the public intellectual, he doesn't take advantage of it in any substantive manner, by constantly focusing on fun over facts. The only dialogue Fallon generated from his interview with Trump was one that was critical of Fallon himself, not the candidate.

Whether in the long run, Fallon's tactic of appealing to all will win out, remains to be seen. Fallon has maintained his apolitical style on the show since the election, even at the cost of losing viewers. According to Koblin (2017), NBC executives had hoped that the loss in ratings would be temporary—the kind of post-inaugural backlash that would slowly return to homeostasis in the months since. But instead, months have now turned into a year, and the gap between Fallon and Colbert is only growing wider.

More than just a question of ratings, however, is a question of sheer content. Indeed, just a month after Trump's inauguration, *The New York Times's* James Poniewozik (2017) compared Fallon and Colbert's coverage of the same Trump press conference, stating "Stephen Colbert and Jimmy Fallon both got out their knives. The difference: Mr. Colbert brought a carving knife, and Mr. Fallon brought a butter knife." As Jimmy Kimmel got similarly political through commenting on attempts at repealing the Affordable Care Act via the lens of his infant son's heart defects, his viewership soared (Koblin, 2017). And it is that ability to be both true to one's

own beliefs about society while staying funny and relevant that makes a great satirist, and an even greater late-night host. Sims (2016) points out that focusing neutrality will not win a legacy, saying “Great hosts of the late-night genre like David Letterman and Jon Stewart were joke-tellers *and* interviewers, who couldn’t help but bring their opinions with them no matter who they were talking to.”

So while the success of Colbert and Kimmel are just short-term examples, they do appear to support the idea that neutrality, and always picking the silly over the serious, may not be the most prudent choice in an unprecedented era of American politics. When Garber (2015) makes her case for the comedian’s unique role as the public intellectual, she states that their comedy is “intended not just to help us escape from the realities of the world, but also, and more so, to help us understand them.” In that vein, Americans may want someone who is going to speak truth to power before they fall asleep (especially when much of the news media seems incapable of doing so), rather than help them escape, or give them “sweet dreams.”

Donald Trump

President Donald Trump took on many personas during his candidacy in the 2016 election: the businessman, the entertainer, the nationalist, the outsider, and the savior who was going to “make America great again.” However, he also donned another persona that is worth discussing: the satirist. With the rhythm and delivery of a stand-up comic, the catchphrases of a variety show host, the tendency to say that which had been taboo, and the ability to simultaneously seem deadly serious and flippant, Donald Trump used elements of satire constantly while on the campaign trail.

Trump’s candidacy was often marked by the media’s inability to suss out whether he was “just kidding.” From his tweets to his rally appearances, Trump’s candidacy seemed like a piece of performance art—his views so outlandish that he seemed to be doing his best impression of an episode of *Black Mirror*, or even an episode of *South Park*, which both have depicted dystopian worlds in which a loud-mouthed, completely implausible candidate wins an election. But for millions of Americans, they did not see a dystopia—instead, they saw in Trump someone who was willing to say loudly what they had previously just said in private. He was the antithesis of all that was “wrong” with America, from PC culture to “liberal media bias.” He represented what seemed to some as the “average” American—a white, Christian man—in a time when the face of the “average” American is more often a woman, a person of color, a person with a differently-abled body, or a person who doesn’t speak english.

But while his supporters took him very seriously, Trump was still a joke to them, at least partially. However, this was a joke all his supporters were in on, manifested most evidently in the internet culture that developed around his candidacy. Through the sharing of memes and social media trolling, some of Trump’s most rabid fans helped embed the campaign so deeply within the gray area that lies between the joke and the serious, that Trump may not have been able to stop them even if he wanted to. Indeed, as alt-right troll Chuck Johnson said of his internet compatriots, “We memed a President existence” (Nussbaum, 2017).

The sweet-spot that internet trolls and members of the alt-right, and to a larger degree, fans of Trump in general, were able to hit when it came to digesting and disseminating Trump’s message stands in stark contrast to the way that the traditional news media, as well as satirists, were able to cover the candidate. As discussed earlier, Trump and his campaign was an anomaly

to much of the media—his outlandish views, his seeming lack of self-control when it came to speaking his mind through tweet or at rallies, and his sheer lack of political experience and governmental knowledge seemed to confound the media at every turn. The lack of knowing *how* to cover Trump often manifested in his every move or utterance being covered by the press, resulting nearly \$2 billion worth of free media for the candidate (Confessore & Yourish, 2016).

Such constant coverage, coupled with the candidate's tendency towards satirical techniques, and on top of views that were far outside the norm, led to the election's elephant in the room: was Trump being serious, or was he merely just kidding? If the media assumes him to be serious, and thus a serious threat to American democracy as we know it, they run many risks, from fear-mongering to turning off audiences who may be more moderate or conservative. Moreover, they could very well look foolish if Trump's campaign grandstanding never came to fruition post-election. Thus, the media (including satirists, though some to a lesser degree), chose to cover him while erring on the side of humor and spectacle, and that which cannot be taken seriously. However, this created a problem all its own, which *The New Yorker's* Ian Crouch referred to as "The Trump Enigma":

Perhaps major media outlets need to start covering him less, so as to give him a smaller spotlight. Or maybe they need to cover him more, and better expose the dangers and falsehoods of his ideas. This question, what we might call the Trump Enigma, is an old one by now, spanning a couple of election cycles, but no one seems to have cracked the code. Do you starve a Trump or feed him? (2015)

Crouch was not alone in asking such questions. The fact that Trump seemed to outlast both those who treated him as serious, as well as those who treated him as spectacle, caused *The Guardian's*

Elise Czajkowski (2016a) to compare the candidate to a Bobo doll, or inflatable clown, who popped back up again and again—seemingly unfazed by both attacks and jokes alike.

Trump’s immunity to substantive media coverage, as he tiptoed on the line between serious and silly, was due in large part to his sheer manner of delivery and overall demeanor. Ever the entertainer, Trump carried himself like a stand-up comedian throughout the election, which numerous cultural critics picked up on. For example, *The New York Times*’s James Poniewozik said the following about the candidate’s communication tactics:

Stylistically, he works in the mode and rhythms of a stand-up. He riffs. He goads. He works blue. When he gave a victory speech in New Hampshire, feinted at congratulating his opponents, then pivoted—‘Now that I’ve got *that* over with...’—he sounded like a sketch comic doing an imitation of himself. His style has rendered him, weirdly, almost comedy-proof. Election parodies traditionally exaggerate candidates. But Mr. Trump exaggerates himself—he’s the frilled lizard of politics, inflating his self-presentation to appear ever larger. Satire exposes candidates’ contradictions and absurdities. But Mr. Trump blows past those, while his supporters cheer. (2016)

Emily Nussbaum (2017) of *The New Yorker* touched on similar features of Trump’s communication style, saying,

Trump was a hot comic, a classic Howard Stern guest. He was the insult comic, the stadium act, the ratings-obsessed headliner who shouted down hecklers. His rallies boiled with rage and laughter, which were hard to tell apart... Like that of any stadium comic, Trump’s brand was control. He was superficially loose, the wild man who might say anything, yet his off-the-cuff monologues were always being tweaked as he

tested catchphrases ('Lock her up!'; 'Build the wall!') for crowd response. On TV and on Twitter, his jokes let him say the unspeakable and get away with it. (p. 66)

Of course, the flare for humor, for the entertainment, for the bombastic, was not necessarily new for Trump. His larger-than-life personality, and sometimes-controversial business dealings garnered him recognition, first in New York City and its surrounds, and then on a national scale. Trump parlayed his business success into a number of different media avenues, from book deals (including the most famous, and widely-mocked, Trump-penned book *The Art of the Deal*) to the long-running reality show *The Apprentice*, in which Trump originated a well-known phrase that predates those of his campaign: "You're fired."

However, even though Trump has a history of using humor and spectacle to advance himself in other ways, it is worth asking the question of why he still chose this route for his campaign. What is it about the tactics of humor and satire that appealed to Trump, and his base? This can be answered by looking at theory around comedy (and stand-up, more specifically) as what Mintz (1985) refers to as "social and cultural mediation." Mintz situates comedy as we know it today within the larger history of humor, stretching back to Rabelais' carnival fools, and through the (relatively) recent past of minstrel shows and vaudeville. The stand-up comic and the satirist alike, operate in a genre built on a long tradition of fools being ridiculed and laughed at.

Today's humorist operates as what Mintz (1985) refers to as the "negative exemplar": he who is defective, who can be laughed *at*, who can make us feel superior. This, Mintz says, is why so many with perceived failings, turn to comedy as their refuge. But reflected within the negative exemplar, we can also see the worst parts of humanity (including those within ourselves). Here

he transforms into the “comic spokesman,” leading in a celebration turning personal failings into virtues.

Given that the comic can use his imperfections as a unifying feature for his audience, it is no surprise that those with bad intentions would also use it to their advantage. As Mintz (1985) explains, “It might be said, then, that the trickster, con-man, and likable rogue all turn dishonesty, selfishness, disruptive and aggressive behavior, and licentiousness into virtues, or at least into activity that the audience can applaud, laugh with, and celebrate” (p. 77). Of course, this speaks to the history of using humor and spectacle as a mask of nefarious intentions and despotism. Just as satire has been used as a democratic tool since Ancient Athens, so too have tyrannical figures employed its use as a pseudo-bread-and-circuses, focusing on entertainment and being “in” on the joke.

This was similarly echoed in the literature by Billig (2005). That those who are not objectively “good”—from bigots to tyrants—use humor to achieve certain ends is quite typical. Billig recalls Sartre’s 1948 essay on anti-Semitism to illustrate this, stating, “Bigotry resembled a joke, because bigots do not, indeed cannot, really believe in the literal truth of their outrageously expressed opinions and grossly exaggerated stereotypes. In expressing their views, bigots knowingly mock the standards of liberalism and tolerance; and they enjoy freeing themselves from the constraining standards of rationality, decency and evidence. Hence, the discourse of bigotry can have the character of a joke” (p. 210). The bigot with smile is not a comfortable figure for many; yet it is also highly appealing to certain people, which can be seen in the way that Trump’s supporters grew ever more fervent with the unique mixture of “jokes” and bigotry that his rhetoric was comprised of.

Indeed, Mintz and Billig were not the only ones to point this relationship between intolerance, foolishness, and humor. *The Atlantic*'s Meghan Garber (2017b) discussed the legacy of Neil Postman, cultural theorist and author of *Amusing Ourselves to Death*. Postman's prescient work spoke to the dangers of having "too much fun," and Garber asserted that some of Postman's predictions about our overly-mediated world had come true, especially in light of the election: "He knew that despots often used amusement to soften and systemize their seizures of power. He worried that television—an environment where facts and fictions swirl in the same space, cheerfully disconnected from the world's real and hard truths—would beget a world in which truth itself was destabilized" (Garber, 2017b).

But the pursuit of amusement had gone beyond even the constraints of the television, to the unlimited possibilities of the internet. It is the legacy Postman's world, and even Rabelais' world, that allowed for the fool to be elevated and for his immense flaws to be normalized, thanks to the help of the media and an audience hungry for entertainment.

Discussion: Did Satire Matter? Looking at possible effects.

It should be well established at this point, that there were significant examples of satirical misuse or outright failures during the 2016 election cycle. However, to focus solely on that would wrongfully overlook the many times that satirists did good work throughout the election, even despite the impossible challenge Trump provided as source material.

When it comes to satire, the 2016 election proved to be unique in more than just the obvious way. Not only were satirists entering uncharted territory when it came to Trump, they were also adjusting to a new television landscape altogether, as the election was the first without the inimitable presence of Jon Stewart. Stewart had been hosting *The Daily Show* since 1999,

serving as the primary figure in televised satire up through his 2015 departure. Despite being replaced by Trevor Noah in the anchor's seat, Stewart—who had covered four presidential elections in his tenure—left somewhat of a void. However, this void provided an opportunity for others to further develop niche programming, from Noah's revamp of *TDS*, to the programs of former Stewart-era *TDS* correspondents Samantha Bee, John Oliver, and Stephen Colbert, and the distinctly un-Fallon-like iteration of *Late Night*, helmed by former *SNL* player Seth Meyers. This was truly the first election where viewers had the ability to choose from a myriad of programs, from traditional late-night, to fake news.

And a hard choice it was. For every Fallon misstep, or risk *SNL* didn't take, there was a feminist diatribe from Samantha Bee on her show *Full Frontal*, or a "Closer Look" segment from Seth Meyers, where he incisively covered the various politics of the day. Just watching segments, such as John Oliver's "Make Donald Drumpf Again," or Trevor Noah's extended comparison of Trump to African strongmen, was often enough to simply overlook the ways in which other shows weren't sounding the Trump alarm. However, it cannot be speculated as to whether these great illustrations of satire did or did not move the needle, primarily due to a lack of research. However, while there has been no research released regarding what effect(s), if any, satire had during the 2016 US presidential election, if previous scholarship is to be taken into account, it is likely that such research would yield minimal to no effects. That is, even though there has been research detailing examples of satire having a normalizing effect, as well as examples of satire aiding in resistance efforts, the bulk of the research seems to point to satire having very little to do with how elections play out.

It is often satirists themselves who back up this very point: while what they do is important, it is not important in a way that would create legitimate change. In an interview with *Time*'s Richard Zoglin (2016), Samantha Bee was quick to qualify that while she was hopeful that the work of her and her crew was beneficial in some way, it wasn't having any measurable effect on the public, saying, "I don't think we move the needle at all... It would be very hurtful to the show if I started to believe that I had influence. It's very hard to do satire when you take yourself too seriously" (p. 47). Jon Stewart, Bee's former colleague, was similarly notoriously dismissive of the idea that the work of him or his colleagues had any sort of effect other than making people laugh, and maybe think a little (Stefansky, 2016).

But it was Stewart's successor, *The Daily Show*'s Trevor Noah, who not only agreed that satire was unlikely to move the needle, but also warned that watching and sharing satire may give viewers "a false sense of activism" (Zoglin, 2016, p. 47). This idea speaks effects research that demonstrates what researchers call "internal political self-efficacy," in which the viewer receives a boost in their own perceived competence and effectiveness levels when it comes to enacting political change—even if these feelings do not manifest as legitimate political participation (see Baumgartner & Morris, 2006; Hoffman & Young, 2011; Holbert, et al., 2007). Again, while no hard data has been produced thus far on how satire may have had any effect on the election results, it would not be surprising if a boost in internal political self-efficacy was demonstrated. Just by virtue of watching the show, viewers feel a type of catharsis that not only makes them feel validated in their own political opinions, but perhaps lulls them into the false impression that *of course* such a candidate like Donald Trump would not *actually* become president. Watching satire, that is, is participation enough; the heavy-lifting is already being done

by the satirist, and surely nothing except tuning into Trump's daily excoriation at the hands of Bee, Colbert, or Oliver, must be done to stop him.

However, as the election proved, this was not the case. Indeed, the "good" satire likely did little to move the needle, given that they were preaching to those already converted. A number of media critics pointed out, post-election, that believing satire alone could "stop" such a threat to American democracy is joke-worthy itself. *Wired's* Brian Raftery (2016) revealed that he himself had thought this, stating, "I saw people creating an exchanging comedy that both assuaged my fears and affirmed my worldview—so much so that, once in a while, I sometimes allowed myself to think that the comedians could somehow break through in a way that objective information could not." It is likely that Raftery was not alone in this sentiment.

But what of the satirists who satire that normalized Trump? If we are to assume that satire had no hand in resisting Trump's election, can we say the same for the satire that helped him? Probably. As demonstrated in the literature review, satire that normalizes, and satire that resists, are merely two sides of the same coin. In both cases, it must be assumed that satire has any measurable effects in the some way—from activating political participation, to impacting voters' opinions on a certain candidate. But just as Bee or Noah or the like were probably unable to turn voters against Trump more than they already had been turned (given their liberal-skewing audiences), it's just as unlikely that a large number of voters who were on the fence during the election watched Jimmy Fallon tousle Trump's hair and think, 'Well, if he's good enough for Jimmy, he's good enough for me,' and allow that to be the deciding factor.

And lastly, what of Trump himself? While there have been and will continue to be numerous opinions on how Trump succeeded—through scandal upon scandal, through the lack

of support from many in the GOP establishment, through daily remarks that would have swiftly and certainly ended the careers of any other “politician”—his use of satire and its elements was so unique that it is a good place to start when considering the “how.”

Trump managed to embody satire’s rampant aggression and the sort of playfulness marked by a wink and a smile. This allowed him to move with relative ease through a number of places and spaces that, from the outside looking in, would appear to require a disparate set of skills. That is, Trump was able to parlay his comic delivery and laughing bigotry from the stage of *SNL*, to campaign rallies, to debate stages. For a late-night host like Fallon, inviting Trump onto the show probably felt closer to inviting a peer—just two satirists riffing off one another—rather than the obligatory appearance by a stodgy politician.

Just like many powerful authoritarian-minded candidates before him, and the meme-hocking anti-PC activists that celebrated his ascendancy, Trump effectively weaponized satire. He reappropriated what is meant to be an overall hopeful genre for his own personal usage, truly laughing in the face of a culture deemed overly liberal and politically correct—a culture that defined Trump’s frequent insult of “fake news media.” Trump walked a fine line throughout his campaign that would be a challenge for even the most effective satirists—that between the silly and the serious. He shifted so rapidly between the comedian and the nationalist that determining whether he was voicing a legitimate opinion, or just playing around, was all but impossible. He used a genre closely associated with truth-telling, and the leveling of authority, to seem like an everyman advocate for those who felt forgotten by their country. In sum, he used a form of comedy so based in making that which is taboo and disdainful, normal, that he was able to make his own taboo and disdainful thoughts, actions, and opinions, normal.

Conclusion: Should Satire Matter? The role of morality.

Regardless of whether satire had an effect—that of normalization, or that of embodied resistance—during the election, it does not answer the larger questions this paper has asked about morality. That is, even if satire cannot specifically aid in enacting change, or influencing voter opinions, does the satirist still have some sort of moral obligation to the audience in fulfilling the idealized functions of satire?

On a certain level, this speaks to the ongoing public debate on whether “celebrities”—let’s say, stars of film and television, music, sports, etc.—are obligated to not only hold opinions, but voice them as well. Again and again, it must be asked that if one has a platform, do they have a duty thereby to use that platform? Are young teen starlets, for example, beholden to promoting wholesome femininity so as to be good “role models” to young girls? Are actors required to speak up about social injustices, or endorse a candidate for president? Does pursuing fame and notoriety mean that one has signed onto some implicit agreement to participate in the steering of society’s moral compass? Surely, this is the opinion of some.

But this opinion is quite often countered, as has been evident over the past year of the Trump era, by those who wish celebrities and other public persons would simply “stay in their lane.” This puts forth the idea that those with a platform are no more obligated to engage in public morality than those without a platform. An example of this is the outrage over the kneeling protests of NFL players over racial injustice. While this act was praiseworthy to some, to others, the kneeling was representative of “celebrities” involving themselves in a debate that was completely out of the bounds of their occupations and expertise as football players. That is, the players were somehow overstepping their roles as entertainers and sportsmen by exercising

their free speech on the field, providing a dose of morality that some NFL fans found inappropriate.

However, if one looks beyond the debate over the tenuous relationship between celebrity and morality, it should become clear that the satirist isn't *just* a celebrity, or someone with a public platform. Rather, they are the representatives of a centuries-old art form that is intertwined with the history of democratic speech itself. The satirist has consistently been a voice of reason, and an example of speaking truth to power. Can it be said that the satirist, similar to the journalist, is beholden to a sort of code to teach and inform, regardless of whether it leads to measurable changes in the status quo? After completing this research, I believe they are, and that's why I take such issue with the ways in which satire was misused during this election to normalize the looming Trump presidency.

It is equally clear from my research that I am not alone in this thinking. As Meghan Garber points out in her various pieces for *The Atlantic*, satirists have become increasingly important in steering the nation's moral compass, as the chosen few who are able to effectively wield power of jokes combined with messaging. And this is even more important in a world where political speech is mediated through the lens of late-night, or politicians produce stump speeches that sound increasingly like a stand-up's "tight five"—that is, we have been and will continue to be more reliant upon our satirists to guide us as the line between politics and comedy continues to blur.

And the role that satire will continue to play goes even deeper than just having a platform. Satire does so much of the work that is necessary in a functioning democracy: it starts

conversations, filters and re-filters our precise feelings, helps us voice anger or frustration, and puts words to that which we cannot. Garber sums this up nicely, stating,

Democracy demands groups of people who are willing to speak truth to power, whoever, and however, they may be. Increasingly, those people are entertainers. Comedians are serving, more and more, as political activists. Late-night comedy is becoming, more and more, a place of earnest—and informed—political debate. The lines between journalism and other ways of understanding the world—between media as information and media as entertainment—are vanishing. (2017a)

This opinion is echoed in the academic literature as well. Hill's (2013) "normative theory of satire" situates the genre as one that is characterized by "embodied resistance," as satirists must use their platform to legitimize and broadcast voices of dissent. Hill, as well as other researchers (see Baym, 2005; Hariman, 2008) agree that the satirist is best-positioned in our media landscape to engage in the truth-seeking that is a key component to our democracy, despite it being that which journalists cannot do, and that politicians do not want to do.

So, if it is contended that satire is ultimately a power for good, and innately a tool of resistance, how can the normalization during the 2016 election be made sense of? While we cannot look into the minds of Jimmy Fallon, or Lorne Michaels, it should be said that regardless of their intentions, it simply does not behoove some comedians to remain true to the spirit of satire. The risk of alienating your audience, as well as network executives and advertisers, may be perceived as too great when weighing the decision to resist or remain passive.

So despite the great things satire can do, especially in an idealized form, it can be misused for improper ends, bastardizing the magic combination of aggression, play, laughter, and

judgment. It can be completely without teeth, as seen with Fallon and Michaels, or it can be the modus operandi of despots, as seen with Trump. Nonetheless, it remains a vital part of American democracy, especially during a political era in which the very nature of that democracy is threatened.

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