

POLITICAL CRITICISM AND THE POWER OF SATIRE:
THE TRANSFORMATION OF “LATE-NIGHT” COMEDY ON TELEVISION IN THE
UNITED STATES,
1980-2008

by

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The Transformation of “Late-Night” Comedy on Television in the United States,
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Abstract:

How has political comedy on television in the United States changed over time? Earlier examples of political comedy on television were shows like *Saturday Night Live* and various late night talk shows, which focused primarily on political or personal scandals or personal characteristics, rather than policies or substantive issues. In other arenas of television and the public sphere in general, there was serious criticism of scandals, but not in political comedy. Shows that attempted to criticize politicians or serious public issues using satire, irony, or invective such as *The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour*, were routinely censored by network executives. With the advent of cable, and the failures of traditional mainstream journalism after 9/11, a change occurred. *The Daily Show* with Jon Stewart almost immediately adopted a critical stance on the Bush administration that was widely discussed in “serious” public sphere outlets such as CNN, the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*. This form of “critical comedy” has proved popular. This project examines commentary about such programs in the journalistic sphere from each presidential election cycle from 1980-2008. This includes data from newspapers as well as television news sources. Additionally, I conduct content analysis of sets of *Saturday Night Live*, *The Colbert Report*, and the *Daily Show* from each time period, if the show was being produced. I show that political comedy is increasingly influential in public sphere discussions of presidential politics.

Chair: Ron Jacobs

Committee Members: Richard Lachmann and Elizabeth Popp-Berman

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CHATER 1: INTRODUCTION

How has political comedy on television in the United States changed over time? As the number of channels increased from just three networks to a multitude of choices on cable and satellite, has political humor become more critical of politicians and their policies? Earlier examples of political comedy on television were shows like *Saturday Night Live* and various late night talk shows, which focused primarily on political or personal scandals (examples include President Clinton's affair with his intern, Monica Lewinsky), or personal characteristics (such as President Ford's clumsiness or George W. Bush's malapropisms), rather than policies or substantive issues (Moy, Xenos, and Hess 2006; Peterson 2008). In other arenas of television and the public sphere in general, there was serious criticism of scandals, but not in political comedy. Shows that attempted to criticize politicians or serious public issues using satire, irony, or invective were routinely censored by network executives, such as the *Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour* (Bianculli 2009). In short, political criticism on television comedy shows had to be rather innocuous or extremely subtle to go out for broadcast.

However, with the advent of cable, a change occurred. The *Daily Show* with Jon Stewart very quickly adopted a critical stance on the Bush administration that was widely discussed in "serious" public sphere outlets such as the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*. One of the things that was so effective about the *Daily Show* was that it provided a great deal of context about the issues it was satirizing; viewers could approach the program without prior knowledge of important, newsworthy incidents. Later, a spin-off show, the *Colbert Report*, produced a character that was not only critical within the

confines of the show, but carried out a legendary satirical tirade against the Bush administration right in front of it at the White House Correspondent's dinner in 2007. This form of "critical comedy" has proved popular; examples from the last election include David Letterman's scathing comedy about Presidential candidate John McCain and Tina Fey's notable *Saturday Night Live* mocking of the perceived incompetence of Vice Presidential candidate Sarah Palin.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Why is the increase and discussion of critical perspectives in political comedy on television an important sociological issue? Writers on the subject either dismiss entertainment media, and television in particular, as a hopelessly polluted sphere that damages rational critical debate, or examine its democratic potential in a more empirical way. For years, critics of the media, such as Mills (1956), have held that the mass media only reinforces the power of political elites. In his time, one could make an argument that this was true, with the proliferation of censorship on any program that could be seen as subversive (Bianculli 2009; Silverman 2007). Focusing specifically on current entertainment media refutes the claims of writers such as Adorno and Horkheimer (2001) who stated that mass media entertainment only functions as "mass distraction" that keeps the masses pacified, and does not encourage them to question those in power.

Entertainment media is of specific importance due to the number of people that consume it. While critics of politicians and policies have been able to voice their opinions

in the public sphere all along (mostly in newspapers), and serious political talk shows have presented all sides, these outlets are not as widely consumed as popular entertainment programs. A 2007 Pew Research study confirmed that people who watch television shows that deal with political topics are more informed about politics in general; this includes not only shows on different sides of the political spectrum, like Fox News' *The O'Reilly Factor* and PBS' *NewsHour with Jim Lehrer*, but also found that the same held true for regular viewers of the "comedy" programs the *Daily Show* and the *Colbert Report*. They concluded that:

Stewart has always insisted that his show isn't journalism and given its comedic core, its blurring of truth and fiction, and its ignoring of many major events, that is true in a traditional sense. But it's also true that, at times, "The Daily Show" aims at more than comedy. In its choice of topics, its use of news footage to deconstruct the manipulations by public figures and its tendency toward pointed satire over playing just for laughs, "The Daily Show" performs a function that is close to journalistic in nature -- getting people to think critically about the public square.¹

Tocqueville (2007) wrote extensively about the interconnection between democracy and a strong civil society, which is necessary for democracy (Alexander and Smith 2005; Alexander 2006; Cohen and Arato 1994; Keane 1998; Skocpol 2004).

Although Tocqueville was writing about newspapers, the diversity of news-relating

¹ Pew Research Center's Journalism Project Staff. 2008. "Journalism, Satire or Just Laughs? "The Daily Show with Jon Stewart," Examined." May 8. Web. <http://pewresearch.org/pubs/829/the-daily-show-journalism-satire-or-just-laughs>

organs of the press, where the same ideas are distributed “in a thousand minds at once,” is critical to democracy. When he wrote that “A newspaper is an advisor that does not have to be sought out, an advisor that comes everyday unbidden to talk to you briefly about public affairs without disrupting your private pursuits” (600), the same certainly could be said of television. What is civil society, and what is its role in a democracy? It is that which allows the people to make decisions about the democracy in the public sphere:

Responding to the rationalist theories of power put forth by Weber (1978) and Mann, and the disciplinary theories of state power by Foucault (1975), the “state” tends to be reified and hypostasized. Yet if concrete decision making is introduced as a variable, this autonomy of action seems to be confined to political and military elites... There is little or no understanding of the complexity of policy formation, the fact that within democracies wars [and many other issues] are intensely debated and scrutinized by audiences and that the state and its political leaders need continuously to seek support from an often-skeptical civil society. (Smith 2005:7)

The role of media in civil society, specifically the role of television, has been a subject of intense debate for academic scholars writing about the public sphere. A space for intellectual, rational debate, as conceptualized by Habermas (1989), may not be best exemplified in the one-way communication style that is television. Putnam (2001) points to the individualization of leisure time, in part because of the ever-increasing amount of time Americans spend watching television, as the main factor in the erosion of “social

capital” and the resultant decline of civil society and membership organizations that increase citizens’ political power. Postman (1985) writes that the ratings-driven medium of television dilutes the capacity for rational argument, and as the public sphere becomes ever more colonized by it, “the news” becomes indistinguishable from entertainment.

Other writers, such as Schudson (1998), believe that a transformation is taking place in public life, and that social capital is changing in form to reflect a more individualized American self. Entertainment media are part of the aesthetic public sphere, and galvanize individuals in civil society to converse about “matters of common concern.” Although, as Jacobs (2012) writes, “entertainment media are always already inserted into a discourse of civil society, but in a semi-polluted symbolic position that demands justification according to the dominant tests of worth” (8), political entertainment programs are increasingly contributing to rational debate in the public sphere through the use of irony (Jones 2004). Although Habermas himself would probably not regard modern televised political discourse as rational, critical debate, other writers have “suggested that we view the arenas of everyday life as ground for deliberation” (Benhabib 1993; Perrin 2006:146). In fact, Jenkins (2008) suggests that all forms of media communication, in entertainment arenas as well as political ones (if they can still be separated at all) are becoming increasingly interactive, at least for those who are able to utilize the new technologies. All these factors lead to the concept that television may be contributing to intersubjectivity in the public sphere.

What is intersubjectivity, and why is it important for the development of civil society? Like all forms of entertainment that the culture industries produce, such as novels, music, and movies, television supplies common narratives that are publicly

accessible to everyone due to its general rate of consumption, perhaps more so than any other form. “Intersubjectivity is necessary if individuals, who are members of different groups and communities, are to understand and communicate with one another. Without intersubjectivity, there is little possibility for engagement in public between different groups” (Jacobs and Smith 1997:61). Calavita’s (2004) study about the uses of entertainment media for cultivating the political self speaks to the “importance of incorporating individual development processes and meaning-making into work on the political-development implications of mass media on popular culture” (147), and finds specifically that parodic and satirical ways of looking at the news, through entertainment media such as the late-night comedy shows *Saturday Night Live* and the *Daily Show*, contribute to a critical stance on authority. Much of what has developed since the *Daily Show* and the *Colbert Report* gained popularity can best be described as satiric irony, or the joining of criticism and verbal incongruity (Fine and Martin 1990).

Why is this discourse important and what can it contribute to civil society? Many writers, both in sociology and in other areas such as philosophy and literary criticism, have pointed out the illuminating aspects of ironic discourse (Bakhtin 1968; Booth 1974; Brown 1989; Kierkegaard 1992; Pearson 2005). Instead of being elitist or exclusionary, “irony promotes reconstructed images offered by humor and satire [that] clarify issues and make them more palatable” (O’Rourke and Rodrigues 2004:27). It can increase intertextuality (Booth 1974). Jacobs and Smith (1997) argue for “combining the genre forms of Romance and Irony as the preferred organizing vocabularies of contemporary political cultures [which] will enable the vital characteristics of intersubjectivity, solidarity, reflexivity, and tolerance to emerge in public discourse” (61). It is difficult to

exclude Romantic narratives from political discourse. They are at the heart of Democratic civil society; we are hopeful for the future, we are rising, we are always improving the state. But Jacobs and Smith (1997) state that Romantic narratives by themselves are insufficient to the development of civil society. They can progress to a type of nationalism and are “often insensitive to the needs and wishes of the constituent communities within the wider solidaristic sphere of civil society...The result is an aesthetic and narrative version of Tocqueville’s ‘tyranny of the majority’” (69), which may not promote reflexivity. Discourses using irony and satire were regarded in the Renaissance as a great form of truth, equal to, and maybe greater than, “serious” forms (Bakhtin 1968). Humor can actually short-circuit tyranny, leaving the positive aspects of Romantic narratives intact. Such discourses can diminish authoritarian power by showing it to be ridiculous, unnatural, or otherwise false. Bakhtin (1968) writes, “Laughter...overcomes fear...Its idiom is never used by violence and authority” (90). Laughing at something provides a source of agency against power: “In everything, in meaning and image, in the sound of sacred words, parody discovered the Achilles’ heel that was open to derision...” (87).

According to Phiddian (1997), parody is almost exactly the same thing as deconstruction – it is “crooked, reflexive writing, with the instability of irony inscribed deep in its structure. If we read parody ‘straight’ as sincere expression without relating it to a structure of criticism, we *misunderstand* it” (683). Like Said’s (1979) critique of Orientalism, Phiddian (1997) writes that deconstruction is “essentially political,” used “as a hermeneutic of suspicion, as an instrument for unpicking the structures and rhetorics of racism, patriarchy, psychological repression, class” (676). Speier (1998) makes a

distinction between “aggressive and defensive” types of joking discourse; while they both can be used to deflate one’s political opponent, the defensive joke clearly can be a weapon against an opponent that has greater power, and may be one of the only weapons available in such relationships. Discussing Goffman’s use of satire in his work on asylums, Fine and Martin (1990) state that “Like any good satirist, he insists on holding a mirror up to society, showing hypocrisy. While this leads some to see him as cynical...it could also be taken as the howl of a true believer” (101). They state that satire is “profoundly moral; it opts for a morality that we all supposedly hold, but which, as hypocrites, too often we ignore” (101). Current political humor on television can be compared to a type of humor that Bakhtin (1968) analyzed extensively in his work *Rabelais and His World*. He writes of the ancient form of “the carnival [which] is far distant from the negative and formal parody of modern times. Folk humor denies, but it revives and renews at the same time. Bare negation is completely alien to folk culture (11).” Although humor on programs like *Saturday Night Live* could be compared to “bare negation” – just making fun of a politician’s personal characteristics, and parodying all public figures equally without getting into substantive issues – programs like *The Daily Show* and the *Colbert Report* represent a revival of humor that “renews” through exposing the mechanisms of power.

In the mid-20th century, political humor was restricted to the mostly U.K. phenomenon of the “political sitcom...designed to provide regular light entertainment suitable for a mass audience” (Mulkay 1988:211), the late-night comedy which focused on personal characteristics (Moy et al. 2006), or the political cartoon, which, while certainly critical, may only have served to “reinforce the entrenched divisions within the

political community” (Mulkay 1988:211) and required extensive knowledge of the situation which it was visually caricaturing. This is no longer the case, as the newer types of shows themselves are beginning to provide the context to understand the jokes “including video clips, soundbites, and...complete reporter packages” (Baym 2005, 2007:263–264). In fact, they may represent a new type of “humorous mode,” an alternative discourse which is inherently paradoxical (Mulkay 1998), due to the incongruous nature of parody and satire itself.

How could such a project, that combines the narrative genres of Irony and Romance, while representing a new type of political discourse, be carried out in society? The answer emerges with the preeminence of the *Daily Show* and the *Colbert Report*, and its influence on other areas of the public sphere. It is in part because of the fact that they provide so much context about the issues they are joking about that makes these shows able to colonize such areas in unprecedented ways. Also, it is a matter of timing. Certainly, cable news ratings have been steadily increasing over that of network news over the last three decades.² Clearly, according to the Pew study cited above, people are getting news and are being assisted in their level of information by the *Daily Show* and the *Colbert Report*. Combine this with the timing of 9/11 and the backlash of Ironic discourse as a way of fighting the uncompromising dogma of the terrorists:

It is interesting to note that the lingering impact of 9/11 has actually led to an increase in late night political humor. In February of 2002, the Center indicated that Letterman’s level of political humor was 10 times higher than September

² Pew Center. 2009. *The State of the News Media*: “Evening News Viewership Over Time.” Web. <http://www.stateofthemedial.org/2009/>

2001 and exceeded the pre 9/11 average by 65 percent (O'Rourke and Rodrigues, 2004:22).

The overall failure of traditional journalism to fully inform the public and present alternate viewpoints after September 11, 2001, led to a hole in the fabric of adequate news coverage in the public sphere that was filled by political comedy (McClennen 2012).

The influence of televised political humor programs represents another aspect of the overall mediatization of society, which involves the two-sided process of the media becoming an "independent institution" that has its own internal logics and power, while at the same time becoming intermingled with the way other spheres of society, such as the way that the political sphere, the economic sphere, etc., are constituted (Hjarvard 2008). The influence of Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert represents the growing importance of actors as agents in shaping debates (and cultural products) in civil society (Couldry 2006; Hesmondhalgh 2007). Specifically, humor is gaining prominence: "In an era when Americans are reading less and watching more, humor has become a way for Americans to sift through the cacophony of sound bites, white papers, and photo-ops to distill an image of a presidential candidate" (O'Rourke and Rodrigues 2004: 22). The incorporation of clips from comedy programs on non-comedy news programs and networks, such as on ABC's *This Week*, and on *Headline News* and CNN, shows the incorporation of satire into the contemporary Social Imaginary, which is "carried in images [and] stories...shared by large groups of people...[and is] that common

understanding that makes possible common practices and a widely shared sense of legitimacy” (Taylor 2004:23).

What does exposure to political comedy do to people, society, and journalism? While some dispute the findings of the Pew study cited above (Kim and Vishak 2008), most writers on the topic of news, knowledge, and entertainment media find that viewers gain greater knowledge, but can also have more cynicism and distrust of politics and political figures (Baumgartner and Morris 2006) or that there is some influence on viewers’ evaluations of political candidates’ character traits (Moy et al. 2006). While there is disagreement about this particular point, some find that the shows like the *Daily Show*, *Politically Incorrect*, and *Saturday Night Live* provide knowledge, but this effect is moderated by factors such as already-existing political partisanship and knowledge of the viewer (Young, 2004), or their age and education (Hollander 2005; Cao 2008). However, despite an injection of cynicism, watching such shows is positively associated with forms of direct political participation, such as contributing to a campaign, contacting elected officials, or attending campaign events (Cao and Brewer 2008). Late night comedy from older sources such as *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno* and *The Late Show with David Letterman*, in addition to the *Daily Show*, is positively associated with consumption of network and cable news (Young and Tisinger 2006; Feldman and Young 2008). With regard to the rest of the media, political comedy shows can expose the “gatekeeping” functions of traditional news media (McKain 2005). Criticism from the *Daily Show* and the *Colbert Report* can provide a stronger moral compass that journalists can look to and use in order to improve their “integrity” (Borden and Tew 2007) and reflect upon the

distinction between news and entertainment (Feldman 2007). Achter (2008), discussing the comedy of the satirical newspaper *The Onion*, writes that after 9/11:

...the discourse of the news parody was particularly consequential for its capacity to expose and examine the news and address taboo questions about who the terrorists were and what motivated them. By exposing the news as ‘mere’ production and by setting an agenda for learning about Islamic culture and Middle East politics, *The Onion* avoided problems some comics were having and invited U.S. citizens to participate in making new meanings in a confounding news context (277).

Several authors have examined the content of political comedy on television, and discuss its importance to political communication in the public sphere. Warner (2007) writes that “politicians have increasingly utilized what are known as ‘branding’ techniques of commercial marketers to just such an end, in the hopes of persuading the citizen/consumer to trust their ‘product’ - their platform and policy positions - to the exclusion of all others” (18). Through the use of parody, the *Daily Show* “jams” this process, disrupting the transmission of a pure message. This corruption assists in critical assessment of the branded messages. The *Daily Show* has increased critical discourse and “deliberative democracy” in a time when real news and entertainment is becoming difficult to distinguish because of “market pressures” that exist in the wake of increased competition on the news markets on television, especially cable (Baym 2005). Because

new forms of political parody combine seriousness with humor, Bakhtin (1968) believes it may actually make them more powerful:

True ambivalent and universal laughter does not deny seriousness but purifies and completes it. Laughter purifies from dogmatism, from the intolerant and the petrified; it liberates from fanaticism and pedantry, from fear and intimidation, from didacticism, naïveté and illusion, from the single meaning, the single level, from sentimentality. Laughter does not permit seriousness to atrophy and to be torn away from the one being, forever incomplete. It restores this ambivalent wholeness. (123).

Gaines (2007) finds that “The *Daily Show* writers generally construct narrative relationships demonstrating continuity between past and current events” (91), with the effect that the viewers, who may only be watching the show for entertainment value, gain valuable knowledge of “current political discourse.” For example, the *Colbert Report’s* occasional segment, “Better Know a District,” which interviews members of the House of Representatives, not only increases political knowledge by discussing real issues in a humorous way, but also “exposes the irrationality of a right-wing aesthetic that substitutes passion for reason and volume for fact” (Baym 2007:374). In an empirical examination of coverage of the 2004 presidential campaign, Fox et al. (2007) find that, while the *Daily Show* tended to have more humorous coverage of the campaign than substantive coverage, the amount of substantive coverage on the show was *no different* than on the evening news broadcasts that they examined.

Conversely, late night comedy programs *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno* and the *Late Show with David Letterman* had very little substantive issue content when examining coverage of the 2000 presidential campaign (Niven et al. 2003) and tended to focus primarily on candidates' caricatured personality traits rather than on where they stood on the issues (Young 2006). Santa Ana (2009) finds that Leno often mocked immigrants and immigrant issues to allow his audience to distance themselves from their concerns. There is a change in tone, from focusing on character traits and the low-hanging fruit of nationalistic sentiments, to presenting satirical standpoints on substantive issues. In the low-mimetic forms of parodying personal characteristics, there is a focus on mundane elements of everyday life. They are not likely to inspire action. In contrast, a more high-mimetic satire points out that there are important issues afoot, and take a concrete moral stance:

When we are in the low mimetic genres of understanding we find actors motivated by mundane concerns and everyday emotions. At the more mythological end of the scale we encounter drives to action that are more closely tied to moral impulses of a transcendent nature. When characters are enacting the good or bad, sacred and evil, they are not worried about marrying the girl next door or balancing their checkbook. (Smith 2005:21)

Ironic discourse can go either way; it can fail to inspire a moral reaction in the audience. It is this distinction between substantive and non-substantive satire and parody that makes the difference. This is not to say that there is necessarily a clear demarcation point

between the two. Rather, it is conceptualized as a continuum, with easy targets on one end, to the whole system of media, and “the arrogance, ineptitude, and dishonesty of the political leaders on whom it ‘reports’” (Jones 2004:126) on the other.

Besides giving an opportunity to some speakers to use comedy to marginalize minority groups, what are some of the other dangers of ironic political discourse? “More than humor, satire has the reputation of being subtle, so subtle that many miss it” (Fine and Martin 1990:100-101). Jacobs and Smith (1997) expand upon this potential problem:

Beyond the questions of morality, commitment, or ‘ultimate ends,’ however, there are more immediate and pragmatic dangers to the use of Irony in public discourse: namely, that the audience ‘won’t get it,’ or that they will ‘get it wrong.’ Because Irony is always relational and always conditional, the effective reception of its intended meaning requires cultural competence, grounded in the sphere-specific nature of interpretive communities. This is true for all forms of communication. With Irony, however, misreading is much more problematic, because of the importance of recognizing the contrast between said and unsaid...the (potentially) strongest forms of Irony are those where the risk of incomprehension and misunderstanding is greatest (74).

LaMarre et al. (2009) seems to have found empirical evidence to back up this claim. They conducted a study of subjects with both liberal and conservative political leanings, and showed them clips of the *Colbert Report*. They hypothesized that Colbert’s deadpan style of delivery would confuse some viewers into thinking that he was being serious,

when in fact, he is playing a conservative character who routinely exaggerates conservative ideological positions to make them seem absurd (in the style of Swift). They found that indeed, conservatives thought he was being serious, and liberals “get the joke;” however, context may matter - they only showed selected clips to their experimental subjects, and did not show segments which feature other visual clues that Colbert is being ironic (such as his segment “The Word” features a split screen of Colbert making overblown comments, and a running text commentary that pops up beside his head, contradicting what he says).

DATA AND METHODS

In order to study this topic, I conduct two main types of analysis looking at two main sources of data. The first is a content analysis of some late-night comedy programs during the presidential election cycles, and the second is a narrative analysis of journalistic commentary on political humor on television during the same time periods. I operationalize “Election cycle” in this case as the dates between the date of the first televised primary to nominate a candidate, to the election (with the exception of the 2000 election; here, the election cycle extends to the date of Al Gore’s concession). The dates of the election cycles are:

1980: Jan 5, 1980 – Nov 4, 1980

1984: Feb 23, 1984 - Nov 6, 1984

1988: Jul 1, 1987 - Nov 8, 1988
1992: Feb 29, 1992 - Nov 3, 1992
1996: Oct 11, 1995 - Nov 6, 1996
2000: Oct 22, 1999 - Dec 13, 2000
2004: May 2, 3003 - Nov 2, 2004
2008: Apr 26, 2007 - Nov 4, 2008

“Late-night political comedy on television” is operationalized as all evening talk shows on broadcast or basic cable, in the tradition of Johnny Carson, as well as *Saturday Night Live*, the *Daily Show*, and the *Colbert Report*. After the influence of substantive satire on the *Daily Show* and the *Colbert Report* became widespread and critically recognized, through prizes like the Peabody and Television Critics Association awards, airplay of clips on “serious” news sources such as the *NBC Nightly News*, and a great deal of commentary in “serious” newspapers such as the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times* (Jacobs and Michaud Wild 2013), I expect to find that even the once-simplistic parodies of *Saturday Night Live* and character-based humor on hosted shows such as *The Late Show with David Letterman* became much more biting satirical and influential themselves, and that writers in the newspapers will comment upon this. The attention to analysis of the two major newspapers will show the development and progression over time to the current state of affairs, where programs like *This Week* on ABC and news coverage of major events on CNN and HLN often include clips of late-night political comedy.

The content analysis section of the project focuses on three programs: *Saturday Night Live (SNL)*, the *Daily Show*, and the *Colbert Report*. There are a total of 146 original *SNL* episodes throughout all the campaign cycles. I conducted a simple keyword search to identify each sketch that has relevance to the ongoing presidential election for each cycle. There are three election cycles that the *Daily Show* was on the air in the midst of, totaling 642 episodes: 2000 (176 episodes), 2004 (238 episodes), and 2008 (227 episodes). I excluded the guest interview portions of these shows for the purposes of my analysis; doing so makes this program more comparable to *SNL*, which does not have guest interviews (as on the *Tonight Show* or the *Late Show*). In general, prior to the guest interview segment on the *Daily Show*, two to four stories are addressed in one or two segments. I treated each story segment as a separate unit of analysis. This yields an approximate number of 2,000 potentially relevant segments about the election. Of course, not all items are pertinent to the election, but I reached 175 relevant segments for analysis, or slightly less than 10% of the overall sample, through simple random sampling. Using a similar method for the *Colbert Report*, which broadcast 225 episodes during the 2008 election cycle (the first cycle it was being produced), I randomly sampled 22 episodes, and identified 50 relevant segments.

For the content analysis section of the project, I developed a set of codes which included whether or not the comedy sketch or segment, portrays the public figure, their actions, or motivations, as “good or “bad.” Additionally, I inductively coded the content to determine the specific discourses that the speakers use. Finally, I specifically compared the sketches of *SNL* to those on the *Daily Show* and the *Colbert Report*, as well as examined the changes that have taken place in *SNL*’s presidential election comedy over

the past few decades that the show has been on. Comedy on *SNL* has progressed, either gradually or abruptly, from the non-substantive, personality-characteristic focused forms of the past (Gerald Ford tripping) to the politically-meaningful critical parody of Sarah Palin by Tina Fey during 2008. It is difficult to make the argument that showing a President as physically clumsy impugns his ability to govern (at least to rational thinkers); however, Fey's parody of Palin focused on her inability to construct cogent arguments and her lack of political knowledge which, if one “buys” the basis for the parody, would either reinforce one's rational belief that she could not govern, or potentially convince someone who was on the fence about it.

The part of the project that focuses on narrative analysis of the coverage of the comedy programs in the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* examined how the writer regards the criticism and revealed if the writer is using the criticism on the show as a kind of substitute for their own voice. The journalistic commentary portion included all available content on LexisNexis from the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*. While there are some mentions of political comedy on television in other sources available in the database, such as from the *Christian Science Monitor*, and network and cable news sources, the vast majority of the commentary that provides any in-depth discussion at all is located in the two major newspapers. Additionally, these newspapers are arguably the most influential published news sources in the United States. I examined the instances of journalistic commentary about late-night political comedy on television during each election cycle from 1980 to 2008. There are relatively few articles in the earlier years, such as 1980 and 1984, that meet the criteria for inclusion. Initially, I was concerned that I would have too much material to reach back as far as the first primary

debates as the definition of “election cycle”: however, for 1980, there are only eight articles in the *Times* and 14 articles in the *Post*; for 1984, 12 and 14 respectively; for 1988, 33 and 34 respectively. Therefore, I combined some years together to analyze. There were significantly more than 100 articles for the later years.

I conducted a semiotic narrative analysis of the texts similar to that as outlined for the three comedy programs, above. Previous research (Jacobs and Michaud Wild 2013) has shown that writers for the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, when they agree with the critical standpoints of the *Colbert Report* and the *Daily Show*, often use commentary and direct quotes to make or bolster a critical argument that may reflect their own viewpoint. I also find an increasing trend in overall critical standpoints in the texts, reflected in an increasing prominence of critical comedy as an accepted, respected, and usable form of political criticism in the “humorous mode.”

STRUCTURE OF THE PROJECT

Aside from the introductory and theory section, the main body of the project consists of six chapters. Due to the lack of data to perform a content analysis prior to the beginning of Jon Stewart’s version of the *Daily Show*, the small amount of analyzable content that does exist with *SNL*, and the probable corresponding small sample size of journalistic commentary about such programs in this period, I collapsed the analysis of the first three election cycles – 1980, 1984, and 1988 – into one chapter. The third chapter documents a crucial time for the media in the United States – the Clinton era.

This chapter covers the 1992 and 1996 elections. Williams and Delli Carpini (2000) write that this period marked a turning point for journalism, when the rise of “multiple news outlets (cable news/talk shows, radio call-in shows, conservative publications like *American Spectator*), semi-news outlets (*Hard Copy*, *A Current Affair*), entertainment media (*The Tonight Show*, *Late Night with David Letterman*), and the internet (most notably, the *Drudge Report*)” began to erode the traditional distinctions between news media and entertainment media, a trend which assuredly has only continued to increase in the first decade of the 21st century (78). The fourth chapter covers the 2000 election, the first for which there is *Daily Show* content. The fifth chapter covers the 2004 election, during which the *Daily Show* had by now become an important source for public discussion about political events (Jacobs and Michaud Wild, in progress). The sixth chapter, which covers the 2008 election, includes not only *SNL* and *Daily Show* content, and the mainstream press coverage about them, but is also the first election cycle that the *Colbert Report* was being broadcast. The final chapter discusses the findings and provides an overall picture of their significance for research in Cultural Sociology.

RELEVANCE TO THE STRONG PROGRAM IN CULTURAL SOCIOLOGY

This Cultural Sociology analysis takes a Strong Program approach. In order to do this, my analysis must meet three main criteria (Alexander and Smith 2005). The first is that culture must be treated as an independent, rather than a dependent variable. I meet this task by showing that the ostensibly “entertainment” cultural products that I analyze

in this paper have had an impact on other spheres in society, particularly the political/discursive sphere, where they are talked about more often and as being more relevant. This project contributes a continuation of exploring non-rational (in the Habermasian sense) mediated communication in political public sphere.

The second criterion is that the paper must demonstrate a use of thick description of the “codes, narratives and symbols” that construct the meanings in the texts. I accomplish this by examining real conversations and texts in the public sphere as well as material related to the elections and how it is presented in the comedy shows themselves, as well as the primary differences between the older episodes of *SNL* and the newer ones, and how *SNL* compares overall to the *Daily Show* and the *Colbert Report*. Looking at programs and at their meaning structures, coupled with an examination of the “social imaginary” that is created by journalistic commentary (Taylor 2004), can explain a great deal about why satirical commentary is taken seriously.

The third criterion is that the analysis must show how actors, using cultural performances (in this case in writing and on television programs) direct action in social spaces outside of the purely putatively cultural sphere. Political criticism in television comedy is well-suited to a Strong Program semiotic narrative analysis because of its potentially important role in shaping the discourse of civil society. Semiotic codes, represented by Alexander and Smith’s (2005) concept of the “democratic code” versus the “counter-democratic code,” or the discourse of liberty versus the discourse of authoritarianism, is commonly seen in political communication in the public sphere of television. This type of analysis demonstrates the power of not just the state, but also the power of cultural autonomy: “the codes have evaluative dimensions that enable them to

play a key role in the determination of political outcomes (Alexander and Smith 2005). As Smith (2005) writes, “The resulting binary codes mark out and classify the world, defining and evaluating in terms of the sacred and the profane the motivations, relationships, and institutions that are to be sought out, or avoided” (14). The codes reveal debates about whether or not the political actors and policies are deemed worthy of trust and “struggles for inclusion and legitimacy involve efforts to claim rational status, and efforts to discredit and debunk others depend upon the application of labels from a negatively coded list of psychological attributes,” (15) such as deceitfulness, irrationality, etc. My analysis will show how the programs characterize incidents along these lines, as well as if the writers and speakers from various media outlets agree if the politicians, media figures, and policies being criticized are insane, deceitful, irrational, secretive, or otherwise detrimental to Democracy. The intersection of binary semiotic codes with the plot of the stories being told “are the foundations of the cultural systems through which what Emile Durkheim (1965) called the ‘collective conscience’ comes to engage with the more concrete realm of events and things, in effect making them into nonmaterial social facts” (Smith 2005:14).

There is a distinct lack of analysis of contemporary political humor narratives in the literature in Sociology. While many writers in Communications and Political Science have given much attention to audience effects research (Baumgartner and Morris 2006; Cao 2008; Cao and Brewer 2008; Cao 2010; Hollander 2005; Kim and Vishak 2008; LaMarre et al. 2009; Moy et al. 2006; Young 2004; Young 2006; Young and Tisinger 2006) only a handful of articles attempt to analyze the narratives and their possible salience in the public sphere as a whole (Baym 2005; Baym 2007; Boyer and Yurchak

2010; Feldman 2007; Fox et al. 2007; Gaines 2007; Haigh 2010), but not from a Sociological perspective. Jones (2010) conducts an interesting, but very small, study on the narratives Jon Stewart deployed during the brief controversy over his comments regarding investment analyst Jim Cramer (who has a program about investment on the cable network CNBC) and how his bad advice fit into the overall problems of the Wall Street banking crisis, which led to the recent recession. In this article, Jones identifies three overarching narratives in Stewart's commentary – Wall Street greed, the lack of regulation by Washington, and the “hyperventilated and hyperbolic” response by the national media, which did little to help the public understand the crisis. While this is a fantastic and elucidating piece, it does not begin to place the narratives in the larger context of public sphere debates, which is a major goal of this project.

Narrative analysis of the discussions about political comedy, the research design of the project, enables me to make arguments about the actual role of contemporary satire in the public sphere. I find multiple examples like those above which will make the case that, due to the popularity of cable, its successful market-based experiments in substantive satire, the dissemination of clips of those shows on the internet and in other areas of the public sphere, and the extensive commentary that serious journalists have made about it, late-night comedy has transformed from an amusing distraction to a meaningful force in 21st century political commentary.

Many of the writers who mentioned political humor in the presidential campaigns of the 1980's expressed their belief that Johnny Carson made some very influential statements in his monologues:

In his monologue last Thursday night, Johnny Carson was talking about the League of Woman Voters: “They say that if Carter doesn't show up for that debate, they're going to put on an empty chair, while Reagan and Anderson debate. You know what bothers me? Suppose the chair wins.” The studio audience in Beautiful Downtown Burbank broke into a big laugh. In the television business, Carson's monologue is regarded as a bellwether - “the best news analysis on TV,” as one network executive put it this week. In this instance, Carson did appear to be a weathervane; his joke pointed in the direction of a prevailing wind that began blowing through the mass media almost immediately afterward. At first blush, President Carter's decision - announced a week ago last Tuesday, two days before Carson's joke - played horrendously for the president on television and in the papers. The morning line was that Carter had blown a big one - run away from a fight, staged a juvenile temper tantrum, shot himself in the foot. Carson's joke suggested otherwise, and lo, within days the whole tenor of the mass media did, too. As of today, at least, the significance of Carter's decision not to debate seems to have diminished considerably. The media have failed to sustain the issue as an important matter.³

In fact, in an interview in Provenza and Dion's book, *Satiristas* (2010), which contains dozens of interviews with prominent comedians and comic writers, comedian Roseanne Barr stated “I always say if Johnny Carson was still on the air, we never would've gone to Iraq. He was the conscience of the whole TV community” (74). Even though no late-

³ Kaiser, Robert G. 1980. “Carter Winning Gamble on Debates; Carter Appears to Be Winning His Gamble on the Debates; News Analysis.” *Washington Post*, September 18, p. A1.

night comedy host of the chat-show format ever rose to such prominence again⁴, other formats became just as, if not more influential over time.

I find that this tendency to talk about the political climate in terms of what was being joked about on the *Tonight Show* was the precursor to writers who said the same thing about Jon Stewart, although this type of point is brought up much more often as the years go by, and changes in tone, especially when the *Daily Show* gains prominence. A second finding is that writers in the newspapers begin to emphasize the shows' commentaries as being influential on public opinion and dialogue. Third, there is an increase in writers' usage of commentary from the shows to "stand in" for and give additional credence to their own viewpoints, especially when their opinions are controversial or critical of other segments of the media (such as TV news, which the programs often satirize), demonstrating an increasing reliance upon and importance of political humor in the contemporary public sphere. Fourth, the phenomenon of candidates appearing on the programs increases over time, and goes from being taken as a shallow attempt at seeming like the everyman, to something candidates are expected to do in order (ironically) to be taken seriously. John Anderson (who ran as an independent candidate in the 1980 election, after failing to win the Republican Primary) appeared on *Saturday Night Live* on January 26th that year, with a cameo appearance in a sketch, and a few commentators speculated that this might help his campaign. Compare this to the several times candidates made such appearances on *Saturday Night Live* in the 2008 campaign, including John McCain, Sarah Palin, and Hilary Clinton (during the primary) as well as Clinton and Obama appearing on the *Colbert Report* and Obama, Clinton, and

⁴ After he took over for Carson, Jay Leno remained first in the ratings the entire time he was on the air; however, many comedians do not respect him for "dumbing down" his act, or "selling out" for doing many commercial endorsements, and certainly never held him in as high regard as his predecessor.

McCain appearing on the *Daily Show*. Candidates need to appear on the programs, and writers increasingly discussing these appearances point to the continued increase in the shows' importance in the political landscape. Additionally, failure to do well under a sometimes performatively challenging environment has a negative effect on the campaign, and avoidance is not an option.

Fifth, there is a transformation over time in the way that the programs portray candidates. In the earlier years, *SNL* was more likely to mock the candidates based upon personal characteristics (Bob Dole's advanced age, for example). However, as analyses of the *Daily Show* are introduced, and later, *Colbert*, more substantively-based satire and parody becomes evident. More satire is directed at the candidates' policies and governing competence, instead of personal characteristics that may or may not be actually relevant to their ability to govern. Additionally, the commentary in the *Post* and the *Times* adjusts accordingly, paying more attention to the substantive issues about the candidates that the shows satirize. The crux of my argument about the transformation of late night comedy is to be found here: that as the television shows increasingly offer serious criticisms, presented in a humorous, and thus accessible way, other parts of the public sphere begin to discuss these criticisms as well. Therein lies their agenda-setting effects. I believe that these findings show evidence for the greater prominence of satirical and ironic forms of communication, which shows that a larger space for non-traditional forms of deliberation that do not follow strict, Habermasian critical-rational guidelines has opened in the postmodern aesthetic public sphere.

CHAPTER 2: A HISTORY OF LATE NIGHT COMEDY ON TELEVISION

With the emergence of cable, late-night comedy became increasingly critical of politics, policies, and politicians. Although the use of satire certainly has a long history in television, and those who made political satire in the past had good ratings and/or positive critical acceptance (and in this sense, the *Daily Show* and the *Colbert Report* were picking up where the Smothers Brothers left off, examined below), never before was it allowed such license. There are a couple of important structural reasons for this. One is the anatomy of cable itself – language, violence, and sexual scenes are permitted here that would never be permitted on broadcast television due to its control by the FCC. Long-time late-night comedy show host, Conan O’Brien, put it this way:

The censorship *The Smothers Brothers* were up against in the late sixties is almost inconceivable today. There are, like, 900,000 shows on TV now. The bottom is out of the bathtub; it takes so much content to keep it filled, so there’s less reason to be afraid of censorship. If you have a funny and interesting idea, yeah, you may get some letters, but there’s so much to choose from, people will just watch something else. (Provenza and Dion 2010:54)

A second, and historically contingent reason that the shows became more politically critical, is the well-documented lack of critique of the policies of the Bush administration from the “mainstream media” in the wake of 9/11 and the run up to, and beginning of, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Although programs like *South Park* (and its creators’

That's My Bush which had a brief run in 2001) continue to engage in parody of political figures, as does *Saturday Night Live*, entertainment programs that made strong statements against the current political administration tended to vanish quickly from the airwaves. But the “fake news” programs on Comedy Central not only did not get the ax, but continue to thrive and receive prestigious journalism awards, like the Peabody. In the book *Colbert's America*, McClennen sums up the part humor played in the post-9/11 public sphere:

While the network era of newscasters like Walter Cronkite is effectively gone forever, a new era has emerged with greater public choice for news-media consumption, and greater public risk, since most of the news media has been disinclined to offer the public the sort of information and critical commentary vital to fostering productive public debate, in the midst of these tensions, a series of comedians offered the public ways to reflect on social issues via satire, parody, and humor...post-9/11 satire appeared in a complex moment for both the media and the state of the nation. A consequence of this was that satire became one of the few ways that the public could experience dissent. (2012: 65–66)

Many writers in the mainstream press, including *New York Times* columnist Frank Rich, as well as writers in academia (Peterson 2008), attribute the shows' success to their strongly critical standpoints when much of the press was said to be a “lapdog” to the Bush administration. They filled in for the “real” journalists who should have been more critical, especially during the run-up to the Iraq War in 2002-2003: “Jon Stewart and

company at least refused to join the Patriot Parade in which their competitors – in both the mainstream comedy and ‘real’ news realms – seemed to be marching” (Peterson 2008:203). Political comedian Lewis Black explains it this way: “Once the *New York Times* apologized for not giving us information on Iraq – for not *doing their job* – because of *The Daily Show*, Colbert, and others, all of a sudden comedy in essence became a place where information actually became disseminated at least as well, if not better” (Provenza and Dion 2010:16). Cable allowed different ideas to be marketed to niche audiences, which might start off small, and potentially grow larger, in ways that the networks, which must appeal to the broadest base possible from the start, could not. Indeed, even now, the *Tonight Show* (hosted by Jay Leno, and now handed off to Jimmy Fallon) had been number one in the ratings for the 22 years it had been on before Leno left (with a few minor exceptions). Its wide appeal has led it to be non-controversial. Conversely, David Letterman has become much more political over the years (highlighted by the incident when John McCain failed to appear, described below), but trails in the ratings.

Another notable development in the history of satire on television is that it made superficial, character-flaw based political humor appear insufficient to meet the needs of the contemporary, critical media consumer. This process culminated in Tina Fey’s impression of Vice-Presidential candidate Sarah Palin during the 2008 election, for which she won the Kennedy Center’s Mark Twain Prize for American Humor in 2010. Boyer and Yurchak (2010) analyze her performances (as well as Stephen Colbert’s) in terms of what they call “American stioob,” a U.S. version of a Russian term which describes a new form of “ironic aesthetic...[which] thrived in late-Soviet socialism” (181).

Stiob “differed from sarcasm, cynicism, derision or any of the more familiar genres of absurd humor” in that it “required such a degree of *overidentification* with the object, person, or idea at which [it] was directed that it was often impossible to tell whether it was a form of sincere support, subtle ridicule, or a peculiar mixture of the two” (Yurchak 2006: 250; see also 1999, 84). One of the key characteristics of stiob irony was that its identification with its object was unaccompanied by metacommentary on its ironic procedure. In other words, stiob was a “straight,” deep caricature that usually did not signal its own ironic purpose.

Wedel (2009) goes one step further, stating that “it is the *idea of reality* that is often being performed and sought by the media, leaving the reality much more elusive...the performances of...Sarah Palin are nearly indistinguishable from the parodies of her by...Tina Fey” (42). Certainly, in *this* case of stiob, the overidentification is purely ridicule. Although Jon Stewart rarely enacts such dead-pan satirical style himself, the show’s parodies of the structure of the media itself – the correspondents’ “interviews” with people with strange ideas who do not seem to know they are being mocked, the use of the same graphics that CNN uses, amplified only slightly to reveal their absurdity, etc. – fit well with the concept of overidentification, or overperformance. But to the extent that they *are* overperformed, it is only by a small degree. This fact highlights the farcical aspects of the news media in the postmodern era. The *Daily Show*, the *Colbert Report*, and Fey’s performances are successful in part because the much of the public’s

perception of the news media, especially in regards to their coverage of politics and elections, has increasingly included an awareness of its frequent inadequacy. Mike Nichols (director of the film *The Graduate* and of the Broadway production, *Spamalot*) believes that this type of satire is of the utmost importance for a free society:

I watch them a lot, and it seems to me that they're possessed by a kind of joy of *getting it right*. "Making a difference" is such a hideous, used-up idea, but they have a *joy* in making the difference of saying something so clearly that everybody can hear it and see it. Watching Jon Stewart is how I know I'm living in a free country. If you take him and Colbert away, I worry a lot more about things like Guantanamo – coming, as I did, from Nazi Germany...(Provenza and Dion 2010:98-99).

Thus, the examination of how such programs developed into the format they embrace today, when censorship and structural problems prevented such forms of satire from emerging in the past, is an important area for further explanation.

One other notable development over the years is the need, whether real or perceived, for politicians to appear on the comedy programs in order to be considered successful. When John Anderson appeared on *SNL* in 1980, the first presidential candidate to do so, commentators lamented this as a blow to the seriousness of the political process. Over time, many other candidates began to appear on the show, mainly to seem like they could poke fun at themselves, and not seem so distant to those they wanted to vote for them; in other words, to seem like a "regular guy." There was, of course, historical precedent for this: Richard Nixon's September 16, 1968 appearance on

Laugh-In on CBS, done entirely to seem less stiff than in his losing 1960 televised debate⁵. Famously, in June of 1992, Bill Clinton appeared on the *Arsenio Hall Show* to play the saxophone. Although some questioned whether this appearance aligned with the expected dignity of someone running for president, it arguably helped him win over younger voters. In time, not only did these types of appearances become an accepted part of public image development for politicians, it became necessary for them to go on the shows in order to succeed. Part of the “successful political performance” was to go on *SNL*, late-night talk shows, or later the *Daily Show*, and, if not actually be funny, be able to at least be in on the joke. In 2008, when John McCain failed to appear as scheduled on David Letterman’s show, then essentially lied about the reason why he had to cancel, not only did Letterman go after him for being a coward, but so did the mainstream press. The incident was so damaging, that he later went on *The Late Show* to apologize, stating, “I screwed up.” Another notable failure was Sarah Palin’s appearance on *SNL* in 2008. As Tina Fey had been delivering a devastating parody of her after her disastrous performances in mainstream news interviews, she went on the show to appear “in on the joke,” but appeared tense, stiff, inauthentic, and almost hostile. Journalists noted that this hurt her image rather than helped it. Conversely, both Barack Obama’s and Hillary Clinton’s appearances on the show were genuinely funny. Though it is beyond the scope of this paper, it is worth noting that Mitt Romney did not appear on *SNL*, the *Daily Show*, or the *Colbert Report*, despite invitations to do so in 2012. Candidates that do not have a televisually appealing personality have always tended to do worse (famously going back

⁵ Murray, Noel. 2012. “Nixon Gets Socked in Laugh-In’s Most Famous, And Influential, Five Seconds.” *A.V. Club*, Sep 13. Web. <http://www.avclub.com/article/nixon-gets-socked-in-ilaugh-inis-most-famous-and-i-84881>

to the first televised debate between Kennedy and Nixon in 1960), and what it means to *be* televisually appealing has changed to include going on these comedy programs.

The phenomenon of having to prove one's self in the above described manner reflects a change in the public sphere that some theorists have regarded as normatively negative in its effects on democracy itself. Not only are politicians debasing themselves, but they are cheapening the very democratic process. This is the perspective of critiques such as Postman's (1985), Putnam's (2001) and Habermas':

For Habermas, the function of the media have thus been transformed from facilitating rational discourse and debate within the public sphere into shaping, constructing, and limiting public discourse to those themes validated and approved by media corporations. Hence, the interconnection between a sphere of public debate and individual participation has been fractured and transmuted into that of a realm of political information and spectacle, in which citizen-consumers ingest and absorb passively entertainment and information. "Citizens" thus become spectators of media presentations and discourse which mold public opinion, reducing consumer/citizens to objects of news, information, and public affairs. (Kellner 2000 265)

Conversely, one could see the changes taking place not as just news being polluted by entertainment, but see the transforming media environment as evidence that politics is moving into entertainment (Schudson 1998; Delli Carpini and Williams 2001; Jenkins 2008; Williams and Delli Carpini 2011), and that all members of society are getting

greater exposure to it, and have a greater interest in it. In fact, it is arguable that had these transformations not already been occurring before September 11, 2001, that the public would have had far less access to alternative critical discourses (McClennen 2012). Thus, journalists' acceptance and use of satirical narratives to reflect and bolster their own critical discourses would not have been possible otherwise. Although historical factors and changes in the media industry allowed for these types of shows to proliferate and become important to the way citizens and opinion leaders, like journalists, talk about politics in the early 21st century, contemporary satire on television has a long line of precedents that were less successful in directing narratives outside of them. However, there were specific predecessors and influences on them, which are outlined in the next section.

POLITICAL COMEDY ON TELEVISION: A HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Like many cultural institutions, comedy began to become more politically and socially aware in the 1960's. Many credit the comedy, and subsequent legal battles over the content of that comedy, of Lenny Bruce, who pushed the envelope and paved the way for future politically controversial comedians (Zoglin 2008). Others who followed him that had a reputation for similar social commentary, like George Carlin and Richard Pryor, started off on Ed Sullivan as television friendly stand-ups, but later changed their acts as their personal politics evolved and became more radical. If they were going to be true to their real values and beliefs, they would have to risk becoming a money making,

more “mainstream” act. Like Bruce, they became the most daring truth-tellers of their time. These mid-20th century comics met opposition, which may have been partly responsible for the other demons they faced; alcohol and drug addiction, poor personal relationships, and violence. Making inroads to television, especially before cable, proved most difficult. Even Carlin’s groundbreaking 1983 HBO special faced concern, due to the performance of his infamous “Seven Words You Can Never Say on Television” routine, even though it was on pay cable.

Television in the United States has always had a complicated relationship with political satire. On one hand, comedians and social commentators have often attempted to use satire to make intelligent points about the news, politics, and the medium of television itself. Early examples include *That Was the Week That Was* (NBC, 1964-1964), *Rowan and Martin’s Laugh-In* (NBC, 1968-1973) and performers like Ernie Kovacs, Sid Caesar, Victor Borge, and Jack Paar. Later, in 1977, Richard Pryor was given a variety show, which, of course had controversial content. In a move that nearly guaranteed its failure, possibly on purpose from network executives balking after giving Pryor a contract, it was put on at 8 p.m. (Eastern Time) against popular shows *Laverne and Shirley* and *Happy Days*, though it had initially been given the time slot of 9 p.m. (Silverman 2007). Not only did it not do well in the ratings, but many viewers complained about it. On the other hand, there are notorious examples of television executives censoring satirical content, even when it is popular with viewers. This second instance seems to directly contradict the purpose of network, profit-motivated television in the United States – if people are watching, the company is making money. However, pressure from sponsors and politicians have often served as catalysts for the altering of

program content and the outright cancellation of successful programs if their creators, writers, and performers pushed the envelope too far, too fast. Additionally, similar to some people not recognizing that they even were the target of satire as has happened with the *Colbert Report* (LaMarre et al. 2009), the 1970s program, *All In the Family*, did not always make its ironic stance obvious. The character Archie Bunker spouted the most racist, sexist things, typical of white men of his generation and class, but was meant to make these things appear sad and banal. However, liberals watching the program understood that, while conservatives watching it came away with the impression that he was championing their views (Ozersky 2003: 69).

Prior to the emergence of cable, there was a tendency among television executives to pre-censor program content that might be objectionable to those in political power. Interestingly, this was not always done to appease politicians, but sometimes was aimed at appeasing program sponsors who were presumed to not want to be associated with political criticism. There are two cases that illustrate both reasons for censorship. The first took place in the case of the *Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour* which aired on CBS from 1967 to 1969. The show often aimed criticism at those in power, and politics and politicians generally. Ultimately, the show was canceled not because it offended viewers and suffered in the ratings – in fact, “rather than offending a majority of viewers, the program spoke to it – particularly to those Americans who felt disenfranchised by an establishment that still supported the Vietnam War” (Silverman 2007: 61). Tom and Dick Smothers objected having to submit a preview of the show to the network censors ten days before the it was to air, and despite the show having been renewed for a third

season, it was canceled due to their ultimate failure to get the show to the network censors on time.

Most intriguingly, there is some vague and circumstantial evidence that they show may have been targeted by the Nixon administration. Notorious for going after people who mocked him or with whom he disagreed, could the Smothers Brothers and their show have been a target? Bianculli (2009) writes that:

Finding a smoking gun connecting Richard Nixon directly to the demise of The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour was a task at which I proved unsuccessful... Either Nixon covered his tracks well – as many, many people in the inner circle of *Comedy Hour* stars and staffers believe – or it was out of concern about what Nixon and his administration might do next regarding station licenses and political influence that led others to act in ways that might be interpreted...as White House Influence (324).

However, in wake of their show's cancellation, the Smothers Brothers read an excerpt on the air from a letter they received from President Lyndon Johnson, whose policies had been a target of theirs, in support of what they did. It read, "It is part of the price of leadership of this great and free nation to be the target of clever satirists." It seems as if JBJ was aware of the type of abuse of power that could take place, and wished to distance himself from it, while Nixon covertly embraced it.

The second case, that of network censorship due to fear of offending sponsors, is illustrated by the pre-censorship of *Monty Python's Flying Circus* by the television

network ABC. Although the British show was shown in its entirety on PBS in the United States later on, there was a little-known foray into network airings of the show. In 1975, ABC re-packaged and edited together episodes from the fourth season of the program. In many respects, it was an unmitigated disaster. The programs were heavily censored by the network. One of the things that was removed was in an episode called "Mr. Neutron." The title character, an alien superhero, is called "the most dangerous and terrifying man in the world!" for reasons that are never quite explained. Nevertheless, the American government becomes extremely concerned when they lose track of his whereabouts. A military commander, who is obviously meant to be some sort of high ranking U.S. officer, is sitting at a desk directing the search by phone. He is alone in a room issuing orders ("I want a full-scale Red Alert throughout the world! Surround everyone with everything we've got! Mobilize every fighting unit and every weapon we can lay our hands on! I want three full-scale global nuclear alerts with every Army, Navy and Air Force unit on eternal standby!"). As he grows increasingly paranoid throughout the episode, he is shown removing parts of his clothing and checking himself for body odors.

These scenes were deleted with the suspicion that they might be offensive to American sensibilities: "Whether out of sensitiveness to the American supreme command, whose troops had been finally bundled out of Vietnam that April, or to the cosmetic companies whose deodorant ads filled in for the missing bits of *Monty Python*, the joke almost completely disappeared (Hewison 1981: 44)." This and other cuts resulted in an unintelligible mishmash of several of the episodes, with punchlines missing, and sequences presented out of order which made audiences unable to follow the plot. The members of Monty Python sued the network and got a settlement which

prohibited the airing of the edited version ever again. Although this was a landmark legal case which ensured many future artists creative control over their work, the importance for this project lies in the fact that on PBS, the shows were not edited, while on commercial television, it seemed inevitable.

Although the *Monty Python* incident occurred in the 1970s, very little changed regarding politically sensitive satire on broadcast television into the 21st century. Due to the controversial comments Bill Maher made on his ABC show, *Politically Incorrect with Bill Maher*, regarding the events of 9/11, his show was taken off the air. In a nutshell, Maher agreed with his guest, former Reagan presidential aide Dinesh D'Souza that the men who crashed the planes that day were not cowards. These remarks were taken out of context by right-wing talk radio commentators. Eventually several local ABC affiliates across the country refused to air the show under local pressure, and the network followed their lead, not renewing Maher's contract. Maher's show was canceled due to controversial comments he made, but these were not of a parodic or satirical nature. However, it is likely that the network was looking for an excuse to pull the show due to a pattern of controversy that it generated over its run on the network beginning in 1997, which did center on Maher's political humor (Silverman 2007). The show began on cable on Comedy Central, and ended up back on cable in the form of *Real Time with Bill Maher* on HBO, where it is still being produced.

Some writers contend that *Saturday Night Live* became more and more conservative in its parodies of politicians and lost its bite after its initial seasons (Gray et al. 2009; Peterson 2008). Late-night talk shows, such as those hosted by Johnny Carson, David Letterman, Jay Leno, and Conan O'Brien over the years on network television

have always provided an ample supply of humor about politics and politicians, but these have most often taken the form of jokes about their personal foibles or imitations. Paul Krassner, counter-culture icon and co-founder of the alternative “YIPPIES” party in the 1970’s, says of them:

There are so many comedians who are great at their craft, but choose to go with the flow instead of being on the crest of any wave. I respect Jay Leno and David Letterman immensely and think they’re *terrific* comedians, but they just joined in on all the demonizing of Saddam Hussein in the run-up to the war, and only when public opinions shifted did they start to really go after Bush. They *follow* opinion; they don’t really care to *lead* it. (Provenza and Dion 2010: 23–24)

Peterson (2008), in an analysis of President Clinton’s Monica Lewinsky scandal, identified four types of jokes that late-night network comedians told: jokes that poked at Clinton’s “sexual insatiability,” crude innuendo about what went on between the two, insults to the women Clinton may have been involved with, and the rare occurrence of satire with substance. Again, to quote Paul Krassner: “*The Daily Show* is terrific; really valuable, and genuine. But there’s also a lot of what passes for satire, but is really just name-calling. How many people just did jokes about Bush being dumb rather than getting to the real core of what you’re supposed to be exposing?” (Provenza and Dion 2010:23).

Late night talk shows are notorious for avoiding meaningful topics (Peterson 2008). When comedians who appear on the shows make comments about abortion, gun control, etc., the set might be censored. One infamous incident, involving the only time a

comedian's set was cut entirely from a show, involved the late comedian Bill Hicks. Hicks, who died in 1994, was well-known in the U.K. where his powerful, biting jokes about the Gulf War, right-wing radio talk show rhetoric, and racial strife in the United States made him quite popular, but did not go over as well domestically. He was widely seen as a more polished, focused comedian than Lenny Bruce, and was regarded as his successor in many ways. His popularity surged after two of his works, "Arizona Bay" and "Rant in E-Minor" were released posthumously on CD by Rykodisk in 1997, as well as the re-release by the label of his two earlier works, "Dangerous" and "Relentless." Additionally, his focus on George Bush (H.W.), the (first) war in Iraq, and Rush Limbaugh offered audiences the eerie opportunity to imagine they were listening to him from beyond the grave, if one merely substituted a few dates and initials when the second Iraq war began in 2003. Hicks is the subject of four documentaries: *Bill Hicks: Sane Man* (1989); *It's Just a Ride* (1994); *Outlaw Comic: The Censoring of Bill Hicks* (2003); and *American: The Bill Hicks Story* (2009).

On October 1st, 1993, Hicks taped his twelfth appearance on a late-night talk show hosted by David Letterman. He had always felt held back and censored by network executives, but appeared on Letterman's show anyway because of his respect for him. The entire performance was cut by Letterman and his producers (True 2002). Five months later, Hicks died of pancreatic cancer. The editing was mainly due to a joke about the hypocrisy of pro-lifers, and the fact that (in Hicks' opinion) a pro-life group was running an ad on the program at the time. Although at first blaming CBS's standards and practices department, Letterman took responsibility for the incident years later, when he showed the performance in its entirety close to the 15th anniversary of the comedian's

death (where Hicks' mother was present to receive an apology in person). Although he apologized for the censorship, the incident highlights the concern of producers of network television, not of government-mandated restrictions, but of losing commercial sponsorship money.

Instead of addressing topics that are politically controversial, talk shows often engage in “mimicking the external characteristics of politicians, but only rarely thrust a critical knife into their inner fraudulences, [a practice which] lost its force when it was realized that at least some politicians of the television age felt flattered by parodies that reinforced their own brand images” (Hewison 1981:8). This process can clearly be seen when Dana Carvey of *Saturday Night Live* was invited to the White House by the very man he was parodying, President George H.W. Bush, who approved of the performance. Additionally, if they are able to pull off the right sort of performance, politicians can use late-night comedy shows to enhance their images:

Candidates for office know that their political fate rests on how they perform in the late-night comedy crucible – where they go to announce a presidential bid or put their spin on a brewing scandal, or simply show that they're down-to-earth folks who can laugh at themselves. (Zoglin 2008:224)

Another network program that engages with politics on a humorous level is the long-running Fox show, *The Simpsons*; however, it does not engage in the sort of invective that got Bill Maher in trouble with network affiliates, and is generally more of a program that parodies the structure of television itself (Gray et al. 2009). Additionally, stand-up comics

whose acts are or were almost entirely comprised of satirical or ironic political or social commentary (as in the case of Patton Oswalt, David Cross, Eddie Murphy, or Redd Fox) compartmentalize this to their live performances or albums, and steer clear of controversy in their mainstream work, as in the case of Cross doing voiceovers for cartoons like *Kung-Fu Panda* and *Curious George*; even his well-known acting work on *Mr. Show* and *Arrested Development* is more goofy, ironic, or satirizes culture, than being politically controversial. Though Zoglin (2008) credits Steve Martin's ironic political humor in his early career to the further development of this style by Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert, he too abandoned it for more mainstream Hollywood work.

INTO THE 21ST CENTURY

It is accurate to state that political comedy in the 21st century follows a direct line from the mid-20th century, and that even that line extends back much farther. First, the British use of irony and understated humor can be traced all the way back to influence by contact with the Vikings:

The British use of understatement and satire is thought to originate from the Vikings, typically noted for raping and pillaging throughout history, when they brought trade from across the world to British shores. This led to exchanges with Britons, and the Vikings influencing them with the words and expressions they used...Sarcasm, irony and understatement are part of the “common heritage”

between Denmark and the UK says Claus Grube [the Danish ambassador to the U.K.]...sagas, largely from the thirteenth century and known for their “laconic humour, detail examples of comedy in the face of adversity...contain the roots of some Danish and English words showing more similarities in how we communicate. “Sarcasm is very much inherent in British humour,” Mr. Grube told the Telegraph. He cites contemporary episodes, particularly the “extreme popularity” of Monty Python in Denmark as an example of the shared sense of comedy between the two countries which he says shows evidence of a common cultural heritage.⁶

Thus, when Sarah Palin is satirized on *SNL* for being fake, inauthentic, and only pretending to be knowledgeable about domestic and global affairs, this way of portraying her resonates with the already-existing narrative and discursive structures that have been in place for nearly half a century on television. Those mocking her are familiar with Monty Python’s way of doing this, and so, likely, is the audience. It makes sense to everyone. Mocking something provides a source of agency for those who do not have access to power, as a way to puncture the balloon of seriousness surrounding those in power, or those who would seek it (Bakhtin 1968).

Political comedy on television has evolved. Not only is there the changing media environment to take into account, but politicians’ interactions with the media and concepts like “spin” have become to be satirized. There is a growing cynicism in comedy, not necessarily because anything has changed, but perhaps because people are more

⁶ Carter, Claire. 2014. “Vikings ‘Brought Sarcastic Sense Of Humour To Britain’.” *The Telegraph*, March 5. Web. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/history/10677904/Vikings-brought-sarcastic-sense-of-humour-to-Britain.html>

aware of what happens behind the scenes. Social media and scandals have revealed how the sausage is made. Shows like *The Thick of It* (2005-2012) in the United Kingdom on the BBC, and *Veep* in the U.S. on HBO (2012-present), depict the behind-the-scenes machinations in an ironic, if not at all understated, manner. *The Thick of It* can draw a direct line of descent from the much more staid and dignified *Yes, Minister* on the U.K. in the 1980's. Although in both shows, the parties that are in charge are never specifically mentioned, it is all too obvious who they are from the descriptions of their policy positions; the point, however, is that it doesn't matter who is in charge, the plotting and skulduggery remain the same. Image is of prime concern over substance.

Although in the latter part of the 20th century, journalists often wrote about how the news was becoming more like entertainment, essentially agreeing with the critical media theorists, in the 21st century, they are more likely to use the narratives on the late night comedy programs and point to them when they want to make critical points about politicians. Once these narratives have disseminated throughout the public sphere, it would be naïve of them *not* to use them. Commentaries and clips from the *Daily Show* and the *Colbert Report* are routinely used on evening news broadcasts, Sunday morning news programs like *Meet the Press*, and on cable news; skits and parodies of political candidates from *Saturday Night Live* appear frequently as well. These new ways of combining news and entertainment challenges the assumptions that news is simply becoming more like entertainment, because the news narratives are utilizing the comedic narratives as a resource that the audiences not only understand, but also further serves to make them more acceptable as a serious form of editorial information (Jacobs and Michaud Wild 2013).

CHAPTER 3: THE 1980'S

During the election cycles of 1980, 1984, and 1988, political humor on late night television consisted of Johnny Carson, *Saturday Night Live (SNL)*, and later, David Letterman. Commentary about these programs in the *New York Times (NYT)* and the *Washington Post (WP)* often compared and contrasted these shows and commentators. When writing about late night television comedy in these election cycles, journalists made distinct, normative statements about why they did not like it. In general, writers for these papers found Carson's humor astute and more reflective of general public attitudes towards politics, and often dismissed *SNL's* humor as juvenile and indicative of a turn towards a more crass, less insightful public discourse that focused too much on trivial personal characteristics; this type of humor could be directed at any well-known person or public figure and did not differentiate itself as particularly "political" humor. It is no surprise then that many of the laments from academia about the conflation of entertainment and news arose at this time (Postman 1985). In an era when political comedy was not particularly substantive or critical, some saw it as a distraction from real issues and information; if we are too busy laughing at Reagan's bouts of forgetfulness or Ted Kennedy's checkered past, we may pay less attention to policy issues (which, after all, are not by definition particularly entertaining). This complaint would be dismantled after the rise of the *Daily Show* and the *Colbert Report* in the next century as the critical comedy they deployed became part of the language of how the journalists discussed elections, politicians, policy, etc. But for this era, it was a valid criticism, as the data in this chapter will show. The journalists valued substantive, critical humor in this medium

and disparaged the personal. They understood its influence as a sort of “piling on” and making politicians a laughingstock in a way that they could not recover from, but it that was the extent of its power.

Yet beginning in 1988, *SNL*'s humor began to exhibit signs that it was becoming a more politically-directed program. A Republican had been in the White House for eight years, with the real possibility that another Republican – George H.W. Bush – would be there for a further eight. The show became more overtly left-leaning *and* substantively critical at this juncture. Were the writers of the show attempting to use their public forum to influence citizens' political opinions? It is difficult to say with a significant degree of certainty in 1988, but this will not be the case 20 years later. This change foreshadowed the show's rise to a more central focus in American political discourse, the pinnacle of which would be the 2008 election cycle. But in the 1980's, it would be hard to say that it is even the same show that it would later become. Consequently, journalists that talked about *SNL* – when they talked about it at all – characterized it as largely unimportant, despite the fact that even then, it was shaping the popular imagination about any given politicians' character. Answers to the two central research questions of this study overall – one, what kinds of satire did the shows mobilize to make claims about candidates and/or policies, and two, how this satire did or did not become part of public debate – began to form in these 20th century election cycles. This chapter examines these three election cycles of the overall “Reagan-Bush” era, looking at all mentions of the late-night talk show hosts and *SNL*, and covers the dates January 5th, 1980 to Nov 4th, 1980, February 23rd, 1984 to November 6th, 1984, and July 1st, 1987 to November 8th, 1988.

***SNL* IN THE 1980'S: A LACK OF SUBSTANCE**

In 1980, 1984, and 1988, the content of *SNL* was balanced in its lack of substance, mostly having no political slant at all with a slight favoring of a Democratic slant in each year. I determined this slant by an analysis of the narratives. There were a couple of examples of what I call a “Progressive Slant,” that mocked both parties for not being sensitive enough to the needs of minorities, for example.

Vernon Jordan, Head of the Urban League, denounced both the Republican and Democratic Presidential candidates, for turning the other cheek to problems of America’s minorities. Jordan complained that candidate failed to respond to the needs of urban blacks and virtually ignore minority organizations. None of the candidate had any comment and claimed to never have heard of Jordan or of the blacks. (*SNL*, “Weekend Update,” January 26th, 1980)

There were some sketches and jokes in 1980 that slanted quite strongly towards the Republicans, in that they specifically targeted Jimmy Carter as being out of touch with the country’s problems, and actively hiding from them, such as a sketch from April 5th, 1980 called “ABC News: Frank Reynolds Reports on President Carter as White House Hostage.” However, with most sketches having no slant (Table 1), practically no attempt was made to sway audiences politically.

Slant Towards, *SNL*, 1980s (Table 1)

	None	Democrats	Republicans	Prog.
1980, Whole Election Cycle (26)	13 (50%)	8 (30.77%)	2 (7.7%)	3 (11.53%)
1984, Whole Election Cycle (18)	9 (50%)	7 (38.89%)	2 (11.11%)	0 (0%)
1988, Whole Election Cycle (78)	50 (64%)	18 (23.1%)	10 (12.9%)	0 (0%)

Personal or Substantive? *SNL*, 1980s (Table 2)

	Both	Personal	Substantive
1980, Whole Election Cycle (26)	1 (3.85%)	22 (84.61%)	3 (11.54%)
1984, Whole Election Cycle (18)	0 (0%)	10 (55.56%)	8 (44.44%)
1988, Whole Election Cycle (78)	12 (15.39%)	45 (57.7%)	22 (28.21%)

An example of a sketch where there was some substantive criticism on *SNL* is from February 16th, 1980, titled “Debate Substitute,” in which President Carter’s Press Secretary, Powell, is fielding questions instead of the President at a debate with Ted Kennedy. This sketch mocked Carter’s tendency to retreat to the confines of the White House when the going got tough. A character named Burton, a townsman at the New

Hampshire debate, asks a question:

Burton: A lot of us are wondering what the heck the president is doing about the inflation and the energy crisis and Iran and so on, and if he is doing something, why isn't he up here in New Hampshire telling us about it?

Kennedy: Here, here.

Powell: Thank you sir. Well, I can assure you the president is working very hard at this moment. In fact, here's a picture of the President working very hard (holds up picture of Carter rolling up sleeves). See, he's rolling up his sleeve there. I don't know if you can see, but his brow is knit. I wish that I could give you more details but unfortunately that would into the area of the President's performance in office during the last four years, and this is a subject I'm not at liberty to discuss.

Carter's poor communication style is satirized here to the extreme – he will not even represent himself and sends his Press Secretary instead. He gives the impression of “working hard” for the country, but it is all appearance and no substance. Although this is a good example of substantive humor on *SNL*, the sketch devolved into personal attacks against Ted Kennedy's marital and personal problems, when the “Chappaquiddick Incident,” where Kennedy was responsible for the drowning death of Mary Jo Kopechne, is brought up. After being stonewalled by Powell, the characters in the sketch then ask what can be discussed. Powell, the Press Secretary, says, “I'm prepared to discuss the crisis of spirit in this country. I'm willing to talk about government as good as its people, [Kennedy's] wife, and Chappaquiddick.” Another sketch brought up the drowning

incident as well. A sketch called “Presidential Hopefuls Do Household Chores” from January 26th, 1980, where all of the candidates from both parties were mocked as groveling and desperate enough to do household tasks for an Iowa voter before the primaries, featured Ted Kennedy being portrayed as “accident prone.” The Iowa voter, Mrs. Voekler, is handing out chores at her home:

Mrs. Voekler: well, my daughter Ellen should be finished with band practice soon, you could take the car and pick her up.

Kennedy: I would be glad to pick her up.

Mrs. Voekler: Senator Kennedy, I think it would be better if Rosalynn [Carter] took the car. [Big laughs from audience, realizing they were talking about Chappaquiddick] You just rest your back, relax here for a while.

Although there were jokes made about all the other candidates – Carter sends his wife instead of coming himself, Reagan is too old and needs his rest – the focus on the personal life of Ted Kennedy is especially notable. The 1980 season contained less of the elements of true satire, and was comprised mostly of shallow parody and essentially “cheap shots.”

A recurring theme that was a source for commentary by the comedy shows as well as the newspapers throughout the 1980s was Ronald Reagan’s advanced age. The question is, was this the subject of substantive or personal humor (Table 2)? There were plenty of opportunities here for substantive criticism of Regan on the basis of his age. Was he capable of making difficult decisions involving tense relations between the Soviet

Union and the United States? During a time of recession, could he comprehend the complicated economic policies that his advisors were surely discussing with him?

However, these early *SNL* episodes did not take advantage of such possibilities, usually mocking him for having almost a cartoon-version of “senility.” Two typical examples from the “Weekend Update” segment:

Ronald Reagan, who 30 years ago was questioned by the House Un-American Activities Committee as a possible Communist sympathizer now says he was, is, and always will be a Communist...Reagan went on to reiterate his belief that he is not getting too old or senile to run for the Presidency. He then abruptly ended the press conference, put a bowl of rice pudding on his head, and took three umbrella steps out of the room. (“Weekend Update,” February 16th, 1980)

And another that claimed, “Scientists now say they are convinced that increased sunspot activity in recent weeks is the cause of erratic radio transmissions, inconsistent weather reports, and occasional lucid statements by Ronald Reagan” (“Weekend Update,” April 12th, 1980). Even when there was quite a good opening to joke about Regan’s lack of understanding about the issues, potentially due to him being out of touch or even mentally compromised, *SNL* merely went after him for stumbling on his words. Former Presidential candidate and Civil Rights leader Jesse Jackson hosted *SNL* on October 20th, 1984, and even his commentary was no exception to this superficial trend. One sketch, called “Saturday Night News with Jesse Jackson” involved him analyzing answers that Regan gave during a debate in the ’84 election cycle:

Reagan: I think that people should understand that two thirds of the defense budget pays for pay and salaries, or pensions and then you add to that food and wardrobe and all the other things and you only have a small portion going for weapons.

Jackson: ...let me explain what he meant by wardrobe. He meant uniforms. That's an occupation mistake he made. Wardrobe is for a war movie. Uniforms are for a war.

This was also a subtle dig at Reagan's past profession as an actor, yet another near-meaningless personal characteristic. Jackson goes on to say "And I'm glad only a small portion of the defense budget goes to weapons." Although one might interpret this as a structural comment about how the budget is allocated, Jackson did not offer any thoughts as to whether or not Reagan was being entirely truthful or had a good understanding of the issue. However, in his monologue, Jackson did make a few comments about the structure of the media's coverage of the campaign, and how it is more critical of him, in his view, than any of the other candidates. He joked that if he walked on water, the next day's newspaper headline would be, "Jesse can't swim."

The theme of media coverage, or lack thereof, was also evident in John Anderson's run during the 1980 election cycle, who was described, in a "Weekend Update" joke, as having had "yet another newspaper article written about him describing his inability to get any press coverage. This brings the total number of news articles about John Anderson up to 7 million, 10 times the number that have been written about all the

other candidates put together” (“Weekend Update,” February 23rd, 1980). During these early years of the show, *SNL* did a few jokes and sketches that satirized media coverage of presidential elections, but it was not particularly critical of the structure of media. Rather, it focused on the concept that news media would do anything for ratings, and would squeeze the campaign for its last drop of material that audiences would conceivably watch. *SNL* did several sketches in the 1988 election cycle with Al Franken going out with a satellite dish on his head trying to cover the election from the campaign trail, and breaking up while trying to transmit, in a satire of campaign-coverage gimmicks. Television election coverage was also often characterized as generally dull:

People who listened to the legendary Kennedy/Nixon debate...felt that Nixon had won, while those who watched it on TV felt that Kennedy won. People who listened to the Bush/Dukakis debate on radio called it a draw, and those who watched it on TV felt they had listened to it on the radio. (“Weekend Update,” October 15th, 1988)

SNL parodied specific political talk show hosts and veteran newsmen as well. In an attempt to get ratings for a flagging program, a sketch depicted talk show host Tom Snyder interviewing the brothers of Presidential candidates to see if they were as embarrassing as Billy Carter (“Prime Time Saturday” sketch, February 23rd, 1980). An appearance by veteran NBC newsmen Edwin Newman, who hosted the “Weekend Update” segment on November 3rd, 1984, (then called “Saturday Night News with Edwin Newman”) made fun of the Fairness Doctrine:

Our top story tonight is of course the 1984 elections. Unfortunately I will not be bringing you that story for several reasons. I was the moderator of the last Reagan-Mondale debate and I want to continue the non-partisan role I had in that. Also, this is a comedy program and if I tell a joke about Mr. Reagan and a joke about Mondale, and only one of those jokes gets a laugh, it might affect the outcome of the election and determine the make-up of the Supreme Court for years to come, and frankly for one joke, I don't want that responsibility.

POLICY CRITIQUE OR PERSONAL HUMOR?

When did *SNL* satirize actual policies of political parties? There were few sketches or "Weekend Update" jokes in the early years of 1980 and 1984 that were deeply critical of particular Republicans or their policies. Rather, there was a general sense that the Republicans were out of touch with the people and were more inclined to support the interests of the richest Americans. Occasionally, there was an offhanded joke here and there that portrayed them as slightly evil, as in this joke from "Weekend Update," February 23rd, 1980:

Since millions of Americans will be voting for the first time this year, we thought a brief primer would be helpful in understanding the political parties...Imagine that some Republicans were holding a cockfight. The moderate Republican is the

one that brings the duck. The conservative Republican is the one that bet on the duck. And the senile reactionary Republican is the one that tells the story about the cockfight.

This comment was in reference to a joke that Reagan told while on the campaign trail in February, 1980, during the Primary, that some construed as an ethnic joke against the Polish and the Italians, for which he was asked to apologize.⁷

Later on, however, after eight years of the Republican Party being in charge of the White House, the gloves began to come off. During the 1988 election cycle, there were many more jokes and sketches that were critical of Republicans in a substantive way, and revealed a general sense that all of the Republican candidates that voters had to choose from during the primary were bad choices for the voters:

The final tabulations are in for the Iowa caucus and on the Republican side, the figures reveal that Vice-President George Bush actually finished fourth in Iowa behind...a new third place finisher, Drew McLemore...he classifies himself as an anti-ruralist, and has promised, if elected, to destroy Iowa with a thermonuclear device. McLemore edged Bush by a scant 80 votes. (“Weekend Update,” February 13th, 1988)

“Weekend Update” jokes were more likely to go after Republicans in general in this way, while sketches were more likely to go after specific Republicans; however, in the

⁷ “Nation: Duck!” *Time Magazine* March 3, 1980.

sketches, the jokes were much more frequently directed at personal characteristics, rather than substantive policy issues. There were some exceptions, such as this sketch from April 14, 1984, called “Very, Very Hungry Man Dinners”:

Mother: Dinner! Everybody hungry?

Father: You bet! After a day of hopeless job-hunting, I could eat a bear! Oh, not surplus cheese-loaf again! This is the eighteenth day in a row!

Mother: But how can I plan an interesting menu on \$11 a week? What's a welfare mother to do?

President Ronald Reagan: Sound familiar? Well, we here at White House Foods don't believe that poverty-line cuisine has to be boring. That's why we've collected starvation-level cooking from around the Third-World for our Very Hungry, Hungry Man Dinners.

...

President Ronald Reagan: And now, try Very, Very Hungry Man Dinners for the Elderly! Featuring low-sodium Cat Food! And Very Hungry Kid's School Lunches, complete with two vegetables - ketchup and salt! Enough to meet 100% of my federal nutrition standards!

Mostly, however, *SNL* made fun of specific candidates and their personality characteristics during this time period once again. In particular, Dan Quayle stood out as a specific target. He provided ample fodder for all political commentators, humorous or otherwise, during the years he was in office or running for office, with his many gaffes.

Jokes were aimed at his or his wife's haircuts ("Weekend Update," October 8th, 1988, October 22nd, 1988), or his likely surprise and shock would George H. W. Bush die, and if he would wake up to find himself President (sketch: "Dan Quayle: President," October 22nd, 1988). But although his age and inexperience were mentioned briefly, they were never satirized as serious issues.

SNL stayed away from critically mocking either Mondale or Ferraro during the 1984 election cycle. There was one sketch, called "TVs' Foul-Ups, Bleeps, Blunders, Bloopers, Practical Jokes, and Political Debates" where for some reason, Mondale cannot stop accidentally swearing during a Democratic debate (April 7th, 1984), and another bit in which Rich Hall actually followed the real Mondale around to fundraising dinners and gently mocks him for doing so many ("Rich Hall's Election Report," October 6th, 1984). Perhaps because she was the first major-party female Vice Presidential candidate or perhaps because of *SNL*'s general slight Democratic-positive slant, the show did not mock Ferraro at all. However, they also did not discuss any of her policy positions. The show only focused on the fact that she was female, and did not treat her candidacy seriously. In what would now be regarded as a sexist piece of commentary, Billy Crystal, in his monologue as host of the show in October 6th, 1984, said:

Ten years ago, we could never have a woman run for Vice President...But could you imagine some of her old boyfriends, what they must be going through?...I mean, here's she's doing this great thing. They feel a little jealous. And when guys feel left out, they make up stuff about women. These guys in Brooklyn, watching her up on a bar TV screen, "It's Jerry. I slept with her." (Makes so-so motion with

hands).

Interestingly, Ferarro herself appeared on the show during Weekend Update (then called “Saturday Night News”) on October 13th, 1984. She was there to respond to a comment Barbara Bush had made about her, calling Ferarro “a \$4 million word that rhymes with rich but I can’t say it.” Jokingly, Ferarro interpreted this as Barbara Bush calling her a “snitch,” which she humorously disputed. Again, this reinforces an anti-feminist dialogue, which advances the idea that women in politics will always resort to name calling and “cat fights” that have nothing to do with policy. This exchange falls firmly in to the “personal characteristics” category of humor on *SNL* during this time period.

Another prime target during these years is Gary Hart. Two main aspects of Hart’s candidacy were satirized the most on *SNL* – his sex scandal with model Donna Rice, and his dropping out, getting back into, and second drop-out of the Presidential race. Both Weekend Update jokes and sketches focused on these two aspects. A typical comment from Dennis Miller: “So, Gary Hart wants back in the race...This guy sleeps with every dame on the planet, I’m supposed to forgive and forget...I just don’t know how stable this Hart cat is. I’d hate to think we got into World War III because this guy saw a cute chick in the Kremlin” (“Weekend Update,” December 18th, 1987). Miller frequently targeted the indecisiveness of Hart’s campaign with quick one-liners starting with the phrase “This just in,” making it appear that one cannot keep up with all the times Hart changes his mind: “This just in: in the last 3 minutes, Gary Hart was caught in a Washington, D.C. condominium with a 23-year old model, and announced he is dropping out of the race again” (“Weekend Update,” November 5th, 1988). Hart was acting

irrationally, allowing his personal desires to get in the way of running a viable campaign, and thus firmly falls into the anti-Democratic side of the binary as outlined by Alexander and Smith (2005). Like with Dukakis, these personal aspects, and how they affect the campaign, were of primary focus, and no substantive comments were ever made about either of their policies. Once the comedians could heap derision upon a candidate for a personal characteristic, there is little room to go after them for substantive policy issues or ability to govern. This process actually *prevents* the potential for critical comedy to emerge, and was interpreted by the newspaper writers as cynicism, as I describe in the next section. It is much more akin to Bakhtin's (1968) conception of a type of false satire that is only capable of negating and invalidating the politician's place in the Democratic process, without going deeply into the issues or questions of competence.

One of the most ironic statements on *SNL* appeared on the "Weekend Update" segment on November 21st, 1987. Regarding Gorbachev coming to the U.S. to speak to Congress, which Republican leaders opposed, Dennis Miller said, "Now if the Fox network still had the late show on, we could make him host that for a night. Really put the screws to him. But it's off the air now, and I hear they're going to do a late-night comedy news show. Trust me, boys, that's an impossibility, it'll never fly." Of course, as we know, late-night comedy news shows became incredibly popular after the beginning of the 21st century with the advent of the *Daily Show* and the *Colbert Report*. Miller here was possibly joking about *SNL's* low ratings, or the feeling that such a show could not make it in the ratings more than one night a week, and that only in a very small segment, such as "Weekend Update". But the main difference is that this type of show has been and is extremely successful, but only after the shift towards a much more critical form of

comedy that aims its satire at substantive issues more than personal ones. *SNL*'s formula had become tiresome, not political comedy itself. The show at this point in time characterized Republicans as “bad” – out of touch with people’s real-world economic concerns, more likely to represent the interests of the rich, etc. However, specific Democrats, like Ted Kennedy, Carter, Hart, Biden, Dukakis, Mondale, and others, were parodied for being liars, cheaters, indecisive, greedy, and ineffective as leaders. But the criticism was only a cartoon-version of who the people really were or what they really did. One or two incidents were blown up to represent the whole of their political life.

HUMOR COMMENTARY IN THE *POST* AND THE *TIMES*

If *SNL*, Carson, Letterman, or other comedians were just making fun of general impressions about the candidates, Democratic or Republican, or staying within the realm of superficial personality characteristics, it would not fit into the narrative structure of true critical satire. To achieve this, the comedy would need more specificity; a satire of not just the characters, but what they were doing, and of their policies. The “plot” of what the candidates have done, or what their policies indicate they *will do*, was rarely even brought up. Besides a few brief mentions of Republican policies that negatively affect the poor or minorities, *SNL* and other late night comedians stuck to non-substantive criticism in the 1980s which was unlikely to motivate voters to think about the issues. The commentary in the official public sphere reflected a disdain for these programs that reflected the traditional binary between “news” as good and “entertainment” as bad. The

shows had the opportunity to say something important, since they were so widely watched, but they fell short. Other than early-1980's respect for Johnny Carson's place as a satirical pundit, who was recognized as setting the tone for the campaign to an extent, the writers in the journalistic public sphere, here represented by the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times*, found that political comedy on television, and *SNL* in particular, detracted from the Democratic deliberative process. The primary reason for this was that most jokes fell into the framework of personality-based humor, and did not address substantive issues, something that the journalists felt did not add to rational debate. Since only John Anderson appeared on *SNL*, there was not much discussion about candidates appearing on the shows. And the negative feelings towards particularly *SNL* meant that journalists in this era did not often use television political humor narratives to express their own opinions, as they would in later years.

In 1980, neither the *WP* nor the *NYT* had much to say at all on the topic of political comedy on television during the election cycle. There were only 8 mentions in the *NYT* and 13 in the *WP* at all. When they did talk about it, the focus was mainly on Johnny Carson. They described him as “perhaps the nation's most prominent political commentator” and said his monologue was a “bellwether” for the nation's overall political climate at this time. From the coverage in these papers, it would seem like Reagan's landslide victory was not a predictable outcome: “[Carson] asked his studio audience if it thought [third party candidate] Mr. Anderson should withdraw. A sizable number applauded. Then Mr. Carson asked, ‘How many think Carter and Reagan should withdraw?’ Almost everyone clapped” (*New York Times*, October 20, 1980, p. D11). Perhaps the papers gave Carson more credit than they should have. For the most part, the

papers agreed with what Carson was saying about the elections and the politicians in it, that they were not terribly impressive. There was an incident involving a League of Women Voter's debate that was to take place in September, 1980, in which Carter said he would not attend if Anderson was invited, wanting instead to debate Reagan alone. The group at first stated that they would place an empty chair on the stage to symbolize his absence. The papers credit a joke of Carson's – "Suppose the chair wins?" – with the League changing their mind about doing this. It was simply too close to the truth and would perhaps bias the election. Writers for the papers were themselves biased *towards Carson*, perhaps because of his long-standing position as a respected voice in televised political comedy. They were using his jokes to back up their own viewpoint, despite the fact that they turned out to be factually incorrect, in that Reagan ended up being far more popular than either the newspaper writers or Carson gave him credit for being. One exception to the writers agreeing with Carson is a *WP* writer defending Reagan against the barbs of Carson: "contrary to the needles of Johnny Carson, it is not Jerry Brown who is the prototypical laid-back, unflappable and mellow California. Brown is quite driven and uptight, like Jimmy Carter. Reagan is the true Californian" (*Washington Post*, July 20, 1980, p. E7). But this type of comment was not common, with the writers in general holding Carson's satirical political commentary in high regard.

If the papers typically agreed with Carson, and valued his opinions, the opposite was true for their evaluation of *SNL*. There was a general agreement that *SNL* had the ability to accurately point out that the candidates were self-parodying at times:

The charm of Campaign '80 (I guess) is that everything it touches it turns into

parody. This is true even of deadly issues of war and peace, which by the time the candidates get through with them, seem to be coming to us direct from “Saturday Night Live.”⁸

In general, though, they did not write about *SNL* in a positive light. One *WP* writer felt that the show had a negative effect on other reporters:

In some ways, today’s younger reporters who cover [Ted] Kennedy reflect the feeling that for most Americans “there are no heroes today” as George Gallup Jr. states. They are nurtured on “Saturday Night Live” where taste has never been a criterion for humor. Kennedy and Chappaquiddick are spoofed unmercifully; a Bill Murray imitation of Kennedy with seaweed dripping from him, mumbling incoherent and unintelligible sentences.⁹

Of course, this criticism was aimed these other “younger reporters” and not the writer of the article, who was presumably exempt from *SNL*’s effects. This was a trend that would continue in the 2000’s after the establishment of the *Daily Show* and the *Colbert Report* as a resource for establishment newspaper journalists to distinguish themselves from television news (Jacobs and Michaud Wild, 2013).

There were, in fact, several rather brutal jokes on *SNL* during this time period that made fun of the incident where Ted Kennedy’s actions caused the death of the young

⁸ Greenfield, Meg. 1980. “The Real Military Issue.” *Washington Post*, October 1, 1980, p. A17.

⁹ MacPherson, Myra. 1980. “Teddy the Underdog Flies Into the Maine Event; Kennedy Versus The Rose Garden Mystique; How and Why Bleak Fortune Afflicted the Last Of the Kennedy Brothers En-route to the Rose Garden.” *Washington Post*, February 10, P. H1.

woman, Mary Jo Kopechne, described above. They might seem shocking in a more politically correct era, though it is possible to credit this incident to Kennedy's inability to win the Democratic nomination - an overarching piling on of abuse on the loser. If Carson was the presumed cultural indicator of where the election will go, *SNL* was the weathervane for the decline in the tone of public discourse, according to the writers in the *WP* and *NYT*. The papers could not see through the surface-level parody and did not see any substance beneath it, which may (or may not) in fact exist.

In the *WP's* and the *NYT's* coverage of political comedy on television, there was a slight shift that began to take place between 1980 and 1984. There was an increasing relevance of political candidates appearing on *SNL*, and an agreement that candidates who went on the show and did well got a general career boost, but there was a decreasing relevance of its political satire in general; although they paid much attention to Jesse Jackson's appearance on the show, the writers all basically agreed that *SNL* was not funny in those days. Despite the fact that there were many actors and actresses that went on to later success, such as Julia Louis-Dreyfus and Eddie Murphy, the loss of the old "classic" cast members and change in producers sent the show adrift.¹⁰ Ratings were bad, and it seemed the show would not come back on more than one occasion. In 1984, *SNL* Producer Dick Ebersol was quoted in the *NYT*, with commentary by Peter W. Kaplan:

"We'll have a turnover of half of the writers," said Mr. Ebersol, "and we still have one more female slot to fill. It's the most impressive package of talent I've seen, and with the election coming up, it may be a year in which satire comes back." If

¹⁰ Original Producer Lorne Michaels was replaced by Jean Doumanian in 1980, who was in turn replaced by Dick Ebersol. Ebersol was replaced when original Producer Michaels came back.

that happens it may be the first time in a long time that satire becomes what *opens* on “Saturday Night.”¹¹

Harsh criticism indeed. Tom Shales states that the 1984 season’s *SNL* is one “for young Republicans.” Yet Jesse Jackson’s appearance was hailed as an important one and was mentioned in four articles. In the *WP*, Shales wrote:

On Saturday, both problems [of *SNL* not having stars or a black cast member] were solved for one night only. Jesse Jackson revitalized and energized “Saturday Night Live” with a performance that was sure, funny and accomplished...ratings indicate the former Democratic presidential contender attracted larger audiences than are usual for the program in its post-hip era.¹²

Another interesting departure from the previous election cycle was some criticism of Carson’s stance on Reagan. In 1980, the papers agreed with the talk show host’s stance that all the candidates were pretty uninspiring, and they turned out to be wrong when Reagan won in a landslide that year. Then, in 1984, when Carson mocks Reagan, even when it is deserved (such as when Reagan does poorly in a debate) it did not go over well with his audience:

When Johnny Carson makes fun of a public figure, it is generally safe to assume

¹¹ Kaplan, Peter W. 1984. “TV Notes; Role of Networks in Election Results.” *The New York Times*, June 9, p. A46.

¹² Shales, Tom. 1984. “And Now, Here's Jesse! Jackson Scores a Hit On 'Saturday Night Live'.” *The Washington Post*, October 22, p. C1).

that the person has become fair game. The theory is that when Carson is ready to kid, Middle America is ready, too. But several nights after the Mondale-Reagan debate, Carson attempted a few pleasantries about President Reagan's undisputed flop in Louisville. He noted that when the next debate takes place, Reagan "will be two weeks older." Instead of the cascade of laughter that he usually gets from his dotting audience, Carson was met with heavy silence...If the "Tonight" audience is the electorate writ small, American voters are terribly sensitive about Reagan on the ropes. They were embarrassed and disturbed by seeing 100 unedited minutes of the man they intend to reelect.¹³

Reagan was possibly showing early signs of dementia during this debate, and the public and the audience, though perhaps not consciously aware of this potential problem, may not have thought it funny to make fun of an elderly man showing signs of confusion. However, the papers still portrayed Carson as an uncanny predictor of the political climate. When Gary Hart won the New Hampshire primary on February 28th, 1984, defeating Mondale, Carson made a joke about it *before* the results were even in. The *WP* called him a "prescient" commentator when he said, at midnight on "The Tonight Show," "Well, Mondale kind of had a Hart attack tonight in New Hampshire," even though the show was taped six hours earlier in Los Angeles (*Washington Post*, February 29, 1984, p. F1).

The 1988 Presidential campaign participants provided fertile ground for jokes on late-night comedy programs and commentary about them in the mainstream press. This was true for both parties. On one hand there were many more gaffes by Vice President

¹³ McGrory, Mary. 1984. "No Laughing Matter." *The Washington Post*, October 18, p. A2.

Dan Quayle (“The Holocaust was an obscene period in our nation’s history. No, not our nation’s, but in World War II. I mean, we all lived in this century. I didn’t live in this century, but in this century’s history.” -Press conference, September 15th, 1988). There were many comments by Carson and Jay Leno (while filling in for Carson) about Quayle joining the Indiana National Guard to avoid going to Viet Nam. There was the general fear about putting someone like Quayle second in line for the Presidency (a theme that would be repeated, as we shall see, in the 2008 campaign regarding Sarah Palin): “Johnny Carson jokes that a kid ‘scared the hell out of me’ on Halloween when he came to his door dressed as ‘President Quayle’” (*Washington Post*, November 6, 1988, p. C2). There was George H.W. Bush’s “wimp factor” to be mocked: “The press writes about it, pollsters ask voters about it (51 percent agree that the ‘wimp’ image will be a serious problem, Newsweek reports in self-fulfilling prophecy), Doonesbury, Carson and Letterman have their fun with it” (*Washington Post*, October 18, 1987, p. D1). In fact, there were two mentions, one in both papers, of quantitative measures of jokes on late night comedy, and they both found that Republicans were mocked more often than Democratic candidates:

U.S. News & World Report found that television comedians told twice as many jokes about Republican candidates as they did about Democratic candidates in February, with Mr. Bush the prime target.¹⁴

“The Center [for Media and Public Affairs] found that in Carson monologues from Jan. 1

¹⁴ AP. 1988. “Politicians are Fair Game.” *The New York Times*, March 7, p. A16.

through June 7, Republicans were the targets of 73 jokes, compared with 41 about Democrats” (*Washington Post*, July 19th, 1988, p. D6). On the other side, earlier in the primaries, Joe Biden was a frequent target. Eventually, Biden dropped out of the race due to accusations of plagiarism.¹⁵ This, combined with revelations that Biden had stretched the truth a bit about his college accomplishments, resulted in an avalanche of media criticism, including by late-night comedians:

It could even be argued that once flaws are revealed, they are distributed most efficiently, and decline is most rapidly accelerated, by the television comedians. In Joe Biden’s week of agony, he was the favorite topic of Johnny Carson and David Letterman. Once he becomes the butt of a hundred jokes heard in a million bedrooms - Senator Biden tried to cheer up his staff, said Mr. Carson; he told them they had nothing to fear but fear itself - it is hard for any mere politician to survive.¹⁶

It is worth noting at this point that the writer in this *Times* article *did* attribute a causal force of the satire to the “decline” of the politician. However, it was merely an *additional* force to influences that already exist; it was not perceived as the instigating factor.

More important than the plagiarism accusations leveled against Joe Biden, and certainly falling into the category of scenting blood about a candidate’s falling place in the minds of the public, was the alleged affair that Gary Hart had with 29 year old model

¹⁵ Biden had lifted, more or less unacknowledged, a few lines from a speech from a British Labor party leader, when Biden gave a speech at the Iowa State Fair in August of 1987.

¹⁶ Apple, R. W. Jr. 1987. “Candidates' Transgressions Loom Large on Home Screen.” *The New York Times*, September 27, p. D1.

Donna Rice, on his yacht aptly named “Monkey Business.” This caused Hart to drop out of the race on May 8th, 1987, only to re-enter it briefly from December to March, when he dropped out for a second time. His character, and its relevance to the campaign, was mentioned in the papers as an overly-obvious choice of target: “These have to be the cruelest days, because they are the dismissive days. Gary Hart, national joke. Just say those two words in certain quarters: Gary Hart. Ha. Ha. Please, please, stop it, you’re killing me” (*Washington Post*, February 8, 1988, p. B1). Nevertheless, other writers characterized it as clearly fair game for late night television comedy, because of the importance of a candidate appearing as if they were an easy target who could not be taken seriously:

...many people in polls say they cannot support Mr. Hart, and jokes about the reports of his extramarital relationships continue. Many feel, as Johnny Carson said, that Mr. Hart’s trying to ignore his past reputation is akin to Carmen Miranda’s asking people not to notice that she is dancing with a bowl of fruit on her head.¹⁷

Again, the way that writers in the paper treated the commentary by comedians shows that once you have made yourself into a laughingstock, the campaign is effectively over. “Mr. Orren [of Harvard’s Center on Press, Politics and Public Policy] said the troubles of...Democratic candidates had made the party a target for the nation’s most devastating political critics: television comedians. ‘It’s the Johnny Carson jokes that may hurt most...You go from ridicule to derision’” (*New York Times*, October 2, 1987, p. A1). The

¹⁷ Dowd, Maureen. 1988. “Hart’s Campaign Igniting Emotions.” *The New York Times*, January 13, p. D26.

main difference between jabs at Quayle's competence and Hart's infidelities was that Quayle was not running for President himself.

The other Democratic candidate besides Hart that was mocked the most out of all three of these years was Michael Dukakis, and the papers took notice of this as well. Dukakis was portrayed as an alien due to his lack of emotionality and dullness (*SNL* sketch, "Alien Dukakis," October 22, 1988) and, as the nominee, the show portrayed him as someone who could not win: "Out in Euclid Ohio this week, following the debate, and the latest poll results, Michael Dukakis picked up his trumpet and played his newly-adopted official campaign song. Let's hear a little of it (plays 'Taps')" (*SNL*, "Weekend Update," October 22, 1988). Once it became clear the Dukakis would be the Democratic nominee, according to the *WP* and the *NYT*, the coverage of the campaign tilted towards mocking Dukakis most frequently, despite the earlier empirical evidence that Republicans were targets of jokes more often: "In the early months of the campaign, Mr. Carson's jokes were full of references to Mr. Bush as a wimp. Now they are full of jabs at Mr. Dukakis as boring" (*New York Times*, November 7, 1988, p. B15). The writers largely attributed this shift to Dukakis' infamous tank ride. In September of 1988, he was photographed riding in an M-1 Abrams tank, smiling and waving. This goofy image, with the candidate wearing a too-big helmet and giving the thumbs-up, was used by the Bush campaign in an attack ad, claiming that Dukakis was soft on defense due to his voting record, and, like the tank ride, was all appearance, and no substance. However, it is arguable that Carson's jokes about it may have had a devastating impact on his candidacy as the Bush anti-Dukakis ad did:

A national telephone survey of 1,002 registered voters for the Boston Herald and Boston's WBZ-TV found that 25 percent said they were less likely to vote for Dukakis based on what they had seen or heard about the tank ride; 7 percent said the ride made them more likely to vote for Dukakis. More than 58 percent said it had no impact on how they would vote, and 10 percent were undecided or uninformed about the event. "Obviously everyone knew it was a mistake, except the Dukakis campaign," said KRC pollster Gerry Chervinsky, who conducted the survey. "Even Johnny Carson made jokes about the ride. The poll is just proof of what everyone has been saying."¹⁸

Although it was highly likely that at least some of the 25% who said they were less likely to vote for Dukakis "based on what they had seen or heard about the tank ride" got Carson's perspective as the most influential thing they heard about the entire incident, it was also possible that Carson was just going along with the prevailing winds of opinion. Thus Carson's (and the other comedians') shift from concentrating on the Republican candidates to subsequently focusing on Dukakis, made them opinion followers and *not* opinion leaders.

CONCLUSION

The idea that television comedians were just following prevailing sentiment was certainly the opinion of legendary comedian Mort Sahl, known to be a strong critic of

¹⁸ Schwartz, Maralee. 1988. "An Image-Making Flop." *The Washington Post*, September 21, p. A14.

conventional and conservative politics. Speaking about Carson and those comedians who appeared on his show, Sahl said:

In the phrase of Graham Greene, the comedian is a dangerous man. Well, they're not dangerous men. What they're trying to do is sell-in; they're not trying to overthrow... They want to be part of that commercial success, they want to join it. The Carson show is a ticket to join it. The healthy attitude for them would be to be skeptical of that, as a protector of the status quo, which he is. . . .¹⁹

Did *SNL* fall into this category as well? The lack of real substantive humor about the elections, the parties, the candidates, or their policies put *SNL* on equal footing with Sahl's opinions about Carson in these years. They could impact the way people thought of the candidates, but the humor was just drifting along the same course of public opinion anyway, taking advantage of it and not setting the agenda in a critical way. Perhaps the humor was the final nail in the campaigns' respective coffins, but it was not distinct in the way that it spoke about any substantive issue. This would change in the future, but for now, the humor was mired in the mundane. Journalists and other commentators, like Sahl, criticized the lack of substance as having missed an opportunity; that is, when humor about politicians was on the same level as humor about any other public figure or celebrity, it did not reach its potential. It made no difference if a politician spoke oddly or looked strange, but he or she *could* influence citizens' lives in a unique way. Thus the stakes were higher for political humor than any other type.

¹⁹ Boyer, Peter J. 1987. "Hold the Borscht, Here Comes Mort Sahl." *The New York Times*, October 4, p. B5.

Given the lack of critical humor on *SNL*, especially in the early 1980's presidential election cycles, it is difficult to understand how they became such an important cultural force in politics in the late 2000's. The writers in the *Post* and the *Times* did not see much of a future for *SNL* in this time period. Here we see what Moy, et al. (2006), Niven, et al. (2003), and Peterson (2008) talked about: a lack of substantive criticism that presumably functions as "mass distraction." But the show plodded on through the Reagan-Bush era and eventually became slightly more critical of conservative policies. But when the pendulum swung back, and the Clinton era began, the primary target would inevitably become liberals and Democrats (as Tom Shales caustically alluded to above). The deep divisions in the United States after September 11, 2001, and the emerging "War on Terror" would cause the pendulum to swing back yet again. Only this time, the influence of the critically acclaimed *Daily Show* would set the stage for a much more critically satirical *Saturday Night Live*. Jokes about a political candidate's personal life or mere malapropisms can become tiresome and make the viewer more sympathetic to them in the end. In the years that this chapter examines, we can clearly see this effect in the writers' attitudes towards *SNL* in regards to Gary Hart and Dan Quayle. In future election cycles, Bill Clinton and George W. Bush filled these roles. Jokes about Ronald Reagan's age fall flat; Bob Dole would suffer the same jokes. If the *Daily Show* or the *Colbert Report* had adhered to this formula, they would never have lasted, let alone won Peabody Awards.

CHAPTER 4: THE 1990'S

Late night comedy on television during the 1992 and 1996 election cycles was characterized by a noticeable reliance upon personality-based humor at the expense of jokes about substantive issues. If the 1980's was typified by jokes about Ronald Reagan's age, that theme was repeated and greatly amplified in the 1990's by jokes about Bob Dole's age. The tawdriness of jokes about Bill Clinton's presumed sexual improprieties crept in as well (and this was before the Monica Lewinsky scandal). Newspaper commentary in the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* often focused on the trend towards the occasionally vicious personal humor on the shows. This era included *SNL*, David Letterman, newcomer Conan O'Brien, the departure of Johnny Carson, and the rise of Jay Leno. But at the same time, journalists also began to take note of the public's increasing attention to these shows as a source of news. However, the journalists who wrote about it were unable or unwilling to understand why this change was beginning to occur; it was a trend that would only increase as time went on. The writers in the papers saw the comedy as boring, formulaic, and safe, which was not an entirely unfair assessment. In 1992, jokes about Dan Quayle's intelligence would be seen as hurting the Bush campaign (a foreshadowing of what happened with Sarah Palin in 2008). In 1996, journalists saw the constant harping on Bob Dole's age as hurting his campaign. Once his poll numbers began to slip, the jokes about him intensified. The jokes about Clinton's moral character, however, were seen as something he could more easily brush off, especially in the 1996 election cycle, since the economy was doing well.

Substantive humor, to the extent that it happened at all, was directed at George H.W. Bush, and more secondary candidates like Pat Buchanan. One element that did not exist in any campaign in this analysis prior to 1992 is the inclusion of a strong third-party candidate, Ross Perot. Much of the humor on *SNL* in particular was directed at him, thus taking away from other chances to mock the main party candidates. There were opportunities for substantive humor in the 1990's – incidents like the Congressional "Government Shutdown," the L.A. Riots, and the U.S. involvement in the Bosnian conflict were missed chances for truly critical comedy. It seemed like substantive humor was beginning to form in the 1980's election cycles, especially on *SNL*, but the process got derailed during the Clinton era. This was largely due to the personalities that hosted *SNL*'s "Weekend Update" segment – Kevin Nealon in 1992, who was bland and conventional in his humor, and Norm MacDonald, who was savage in his personal critiques. Nealon's and MacDonald's humor were polar opposites in comedic demeanor, though neither of them were substantively critical. The show's overall tone of personality-based humor in the 1990's is driven by these personalities to the detriment of substantive humor (Day 2012). This would change after more substantively critical comedians like Tina Fey emerged in the 2000's, but for now, *SNL* remained weak in its satire. This chapter examines the 1990's election cycles of the "Clinton" era, looking at all mentions of the late-night talk show hosts and *SNL*, and includes the dates from February 29, 1992 to November 3, 1992 and October 11, 1995 to November 6, 1996.

DOMINANCE OF PERSONALITY-BASED HUMOR IN 1992 AND 1996 ON SNL

Jokes in the 1992 and 1996 election cycles were mostly about personal humor rather than substantive; when substantive issues were brought up at all, they were usually combined with personality-based humor. This weakened the satire. There were far more “Weekend Update” segment jokes than sketches, and, as mentioned above, these jokes were largely driven by the type of humor that the comedians who delivered them employed.

Slant Towards, *SNL*, 1990s (Table 3)

	None	Democrats	Republicans
1992, Whole Election Cycle (62)	27 (43.5%)	20 (32.3%)	15 (24.3%)
1996, Whole Election Cycle (61)	11 (18%)	37 (60.7%)	13 (21.3%)

Personal or Substantive? *SNL*, 1990s (Table 4)

	Both	Personal	Substantive
1992, Whole Election Cycle (62)	3 (4.8%)	47 (75.8%)	12 (19.4%)
1996, Whole Election Cycle (61)	7	51	3

	(11.5%)	(83.6%)	(4.9%)
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Even when substantive jokes stood alone, they were not effectively critical, as in this *SNL* sketch about Clinton’s economic policy, where he was portrayed in a debate exchanging questions and answers with Ted Koppel and a perplexed voter:

Clinton: Thank you, Ted. I appreciate the chance to be here tonight to talk to these nice people about the REAL issue in this campaign: the economy.

Ted Koppel: Well, Governor, let’s take our first question from one of our undecided voters. Yes, Sir?

Leon Norwood [a voter]: Hello, Governor. My name is Leon Norwood. I heard you say in a speech you were gonna cut middle-class taxes to increase consumer spending... isn’t that the same old tax-and-spend we *always* hear?

Clinton: Well, Leon, I meant we would cut *your* taxes, so *you* would have more to spend.

Leon Norwood: There it is! “Tax” and “Spend.”

Ted Koppel: Excuse me, Governor, if I may, Sir. Just because the words “tax” and “spend” appear in the same sentence, it doesn’t make it a bad thing. There are *other* words in there - verbs and modifiers that *change* the meaning. (*SNL*, “Nightline” Sketch, October 26, 1992)

This exchange highlighted the confusion of the average voter about (somewhat) complex economic policy. But it was not a particularly substantive joke about Clinton's policy propositions, other than that they might be difficult to understand; but this could just as easily have been the case because voters were willfully ignorant and not paying close enough attention to substantive matters that could impact their financial lives.

Republican candidate George H.W. Bush had the most substantive satirical jokes directed at him in the 1992 election cycle, with a total of eight. These were all "Weekend Update" segment jokes, so none were extensive or went into great detail. They covered four main topics. One was the L.A. riots (which was just represented by Adam Sandler's character Operaman singing about Bush falling asleep during the LA riots because he is old, from a segment on "Weekend Update," May 16th, 1992). The second was about Bush being dishonest about his poll numbers: "And President Bush today attacked journalists for their left wing bias against him. When asked for examples, Bush cited all the polls that showed him trailing Gov. Clinton" (*SNL*, "Weekend Update, October 24, 1992). The third topic was the Iran-Contra scandal, and about Bush's dishonesty about it:

A note written by Caspar Weinberger has contradicted President Bush who had said he didn't know about an arms-for-hostages swap back in 1986. Today the President admitted he lied, but added, "That's only 6 times I've lied. Clinton has lied 11 times, so I'm 5 points ahead of him." (*SNL*, "Weekend Update," October 31, 1992)

The fourth topic, and the most extensively joked about in the substantive category, was the poor state of the economy after the Reagan-Bush years: “President Bush took to the rails last week, campaigning...by train so he could take his message directly to those Americans most affected by his presidency...the hobos riding in the freight car” (*SNL*, “Weekend Update,” October 3, 1992). Additionally, a simple misstatement became a chance to criticize economic policy, albeit weakly:

On Thursday, President Bush greeted a crowd in NJ with this Freudian slip:

Bush: And so today, I don’t want to run the risk of ruining what is a lovely recession, a lovely reception by...

He also complimented them on their delightful deficit, and promised never to give up his fight against jobs. (*SNL*, “Weekend Update,” October 24, 1992)

However, there were not many substantive jokes overall, despite the possible choices that could have been made after 12 years of Reagan-Bush economics.

One substantive joke was made about Gingrich: “Asked why so few Republicans were involved in Rubbergate, House minority whip Newt Gingrich explained, that’s what S&Ls are for” (*SNL*, “Weekend Update,” March 21, 1992). The House Banking scandal of 1992 (in which House members overdrew their accounts) was likened to the Savings and Loan Scandal of previous years. This joke was similar to the allusion to the Iran-Contra controversy referenced above. The point was that Republicans could not be trusted to be honest about a range of topics due to their history of lying about involvements in important institutional issues. But old scandals were not as relevant as

fresh ones, and some viewers may not have even remembered the details of these clearly. Why didn't *SNL* take advantage of current problems as satirical fodder during this election cycle? In later years, *SNL* puts much more effort into pulling specific current events and parodies of what the candidates were saying and doing in the week that the show would air. But in these years, the show relied much more on easier targets of personality-based jokes and references to things that happened in the past that viewers would potentially be more familiar with.

Part of the reason why personal humor was so much at the forefront in 1992 was because of the strange personality of the third party candidate, Ross Perot. There was some extremely brief substantive humor about Perot – one “Weekend Update” joke about the fact that he had to pay his campaign “volunteers” (*SNL*, October 3, 1992); and one sketch where he outlined his policy to improve unemployment that showed he did not understand the economy and often tried to sound smarter than he really was:

Good evening, I'm Ross Perot...Now, what happened last week in Los Angeles scared me half to death...Now, here's what I'm gonna do - I'm gonna rebuild every building, state-of-the-art technology, put computers in every one of them, train the Crips, train the Bloods to operate the computers, put them to work competing against the Japanese. (*SNL*, “Ross Perot for President” Sketch, May 9, 1992)

Dana Carvey's Perot character then went on to spout many confusing and unsupported claims about business statistics (parodied in an *SNL* Sketch on October 3, 1992 where he

talked about how much money the country would save if everyone wore the same style shoe). But not much was known about Perot's policy positions, in part because he had such a hard time explaining them to the public and in part because other factors overwhelmed his ability to effectively communicate. First, there was his Southern accent and propensity to talk fast, coupled with the many numbers he would spout, and rapid-fire changing of topics he engaged in, which made his real ideas hard to pin down. Second, he had the stigma of buying his way into the election, as no one without political experience would have made it to a national election and gotten their name on the ballot in all 50 states without an enormous personal bankroll: "Ross Perot filed a financial disclosure statement on Friday, putting his personal fortune at 3.3 billion, or 800 million more than previously estimated. As a result, yesterday Perot was awarded an honorary Dr. of Money degree at Oklahoma State University" (*SNL*, "Weekend Update," May 16, 1992). Third, he was of short stature, which was mentioned a few times as a reason not to take him seriously: "While campaigning this week, Ross Perot was startled when he was continuously picked up and kissed by babies" (*SNL*, "Weekend Update," October 31, 1992), and allegedly resembled chicken-selling businessman Frank Perdue (*SNL*, "Weekend Update," May 16, 1992). Finally, there was a great deal of contention amongst his campaign staff and indecision on Perot's part on whether he would run or not run. In July of 1992, after his campaign manager resigned amidst "emptiness and chaos,"²⁰ Perot claimed on the CBS newsmagazine program *60 Minutes* that his family was the target of a George H.W. Bush-directed CIA plot to disrupt his daughter's wedding, and that he

²⁰ Lewis, Anthony. 1992. "Abroad at Home; Why Perot?" *New York Times*, October 2.

needed to drop out of the campaign to spare her embarrassment.²¹ These factors made him more susceptible to jokes about his personality, appearance, and wealth, and indecisiveness, which is exactly what *SNL* engaged in the most in 1992. A sketch highlighted his propensity for bizarre accusations and the public perception of them:

Ross Perot: Alright, this...astrologer to the stars had a premonition. She told me that the Republican Party was planning to drug me and my family, yank all our dental work, and replace them with transmitters inside our fillings!

Reporter: Are you saying you have transmitters in your teeth? (*SNL*, "Ross Perot Press Conference" Sketch, October 31, 1992)

Additionally, *SNL* mocked Perot's selection of an unusual running mate, the 69-year old Admiral James Stockdale. During an October debate appearance alongside Quayle and Gore, Stockdale seemed unprepared to discuss policy, and had difficulty hearing the questions. His opening statement began with the lines, "Who am I? Why am I here?" while meant to be a rhetorical introduction, it was clearly open to misinterpretation. This debate performance resulted in arguably the most memorable campaign sketch of the 1992 election cycle. In a devastating portrayal of the Admiral, *SNL* performer Phil Hartman played him as a terribly confused, senile old man who Dana Carvey's Perot desperately wanted to get rid of by dropping him off in the middle of

²¹ Berke, Richard L. 1992. "The 1992 Campaign: The Overview; Perot Says He Quit In July To Thwart G.O.P. 'Dirty Tricks'." *New York Times*, October 26.

nowhere. The phrase “gridlock,” used by Stockdale to indicate that government was unable to operate efficiently, was also satirized.

Perot: ...you wanna hear some music? You'd like that, wouldn't you?... Aw, I don't believe it! You see? Is that how the game is played, Admiral? They can't put a transmitter out here so good, honest, decent American people can hear some nice country music. And I just think that's sad!

Stockdale: GOVERNMENT'S IN...! IN GRIDLOCK!

Perot: Well, there you go! Now, that was vintage! That was one of the finest moments in any debate I've ever seen. ...

Stockdale: WHO AM I?! WHY AM I HERE?!

Perot: Well, you're the Admiral! You're taking a joyride! Oh, I get it! You're quoting yourself, right? “Who am I?” Now, that line there, that was precious! And you know, Admiral, when you were wandering around there - remember that? When it looked like you were gonna go over to Gore's podium?...And the part where you were stopping and stuttering - grand slam, I'll tell you! Shows you weren't rehearsed...And the way your mind drifted - showed you're open to new ideas. And, Admiral...when you forgot your hearing aid was off, like you didn't know where you were - well, that was just stunning! (*SNL*, “Perot-Stockdale” Sketch, October 24, 1992)

Although it is easy to claim that *SNL* was just being incredibly unflattering in their portrayal of Stockdale, the show was following its standard practice of highlighting

personal characteristics in this election, and his debate performance was simply too easy of a target to pass up.

As indicated in Table 4, there were nearly four times as many personal jokes and sketches as substantive ones, and most of the substantive humor was directed against Republicans. The personal humor mainly targeted Perot and Clinton, with some targeted at Jerry Brown and Paul Tsongas, and also at Bush and Quayle. The Clinton humor focused on his claim that he “didn’t inhale” when he tried marijuana in college (*SNL*, “Weekend Update,” April 18, 1992), his alleged “draft dodging” during the Viet Nam war, and his perceived propensity to pursue women other than his wife (*SNL*, March 21 1992 and April 11, 1992), which would of course become a major subject of mockery in subsequent years. Brown was mocked for the highly superficial perception that he was somehow strongly associated with “space” culture because his girlfriend in the 1970’s, singer Linda Ronstadt, had nicknamed him “moonbeam,” and that he was a drug user: “In a startling revelation today, Jerry Brown admitted that he, too, once smoked marijuana, but he never exhaled” (*SNL*, “Weekend Update,” April 11, 1992). Clinton and Brown were parodied discussing the way they were particularly perceived in the culture:

Clinton: ...I just want you to know that I think you got a raw deal with that marijuana party thing in California, and I’m not going to bring it up...I mean, I don’t think either of us is being served by drug stories at this point in the race, I mean it hurts the process, and it hurts the party.

Brown: I agree, Bill, and it would be like bringing up old nicknames that really weren't fair. And I know that you're not interested in referring to me as Governor Moonbeam, or Spaceman Jerry, or Governor Spaceman, or Captain Weirdo.

Clinton: Well, exactly. The last thing America wants to dwell on is something that happened years ago. Like who registered for what draft, and how they got out of it. (*SNL*, "Clinton-Brown Debate" Sketch, April 18, 1992)

Tsongas (the only candidate to appear on the show this election cycle, on April 18, 1992, but only to deliver the "Live from New York, it's Saturday Night!" opening line) was mocked for having a "nerdy" voice and was portrayed as having a certain kinship with Star Trek fans (*SNL*, "Star Trek Democrats" Sketch, March 14, 1992). Personality-based humor about George H.W. Bush was also about his wealth that made him out of touch with the voters: "...the candidates have finally agreed on the debates, over Clinton's objections that the dates conflicted with World Series play offs...Bush agreed, providing the dates don't conflict with the New England Horseshoe Pitching Finals in Kennebunkport" (*SNL*, "Weekend Update," October 3, 1992). Humor also dealt with his "uncoolness:" "President Bush Thursday unveiled the Bush League, his new line of sportswear for dorky white guys," (*SNL*, Weekend Update, May 16, 1992) and that he gave people "the creeps" (*SNL*, "Weekend Update," October 24, 1992). Also in the "uncool" category were both Quayle and Gore: "Vice President Dan Quayle and Senator Gore agreed the Madonna book was offensive, but couldn't agree which page was most offensive" (*SNL*, "Weekend Update," October 24, 1992).

Nothing was more stiff and backwards-looking in this election cycle than Quayle's commentary on the fictional television character Murphy Brown. When the character decided to bear a child alone, after the father decided not to be in its life, Quayle commented (in a speech to the Commonwealth Club in May 1992) that it was indicative of the increasing propensity of American culture towards "ignoring the importance of fathers." It seemed silly to criticize the lifestyle choice of a fictional person, and made Quayle sound critical of single mothers, who often had little choice in the matter. However, *SNL* only mentioned it briefly, and mocked the media for continuing to bring it up in the six months between the comment and the election: Adam Sandler's "Operaman" character sang: "Enuffo! Enuffo! / Topico over exposo!" (*SNL*, "Weekend Update," September 26, 1992).

One sketch, a parody of a debate between Bush and Clinton, provided a good example of the dichotomy between personal and substantive humor. Bush was questioned by a debate moderator about how he would bring down the deficit, and brought up his failed promise to not raise taxes which he famously broke in his first term:

Jane Pauley: Honestly now, don't you feel some kind of tax hike will be needed to reduce the deficit?

George Bush: Jane, the answer is no! I will never raise taxes again! Never, ever, ever, ever...never, ever again! And I mean never, ever, ever, ever, never ever..!!

Jane Pauley: Thank you, Mr. Presi...

George Bush: Never, ever, ever!

(*SNL*, "Debate '92: The Challenge to Avoid Saying Something Stupid" Sketch,

October 10, 1992)

But in regards to Clinton, in the same sketch, another moderator merely brought up Clinton's anti-war past and echoed the "I didn't inhale" line for which he was so frequently mocked:

Sam Donaldson: But isn't it true that during one of the peace demonstrations you burned an American flag in Red Square?

Bill Clinton: I tried to burn an American flag *once*. I didn't like it. It gave off toxic fumes, so I didn't inhale.

Although some have argued that *SNL*'s satire had become more conservative by this time period (Gray, et al 2009; Peterson 2008), this election was characterized as a bad choice between almost equally bad candidates (a sentiment that would be strongly echoed in 2000), giving Clinton a slight edge because he was the least objectionable in comparison. Kevin Nealon, who anchored the "Weekend Update" segment this year, summarized the problems with the candidates in two of his "Subliminal Editorial" bits, where he says one thing in a normal voice, then says what he really thinks in a softer one:

Well, a Gallop Poll shows that 78% of American voters feel that the media manipulates too many people into believing what they want them to believe. *I* would have to disagree with that... The media simply covers the day's events – (*Iran Contra*) - whether it's Bush's proposed economic plan – (*Big Joke*) - or

whether it's Perot deciding whether or not to re-enter the race – (*Don't Bother*) - or the feud between Hollywood and Dan Quayle – (*Idiot*) - I *do* think, however, that the media *should* back off of Mr. Quayle – (*Big Wedgie*) - Now I would definitely say that voters make up their own minds – (*Clinton*) - I really do. (*SNL*, “Weekend Update,” September 26, 1992)

Some think that Bush has reached an all-time low in his campaign. As a mature adult, I've actually never seen grown men so childishly attack on another (*three stooges*). The mud-slinging doesn't really benefit anyone (*Clinton*). Why don't they just you know deal with the real issues effecting America (*Madonna*)? I mean Clinton's been working with a lot of good people (*KGB*) and I think he's got some really good ideas (*wife swapping*). But on the other hand, Bush has his priorities too (*fishing*) and of course he has had a lot of experience (*hookers*). And of course there's Perot (*elephant ears*) I'm sure he has a good wavering (*Alzheimer's*), he's back in the running. (*SNL*, “Weekend Update,” October 10, 1992)

But *SNL* did not take much of a side this election. The candidates were either “weird” like Perot, “uncool” like Bush, Quayle, and Gore, or had a morally questionable past, like Clinton and Brown.

In the 1996 election cycle, substantive jokes were almost non-existent. As indicated in Table 4, there were only three purely substantive jokes; two are about Pat Buchanan, and one was about Dole not wanting minority voters to come to the polls.

There was a brief sketch in the last episode before the election that was a parody of a political ad “Paid for by Dole/Kemp,” where a black man, a gay man, and a woman told the viewer “Your vote doesn’t make a difference. Don’t vote if you are a woman, black, or a gay man” (*SNL*, “Dole/Kemp ‘96” Sketch, November 2, 1996). Regarding Buchanan, there were two jokes on “Weekend Update” that suggested he was a Nazi and a racist:

Meanwhile Pat Buchannan warns that if frontrunner Bob Dole chooses General Colin Powell as a running mate, his followers will march out of the Republican convention. Later Buchannan admitted that actually his followers march everywhere they go. (*SNL*, “Weekend Update,” March 16, 1996)

In Colorado this week Bob Dole warned that if Pat Buchanan is the Republican nominee the party might lose both the presidency and control of congress. In response Buchanan warned that if anyone other than himself becomes president, blacks will retain the right to vote (*SNL*, “Weekend Update,” February 24, 1996)

Arguably, joking about a candidate’s attitude towards minorities is a joke about personal characteristics; but compared to the personality-based jokes that *SNL* normally made, such as about a candidate’s age or propensity to sexual transgressions, jokes about a candidate having strong negative attitudes about minorities rose to the level of a substantive criticism.

There were *no* purely substantive jokes about President Clinton in this election cycle. Some substantive areas were mentioned, but they were always tempered with a joke about his personal characteristics. The prime example of this was a sketch where Clinton was sitting in the White House kitchen late at night calling people randomly on the phone trying to get reassurance about his policies:

Clinton: Hello Ben? Ben Watenburg, conservative columnist. Yeah it's Bill Clinton calling. Listen, I've been sitting here reading your book and there's something that's been bothering me. You know that part where you said that I ran as a centrist, then I tried to govern from the left after raising taxes and trying to force Socialized medicine on the country? Well that was just right on the money. That was a real bull's eye. I mean, I don't know what the hell I'm doing in this job....I'm sorry to call this late I just wanted to get that off my chest. I'm sorry please don't hate me.

...

Hello? You don't know me, I just dialed your number at random...Look, I don't know what your politics are. I don't know if you're a Democrat or a Republican. But if you'll just tell me what to do, I swear to God I'll do it! I'm not kidding! If you want Welfare eliminated I'll do it. If you want it expanded I'll do that too, I don't care, it's your call. I just want one person to tell me that I'm doing a great job. (*SNL*, "White House Kitchen" Sketch, November 11, 1995)

Clinton here was characterized as indecisive and worried about the fact that he had betrayed his base. But even though these are clearly substantive issues, Clinton was portrayed ordering pizza and eating everything in sight. Although in the present day, Bill Clinton appears to be at a very healthy weight after undergoing quadruple bypass surgery in 2004, jokes about his love of fast food were prevalent in popular culture when he was President. Additionally, the U.S. and NATO intervention in Bosnia was occurring during this time, and could have been a target for substantive criticism on *SNL*. However, the jokes were barely substantive and the punchlines were about personal issues. In the 1996 election cycle, there were 51 personal jokes, 3 substantive, and 7 that were both personal and substantive. This joke was an example of one that brought up a substantive issue, but the punch line was related to drug use, a personal issue:

Charged by critics with failure to create an exit strategy for Bosnia, a defiant President Clinton, today, insisted that he has one ready. Should the situation deteriorate, he'll have all 20,000 troops airlifted to England and smoking pot within 24 hours. (*SNL*, "Weekend Update," December 9, 1995)

This weakened the joke and undercut its ability to be truly critical of a real, serious issue. Another "Weekend Update" joke that mentions Bosnia was not even directed at Clinton at all:

Republican hopeful Phil Gramm says that Bob Dole should not get the nomination because he backed President Clinton's plan to send troops to Bosnia.

Dole responded that Gramm should not be nominated for President, because, well, look at him. Take a gander at the fella. (*SNL*, “Weekend Update,” February 10, 1996)

President Clinton at this time was also embroiled in the Whitewater land deal scandal and was also the subject of conspiracy theories about the death of former Deputy White House Counsel Vince Foster in 1993, who committed suicide. Both of these issues could be considered either personal or substantive issues; however, even though they rose to a level of gravity that sex scandals or jokes about personal appearance did not, they were not about policy positions, knowledge, or competence. Both issues were the target of some “cheap shots” on “Weekend Update:” “The president may have secretly intimated that he would pardon the whitewater swindlers, “But only after making every effort to have them killed in Prison” (*SNL*, “Weekend Update,” October 5, 1996). It is also worth noting at this point that the host of the “Weekend Update” segment during this election cycle was Norm MacDonald. His tenure at the desk was characterized by extremely cruel jokes about public figures, most notably about O.J. Simpson. Most of the political humor at this time originated from him, either on “Weekend Update” or in the form of his Bob Dole impression (discussed below). His time at the desk was in direct contrast to the 1992 election cycle, occupied by Kevin Nealon, who, while not afraid to joke about the candidates, did not rise to the level of pure viciousness that MacDonald did. Many times, MacDonald’s most extreme jokes were met with dead silence by the audience; however, his targets were generally deserving of the vitriol he cast (like Simpson).

One major difference between this election cycle and the last one was the amount of jokes directed at the candidates' wives, with 10 about Hillary Clinton and two about Elizabeth Dole. However, these jokes were entirely personal. The jokes about Elizabeth Dole were about her appearing unable to seem relaxed in interviews and her drive as a woman making her appear to be "a bitch on wheels" (*SNL*, "The Barbara Walters Special" Sketch, October 26, 1996). The jokes about Hillary Clinton were primarily about Bill Clinton's presumed dislike of her. Twice, Clinton, played by Darryl Hammond, appeared on "Weekend Update" to review movies about a fictional president whose wife was dead, including *Independence Day* (*SNL*, "Weekend Update," October 5, 1996) and *An American President*:

Rob Reiner's latest film tells the story of a young, idealistic president, who has not only a hostile Congress and a nasty Republican contender to deal with, but also has to raise a 12-year-old daughter on his own, because, you see, his wife is dead. I love this movie! (*SNL*, "Weekend Update," December 9, 1995)

Norm MacDonald's use of the O.J. Simpson murders trope came full circle when he inserted it into a "Bill hates Hillary" joke: "On Friday, the Juice officially endorsed Bill Clinton for President, adding, 'I'd like to help him any way I can.' To which the President replied, 'Well, there is one thing,'" and then they cut to photo of Hillary Clinton, implying that the President would like Simpson to murder his wife as well (*SNL*, "Weekend Update," May 18, 1996). The Whitewater scandal, in which Hillary Clinton was also implicated, played into the theme too:

...President Clinton is still refusing to say whether he will pardon former Whitewater associates Jim and Susan MacDougal. But when asked if he would pardon First Lady Hillary Clinton the President was crystal clear. "She does the crime, she does the time." (*SNL*, "Weekend Update," October 26, 1996)

There were also a few personal jokes about Steve Forbes and Pat Buchanan during the primaries. Buchanan was portrayed as mean-spirited, and Forbes as the out-of-touch rich man who wanted to buy his way into the election out of boredom, similar to Perot's campaign in 1992. One sketch depicted them having a physical altercation. In the sketch, Forbes and Buchanan were checking out of the hotel after the Iowa Caucuses. Buchanan made fun of him for having a gold credit card, but Forbes let him know it was actually a platinum card. Buchanan snatched it from him.

Buchanan: Platinum's for pansies!

Forbes: Well, that's your opinion. I just don't happen to think so.

Buchanan: Nice come back, Forbes. Hey how does it feel to get your ass kicked?

What did you do, place fifth?

Forbes: For your information I placed fourth. Now if you will excuse me I have a plane to catch.

Buchanan: What your own private jet?

Forbes: Well if you must know it's a one man space shuttle. But I have to get to the bank first.

(*SNL*, “Bully Pat Buchanan” Sketch, February 24, 1996)

As with many of the candidates, Forbes also had many personal characteristic-based “Weekend Update” jokes directed against him: “Finally some good news for Steve Forbes, in his sputtering campaign this week, he picked up the endorsement of *Forbes Magazine*” (*SNL*, “Weekend Update,” February 17, 1996).

A potentially big source of substantive humor was the so-called “Government Shutdown” instigated by Newt Gingrich. Due to what essentially amounted to interpersonal conflicts between the Speaker of the House and President Clinton, many government services were suspended in 1995 and 1996. An *SNL* sketch depicted Gingrich and Dole having a childish fit over not being able to fly in the “First Class” section of Air Force One (which is of course a fictional concept). But it was only briefly mentioned in one sketch:

Gingrich: Has any other Speaker of the House been subjected to this kind of total lack of respect?

Dole: Pipe down Gingrich we’ll fix his wagon when we get back to DC. (*SNL*, “Flying Coach” Sketch, November 18, 1995)

In contrast to the 1992 election cycle, where there was either no favoring of political parties, or mostly equal mocking of both, the 1996 election cycle *SNL* political humor was mostly slanted towards the Democrats. There was no or slant or equal mocking of candidates in both parties in 10 jokes/sketches, 13 that slanted towards the Republicans,

and 37 that slanted towards the Democrats. This was mostly because of humor directed against Bob Dole. Earlier in the election cycle, there were many jokes about Dole being mean, old, physically frail, and frightening to children. But later, as it became obvious that he was going to lose because of his poor poll numbers, the humor began to include jokes about his impending loss as well. Dole was portrayed throughout the election as unable to connect with the voters. In one sketch, he was shown practicing speeches in front of the mirror:

Dole: "I'm President Bob Dole, I'm President of the United States, nice to meet you, Ambassador! (laughs). This must be your lovely wife? Assistant? Sorry. Oh, your wife passed on?...Rest assured, you have the condolences of the President of the United States, I'm President of the United States, I'm President Bob Dole, I'm President and I live in the White House!" (*SNL*, "The Real World" Sketch, March 16, 1996)

Another sketch depicted him meeting with and talking to former President George H.W. Bush about why he was behind in the polls. One of the main real-world criticisms President Clinton's detractors was about his morals. Although Dole did not have a problem with the "character issue," he was unlikable by comparison:

Bush: Your campaign, an embarrassment. Your image, scary! Spooky! Children run away!

Dole: Why do people vote for him? Why do people like him so much?

Bush: Well, Clinton is like a laid back uncle. They guy who will buy them beer when they're under age. Bob Dole, scary old neighbor. Guy who cuts up Nerf footballs that accidentally fall in his yard.

Dole: But don't they know Bob Dole is the better man?

Bush: Tough sell, Bob. Economy is strong, you claim it should be stronger. Crime low, you claim it should be lower. Status quo good, you claim it should be gooder.

Dole: I can beat Mondale!

(*SNL*, "The Fishing Dock" Sketch, November 2, 1996)

This sketch also included the point that Clinton was doing a fairly good job as President, so the voters were not compelled to change direction (as they had done with Bush). Additionally, it carried the theme that Dole was a confused old man (with the "Mondale" line). *SNL* did an entire sketch devoted to mocking Dole for falling off a stage at a campaign rally in September, 1996 (*SNL*, "ABC News Election Report" Sketch, September 28, 1996). The fact that Dole seemed poised to lose to Clinton, both because of the poll numbers, and his having to go up against the charismatic Clinton in debates, was the subject of many sketches - "Mr. Dole, we also appreciate you taking time out from your grueling and hopeless campaign to talk with us tonight. For a man your age that can't be very easy" (*SNL*, "ABC News Election Report" Sketch, September 28, 1996) and numerous "Weekend Update" jokes:

...today both candidates were at Hartford's Bushnell Auditorium for some last minute fine tuning [for the last debate]. President Clinton is still deciding which themes to emphasize in his opening remarks. While Bob Dole is deciding whether to pull the fire alarm or phone in a bomb threat. (*SNL*, "Weekend Update," October 5, 1996)

Our top story tonight, according to a new CNN poll Republican candidate Bob Dole now trails President Clinton by 15 points. A Dole campaign spokesman says that despite this numbers it is possible for them to reach their ultimate goal, to lose by 7 points. (*SNL*, "Weekend Update," October 19, 1996)

Several of the personal jokes and sketches were actually about both Dole and Clinton. They summarized the contest between the men as Dole being the more morally upstanding man and a war hero, but was so stiff and unable to connect with the voters, that Clinton could do anything he wanted and still win.

In the Midwest last week, Bob Dole charged that if President Clinton is reelected, he'll put Hillary Clinton in charge of welfare reform. Asked to respond, President Clinton said, "Yes, it's true. Also Chelsea will be secretary of state and my brother Roger will take over as Drug Czar. Oh, and one more thing. I'm still going to win." (*SNL*, "Weekend Update," September 28, 1996)

Clinton: I'm at a point where I'm relaxed, where I feel like I've grown into the office of the Presidency of the United States of America. And you know what else? Hey America, guess what? I inhaled! I inhaled, then I exhaled, then I inhaled again. In fact, I filled a scuba tank with dope smoke and swam the English Channel. (*SNL*, "ABC News Election Report" Sketch, September 28, 1996)

As it turned out, *SNL* was correct in these suppositions. Although Republicans themselves, along with late-night comedians, continuously mentioned Clinton's "character issues," they were not enough to cost him either election. The need to change direction from the Reagan/Bush years in 1992, and the relatively good state of the economy in 1996, made the "character issue" less relevant, despite Republicans trying to start a "Culture War" (as Pat Buchanan essentially called for in his 1996 Republican National Convention Keynote Address). Thus, personality-Based humor was the norm on *SNL* in 1992 and 1996.

JOURNALISM EXAMINES ROLE OF COMEDY PROGRAMS IN ELECTIONS

Although there was not a lot of utilization of the narratives on late night television comedy by the journalists to stand in for their own opinions, during these election cycles, there were two more pertinent changes from the 1980s. Besides examining the very personality-based humor, they realized and discussed the relevance the programs were having on public sphere conversations about the elections, questioning the more

prominent role of late night comedy on television in the democratic process, and increasingly began to reflect on politicians appearing on the programs. Was it “undignified” for the politicians to appear on them in order to gain exposure and seem more relatable? Would it somehow “cheapen” our Democracy? Would celebrity status trump policy positions? Tom Shales of the *Post* certainly thought so in 1992:

But surely dignity was one of the first victims of the 1992 presidential race as it was run on television, where all campaigns are now fought. The talkshowfication of America continues apace; now the political process is conquered too. Perhaps when 1996 rolls around, presidential candidates will take turns popping up... just to show they're regular Joes. And Janes. They can play themselves on “Saturday Night Live.”...Four years ago, this sort of thing didn't happen. The scaling down and informalizing of everything hadn't gone quite so far...It is true that John Kennedy, Richard Nixon and other political figures appeared with Jack Paar on “The Tonight Show” and on Paar's prime-time hour in the late '50s and early '60s...But the Paar show wasn't the center ring for the entire political process. No other talk show was, either.²²

It is true that politicians would make an increasing amount of appearances on *SNL* and other late night comedy programs in later years, at least in part for the reason that Shales here gives – to make them seem like “regular people.” However, Shales either changes his mind or contradicts himself, when he said four years later that “Some people may worry that Forbes did something to damage his dignity by appearing on the

²² Shales, Tom. 1992. “On the Tube: All Talked Out.” *Washington Post*, November 2, p. D1.

show...dignity? The guy was part of a presidential primary! What could be less dignified than that? ” (*Washington Post*, April 15, 1996, p. C01). It is as if it had become less of a problem, or that he simply accepted its inevitability. But by contrast, other journalists saw it as simply the way things were changing in the election in an increasingly mediated public sphere:

This year is not the first time Presidential candidates have made appearances in unorthodox forums; in 1984, for example, Gary Hart appeared on “Saturday Night Live”...But in 1992, such appearances are becoming so commonplace that some viewers would not be surprised to see President Bush pay a visit to Jay Leno.²³

This is a prescient comment. Candidates appearances on talk shows did in fact increase after this election cycle; more on the reasons why in later chapters. Other than to seem like they are “regular Joes,” which is only part of the story, *why* were politicians increasingly going on the comedy programs? This question remained unanswered by journalist in the 1990s.

Contributing to knowledge about the political process in the public sphere was also something that talk shows actually did in greater and greater amounts as time went on. But in the 1992 and 1996 election cycles, the journalists merely observed the phenomenon, and did not attempt, or were unable to, explain why it was happening. When then, did Tom Brokaw go on the *Tonight Show* to say what he really thought about the Democratic National Convention, as was discussed in the *Times* in 1992?

²³ Kolbert, Elizabeth. 1992. “The 1992 Campaign: Media; Whistle-Stops a la 1992: Arsenio, Larry and Phil.” *New York Times*, June 5, p. A18.

“I did an actual calculation,” Mr. Brokaw quipped in a live report to Mr. Leno from Madison Square Garden early yesterday morning. “If he had spoken for another 10 minutes, his speech would have been longer than Ross Perot’s Presidential campaign.” Welcome to the new world of political broadcasting, where viewers may have learned as much about the Democratic convention on Music Television, Comedy Central and even The Tonight Show as from the network news programs...In this year of talk-show politics, the melding of news and entertainment was probably inevitable...On Comedy Central, a cable network whose “Indecision ‘92” offered more coverage than ABC, CBS and NBC...Those who were not sated by NBC News’s coverage could switch on “Late Night with David Letterman” to see Gov. Ann Richards of Texas, who presided over the event...²⁴

Was Ann Richards on Letterman’s show just because of “the melding of news and entertainment”? Why was this phenomenon occurring? The journalists did not offer an explanation. Since these questions went unexamined, and because they were part of it, the journalists failed to see what was happening to the official public sphere; namely that it was not adequately exploring the candidates and the issues surrounding them, a job that was increasingly becoming the role of entertainment media. Although much of the humor on *SNL* in particular was personal, and not substantive during these election cycles, the severity of the commentary and vitriol against the Republican candidates in particular

²⁴ Berke, Richard L. 1992. “The 1992 Campaign: Convention Humor; When TV Turns Politics Into a Laughing Matter.” *New York Times*, July 18, p. A10.

may have reflected more of the national feelings towards them than the journalists dared to write about. Accordingly, often journalists did not see the comedy as either interesting or contributing to democratic process. A commentary in praise of Bill Maher's then-new ABC show, *Politically Incorrect*, included a comparison to *SNL*'s "Weekend Update" segment, which was said to have "become tame and unfunny" (*New York Times* February 22, 1996, p.C13). This is in fact rather contradictory, given that other commentators found *SNL*'s and the talk show hosts' humor vicious. The fact the late-night comedy at this time was so incredibly focused on personal characteristics of the politicians made them seem to some journalists formulaic, repetitive, and completely unfunny:

It used to be his routines were clever, sarcastic commentaries on American pop culture, especially television. Now all Leno wants to joke about, in his nightly opening monologues, is politics...endless variations on gags about George Bush's failures, Dan Quayle's incompetence, Ross Perot's lack of stick-to-itivity, Teddy Kennedy's sex life...He's doing political jokes to the exclusion of almost all other kinds. And not particularly good political jokes, either.²⁵

Late night televised comedy was said to be a news source for younger people who do not often traditional news sources (*New York Times*, July 9, 1996, p. A17). The *Times* noted that "A recent survey for the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press found that 40 percent of people under 30 - and 25 percent of adults overall - say they learned something about the 1996 campaign from late-night television humor" (*New York*

²⁵ Shales, Tom. 1992. "Jay Leno Missing His Funny Bone." *Washington Post*, July 30, p. C1.

Times, July 14, 1996, p. D7). If the shows were so unfunny and predictable, why were so many people getting news about the elections from them? There was scarcely any discussion about this, which would seem like an obvious question. Journalists in these election cycles were either not yet able or were unwilling to be reflexive about the changes that were taking place in people's consumption of news, a change that would only intensify in subsequent years.

THE PAPERS EXAMINE PERSONALITY-DRIVEN HUMOR

Ross Perot and Dan Quayle were late-night comedy's prime targets in the 1990s. Although he ran in both 1992 and 1996, Ross Perot was a much greater factor in the former of the two election cycles. His appearance, speech, and demeanor were tailor-made to be satirized on *SNL*, as the previous analysis indicates. Journalists in the *Post* and the *Times* saw his candidacy through the lens of late-night political humor. Perot's indecisiveness about running and bizarre accusations about the Bush campaign were seen as ultimately harmful to democracy, and the jabs were well-deserved:

The overpowering aroma of mendacity is in the air, and George Bush, Bill Clinton and Ross Perot have accomplished something that seemed impossible: They have made cynical American voters even more cynical... Letterman took note of the feckless mood in a top 10 list of voter pet peeves. "You spend a week painting 'Ross Perot for President' on your family car and he drops out. You

spend a week scraping ‘Ross Perot for President’ off your family car and he’s back in.”²⁶

One thing that only increased over time, both on *SNL* and the newspapers’ commentary about it and other late-night political comedy, were jokes about the intelligence of Vice President Dan Quayle. In the 1988 election cycle, he had only begun to commit gaffes and say strange things. But the “potato” incident, and his criticism of the fictional television character Murphy Brown’s life choices, increased mentions of him dramatically: “David Letterman immediately booked William Figueroa, the 12-year-old who had spelled the word correctly. (*Washington Post*, June 21, 1992, p. A16). In fact, comedy about Quayle in the 1992 election cycle was so prevalent, there was practically none about George Bush by comparison. Often, the journalists used quotes from late night comedians to reinforce and editorialize about Quayle without directly having to do so: “...Quayle is still more than capable of pulling a stunning boner. His recent misspelling of the word “potato”... prompted Jay Leno to remark: “Maybe the Vice President should stop watching ‘Murphy Brown’ and start watching ‘Sesame Street’” (*New York Times*, July 5, 1992, p. F11). In a close election, this type of comedy was in fact seen as a potential deciding factor. Bush could not afford even the slightest negative impact on the Republican ticket:

How big a drag is Quayle? Martin Wattenberg, a political scientist at the University of California at Irvine, has studied how much vice presidential

²⁶ Dowd, Maureen. 1992. “The 1992 Campaign: Political Week; When Trust Is at Issue, The Trusted Are Scarce.” *New York Times*, September 29, p. A18.

nominees help or hurt their tickets in every election since 1952. “Quayle hurts the ticket more than any vice president we have data on,” said Wattenberg... “He’s seen as a fool,” said Mark Penn, a political consultant and pollster... “Is this race such that Bush can win with a [perceived] fool on the ticket? No.”²⁷

S. Robert Lichter, the director of the Center for Media and Public Affairs, an organization financed by conservative political groups mainly to conduct sociological studies of the media [said Quayle] “...had been relegated to occasional use as the symbol of any stupid or childlike behavior,” Mr. Lichter said. “Clearly he had worked hard to try to rehabilitate his image. But his face just went back up on the dartboard.” ...The subject of [Letterman’s] nightly top 10 list: “Dan Quayle’s top 10 other complaints about TV.” Among the selections... “‘China Beach’ failed to show Vietnam War contribution of Indiana National Guard.”²⁸

The trend of the journalists using the comedy as a stand-in for their own opinions would only increase in future election cycles. Still, it is important to note that the comedy here was still almost entirely personal, and not policy based or substantive, even if it may have had an influence on voters. As the *Times* noted:

...millions of late-night viewers surely do not receive the most uplifting impressions of their leaders - one man known variously as Tubby and Fat Boy,

²⁷ “Morin, Richard. 1992. “Beyond the ‘Bounce’: A Very Close Election.” *Washington Post*, July 26, p. C1.

²⁸ Carter, Bill. 1992. “CBS Is Silent, but Then There’s the Next Season.” *New York Times*, May 21, p. B16.

who could become the first President to ride in a limousine with license plates made by the First Lady; and another so old his Social Security number is 2, and so crotchety his top priority is sitting on his porch in his bathrobe, shaking his fist at cars.²⁹

Personality-based humor affected Jerry Brown's Primary run, as perception of the candidates' personalities overrode attention to their actual policies. *SNL*'s portrayal of "Mr. Brown at a "Star Trek" convention, that [seizing] upon the image [of "Governor Moonbeam"]" is mentioned in the same paragraph as voters being unable to think of him otherwise, and that "He hasn't changed that perception" (*New York Times*, April 12, 1992, p. A32).

Non-substantive political humor was particularly observed by journalists in the 1996 election cycle, and they agreed that the comedy on *SNL* and the late-night talk shows had grown even *more* personal over the last four years, and was influential, but not informative to the political process:

Clinton jokes fall into two categories: "cheatin' and eatin'," as one wit put it. Mr. Dole is portrayed as humorless, expressionless and very, very old. The comedians say they are merely following the lead of the news media in raising certain subjects, like candidates' marital lives, that were once left alone. The comics, however, tend to harp on these themes nightly. Many political strategists think the

²⁹ Bennet, James. 1996. "Politics: The Laugh Meter; Did You Hear the One About the '96 Campaign?" *New York Times*, July 9, p. A17.

late-night comedians have an uncanny ability to peg which candidates' qualities and what public miscues will stick in people's minds.³⁰

"You don't change anyone's mind with this stuff," said Mr. Leno... "You just reinforce what they already believe." If that is true, late-night humor this year is remarkable for what it reveals about conceptions of the candidates. As they have for generations the political jokes focus not on Government policies but on candidates' perceived foibles and personal vulnerabilities... "What's different here is that there is a sharpness and there is a coarseness, and there is a personal quality to this stuff, particularly with this President," said Andrew Kohut, the director of the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press...³¹

In 1996, the Republicans took the brunt of the humor on the TV programs and the papers took note of it. Dole supposedly tried to temper his image as particularly abrasive a bit after his losses in the 1992 Primary campaign after he successfully became the nominee in 1996. But his old image lived on and was intensified in the way Norm MacDonald both parodied him and talked about him on *SNL*'s "Weekend Update" segment.

But while Mr. Dole's calm demeanor in 1996 is emerging as one of the more intriguing aspects of this campaign - and challenging some people's long-held

³⁰ Bennet, James. 1996. "Word for Word/Late-Night Comics; Joking About Bill, Bob and Hillary with Dave, Jay and Conan." *New York Times*, July 14, p. D7.

³¹ Bennet, James. 1996. "Politics: The Laugh Meter; Did You Hear the One About the '96 Campaign?" *New York Times*. July 9, p. A17.

perceptions of the presumed Republican Presidential candidate - in other quarters Mr. Dole's reputation lives on. That is evidenced by...the continuing parodies of him on "Saturday Night Live"...³²

First and foremost, as was shown in the analysis of *SNL* above, Dole was portrayed on all the late-night comedy programs as being as old as Methuselah. This clearly was an easy, if not lazy, way to characterize him and certainly had nothing to do with his policies. But even the Clinton campaign used the image, furthered by the comedy, to their advantage, which the journalists noted:" ...the old-guy bashing of Mr. Dole in political cartoons and late-night comedy routines has reached an intensity that makes the jokes about Ronald Reagan in the 1980's seem like gentle kidding (*New York Times*, May 5, 1996, p. D1). As a result, Elizabeth Dole went on a Public Relations campaign on Letterman and Leno to try and counteract the image of the mean, old foggy that *SNL* especially characterized her husband as being. The papers noted her going on the programs, including presenting David Letterman's "Top Ten List" in October, 1996. Additionally, she appeared on Jay leno:

Earlier this week, the 60-year-old Mrs. Dole even shed her custom-tailored business suit and high heels for jeans, a black leather jacket and boots and roared onto the Jay Leno show on the back of Mr. Leno's motorcycle. If she could

³² Nagourney, Adam. 1996. "With a Smile, Dole Tries to Fight a Stern Reputation." *New York Times*, June 10, p. B10.

convince late-night viewers that she was hip, the theory went, they might take another look at her husband.³³

Even though he was mentioned only a handful of times, no one received as much direct vitriol as Pat Buchanan on *SNL* and the other programs. His unsuccessful primary campaigns were significant, in that they increased the focus on the “culture war” (which was the subject of his Keynote Address at the 1992 Republican National Convention³⁴). Journalists in the *Times* and the *Post* used the remarks on the comedy shows as a substitute for their own opinions:

The sassy sociological observers of late-night TV are having a ball with Patrick Buchanan. David Letterman said Buchanan is “going to take a couple of days off after the New Hampshire primary and then invade Poland.” Jay Leno said Buchanan’s campaign was generating the most heat - “It’s mostly from burning books and crosses,” he said, “but it’s heat.”³⁵

If the Clinton campaign was able to use television comedy to make points about Dole, then the Republicans certainly were able to do the same thing:

Last December, Letterman cracked that if Clinton gets any higher in the polls, “he’s gonna start dating again.” Soon afterward, Democratic Sen. Ernest Hollings

³³ Seelye, Katharine Q. 1996. “Politics: The Spouse; On the Trail, Dole’s Wife Seeks Votes of Women.” *New York Times*, October 5, p. A10.

³⁴ <http://buchanan.org/blog/1992-republican-national-convention-speech-148>

³⁵ Fisher, Marc. 1996. “Buchanan’s Brash Rhetoric Ruffles Convention.” *Washington Post*, February 22, p. A01.

repeated the joke to the Sumter, S.C., Item, whose article was faxed to White House reporters by local Republicans...the line was later used by Pat Buchanan, Rep. Robert Dornan, California GOP Chairman John Herrington and Newsweek's Howard Fineman.³⁶

But in comparison to what was said on *SNL* and other shows about the Republicans, despite all the jokes about his sexual proclivities, weight, drug use, draft-dodging, and “hatred” of his wife, the jokes about Clinton on late night television did not cut as deeply as those directed at the Republicans: “Clinton now enjoys a 15- to 20-point lead over Dole in the national polls, despite the fact that jokes about his morals have become standard fare on late-night television (*Washington Post*, June 16, 1996, p. X05).” The *Times* noted that “the Clinton and Dole campaigns are taking the late-night jokes seriously” and that “that the jokes are increasing, and growing harsher;” further, “Political humor has long served as at least a lagging - if not a leading - indicator of public attitudes,” and “political analysts often seem to view the comics as rollicking successors to the late Walter Lippman, the influential columnist” (*New York Times*, July 9, 1996, p. A17). But even though there was a lot of silly personal humor about him, Clinton laughed it off in both election cycles: “He laughed especially hard at [an SNL] sequence that portrayed him as a bead-wearing hippy defending himself against accusations that he evaded the draft...” (*New York Times*, October 18, 1992, p. A28).

³⁶ Kurtz, Howard. 1996. “Clinton’s Caricature Sketch; Political Opponents Make Their Point with Barbed Wit.” *Washington Post*, June 4, p. D01.

CONCLUSION

Although Democrats during this era did become a larger target of the humor (Bill Clinton in particular), as was predicted by journalists in the previous election cycles, the humor remained personality-based, and was not particularly critical of policies, so did not do much to damage to them politically. Other than serious questions about Dan Quayle's intelligence that did not probe more deeply than his spelling abilities, these types of jokes did not appear to hurt the campaigns (according to the journalists in the *Times* and the *Post*). When an increasing amount of the politically-based humor on *SNL* came from the "Weekend Update" segments, and not the sketches, the tone of the jokes were so dependent upon the host of the segment (Day 2012). Ross Perot's insertion into the 1992 campaign was a significant reason why *SNL* was so distracted with personality-based humor in the 1992 election cycle, and Norm MacDonald's constant emphasis on Bob Dole's age and "crankiness" was the reason in 1996. This led to missed opportunities to make substantive jokes about real issues and politicians' responses to them that were going on in the country during these years

In the 1992 and 1996 election cycles, we have begun to see the groundwork laid for what would come in 200, 2004, and 2008: the mainstream media, the "serious" journalistic sphere, was beginning to erode as a primary source of news. After September 11, 2001, when the "news" did little to question what George W. Bush's administration was doing in response to the war, and late-night comedy in the form of the *Daily Show* began to increasingly fill a critical gap in questioning the official discourse, it is reasonable to see why. But as noted in this chapter, the process had already begun, even

before the *Daily Show* or the War on Terror had begun. The journalists had begun to see the comedy as much more influential on voters' attitudes, rather than just a reflection of them in contrast to the 1980's. The *Times* noted, as discussed above, that comedians may be on the path to becoming more like serious cultural analysts, like Walter Lippman; but they were not anywhere near the level of crucial commentators that they would become after 2001. But this was really the only attempt to contextualize what was beginning to happen with humor, but as for the "political analysts" that are mentioned, they go unnamed and their ideas go unspecified. In future election cycles, after the *Daily Show* and the *Colbert Report* begin to challenge the quality of news journalism, both on television and in print, journalists in these papers accept and are reflexive about the criticisms about TV, but not about their own failings and shortcomings (Jacobs and Michaud Wild 2013). This tendency has its roots in their general confusion about why democratically involved citizens were beginning to turn to satire as a source of news.

Increasingly in the 1992 and 1996 election cycles, journalists began to question the role of late night comedy on television in the democratic process. Would celebrity status trump policy positions? Tom Shales of the *Post* certainly thought so in 1992:

But surely dignity was one of the first victims of the 1992 presidential race as it was run on television, where all campaigns are now fought. The talkshowfication of America continues apace; now the political process is conquered too. Perhaps when 1996 rolls around, presidential candidates will take turns popping up... just to show they're regular Joes. And Janes. They can play themselves on "Saturday Night Live."...Four years ago, this sort of thing didn't happen. The scaling down

and informalizing of everything hadn't gone quite so far... It is true that John Kennedy, Richard Nixon and other political figures appeared with Jack Paar on "The Tonight Show" and on Paar's prime-time hour in the late '50s and early '60s... But the Paar show wasn't the center ring for the entire political process. No other talk show was, either.³⁷

It is true that politicians would make an increasing amount of appearances on *SNL* and other late night comedy programs in later years, at least in part for the reason that Shales here gives – to make them seem like "regular people." However, Shales either changes his mind or contradicts himself, when he said four years later that "Some people may worry that Forbes did something to damage his dignity by appearing on the show... dignity? The guy was part of a presidential primary! What could be less dignified than that? (*Washington Post*, April 15, 1996, p. C01)." It is as if it had become less of a problem, or that he simply accepted its inevitability. But by contrast, other journalists saw it as simply the way things were changing in the election in an increasingly mediated public sphere:

This year is not the first time Presidential candidates have made appearances in unorthodox forums; in 1984, for example, Gary Hart appeared on "Saturday Night Live"... But in 1992, such appearances are becoming so commonplace that some viewers would not be surprised to see President Bush pay a visit to Jay Leno.³⁸

³⁷ Shales, Tom. 1992. "On the Tube: All Talked Out." *Washington Post*, November 2, p. D1.

³⁸ Kolbert, Elizabeth. 1992. "The 1992 Campaign: Media; Whistle-Stops a la 1992: Arsenio, Larry and Phil." *New York Times*, June 5, p. A18.

Was it “undignified” for the politicians to appear on them in order to gain exposure and seem more relatable? Would it somehow “cheapen” our Democracy? These attitudes reflected the “news is becoming more like entertainment” lament of Postman (1985) and others; but this perspective soon becomes an oversimplified view of things. In the 2000 election cycle, there would be a shift towards entertainment becoming more like news because of two primary reasons. One, because of some structural changes in the landscape of such “entertainment media,” namely SNL’s “Weekend Update” segment going to a two-“anchor” format, as it had not been since its inception, and the premier of the *Daily Show* (which just as often came to be critical of the media’s coverage of politicians as well as their policies). And two, because of historical events, including the contested 2000 election and, later, traditional news journalism’s failures after September 11.

CHAPTER 5: THE 2000 ELECTION

The election cycle in 2000 was unlike previous election cycles in many key ways; of course, the most important difference was the contestation of the Florida voting results from the Gore campaign, which led to the landmark *Bush v. Gore* Supreme Court decision; the fact that the popular vote went to Gore, and the Electoral College went to Bush; and the resultant entrenchment of the political divisions in the United States that continues (and has intensified) to this day. Television comedy about the election of 2000 started off like many of the previous years; on *Saturday Night Live*, there was a single male comedian at the “Weekend Update” desk, who drove most of the comedy with his own characteristic tone; the jokes on all the late-night shows were very personality-driven; the programs tended to favor the Democratic candidate, although not by much. However, it was also a transitional election cycle for late-night comedy as well. The year 2000 was the first election cycle that the *Daily Show* (with Jon Stewart at the desk) covered. Journalists in the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times* noticed the uniqueness of the type of contribution that the *Daily Show* was making to political discourse during this election cycle, but only on a very superficial level. Although some commentators remarked that studies showed more of the younger viewers were likely to get political knowledge from “entertainment” programs, most of the commentary that was made on the newspapers during this time was negative comments about the saturation point of news becoming more like entertainment.

This year also marked the transformation of the “old” *SNL* to the “new” *SNL*. In the first half of the election cycle, the “Weekend Update” desk was anchored by Colin

Quinn; a white male, his jokes driven more by his personality and comedic style than the material, and entirely typical of the “Weekend Update” segment as it had always been. But the second half of the 2000 election cycle, beginning with the Fall season, saw a major departure; the desk was anchored by Jimmy Fallon, who was relatively young, and Tina Fey, the first woman to appear in the primary role (albeit as co-anchor). Journalists did not take note of this development at all, which would prove incredibly significant to political discourse in later years. Instead, they primarily focused on the perception that the candidates were becoming increasingly required to appear on late night comedy, including *SNL*, the *Tonight Show*, and *Late Night*, in order to seem more authentic. *SNL*’s “Weekend Update” segment also transitioned to a more substantive straight-news parody, most especially after Election Day had passed and the country still did not have a President Elect. The effect that this disputed election would have on late-night comedy would only be surpassed in later years by the effects of the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001; but the dispute served as a catalyst for structural changes in late-night television comedy that still exist. Two factors: the historically contingent events of this election (and later 9/11); and the structural changes in the industry came together to produce this transformation. In the 1990s, cable news had permitted greater enclaves of news and information ideological polarization to emerge, and the *Daily Show*’s change to a more substantive-based kind of satire program was a direct reaction to it (and later, the *Colbert Report*, would make this even more obvious). Even though the program’s effects would not be obvious until the next two election cycles, the irregularities of the 2000 election would provide an opening for it to become more influential in the future.

LATE NIGHT COMEDY IN THE 2000 ELECTION: THE TRANSITION

Over the entire election cycle on *SNL*, 31% of Weekend Update Jokes and sketches were directed at both or neither of the parties; 54.6% favored Democrats; and 14.4% favored Republicans. Unexpectedly, there were many more jokes that favored Democrats during Colin Quinn's time on "Weekend Update" than in the Fey/Fallon weeks. Of these jokes on this segment during Quinn's time, 8.7% were directed at both or neither of the parties; 19.6% favored Republicans; and 71.7% favored Democrats (Table 5). During the Fey/Fallon episodes, 45.5% were directed at both or neither of the parties; 45.5% favored Democrats; and 9% favored Republicans. Although the general trend was to favor Democrats, the Fey/Fallon weeks were clearly more balanced in their satire. Of all sketches and jokes before the election was held, 57.8% were directed at both or neither of the parties; 28.2% favored Democrats; and 14% favored Republicans. However, of all sketches and jokes after the election was held, during the Bush v. Gore debacle and just leading up to it, a slight shift towards favoring Democrats occurred: 38.5% of jokes and sketches were directed at both or neither of the parties; 46.1% favored Democrats; and 15.4% favored Republicans. It should be noted that this set of jokes and sketches were entirely during the Fey/Fallon weeks, and as most of the information being analyzed were jokes on "Weekend Update," there could be an effect due to this change.

Slant Towards? *SNL*, 2000 (Table 5)

	None	Democrats	Republicans
2000, Whole Election Cycle (97)	30 (31%)	53 (54.6%)	14 (14.4%)
Colin Quinn at Weekend Update Desk (46)	4 (8.7%)	33 (71.7%)	9 (19.6%)
Tina Fey and Jimmy Fallon at Weekend Update Desk (33)	15 (45.5%)	15 (45.5%)	3 (9%)
2000, Before Election Disputed (71)	41 (57.8%)	20 (28.2%)	10 (14%)
2000, After Election Disputed (26)	10 (38.5%)	12 (46.1%)	4 (15.4%)

But even though there was a stronger favoring of Democrats in the Quinn weeks, it is also important to note that there was a large increase in substantive jokes after Fey/Fallon took over, and also after the election was disputed. So, even though Quinn appears to favor the Democrats more, in general, he (and the accompanying sketches during his time period) relied upon the older formula of going after the personal characteristics of those running, rather than their competence or policy positions. Over the whole election cycle, there were practically no substantive jokes that favored Republicans and were aimed at Democrats, but the reverse was true when looking at substantive jokes favoring Democrats and against Republicans (7.2% versus 35.8%).

Personal or Substantive? *SNL*, 2000 (Table 6)

	Both	Personal	Substantive
2000, Whole Election Cycle (97)	12 (16.5%)	45 (56.7%)	26 (26.8%)
2000, Whole Election Cycle, Republicans (14)	3 (21.4%)	10 (71.4%)	1 (7.2%)
2000, Whole Election Cycle, Democrats (53)	7 (13.2%)	27 (51%)	19 (35.8%)
2000, Whole Election Cycle, No Slant (30)	6 (20%)	18 (60%)	6 (20%)
Colin Quinn at Weekend Update Desk (46)	5 (10.9%)	30 (65.2%)	11 (23.9%)
Tina Fey and Jimmy Fallon at Weekend Update Desk (33)	4 (12.1%)	18 (54.6%)	11 (33.3%)
2000, Before Election Disputed (71)	12 (16.9%)	45 (63.4%)	14 (19.7%)
2000, After Election Disputed (26)	4 (15.4%)	10 (38.5%)	12 (46.1%)

Similar to *SNL*, on the *Daily Show*, the jokes were mostly slanted towards the Democrats and aimed at Republicans (48.9%). Only 21.3% of jokes were aimed at Democrats, with

29.8% favoring neither party and aimed at candidates and policies from both of them (Table 7). This was more so the case before the election dispute – after the Election Day fiasco (which did not contain as many shows to sample from), jokes targets were evenly distributed among both candidates and parties.

Slant Towards? *Daily Show*, 2000 (Table 7)

	None	Democrats	Republicans
2000, Whole Election Cycle (47)	14 (29.8%)	23 (48.9%)	10 (21.3%)
2000, Before Election Disputed (41)	12 (29.3%)	21 (51.2%)	8 (19.5%)
2000, After Election Disputed (6)	2 (33.3%)	2 (33.3%)	2 (33.3%)

The distribution of personal versus substantive jokes in the 2000 election cycle was similar between the shows as well, with 29.8% being substantive, 53.3% being personal, and 14.9% including elements of both (Table 8). Of these, there were 70% of personal jokes that favored Republicans, and 20% substantive jokes that favored them, while there were only 47.8% of these that favored Democrats and 34.8% substantive jokes that favored them. Here we can see that more substantive jokes were aimed at Republicans, again similar what was happening on *SNL*. Bush was primarily mocked for his presumed past drug and alcohol use and his poor usage of English, but Gore was presented as stiff, boring, and uninspiring. After the election was disputed, the percentage of substantive

jokes went up (24.4% substantive before, and 57.1% substantive afterwards), again similar to the pattern on *SNL*. The stakes had gotten higher due to the fact that there was a major threat to democracy because of the potential for corruption in the state of Florida.

Personal or Substantive? *Daily Show*, 2000 (Table 8)

	Both	Personal	Substantive
2000, Whole Election Cycle (47)	7 (14.9%)	26 (55.3%)	14 (29.8%)
2000, Whole Election Cycle, Republicans (10)	1 (10%)	7 (70%)	2 (20%)
2000, Whole Election Cycle, Democrats (23)	4 (17.4%)	11 (47.8%)	8 (34.8%)
2000, Whole Election Cycle, No Slant (14)	2 (14.3%)	8 (57.1%)	4 (28.6%)
2000, Before Election Disputed (41)	7 (17.1%)	24 (58.5%)	10 (24.4%)
2000, After Election Disputed (7)	0 (0%)	3 (42.9%)	4 (57.1%)

Humor on *SNL* in the 2000 election cycle was most memorable for the impression of George W. Bush by Will Ferrell. Bush often used malapropisms like “misunderestimate” and “subliminal,” and mixed up phrases (“Families is where our nation finds hope, where wings take dream” -October 18, 2000) while speaking in public,

and Ferrell capitalized on these as a cornerstone of his impression. A vacant stare and an overly self-assured demeanor, despite appearing to know very little, were the physical characteristics of Ferrell's parody. There were two main personal stereotypes of Bush that comprised the majority of the content of sketches Ferrell was in as Bush: his reputation as a former "partier" and drug user, and his seeming like "the dumb guy" (*New York Times*, September 24, 2000, p. F72). These types of jokes were prevalent in sketches and "Weekend Update" jokes, both during Colin Quinn's era and the Tina Fey/Jimmy Fallon era. A typical joke about Bush's drug use by Quinn:

During Thursday night's GOP debate, George W. Bush vowed to stick to his \$483 tax cut by insisting on quote, "Tax cuts, so help me God." Some pundits felt this was a hollow claim, however, believing Bush probably used up all his favors from God in the 1970s when he was lying on bathroom floors with his heart racing. (*SNL*, "Weekend Update," January 8, 2000)

Although this piece from "Weekend Update" during Fey/Fallon referenced his policy positions on capital punishment, it mostly kept to jokes about Bush's past. This one, about revelations that both Bush and Cheney had past drunken driving arrests, is still mainly personal:

Bush says he kept the story of his arrest secret because he felt it did not set a good example for his daughters, preferring instead that they see him as a failed businessman who executes people..." That was a turning point in my life," said Bush. "I went home, took a long, hard look at myself in the mirror and decided

then and there to quit drinking in 10 years.”...Bush did question who was behind breaking the story just days before the election, saying,” I bet it was one of those creeps I used to do coke with.” (*SNL*, “Weekend Update,” November 4, 2000)

A segment on “Weekend Update” featured Ferrell appearing as Bush to talk about his newly-written autobiography, and implied that it was written quickly due to cocaine use:

Quinn: Governor Bush, first off...how do you have time to write a book while you are governor of Texas and a full-time presidential candidate?

Bush: Well, Col, I only sleep about 45 minutes a night. Plus, the book itself only took two days to write.

Quinn: Two days? The book’s over 250 pages!

Bush: I was a little wired that week! Uh...I’ve been doing some partying.

(*SNL*, “Weekend Update,” November 20, 1999)

George W. Bush as unintelligent was also a significant part of Ferrell’s impression of him and the subject of numerous “Weekend Update” segment jokes. However, they were almost entirely superficial, and did not address his competence as a politician or policymaker. One sketch portrayed Dana Carvey reprising his role as George H.W. Bush, trying to help his son seem less incompetent and more like him, but realizing that it might be a fruitless endeavor: “I know you’re not quite right in the head, son. Maybe it’s this dyslexia they keep talking about. Back when you were born, Babs and I called it ‘retardation.’ I guess no one says that anymore” (*SNL*, Sketch, Father and Son Go Hunting,” October 21, 2000). In another sketch, Bush’s father was portrayed as helping

the son with his “own” opinions, which should always be vague; this was a little bit substantive, in that it did mention policy, but it was not about the substance of the policy, thus making it more personality-based:

Son: What about Social Security?

Father: Should be very social...and very secure...Slip-sliding, that’s what I’m doing.

Son: Dad, you are awesome!

Father: That’s right. Now, you try.. Should we send the Gonzalez boy back to Cuba?

Son: I don’t give a rat’s ass!

Father: No! No, no, no! You can’t say that! You should have said, “The little brown one - should he go or stay? Don’t know. Can’t say. Wouldn’t be prudent!

(*SNL*, Sketch, “Father and Son Bush.” April 8, 2000)

All of these characterizations made Bush seem flaky, but did not specifically address his capabilities as a political actor. The one substantive area that candidate Bush was mocked for was the State of Texas’ propensity to execute many people while he was Governor:

An entire school showed up at a George W. Bush rally in Dearborn, Michigan this week to complain to the governor that their building is unsafe and they lack books and teachers. A sympathetic Bush promised that if elected, he’ll take care of the

students the best way he knows how, by executing them. (*SNL*, “Weekend Update,” October 14, 2000)

But these were mere exaggerations for comedic effect and did not get at the potential policy implications should he become President.

While *SNL* mainly focused on Bush’s personal characteristic of seeming like “the dumb guy,” and making fun of his rumored college-age drug use, the *Daily Show* was more likely to focus on Bush appearing mean or unsympathetic. While this was also not a substantive issue, it demonstrates that the *Daily Show* was more interested in issues about his character that *were* relevant, timely, and empirically demonstrable. Arguably the most memorable example of Bush’s demeanor which the *Daily Show* commented on that was actually pertinent came when Bush appeared on *Late Night* and had an extremely awkward interview via satellite with Letterman. In January 2000, David Letterman underwent emergency heart surgery, and had a quadruple bypass; he returned a few weeks later. In March, during an interview with the candidate, Bush made an incredibly tasteless joke referencing Letterman’s near-death health scare, which was met with boos from the audience. The *Daily Show* highlighted this:

Bush’s Letterman appearance was quickly hailed as “A train wreck the likes of which America hasn’t seen since *The Fugitive*, and showed the Texan brandishing his very own form of compassionate conservatism:

Letterman: I want to remind you of one thing, here, the road to Washington runs through me, you’re aware of that, aren’t you?

Bush: It's about time you had the heart to invite me. (audience boos)

Letterman: You keep saying you're a uniter, not a divider...

Bush: That's true.

Letterman: What exactly does that mean?

Bush: It means that when it comes time to sew up your chest cavity we use stitches as opposed to opening it up...

Stewart: Bush's aides reassured the governor that he killed, and when the audience groans, it's a sign you're really getting through to them. (*Daily Show*, March 2, 2000)

Later, the *Daily Show* also showed how Bush's character was demonstrated when he was overheard talking to running mate Dick Cheney at a campaign stop about a *New York Times* reporter who was in the audience:

This weekend, George W. Bush gave us a glimpse of how wars might start if he was president, when a microphone picked up this comment he made to running mate Dick Cheney about a New York Times reporter:

"There's Adam Clymer, Major League asshole from the New York Times."

Now, we can't be 100% sure what that bleeped word was, but the NY Daily News reported that Bush called the reporter a quote: "@\$#&*!" We here at the Daily Show think that may be just a dreadful misspelling of "asshole." We're not sure... (*Daily Show*, September 5, 2000)

The comment about “how wars might start” shows that the *Daily Show* and Jon Stewart were focused on linking Bush’s character issues to his competency to be President, and not just about scoring points about his past or intelligence.

Bush as the “rich guy” who was more easily able to overcome his past alcoholism because he most likely had access to adequate treatment and counseling was highlighted when he appeared on *The Oprah Winfrey Show* in an interview satirized by Jon Stewart on September 20th, 2000, where Oprah asked him softball questions (as one would expect), and Bush tried to appear more genuine by bringing up his struggles:

Bush: Alcohol was beginning to compete for my affections...for my wife and my family...

Stewart: But Oprah didn’t pull any punches with the candidate, as she throttled the Texas Governor with questions like, “What was the best gift you’ve ever given?”

Bush responds that he gave his wife Laura the Promenade to the SMU library (to be named after her), thus totally negating his effort to seem normal. In contrast, the portrayal of Bush as the “dumb guy” on *SNL* made him more relatable to the general public.

Will Farrell’s parody of Bush in the 2000 election cycle was best represented by a sketch on October 7th, 2000, in which Bush and Gore were having their first debate. It included Bush being questioned by the moderator about political crises in Eastern Europe and Slobodan Milosevic’s policies, but Bush would not answer. Instead he said “I’m not going to pronounce any of their names tonight, because I don’t believe that’s in our

national interest.” Bush as “dumb guy” was cemented when Chris Parnell, playing debate moderator Jim Lehrer, asked the candidates “to sum up, in a single word, the best argument for his candidacy” at the end of the sketch. Bush/Ferrell simply replies “strategery.” Although this was not a malapropism Bush himself actually used, it came to represent all of his vocabulary mistakes. But even though being unintelligent and mixing up words is not a positive trait for a presidential candidate, it was balanced by Darrell Hammond’s portrayal of Al Gore, depicted as wooden and uncharismatic. Was *SNL* trying to convince the audience that neither candidate was a good choice? Both of the parodies were mainly about personal characteristics. The *New York Times* described the race, and the parodies of the candidates, as “The Stiff Guy vs. the Dumb Guy.” (September 24, 2000, p. F72). The portrayal of Gore as being boring, impersonal, and using jargon was also evident in the “First Presidential Debate” sketch, when, asked by Parnell/Lehrer to sum up *his* campaign, simply replied “lockbox,” referring to Gore’s plan to only allow Medicare payroll taxes to strengthen Medicare, and not be used for Congress members’ “pork barrel” projects. Darrell Hammond would also appear on “Weekend Update” playing soon-to-be-former President Clinton, and commenting on the race, and the poor choices that the voters had between Bush and Gore: “Look, I love this guy. You know that, but come on. English is Al Gore’s second language. His native tongue is binary code” (*SNL*, “Weekend Update,” February 5, 2000). Gore was portrayed as emotionless, but little was said about his policies: “During an interview this week on ‘60 Minutes’, Al Gore denied that he was angry about the election, saying, ‘Anger? What would be the point of feeling that way?...Seriously. Tell me. I am fascinated by your human emotions’” (*SNL*, “Weekend Update,” December 9, 2000). Similar to *SNL*, Gore

was mocked on the *Daily Show* for being boring and difficult to listen to for a sustained period of time: “Al Gore’s speech was described as “electrifying,” in as much as it made listeners want to climb into a bathtub with a space heater” (*Daily Show*, May 31, 2000). Gore’s association with Bill Clinton, who was ending his second term in scandal and impeachment hearings, was portrayed as a deficit to his public image: “With his crucial victory in the New Hampshire primary, insiders feel Vice President Al Gore might be getting a tad bit overconfident. Earlier today he actually allowed his photograph to be taken with this man (showing a picture of Clinton) ” (*SNL*, “Weekend Update,” February 5, 2000).

Ultimately, though, the thread that ran through most of *SNL*’s parodies of both Bush and Gore (before the election dispute took place) were that they were very similar in their personal backgrounds, and that it did not matter much who the voters chose, because both would be the wrong choice. Several sketches characterized them as basically the same; two combined satire of substantive issues, but the rest were personal. In the sketch that parodied the third Presidential debate, a person in the audience questions Bush as to how his policies differ from Gore’s, but he could not articulate an answer, either because he was not good at discussing his own policies, or, more likely, he was perceived as not being very different from Gore in the first place:

Audience Member: Governor Bush, I’ve been following the campaign very closely, but I need to know more about where the candidates stand on the issues I really care about: protecting a woman’s right to choose; dealing with global warming; and fighting the big oil companies; and HMOs. Do you and the Vice-

President have any differences on these issues, which would help me decide which one to support? Right now, I have no idea.

Bush: ...that's a very good question...and uh...there are differences between the Vice-President and myself on those issues.

Audience Member: I did not realize that. (*SNL*, Sketch, "Third Presidential Debate," October 21, 2000)

This sketch was both a parody of Gore's difficulties in articulating his differences from Bush, as well as mocking voters who were not paying close enough attention to something very important. On "Weekend Update," their "political correspondent," Kevin Brennan, discussed the personal characteristics of Bush and Gore's similar backgrounds:

Brennan: So, it looks like we're down to two candidates - Republican George W. Bush, and Democrat Al Gore. Let's look at how they're different: Gore went to Harvard, whereas Bush went to Yale. Bush's father used to be President, but Gore's father used to be a Senator. They both served in the military during Vietnam. Gore was a roving reporter who never roved near enemy lines, and Bush served in the Texas National Guard where he did an excellent job keeping the Viet Cong out of Dallas. (*SNL*, "Weekend Update," March 11, 2000)

One major difference between *SNL* and the *Daily Show* was that the *Daily Show* did *not* emphasize the sameness of the party nominees' policy positions as much as *SNL* did. One sketch portrayed both Gore and primary challenger Bill Bradley as puppets:

Stewart: The State of New Hampshire turned into a political Thunder Dome last night, one that two men entered, and 500 desperately wanted to leave. Vice President Al Gore and Presidential hopeful Bill Bradley sparred in the first Democratic Town hall of the 2000 campaign. Since CNN was kind enough to impose a media blackout on the event, the Daily Show's in-house political puppeteer was asked to capture the essence of the debate.

Puppet 1: Me too!

Puppet 2: Me too!

Puppet 1: And me too! (*Daily Show*, October 28, 1999)

But the *Daily Show* did not make the choice between Gore and Bush later on as more or less the same, as did *SNL*.

An important substantive area that the *Daily Show* pointed out was Bush's campaign tactic of emphasizing that he would be very different from Clinton. However, Clinton's policies led to economic growth that was well above average. It was strange that Bush would try to use this to his advantage. At the Iowa caucuses after his victory, Bush remarked: "And tonight also marks the beginning of the end of the Clinton era." Stewart responded to this by stating, "Yeah, he added, an era when Iowa's unemployment level fell to below 2%, and y'all made more money than ever imaginable. Enough is enough!" (*Daily Show*, January 25, 2000). Stewart joked about Bush's allegiance to special interest groups like the National Rifle Association, a substantive issue that was not brought up by *SNL*:

The George W. Bush campaign is scrambling to defend itself against a new advertisement released by a pro-gun control lobby group. The ad shows behind the scenes footage of an NRA meeting, where officials boast of the influence that they'll have should Bush be elected... (they talk of having "unbelievably friendly relations)...how friendly you ask? Let's just say by Bush's inauguration, history books will be saying JFK slipped in the shower. (*Daily Show*, May 8, 2000)

The *Daily Show* also pointed out times when Bush was being hypocritical about substantive policy issues. Bush accused Gore of being insincere because of his changing stances on campaign finance, Medicare, and tobacco; however, Bush pandered to the Log Cabin Republicans, a cynical and duplicitous move if one took into account his policy positions on issues like same-sex marriage and gays serving in the military:

George W. Bush avoided his campaign's first nosebleed by agreeing to meet with the Log Cabin Republicans, group of gay Republicans, or, more specifically, four gay Republicans. Bush claims it's all part of an effort to reach out to non-traditional Republican voters. You know, without actually touching them. (*Daily Show*, April 13, 2000)

Perhaps presaging the problems that would emerge in the Florida election results, the *Daily Show* also discussed Bush's problems with African Americans. His appearance at an NAACP event was described as having "provided him with a refreshing chill on a hot

July evening,” and trying to link the modern GOP with past Republicans like Abraham Lincoln, pandering hypocritically once again (*Daily Show*, July 13, 2000).

A main reason the *Daily Show* distinguished itself from *SNL* was its satirical engagement with the actual candidates. During the Primary, Daily Show Correspondent Steve Carell tried to go on McCain’s campaign bus, but was disappointed to find that he had to go on the “overflow” bus instead – not for major journalists. However, by the end of the sketch, he convinced McCain’s wife Cindy to let him on the real bus. He then interviews McCain, feigning seriousness about economic policy after several softball questions:

Carell: Let’s do a lightening round. Your favorite book?

McCain: For Whom the Bell Tolls.

Carell: Favorite movie?

McCain: Viva Zapata.

Carell: Charlton Heston?

McCain: Marlon Brando.

Carell: Close enough. If I were a tree, I would be a...?

McCain: If I were a tree I’d be a root. What does that mean?

Carell: Senator, how do you reconcile the fact that you were one of the most vocal critics of Pork Barrel Politics, and yet, while you were chairman of the Commerce Committee, it set a record for unauthorized appropriation? (McCain looks uneasy.) I’m just kidding! I don’t even know what that means! (*Daily Show*, December 16, 1999)

Even though Carell backed off at the end, the exchange showed that the *Daily Show* was not afraid to take risks. This exchange would be noticed by journalists in the mainstream press, which I discuss below, though they fail to understand its full significance.

Additionally, it showed that McCain could be taken off guard and made to look less confident than he would like. This would become a major weapon in the show's narrative arsenal in later years.

A handful of *SNL* jokes and sketches were devoted to particular concerns should George W. Bush become president; fears that, in retrospect turned out to be, in part, quite prophetic. One joke on "Weekend Update" seemed to predict the election controversies and point out the connections in the Bush family that could give him undue advantage (albeit in California, and not in Florida, and focusing on his father, and not his brother, as it turned out: "Despite trailing Al Gore in polls in California, Governor Bush says that he does not plan to let the Vice President win that liberal state in November. When asked how he plans on doing that, Bush replied, 'My father ran the CIA. We'll think of something'" (*SNL*, "Weekend Update", April 15, 2000). Another hinted at the economic disasters that would befall the U.S. later on in his administration:

The Federal Reserve Tuesday raised short term interest rates by half a percentage point in an effort to slow down the economy. Republicans this week blasted Fed Chairman Alan Greenspan's decision and continued to push their own plan to slow down the economy. (Shows picture of G.W. Bush) (*SNL*, "Weekend Update," May 20, 2000)

Finally, there were two instances, one “Weekend Update” joke, and one sketch, that hinted at unease and worry about what another Bush in the White House might do in terms of going to war over oil, a perception that was held by some in regards to President George H. W. Bush’s Gulf War in the early 1990’s: “...Bush this week blamed President Clinton for the recent increase in gas prices and said if he were president, he’d abolish the gas tax, and if necessary, go to war with Alaska and steal their oil” (*SNL*, “Weekend Update,” March 18, 2000). In the episode right before the election was held, *SNL* showed three sketches spoofing what each of the three major candidates’ presidencies might look like (Bush, Gore, and Nader). The sketch about Bush’s presidency was uncanny. Will Ferrell’s Bush was being made to give a press conference by an advisor about the problems that he had caused in his first two weeks in the Oval Office:

Bush: Hey, America! So, how we all doing out there, huh? Yeah, not so good. I broke the Hoover Dam...we had that war thing happen. But I mean, who ever heard of a Civil War, anyway? What is that? (he grabs a pair of fake binoculars, unscrews the lens, then pours alcohol from it into his mouth) I have missed you, ol’ buddy!...Whoo! I think we can agree, Americans, that these have been a difficult first two years of my presidency.

Advisor: You’ve been President for two weeks! (*SNL*, “A Glimpse of Our Possible Future Part I” Sketch, November 4, 2000)

Although Bush did not cause an actual Civil War, the war against Iraq that he and his administration started divided Americans and erased the feeling of unity many felt after the attacks of September 11, 2001.

SATIRE ON *SNL* AND THE *DAILY SHOW* FOLLOWING ELECTION DISPUTE

Although Bush and Gore were portrayed as similar to each other on *SNL* before the election took place, and there was a great focus on their personal characteristics, after the election did not produce a clear result, *SNL* made more substantively-focused jokes than before. These dealt with the possible effects that severely Conservative policies would have on society, and also with the perceived corruption of the Florida election decisions. After the election, there was a period of time that lasted several weeks before the election was finally decided. In this period on *SNL*, there were 11 substantive jokes and sketches, 9 personal ones, and 4 that were both substantive and personal. Right after Election Day, *SNL* starts off as more lighthearted with their humor, exemplified by a sketch from November 11, 2000, called “The Presidential Couple,” in a parody of the television sit-com *The Odd Couple*, where Bush and Gore both take up residence in the White House as Co-Presidents. Gore was portrayed as the man who would deal with the serious issues, while Bush would just goof off and not take anything seriously:

Bush: Just think of the hilarious possibilities of having two presidents who hate each other’s guts!

Gore: For example, I might be having a crucial summit meeting to discuss foreign policy in China...

Bush: And then I'll leave my laundry lying around in humorous piles!...

Gore: Now, what happens...what happens if we come to a complete standstill on an issue facing the nation?

Bush: Like, what if Al wants to appoint a pro-choice justice to the Supreme Court, and I want to appoint the Texas Rangers?

Gore: Well, don't worry, America...George W. came up with a fair and impartial system by which we can arbitrate any conceivable dispute.

Bush: It's called Rock, Paper, Scissors. I learned it in college.

Another sketch featured Gore and Bush's brother, the Governor of Florida Jeb Bush, discussing George W.'s perceived lack of intelligence:

Gore: Jeb, let me ask you something. You seem to care a lot about this country. When you saw your brother actually had a chance of winning, were you ever tempted to tell everyone how he's...well, you know...“special”?

Jeb Bush: Shh.. I tried...but believe me - the more people that learned about his disability, the more popular he became...like Tom Arnold. (*SNL*, Sketch “Palm Beach,” December 9, 2000).

Additionally, there was a great deal of focus on the personal life, and personal characteristics, of Katherine Harris, the Florida Secretary of State who was responsible for throwing out a number of disputed ballots, which essentially decided the election:

First, she set a deadline for the recount, then she was overruled, now she has been stripped of her ability to certify the Florida votes. Katherine Harris hasn't gotten this much attention since Spring Break '77. Look at her, she looks divorced. She looks like the woman being cheated on in a Mexican soap opera. Katherine, honey, there's another setting on your make-up mirror. It's called "daytime" (*SNL*, "Weekend Update," November 18, 2000)

Jokes on "Weekend Update" also mocked the voters of Florida for their inability to understand how the ballots actually worked, mainly because of the stereotype that many elderly people live in the state: "Online advocates say that the delays and confusion over ballot counting wouldn't be a problem if people voted on the internet... Sure, they can't candle punch cards, but old people love the internet. My grandfather's afraid of his answering machine" (*SNL*, "Weekend Update, January 11, 2000).

Another thing that distinguished the *Daily Show* early on in its run, which particularly emerged during this election cycle, was their propensity to gather news clips from many sources (cable news and network news) when a candidate or politician was speaking. Many times they did this over time, to show when a politician had made a statement in the present that contradicted what they said in the past. During the presidential campaign, however, it became increasingly clear, when the *Daily Show*

employed this technique, it was done to make obvious the “talking points” that the candidates used. The show gathered clips of the candidates saying the same thing over and over again. After Election Day had passed, Gore went on several TV shows and used the same strange analogy about the inaccurately scanned votes. To paraphrase, he said, repeatedly, that supermarket checkout lines were not going to not let you buy something if it did not scan properly. Although he was certainly correct about this, this technique of showing the repetition employed by the *Daily Show* made Gore seem both dull and desperate (November 30, 2000). After the election dispute, Jon Stewart continued to frequently discuss the various aspects of the situation. The show emphasized the complexity of the issue, and expressed fears that it would be long, drawn out, and harmful to the Democratic process (which all turned out to be true). They showed a clip of Gore’s campaign manager talking about the beginning of the dispute:

William Daley: We’re in the process of speaking with lawyers, secretary Christopher is one of the top lawyers in America. We have lawyers that have gone to Florida, and they’re lawyers in Florida who are experts in elections laws... He continued...and by the way, don’t think because I just used the word “lawyer” four times in fifteen seconds that this is gonna be a long process... (*Daily Show*, November 9, 2000)

As it became increasingly clear that the election would not be decided quickly, that it would come down to decisions made by the Florida Supreme Court and the Supreme Court of the United States, and that there were actually serious problems with the ballots

and the way they were being counted (or not counted), *SNL* and the *Daily Show* became much more substantive in its jokes about the election dispute. Jokes about Katherine Harris also focused on her connections to the Bush family and her rumored ulterior motives for favoring Bush over Gore. In a sketch parodying Chris Mathews' show *Hardball*, Mathews questions Harris about whether or not she feels the Florida Supreme Court will decide in Bush's favor. She says, "The Florida Supreme Court can chomp on it, I'm gettin' out of this backwater state. All I have to do now is practice smiling for my ambassador job" (*SNL*, Sketch, "Hardball," November 18, 2000).

Similarly, at the end of the conflict, the *Daily Show* addressed the issue that there might have been "conflicts of interest" in how the election dispute was being handled in Florida, and they laid out these conflicts in more detail than *SNL* (and arguably better than most traditional news sources):

Stewart: One of the major stories that's been coming out of yesterday's hearings is the suggestion that certain key players in this case may have conflicts of interests. Now let's just put this in perspective...Justice Scalia's son is a partner in the same law firm as Bush's chief lawyer, Bush's brother is Florida's Governor, the head of Bush's Florida campaign happens to be Secretary of State in that area, and Bush's cousin was the first network news official to prematurely call the election for Bush...in a related story, Al Gore's daughter works for Futurama, so...gonna have to keep an eye on that powder keg. (*Daily Show*, December 12, 2000)

This particularly substantive criticism essentially stated that Gore did not have a real chance of getting a fair outcome. Even so, the *Daily Show* also mocked how the Gore campaign dealt with the situation. After the Florida Supreme Court and the US Supreme Court handed down rulings that were not good for Gore's challenge, the Gore campaign said some strange things:

Yesterday also saw the US Supreme Court, seen here in its natural setting, put aside a ruling by the Florida Supreme Court that had allowed for manual recounts...Gore's lawyer, David Boies, had some strong words about the ruling:
Boies: The United States Supreme Court has no authority at all.

(Stewart appeared confused) Oh that's right, he's gone batshit insane. (*Daily Show*, December 5, 2000)

Democracy itself was on the line, the elderly were effectively being disenfranchised by the confusing ballots, and African Americans disenfranchised by and not being allowed to vote, having been mistakenly purged from the rolls as felons:³⁹ "Jeb Bush, the Governor of Florida and Brother of George W. Bush took himself out of the Florida Recount Process, noting, look, I already threw out 19,000 ballots, hassled black voters, and confused the old Jews, my work here is done" (*SNL*, "Weekend Update," November 11, 2000). In the final analysis, the controversy over the election was portrayed on *SNL* as a terrible circumstance for Democracy, riddled with the potential of corruption, due to the

³⁹Palast, Gregory. 2000. "Florida's flawed 'voter-cleansing' program: Secretary of State Katherine Harris hired a firm to vet the rolls for felons, but that may have wrongly kept thousands, particularly blacks, from casting ballots." *Salon.com*, December 4. http://www.salon.com/2000/12/04/voter_file/.

close ties of the people who had the ability to make the decisions about it to George W. Bush. It was an embarrassing circus:

Tina Fey: So now we're up to today. At eight o'clock this morning, the hand recounts start up again, then the Circuit Court rejects Bush's appeal, the Prime Minister of Israel resigns, no one notices, then this afternoon the U.S. Supreme Court got all up in it and stopped the recount. In light of these events, America is cancelled. Citizens are asked to choose between Canada and Mexico by 4 p.m. tomorrow. (*SNL*, "Weekend Update," December 9, 2000)

Jimmy Fallon: The tension, the excitement, the emotions, people - it kicks ass! Disenfranchised voters! Oh, yeah, I said it! And I know what it means, too! Yeah, I'm watching CNN now, because I want to!...Decision 2000, that's what they call it. Not "The Election". You know why? Because it's a TV show. It's "Survivor". It's "Millionaire". It's "The Real World" - the Boston one. You hear that, America? For the first time ever, politics are exciting! (*SNL*, "Weekend Update," December 9, 2000)

There really was not any other similar incident in any other election cycle, but it is clear that it represented a turning point for political humor. In the years to come, the disputed win of the Bush campaign would be a source which comedy could draw upon. If Bush was an illegitimate President, they would have greater license to be more critical of him than any other. This, along with the later events of September 11, 2001, would elevate the place of political humor as an alternate resource of public discourse. Later, a *Daily Show*

executive produce would be quoted as saying that their “currency is one of insanity” (*New York Times*, November 22, 2000 p. E17), meaning that politics had become so absurd, only satire could adequately contextualize it. As discussed below, the journalists in the *Times* and the *Post* have only a limited understanding of this phenomenon.

JOURNALISTS DEBATE INFLUENCE

The trend for journalists in the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* to place greater importance upon late-night comedy’s influence on the narrative construction of the elections continued its growth in the 2000 election cycle. However, they debate exactly how much influence it was having, and in what areas of the public’s perception. They focused on comedy hosts like Leno and Letterman, and the power of *SNL* to set the tone. They mentioned the *Daily Show*, but failed to see how much of a key part of the construction it might become, instead often either directly bemoaning the conflation of entertainment and news, or quoting those who did. Although the representations of the candidates on the late-night comedy programs were humorous and exaggerated, “the [campaign] advisers say...the monologues are playing a crucial, if flawed, role in shaping voters’ perception of candidates...The power of the late-night television hosts to define a candidate’s political weaknesses and quirks often terrifies candidates” (*New York Times*, January 19, 2000, p. A16). A case in point about Al Gore was described in the *New York Times*: “Mr. Clinton called...Gore’s top strategist, a couple of weeks ago to tell him he ought to make the vice president watch a skit about the first debate on...’Saturday Night

Live,' in which Mr. Gore was depicted as overbearing and orange" (*New York Times*, October 20, 2000, p. A1). Although Gore may or may not have possessed these qualities, they simultaneously informed the public's perception of him, and were informed by the perception that already existed.

"It's the Jay Leno test," said David Axelrod, a Democratic strategist in Chicago.

"If a salient quality of yours begins to become a frequent repeat joke in Jay

Leno's monologue, then you've reached such a level of attention and penetration that that quality will begin to define you. These things are almost always unfair.

People are more complex than one quality. Bush may not be a genius, but he's not a moron either - or he wouldn't be where he is."⁴⁰

It appeared that the shows, the journalists, and the campaign advisers were focusing on representations of these non-substantive superficial traits. However, in time it became apparent during this election cycle that the *Daily Show* was pulling away from this type of characterization and including more substantive issues; but it took the journalists some time to notice what was happening and begin to reflect on it; more analyses on this in later cycles.

Instead of meaning, journalists focused on appearances made by the candidates, and the parodies of them, on *SNL*. They noted that *SNL* had become "Hot enough that for last night's election coverage, Will Ferrell and Darrell Hammond...were invited to join

⁴⁰ Berke, Richard L. 1999. "The Nation: Negative Spin; Their Biggest Campaign May Be Against Type-Casting." *New York Times*, November 28, p. D1.

Tom Brokaw and the NBC News team” (*New York Times*, November 8, 2000, p. E10).

But even the influence of these satires was met with some skepticism:

The late-night show’s latest political sketches [with Hammond and Ferrell] have been called the most important political writing of this election year by MSNBC senior political analyst Lawrence O’Donnell. But since he works for NBC - in addition to his gig on network co-owned MSNBC, he’s a writer-producer on NBC’s hit drama “The West Wing” - you might want to ratchet that hyperbole down a notch or two.⁴¹

Even as the influence of Leno, Letterman, and *SNL* was being discussed by the journalists, a few recognized the growing influence of the *Daily Show*, saying it was “Once an obscure cable program with a cult following,” and had become “an almost legitimate though farcical news outlet for young people...” The fact that they had to use qualifiers like “almost” and “though farcical” shows that their recognition of its influence is seen through the filter of polluting the program and Jon Stewart as “merely” entertainment (Back et al. 2012). *Daily Show* executive Producer Madeleine Smithberg was quoted as saying “The ‘Today’ show has clips of us almost every day.” Why was this happening? They said that they thought it was because they were “freer than real television journalists are to point out how bizarre the situation is”...and that comedians were the ““only ones who can make sense of it; because our currency is one of insanity,”

⁴¹ de Moraes, Lisa. 2000. “Taped From New York, It’s the Candidates on ‘Saturday Night’.” *Washington Post*, November 3, p. C7.

Ms. Smithberg said” (*New York Times*, November 22, 2000 p. E17). After 9/11, this idea turns out to be even more relevant.

The discussion about the “freeness” of the fake show to be more truthful about the situation was truly prescient, and would exponentially increase after 9/11. But the stage was set, and viewers and creators of the *Daily Show* (if not totally the journalists writing about it) had insight as to what was beginning to happen in regards to it. The idea that people were really getting news from the *Daily Show* was one that Jon Stewart dismissed:

“What news are they getting? We’re not breaking any news,” Stewart says.

“We’re a very reactive business.” The comedians don’t drive the national discourse - unless, perhaps, you think all the late-night jokes on the Lewinsky scandal turned the attention of Dan Rather, Tom Brokaw and Peter Jennings to an issue, he says, that “otherwise would’ve been ignored.”⁴²

But the journalists were still writing superficially about the importance of the *Daily Show* as well, noting that “As if the line between news and entertainment on television were not already blurry enough...yesterday, the word on the logo for NBC’s election coverage - which had been ‘Decision 2000’ - changed to ‘Indecision 2000’...Was it a deliberate echo of Jon Stewart...?” (*New York Times*, November 9, 2000, p. D2).

⁴² Milbank, Dana. 2000. “Tracking Laughs Is No Joke in Election Year.” *Washington Post*, October 19, p. C01.

CANDIDATES SEEN IN LIGHT OF PERSONAL HUMOR

Journalists in this election cycle gave more attention and importance to the candidates appearing on late-night comedy programs than in the past, and were distracted by it. Writers saw the appearances under the umbrella of two epiphenomena; first, their perception that news and entertainment were merging, and thus candidates had to go on them to get their message out, and second that they needed to counter the personal attacks being made against them, clear the air, and get on to more substantive matters. But there was more going on than just candidates going on the shows to burst the caricatures being made of them; the shows themselves, led by the *Daily Show*, were becoming more substantive in their satire, which the writers did not yet recognize. In this same vein, the shows had not yet shed the polluted entertainment side of the public sphere binary as they would later on, when it would diminish or become irrelevant. Journalists saw the appearances as an essential feature of the campaign, which was accurate; candidates had to appear on the shows to seem relatable and perform their competency as candidates in order to succeed. Both Bush and Gore, for the most part, were successful in their attempts in doing this. One notable exception, as the *Daily Show* noted (above) was when George W. Bush appeared via satellite on Letterman's show. His performative failure did not escape the notice of the journalists:

“I could barely watch it,” Vance DeGeneres, a veteran comedy writer and performer on Comedy Central's “Daily Show,” said of the incident on “Late Show with David Letterman.”...After weeks of goading by Mr. Letterman, Gov.

George W. Bush of Texas agreed to appear by satellite on his show, an encounter that was, by most assessments, a disaster for the Republican presidential candidate. Mr. Bush, hampered by the split-second time delay and projecting an air of being led on a forced march, offered one lame quip after another, including a pun about Mr. Letterman's recent heart operation so strained that it left the host staring, mortified, into the camera.⁴³

If Bush had many appearances like this, it would have been disastrous for him; however, this was an exception. He learned from this failure, because he did not repeat it. In fact, this was exactly how his performance was narrated in the papers; Bush managed to recover from the bad Letterman appearance by going on Leno's show and appearing confident and more authentic, "unlike an earlier appearance in the campaign on CBS's 'Late Show,' when...he bombed trying to match David Letterman joke for joke, Mr. Bush made no effort to go head to head with Mr. Leno. Instead, Mr. Bush gave relaxed, straightforward answers about...the campaign" (*New York Times*, March 7, 2000, p. A1). Thus Bush turned the failure around to his advantage and made himself look authentic once again.

The journalists especially took note of both Bush and Gore's appearance on an *SNL* special which aired in prime time, noting that "Bush and Gore reinforce their own stereotypes as, respectively, a habitual word mangler and a pedantic glory hog," but commenting that "The remarkable thing about the candidates' bits on a show airing just two days before the election is how unremarkable it all seems" (*Washington Post*,

⁴³ Marks, Peter. 2000. "Television/Radio; Fear and Joking on the Late-Night Campaign Trail." *New York Times*, May 7, p. B31.

November 4, 2000, p. A1). Why did they have to do this if it would perhaps make them look foolish? It went beyond simply having to seem “normal” or able to take a joke; they were “self-deprecating” on the shows but there was greater peril in *not* doing it – “In attempting to co-opt the joke, Bush and Gore may recognize some political danger in leaving parody unanswered.” But although this new way of performing authenticity as a presidential candidate might have been advantageous for the candidates, it was *not* good for the narrative integrity of contemporary satire:

Does good-naturedness by the spoofees perhaps indicate that “SNL’s” satire is toothless - perhaps too good-natured itself? Maybe...the victims feel it behooves them to accept the joking graciously and even participate in it. As all the world knows, thanks to recent news reports, after this year’s first debate Gore and Bush aides watched the “SNL” version as one way of determining where their candidates went wrong.⁴⁴

The general consensus in the papers was that appearing on the shows was not especially helpful to the candidates, but *not* appearing on them would be harmful, that “a candidate is serious about running but not so serious about themselves” (*New York Times*, May 7, 2000, p. B3). Journalists wrote about quantitative measures that researchers were collecting about the number of jokes, trying to see whether there was a correlation between how well they did when appearing on the late-night programs and how many jokes were directed against them in comedians’ monologues:

⁴⁴ Shales, Tom. 2000. “‘Presidential Bash’: Hands-Down Winner.” *Washington Post*, November 4, p. C01.

In August, when Bush was still riding high, Curry counted 78 jokes about Gore and 43 about Bush. In September, when Gore was strong, the count reversed: 94 about Bush and only 34 about Gore. Now that Gore is skidding, the October count so far has the two much closer: 78 for Bush, 67 for Gore.⁴⁵

Other than the superficial “news-is-becoming-more-like-entertainment” lament, there was almost no reflection in the papers during this election cycle about what it *actually meant* in terms of the transformation of the public sphere itself. The above mentioned data collection only showed the slightest of engagement with the reality of the situation – a reality that the journalists did not really want to acknowledge, which was that they were being circumvented. The segment from the *Daily Show* where Steve Carell got onto the “secondary bus” for John McCain’s campaign and harassed McCain’s wife until he got access to the Republican Primary Candidate (described above), received a mention in the *New York Times*, but they missed most of the point about its true relevance: “The segment followed Mr. Carell’s exploits as he tried vainly to get a seat on Mr. McCain’s bus, a conceit that was inherently funny: Mr. McCain had become instantly legendary for the generous access he provided to the press” (*New York Times*, May 7, 2000, p. B31). Carell masterfully makes fun of the news media itself, by starting to ask vacuous “fluff” personality questions of McCain, then hit him with a serious question, which confused the candidate, making him look like a deer in the headlights; but then Carrel let him off the hook, *just exactly as the journalists would do*, because they would not want to lose their access.

⁴⁵ Milbank, Dana. 2000. “Tracking Laughs Is No Joke in Election Year.” *Washington Post*, October 19, p. C01.

Several comments were made in the papers about the perception that news and entertainment were becoming more alike. Why the candidates' appearances on the show are important was seen under this light. Some writers expressed the idea that it was a normatively bad thing, and observed that the process had been going on for some time, saying it was "a boundary that has been fading since the psychedelic days of 'Rowan and Martin's Laugh-In'" (*New York Times*, May 7, 2000, p. B31).

One is liable to say almost anything after too much coffee, too little sleep and too many campaign stops...there is the increased number of media chatterers all too willing to amplify the simple slip into epic proportions. The confluence of the entertainment and political worlds also has helped magnify these mistakes. The Leno and Letterman shows feed off them; as a result, gaffes take on a late-night life of their own, reaching young voters largely unexposed to television news broadcasts or newspapers.⁴⁶

Being able to go on the programs and perform successfully under difficult conditions had become a rite of passage. The candidates must appear on the shows; if they did not, they risked being seen as unlikeable: "America is seeing the ultimate in the fusion of not just entertainment and news, but entertainment, news and politics. And truth be told, the candidates have no choice. They have to play. The public demands it" (*New York Times*, January 13, 2000, p. B1). The number of jokes had been steadily increasing in this arena of the public sphere, a trend which worried "Bob Lichter, who runs [a] research group. 'It's one small blip in the gradual decline of Western civilization...There's no distinction

⁴⁶ Kohut, Andrew. 2000. "The Vox Pop On Malaprops." *Washington Post*, September 24, p. B01.

anymore between news and popular culture” (*Washington Post*, October 19, 2000, p. C01). However, no one tried to explain *why* the confluence of entertainment and politics was bad; it was unquestioningly assumed to be.

Even so, some journalists still maintained that there *was* a distinction, and that the comedy shows were throwing light on just exactly what that distinction was and why the jokes had begun to increase so much: “Because ‘The Daily Show’ is far more enjoyable when compared with the traditional newscasts, it could actually encourage young people to watch the nightly news - if only to make fun of it” (*New York Times*, August 1, 2000, p. E1). Thus, there was the possibility for normatively good outcomes – such as getting “young people” (whatever that meant) to know more about the news, but the writers were still very ambivalent about the changing situation: “Who knows, maybe the ‘SNL’ business even helps engage and inspire an apathetic electorate; one has to be au courant in order to get the jokes told about the candidates on ‘Saturday Night Live ’” (*Washington Post*, November 4, 2000, p. C01). Others blamed the lack of engagement on the qualities of the candidates themselves:

Perhaps watching a candidate on the “Late Show With David Letterman” has somehow become a substitute for voting...the two guys playing the leads are not living up to the script. “There’s nobody turned on by this election,” said Gov. Jesse Venture of Minnesota, the independent and former professional wrestler. “Maybe people want to be entertained. Maybe the question is: Have we become a society based upon entertainment?”⁴⁷

⁴⁷ Berke, Richard L. 2000. “The Nation: Voter Tune Out; Focusing on the Few, Blind to the Many.” *New York Times*, October 22, p. D1.

A prime opportunity for real analysis of how political commentary was transforming was missed when George W. Bush, on the *Tonight Show*, jokingly discussed the idea that “his ‘little brother recognizes that Thanksgiving might be a little chilly’ if he does not deliver Florida. He repeated that line tonight in Tampa” (*New York Times*, November 6, 2000, p. A1). Of course, Bush was talking about his brother Jeb, Governor of Florida, who historically, of course did just that; but they took the candidates’ appearances on show like Leno’s so lightly that this comment did not seem highly undemocratic, even to joke about.

While journalists acknowledged shows like “Leno and Letterman, quite literally, have become the town squares of the campaign,” because the candidates keep appearing on them, to reach the largest number of people” (*New York Times*, October 28, 2000, p. A11), they were hesitant to make a causal link between the amount of sketches and voting patterns:

While Johnny Carson did some political humor and “Saturday Night Live” has done skits for years, the real watershed year for TV political humor was 1988, when Dan Quayle became the perpetual butt of late-night jokes, according to Robert Lichter of the Center for Media and Public Affairs in Washington. Since that year, he said, the number of jokes on TV about the candidates has soared.⁴⁸

⁴⁸ Farhi, Paul. 2000. “Al and Dubya’s ‘Saturday Night’ Date; Candidates Follow Laugh Track to Voters.” *Washington Post*, November 4, p. A1.

...there's no evidence that [the amount of jokes about candidates] actually has any impact on the way people vote. For its years of studying and counting late-night political jokes, the Center for Media and Public Affairs hasn't found any links between the jokes about a candidate and the candidate's electoral success.⁴⁹

But it was likely that the amount was not really what was important here; comedians could make numerous off-handed remarks about the candidates' personal characteristics, and audiences would likely experience these as more-or-less the same block of jokes; more jokes did not mean more influence, and would have the effect of diminishing returns. It was the *meaning* of the jokes that had impact; the *Times* noted the Pew study that "roughly one in 10 Americans said they routinely gleaned information about the presidential race from late-night talk shows" – information did not consist of "Bush mispronounces words" or "Gore looks orange;" people already knew this. New information was what mattered for elections, especially going forward from this election cycle. The *Times* rightly pointed out that "considering that the 1996 presidential election was decided by a mere eight percentage points, what each and every consumer of comedy on television takes away from the experience can be highly significant" (*New York Times*, May 7, 2000, p. B31). But still, they did not speculate on what that would be. Perhaps the reliance upon personality-driven humor overshadowed any insight the journalists might have had.

Other than the many negative comments about the Letterman appearance, the journalists were largely dismissive about the humor on television about George W. Bush.

⁴⁹ Milbank, Dana. 2000. "Tracking Laughs Is No Joke in Election Year." *Washington Post*, October 19, p. C01.

As with Gore, most of it dwelt upon personal characteristics of his that might or might not have any bearing on his ability to be an effective President. Bush as the “dumb guy” and Bush as the former partier dominated the narrative. The former was simply regarded as the corollary to the “Gore as boring” narrative:

In the debate sketch [Will Ferrel playing George W. Bush] displays an entire range of baffled looks in response to a single question, as his eyes squint and you can see the wheels churning in his head. Asked for a single word that sums up his candidacy he says, “Strategery,” then gives a smug smile.⁵⁰

The same sketch had him unsure how to pronounce the names of world leaders. This image takes over the satire about Bush, and no inroads about his political abilities or policies are made, and it was largely ineffectual: “Despite lampoons by Letterman and others, Bush as a bumbler seems ancient history in this cyclorama of a campaign” (*Washington Post*, October 16, 2000, p. A08). The latter representation, that of Bush as a former drug and alcohol abuser, was specifically refuted by the journalists: There is a popular image of Mr. Bush’s younger days, fueled by late-night television jokes, suggesting that he spent much of the 1970’s stupefied in a drug-fueled haze...[but] his behavior was more callow than criminal” (*New York Times*, July 29, 2000, p. A1). There was little to no impact upon the campaign.

Journalists took special note of the way that Al Gore altered his debate and media performances in reaction to how *SNL* had portrayed him. Gore had a media coach,

⁵⁰ James, Caryn. 2000. “Critic’s Notebook; Where Politics and Comedy Intermingle, the Punch Lines Can Draw Blood.” *New York Times*, November 4, p. B11.

Michael Sheehan, watch the tape of his performance and try to improve upon his “overbearing manner and jargon-laden speech” (*Washington Post*, October 11, 2000, p. A14). Maureen Dowd described this as “a ‘Clockwork Orange’ moment, desperately trying to condition Mr. Gore against another such unbearable performance...[as] the vice president hogs the microphone for a sob story without end, delivered in punctilious tones, and wants to deliver two closing statements ” (*New York Times*, p. A35). Additionally, his word choices are focused upon, rather than the policy positions behind them:

There was one notable change in Mr. Gore's remarks today: He lost the “lockbox.” After “Saturday Night Live” parodied his frequent use of that term to refer to his promise to protect Medicare and Social Security surpluses from raids by Congress, Mr. Gore avoided the metaphor today.⁵¹

But again, these are not substantive issues, were not likely to sway opinions.

Certainly one unique feature of this campaign cycle was that it lasted so long, with the extended period of time that the U.S. Supreme Court took to finally decide the disputed election. The late-night comedy programs commented upon the incident in many different ways, as outlined above; however, the journalists chose to primarily focus upon the humor about ballot problems, not the threat to democracy (largely advanced by the *Daily Show* and to a lesser extent Tina Fey and Jimmy Fallon). This was a wasted opportunity; they mainly summarized the remarks on the shows, commenting about “the matter that has caused an extended legal dispute and no end of late-night comedy on

⁵¹ Sack, Kevin. 2000. “The 2000 Campaign: The Vice President; Gore Again Alters Day To Meet On Middle East.” *New York Times*, October 14, p. A1.

television - how to judge dimpled ballots” (*Washington Post*, November 24, 2000, p. A01). They deplored the generalized sense of confusion and inability of the mainstream news media to sort it out:

The cable channels have the advantage of sticking with the story for hours on end, but that can also be something of a handicap. If the information emanating from the courtrooms and counting rooms is not coherently assembled, the overarching significance is lost. “You sit and you watch the Lenos and Lettermans and ‘Saturday Night Live,’ and you realize that the parody captures the confusion,” said Ramon Escobar, MSNBC's executive producer.⁵²

Florida as a target of humor was also discussed, but again, this was structurally insignificant: “For weeks, Floridians have seen their state ridiculed around the country, and seen it become the focus of late-night television sarcasm and comedy” (*New York Times*, December 11, 2000, p. A29). Ultimately, the journalists failed to note the important points that *SNL* and the *Daily Show* in particular were making about the threats to democracy that the election dispute might have posed: “Each evening on television, scholars and pundits solemnly warn of nightmarish possibilities, only to be followed by late-night talk-show hosts who make fun of it all” (*New York Times*, November 12, 2000, p. D3). There was so much more being discussed and satirized on *SNL* and the *Daily Show*, that to say that they were just “making fun of it all” is indicative of how little the journalists understood about the changing nature of political satire at that time.

⁵² Marks, Peter. 2000. “Counting The Vote: The Media; For TV, A Story With Everything.” *New York Times*, November 19, p. A37.

CONCLUSION: ADVANCE OF COMEDIC TALK AS MEANING RESOURCE

There was a measure of progress made in this election cycle towards both substantive humor on the programs themselves, as well as recognition of this in the *Post* and the *Times*. In the election cycles in the 1980s, there was an almost total lack of substantive humor. The main criticism leveled against political comedy during this decade was that it was following the tone, rather than setting it, and thus was not truly satirical. With the structural changes in *SNL* including more gender diversity at the “Weekend Update” desk (which was always a large source of political humor on the program), an original source of the transformation is revealed. Fey’s presence was not exceptionally meaningful in terms of gender dynamics in this election cycle; but if she had not been there for such a long period of time before 2008, she may well not have been such a strong satirical narrative presence when she came on *SNL* to parody Sarah Palin. Additionally, with the arrival of the *Daily Show*, and the turning point of the disputed election, the momentum begins to shift in 2000. In this year, the humor about George W. Bush’s intelligence mirrored that of the humor in the 1990s about Dan Quayle. However, there were no sexual scandals as there were back then (including those of Gary Hart and Bill Clinton). This absence in 2000 made the shows have to look for other avenues of mockery, and perhaps drove them to more substantive areas to draw upon. Finally, in 2000, there were not any jokes about the candidates’ wives, as there had been, especially about Hillary Clinton. As predicted by numerous commentators in the past, candidates did more regularly appear on the shows, both to reach this young, large

audience of potential voters, but also to make themselves seem normal. This was especially relevant for Gore, who needed to portray a more relaxed attitude.

The journalists did not completely accept the caricatures of either Gore or Bush, specifically refuting them in some instances. And when the candidates themselves appeared on the shows, to defuse the strength of the parodies about them, appearing “in on the joke,” it caused the journalist to ultimately regard the shows as “toothless,” and without satirical power. But commentators about the programs missed many opportunities when the candidates really were *not* in on the joke, such as the incident described above between Steve Carrell and John McCain. These “confrontations” would only increase over the years. The *Daily Show* would eventually become the gold standard against which all other political satire would be judged because of this, among other reasons. Although it was clearly the case the news and entertainment were beginning to become more alike in the latter part of the 20th century (Williams and Delli Carpini 2011), the journalists plainly did not recognize the fact that it was not just news becoming more like entertainment (Jacobs 2012), but entertainment becoming more like news *at the same time*. It was a blurring of the lines, not a colonization of one over the other. Politics is everywhere, as Schudson (1998) claimed. Why should it not be more of a part of entertainment, if it was becoming more incorporated into all areas of the public sphere? Political discourse had started to change based on the historically contextualized events that brought the realm of politics into seeming more and more absurd, thus making discussion about them that was based in absurdity seem more natural. The Pew studies that showed that people were gaining more political knowledge by watching the programs (Feldman 2007; Hollander 2005; Young 2004), and other studies showed that

this had a positive effect on civic engagement (Cao and Brewer 2008). But these measured effects were only part of the picture. The shows were taking a more prominent place as a source of meaning in public discourse. The *Daily Show* in particular was perfectly positioned to take on this role. Throughout the 1990s, the growing polarization of cable news made political discourse on television seem more inherently farcical. At the same time, people relied upon cable more and more to get information about political events. Combined with the contentious election dispute (and later 9/11), the *Daily Show* became both a reaction to these events, and a narrative resource for voters and journalists. In part, it came along at exactly the right time, but also carved a place for itself as an influencer unto its own.

As Jacobs and Michaud Wild (2013) argue, “If these new media formats are to have any significant influence, they need to become part of the discussions that take place within the larger public conversations organized by elite media. Without this kind of public focus and attention, it becomes extremely difficult for them to have any steering influence over civil society” (91). In the 2000 election cycle, journalists recognized the importance of the comedy programs, but it is clear from this analysis that they also made a few tentative attempts to emphasize their significance in guiding the narrative about the candidates and the election, particularly towards the end. Gore and Bush had equally failed performances in the main portion of the 2000 election cycle - there was no advantage or disadvantage to either one as the shows, especially *SNL*, portrayed them both in differently unflattering lights, but no more one than the other. Thus, there was no narrative “foothold” for elite media participants to grasp and use as a meaning structure to criticize one over the other or represent their own viewpoints. In later years, they

would use *SNL* and the *Daily Show* to do these things (Jacobs and Michaud Wild 2013). Mentions of the Pew study about where people were getting their political information from were tempered by more thorough discussion of how news and entertainment becoming more alike might be a negative trend. The influence of the *Daily Show* was under-examined in this election cycle, but it was also not as strong as it would become. The program's usage of sound bite montages, and going back into the archives to show political figures contradicting themselves, had not yet begun to be seen by journalists as a new way to make rational arguments about political discourse. In subsequent years, there would be an increase in journalists, in print as well as television, using quotes and clips from the show to represent their own viewpoints.

CHAPTER 6: THE 2004 ELECTION

The Presidential Primaries during the 2004 election cycle were long and managed to fragment the Democratic Party. Howard Dean emerged as an early frontrunner, and made some great advances in grassroots organizing on the internet. Despite this accomplishment, he became seen as volatile and unstable, culminating in his concession speech after he lost the Iowa caucuses to John Kerry and John Edwards, in which he was picked up on a microphone uttering a strange “scream.” John Kerry instead became the nominee. He was portrayed in the media, and on late-night television comedy programs, as not dissimilar enough from George W. Bush in terms of his educational and personal background; both had roots in the northeast, came from wealth, and went to Yale. The primary difference in their biographies was that Kerry served in Viet Nam, and Bush did not, having been in the National Guard - at the time, widely considered to be a way to get out of going overseas. Despite the highly contentious and close election, and Kerry’s genuine war service, Kerry lost. Part of the reason was Kerry’s inability to manage to look like a “regular guy” as well as Bush could, despite neither of them being one. Another reason was, despite the questionability of the war in Iraq, many citizens did not want to change leadership so soon after 9/11 and during a major military incursion.

Writers in the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times* began to take much greater notice of how both *Saturday Night Live*, and especially the *Daily Show*, commented on these and other issues during the campaign. A major study by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press in January 2004, which showed a greater reliance upon such “alternative” news sources such as *SNL* and the *Daily Show*, provided

a backdrop and justification for journalists who had been using the criticism provided by the comedy programs to back up their own opinions. Additionally, Jon Stewart's appearance on the CNN program *Crossfire*, which was highly critical of the way that cable news presented important political issues, where he opined that the argumentative way that the hosts narrated matters of public concern actually harmed important rational discourse itself, was something that some of the journalists had apparently been waiting for someone to come out and say for quite some time, judging by the positive reaction it received. Matters like the War on Terror, the lack of Weapons of Mass Destruction that the administration claimed would be found, and the television news media's uncritical attitude towards these issues opened up an opportunity for (especially) the *Daily Show* to begin to be taken more seriously, as they were filling this need. The fact that the newspapers themselves had been complicit in this inadequate coverage was not addressed.

In the 2004 election cycle, from May 2, 2003 - Nov 2, 2004, I identified a total of 65 segments of the *Daily Show* that were related to the Presidential election and the Democratic Party primary. I arranged the show dates in a list by date. There were 239 total shows. I selected every third show date and picked out the most relevant sketch for that day. For dates that had no election-based segments, I shifted the selection to either the date before or the date after. The closer the show was to the election, the more likely I was to find a relevant segment. The earlier dates at times had no relevant segments for several dates in a row, so these areas of time were omitted. Earlier sketches were more likely to deal with the Democratic Primary. Despite the fact that the newspapers praised the *Daily Show* for its substantive coverage, and tended to largely ignore *Saturday Night*

Live during this election cycle, a closer analysis of this program reveals that, out of 58 total politically-themed jokes and sketches, 24 were substantive, 29 were personal, and 5 have elements of both. Jokes aimed at Bush (slant towards Democrats) were mostly substantive (out of 28, 8 were personal and 20 substantive) while jokes aimed at the Democratic candidates, and eventually just at Kerry, were mostly personal (12 were personal, 1 was substantive). There were 17 jokes/sketches aimed at all the candidates, and these were generally mixed between personal and substantive.

Slant Towards? *SNL*, 2004 (Table 9)

	None	Democrats	Republicans
2004, Whole Election Cycle (58)	17 (29.3%)	28 (48.3%)	13 (22.4%)

Personal or Substantive? *SNL*, 2004 (Table 10)

	Both	Personal	Substantive
2004, Whole Election Cycle (58)	5 (8.6%)	29 (50%)	24 (41.4%)
2004, Whole Election Cycle, Republicans (13)	0 (0%)	12 (92.3%)	1 (7.7%)
2004, Whole Election Cycle, Democrats (28)	0 (0%)	8 (28.6%)	20 (71.4%)
2004, Whole Election Cycle, No Slant (17)	5 (29.4%)	9 (53%)	3 (17.6%)

Although there was occasional criticism, both the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* combined had 27 articles each that spoke of comedy programs in a positive light, with 9 negative articles in the *Times* and 10 negative articles in the *Post*. The fact that there was such a striking similarity across the papers, and with different authors, showed the general consensus about the importance and influence of the comedy programs.

This year is a much more “normal” election year than the last one, both in terms of the actual election itself – not being contested – and also in terms of the television humor. Although there was a replacement at the “Weekend Update” segment, adding Amy Poehler (making it the first time there were two female comedians doing the segment), it wasn’t markedly different in tone after Jimmy Fallon left. Additionally, the *Daily Show* had become more established as an alternative, satirical voice to mainstream news media after 9/11, which it had not yet done in 2000. An interesting pattern emerged in the *Daily Show* segments. I initially expected that most of the humor would be coded as substantive. However, there were 22 substantive segments, 33 personal-humor focused segments, and 10 that could be coded as both. Table 12 shows the breakdown of the humor:

Slant Towards? *Daily Show*, 2004 (Table 11)

	None	Democrats	Republicans
2004, Whole Election Cycle (65)	16 (24.6%)	18 (27.7%)	31 (47.7%)

Personal or Substantive, *Daily Show*, 2004 (Table 12)

	Both	Personal	Substantive
2004, Whole Election Cycle (65)	10 (15.3%)	33 (50.8%)	22 (33.9%)
2004, Whole Election Cycle, Republicans (31)	2 (6.5%)	26 (83.8%)	3 (9.7%)
2004, Whole Election Cycle, Democrats (18)	2 (11.1%)	2 (11.1%)	14 (77.8%)
2004, Whole Election Cycle, No Slant (16)	6 (37.6%)	5 (31.2%)	5 (31.2%)

The pattern that was established after the 2000 election was disputed continued in this year. As is shown, most of the personal humor was against the Democrats (coming mainly in the time dealing with the long Primary) and most of the substantive humor was based against President Bush and his Republican administration. Specifically, substantive humor about the Republicans on the *Daily Show* was mostly focused on the handling of the Iraq war, the “Swiftboat” attack ads against Kerry, and the media. Personal humor against the Democrats on the *Daily Show* was mostly focused on the interminable length of the Primary, which included the infamous “Dean Scream” incident, various jokes about the candidates having creepy facial expressions (*Daily Show*, May 5, 2003), and the generally dull nature of the many debates and of the many candidates.

PERSONAL HUMOR STILL INFLUENTIAL

Although the vast majority of the mentions of late night television comedy in the *Times* and the *Post* during the 2004 election cycle consisted of writers commenting on the *Daily Show*, there were occasional mentions of other late night comedy, such as comments about *SNL*. However, *SNL* was still in a very personality-driven humor mode in the 2004 election cycle. This type of satire could still have an influence, but it was more akin to the Gerald Ford as “klutz” humor that the show employed throughout its history, rather than the more substantive satire of the *Daily Show*:

For Mary Lou Anderson, who came in leaning Kerry and left even more so, her choice is informed by instinct. With an apologetic laugh, she says of Bush, “I

wish I hadn't watched so much 'Saturday Night Live'!" But she cannot help but think of the show's comedic skits when she watches Bush debate. "It colors my feelings about the man, it does... And the next thing you know, you're looking at the man, and you're saying to yourself: buffoon."⁵³

Personality based humor on *SNL* against George W. Bush as a whole focused on the concept that he was not intelligent, but this was not necessarily focused on him being unable to do his job. Rather, it portrayed him as merely goofy, with a checkered past. This included jokes about his admitted substance and alcohol abuse as a younger man. Most of these jokes consisted of one-liners delivered in the "Weekend Update" segment. "While speaking at a Christian Youth Center in Dallas, President Bush said that religion helped him overcome his heavy drinking and rowdiness. But it was good old-fashioned Texas willpower that got him off the cocaine (*SNL*, "Weekend Update," November 1, 2003)."

First Lady Laura Bush said Tuesday that if her husband is elected to a second term, she would like to help juvenile delinquents with substance abuse problems. When asked how she would do that, Mrs. Bush replied, "Just as I always have. By marrying them and bearing their children." (*SNL*, Weekend Update," October 23, 2004)

⁵³ Harris, John F. and Richard Morin. 2004. "Debate Helps To Sway Undecided; Third Encounter Reinforces Trends." *Washington Post*, January 22, p. A06.

Drug humor was not limited to Bush, however: “In the ‘Rock the Vote Presidential Debate’ Tuesday night, Democratic presidential candidates Howard Dean, John Edwards, and John Kerry admitted that they had smoked marijuana, while Dennis Kucinich admitted that he was ‘High right now’ (*SNL*, “Weekend Update,” November 8, 2003).” The “dumb frat guy” (*New York Times*, March 14, 2004, p. A22) portrayal of Bush continued to be the dominant way that *SNL* parodied the president. This was again the subject of one-liners: “In a Veteran’s Day speech this Tuesday, President Bush vowed: ‘We will finish the mission we have begun - period.’ Afterwards, he was advised that, in the future, he doesn’t have to read the punctuation marks” (*SNL*, “Weekend Update,” November 5, 2003). “On Monday, President Bush boarded a bus for a campaign tour across southern Michigan. The president remarked that the bus seemed a lot bigger than the one he remembered from school” (*SNL*, “Weekend Update,” May 8, 2004).

Personal humor about Bush on the *Daily Show* aligned with *SNL* – Bush as the “dumb guy” was also a common theme. A comment by Stewart on the difference between Bush and Kerry showed that, while Stewart was emphasizing the “frat guy” image of Bush, he was doing so in a way that indicated that Kerry had more intellectual standing and history of actually working on public issues. Thus, this characterization could be classified as either personal, substantive, or both: “Returning from Southeast Asia, Kerry further distanced himself from Bush by joining the antiwar movement...and he became a U.S. Senator instead of wondering around in an alcoholic haze until he was 40” (*Daily Show*, July 29, 2004).

The *Daily Show*’s main personality-based jokes were about the Democratic primary being generally unmemorable and uninteresting. They called the segments that

covered this time period in the elections the “Race from the White House,” which indicated that the Democrats were unlikely to win with their uninspiring candidates. There was also humor about the voters themselves being disengaged from the primary:

Stewart: According to a recent poll, two thirds of the American public cannot name a single Democratic Presidential candidate. Well, at least not by their proper names. Everyone knows there’s “Necky” (Dean)...and “Frown-o” (Kerry)...then there’s the dude who looks like a gnome (Kucinich)... (*Daily Show*, September 9, 2003)

A few days later, Stewart stated that “Wesley Clark’s announcement brings to 10 the number of Democrats running for president that most Americans can’t name” (*Daily Show*, September 17, 2003). Later on, after the Primary was over, the “Kerry is boring” theme emerged. While talking to a group of bored-looking children and teachers about his education plan that would challenge “No Child Left Behind,” Stewart said, “Kerry then unveiled his own education plan, ‘No Child Left Awake’” (*Daily Show*, May 5, 2004). But mostly, what Democratic candidates were mentioned for was their looks and tone of voice, and they were not criticized in terms of policy positions.

Personality-based humor about both Bush and Kerry on *SNL* came together when they were “interacting” in a sketch which depicted what a meeting between them might have been like near the Yale campus in 1968. This sketch emphasized the elitist background of both of the candidates as belonging to an exclusive class that most Americans could not relate to. Both characterizations of “Bush-as-frat-guy” and John

Kerry as the “stiff guy” (*New York Times*, March 8, 2004, p. E1; *New York Times*, March 14, 2004, p. A22) emerged in this sketch:

Bartender: Got your diploma, George?

George W. Bush: Yes, sir. Listen to *this*: “This diploma defers upon George W.

Bush...” - that’s *me* - “...a Bachelor of Arts, with a major in Physical

Education...And a minor in Partying!” I wrote that in myself!

[Bush sits next to Kerry] Hey, buddy, nice shirt. Are you missing your Cub Scout troop, or something?

Kerry: No, actually, I’m a lieutenant in the United States Navy, on leave from active duty in Vietnam.

George W. Bush: Whoa! Son of a bee sting! I know you! You’re John Kerry! You graduated two years ago - remember *me*? George Bush! I was the one who, uh...put the firecracker in that bulldog’s butt at the Princeton game!

John Kerry: Oh, yes, I remember. A friend of mine explained to me that it was *humorous* - and that an appropriate response would have been *laughter*. (*SNL*, Sketch, “Mike’s Bar,” December 14, 2004)

Kerry as “flip-flopper” – unable to make up his mind and taking several positions depending on which way the political wind was blowing – was another aspect of personality-based humor delivered against Kerry on *SNL*, especially in debate sketches:

Jim Lehrer: Senator, the President appears to be leveling a charge he frequently repeats against you, that you're a flip-flopper. How do you respond?

Kerry: My opponent will like you to believe that I've changed my opinion on the war. The fact is I have one position, and one position only. Was Saddam a threat? Yes. I've said so since day one. Was his regime dangerous to the security of the United States? Of course not. Did he deserve to be removed? You bet. Was it the right action to remove him from power? No way. Was he in possession of weapons of mass destruction? Absolutely. Did he possess these weapons? No he did not. And that has always been my position. (*SNL*, Sketch, "Presidential Debate," October 2, 2004)

Earlier, during the primaries when Edwards was still running, he was characterized as shallow, and as someone who took advantage of his good looks. A parody political ad had him appearing in a towel to gain votes over Kerry (*SNL*, Sketch, "Meet the Press, March 6, 2004). Howard Dean was shown as emotionally unstable, excessively cursing while on the phone (*SNL*, Sketch, "Howard Dean Headquarters," January 17, 2004), finally culminating in a parody of the "Dean Scream" incident (*SNL*, "Weekend Update," February 7, 2004).

Later in the 2004 race, there were a handful of incidents where the candidates Kerry and Edwards rather overtly mentioned that Vice President Cheney's daughter was a lesbian. During the real final Presidential Debate, Kerry stated, "If you were to talk to Dick Cheney's daughter, who is a lesbian, she would tell you that she's being who she was, she's being who she was born as." The purpose of mentioning her sexual orientation

was to point out the hypocrisy of the Republican Party's platform against marriage equality, but it came off as political opportunism. *SNL* satirized this as the candidates seeming unable to stop casually dropping the information at every opportunity during the debates. Kerry made several mentions of Cheney's daughter's sexual orientation, bringing it into answers to questions to which it had no relevance in an *SNL* "Presidential Debate" sketch, on October 23, 2004:

Kerry: Jim, I think if you were to ask Mary Cheney, Vice President Cheney's daughter, who is a lesbian, I'm sure she would tell you one, that she's being who she is. And two, that we went into Iraq the wrong way.

...

Kerry: Jim, may I add something here?

Leher: Is it about Vice President Cheney's daughter being a lesbian?

Kerry: Sort of.

Leher: Perhaps we can save that for the next debate.

Although these largely irrelevant interjections spoke to the character of the Democratic ticket, they were not particularly critical of their competency for office, and did not concentrate on their policy positions. However, other jokes, mainly on the *Daily Show*, addressed these issues. And the *Post* and the *Times* began to take more notice when they did.

SUBSTANTIVE HUMOR BEGINS TO GAIN MOMENTUM

If any substantive humor about the Democrats existed at all on the *Daily Show*, it came when Kerry tried to act like a “working class” sympathizing candidate. One of the things that George W. Bush was often mocked for in late night comedy was his emphasis on and exaggeration of a Southern accent, when his birthplace was Connecticut and his educational background was Yale. Kerry shared this tendency with Bush and occasionally fell into the appearance of inauthenticity:

Stewart: On Monday, [Kerry] used his war hero status to play to the crowd near the Navy town of Norfolk, VA.

Kerry: You know, George Bush thought he could play dress-up on an aircraft carrier. And he thought he could stand up there in front of a big sign that said “Mission Accomplished.”

Stewart: (Mocking Kerry) And as I stand here in my borrowed work jacket in front of a sign that says “The Real Deal,” I say to you there is no irony in these statements. None! None at all! No Irony! (*Daily Show*, February 11, 2004)

The lack of difference between Bush and Kerry’s backgrounds was a major talking point of this election. Acting like a “regular guy” was something Bush tried to do all along, so would not be a particularly substantive criticism of him; but for Kerry to try to follow in this mode of expression made him seem incompetent. Stewart points out that the Bush

administration's mishandling of the aftermath of the Iraq invasion allowed terrorists to gain the weapons that Saddam Hussein used to control.

Stewart: The President said that if John Kerry had been in office, we wouldn't have even had a war to argue about.

Bush: If Senator Kerry had his way, we would still be taking our global test, Saddam Hussein would still be in power, he would control all those weapons and explosives, and could have shared them with our terrorist enemies.

Stewart: Our terrorist enemies have them now. That's the whole point.

(Pretends to stick pen in his eye) (*Daily Show*, October 28, 2004)

A segment with then-*Daily Show* correspondent Stephen Colbert points out the hypocrisy of Zell Miller's statement at the RNC in 2004:

Zell Miller: Today's Democratic leaders see America as an occupier, not a liberator. And nothing makes this Marine madder than someone calling American Troops occupiers rather than liberators!

Colbert: Well, there Miller was right. No one who equates our military action in Iraq with an occupation is fit to lead our troops.

Stewart: But the President said the same thing- look at this!

(Clip of Bush) The people of Iraq do not support an indefinite occupation.

They're not happy they're occupied. I wouldn't be happy if I was occupied either.

Colbert: OK, Jon, I see your game. Showing the hypocrisy of Miller's statement by turning his own words against him, thus undermining the very premise of my and his entire analysis. (*Daily Show*, September 2, 2004)

Substantive humor on *SNL* was mostly limited to George W. Bush, and mainly focused on the mishandling of the War on Terror. After the initial victories, including taking over Baghdad, the administration did not have a solid plan in place to deal with a potential insurgency.

Bush: As we all know, there are those in Iraq who want freedom- who don't want freedom for that country. The Saddam loyalists, the insurgents, the terrorists. In Phase Two we smoke these folks out, by letting them think they're winning, you know. Convincing them that we don't know what we're doing. In other words, lulling them into a false sense of security. And that's where we are right now - Phase Two, the Lulling Phase. And, despite what our critics would tell you, it's- it's workin'! Terrorist confidence and morale have never been higher...uh...we're will working on Phase Three. You know, uh... and believe me, uh, we're workin' hard. Cause it's... you know, it's hard work. (*SNL*, Sketch, "Presidential Debate," October 2, 2004)

As of yesterday, the Bush administration said they still haven't found the source of the White House leak that outed a woman as a CIA operative. So, just to recap, here are the things President Bush can't find: The White House leak, Weapons of

mass destruction in Iraq, Saddam Hussein, Osama Bin Laden, A link between Saddam Hussein and Osama Bin Laden, The guy who sent the anthrax through the mail, and his own butt, with two hands and a flashlight. (*SNL*, “Weekend Update,” October 3, 2003)

After months go by, and it becomes apparent that no Weapons of Mass Destruction were to be found (the ostensible reason that Iraq was invaded in the first place), late night comedy programs begin to mock the administration mercilessly:

Naturally, rebuilding Iraq’s gonna cost money. A lot of money. Perhaps, as much as 1,700 million...uh., b-billion dollars...That’s why, early this week, I intend to ask Congress for an additional appropriation to finish the job, in the form of what I call a “blank check.” I’m not gonna tell them the amount. Because, partly that’s the point of a blank check. And, in all honesty, It’d just be a guess, anyway!

(*SNL*, Sketch, “A Message from the President of the United States,” November 1, 2003)

Other than commentary about the war, substantive humor against the Democratic field on *SNL* generally mocked them for being ideologically fragmented, their infighting, and being indecisive on policy positions. Lieberman was an easy target. He was satirized as being out of touch and inauthentic: “I am a hardcore, hip-hop, rock ‘n roll candidate. I bring in the noise, and provided that it is fiscally responsible, I shall bring in the funk as

well. And that, my fellow Americans, is fo' shizzle" (*SNL*, Sketch, "Hardball," December 13, 2003).

SNL joked about the scandal about Bush going AWOL from the Texas Air National Guard, (which brought Dan Rather's career at the CBS Evening News to an end): "The White House Tuesday defended President Bush against Democratic accusations that he was absent without leave...A spokesman labeled the claims 'shameful,' and 'the worst of election year politics,' and 'completely true.'" (*SNL*, "Weekend Update," February 7, 2004). The SwiftBoat ad campaign against John Kerry was something that *SNL* came out completely against. The idea that Kerry did not do all he claimed in Viet Nam was characterized on the show as a lie. Even though the ad campaign was not funded by the Bush campaign, Bush did not completely decry it, and connections were made between a Florida campaign office and the efforts to diminish Kerry's military service.⁵⁴ *SNL* carried the absurd claims made in the ads to their logical conclusion by inflating them, but only slightly. Men like the ones that appeared in the ad were satirized in a sketch on October 2, 2004.

Ken Gardner (PGF-44 John Kerry's boat): When Kerry noticed the swift boat had a gasoline engine, he blew a gasket. Kept going on about our *dependence* on *foreign* oil. That's when he threw the whole engine overboard, and ordered us to complete the mission on windpower. Then, of course, he flip-flopped, and made us put the tank back in.

[Caption: "Steve Cordier Builds models of boats like the one Kerry served on"]

Steve Cordier: We happened upon two Viet Cong soldiers, and everyone thought

⁵⁴ http://www.usatoday.com/news/politicselections/nation/president/2004-08-20-swift-boat-flier_x.htm

it was an ambush. John Kerry jumped off the boat and chased after them. Within minutes, he returned to the boat with the soldiers and said, “These men are in love.” And he conducted a gay marriage ceremony. To honor, obey, and love you long time. It made us all sick.

[Caption: “Paid For By Swift Boat Veterans For Truth and A rich Texas Dude. Not Authorized By any Candidate, Especially Bush. We Haven’t Even Talked to Bush. We Bet He Hates These.”]

Announcer: Paid for by Swift Boat Veterans For Truth.

[Picture of Adobe Photoshop logo]

Second Announcer: *And* Adobe Photoshop. Adobe. When you want the truth, *real* bad. (*SNL*, Sketch, “Swift Boat Veterans for Truth”)

In one segment, Stewart criticized an assertion by Robert Novak, who refuted the fact that John Kerry’s SwiftBoat shipmates stood with him at the DNC.

Stewart: Novak says “Unfit for Command [the 2004 book that criticized Kerry] sends a devastating message, unless it is effectively refuted.” Because in this country, when a scurrilous charge is made against you by people, you’re guilty unless you prove otherwise, that’s how it works! Kudos Robert Novak: you truly are a Douchebag of Liberty. (*Daily Show*, August 10, 2004)

According to Stewart, the election was polluted by outside groups trying to exert influence through personal attacks, while the official campaigns do not have to get their hands dirty.

9/11, THE 2004 PEW STUDY, MEDIA CRITICISM: THE RISE OF THE *DAILY SHOW* AND THE INFLUENCE OF STEWART ON MAINSTREAM POLITICAL DISCOURSE

September 11, 2001 cast a shadow over the 2004 election, as it was the first one since the attacks. The *Times*, quoted above, (*New York Times*, January 6, p. C5) characterized the changing face of political humor in terms of 9/11, and this was a recurring theme. The influence of the *Daily Show* in particular increased because of how political discourse changed.

...the first [campaign] since the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11...has squelched much of what usually passes for political humor. The most the presidential candidates seem to be able to muster is a sardonic smile. Such is the tenor of the campaign that it has transformed Comedy Central into a serious network. Al Franken, Jon Stewart and Dennis Miller used to be comedians. Now they are pundits.⁵⁵

In general, writers lauded the greater reliance Americans had on late-night comedy, and particularly on the *Daily Show*, because essentially, it was better than not having any

⁵⁵ Strauss, Robert. 2004. "Laugh Early and Often." *New York Times*, October 31, p.14NJ4.

guidance at all. This assistance was not being provided by the television news media as it once was:

Let me be the last to observe that we are currently living in a golden age of satire. While citizens in earlier eras had Walter Cronkite and the “CBS Evening News” to help them navigate contentious and confusing matters of public import, more and more of us seem to rely on Jon Stewart and Comedy Central. Which suits me just fine.⁵⁶

A January, 2004 Pew Research Study found that “young people, by far the hardest to reach segment of the political news audience, were abandoning mainstream sources of election news and increasingly citing alternative outlets, including comedy shows such as the *Daily Show* and Saturday Night Live, as their source for election news.”⁵⁷ The *Times* and the *Post* often quoted this study to back up their statements about the influence of late-night political comedy (*Washington Post*, September 12 2004, p. B02; *Washington Post*, January 12, 2004. p. A06; *New York Times*, October 3, 2004, p. G20). The positive effects of people increasingly getting their news from late night comedy were also discussed as proof that the papers were correct in praising them.

As one of many young voters who say they get most of their campaign news from the irreverent “Indecision 2004” segment on “The Daily Show,” on the Comedy Channel, Jeff Leek, 22, a statistics major at the University of Washington, said

⁵⁶ Scott, A.O. 2004. “Moral Guidance From Class Clowns.” *New York Times*, October 15, p. E1.

⁵⁷ <http://www.people-press.org/2004/01/11/cable-and-internet-loom-large-in-fragmented-political-news-universe/>

politics were a big topic this year among his friends. “There’s less cynicism, less of this ‘oh, it doesn’t matter...’”⁵⁸

This praise was especially evident when it came to the shows helping the campaign of John Kerry over George W. Bush:

But while such voters [that watch the programs] may not be able to explain the details of Mr. Kerry’s health care plan, the convention coverage, seeping through the filter of late-night monologues or quickly scanned headlines, can nonetheless help plant a positive image of Mr. Kerry in the minds of these voters.⁵⁹

Not all the writers saw the influence of political humor in other areas of the public sphere as positive.

Television is increasingly awash in fake anchors delivering fake news, some of them far more trenchant than real anchors delivering real news... This phenomenon has been good news for the Bush administration, which has responded to the growing national appetite for fictionalized news by producing a steady supply of its own. Of late it has gone so far as to field its own pair of Jayson Blairs, hired at taxpayers’ expense: Karen Ryan and Alberto Garcia, the “reporters” who appeared in TV “news” videos distributed by the Department of Health and Human Services to local news shows around the country... Back at

⁵⁸ Egan, Timothy. 2004. “Vote Drives Gain Avid Attention of Youth In '04.” *New York Times*, September 15, p. A1.

⁵⁹ Editorial. 2004. “A Stage for Candor.” *Washington Post*, July 26, p. A10.

Comedy Central, Jon Stewart was ambivalent about the government's foray into his own specialty, musing aloud about whether he should be outraged or flattered. One of his faux correspondents, though, was outright faux despondent. "They created a whole new category of fake news - infoganda," Rob Corddry said. "We'll never be able to keep up!" But Mr. Corddry's joke is not really a joke. The more real journalism declines, the easier it is for such government infoganda to fill the vacuum.⁶⁰

It may be natural that political humor peaks in a presidential election year, but it is also true that the relationship between comedy and politics has never been more entangled...But by now comedy has become such a standard tool for politicians that candidates for high office like Arnold Schwarzenegger and John Edwards have announced their intentions to television hosts like Jay Leno and Jon Stewart...The point is that if comedy has long been a critical weapon used by commentators against politicians it is now also a standard political tool used by politicians to defuse criticism and to court voters.⁶¹

However, the "infoganda" model was something that the *Daily Show* in specific continually called out, and many programs often mocked politicians for feeble attempts at humor. The official political sphere might have occasionally used the same humorous methods, but they did not often succeed.

⁶⁰ Rich, Frank. 2004. "Operation Iraqi Infoganda." *New York Times*, March 28, p. B1.

⁶¹ Weber, Bruce. 2004. "Strategy and Spin Are Cool, But Voters Like to Laugh." *New York Times*, March 8, p. E1.

One area in which there was broad agreement was the fact that the *Daily Show* was critical of other television news and political media that covered the election. The writers that highlighted the *Daily Show's* criticism of the media simultaneously bolstered their own arguments and placed themselves above the polluted sphere of television news. Why did the criticism contributed by the *Daily Show* stand out? The *Times* used the show's attitude toward television news' coverage of the Democratic National Convention as evidence of it being shallow. It stood out from the other late-night programs in that it “zeroed in on the television journalists who chose to snub the convention as they covered it [and] lampooned those who deplored the slick, synthetic packaging of events, then grew indignant when Al Sharpton diverged from the script (*New York Times*, August 1, 2004, p. D1).”

The *Daily Show* had since the 2004 election cycle devoted weeks of coverage focusing on each parties' conventions...arguably more thorough than much of the network and cable coverage. Another area in which the *Daily Show* was said to be more thorough was in its criticism of the invasion of Iraq. The Post called it “the year's best news and information program...[and] the only one early on to ask the tough questions about the decision to invade Iraq. Of course, it was for humorous effect, but at least they were asking.”⁶²

In comparison to other late night comedy, the *Daily Show* was superior:

⁶² de Moraes, Lisa. 2004. “CBS Clocks Out on Airing Reagan's Convention Speech.” *Washington Post*, July 20, p. C07.

Ted Koppel...is Stewart's true foil, today's reigning example of the ultra-establishmentarian television journalist whose authority comes at the expense of any identification with his audience. While I'd still take Koppel over Jay Leno, that's less because Leno is a comic than because he's a dumb one. Never risking an original perception, his topical jokes are gag recyclings of the conventional wisdom, making him indistinguishable at times from a Republican Party shill...⁶³

Although 2008 would bring an interesting confrontation between David Letterman and Republican nominee John McCain, the political comedy of the talk-show format programs would not rise to the level of pure critical commentary that the *Daily Show* established. Ratings for basic cable programs were not subject to the same kind of pressures as network TV, and thus could take more risks. But the newspaper commentary was more focused on blaming the talk show host specifically for not being more original or willing to stand up for the truth, even if it went against "conventional wisdom." One incident that resulted in the acceptance of Jon Stewart in particular as an influential political and media commentator was the infamous *Crossfire* incident, when Jon Stewart appeared on the old version of CNN program on October 15, 2004, and criticized it as harmful to America – "He said the program is 'hurting America' by encouraging partisans to yell at each other" (*Washington Post*, October 23, 2004, p. A01) as it had, in recent years, devolved into a shouting match between the "Conservative" host Tucker Carlson, and the "Liberal" host, Paul Begala. The President of CNN, Jonathan Klein, attributed the show's cancelation after 23 years in part to Stewart's critique in a *Times* article:

⁶³ Carson, Tom. 2004. "Last Comic Standing." *New York Times*, October 3, p. G20.

Mr. Klein specifically cited the criticism that the comedian Jon Stewart leveled at “Crossfire” when he was a guest on the program during the presidential campaign. Mr. Stewart said that ranting partisan political shows on cable were “hurting America.” Mr. Klein said last night, “I agree wholeheartedly with Jon Stewart’s overall premise.” He said he believed that especially after the terror attacks on 9/11, viewers are interested in information, not opinion.⁶⁴

One exceptional thing that the *Daily Show* was noted for in the *Times* and the *Post* was that it was highly critical of cable news. This was especially true of Fox News, which proposed that they create a “Truth Squad” to get to the bottom of what’s really going on in the election in a non-partisan way. The first question in this “new era” was asked of John Sununu by Fox News host Chris Wallace:

Wallace: Tell me the three worst things about John Kerry’s economic policies.

Stewart: You know it’s questions like that that almost make a man lose his faith in Fox News Truth Squads. (*Daily Show*, April 7, 2004).

However, Stewart did not restrict his criticism to the right-leaning Fox, as was seen in the *Crossfire* incident, and this quote, which pointed out that none of the cable news outlets ask adequate follow-up questions. When various Republican commentators (Like RNC Chairman Ed Gillespie), speaking on CNN and MSNBC, as well as Fox, called John

⁶⁴ Carter, Bill. 2005. “CNN Will Cancel 'Crossfire' And Cut Ties to Commentator.” *New York Times*, January 6, p. C5.

Kerry and John Edwards the most liberal Senators in history, despite the dubiousness of this claim based on their voting records, on, Fox, etc., Stewart called it out:

Stewart: Wow, those guys are liberal!...and while we don't have any idea what that means or where those rankings come from or how they were arrived at or whether it's even true...I don't like the sounds of it...Talking Points – they're true because they're said a lot. (*Daily Show*, July 14, 2004)

Stewart criticized CNN especially in its placement of profit motive over information, in its airing of a debate which Stewart regarded as shallow:

Stewart: Last night, CNN aired “America Rocks the Vote,” a 90-minute pander...I'm sorry, special...featuring 8 of the 9 Democratic contenders in a format designed to appeal to 18-30 year olds. Because if you wanna reach young people, there's no better lead-in than “Lou Dobbs' Moneyline.” (*Daily Show*, November 5, 2003)

Stewart's appearance and impact on *Crossfire* highlights the importance that the *Daily Show* was beginning to have during the 2004 election cycle. The show was no longer just a substantive satire of the political process, but also of the media, which had become inextricably linked to it. If the quality of television media coverage specifically was not good, the public would not make informed decisions. This was the meaning of Stewart's “hurting America” comment: rational public debate was being sidelined by meaningless

shouting matches where the loudest one wins. The fact that the *Daily Show* had become the alternative, and that Stewart was the voice of informed reason, did not sit well with him, which will be discussed later. As Darrel West, a Brown political scientist and author puts it, “The ‘Crossfire’ conflict supports the charge that the line between television news and entertainment was blurred beyond all recognition...[Tucker Carlson] wasn’t wanting commentary, he wanted entertainment” (*New York Times*, October 24, 2004, p. D5). The two hosts publically criticized Stewart for being “sanctimonious,” but Stewart returned the criticism:

But he is fed up with a process in which “people who are giving talking points come on these shows and are questioned by people on the other talking-pointed side. ‘Crossfire’ is the crack cocaine, the purest distillation of it.” Some journalists have rallied to his defense. “Jon Stewart never said he was going to renounce his standing as a smart guy who went to William and Mary and as a sharp social critic,” says NBC anchor Brian Williams, a past “Daily Show” guest. “Sure he has an impact. The din of our media has reached the point where we could use a have-you-no-sense-of-decency-sir-at-long-last moment.”⁶⁵

This last comment by Brian Williams, contextualizing Stewart’s remarks in terms of the end of the McCarthy era, genuinely elevated his discourse to the level of historical importance. Many commentators in the papers were quite happy with how the incident played out, as if they wanted to say the same thing themselves for a long time:

⁶⁵ Kurtz, Howard. 2004. “The Campaign of a Comedian; Jon Stewart's Fake Journalism Enjoys Real Political Impact.” *Washington Post*, October 23, p. A01.

Jon Stewart could not resist a last dig at CNN's "Crossfire" during his monologue on Comedy Central on Monday night. "They said I wasn't being funny...And I said to them: 'I know that. But tomorrow I will go back to being funny'"...that is why his surprise attack on the hosts of CNN's "Crossfire" was so satisfying...he told Paul Begala and Tucker Carlson that they were partisan hacks and that their pro-wrestling approach to political discourse was "hurting America."...Real anger is as rare on television as real discussion."⁶⁶

Stewart was uneasy with his position as the voice of reason: "Asked whether he worried about reports that young viewers get most of their political news from late-night TV programs, he responded, 'Every day, sir'" (*Washington Post*, January 10, 2004, p. C07). However, he knew that an alternative was necessary. Speaking on the "relatively atrocious" nature of cable news, he said "'It's not that we shouldn't know when someone is kidnapped, it's that we should not have to wait until they come back to see other news'" (*Washington Post*, January 10, 2004, p. C07). Stewart's place as an alternative voice opened him up to criticism from the traditional news sources he had mocked. This caused him to try to distance himself from his newly crowned title: "...he hotly denies allegations that he has become a 'pundit' or, as Newsweek recently put it, 'He's starting to be taken seriously as a political force.' 'I've made wonk? Very exciting...We're in worse shape than I thought'" (*Washington Post*, January 22, 2004, p. C03).

⁶⁶Stanley, Alessandra. 2004. "No Jokes or Spin. It's Time (Gasp) to Talk." *New York Times*, October 20, p. E1.

The focus that the *Times* and the *Post* placed on this entire dialogue showed that they wanted to position themselves on Stewart's side in opposition to the polluted cable and network news that he disparaged.

Jon Stewart, fake journalist and proud of it, keeps insisting he's just a comedian...sharp-edged skewering has turned the Comedy Central funnyman into a cultural phenomenon who, despite his protestations, seems to be having some undefined, irony-drenched influence on how the campaign is perceived..."There's a difference between making a point and having an agenda...We feel a frustration with the way politics are handled and the way politics are handled within the media..."When I listen to Jon, he really is profoundly concerned and angry about real issues," Koppel says. "He is to television news what a really great editorial cartoonist is to a newspaper." But, Koppel says, "a satirist gets to poke and prod and make fun of other people, and when you say, 'What about you, dummy?,' he says, 'I'm just a satirist'"⁶⁷

Sorry, Jon, but you can't interview Bill Clinton, Richard Clarke, Bill O'Reilly, Bob Dole, etc., etc., and still say you're just a comedian."⁶⁸

...Stewart's show has so much buzz during this election, it's annoying some of the traditional TV newsies. "A lot of television viewers - more, quite frankly, than

⁶⁷ Kurtz, Howard. 2004. "The Campaign of a Comedian; Jon Stewart's Fake Journalism Enjoys Real Political Impact." *Washington Post*, October 23, p. A01.

⁶⁸ Cave, Damien. 2004. "If You Interview Kissinger, Are You Still a Comedian?" *New York Times*, October 24, p. D5.

I'm comfortable with - get their news from the Comedy Channel on a program called 'The Daily Show,' "Nightline" anchor Ted Koppel whined to his viewers in a telecast from the Democratic convention in Boston.⁶⁹

However, perhaps sensing that they might be fighting a losing battle, "Television news programs, trying to court this audience, routinely run clips of Jay Leno, David Letterman and Stewart" (*Washington Post*, January 12 2004, p. A06).

THE SHOWS SET THE TONE FOR DISCUSSION OF BUSH'S INADEQUACIES

One of the most common ways the writers in the papers spoke of the comedy programs was to use quotes from them as a proxy for opinions they already had. Although this occurs with many of the programs, again, it was mostly about the *Daily Show*. Criticism of President Bush was a frequent topic: "The debate tomorrow should not seek to discover which candidate would be more fun to have a beer with. As Jon Stewart of the 'The Daily Show' nicely put in 2000, 'I want my president to be the designated driver'" (*New York Times*, September 29, 2004, p. A25). Bush's intelligence, as well as his seriousness as a candidate, was addressed in this way: "Stewart made a serious remark that goes to the heart of what has been Bush's problem. He referred to the president's nonexistent 'learning curve,' which is indeed troubling...Bush has shown little growth" (*Washington Post*, October 15, 2004, p. A23) with Stewart also calling Bush "thickly muddled" in his debate performances. These were substantive critiques of

⁶⁹ de Moraes, Lisa. 2004. "Seriously: Kerry On Comedy Central." *Washington Post*, August 24. P. C01

Bush's ability to be President. Compare this to Jay Leno's (and *SNL*'s) frequent jabs at Bush's reputation of a former "frat guy" which were not particularly critical in a real way: "For two years and four months, America waited, patiently, for this moment: the day George W. Bush's old fraternity brothers would party at the White House... 'Boy, that is every C-student's dream come true...,' Jay Leno marveled... 'Go back to your class reunion as president'" (*Washington Post*, May 30, 2003, p. C01). Letterman, possibly taking a cue from the more substantive *Daily Show*, was quoted as saying that Bush "is asking Congress for \$ 80 billion to help rebuild Iraq... And when you make out that check, remember there are two L's in Halliburton" (*Washington Post*, September 19, 2003, p. A15). This joke had an interesting impact on political discourse:

The Democratic-leaning activist group American Family Voices uses the line in a spot accusing the administration of cronyism and Halliburton of profiteering. "Billions of tax dollars going directly to Halliburton through sweetheart, no-bid government contracts," the announcer in the ad says, after quoting the Letterman joke.⁷⁰

Bush was not the only target of substantive jokes, especially on the *Daily Show*. Paper columnists used Stewart's words to express their own displeasure about the lack of real differences between Bush and Kerry, and the empty rhetoric that they perceived the candidates would often use:

⁷⁰ Editorial. 2003. "A Stage for Candor." *Washington Post*, September 19, p. A10.

...Stewart pinpointed the differences between the two candidates in October's GQ: "One is making America stronger and safer and is looking out for you, the hard-working American voter. The other has made strong decisions for a safe America, so that hard-working Americans can be stronger and safer."⁷¹

This lack of difference emerges especially when Stewart criticized the overly centrist-to-conservative policy positions of former Vice Presidential candidate Joe Lieberman: "Rival campaigns dismissed [Lieberman] as too conservative, deriding him as 'Bush Lite.' At one point...Jon Stewart satirized him as 'the candidate for people who want to vote for George Bush but don't find [Bush] Jewish enough'" (*Washington Post*, February 4, 2004, p. A12).

THE CANDIDATES ON THE *DAILY SHOW* AND *SNL*: INCREASINGLY SUBSTANTIVE CRITICISM

Going on programs like *SNL* or the *Daily Show* was increasingly used in this election year as a tool for the candidates to improve their image as a method of damage control, especially in the case of Howard Dean, or to simply make them seem more likeable, especially in the case of the rather wooden Kerry (*New York Times*, March 28, 2004, p. A28; *Washington Post*, April 10 2004, p. C01). The candidates appeared on late night comedy programs to appear more "real," but it was often regarded as ineffective:

⁷¹ Carlson, Peter. 2004. "Election Uncoverage, From the Wheel Deal To the Abstinent Voter." *Washington Post*, October 26, P. C01.

This is true even when the candidates appear on the smartest and least canned late-night TV show of the bunch, Jon Stewart's "Daily Show." Ben Karlin, its executive producer, says: "There's almost nothing genuine about a politician appearing on our show, including those we like. We're being used to bring them some associative hipness - so they can say, look at us, our guy can laugh at himself. We have no illusions about it. We're just another part of the media strategy." Indeed, such a media strategy could be seen most clearly at work after the Dean "scream," when the candidate immediately made himself available to do a self-deprecating "Top Ten" list on Letterman, if only with the hope that that new tape loop might replace the one of his Iowa yelp on cable and network news. (It was not to be; Dr. Dean trying to be funny was not as funny as Dr. Dean's improvised Iowa peroration.)⁷²

However, as the *Times* noted, "Even before Monday night, opponents were trying to portray Dr. Dean as the angriest man in politics, prompting 'Saturday Night Live' last weekend to depict him as a cursing egomaniac" (*New York Times*, January 21, 2004, p. A24). There was a two-way effect here: shows with more personality-driven comedy like *SNL* or Leno's took cues from the prevailing media image of the person in question, thus amplifying and reifying the image. At the same time, the candidates tried to use the shows, as well as the more substantive *Daily Show*, to change the direction of public opinion, as Ben Karlin stated, above. As Charles Krauthammer put it, "When the late-night comics call you... 'the Incredible Hulk' (Conan O'Brien) and 'Mr. Rogers with

⁷² Rich, Frank. 2004. "Paar to Leno, J.F.K. to J.F.K." *New York Times*, February 8, p. B1.

rabies' (Jay Leno), you've got trouble. The most difficult thing to recover from in politics is ridicule" (*Washington Post*, January 23, 2004, p. A21). Conversely, "the same media that played the 'I Have a Scream' speech time and again also gave him the opportunity to come back on the David Letterman show..." (*Washington Post*, January 29 2004, p. A01).

The way that narratives built upon one another, with the assistance of late night comedy programs, was demonstrated in the following *Post* quote: "By yesterday, every new development [about Kerry] was being reported with a sinking-ship tone... Things hit a new low when Kerry did the 'Tonight Show' and a foulmouthed puppet - Triumph the Insult Comic Dog - made fun of him..." (WP November 13, 2003, p. C01). Kerry's attempt to seem like a "real" person by appearing on the *Tonight Show* backfired when the joke was on him rather than about him. Bush's campaign had become wise to this mechanism in ways that Kerry's did not:

Bush "has been the punching bag for the Democrats and, to some degree, for the news media for about a month now," said Tobe Berkovitz of Boston University's communications school. "Bush needs to show he is the commander in chief of substance, and you don't do that with David Letterman or Jon Stewart or Jay Leno."⁷³

Bush would not have stood a chance on these shows because of all the easy targets about his personality that he provided over the years. He did not have the problem of not

⁷³ Kurtz, Howard. 2004. "Bush to Defend Record on TV; Talk Shows Have Garnered Key Role in Presidential Politics" *Washington Post*, February 6, p. A12.

seeming “real,” and thus did not need to use the shows as the Democratic candidates did. Although he made himself a target for seeming too unserious (see Stewart quote above about wishing for a “designated driver”), Bush did not make the situation worse by trying to augment his “realness” by relying on late night comedy. The result was (at least in part) his victory in the 2004 election.

When the papers did have extended commentary on shows other than the *Daily Show*, they tended to focus on how the programs satirized the candidates’ personalities, rather than their commentary on substantive issues.

...the nation’s late-night comedians still haven’t quite pegged him. They haven’t completed the ritual of turning a presidential candidate into a stock character like Bush the Dumb Frat Boy, Gore the Know-It-All Stiff, Clinton the Gluttonous Lecher or Reagan the Amiable Dunce. Comedians have tried the Rich Guy... They’ve also tried the War Bore, as depicted in jokes about Mr. Kerry’s frequent references to his Vietnam service. There’s also Kerry the Waffler on issues... The most popular persona so far seems to be Killjoy Kerry, as depicted in the many jokes about his long face and dour demeanor.⁷⁴

The lack of difference between the candidates’ backgrounds was also a topic on other programs, although not in a particularly substantive way: “As Jay Leno noted, the choices in the presidential election range all the way from a rich, white guy from Yale to a rich, white guy from Yale” (*New York Times*, March 21, 2004, p. D12). Late-night comedians

⁷⁴ Tierney, John. 2004 “Political Points: Kerry Missing Late-Night Peg.” *New York Times*, March 14, p. A22.

poking fun at Kerry's choice of hobbies was also a topic of discussion in the papers: "David Letterman mocked him for windsurfing instead of campaigning. Jay Leno played the flip-flop card, quipping that even Mr. Kerry's hobby depends on which way the wind blows" (*New York Times*, September 5, 2004, p. D2). Charles Krauthammer managed to transmute a rather meaningless comment by Jay Leno into an indictment about Kerry's stance on the substantive issue of Iraq, but it came off as a bit of a stretch:

When Kerry went off windsurfing during the Republican convention, Jay Leno noted that even Kerry's hobbies depend on wind direction. Kerry on the war has become an object not only of derision but of irreconcilable suspicion. What kind of man, aspiring to the presidency, does not know his own mind about the most serious issue of our time?⁷⁵

Even Tina Fey, who would become a solid force for substantive parody in the 2008 election cycle, merely made fun of Bush's jumpsuit when discussing the infamous "Mission Accomplished" landing on the aircraft carrier, when there were so many other possible avenues. The *Times* missed this point entirely: "On 'Saturday Night Live,' Tina Fey subjected the photographic record of his getup to close scrutiny and wondered if he had stuffed 'socks down the front of the jump suit'" (*New York Times*, May 11, 2004, p. B2).

The debates have had a clear, if subtle, effect on the images of the candidates...Mr. Kerry's caricature evolved slightly between the...episode [of

⁷⁵ Krauthammer, Charles. 2004. "Nowhere Left to Flop." *Washington Post*, September 17, p. A27.

SNL] that followed the first debate and the one that followed the second. In the first sketch he was portrayed as a serial panderer, in the second as the clear winner of the debates despite his own personality failings. At the end of one exchange in the sketch that ran on Saturday, the actor playing Mr. Kerry, Seth Meyers, said: “I should just sit down, confident in the fact that I just cleaned the president’s clock, and not say anything else. But I’m not going to do that. No, I’m gonna keep on talking. Why? Because I can’t help myself.”⁷⁶

SNL’s lack of substantive humor confused those writers in the *Post* and the *Times* who liked to lump all late night comedy together. Those who pay more specific attention to the *Daily Show* did not fall into this narrative mode.

At this point, it was clear that *SNL* was not taking on the candidates in a substantive way. Writers in the *Post* and the *Times* discussed *SNL* in much the same way that they discussed Leno, etc. There were personality-driven caricatures and no expectations that *SNL*’s commentary would be any different from the regular talk show hosts, other than being perhaps a bit more elaborate in execution. However, at this point, even though the writers occasionally wrote about the distinction between substantive and personality-based humor, they didn’t fully embrace that there was a distinction, often lumping Jon Stewart in with the other late night comedians. This was in spite of the fact that they often singled him out for particular praise or, in the case of Tom Shales, particular derision. This confusion was typified by a piece in the *Post* which discussed a Center for Media and Public Affairs study about political humor on television.

⁷⁶ Bennet, James and Jim Rutenberg. 2004. “A Television Event That Delivered High Drama and Garnered High Ratings.” *New York Times*, October 15, p. A20.

George Bush still wears a dunce cap. And John Kerry is one strange-looking dude. That, at least, is the way late-night comedians are portraying the presidential rivals...the musings of Leno, David Letterman, Jon Stewart and Conan O'Brien may have as much to do with shaping the candidates' public personas as a ton of newspaper stories, magazine features and cable arguments...the Center for Media and Public Affairs has divined that Bush remains the biggest late-night target - the butt of 213 jokes from Jan. 1 through March 9 - compared with 53 for Kerry (who barely beat the 43 jibes aimed at Dennis Kucinich). Even in February, when Kerry was surging to the nomination, it was Bush hands down, 121 to 25...But this is one contest where winning amounts to losing: 94 percent of the jokes about intelligence, and 89 percent about honesty, involved the president. Kerry drew nearly half the cracks aimed at a candidate's appearance...Bush's other vulnerabilities at that hour, according to the report: his military service and his credibility on Iraq...Kerry gets needled on his wealth and reputation for flip-flopping.⁷⁷

What was not done in this article was to make a distinction between who was making what kinds of jokes, only a numerical count of the targets of the humor, which was what the study reported.

There were some other interesting incidents that seemed to have been influential. One such incident involved David Letterman. A strange incident occurred on late

⁷⁷ Kurtz, Howard. 2004. "Bush and Kerry, a Running Gag on Late Night." *Washington Post*, March 22, p. C01.

March/Early April that put Letterman at the center of a controversy involving CNN and the White House. The *Post* reported:

Did the White House find weapons of mass destruction at the Ed Sullivan Theatre, or did CNN mess up its report on a “Late Show With David Letterman” segment poking fun at President Bush? Monday night Letterman debuted a new bit on his show, called “George W. Bush Invigorates America’s Youth.” What followed was a series of very brief clips from a recent speech in Florida...to a Norman Rockwellian group of average citizens. Among them was one apple-cheeked boy of about 12...who is caught on camera yawning uncontrollably, twisting his head from side to side, checking his watch and otherwise looking pretty thoroughly bored, while the other people serving as background ignored him. The folks at CNN got a kick out of it and the next morning, during “CNN Live Today,” ran the clip, crediting Letterman...Right after the break, Kagan told viewers: “...We’re being told by the White House that the kid, as funny as he was, was edited into that video...”⁷⁸

Later that night, Letterman reacted strongly to the accusation, calling it “an out-and-out, 100 percent absolute lie” as he had not edited the tape at all. Later in the broadcast, he said, “CNN has just phoned and, according to this information, the anchorwoman misspoke, they never got a comment from the White House. It was a CNN mistake.” He then complained about having been made to think, and state, that the White House was

⁷⁸ de Moraes, Lisa. 2004. “Boy Yawns, CNN Bumbles, Letterman Yelps.” *Washington Post*, April 1, p. C01.

the source of the lie. The story got stranger the next day when the Post reported that the White House Press Secretary had begun handling “media access” to the boy “13-year-old Tyler Crotty - son of Orange County, Fla., chairman and major Bush fundraiser Richard Crotty” stating also that ““He’s a young person who strongly supports the president and is excited about getting a chance to talk about it”” (*Washington Post*, April 2 2004, p. C01). They also quoted Orlando Sentinel columnist Scott Maxwell as saying:

“I think whatever problems the Bushes might have had with the [Crotty] son they got over with pretty quick as soon as Dad reached ‘Pioneer status,’ Maxwell says. That’s the hokey title given to anyone who raises more than \$100,000 for the president’s reelection effort...Meanwhile, CNN apologized on the air to Letterman yesterday for having reported Tuesday that the White House said his videotape had been altered to put the boy right behind Bush...CNN retracted that report Tuesday night, but only after Letterman had shown the clip of Kagan telling viewers that the White House said the tape was doctored, and only after Letterman had called the White House a bunch of liars...Last night, Letterman called it “a landmark day, because for the first time in 25 years of network television broadcasting, the first time ever since I’ve been doing this, someone has apologized to me.”⁷⁹

Letterman went on to say that the whole incident was suspicious to him because initially the child’s father was upset with him and now seemed to find it funny. Perhaps because it made CNN look like the fool in the end instead of Bush. It was possible that Letterman

⁷⁹ de Moraes, Lisa. 2004. “White House Spins The Boy Who Yawned.” *Washington Post*, April 2, p. C01.

was becoming more politicized in his commentary. This topic will be explored further in the chapter on the 2008 election cycle.

CONCLUSION

The writers in the *Post* and the *Times* highlighted the differences between Jon Stewart's and the *Daily Show's* sort of comedy, and the personality-based humor of *SNL*. This was a time when jokes about candidates' looks or speech patterns were a detriment to the type of issue-based humor that was necessary, and by contrast, made *SNL* look like a form of comedy that belonged firmly in the 20th century, and the comedy of the *Daily Show* in the 21st. In 2008, *SNL* would get the message, and catch up. A specific reflection of this trend of the *Daily Show* taking one and issue and doing substantive humor about it, while *SNL* did personal humor about the same thing, was the way Bush's intelligence was portrayed. *SNL* made it seem as if there wasn't too much of a difference between Bush and Kerry, "the stiff guy vs. the dumb guy." Both went to Yale, were wealthy, etc. But the *Daily Show* wasn't merely mocking his mannerism, malapropisms, or background, they were questioning whether or not he was fit to be the President in the first place, using his bad decisions and questionable judgments about the need to go to war as a backdrop. Thus, there really *was* a difference between the candidates because Kerry would likely not have had the same policies.

Appearing on the late-night comedy programs had become another important aspect to campaigns, and even though politicians did find it necessary to appear on them in the past in order to seem like a "regular person," the growing realization that the shows

were where a large portion of the younger voting public got their news made it even more necessary than before (Feldman and Young 2008; Young and Tisinger 2006; Young 2006) . The papers noted that Bush didn't appear on them, and it could be inferred then that he didn't need to, because he was not going to get that part of the electorate anyway. In the 2004 election cycle, mainly Democratic candidates appeared on them; in 2008, it would shift to an almost equal representation. Going on the shows could (and in 2008, did) backfire for the candidates who may seem as if they were failing to perform authenticity of being "real" and merely using the shows as cover (Larson and Porpora 2011; Alexander 2010). But not going on them would miss a vital audience. In previous years, this concern was not as great, and in this year, the discourse by some journalists about appearing on the shows taking away from the gravitas of the candidates has disappeared. In fact, rather than criticize comedy programs for being shallow and taking away from the seriousness of political narratives in general, the journalists were now more likely to characterize mainstream media coverage of the election as narrow and largely uncritical. The aftermath of 9/11 made it more necessary than ever that journalism be willing to question the official policies of the president and his administration, but instead they went on the opposite direction, opening up a space of opportunity for a new way of discussing politics to come about (Calavita 2004). This contribution enhanced the vibrancy of civil society (Alexander and Smith 2005; Alexander 2006). The newspaper writers, while reflecting on this need, do not simultaneously reflect on their own complicity with it. Instead, they spend time writing about things like Jon Stewart's impact on cable news, particularly his criticisms of the partisanship of Fox, and the

shallowness of CNN, exemplified by his role in getting *Crossfire* cancelled (Jacobs and Michaud Wild 2013).

Historically, when a television program would be so up front about criticizing the President's policies, they risked getting taken off the air, as happened to the Smothers Brothers in the prior century (Bianculli 2009). Unlike the talk show format programs with a monologue that often featured political jokes, the *Daily Show* dealt with substantive issues head-on, while still retaining some of the personality-based humor of the past. This made the show more accessible to viewers, and softened some of the harsher criticism. Additionally, the show was not fully partisan, calling out Democrats when their policies were less than progressive. The show's propensity to use politicians' own words against them by going through archival footage and seeing when they contradicted themselves made it an invaluable resource for journalists, both in newspapers and on television, who could simply lift the segments or transcripts of them verbatim to demonstrate a point.

A number of new narratives in the media coverage about political comedy on television emerged in the 2004 election cycle. In 2000, Jon Stewart was still an unknown quantity. So much changed from that election cycle to this one, because of the September 11 attacks, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the lack of criticism of the Bush administration in mainstream journalism (as well as its complicity in spreading false information). The role of "serious journalist" was one that Stewart wanted to reject, making himself out to be "just a comedian." When writers and citizens began to realize that his voice was one of the only major ones in the public sphere that fostered dissent and questioning of the official Republican Party line, the contrast became starker between "comedy" and substantive satirical criticism. Journalists had to point it out. The fact that

Stewart was rejecting his serious role, even as it was growing, shows that he was not attempting to usurp or assume this role, but that it happened organically. Writers in the *Post* and the *Times*, who had not questioned the wars as much as perhaps they believed they ought to have, were now open to finding any voice that agreed with them, in order to try to prevent Bush from being re-elected. Although this failed, the structural propensity for the journalists to use satirical comedy narratives as a resource would continue to stay in place, into the next election cycle and beyond.

CHAPTER 7: THE 2008 ELECTION

Humor in the 2008 election cycle early on was characterized by its remarks about the extremism of the Republican primary candidates, and the infighting between Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton being harmful to the party on the Democratic side. Later, when the nominees had been selected, it shifted to criticism of John McCain's pick of Sarah Palin as his running mate, and mockery of how the media and Republicans were trying to demonize Barack Obama for his perceived racial and religious otherness. Newspaper commentary was especially engaged with *Saturday Night Live's* portrayal of Sarah Palin as dangerously incompetent. Two main areas stood out in journalistic commentary on the 2008 election cycle; first, writers were focused on how well or how poorly candidates appearing on the shows performed. Obama was ranked most competent, with Clinton behind him; McCain made some major mistakes (namely the Letterman appearance fiasco), while Palin was both the most scrutinized and least able to portray herself as a genuine, authentic politician. The second area is the discussion by journalists of the place that political comedy has now firmly occupied, that of a substantive, critical perspective that television news has increasingly failed to live up to in the 2000s thus far. Two other areas, that of journalists relying on the shows' words to express their opinions, and the relevance of the topics on the shows being worthy of paying attention to, are by this election cycle taken for granted, and couched in terms of the other two areas. This election cycle also saw the addition of the *Colbert Report* to the late-night comedy landscape. The duration of the 2008 election here is considered to last from April 26, 2007 to November 4, 2008. I identified were 63 total *Daily Show*

segments, 50 *Colbert Report* segments, and 97 *SNL* sketches and “Weekend Update” jokes.

A majority of *Daily Show* segments were slanted towards Democrats (52.38%, while another significant segment had no slant (39.68%); only 7.98% were slanted towards Republicans in criticism of Democratic candidates and policies (Table 13). The percentages were similar for the *Colbert Report*, with a slightly greater edge towards Democrats (Table 14).

Slant Towards? *Daily Show*, 2008 (Table 13)

	None	Democrats	Republicans
2008, Whole	25	33	5
Election Cycle (63)	(39.68%)	(52.38%)	(7.98%)

Slant Towards? *Colbert Report*, 2008 (Table 14)

	None	Democrats	Republicans
2008, Whole	16	33	1
Election Cycle (50)	(32%)	(66%)	(2%)

The slant on *SNL* in 2008 was more complex than on the *Daily Show* or *Colbert*. There was mostly no slant at all; and a lot of the slant towards Democrats takes place after Palin enters the scene (Table 15).

Slant Towards? *SNL*, 2008 (Table 15)

	None	Democrats	Progressive	Republicans
2008, Whole Election Cycle (97)	58 (59.8%)	32 (33%)	3 (3.1%)	4 (4.1%)

The *Daily Show*'s humor had slightly more substantive jokes (44.44%) with most of them aimed at Republicans (Table 16). Colbert's humor was 60% personal, and both personal and substantive humor mostly favored Democrats (Table 17).

Personal or Substantive? *Daily Show*, 2008 (Table 16)

	Both	Personal	Substantive
2008, Whole Election Cycle (63)	12 (19.05%)	23 (36.51%)	28 (44.44%)
2008, Whole Election Cycle, Republicans (5)	0 (0%)	4 (80%)	1 (20%)
2008, Whole Election Cycle, Democrats (33)	7 (21.21%)	7 (21.21%)	19 (57.58%)
2008, Whole Election Cycle, No Slant (25)	5 (25%)	12 (48%)	8 (32%)

Personal or Substantive? *Colbert Report*, 2008 (Table 17)

	Both	Personal	Substantive
2008, Whole Election Cycle (50)	3 (6%)	30 (60%)	17 (34%)
2008, Whole Election Cycle, Republicans (1)	0 (0%)	1 (100%)	0 (0%)
2008, Whole Election Cycle, Democrats (33)	2 (6.1%)	17 (51.5%)	14 (42.4%)
2008, Whole Election Cycle, No Slant (16)	1 (6.3%)	12 (75%)	3 (18.7%)

SNL's humor was fairly equal between personal and substantive overall. But there was a strong pro-Democrat substantive bias; most substantive jokes favored Democrats, and were against Republicans, mainly because of the anti-Palin tone that took place later on (Table 18).

Personal or Substantive? *SNL*, 2008 (Table 18)

	Both	Personal	Substantive
2008, Whole Election Cycle (97)	10 (10.3%)	47 (48.5%)	40 (41.2%)
2008, Whole Election Cycle, Republicans (4)	2 (50%)	1 (25%)	1 (25%)
2008, Whole Election Cycle,	3	5	24

Democrats (32)	(9.4%)	(15.6%)	(75%)
2008, Whole Election Cycle, Progressive (3)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	3 (3%)
2008, Whole Election Cycle, No Slant (58)	5 (8.6%)	41 (70.7%)	12 (20.7%)

The prominence of the *Daily Show* that began in 2000, and became strongly entrenched in 2004, was deepened in 2008, by two main factors: one, the increasing tendency for journalists to realize that what Stewart was doing was informed more by substantive policy or competency concerns about the candidates; and two, the debut of the *Colbert Report*, which, although different in form than the *Daily Show*, was similar in function. Colbert was another, similar voice that could counteract both the Republican echo chamber of Fox News, but also continued to challenge the capableness of cable news in general, as it worked as a direct parody of it at times. Another very influential factor on journalists' discourse in the *Post* and the *Times* during this cycle was *SNL*, specifically Tina Fey's impression of Vice-Presidential candidate Sarah Palin. It was widely studied in Communications literature as potentially having influenced voters through what researchers called the "Fey Effect" - those who saw the parody of her poorly performed network television interviews were likely to have a low opinion of her (Baumgartner, et al. 2012; Esralew and Young 2012; Young 2011). However, this study demonstrates that mainstream journalists in the public sphere were just as, if not more, influenced by the parody, and suggests that the so-called "Fey Effect" could have also been amplified by these intermediaries (Alexander 2004; Jacobs and Townsley 2011).

PERSONAL HUMOR IN 2008 CONCENTRATED AT BEGINNING OF ELECTION

Early on in the election cycle, there was an equally non-substantive treatment of most of the primary candidates from both parties on *SNL*. The show characterized the Republicans as anti-science and superstitious religious zealots with strange beliefs. This included Mitt Romney as well as the Republican field in general: “Presidential candidate Mitt Romney told 60 Minutes this week that he can’t imagine anything more awful than polygamy, except having only one wife” (*SNL*, “Weekend Update” May 12, 2007); “During last week’s Republican debate, 3 of the 10 candidates said they did not believe in evolution, including Kansas senator, Sam Brownback, who said he would defend his conviction, one side of the Earth to the other” (*SNL*, “Weekend Update” May 12, 2007). Democratic candidates did not fare much better, and many were featured in a sketch that featured former Alaska Senator Mike Gravel and Chris Dodd lamenting about the advantages that Bill Richardson had because he was “half Mexican”:

Dodd: Nobody would dare argue with you because you’re half Mexican. You know unless they are three quarters Mexican or full on Mexican.

Gravel: I wish I was half Mexican

The sketch later on went to explore Gravel’s supposed mental instability. Gravel’s campaign was most well-known for bizarre, difficult-to-interpret campaign videos, practically no positive polling numbers, and strange statements in the media.

Edwards: All right, well, I'll think about it. Congressman Kucinich, any ideas?

Kucinich: Wouldn't this be a great time to bring up her vote against my proposal to create a federal Department of Cat Outreach? I think it's a good issue - we have a secretary of defense, why not a secretary of Cat Outreach? Well, I'm going to mention it.

Edwards: All right Sen. Gravel, you've been out of politics for almost 30 years and are obviously quite mentally unstable - any thoughts?

Gravel: I can tell you I'm so furious about Hillary's vote to go into Iraq, if I get a chance tonight, I'm just going to deck her! I swear to God, I'm going to lay her out.

...

Gravel: All right, you guys probably won't like this idea, but I think we should kidnap her...I'm serious, when she gets here, a couple of us grab her while the others chloroform her and tie her up.

...

Edwards: Wait a second, do any of us even have rope and chloroform?

Gravel: I do, in my car. (*SNL*, Sketch, "Democratic Nominees Backstage," November 3, 2007)

Personality-driven humor on *SNL* primarily characterized McCain as very old, and unable to win votes from any part of the electorate except a dwindling number of those voters who were very old themselves: "Senator John McCain addressed his supporters, saying,

‘Stand up with me, my friends. Stand up and fight for America.’ To which his supporters responded, ‘We can’t!’ (picture of people in wheelchairs is shown)” (*SNL*, “Weekend Update,” March 8, 2008).

Brian Williams: NBC News has obtained a copy of McCain’s birth certificate that appears to confirm that he is not only old, but very old. The kind of old that makes you not really trust him with scissors. Due to the potentially damaging nature of these allegations, we’ve invited Sen. McCain to be on the program...Here’s a surveillance photo of you, Senator, walking into Bob Evans to take advantage of their buffet.

Sen. John McCain: Yes, I was having dinner. I don’t see how that’s relevant.

Brian Williams: Can you see the time stamp on that photo, Senator? It says 4:30 in the afternoon. (*SNL*, Sketch, “NBC Special Report,” March 15, 2008)

Race was an issue in the election, and was treated more substantively later on, but was also the subject of non-substantive, personality-based humor on *SNL*. Some people claimed that Barack Obama had an advantage because he was biracial; no one would want to be seen criticizing him, lest they be perceived as racist. This was clearly a ridiculous assertion, due to lingering racist societal attitudes, and therefore *SNL* used it to emphasize the absurd tone that the campaign often took:

Jesse Jackson: Yes, sir. Embrace your race... for you cannot erase... your face! So, tonight... we intrigue you... of the vigilant. for, as close as you are to the

presidency... you know from our people's history what could happen. One mistake, and --

Together: They take it away!!

...

Jesse Jackson: Mr. Obama, you a smoker, so it's fine to partake of a cigarette here and there...

Rev. Al Sharpton: But if it's a whole pack of Newport menthols --

Together: They take it away!!

Jesse Jackson: It's fine to have the media talk to women from your past...

Rev. Al Sharpton: But if they dig up ONE baby mama...(SNL, "Weekend Update," May 17, 2008)

Obama had to contend with issues that no other major candidate ever had to before: namely the intersection of his race and his rumored religion. Because Obama is biracial, his "blackness" was emphasized by racially insensitive commentators, while at the same time being called into question due to his Caucasian mother. In addition, the fact that his father was Muslim overshadowed the fact that he was a Christian. At the same time, his particular brand of Christianity was criticized, because of the comments of the pastor at this former church, Rev. Jeremiah Wright, who was often perceived as expressing too much black anger for the comfort of some audiences. *SNL* mainly contended with the race and Islam issues: "On Wednesday, Barack Obama danced live, via satellite, for the Ellen DeGeneres show, in an attempt to prove that he's not a Muslim but, rather, very,

very white” (*SNL*, “Weekend Update” October 25, 2008). In contrast, the main personal attribute that Hillary Clinton was mocked for was her association with her husband.

Hillary Clinton’s campaign, on Friday, released her joint tax returns, showing \$109 million in income over the last seven years. Though most of that comes from Bill Clinton’s speaking engagements, book royalties, and stud fees...After Governor Bill Richardson switched his support from Hillary Clinton to Barack Obama last week, an angry Bill Clinton said, “Five times to my face he said he would never do that.” Wow, so he looked you right in the face and lied to you. What’s that like? (*SNL*, “Weekend Update,” April 5, 2008)

Her gender was not an issue in the same way that Obama’s race and religion was. But the more unpleasant aspects of Bill Clinton’s legacy remained to taint her campaign; the assumption as that if he were to become president, there may be some influence from him in her administration the same way that she influenced his. Although his presidency was functionally more positive than negative, he will never be able to escape being the subject of jokes about his checkered past (Alexander, et al. 2006)

SUBSTANTIVE HUMOR: TERRORISM AND THE ECONOMY

Major substantive issues that were discussed on all three programs included foreign policy and the economy. Regarding foreign policy issues, the primary topic that

was discussed were the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, specifically comparisons to the Bush administration's actions and policies. Earlier in the election cycle, when the Republican field had not yet been narrowed down to John McCain and debates were occurring with frequency, it was easy for the *Daily Show* to demonstrate that not only were the current candidates likely to continue Bush's interventionist policies, but would also escalate them. When asked a question about what could be done about Iraq's nuclear program, candidate Rep. Duncan Hunter said:

I would authorize the use of tactical nuclear weapons if there was no other way to preempt those particular centrifuges...

Stewart: (looking very shocked) Nuclear weapons to take out a centrifuge. Mm. Yes, last night's debate gave Republican candidates the opportunity to distance themselves from President Bush and his moderate policies. Although many still agreed with Bush's most important decision...[referring to starting the Iraq war] (*Daily Show*, June 6, 2007)

Stewart goes on to discuss the candidates' positions on the justifications for the War in Iraq. When asked about going into Iraq, even knowing that there were no weapons of mass destruction, they all still said it was the right thing to do. Stewart said this was "the first documented cases of 20/20 hind blindness" (*Daily Show*, June 6, 2007). Later in the election cycle, Republicans caught on that they had too much in common with the Bush administration, and that Obama's slogan "Change you Can Believe In" was actually resonating with the voters. However, because of these early debates where they seemed

to not only want to go the same hawkish way as the Bush administration, but to actually push further in that direction, any sort of attempt at painting themselves as different became inherently laughable. Stewart picked up on this easily, when they Republicans decided they needed to “re-brand” their image:

But you know what? The theme of “change” has been sweeping the nation...so what does the party of status quo do to get their brand back on track...launch a new slogan! “The Change You Deserve” [on republican website GOP.gov]...”The Change You Deserve” is actually a slogan that’s already taken. But not by a political party, but by Effexor, a powerful anti-depressant medication which I can only assume after the past 7 years, you’re already taking. (*Daily Show*, May 15, 2008)

But candidates paradoxically needed to align themselves with Bush in order to retain the Republican base, while at the same time having to appeal to those who were weary of the previous eight years. Ultimately this was a losing battle.

McCain and Bush once had a confrontation in 2000 about McCain being mentally unstable and having post-traumatic stress disorder after his imprisonment in Viet Nam. After Bush won the nomination, McCain was able to put all that behind him.

[McCain endorsed Bush in 2000]...and lo, over the next eight years, McCain continued to enthusiastically support the President...and now, finally, it’s Senator Johnny’s time to shine. And so the senator headed to the White House to receive

the heartfelt endorsement of our Commander in Chief (Bush is shown dancing in an odd manner)...It's 3 AM in the White House...the phone is ringing, but the President doesn't hear it because he's dancing to Jamiroquai...(Bush is shown giving McCain a half-hearted endorsement)...all right so, no explicit endorsement from George W. Bush, although on the plus side, no explicit endorsement from George W. Bush. (*Daily Show*, March 6, 2008)

It seemed that Hillary Clinton may also have been too hawkish for Stewart, as he took the opportunity to criticize her as well. Discussing the minor discrepancies between their foreign policy ideas, Obama believed it was unwise to not communicate with foreign leaders we disagreed with, as that was a continuation of old policies that did not work, while Clinton just wouldn't "commit" to meet with them in her first year in office, Stewart had this to say:

How would Obama counter this statement to highlight his campaign's narrative of Hillary as an inside the beltway hack tainted by fifteen years in Washington (shows picture of Cheney with Hillary's head). Here's what Obama would do:

Obama: "I don't want a continuation of Bush/Cheney. I don't want Bush/Cheney light."

Oh, he would call her that directly. (*Daily Show*, August 2, 2007)

This can be perceived one of two ways: either Stewart was disagreeing with Obama, citing this as a slight against her, or he was using it to in fact call Hillary Clinton

“Bush/Cheney light,” meaning that her policies were uncomfortably close to the previous administrations’. In this way, the *Daily Show* took a firm stance against the continuation or escalation of the use of force, making it an unambiguous narrative source for journalists to use when doing the same. This would be especially important later on in the election cycle, when Sarah Palin and her views on the Bush Doctrine came up.

Besides foreign policy, domestic economic problems were similarly dominant in public sphere debates during the 2008 election cycle. Candidates who demonstrated a lack of understanding about how serious the financial crisis was becoming also were portrayed as unrealistic in their views (which would also come up later in reference to Palin). Many media figures had initially been excited for Fred Thompson’s debut. When he did appear, he was stilted, and said he did not believe the economy was in a downturn. Stewart said, “It turns out Fred Thompson, though a skilled actor, not so hot at improv, despite his many years in the Uptight Citizen’s Brigade” (*Daily Show*, October 10, 2007). Although at first glance this seemed like a shot at Thompson’s stiffness, it shows that he was easy criticized for not being able to come up with an adequate response to questions about the economy; therefore, he wouldn’t be able to improve it, if he did not even understand it. Giving bad interviews was a performative failure that increasingly received attention in this election cycle (Alexander 2010). Colbert exclusively criticized Republicans throughout the entire campaign. During Primary season, a frequent target for him was Fred Thompson as well, who he also mocked for not believing there was an economic downturn in the first place (*Colbert Report*, October 16, 2008). Thompson was also subject to personality-based humor about his age: “The Fred Thompson Presidential juggernaut keeps languidly creaking forward. I originally thought Thompson’s trademark

laziness was an asset in the campaign. After all, if slow and steady wins the race, then imagine what stationary and half-asleep could do” (*Colbert Report*, October 4, 2007).

Other Republicans were said by Colbert to be like Teddy Roosevelt, in that they had big, boisterous personalities, while Democrats were more like FDR, in that they offered specific solutions to the problems at hand (*Colbert Report*, September 25, 2008). Republicans were characterized as having no ideas of their own, and only able to react and unsuccessfully make fun of the Democrats. Failed humor was almost worse than irrationality:

Now to highlight what a charade proper air pressure is, the McCain campaign has started handing out “Barack Obama Energy Plan” tire gauges. You see, it’s a great way to drive home what a ridiculous plan this is. Plus it’s an easy way to check your tire pressure. And that can save you a lot of money. (*Colbert Report*, August 5, 2008)

When asked about corruption, Republicans would deflect questions with talk about rebuilding the family structure, relying upon old tropes of culture wars which had worked in the past, but were no longer relevant (*Colbert Report*, May 7, 2007). And the only things they could tout as victories were things like when Mitt Romney bragged he won elections in the Primaries in states where he lived: “It’s the same sense of victory when I came home at night, and my wife has not changed the locks on our house” (*Colbert Report*, February 6, 2008).

On September 24, 2008, the Republican nominee John McCain suspended his presidential campaign, for what he explained at the time was to deal with the economic crisis that had fractured the U.S. economy (and would continue to do so for years to come). This was met with derision but pundits and comedians alike, as an odd move that was only meant to gain publicity, and would be largely ineffective with actually helping with the problems at hand. Stewart discussed the incident, saying he “blew off his interview with David Letterman” to basically rush around giving other interviews, trying to explain how suspending his campaign could possibly help the financial crisis.

Because of the grave condition of this situation, returned for a possible Senate vote for the first time since April 6th. And as his plane landed in Washington, D.C., a mere 22 hours after his initial New York announcement...I mean for god’s sakes, you could have walked there in that time!...(But they’d all reached an agreement before he got there.) So to sum up: the net effect of John McCain suspending his campaign: angering David Letterman. (*Daily Show*, September 25, 2008)

SNL discussed the Republican candidate’s economic policies as if they were a joke in and of themselves from then on. A serious substantive issue, the economic crisis was used as a way to expose McCain as the wrong choice to deal with the mess as president.

Additionally, a sketch that made fun of that issue also hinted at another main way that *SNL* (and all comedians) portrayed McCain – as so old, he’s senile. This is reminiscent of the way that Reagan was characterized in the 1980s. Finally, the sketch also incorporated

a third element: “Joe the Plumber.” Samuel Joseph Wurzelbacher gained the nickname when he became an ally of the McCain/Palin campaign as a voice for conservative taxpayers. However, much of the press and comedian did not take him seriously, and he was often invoked as a meme to demonstrate the facetiousness of the Republican campaign.

Sen. John McCain: The fact is, Senator, only one of us has a record of fighting wasteful government spending, and it’s me. As President, I would go after the bloated budgets with a GIANT hatchet, and THEN use a scalpel. Or I might take the advice of my friend, Joe the Plumber, and use a plunger.

Sen. Barack Obama: A - a - a plunger? I don’t understand.

Sen. John McCain: Obviously, Senator. It’s not an ordinary plunger. It’s a magical plunger.

Sen. Barack Obama: So, your friend “Joe the Plumber” has a “magical plunger”?

Sen. John McCain: That’s correct.

Sen. Barack Obama: Would your friend Joe, be, by any chance, uhhh - an “imaginary friend?” (*SNL*, Sketch, “Presidential Debate,” October 16, 2008)

One of the most identifiable themes of the 2008 election (as well as obviously 2004) was that, in the post 9/11-era, fear, terrorism, and the emphasis on foreign threats were used as narrative devices, especially by the Republican candidates. Colbert, not having been on in the previous cycle, was now able to highlight these as excessive and overused. Early on in the election, he commented that all of the candidates represented “a

potentially disastrous fuck up,” interestingly on the sixth anniversary of the attacks (*Colbert Report*, September 11, 2007). Could the American people be trusted to elect a leader that would keep us safe? Dire warnings of Republican candidates that the Democrats couldn’t be trusted to do this implied that death would result from their election, and Colbert mocked the idea of running a fear-based campaign in general. To do appeal to this is irrational and ultimately anti-Democratic (Alexander 2006). Specifically, Republicans conflated terrorism directly with Islam, a tactic the Democrats tended to avoid. And the quote by Joe Biden during a debate in October 2007, that Giuliani only ever said in speeches “a noun, and a verb, and 9/11” was echoed by Colbert: “Rudy Giuliani Has used the words “Islamic Terrorism” so many times, ‘September 11’ is starting to get jealous” (*Colbert Report*, August 9, 2007). The Democrats did not use the words “Islamic Terrorism” but they talked about al Qaeda frequently, as well as other specific threats: “That’s four different enemies. They make it sound like we’re in the middle of a complex, nuanced struggle requiring deep understanding of the differences between politically and religiously diverse groups. How are you gonna fit that on a bumper sticker?” (*Colbert Report*, August 9, 2007). It would seem that the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan would be a major topic for substantive comedy, but it did not get brought up very frequently on *SNL*. There were a few brief mentions of foreign policy positions, but comedy about it was mostly contained to Palin’s lack of foreign policy experience, which I will discuss later in this chapter.

INFIGHTING BETWEEN DEMOCRATIC FRONTRUNNERS LEADS TO CRITICISM

In a lighter moment earlier in the election cycle, when John Kerry endorsed Obama, Colbert said, “I don’t agree with anything he said, or anything he stood for, but he did not deserve that” (*Colbert Report*, January 10, 2008). But later, and by far, the vast majority of the humor on Colbert about the Democrats was directed at the Clinton campaign’s negativity towards the Obama campaign. Thus, this humor was almost entirely pro-Obama, and cannot be said to be slanted towards Republicans. Why was there such strife between the two primary frontrunners? It appeared that heading into the 2008 convention, neither candidate would have enough delegates to easily clinch the nomination, thus necessitating a brokered convention. This was seen as potentially harmful to the party. Initially, it looked as if Hillary Clinton was going to fight the exclusion of the delegates from Michigan and Florida. These two states had held their primaries earlier than they were to be allowed, thus Clinton being the only candidate on the ballot. The Obama campaign argued then that they were not fair contests. A compromise was reached wherein each delegate would count for half. Although contested, this compromise eventually stood, and Barack Obama’s momentum picked up before the convention.

But before this was all settled, Clinton seemed to be prepared to fight all the way to the convention floor. Just when things would look resolved, she would offer resistance. Colbert was highly critical of these tactics, saying things like “Nothing brings closure to a campaign like opening it up again” (*Colbert Report*, August 11, 2008). Going back and

forth and being indecisive, and that being harmful to the party, was the major source of Colbert's criticism of her. He spoke of Clinton as being inconsistent about what states should count when she agreed not to argue the point, and was hyperbolic, comparing her struggle to civil rights arguments about voting, stating "she's being remarkably consistent in saying whatever it takes to win" (*Colbert Report*, May 29, 2008). He even went so far as to allude to her tactics as being similar to Karl Rove's, who had tried to offer her advice on dealing with a brokered convention. Colbert remarked, "If you set the rules, it is almost impossible to lose" (*Colbert Report*, May 6, 2008). This is still more of a comment about Rove, but it shows that Colbert was making substantive commentary and allusion to her employing the same sort of dirty tricks. When it was said that blogger Matt Drudge got a photo from the Clinton campaign of Obama dressed in traditional Somali clothing (including wearing a turban), Colbert commented on this. To counter accusations of drumming up race-based or anti-Islamic feelings against her opponent, the Clinton Campaign manager criticized the Obama campaign for suggesting the photo of him in the clothing was divisive. Colbert sarcastically commented that "it brings the nation together in the belief that Barack Obama is a terrorist" (*Colbert Report*, February 26, 2008).

Additionally, there were several jokes and sketches on *SNL* that mocked Clinton for doing everything necessary to gain the upper hand on Obama, even if it was pointless or unethical. Clinton was characterized as overly aggressive and a sore loser:

Clinton: All right energy policy. The big oil companies are quite happy with the status quo. They are earning record profits and pretty speeches are not going to

make them give up power. It's going to take a fighter, not a talker - someone who is aggressive enough and relentless enough and demanding enough to take them on. Someone so annoying, so pushy, so grating, so bossy, and shrill with a personality so unpleasant that at the end of the day, the special interests will have to go, "Enough! We give up! Life is too short to deal with this awful woman! Just give her what she wants so she'll shut up and leave us in peace." And I think the American people will agree that someone is me. (*SNL*, Sketch, "Democratic Debate," March 1, 2008)

Hillary Clinton: I'm Hillary Clinton... and I approved this unfair - and deceptive - message.

Announcer: It's 3am. Across our country, kids are sound asleep. But, somewhere in the nation's...

Barack Obama's Voice: Uh... Hillary? I'm sorry to call this late again, but... I need your help.

Hillary Clinton: Mr. President, what can I do?

Barack Obama's Voice: The CIA has just confirmed that Iran has created a nuclear device. It looks like the Russians, the North Koreans, and Hugo Chavez has been helping them.

Hillary Clinton: I was afraid of that. When did this start.

Barack Obama's Voice: Apparently, the day I was sworn in. Those mother[bleep]!! Those [bleep]!! I trusted them! I gave them my complete and total trust! And they [bleep] LIED to me!!

Hillary Clinton: Mr. President -

Barack Obama's Voice: Oh, my God! I am so [bleep]!! What do I do, Hillary?

What do I do?!

Hillary Clinton: Mr. President, you can start by getting a hold of yourself.

Barack Obama's Voice: I ca-an't!! Don't you see that I'm in a panic?! A blind, unreasoning, inexperienced PANIC!!

Clinton: For God's sake, Mr. President! Man up! Calm down and listen! (*SNL*, Sketch,

Phone Call, March 8, 2008)

“Hillary Clinton, on Tuesday, said she is not a quitter, and compared herself to Rocky Balboa -- the washed-up, over-the-hill, white contender, who, despite a herculean effort, is soundly beaten by the charismatic black guy!” (*SNL*, “Weekend Update,” April 5, 2008).

Even Bill Clinton, while campaigning for Hillary, made anti-Obama statements that Stewart believed he otherwise would not have made. When Bill Clinton called Barack Obama's campaign a “fairytale,” Stewart retorted, “Your campaign slogan was ‘A Place Called Hope.’...If his wife wasn't running, he'd be all over Obama” (*Daily Show*, January 28, 2008). When the Clinton campaign compared Obama's tactic of “winning” to taking pages out of “Karl Rove's playbook,” Stewart portrayed this as tremendously ridiculous. In one segment, he got out a very old book that, when opened, ghosts appeared to come out. He criticized this turn of phrase, saying, “Slightly misstating someone's position on trade doesn't appear to be in there” (*Daily Show*,

February 26, 2008). But even so, Hillary Clinton was not as divisive as the Republicans had been regarding any of the substantive issues at hand. So when Clinton went onto several Sunday morning talk shows, and tried to prove her humanity, she seemed overly “chipper,” laughing more maniacally each time she’s asked the same questions again and again. Stewart mocks her, saying, “I’m joyful!” Was this laughter spontaneous? In some instances, it did seem justified, as when she goes on Fox news, and they ask her why she’s so “hyper partisan” – and she really laughs, genuinely. “OK, I get it, you go on Fox news, and they ask you why you’re so partisan. That’s funny” (*Daily Show*, September 25, 07).

Hillary: First: I am a sore loser. If, and when, I am the nominee, I know, as do the superdelegates, that Sen. Obama will work his heart out for my election. If, on the other hand, Sen. Obama is chosen, I will probably refuse to campaign for him! Or, if I do so, it will be in a resentful, half-hearted way, thus ensuring his defeat -- so that I can run again in 2012. You see, unlike my opponent, I am just not going to lose gracefully. It’s not a criticism of Sen. Obama... it’s just a fact!...Now, to those of who that worry, if my opponent is denied the nomination, that African-Americans might simply stay home, I remind you: a. until Sen. Obama shockingly, and, might I add, rudely and selfishly, won the Iowa caucuses, most African-Americans supported me; b. my husband was the first Black president; and, c. in the days ahead, we expect to receive the endorsement of America’s pre-eminent African-American leader, Rev. Jeremiah Wright. (*SNL*, Sketch, “A Message from the Next President of the United States,” May 10, 2008)

When Hillary Clinton was on the show, Stewart addressed this directly. When she appeared on his show on March 3, 2008, he aired to her a clip of her giving a speech in Ohio where she said they need a president who's going to care about the working people, and referred to them as the "salt of the earth."

Stewart: I always feel bad for Ohio, and I'll tell you why. It seems like every four years, people fly in and they crisscross the state, and they go, "Ohio, you are the salt of the earth, you are the blue collar people, and then the election is over and they disappear, and nobody in Ohio gets to hear from them. How do you convince people that have been in this abusive relationship with politicians for this long, how do you convince them of the sincerity of what's going on there?"

(Hillary is laughing)

Hillary: I got up this morning and went out to the shift change at 5:30 at one of the big auto plants in Toledo...I'm just trying to be there with people and let them know that I care about what goes on in their lives and I know that they've got a lot of tough challenges...it can't just be about the speeches...you're right, when that's all over they're still gonna be losing jobs and healthcare...we need a president who gets up every day and cares about the American people, what a novel idea.

...

Stewart: This idea between experience and hope, as though in Washington, those two are mutually exclusive...that if you have the experience, it kills the hope inside you...are you uncomfortable in the role of chastising someone's idealism..?

Hilary: No, because I really admire that. I think that the ability to inspire and certainly get people involved...is wonderful. It's important though we remember the job has to be the daily getting up and doing it. I try to mix both of those because obviously I wouldn't be doing this if I didn't care deeply about changing our country...it's not just going to happen because we want it to happen.

She more or less deflected this question, and went on to talk about coalitions needed to get universal healthcare, etc. (*Daily Show*, March 3, 2008)

MAINSTREAM MEDIA A TARGET FOR LATE-NIGHT COMEDY

The way that the mainstream media – especially cable news – narrated the campaign was a major source of commentary by the *Daily Show*. Contradictory statements were highlighted most of all. The program often showed cable news commentators saying the campaign should be covered one way, and then showing clips of them doing the opposite of what they said should be done. For example, Stewart joked that Obama shouldn't be upset about the *New Yorker* cartoon depicting him as a Muslim extremist, because he was not one, and that was what actual extremists were likely to do:

But as always, nowhere was the anger at the media hotter than in the media.

Chris Matthews: It's offensive, say both the Obama and McCain Campaigns, and I agree.

Tacky, outrageous, offensive...(CNN, etc.)

Good for you, media! You should be outraged! How dare the New Yorker Magazine present horrible misperceptions of Barack Obama without clearly stating whether or not the allegations are true. That is so your job.

Anderson Cooper: Was Senator Barack Obama schooled in Islamic Radicalism? And other quotes about Jeremiah Wright, etc., by Gretchen Carlson, Geraldo Rivera, Sean Hannity, etc.

So now we know where the real two-dimensional figures are! Television! (*Daily Show*, July 15, 2008)

The amount of time spent rehashing the same discussions and essentially filling time by talking about nothing with any substance was another criticism of cable news:

You might be thinking to yourself, ‘Hey, you know what? I’m done talking about this. Or you might be thinking that just the very nature of having to kill six hours dissecting 43 separate results that would ultimately lead to no resolution would be the very definition of tedium! Well you my friend would be wrong. (*Daily Show*, February 6, 2008)

People on news programs discussed how complex, interesting, and fascinating and exciting the campaign was. But then they would say simplistic things like “voters like to vote for who they like.” Stewart replied to this by saying, “I’m the same way with the foods I eat and the stuff I do” (*Daily Show*, October 31, 2007). Many media figures had

early on declared Hillary the winner and unbeatable. However they contradicted themselves by saying Obama was up to the challenge of proving himself in the debate:

But wait. You just told me it was over. Now it's apparently the fight of the century? Wow, what a manufactured showdown. I wonder if tonight's first question will reflect this well-crafted narrative...

Brian Williams: Senator Obama, we'll begin with you. What are the issues where you, Senator Obama and Senator Clinton have differed?

Obama: Some of this stuff gets overhyped (Stewart has a balloon he deflates, emphasizing that Obama was not up for playing along with the media's games)

(Daily Show, January 9, 2008)

Talking about Hillary Clinton's defeat by Obama in the New Hampshire primary, the media used hyperbolic popular culture references:

What kind of references are these? Friday the 13th, Empire Strikes Back, and The Abyss. Decent movies. But this is a big primary, does anybody have a struggle analogy that's a little more epic?

Chris Matthews: Hillary Clinton's campaign, is not, to use the parlance we all use, positioned well. If you remember in the great movie, Lawrence of Arabia...

Oh, sweet Jesus.

Chris Matthews:...where the Turks aimed all their guns at the sea, and the Arab revolt came in from the desert....this latter-day Lawrence, Barack Obama, crossed the Nefud, and came behind the Clintons, into their own base...

(Stewart is shown with head on his desk in frustration)

And that's what happened in New Hampshire! But of course, I was wrong two minutes ago! (Mocking Chris Matthews:) That guy is insane. (*Daily Show*, January 9, 2008)

SNL satirized Barack Obama's popularity (compared to both Clinton and later McCain). With Clinton, there was a sense that the media was not being tough enough on Obama, and that he could do no wrong. In response to this criticism, they actually did become tougher on him after certain sketches aired that criticized their lack of scrutiny (which got a great deal of attention in the press, discussed below).

Like nearly everyone in the news media, the three of us are totally "in the tank" for Senator Obama. We will make every effort tonight to keep these biases hidden, but, should it become obvious, please remember we're only human. I, myself, have been clinically diagnosed as an Oba-maniac! While my associate, John King, just last week suffered his third Barack-Attack...Now, let's meet the candidates. Just four years ago, Barack Obama was known only as a brilliant, charismatic, and universally admired member of the Illinois State Senate. Today, he is one of our nation's truly visionary leaders, and, soon - knock on wood - the first Black President of the United States. Senator Barack Obama. In 1992,

Hillary Clinton's husband, William Jefferson Clinton, became the 42nd President of the United States. A few years after that, he cheated on her again, and she was able to ride the ensuing wave of sympathy into the U.S. Senate, against a weak Republican opponent in an overwhelmingly Democratic state. In the Senate, she is widely known as a good listener, with an excellent attendance record...Now, as is customary at these debates, we're going to have a question from an ordinary citizen, chosen completely at random from our audience. Tonight's questioner is: Obama Girl.

Obama Girl: Senator Obama? "I can't wait till 2008 / Baby, you're the best candidate / Yes, I got a crush on Obama / I got a crush on Obama -"

Hillary Clinton: ...I really have to say something here. First of all, that wasn't even a question; second, she was lip-synching; and - and - third, I really find it difficult to believe this particular questioner was chosen at random. (*SNL*, Sketch, "CNN Univision Democratic Debate," February 23, 2008)

Colbert, like Jon Stewart, was also apt to denigrate cable news for playing into the simplistic media narratives that the Republicans (and to a lesser extent the Clinton campaign) were trying to make the main story of the election, instead of policy. Fox News kept bringing up Obama's middle name, Hussein, while other media was almost unthinkingly very pro-Obama, and the contrast was jarring (*Colbert Report*, July 21, 2008); a theme that *SNL* would explore and which the newspaper writers would take great notice of. Barack Obama's "fist bump" incident was one of these things – what the viewer interpreted it as revealed more about them, and potentially racist views: "Terrorist

fist jab” Fox News called it, and Colbert said of it, the fist bump “is like a Rorschach test” (*Colbert Report*, June 10, 2008). Colbert portrayed the tactics of cable pundits as backfiring, and he turned out to be right: “The media has hammered Obama over the Reverend’s comments, putting the Senator on the defensive, and backing him into a corner. A corner with five cameras, eight flags, two microphones, and thirty minutes of uninterrupted airtime, right where Obama’ at his weakest” (*Colbert Report*, March 18, 2008). Making irrational statements, and then giving Obama the perfect opportunity to demonstrate his rationality in light of them, was recognized as a very counterproductive strategy. The functioning of Democracy was put squarely in the corner of the Democratic party, when Colbert highlighted situations as described above, as well as pointing out that conservative pundits, like George Will, said that they wanted “quality” voters, not quantity, because young voters were more likely to vote for Obama. Their choice to vote was criticized because it went against the outcome Republicans desired (*Colbert Report*, October 1, 2008). By the time the campaign had reached the point where McCain had become the nominee, and the antics involving Sarah Palin and ancillary characters like Joe the Plumber had started, it was almost as if Colbert was letting the people speak for themselves. Most of the narrative satirical work had been done for him. “Clearly, the McCain Campaign is targeting its most important voter: Joe the McCarthy” (*Colbert Report*, October 28, 2008).

Issues that entered into this campaign that had not previously been anywhere near as relevant in any other were race and religion. Barack Obama, being biracial, was the catalyst for several different negative, racially-charged narratives emerging in the campaign, which the *Daily Show* addressed. Jon Stewart did many segments throughout

the campaign entitled “Baracknophobia” (complete with a graphic of Obama mixed with a spider). Indeed, his race brought out a lot of hidden fears among some parts of the voting population.

There’s one emerging fear that trumps all others – Baracknophobia! It is defined as the irrational fear of hope. The irrational fear that behind the mild-mannered façade, Barack Obama is intent on enslaving the white race...it’s true, wake up white people! The sickness manifests itself mostly through rumor, often in the form of the only email your grandmother has ever been able to successfully forward. (*Daily Show*, June 16, 2008)

The “wake up white people” phrase is one often used by White Supremacists to try to galvanize support. Stewart’s usage of it associated the criticisms of Obama with those who would be radically racist. Stewart called out cable news here: on one hand, they condemned it, but on the other helped to spread the rumors (like asking if he took the oath of office on the Koran).

Discussions of the cover of the *New Yorker* in July of 2008, which depicted Michelle and Barack Obama as terrorists, or black power supporters, drew controversy – while it was meant to satirize the media narratives, some thought it went too far, and actually reinforced them.⁸⁰ But Stewart pointed out that Obama not getting upset about it proved he wasn’t an Islamic extremist, because getting upset over cartoons is something that they have historically done.

⁸⁰ PBS NewsHour. 2008. “New Yorker Cover Satirizing Obama Raises Controversy.” July 14. http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/politics-july-dec08-obamacover_07-14/

Was Obama a radical, sympathetic to the causes of the Weather Underground or the Black Panthers? Certainly, the vague association with William Ayres fueled these fires, specifically because of comments by Sarah Palin. Her commentary about “palling around with terrorists” got a lot of media attention, but ultimately backfired because of its irrationality. Obama really did not know Ayres well and only served on the board of directors of the Woods Fund of Chicago at the same time as he did, for three years. In one segment, Palin was shown as saying “it’s time we met the real Obama” in an interview. Stewart responds:

Excuse me, woman we met six weeks ago, I have a question! We want to know about you! Is your husband a crazy secessionist! Did you fire that guy for not firing the guy you wanted him to fire!...Oh well, I’m sure we’ll have plenty of time to get to know her once she’s president. What is it she knows about Obama that we don’t?

[She goes on to say comments about “palling around with terrorists.”]

“Paling around is a pretty serious accusation. What kind of crazy source do you get that kind of information from? (It then emerges that the source was the *New York Times*) (*Daily Show*, October 7, 2008)

Members of the media talked about Obama “playing the race card” because he said “So what they’re saying is, we know we’re not very good, but you can’t risk electing Obama. He’s new, he doesn’t look like the other presidents on the currency...” Stewart characterized this very small comment as playing the race card, and more of a comment

about the Republicans' making racial commentary in their ads. But he does say Obama took the bait. Everything in the media is a "card" of some kind – gender, class, etc. (*Daily Show*, August 4, 2008)

(After quoting some pundits who said the Wright incidents would scare away white voters:) We all love Jesus, but why do you have to be so black and angry about it? See, as it turns out, this wasn't about religion. This was about race. Which brings us to today. Barack Obama, addressing the controversy with what was billed as a major speech about race...(Obama discusses his mixed race heritage and family upbringing.) We get it. The holidays at your house are crazy. It's a hassle. Get to the crazy preacher and how he's not really that mad! (Obama condemns Wright's comments as divisive, but says his anger is part of the black commute's experience). Black anger real? (Stewart pretends to lock car.) (*Daily Show*, March 18, 2008)

Obama's race and rumored religious affiliation with Islam was a source of mockery as well. Inclusion of jokes about these issues further highlighted the extremely negative personal tone that the election took against him: "On Wednesday, Barack Obama danced live, via satellite, for the Ellen DeGeneres show, in an attempt to prove that he's not a Muslim but, rather, very, very white" (*SNL*, "Weekend Update," October 25, 2008). On October 10, 2008, at a McCain rally, a woman asked John McCain about Obama being an "Arab," which he handled in a polite, but firm manner, correcting the misidentification.

Despite this, the video of the exchange made McCain's supporters seem out of touch with reality and racist. A parody of the "Crazy old lady" from the campaign rally, took shape.

Seth Meyers: Ohhhh, oh no. It's that crazy lady from the McCain rally...

Crazy McCain Supporter: I gotta ask you a question. About Obama... ..I can't trust him. Obama.

Seth Meyers: Why -- why can't you trust Obama?

Crazy McCain Supporter: I read about him...and he's a...he's a...he's a...he's a Arab.

Seth Meyers: No. No, ma'am, he's not an Arab. (*SNL*, "Weekend Update," October 16, 2008)

Gender was also an issue; the fact that no matter if Hillary Clinton won the nomination or Barack Obama did, there would be a major party nominee for President that was not a white male for the first time in history. Some people saw this as a historic step towards progress and equality in general, but the contentious campaign between the two frontrunners highlighted the question many were afraid to ask: would it be better to have the first woman president, or the first non-white one? On *SNL*, Tina Fey spoke for Hillary Clinton:

I think what bothers me the most is when people say that Hillary is a bitch. And, let me say something about that: Yeah, she is! And so am I!... You know what?

Bitches get stuff done. ...So, I'm saying it's not too late, Texas and Ohio! Get on board! Bitch is the new black!" (*SNL*, "Weekend Update" February 23, 2008).

Meanwhile, a few weeks later, outspoken black comedian Tracy Morgan took Obama's side, while mocking some harmful stereotypes:

Why is it every time a black man in this country gets too good at something, there's always someone to come around and remind us that he's black?...I got a theory about that. It's a little complicated, but, basically, it goes like this: We are a racist country. The end!...People say he's not a fighter. Let me tell you something, he's gangster. He's from Chicago! Barack is not just winning because he's a black man. If that were the case, I would be winning. And I'm WAY blacker than him! I used to smoke Newports and drink Old English! I grew up on government cheese! I prefer it...In conclusion, three weeks ago, my girl, Tina Fey -- she came on this show, and she declared that "Bitch is the new Black." And you know I love you, Tina. You know you're my girl. But I have something to say: Bitch may be the new Black... but Black is the new president...bitch! (*SNL*, "Weekend Update," March 15, 2008)

For both Democrats and Republicans, religion was a topic that the *Daily Show* characterized in different ways; primarily, it was used to call out hypocrisy by the Republican party. The pastor at Obama's former church, Jeremiah Wright was used as a wedge issue by the Republicans to try to paint Obama as somehow "un-American;"

however, one of McCain's supporters, John Hagee – pastor of Cornerstone Church in San Antonio, Texas, a non-denominational megachurch, had said a lot of negative things about Muslims, and compared Catholics to Hitler. John McCain said he was glad to have his support, and Stewart pointed out that Obama was being raked over the coals about Wright, while no one said anything to McCain about these statements (*Daily Show*, April 24, 2008). Another major incident involving Religion during the campaign was the statement by Obama about Pennsylvania, that “You go into some of these small towns in Pennsylvania...the jobs have been gone now for 25 years...they get bitter or they cling to guns or religion...or antipathy towards people who aren't like them...anti-immigrant sentiment...” (Obama Fundraiser, April 6, 2008). Stewart characterized the backlash against this as overblown, saying, “That is outrageous, sir, outrageous! These people do not turn to god and guns and mistrust of foreigners because of a downturn in the economy...those are the very foundations those towns are built on, sir” (*Daily Show*, April 14, 2008).

Later, the same ideas that had been applied to Hillary Clinton during the primary – bound to lose, did unethical things in the campaign, or allowed them to happen – were applied to the Obama vs. McCain contest: “A woman in Pennsylvania who claimed that a man attacked her and carved a “B” on her face when he saw her McCain bumper sticker, admitted Friday that she made the story up. Still unanswered: Who did this to John McCain? [image: McCain with “Obama “Hearts” Ayers” tattoo on his arm]” (*SNL*, “Weekend Update,” October 25, 2008).

Bob Schieffer: Gentlemen, over the last few weeks, the tone of this campaign has become increasingly nasty. Senator Obama, in describing your opponent, your campaign has used words like “erratic”, “out of touch”, “lying”, “losing his bearings”, “senile”, “dementia”, “nursing home”, “decrepit”, and “at death’s door”. Senator McCain, your ads have featured terms such as “disrespectful”, “dangerous”, “foreign”, “sleeper agent”, and “uncircumcised”. Are you both comfortable with this level of discourse?

Sen. Barack Obama: Uh, look, Bob: uh, obviously, in any campaign, harsh things are going to be said. And certainly, both of our campaigns have now and then crossed the line. But, I have to say; I am troubled by some of the things said about me at my opponent’s rallies. Things like “traitor”, “kill him”, and “off with his head”. Uhhh - and, unfortunately, Senator McCain has yet to condemn these comments.

Sen. John McCain: Bob, as to the “off with his head” comment, that was shouted at a rally we held at a Renaissance Fair. The gentleman had too much mead and he was removed by security.

Sen. Barack Obama: Uhhhh - at that same event, I was also denounced as a “sorcerer.”

(*SNL*, Sketch, “Presidential Debate,” October 16, 2008)

Both Stewart and Colbert did not have as much to say about Sarah Palin as *SNL* did, possibly because she was so obviously incompetent, and *SNL* was providing such a devastating satire of her, that they may have felt their time was better spent on other

issues. The *Daily Show* made specific reference to the parody, but in the context of a substantive critique of how Republicans dealt with the poor economic situation.

Sean Hannity: Senator Barack Obama yesterday was attacking Senator McCain for saying that the fundamentals of the economy are strong.

Stewart: HE DID WHAT. Go on.

Palin: It was an unfair attack on the verbage that Senator McCain chose to use because the fundamentals, as he was having to explain afterwards, he means our workforce, he means the ingenuity of the American people...

Stewart: Yeah, I think on this election Sean, the candidates, what they say, their “verbage,” I think that should be off-limits. You know that what we say, you know, or you should know, Sean, we don’t mean it. How unimportant are words to Sarah Palin?

Hannity: What did Governor Palin think of Tina Fey’s portrayal? Take a look:

Palin (interview on campaign trail): Did you watch Tina Fey on Saturday Night Live?

I watched with the volume all the way down. It was hilarious. Again, didn’t heart a word she said. But the visual, spot on.

Stewart: Yah, the way she was pretty with glasses? Hilarious. (*Daily Show*, September 18, 2008)

The dialogue on the first sketch about Palin on *SNL* centered on the three main subjects discussed in the papers: Russia, climate change, and the Bush Doctrine.

Clinton: I believe that diplomacy should be the cornerstone of *any* foreign policy.

Palin: And I can see Russia from my house!

Clinton: I believe that global warming is caused by man.

Palin: And I believe it's just God hugging us closer!

Clinton: I *don't* agree with the Bush Doctrine.

Palin: [laughs] I don't know what that is! (*SNL*, "A Non-Partisan Message From Sarah Palin & Hillary Clinton" Sketch, September 13, 2008)

The comments about "keeping an eye on Russia" Palin made in the original interview were simplified into the absurd claim "I can see Russia from my house," which she never directly stated. But it is this slight departure from what was actually said that pushed the reality into the realm of absurdity, and made Palin appear foolish. This sketch was conversation between Hillary Clinton played by Amy Poehler, and Palin played by Fey. It was clearly meant to highlight the differences between the two female candidates; later, writers in the newspapers would make comments about how the choice of Palin was a cynical attempt to pull disillusioned Hillary Clinton voters from voting for Obama, and if that was indeed the case, it backfired tremendously.

Stewart was more likely to let her own words speak for themselves: He commented on the Charlie Gibson interview, where she was being questioned about the Bush Doctrine: "She doesn't need to know what the Bush Doctrine is, she is the Bush Doctrine. Her foreign policy experience consists of being able to see Russia from an island in Alaska" (*Daily Show*, September 15, 2008). Stewart talked about her primarily

in terms of how other media figures were hypocritical when it came to glossing over her many faults. He pointed out the incongruity of Karl Rove lauding Palin for her experience, being the mayor of Wasilla Alaska (population 3,000) and its Governor, while criticizing Obama's possible pick of Tim Kaine (whose experience was being Mayor of Richmond and Governor of Virginia.) Additionally, Bill O'Reilly was shown making contradictory statements about celebrity Jaime Lynn Spears' pregnancy and Sarah Palin's daughter's (*Daily Show*, September 3, 2008). Colbert highlighted the absurdity of the McCain/Palin's constant use of the word "maverick," and how it was essentially meaningless; reflexively going against rules for no rational reason other than to appear different.: "John McCain and Sarah Palin are going to win this election. Why? Because they are mavericks" (*Colbert Report*, November 3, 2008). Ultimately, he appeared confident that Obama would win, and didn't need to do a lot of the narrative work, but let the situation speak for itself.

Heck, gosh, me and Todd, you betcha, we're just average, working-class, salt-of-the-earth Governor and snow machine champions. Governor Palin gets up every morning and puts on her governin' overalls and goes down to put in an 8-hour shift over to the executive branch factory...How can a woman who spent more on clothing in six weeks than most Americans make in two years, show that she can still relate to the common folk? (She is shown greeting a crowd lauding their Carhart overalls and steel toed boots.) (*Daily Show*, October 22, 2008)

Palin appearing on *SNL* came too late to do anything about her image. One sketch involved the candidate (portrayed by Fey) at a press conference:

Reporter: Yeah, at a rally in North Carolina this week, you said that you like to visit the “pro-America parts of the country.” Are there parts of the country that you consider un-American?

Palin: Oh, you know, that was just my lame attempt at a joke. But, um, yes -- New York, New Jersey, Massachusetts, Connecticut, Delaware and California. But, then, also, too, you have states like Ohio and Pennsylvania and Florida, which could be real, real anti-American or real, real pro-American. It’s up to them (she winks). And now, I’d like to entertain everybody with some fancy pageant walkin’. (*SNL*, Sketch, “Palin Press Conference,” October 18, 2008)

The last part was a reference to her having been in beauty pageants in the past. After this exchange, the camera cuts to a location backstage, where the real Palin was watching with *SNL* producer, Lorne Michaels, and later, Fey co-star on the show “30 Rock” Alec Baldwin:

Michaels: I really wish, uh, that that had been you....(the night’s guest, actor Mark Wahlberg, appears briefly and storms off angrily)

Michaels: He didn’t like the impression we did of him on the show.

Palin: Tell me about it.

Alec Baldwin: Hey, Lorne. Hey, Tina. Lorne, I need to talk to you. You can't let Tina go out there with that woman. She goes against everything we stand for. I mean, good Lord, Lorne, they call her... what's that name they call her? Cari... Cari... What do they call her again, Tina?

Palin: Uh, that'd be Caribou Barbie.

Alec Baldwin: Caribou Barbie! Thank you, Tina. I mean, this is the most important election in our nation's history. And you want her - our Tina - to go out there and stand there with that horrible woman. What do you have to say for yourself?

Michaels: Alec, this is Governor Palin.

As writers in the Times and the Post would later note, Palin appeared a bit too genuinely angry, and the attempt to appear able to laugh at herself seems to have gone awry.

Later, right before the election, after it seemed like McCain would almost certainly lose, he appeared on *SNL* himself, alongside Fey as Palin. It took the form of them basically having an end-of campaign fire sale on the home shopping channel, QVC. First, they made fun of her expensive wardrobe scandal:

Sen. John McCain: The final days of any election are the most essential. This past Wednesday, Barack Obama purchased airtime on three major networks. We, however, can only afford QVC.

Gov. Sarah Palin: These campaigns sure are expensive! (she strokes her jacket lapel)

Sen. John McCain: They sure are. They sure are.

Other topics, that played like a “greatest hits” of the controversies and scandals, included mentions of Joe the Plumber, the association the McCain/Palin campaign made with William Ayres (And what busy hockey mom wouldn’t want to freshen up her home with Sarah Palin’s “Ayers Fresheners”? You plug these into the wall when something doesn’t quite smell quite right.). At the end of the sketch, Palin turns to a different camera and whispers:

Okay, listen up everybody, I am goin’ rogue right now, so keep your voices down. [she holds up a “Palin 2012” t-shirt] Available now, we got a buncha’ these “Palin in 2012” T-shirts. Just try and wait until after Tuesday to wear ‘em, okay? Because I am not goin’ anywhere! And I’m certainly not goin’ back to Alaska! If I’m not goin’ to the White House, I’m either runnin’ in four years or I’m gonna be a white Oprah, so... you know, I’m good either way! (*SNL*, Sketch, “A Special Message from Sen. John McCain & Gov. Sarah Palin,” November 1, 2008)

This sketch was a perfect send-off to the campaign, complete with a resigned McCain, and the satire of what many people had come to believe at this time – that Palin was squeezing everything she could get out of the opportunity, because it was unlikely that, given her poor performance, it would ever happen again.

PERFORMATIVE SUCCESSES AND FAILURES DISCUSSED IN THE PAPERS

Most notably in 2008, the parody of Sarah Palin by Tina Fey became recognizable shorthand for the way journalists talked about the candidate, showing that a satirical portrayal of the candidate was taken just as seriously as any facet of mainstream journalism would be. Her opinions, interviews, and policy positions were seen through the lens of the parody of them. The parody was scrutinized far more than the actual interviews. Because of this, there was greater focus on her than any other candidate, influencing the overall public sphere dialogue about her more than anything else. The fact that commentary from the cultural sphere had such an impact on the sphere of news journalism in this election cycle clearly demonstrates a directional flow of influence of the opinion leaders of comedy, namely Jon Stewart, Stephen Colbert, Tina Fey, and all the associated shows' writers, that shaped the narratives in the newspapers, and thus public opinion (Katz and Lazarsfeld 1955). The satire on the programs was a relatively autonomous, influencing variable in this election. The trend towards this had been building over time, but in 2008, it was fully realized.

The papers remarked upon Clinton's appearances on *SNL* and the *Daily Show*, but did not analyze them in any great depth, saying "Her appearances on 'Saturday Night Live' and 'The Daily Show With Jon Stewart' were also generally well received last week and...presaged a big comeback at the polls" (*New York Times*, March 9, 2008 p. WK1). The appearance on the *Daily Show*, where she was asked many important questions about the substance of her campaign and policies, was glossed over, and

represented an important opening for the newspapers to truly engage with where her message was lacking:

Clinton, meanwhile, plans to continue her focus on the economy, and scheduled a 4:30 a.m. visit on Monday to a Chrysler plant in Toledo as the shifts are changing, before flying to Texas. Among the events on her schedule are an interactive town hall meeting Monday night and a satellite appearance on Comedy Central's "Daily Show With Jon Stewart." Over the weekend, she flew to New York for a surprise appearance on NBC's "Saturday Night Live," part of a frenetic late push to revive her candidacy.⁸¹

Why did she need to revive it in the first place? Obama appeared much more at ease on the programs than she did, more easily mocking himself (such as when he appeared in an *SNL* skit in November, 2007, wearing a mask of his own face). The only negative about him that was not race or religion based (and therefore not mockable, because that would be perceived as racism or Islamophobia) was his "elitism." This was not easy for him to counter directly, mainly because of his speech patterns and occasional "stiffness," despite his greater ease with humor. But his wife, Michelle, did not have any of these personality characteristics, real or imagined, and her appearance on *Colbert* helped to dispel some of these images and make him more relatable. It wasn't so much what she said, but how she "was," in that she speaks in a much more down-to-earth and warm manner than her husband. Maureen Dowd's comments in the *Times* represented the superficial-level

⁸¹ Kornblut, Anne E. and Shailagh Murray. 2008. "Democratic Candidates Trade Gibes Across Ohio; Obama Takes On Clinton on Foreign Policy." *Washington Post*, March 3, p. A01.

perception of Obama that summed up the facile commentary about him the public sphere, but even she found that Michelle Obama was able to do something to counter the negative perception:

Obama did not grow up in cosseted circumstances...But his exclusive Hawaiian prep school and years in the Ivy League made him a charter member of the elite, along with the academic experts he loves to have in the room...Michelle did her best on “The Colbert Report” Tuesday to shoo away the aroma of elitism.⁸²

Hillary Clinton would not have had the same advantage if her husband had appeared on any of the shows. His tainted personal image from his presidency at that time would have worked against her, in terms of her relationship with him, which would have overshadowed any of the positive feelings that had built about his actual Presidency since he left office.

John McCain appeared on *SNL*, but his more famous appearance – or initial lack thereof – was on the *Late Show* with David Letterman. When the financial crisis hit, McCain “suspended” his campaign, and went back to Washington; he said it was to deal with the problems that had arisen, but many saw it as a cynical attempt to distract voters from the fact that his campaign was going down the drain after his pick of Palin as a running mate. One way that he handled this situation very poorly was when he was scheduled to appear on David Letterman’s show, and cancelled at the last minute.

⁸² Dowd, Maureen. 2008. “Eggheads And Cheese Balls.” *New York Times*, April 16, p. A25.

It all started last month when the GOP candidate backed out of an appearance on the show, telling the late-night host personally that the economy was in such a state of crisis that he was suspending his political campaign and had to rush back to Washington...Instead he rushed over to the “CBS Evening News” studio to be interviewed by Katie Couric, then stayed the night in Manhattan and spoke at a conference there the next day...That first night, when McCain canceled, Letterman threw up the CBS in-house video feed showing the senator from Arizona getting his makeup touched up pre-Couric chat.⁸³

Eventually, McCain was forced to go on the show and apologize, after Letterman did not let up on him in the slightest, often including him in the “Top Ten” segment, and growing increasingly critical of his very trustworthiness.

John McCain, so pugnacious in his encounters with his Democratic rival, folded like a tent when confronted last night by late-night host David Letterman, whom McCain stood up last month. “I screwed up,” McCain said of his last-minute decision to cancel his appearance on CBS’s “Late Show” last month, forcing Letterman to scramble to find a replacement guest...“Can you stay?” [Letterman] asked, dripping cynicism...The candidate admitted he “screwed up” but bravely tried to suggest he’d done Letterman a favor by backing out of his previous

⁸³ de Moraes, Lisa. 2008. “Will Gloves Come Off When McCain Faces Letterman?” *Washington Post*, October 16, p. C07.

date....”I haven’t had so much fun since my last interrogation,” said McCain, a Vietnam War POW.⁸⁴

However, nothing in any election cycle compared to the dislike in the mainstream press of Sarah Palin. And *SNL* gave writers the perfect framework from which to discuss exactly what substantive issues were most worrying about her.

In the *Times*, Columnist Gail Collins wrote an Op-ed that criticized McCain for picking an inexperienced extremist Evangelical Christian to try to play up to women voters and his base, and said Palin’s “guard stands as our last best defense against possible attack by the resurgent Russian menace across the Bering Strait” (*New York Times*, August 30, 2008, p. A19). Considering that Palin stated this later on in the ABC *World News* interview conducted by Charlie Gibson on September 11, 2008, this was an eerily far-seeing comment. After the failed Palin interviews, and the *SNL* parodies of them, and after McCain had to apologize to David Letterman, it appeared that the McCain/Palin campaign was doing more damage control than campaigning. Polling showed this, as well as Palin’s actions. When Palin went on *SNL*, she was trying to prove that she had a sense of humor about herself; but she did not succeed at counteracting the parody of her: “The ‘SNL’ skits gave Ms. Palin the last word in every joke...the strategy...looked a bit odd...her performance did little to assuage the concerns that have troubled many Republican and independent voters” (*New York Times*, October 20, 2008, p. C1). Palin appeared to disdain Tina Fey and was uncomfortable. She was put on the show by the campaign to be more “real” and display authenticity by being able to laugh

⁸⁴ de Moraes, Lisa. 2008. “Last Debate Is Not a Winner, In the Ratings.” *Washington Post*, October 17, p. C01.

at herself, but the performance looked contrived. Palin's appearance on *SNL* on October 18th, 2008, had an effect on polling data, as voters liked her more before the interviews and the impression. Palin had "become a drag on the GOP ticket: 52 percent of voters said McCain's selection of her makes them doubt the types of decisions he would make as president, a reversal from a Post-ABC poll following the nominating conventions" (*Washington Post*, October 21, 2008, p. A02).

There was not much known about Palin before the interviews with Katie Couric and Charlie Gibson that Tina Fey parodied, and journalists used the parody to criticize Palin. Although some writers claimed that this may have affected how the voters thought about her, and ultimately McCain (Baumgartner, et al., 2012), Palin became an object of derision in the *New York Times* and *The Washington Post* after *SNL* deployed the parody. Although the parody alone could not be said to have caused the change by itself, it was used by Palin's critics as a rhetorical resource. Tina Fey's parody of Palin was mentioned in 19 articles in the *Washington Post* and 27 articles in the *New York Times* and most coverage of her was colored by the satirical portrayal from then on.

Three issues – Palin struggling with the concept of what the "Bush Doctrine" was, her views on climate change, and her proximity to Russia counting as foreign policy experience – were the main topics writers discussed. About Palin's confusion over the "Bush Doctrine,"⁸⁵ Columnist Bob Herbert in the *Times* wrote, "...I've gotten the scary

⁸⁵ Conservative *Washington Post* columnist Charles Krauthammer was the first to use this phrase in 2001 to refer to a number of things, including defensive first strike war and Bush's desire to "spread Democracy" in the Middle East and North Africa as a means to combat presumed Muslim extremism. He challenged Gibson's questioning of Palin about it, and even his understanding of it, in a *Post* article entitled "Charlie Gibson's Gaffe," September 13, 2008. But whether or not Gibson understood it was not as important as

feeling, for the first time in my life, that dimwittedness is not just on the march in the U.S., but that it might actually prevail” (*New York Times*, September 13, 2008, p. A19). These comments were made *before* Tina Fey’s satire on *Saturday Night Live*. What happened *afterward* demonstrated an influence on the official journalistic sphere by the unofficial, cultural/aesthetic public sphere (Jacobs 2012).

After the first sketch, most of the journalists in the *Post* and the *Times* saw her from then on as an incompetent exaggerator of her own qualifications. “Palin was halting, repetitive and occasionally stumped on basic questions. And the worst moments [of the Couric interview] - boasting again, Tina Fey-like, of Alaska’s proximity to Russia - have been endlessly replayed on other networks and the Web” (*Washington Post*, September 29, 2008, p. C01); “Some of Palin’s occasionally rambling responses to Couric have been used verbatim in Tina Fey’s “Saturday Night Live” send-up...” (*Washington Post*, October 2, 2008, p. A07).

...Palin tends to “slip back to her talking points,” as CBS’s Katie Couric recently put it. John McCain is a maverick. Lots of things need some shakin’ up...”
Forgive me, Mrs. Palin,” faux Katie Couric said to faux Sarah Palin on last week’s “Saturday Night Live,” “but it seems to me that when cornered you become increasingly adorable.”⁸⁶

whether or not Palin agreed with, or even understood the policy. This is what other journalists, and *SNL*, soon focused on.

⁸⁶ Copeland, Libby. 2008. “Shooting From the Hip, With a Smile to Boot.” *Washington Post*, October 1, p. C01.

Ultimately, because of her poor performance and how *SNL* emphasized it, there was a low bar set for her to succeed in the debate between her and Joe Biden: “The criteria for success for Palin was, don’t sound like Tina Fey and don’t get into a situation in which it appears you’re incredibly intellectually shallow. She did that, and everyone’s saying it was a triumph” (*Washington Post*, October 4, 2008 p. C01). Instead of showing political competency against Biden, “The debate...was between the dueling images of the Alaska governor: the fuzzy-minded amateur parodied - with her own words - by Tina Fey...” (*New York Times*, October 3, 2008, p. A18). After the representation of Palin as ridiculous caught on, it did not go away. She did not talk to the media for a period of time after the nomination. This gave the impression that the campaign had something to hide: “Ms. Fey’s take on Ms. Palin has all but defined the candidate, who has resisted media coverage” (*New York Times*, October 9, 2008p. C1).

This description of Palin’s comments in the Vice-Presidential debate about the state of the economy was totally colored by the impression:

“We’re gonna ask ourselves what would a maverick do in this situation, and then ya know, we’ll do that.”...Oh, wait a minute. That wasn’t Gov. Sarah Palin in the debate. That was Tina Fey doing her impression of Sarah Palin...an impersonation...so resonant, it almost displaced Ms. Palin’s own performance as herself...At times there has even been some ambiguity about where reality ends and caricature begins.⁸⁷

⁸⁷ Rothstein, Edward. 2008. “The Power of Political Pratfalls.” *New York Times*, October 13, p. C1.

Republicans as well as Democrats began to have serious reservations about her: “Her performance in the interview sparked serious heebie-jeebies among Republicans...” (*New York Times*, October 5 2008, p. WK3). The McCain campaign wanted Palin to appeal to women voters, especially Independents and those who might have wanted Hillary Clinton to win. Her lack of experience was marketed as a positive quality, because she would “shake things up” and not be a “Washington insider” – ironic because McCain had been in Washington for so long. These were two key components of the McCain campaign’s strategy that were taken apart by the parodies of the interviews. Regarding the former, Fey’s characterization of Palin made people think she was picked more for her looks than acuity (the “fancy pageant walkin’” line, above, demonstrates that, pointing to her past in beauty pageants) and would be a poor second compared to Clinton. The fact that Clinton and Fey were shown in a sketch together emphasized the differences side-by-side. The parody also highlighted Palin’s ignorance on important issues: “Voters were about evenly divided on [the question of Palin’s experience] a month and a half ago, but toward the end of September a clear majority said she was not qualified. In the new poll, 58 percent said she is insufficiently experienced” (*Washington Post*, October 25, 2008, p. A03). As the election date drew closer, this trend did not reverse: “The polls also suggest that Sarah Palin has, in two short months, managed to scare the pants off large portions of the population” (*New York Times*, November 1, p. 2008, A23). Palin galvanized opposition to her, a different manner of “energizing” effect; voters subsequently wanted Obama to win even more. Preventing Palin from becoming Vice President became an important goal. Campaign contributions to Obama increased.

One of the major parts of this anti-Palin movement of the electorate was that it helped repair the breach created by the Democratic primary campaign between Obama and Clinton, summed up in a *Post* article, “An Unwitting Assist from the Hockey Mom”:

The Hillary voter has come home...”Palin - God forbid! Where did they find her?” Evelyn Fruman exclaimed Monday before a Clinton speech at a Jewish community center here...Nearby, Rina Jampolsky was wearing a “Hillary Sent Me” button...“I thought I wouldn’t vote at all when Hillary left the race,” she said. “But as soon as McCain selected Sarah Palin, my decision was made.”⁸⁸

Even comments about Palin that once had a completely positive connotation - such as the fact that she “energized” the McCain campaign – became clouded by her inadequacies. “Though she initially transformed the race with her energizing presence and a fiery convention speech... after weeks of intensive coverage and several perceived missteps, the shine has diminished” (*Washington Post*, October 2, 2008, p. A01). The *Post* also quoted two male voters talking in Virginia, in a conversation that spoke volumes about Palin’s failed performance as a competent politician: ““But Sarah Palin is great, even though she’s not so keen on foreign policy,’ [the first man] said. ‘She’s not keen on anything,’ [the second man] retorted. ‘John McCain could keel over and have a heart attack, and we’d be left with a dingbat’” (*Washington Post*, November 2, 2008, C07).

⁸⁸ Milbank, Dana. 2008. “An Unwitting Assist from the Hockey Mom.” *Washington Post*, October 14, p. A03.

JOURNALISTS RECOGNIZE GREATER SUBSTANTIVE HUMOR CONTENT

In the 2008 election cycle, journalists were unequivocal about the influence that late night comedy programs were having on the public dialogue about the election. They discussed the fact that many people got their information from them and the shows' direct impacts on the media. They recognized that that the programs favored Democratic candidates, and they were "an underrated factor in this campaign, and an undeniable advantage for Obama [who]... has basically joked and danced his way through such appearances...Jon Stewart asked him about "the whole socialism/Marxist thing" (*Washington Post*, November 3, 2008 p. C01). By contrast, previous election cycles were not as tailor-made for the more critical satire that was now being recognized:

All the performers are riding high on the rousing reception they've received since returning for the new season, a hugely renewed enthusiasm that is a tradition for the show in election years -- though this year, it seems, more than any other. With the nation focused on the candidates and their manipulations, "SNL" has tailor-made targets that seem especially ripe. Eight years of George W. Bush really weren't a great boon to the show; he seemed hard to satirize...Bush turned out to be his own best parody, a self-satirizing figure who seemed to thwart friendly spoofing.⁸⁹

⁸⁹ Shales, Tom. 2008. "Early Returns Are Promising In 'SNL's' Thursday Campaign." *Washington Post*, October 10, p. C01.

Due to the confluence of the transformation of the shows, in response to the overly complacent media environment after 9/11, and the specific personalities of this election cycle's candidates, the programs had the opportunity to be more influential, an opportunity that they specifically took.

One of the biggest influences that *SNL* had on campaign coverage was its jokes about how the media was very critical of Hillary Clinton, but willing to let Barack Obama off the hook on practically every issue. Several sketches were devoted to this. In another example of newspapers taking advantage of every opportunity to criticize network and cable news (perhaps to make themselves look better in comparison), journalists often spoke of this supposed influence. In fact, the “characterization [was] stoked nearly every day since by Mrs. Clinton and her aides” (*New York Times*, March 1, 2008, p. A13) as fuel to the fire that the media was treating her unfairly. In turn, campaign coverage on television shifted, and many commentators directly discussed the skits as the primary reason why: “It took many months and the mockery of ‘Saturday Night Live’ to make it happen, but the lumbering beast that is the press corps finally roused itself from its slumber Monday and greeted Barack Obama with a menacing growl” (*Washington Post*, March 4, 2008, p. A02). Multiple times, the papers stated that “the tone of the Democratic contest seems to have shifted, with Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton’s campaign more buoyant and Senator Barack Obama’s more defensive,” and attributed it to “the ‘Saturday Night Live’ show on Feb. 23, when...it mocked the news media for treating Mr. Obama more gently than it treated Mrs. Clinton.” Further, the Clinton campaign was able to use that narrative, both in a debate and in confrontations with the press (*New York Times*, March 5, 2008, p. A20).

Why did it take a skit on “Saturday Night Live” to change the tone of TV news operations’ Democratic primary coverage? TV critics got a chance to ask that exact question of a whole panel of CNN on-air talent touting the network’s presidential campaign coverage at Thank God We’re Working Summer TV Press Tour 2008...[Coverage] changed dramatically after that skit, where they pointed out how [Barack] Obama was getting the softballs, while Hillary [Clinton] was getting the knock-down pitches,” the critic shot back.⁹⁰

The Wright story initially erupted in March, shortly after journalists were stung by a pair of “Saturday Night Live” skits that portrayed them as in the tank for Obama...[Afterwards] the press was no longer giving him the benefit of the doubt. Minor incidents - Obama throwing gutter balls or refusing to indulge in high-calorie foods - were trumpeted as evidence that he is an out-of-touch Harvard elitist.⁹¹

This was one of the most direct influences that a comedy program had on the way that a Presidential campaign was covered in the several years that I have analyzed.

As in previous years, journalists revisited the idea that many people, especially younger voters, were getting their information about politics from the late-night comedy shows. When the shows went off the air due to the writers’ strike, “hundreds of thousands

⁹⁰ de Moraes, Lisa. 2008. “CNN, ‘SNL’ and TV Critics’ Primary Concerns.” *Washington Post*, July 12, p. C07.

⁹¹ Kurtz, Howard. 2008. “Obama’s Chilly Spring: Once-Cordial Press Coverage Turns Decidedly Cool.” *Washington Post*, May 5, p. C01.

of American citizens lost contact with what's going on in the outside world. The recourse to vintage episodes of 'The Colbert Report' immediately disconnected voters - at least the ones too young to remember the '70s - from the nation's unfolding political drama" (*New York Times*, November 9, 2007, p. A26).

It is no secret that late-night comedians have become quasi news anchors, especially to under-30 voters - about half of whom say they at least sometimes learn about the campaign from programs like "Saturday Night Live" and "The Daily Show" (compared with about a quarter of people ages 30 to 49), a 2004 Pew Research Center survey found...

This was seen to have a benefit to the Democrats. The Center for Media and Public affairs conducts regular studies on which party or candidates are the targets of late-night humor. Even though the Democratic candidates have more jokes aimed at them, according to their study from January 1st, 2008 to October 10, 2008, it was fairly obvious that the more substantive ones, aimed at Republicans, were what was resonating with journalists.⁹² But the number of jokes and who they were aimed at was not the only thing that journalists paid attention to. For the first time, in this election cycle, they began to acknowledge that it wasn't just exposure to the jokes that was having an influence; it was the critical qualities of them:

⁹² Nagourney, Adam. 2007. "A Year Still to Go, and Presidential Politics Have Shifted Already." *New York Times*, November 4, p. A26.

Following 9/11 and the invasion of Iraq, the show focused more closely not just on politics, but also on the machinery of policy making and the White House's efforts to manage the news media. Mr. Stewart's comedic gifts - his high-frequency radar for hypocrisy, his talent for excavating ur-narratives from mountains of information, his ability, in Ms. Corn's words, "to name things that don't seem to have a name" - proved to be perfect tools for explicating and parsing the foibles of an administration known for its secrecy, ideological certainty and impatience with dissenting viewpoints.⁹³

In fact, this article observed (without the advantage of having a great deal of specific empirical data to back up the assertion) the same phenomenon that this study has shown – that the *Daily Show* in particular went from personality-based humor to emphasizing the substantive problems with the Bush Administration, and by extension, the current Republican candidates:

Over time, the show's deconstructions grew increasingly sophisticated. Its fascination with language, for instance, evolved from chuckles over the president's verbal gaffes...to ferocious exposes of the administration's Orwellian manipulations: from its efforts to redefine the meaning of the word "torture" to its talk about troop withdrawals from Iraq based on "time horizons" (a strategy, Mr. Stewart noted, "named after some-thing that no matter how long you head towards it, you never quite reach it"). For all its eviscerations of the

⁹³ Kakutan,i Michiko. 2008. "The Most Trusted Man In America?" *New York Times*, August 17, p. AR1.

administration, “The Daily Show” is animated not by partisanship but by a deep mistrust of all ideology. A sane voice in a noisy red-blue echo chamber, Mr. Stewart displays an impatience with the platitudes of both the right and the left and a disdain for commentators who, as he made clear in a famous 2004 appearance on CNN’s “Crossfire,” parrot party-line talking points and engage in knee-jerk shouting matches.⁹⁴

This was the first election cycle in which Stephen Colbert’s show was on, and it was also recognized as a major force unto its own, even though it was a part of the overall landscape of political satire. His “character,” a more direct satire of both conservative politics in general, and conservative media commentators in specific, was a unique response to the post-9/11 media landscape: “As Mr. Colbert demonstrated on Sunday morning [on *Meet the Press*], it isn’t that he finds the Beltway’s folkways amusing, he finds them appalling” (*New York Times*, October 22, 2007 p. C1). Finally, there had been a recognition that what Stewart and Colbert were doing was qualitatively different from what had been done in the past, and late-night monologues were still doing even now:

John McCain is a doddering fossil. Hillary is pathological ambition poured into a frigid pantsuit. And Barack -- well, Barack Hussein Obama’s mere name is mined for cheap yuks because comedically, he’s proved about as hard to pin back as a pair of protruding ears. Those are one-note caricatures perpetuated weeknightly

⁹⁴ Kakutan,i Michiko. 2008. “The Most Trusted Man In America?” *New York Times*, August 17, p. AR1.

largely by broadcast TV's late-night chat hosts, who are paid to multiply audiences by the lowest comedic denominator. And because of this political shtick, Peterson, the author and University of Iowa academic, accuses Leno and Letterman and Conan and company of practicing only "pseudo-satire." True satirists, Peterson contends, are genuine critics... Which is why he believes the likes of Stewart and Colbert are healthy contributors to the election's national conversation - whether they themselves subscribe to such influence or not... once satire takes hold, perhaps its greatest influence is encouraging critical thought. "Good satire goes beyond the specific point it's trying to make and teaches you how to think critically," McGruder says.⁹⁵

The critically satirical shows were not only "real" satire, but often times "real" news in contrast to the networks: "Next to such 'real' news from CBS, the 'fake' news at the network's corporate sibling Comedy Central was, not for the first time, more trustworthy. Rob Riggle, a 'Daily Show' correspondent who also serves in the Marine Reserve, invited American troops in Iraq to speak candidly about the Iraqi Parliament's vacation" (*New York Times*, September 9, 2007 p. D14) which was not something that was seen anywhere else.

So here's Lt. Gen. Ricardo Sanchez, commander of coalition forces in Iraq four years ago, describing the situation in a TV interview in September 2003: "We're not in a quagmire," he's saying confidently. "The progress is unbelievable." So

⁹⁵ Cavna, Michael. 2008. "Comedians Of Clout; In a Funny Way, Satirical Takes Can Color Perceptions of the Presidential Contenders." *Washington Post*, June 12, p. C01.

what about that progress, general? Because here's Sanchez, now retired, talking about Iraq in a video clip from last October: "There has been a glaring, unfortunate display of incompetent strategic leadership within our national leaders. . . . There's no question that America is living a nightmare with no end in sight." The before-and-after videos didn't air on CNN or MSNBC or ABC. Instead, the revealing sound bites ran back to back on "The Daily Show With Jon Stewart." The satiric Comedy Central program regularly unearths telling footage ignored or overlooked by the real news guys.⁹⁶

Stewart, even though he continued to downplay his role in the public sphere as "just a comedian," never held back when it came to pronouncing his disdain for television news: "Obama could cure cancer and [Fox news would] figure out a way to frame it as an economic disaster'...Stewart...declared his love for newspapers as a better source of political coverage but said they are fighting 'a losing battle because they're getting overshadowed'" (*Washington Post*, August 26, 2008, p. A20). However, television was not the only thing he criticized, saying that newspapers were better, but not without problems when it came to staying outside the political influence machine:

The Comedy Central funnyman touched a nerve when he criticized journalists for having off-the-record dinners with politicians... "That colors your vision of them so clearly and so profoundly," he said... "I don't say access is useless. But the more you get sucked into it, the more you become part of that machinery." And

⁹⁶ Farhi, Paul. 2008. "It's Funny How Funny Just the Facts Can Be; 'Daily Show' Staffer Mines News for Laughs." *Washington Post*, April 30, Pg. C01.

when another reporter accused him of courting the press at the breakfast as skillfully as any officeholder, Stewart called the comparison “crazy.”⁹⁷

Although it is important that this was mentioned, there was not much reflexivity about it on the part of newspaper journalists.

CONCLUSION: THE TRANSFORMATION AND ITS CONCRETIZATION

The 2008 election cycle showed the transformation that started taking place when the *Daily Show* premiered in 2000 – not only a shift from Personality-based humor to substantive satire, but the journalists who wrote about it actively pointing it out and discussing how important it was to political discourse in general (Schudson 2011). Gone are the days of writers lamenting that people are getting their news from these sources to the detriment of real political knowledge. Early on, journalists acknowledged that (according to Pew and other studies) voters, especially younger ones, were increasingly receiving their news this way (Cao 2010; Cao 2008). But that trend was always accompanied by ambivalence about the effect on democracy it could have (Jacobs 2012). Now, they worried that these same citizens would not be adequately informed when the shows suffered because of the writers’ strike that made it difficult to produce the shows (Fox, et al. 2007).

⁹⁷ Kurtz, Howard. 2008. “No Joke: Jon Stewart Takes Aim At 24-Hour Cable News ‘Beast’.” *Washington Post*, August 26, p. A20.

The humor on the programs started off with more personal jokes. But there was a transition from personal humor early on (mostly with respect to wide range of primary candidates) – to more substantive jokes after that. Even the personality-based humor during the Primary phase of the election cycle is laced with substantive undertones. Regarding the economy, the splash that Fred Thompson made at first was quashed by jokes about him not understanding the seriousness of the economic problems the country was facing; this underlied the satire about him being an actor, old, not serious, and unintelligent. McCain managed to give all comedians an opening to mock him regarding the economy with the campaign suspension fiasco, and his snub of David Letterman. His campaign seriously mishandled the response to economic crisis. The tactic failed to appear serious, and seemed as if it was a substitute for real action. Sarah Palin failed to perform legitimate, authoritative, knowledgeable political authenticity, both on and off the comedy programs. The parodies of her provided ample openings for journalists to hold up as an example of why she would not make a competent Vice President, in both personal and substantive ways. More substantive humor throughout the campaign focused both on the economy, and the direction the country should take regarding terrorist threats and the wars. Stephen Colbert and Jon Stewart were likely to favor Obama, because he was the least hawkish of all the candidates, having not supported the War in Iraq in the first place. In this way, among others, they were able to shape political debates (Couldry 2006; Hesmondhalgh 2007). Here also, McCain failed to convey that his Presidency would take the country in a different direction. And the early Republican Primary candidates were going against public opinion that the wars should be reined in, not expanded.

With respect to Hillary Clinton, personality-based humor focused more on her husband's former indiscretions, and not her directly. While there were few times her gender was attacked, Obama's was mentioned constantly, if indirectly; and his perceived religious background and middle name were openly called into question. John McCain was being more rational than Sarah Palin; during a press conference, a woman asked him if Obama was an Arab, which demonstrated that the paranoia about his ethnic background was out in the open. However, he dealt with this situation in a prudent way. Yet at the same time, Palin was free to make all the insinuations about "palling around with terrorists" that she wanted. These racist dogwhistles were effective only to an extent; satire on the shows was easily able to call them out (Jones 2010; Jones 2009). Journalists amplified the humor, and were able to use the characterization of Obama as somehow un-American as irrational. Generally, the shows did not criticize Obama's policy positions, and only lightly mocked the way he talked or other relatively meaningless things. When he appeared on the programs, he was genuinely funny, but Clinton was a little defensive. Palin, when she appeared on *SNL*, did not seem genuine (Alexander 2010; Moy, et al. 2006).

Most critical humor about Clinton was directed at the conflict between her and Obama regarding the fight for the Democratic nomination. Journalists were concerned that this would hurt the party as a whole in the long run, and were able to use the criticisms that (especially Colbert and Stewart) were making about the way her campaign was acting, comparing the tactics to that of Karl Rove. Further, journalists were able to utilize the jokes on all the programs, especially *SNL*, about how the cable and network television news media was "in the tank" for Obama, thus making themselves look more

reasonable. Even though Stewart made some specific criticisms that even newspaper journalists were too inside the system themselves, the writers in the *Post* and the *Times* were either able to gloss over them or ignore them completely, even though they had the opportunity to do otherwise (Borden and Tew 2007). Even after the failures of prominent newspaper journalism after 9/11 (McClennen 2012), journalists generally lacked the capacity to be reflexive about their own failings (Jacobs and Michaud Wild 2013).

While journalists once denigrated *SNL* as being vicious and essentially without substantive content, in 2008 they listen to it for narrative cues, and laud Stewart and Colbert as being more competent political speakers than those on most television news. Peterson & Kern's (1996) concept of "cultural omnivorousness" is demonstrated in the journalists' developing attitudes about political comedy on television. This change can be attributed to several factors; that as new cohorts of journalists come into the forefront of deciding what is relevant political speech, they are bringing with them a liking for forms of culture that are not commonly considered meaningful in earlier periods; that the newer groups of people are "gentrify[ing] elements of popular culture and incorporat[ing] them into the dominant status-group culture" (906); and that forms of speech previously associated with "inferior" media, like late night television comedy, are no longer so stigmatized as political sensibilities change. This idea can be linked to Katz and Lazarsfeld's (1955) analysis of opinion leaders. Sometimes, the new experts (like Stewart or Colbert) do not come from elite backgrounds, and open up the public sphere to alternative voices. This process really began in 2000, but solidified throughout the decade. Their contribution is necessary to expansion of public discourse, the kinds of voices who are allowed to speak, and ultimately increases the types of things that are

allowed to be discussed. Katz and Lazarsfeld stated that one of their most important findings is that they found two types of influence:

Formal media will influence mainly by representation or by indirect attraction...by what they tell. People, however, can influence both this way and by control. People can induce each other to a variety of activities as a result of their interpersonal relations and thus their influence goes far beyond the content of their communications. This is probably the most important reason why we have found the impact of personal contact to be greater than the impact of formal media (185).

There are two main reasons why this may have changed. One is that direct, face-to-face, personal associations may have decreased, and may have been replaced by solitary media consumption (Putnam 2001). The second is that they really were too early to look at the influence of television, which may have a greater influence than print media or radio, at the very least since people's time engaged with that medium continues to increase. This is why voters need not have seen the Palin parody, for example, to have been influenced but it, and why the "Fey Effect" studies are unable to draw out the more interesting parts of how the political comedy/cultural sphere acts as a semi-autonomous, independent variable on the sphere of serious news journalism. There is evidence presented here for a direct influence of satire on television on journalists, and thus on the public sphere as well.

CHAPTER 8: CONCLUSION

The research questions in this analysis can be categorized into three main areas. The first is the basic thick description of how has political comedy on television in the United States changed over time; *SNL* has been a narrative force that has run through all of the political life of the United States since 1974. Perhaps being born in the middle of the most inherently ironic and satirizable political scandal of the 20th century set it on that path. The inclusion of a segment specifically for the mocking of the news of the day, and the fact that they continued that tradition, was the basis for later programs like the *Daily Show* and the *Colbert Report*. *SNL* was the only such semi-weekly place where this sort of direct news-desk style satire occurred. The monologues of late night talk shows were said by academics and journalists to at some level set the tone for how Americans discussed politics, but they often were only taking advantage of popular sentiment. *SNL* sketches allowed the actors on the show to specifically parody politicians. There was however a general divide between, the two types of humor; sketches largely played on the personal characteristics of the figures and did not delve much into their policies; “Weekend Update” jokes were often at least somewhat more substantive in content. And this is the way that political satire remained until the *Daily Show* came along. There was equilibrium throughout the 1980s and 1990s where *SNL* in some ways helped maintain the political status quo.

However, changes in the television industry provided a space for a more focused, substantive political satire that could be on four nights a week (at first for a half an hour, and then for an hour after the premier of *Colbert*). A few-minutes long “Weekend

Update” segment during the normal season of *SNL* was no longer adequate. Right-wing talk radio and Fox News, which came to prominence during the Clinton administration, did not have any kind of comparable left-wing response. And the terrorist attacks and subsequent wars in 2001, when journalism seemed to abdicate its responsibility to provide adequate investigation and an alternative voice to what the presidential administration was saying, solidified the *Daily Show*’s place as an important place where citizens could see their own viewpoints represented, who were not seeing it many other places in the mainstream media. The *Colbert Report* brought this concept full circle, as a more direct parody of conservative cable news “talking heads” like Bill O’Reilly. *SNL* would have faded into irrelevance if it were not for the 2008 parody of Sarah Palin, which was much more substantive, as it directly addressed her lack of knowledge and questionable policy positions, as well as her more mockable personality characteristics.

The second question this work addressed was what does exposure to political comedy do to journalism, and in turn, what effect does that have on citizens, voters, and politics? Initially, journalists broke into two separate camps regarding how they regarded the increasing influence of political comedy on discourse about elections. On one hand, there was a tendency to worry that entertainment and politics were becoming more alike, and that this would be damaging to the seriousness of the political process and democracy on general. On the other hand, this analysis revealed that many writers used the criticisms of the show when what they really wanted to say was too polemical or perhaps unprofessional; a direct quote from the comedian or sketch would often substitute for their own voice. In the earlier election cycles, journalists worried that jokes about a candidate’s age, or potentially misleading representations of their earlier years as drug or

alcohol users, or womanizers, would have an unfair impact on how voters perceived that candidate. However, this concern was largely unfounded, as the comedy was usually just going with the prevailing winds of public sentiment. Later, when the more substantive comedy emerged, the fears of getting informed from political comedy evaporated when it became apparent that what the shows were doing was often more hard-hitting and elucidating than what network and cable news accomplished throughout the 2000s (Jones 2004; Jacobs and Michaud Wild 2013). Even though Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert in particular criticized newspaper journalism along the same lines, writers glossed over these issues and were not self-reflexive about their own complicities in this problem.

Although there were several studies that attempted to show the direct impact of Tina Fey's impression of Sarah Palin on *SNL* on the campaign (Baumgartner, et al. 2012; Young 2011; Esralew and Young 2012; Young and Flowers 2010), and ultimately John McCain's loss, the results of them were often mixed and inconclusive. A more nuanced narrative analysis of newspaper commentary here shows that journalists were very influenced by it, and often used it as a shorthand for referring to the Vice Presidential candidate. It is difficult to measure the full effects of the Fey impression, but it appears that it had a diffuse and far-reaching influence. The male voters quoted talking about her in 2008 in the *Washington Post* most likely would not have regarded her as a "dingbat" only from watching her poorly-performed interviews, but that is very hard to prove. One effect of political comedy that is shown in empirical research is that people who watch the shows are as informed as those who watch traditional news sources, and are those who are more informed are more politically engaged (Baumgartner and Morris 2006; Baumgartner and Morris 2007; Cao 2008; Cao 2010; Cao and Brewer 2008). This

different way of talking about politics is more accessible to viewers, especially younger ones. The transformation of political comedy from sometimes light-hearted, sometimes relatively vicious personality-based jokes, into a resource for journalists and voters to call upon, to be better informed by, and to inject a dose of skepticism about candidates' claims and competencies is evident in the analyses presented here.

The third area that this study addressed was the question of why was the increase and discussion of critical perspectives in political comedy on television an important sociological issue. It is relevant because of what the discourse has contributed to civil society. As mentioned, the general failure of traditional journalism to inform the public and present alternate viewpoints after September 11 opened up a space in the public sphere that has been occupied by political comedy ever since. Criticizing or questioning the Bush administration's policies in a "time of war" was seen as unpatriotic. Satire is not held to the same social norms as any other form of discourse; it can "get away with" things that serious discussions of politics cannot (Jones 2010). Ultimately, presenting differing viewpoints in a democratic society works in favor of rationality, and the silencing of them, whether overt or tacit, will be seen as bad for civil society (Alexander 2006). Journalists made these claims about the *Daily Show* and the *Colbert Report*.

STRONG PROGRAM ANALYSIS

Previous studies of political humor on television have focused on media effects and content analysis. Media effects have been regarded as wither negative (mass

distraction) or positive (increasing knowledge and civic engagement). The negative approaches have tended to be more theoretical than empirical, and were conducted at a time when transitions in how audiences gain and take action with political information were in a state of transformation (Peterson 2008; Postman 1985), or focused more narrowly in the narratives of certain segments of a show rather than all of them taken as a whole (Day 2012; Shoemaker and Weinstein 1999). Now that the change over from getting political information from the trusted anchor on network news in pre-deregulation era, to getting information from the more fractured and polarized landscape of talk radio, cable news, and late-night political comedy programs had completed, a new study of how political comedy has permeated the narratives was necessary. More positive effects studies have tried to prove things like the “Fey Effect,” where voters who watched Tina Fey’s parody of Sarah Palin on *SNL* were shown to be slightly less likely to vote for her and had somewhat contradictory findings (Young and Flowers 2010; Baumgartner, et al. 2012; Young 2011; Esralew and Young 2012). However, the effects were minimal, and did not take into account the influential outside judgments of opinion leaders in prestigious newspapers like the *Post* and the *Times* (Katz and Lazarsfeld 1955). If they were exposed to the parody, they passed it along to their readers who, in turn, need not have watched Fey’s performance at all. Content analyses have centered on the idea of an intersubjective culture where all the media narratives collide (Jenkins 2008) and have positive effects on civic engagement (Jones 2010; Jones 2004; Gray, et al. 2009); however, the process by which this occurs has not been demonstrated prior to this study. In order to demonstrate empirically that the programs have had an intersubjective influence, there needed to be a close examination of the codes and narratives of the shows

over time, and where and when their effects showed in the other sphere of mainstream journalism. In this way, there is a comprehensive and integrated look of the programs' salience increasing over time.

Three main areas of analysis of *SNL*, the *Daily Show*, and the *Colbert Report* show where the narratives became influential on mainstream journalism over time: what are the main codes in each election cycle; do the narratives become more substantive over the years, and if so, who do they mostly target; and how does *SNL* compare overall to the *Daily Show* and the *Colbert Report*. Generally, personal humor mostly targeted Democrats, while substantive mostly targeted Republicans. This can explain a great deal about why satirical commentary was taken seriously by journalists after they began to recognize these trends and use them. As time went on, the shows transformed into more rational carriers of Democratic codes than television news often did, and writers in the *Post* and *Times* were able to draw boundaries between themselves and network and cable news using the shows' increasingly critical satire (Jacobs 2012; Jacobs and Michaud Wild 2013). How, specifically, did these changes take place from 1980 to 2008?

The 1980 election cycle appeared more critical of Jimmy Carter; however, after Reagan had been in office for eight years, and even going forward in to 1988 when George H.W. Bush was running, *SNL* was more critical of the Republican candidates. This may have been a general trend of going after the incumbent party. In general, though, they mocked personality characteristics, with each election cycle being the majority of jokes that way, with 1984 having the greatest minority percentage of substantive jokes. Dan Quale was the hallmark of 1980's *SNL* satire, being easily mocked for his verbal gaffes. When Ferraro ran, *SNL* only made jokes about her gender, and did

not discuss her policy positions. The volume of political jokes increased dramatically from 1984 to 1988. Satire slanted in each year towards the Democrats; Republicans were held as being out-of-touch, and holding the best interests of the rich. The news media was satirized as being inept, dull, and gimmicky. The years of 1992 and 1996 were relatively similar to both each other and the previous cycles, in that jokes were also mostly personal and mostly favored Democrats; however the amount of jokes and sketches again increased from the 1980s. These years were focused on the style of the comedians delivering the jokes; Kevin Nealon's deadpan style and Norm MacDonald's over-the-top personal attacks (which eventually got him fired, even though they were often deserved) made the years reflect their unique voices. Jokes about voters being confused or uninformed entered the narrative. Iran-Contra and other scandals, as well as the infamous Government Shutdown, were mentioned, but only briefly. The economy was the main topic of substantive humor, as the country recovered from the 80's-era recessions, and *SNL* directly blamed Republican policies. Personal humor, about Dole's age, Ross Perot's strangeness, Quayle's culture wars attacks, and Bill Clinton's personal life, were the most memorable topics. All in all during these years, *SNL* did not particularly take sides. The anti-incumbency tone was gone, as Clinton had done a fairly good job in his first term.

The focus of political comedy on television really begins to change in 2000, due to a three main factors; one, the shift on *SNL* away from the single comedy personality at the "Weekend Update" segment to a more gender diverse two-person delivery; two, the debut of the *Daily Show*, which quickly became an "alternative" news source for young voters; and three, the, which made them all seem to take politics much more seriously, when it looked like corruption and cronyism would decide the outcome. Humor both

increasingly began to favor the Democrats and become more substantive after this and this trend would only advance after 9/11. On *SNL*, humor went from not really favoring any party, to favoring Democrats. Before the election dispute, *SNL* was most notable for the impression that Will Ferrell did of George W. Bush. His misstatements and garbled words became the go-to way of parodying him, but the satire was not critical or substantive enough to address his policies; thus journalists did not latch on to it as a narrative resource to criticize him in a meaningful way. His characterization as a “partier” in college was part of the past, and did not speak to his present competency. Bush was caricatures as the “dumb guy” and Gore as the “stiff guy,” and neither were a particularly good choice. They were both wealthy and came from privileged educational backgrounds. The show even called back Dana Carvey, who had done the impression of the previous President Bush on *SNL*, a parody that was enjoyed by the man himself; thus, it did not elucidate any real concerns about his presidency. On the *Daily Show*, Bush was portrayed as unpleasant and petty, pointing out his appearance on Letterman’s show as sarcastic and mean to the host who had recently had heart surgery. In terms of substantive concerns, Bush was shown as being confused about foreign policy and world leaders, and being hawkish, while Gore was satirized as having a confusing, jargon-laden, and overly-simplistic economic policy.

After the election dispute, although it was a short period, *SNL* in particular moved from more personal to more substantive satire, which was critical of both the poorly-handled resolution to the election, as well as a greater focus on how Bush’s policies would affect the country if the election was decided in his favor. His intelligence was portrayed less as bumbling but harmless, to more of a serious detriment on his ability to

govern effectively. The *Daily Show* utilized its technique of showing a politician speaking on several programs, and sticking to their talking points, by showing Gore going on several shows after the election and not being forceful enough in calling out the poor way that the resolution to the dispute was being handled. Overall, both shows made remarks about the serious problems that having the Supreme Court decide the election, rather than the voters, might have on Democracy itself. A critical mass of substantive criticism was achieved in the 2004 election cycle; the issues that were most prevalent on most network and cable news were also prevalent on political comedy shows, namely the questionable evidence that led the United States into war, the further escalation of it, the interminable length of the Primary, the negative rumors about Bush's time in the Air National Guard, the "Swiftboat" attacks against John Kerry, his reputation as indecisive, and both Bush and Kerry's past education at Yale. The latter was a point which all comedy programs took as the candidates failing to perform authenticity, including Bush's exaggeration of his Southern accent. There was also a great deal of infighting amongst the Democrats, portrayed by the comedy programs as hurting the party, a theme which would re-emerge in 2008. There was a widening of the gap between substantive humor aimed at Republicans, and personal humor aimed at Democrats. Although it had a larger amount of jokes aimed at Democrats, there was an even stronger division along those lines on the *Daily Show*, which was further entrenched as a source of reliable political information.

By 2008, the *Daily Show* was in a position to set the tone for the way that many journalists talked about politics; later, after the nomination of Sarah Palin, *SNL* became a significant part of this process as well. The addition of Stephen Colbert's show to the way

politics was discussed added to the importance of the programs – after the 2006 White House Correspondents’ Dinner, where he, in a satirical manner, openly criticized George W. Bush’s foreign policy in front of him, Colbert began to be taken very seriously. His satire also focused on being critical of the media and its failings, as the character he was playing was a direct parody of conservative Fox News pundits such as Bill O’Reilly. The addition of Colbert’s parody of him and people like him highlighted the absurdity of conservative media “talking heads” who were more bluster than substance. Humor on the *Daily Show* and *Colbert* in 2008 was more strongly polemical, favoring Democrats, then on *SNL* which was slightly more neutral, until Sarah Palin was selected. On all the shows, substantive humor was mostly directed against the Republicans. Personal humor was most evident in the beginning of the election, and was directed against both parties’ candidates, since there was a large, open field of candidates, many of whom had very pro-war beliefs (on the Republican side) or were unlikely to gain a lot of popular support (on the Democratic side).

Later, after Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton became Democratic frontrunners, humor focused on race, religion, and gender, issues that were specifically treated one-dimensionally by the news media, which the shows additionally made fun of. Cable and network news journalists were parodied, specifically on *SNL*, as being uncritical of Obama, while going after Clinton, and once they did enough jokes and sketches about this, television news journalists responded to that criticism; newspaper journalists then pointed to the irony of a comedy program giving the more polluted sphere of television news a wake-up call. Infighting between the Democratic candidates, which almost led to a contested Primary, was especially satirized on *Colbert*. Later, criticism of how

Republicans treated Obama's race and religion were critically parodied on the shows, making evident the racism that underlied them. On the Republican side, the two most substantive issues discussed were foreign policy, as all the shows firmly came out against escalating the wars, which the Republican candidates wanted to do, and the economy, especially later on. John McCain's decision to "suspend his campaign" was viciously mocked as a campaign tactic, rather than an honest attempt to do anything that might help, and hurt his performance as a competent politician. The choice of Sarah Palin also hurt his image, as she was clearly not ready to take on the second most powerful role in the government. The Republicans were portrayed on the comedy shows as making emotional, rather than rational appeals to win the campaign.

In order to demonstrate how the shows narratives, as described above, became influential on the journalistic public sphere, this analysis showed how cultural performances by speakers in the cultural sphere, using the method of writing and on television programs, directly influenced thought in spheres outside of them. As demonstrated above, the "democratic code" (Alexander and Smith 2005) is seen in political communication in the public sphere of late night television political comedy. "The resulting binary codes mark out and classify the world, defining and evaluating in terms of the sacred and the profane the motivations, relationships, and institutions that are to be sought out, or avoided" (14). Debates about whether or not the political actors and their policies and performances were believable and genuine were sparked, furthered, and enhanced by the shows. The things the programs and the speakers on them discuss, parody, and satirize show the "struggles for inclusion and legitimacy [which] involve efforts to claim rational status, and efforts to discredit and debunk others depend upon the

application of labels from a negatively coded list of psychological attributes” (15), such as competency, authenticity, and rationality. In the analyses of the changing way this was discussed in the sphere of serious news journalism, it is evident that it has shaped the discourse of civil society. The next section discusses the specific ways in which this has occurred over the years.

JOURNALISTS’ EVOLVING NOTIONS OF TELEVISION POLITICAL COMEDY

I have discussed specific cases in each election cycle that show how late-night comedy has become a meaningful force in contemporary political discourse. I have demonstrated this change in four specific areas in how it is discussed in the larger public sphere: journalists’ increasing tendency to refer back to the incidents, people, or policies parodies or discussed on the comedy programs as relevant topics of discussion; journalists’ increasing reliance on the perspectives presented on the shows to stand in for their own opinions; discussions of the increase in candidates appearing on the programs and the need for them to successfully perform political competency while at the same time being able to laugh at themselves; and the transformation of a more personality-based way of being critical about the candidates to a more substantive way of contending with them, and journalists’ recognition of this phenomenon as important. The change demonstrates that the programs are in line with the “democratic code” of rational, evidence-based judgment’s that can help shape opinion, and thus cultural autonomy,

enabling the actors on the programs “to play a key role in the determination of political outcomes” (Alexander and Smith, 2005).

This realization builds slowly over the eight election cycles I have analyzed. Starting in 1980, there was a centrality of Johnny Carson’s monologue as a “bellwether” for what the citizens and voters were most likely to be most concerned with that the time. *SNL* was not considered by journalists to be on the same level. It was discussed as being crude and unnecessarily mean, and was said to potentially have an overall negative impact on younger reporters who were more likely to be attracted to it, rather than the more mature and staid comedy of Carson, in comparison. *SNL* was said to portray candidates in an undignified way. In 1984, Carson was a little off the mark about Reagan, who Carson seemed to find uninspiring, but who won in a landslide; however, journalists were also wrong, because they largely agreed with him. The people were not as willing to accept any portrayal of Reagan as old and forgetful, and this year saw a general disconnect between the journalists’ appraisal of the shows, and what the voters actually did. A more rich resource of candidates in both parties that could be mocked for things that journalists and the public more readily accepted came in 1988, now that the field was open after Reagan could no longer be re-elected. Dan Quayle became the standard by which *SNL* and late-night talk show hosts could mock someone for not being very smart, and not because they were just getting old. Gary Hart’s indiscretions and Joe Biden being accused of plagiarism and dissembling about his accomplishments were things that the comedy could easily satirize, and journalists could readily utilize these narratives. Journalists began to realize that once a negative satirical portrayal caught on, it was difficult to shake off, in the modern media landscape where so many people would see it

and discuss it with one another. But this force was not in this decade regarded by journalists as a major factor in the success or failure of a candidate, but rather only a contributing one. The election cycle of 1992, with respect to political comedy, was almost entirely overshadowed by third party candidate Ross Perot. Journalists latched on to *SNL*'s portrayal of him as changeable and generally bizarre, and his running mate as old and confused. Dan Quayle remained as a prime target, with his spelling gaffe and strange criticisms of popular culture. Journalists began to realize that people were gaining more knowledge about political campaigns from the monologues and sketches, but they did not do much more than recognize the growing phenomenon. The 1996 election cycle saw a return to more traditional and nearly exclusive attacks on Republican candidates, a phenomenon that would continue into the next century, and one which journalists would have a greater reliance upon using as a narrative resource. In particular, Norm MacDonald's parody of Dole on *SNL* was seen more in terms of his temper, rather than in terms of making fun of him for his age, as in the prior case of Reagan. Clinton's alleged sexual proclivities, "draft-dodging," and drug use were also satirized, but journalists focused on them less, a theme that would recur when journalists did not buy into the show's humor about George W. Bush along similar lines. In 1996, journalists mentioned for the first time a Pew Research poll that gave empirical data about how many voters were getting their news from late night comedy. They would continue to mention such polls in future election cycles as evidence that entertainment and news were converging; later, they would use such data as evidence that the shows were having a positive effect on democracy by informing parts of the public who might not get information otherwise.

A change takes place in 2000. There is a continuation of the tendency for journalists to place greater importance on television comedy's impact on the narratives about the candidates and the elections, but they were not certain or unified about what that impact is or how great it was. There was still a focus on *SNL* and late-night talk show hosts' monologues, but they did not particularly include the new *Daily Show* as much of a part of this. There was lamentation about the confluence of news and entertainment on one hand, and recognition of the possibility that greater engagement with politics through a more accessible medium like comedy could be good for civic engagement on the other; one has to be at least a little informed in order to get the jokes after all. Journalists quoted political campaigns who said they believed political comedy's influence was growing. This was the general tone throughout most the election cycle; however, the stakes changed after the election was disputed and went to the Supreme Court, and journalists recognized that the comedy programs were uniquely positioned to highlight the absurdity of it all. After other events in this decade, this new niche for political comedy would only deepen. By 2004, the divide in the country was deep, and the comedy shows reflected it. In particular, the *Daily Show* was increasingly critical of not just politics, but of the media's role in it. Satire had taken up the role of calling out the administration where mainstream news failed; newspaper writers pointed to this, while at the same time failing to recognize their complicity in it. They focused instead on things like the infamous *Crossfire* appearance by Jon Stewart, where he said the poor quality of debate had harmed America and Democracy. Instead of complaining that Americans were getting their news from the programs, there was recognition that it was better than the one-sided, generally pro-administration viewpoint people were getting from television and cable

news. Young voters were leaving the traditional media sourced behind, reflected in new 2004 Pew numbers. Stewart as the new Cronkite did not sit well with the comedian, but it did with most of the journalists. By the time of the 2008 Presidential election, there was little concern on the part of journalists that that political comedy could have any negative effects on Democracy. The *Daily Show* was seen as more reliable than mainstream television news; it had its own agenda, which was one of exposing falsehoods and making connections between the various things politicians said at one moment versus the things that they might say in another, to serve their own interests rather than be honest. Gone was the ambivalence of journalists towards political comedy; it had proven itself as an important informational resource, and a new moral compass. Journalists worried that the writers' strike could disrupt this.

Another way in which the shows had an influence on the public sphere, and journalism in particular, is when writers over the years have used direct or paraphrased quotes from the programs to represent their own opinions; this was the especially the case when their views were polemical, controversial, or reflected their critical views of television news. As with every other interpretation of what was happening with political comedy on late night television, this factor evolved over the years from a few brief mentions to an all-out usage of a satirical portrayal as shorthand for the writers to use. Going back to the 1980 election cycle, there was still a favoring of Carson over anything else. Perhaps because of Carson's respected place in popular culture, writers privileged his views about then-candidate Ronald Reagan and failed to see how popular he was with so many voters. In 1984, Carson was once again prescient, and the journalists had stayed with him as a predictor of how elections might go, as Carson essentially predicted that

Gary Hart would win the New Hampshire Primary over Walter Mondale; but even so, this was a minor thing, considering Mondale would go on to win the nomination. Carson's opinions were no longer in line with the electorate, and this provided an opening for other late-night programs, like *SNL*, to replace him as a bellwether. And this proved to be the case; journalists were more likely to quote more varied sources after this election cycle, including David Letterman and *SNL*. Jokes about the competency of Dan Quayle (which would be echoed later in journalists utilizing *SNL* as a narrative resource about Sarah Palin) where the writers quoted comedians were frequent in 1988. These were typically ways that the journalists could get away with making remarks about the personal characteristics of the candidates however, and more substantive criticisms would occur later. But in 1988, besides Quayle, it was all about the appearances of the candidates as competent political actors. On the Republican side, there was George H.W. Bush's "wimp factor" which shows mocked, and on the Democratic side, there was Dukakis trying to appear tough by riding a tank which backfired, and his "boringness" which the shows mocked and the writers picked up on. Dan Quayle continued to be a subject from which journalists drew direct quotes from the satires of him. By this time, he'd had his "potato" spelling gaffe incident, as well as his ridiculous escalation of the culture wars by criticizing the life choices of a fictional television character. The election was close, and Bush's campaign could not afford such negative publicity. Journalists who didn't want them to win had extra ammunition provided by Quayle, and enhanced by ready-made commentary on the comedy shows. Additionally, the 1996 election cycle saw many quotations about the extremism of Pat Buchanan from the late-night shows.

The next three election cycles marked a turning point with the relationship between journalism and the late-night comedy programs. The *Daily Show* premiered, and although in 2000, journalists were skeptical of how normatively positive its influence was, they recognized it; but they were slow to adopt it as an important source to quote, still relying more on the talk show format programs and *SNL*. Even at this time, though, cable and network news programs were using clips of it; it is likely that the journalists did not want to align themselves with the more polluted format of television. By 2004, the reluctance to use observations from Jon Stewart had decreased dramatically, due to the disputed election and the terrorist attacks and subsequent wars. There emerged a strong division between the kind of commentary that the *Daily Show* did, which was a substantive, utilizable source of criticism, and the type of things that other late-night comedians did, which tended to be more personal in nature. For Stewart, Bush was untrustworthy and lied about events occurring in the Middle East in order to get the country into a war. Many were of the opinion by this time that Bush was not smart enough to be President, and the humor about him shifted from just making fun of the way he talked, to the fear that he was unqualified to be President. This marked a distinction for journalists in the type of humor talk show hosts like Leno would use, compared to the more substantive *Daily Show*. By the 2008 election cycle, journalists in the *Post* and the *Times* were frequently as concerned as Stewart, Colbert, and possibly the writers on *SNL* that if Republicans won, the country would become more hawkish, and later displayed worry that if McCain won, the unqualified Sarah Palin would be second in line for the Presidency, echoing former concerns about Bush. The way that Palin was portrayed on *SNL* became the stand-in for the way that the journalists discussed her, almost as if they

were relieved another area of the public sphere was finally seeing the things they were, and the voting public was actually listening.

Politicians went from hardly ever appearing on late night talk shows and *SNL* in the 1980s, to appearing on them regularly in 2008. Third-party candidate John Anderson's appearance on *SNL* was met with mixed feelings; when Jesse Jackson appeared in 1984, it was much discussed, but there was not much impact associated with it. Generally it was not seen as necessary to gain exposure, and was regarded as part of the cheapening of democracy that came with the conflation of entertainment and politics (especially by Tom Shales in the 1990s, although even he came around to seeing it as necessary). Sometimes, the wives of the candidates would go on the shows for them, as Elizabeth Dole did on 1996 when she went on Leno's and Letterman's shows to make Bob Dole seem like a more relatable person; and as Michelle Obama did in 2008 on the *Colbert Report* to counter Barack Obama's image as too serious or elitist. This option was not available to Hillary Clinton, as jokes about her husband were still a staple of the shows. Candidates throughout the 1980s and 1990s election cycles went on the shows to seem more down-to-earth, but these appearances created the precedent that it was necessary to do so, and part of the overall performance of competency as a politicians and potential leader; after all, if they couldn't take some good-natured ribbing on *SNL* or a talk show couch, how well would they perform under the pressures of the Presidency?

On such example of a failure was in the 2000 election, when George W. Bush appeared on Letterman's show, and seemed to insult him. He appeared mean-spirited and unfunny. He recovered, appearing on Leno later on, but the subsequent appearance was analyzed in comparison with his past failure. Even though it did not cost him the election,

he did not appear on any of the programs in 2004 when he was running for re-election. Overall, though, appearances on late night comedy programs were beginning to be seen by the journalists as a part of the fabric of the campaign, and becoming unremarkable and even mundane. There was risk in appearing foolish, but greater risk in appearing unable to be in on the joke; but for the writers, it meant that the shows were becoming co-opted at the same time. As the *Daily Show* became more accepted and “hip,” the appearance of the self-deprecating candidate became a known quantity. Still, the candidate as “real” was epitomized in 2008 by Barack Obama; although it gave his critics an opening to call him a mere celebrity, it had an overall positive effect. More stiff or “wooden” candidates like Kerry, Gore, and McCain were at a distinct disadvantage, recognized by the journalists. Bush never even attempted to take up the Stewart challenge, and the papers pointed this out in 2004. In 2008, late-night comedy show appearances were influential and arguably as important as news program interviews. Hillary Clinton’s appearance on the *Daily Show* then was said to have revived her primary candidacy, at least temporarily. Notable failures that were discussed by the journalists in 2008 included of course Sarah Palin appearing on *SNL*, and not looking comfortable about it; but John McCain’s failure to appear on Letterman’s show, lying about why he had to cancel, and then later going on to apologize after David Letterman mocked him mercilessly showed how powerful appearances could be on them.

The transformation from personal to substantive humor on late night comedy has been thoroughly demonstrated; journalists’ recognition of it is a phenomenon that needed more close examination to understand how political comedy on television became more influential in the public sphere. In the 1980s, critical satire was almost non-existent on

television, most likely because of how it had failed to stay on network TV in the 1970s. Satirist like Mort Sahl were quoted in the *Times* as describing its low point, following prevailing political winds rather than leading. Voters would take it as part of the general milieu of impressions of politicians' personalities, and would be unlikely to be influenced, only solidifying opinions they already held. News was being polluted by entertainment. *SNL* was part of this process as well, mostly sticking to making fun of the candidates' personalities rather than addressing their policies. There was little change from this mode in the 1990s, as the shows reinforced certain images of candidates being sexually promiscuous (like Hart, Clinton, and Kennedy), not very intelligent (like Dan Quayle), mentally unstable (like Ross Perot or Jerry Brown), or angry (like Bob Dole). Journalists regarded these personality-based parodies and jokes as confirming impressions that viewers already had about the candidates. Journalists in the *Post* and *Times* were either ambivalent about the state of political comedy on television, or downright hostile to it, not believing it was particularly funny. The 2000 election cycle is where this trend begins to change; at first, the election goes similarly to all the previous ones. The programs mocked the personality characteristics of the candidates; Gore was boring and Bush was the dumb guy who mispronounced words, and journalists really didn't fully buy either representation. There was some acknowledgement by journalists that the *Daily Show* was taking things in a different, more substantive direction. Only after the election was disputed in Florida, did journalists begin to more frequently take note of the fact that the comedy programs pointing out how ridiculous the situation was, and acknowledge that politics had become so absurd, the only appropriate response to it

was through humor; while at the same time, the shows became more substantive themselves, perhaps realizing what was at stake.

The next two election cycles, with journalists depending upon quotes and ideas from the shows (especially from Stewart and later Colbert), show the importance of the critical, substantive comedy on the public sphere. Remarks about Bush's intelligence were less likely to be about his old days a partier or his speech patterns, and more likely to be about his actual competency and seriousness as a leader who had good intelligence coming from his advisors. The divergence between the *Daily Show* and Jay Leno, for example was more and more apparent. Leno kept doing frat jokes, and Stewart (and Letterman) was calling into question the administration's connections with Halliburton. However, despite all of this, both the programs and the journalists saw little substantive difference between Bush, Kerry, and Lieberman, in terms of their rhetoric. Other shows simply focused on Kerry and Bush's similar Yale backgrounds, which were not as important; *SNL* was characterized by journalists as falling into the latter type of more personality-based jokes. There was a recognition that the *Daily Show* was making real issues accessible to viewers in ways that television news often did not, and in ways that other late-night programs did not attempt to do. Journalists also used the shows' critical satire of the television news media to make the point that cable and network news were more openly hard on Hillary Clinton and treated Barack Obama more delicately.

In 2008, journalists were even stronger about their opinions that people were getting better information from the shows than television news. Specifically, writers in the *Post* and the *Times* pointed to the fact that news media in general had failed to adequately question Republicans' claims in the wake of 9/11, and addressed that fact that

the *Daily Show* and the *Colbert Report* were filling this role. Stewart and Colbert were pointing out hypocrisy. They recognized that the programs favored Obama over McCain, and Democrats over Republicans, specifically because they wanted to take the country away from war, and not towards it, as Republican candidates early on in the election cycle appeared to openly want to do. Further, journalists believed that the difference between Palin and Bush in previous election cycles was that Bush was difficult to satirize, because he was essentially self-parodying, whereas satire of Palin had to be carefully cultivated, and focused on critiques of her policy positions and competency rather than just her personality.

SATIRE'S IMPACT AND AVENUES OF FUTURE RESEARCH

It is not shown in this study that the *Daily Show* clearly had a direct impact on *SNL*, and it becoming more substantive in its criticism by 2008, but the general direction of political comedy was undoubtedly pushed this way by Stewart's program. They raised the bar, even if they did not want to acknowledge that this was what they were doing. It is logical to assume that *SNL* risked becoming irrelevant if they did not do something different, judging by how negatively journalists saw the program in the 1980s and 1990s. The unfavorable tone reversed completely by the 2008 election. As discussed in the chapter about this election cycle, the programs, their writers, and their personalities had become opinion leaders to the journalists, thus directing the course of public opinion (Katz and Lazarsfeld 1955). Cable and network television, which had once been

considered more serious sources of news, were criticized after 9/11 and the crisis of the 2000 election, opening up opportunities for new avenues of information that were less formal and more culturally-driven. Journalists eventually caught on to this and accepted it as part of the informative media landscape. They themselves followed the trend of cultural omnivorousness, which meant that once-denigrated forms of culture were now more acceptable for elite consumers to refer back to as relevant (Peterson and Kern 1996). These changes were driven in part by developments in the news media as an industry – a greater number of choices did not always increase its quality – and in part by broad cultural factors as outlined above. As a result, journalists transferred their dislike of the once-polluted category of late night comedy on television, most evident throughout the 1980s and 1990s, to the sphere of cable and network news journalism. It may be fair to say that the sphere of entertainment/satirical news programs have transferred from a polluted category to a semi-polluted one (Jacobs 2012); where journalists once vilified it as being a totally corrupting force on rational debate, as Putnam (2001) would argue, they transformed their discussion of it to conform more to what Schudson (2011) would argue – that politics is everywhere, and the shows are following this general trend.

As the jokes began to be aimed at substantive issues like candidates' knowledge, policy issues, overall ability to be effective politicians, and their authenticity as performing real competency, in contrast to relatively meaningless personal characteristics, journalists recognized that the shows were often more rational than television news. Additionally, humor itself is more accessible than the often polemical and drier presentations of traditional news (O'Rourke III and Rodrigues 2004). The shows can thus direct narratives outside of their own sphere (Couldry 2006;

Hesmondhalgh 2007). These non-traditional sources of deliberation carved a place for themselves in the contemporary public sphere that follow Habermasian critical-rational guidelines, but do not strictly adhere to them. This study used the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* as indicators of mainstream journalism; however, during this time, cable and network news also used clips of the comedy programs to back up their points or demonstrate them in different ways. Future research could include a study of these instances on various television programs. Further, a recent Annenberg study showed that individuals who watched Colbert were better informed about an important substantive political issue, namely super PACS (Hardy et al. 2014); other issues could be studied in similar ways. With Stephen Colbert moving to take over the *Late Show* on CBS, and abandoning his Swift-esque character, a subsequent study could analyze this program in comparison to others like it. Additionally, how does TV news contend with the fact that they are often being mocked on these programs, while simultaneously using their clips? Further, TV news reporters, such as *NBC Nightly News*' Brian Williams, often appear on the *Daily Show*. How might this fit into the wider media landscape? Do the media figures themselves, who are often being criticized, need to be in on the joke as well?

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