

**On with the Motley: Television Satire and  
Discursive Integration in the Post-Stewart/Colbert Era**

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## **DEDICATION**

In memory of Gussie Finknottle Martin,

The best dog who ever barked.

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## ABSTRACT

*The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* and *The Colbert Report* became cultural phenomena in mid-2000s. Their influence on politics and the news media brought political satire on television to a new level of prominence as politicians, world leaders, authors, and journalists flocked to the Comedy Central shows to spread their messages. The shows greatly expanded the boundaries of previous television satire programs by offering in-depth analysis of important issues in creative, hilarious ways, while taking the news media to task when it failed to critically inquire into government claims. When Stephen Colbert ended his show in 2014 and Stewart departed *The Daily Show* the next year, they left a gap in television satire that has yet to be completely filled.

This thesis explores the current state of satirical television news shows. The manuscript traces the emergence of political satire on television. Then, through the theory of discursive integration, the thesis takes an in-depth look at Stewart and Colbert's satire, and investigates current political satire in the post-Stewart/Colbert era. The thesis explores current political satire in the context of the shows that came before it, again using discursive integration as a theoretical underpinning. The goal of the thesis is to gain an understanding of where current satire fits in the historical context of television satire, and how newer shows have pushed discursive boundaries established by *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* and *The Colbert Report*.

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## PART 1: EVOLUTION OF TELEVISION SATIRE

### Introduction

I was brought through the secret White House tunnel entrance at Mount Rushmore. It was a round table meeting with the President, Elvis — still alive — Minister Farrakhan and the Area 51 alien.

— Jon Stewart (Blistein, 2015)

When then-presidential candidate Richard Nixon made a surprise, unprecedented cameo on *Rowan & Martin's Laugh-In* in 1968, looked into the camera and repeated the show's quip, "Sock it to me?", no one could have predicted that nearly half a century later a president, Barack Obama, would invite a comedian, Jon Stewart, to the White House for private conversations.

Richard Nixon used *Laugh-In* as an avenue to reach younger voters by acting hip and by showing that he could take a joke. Politicians saw value in appearing on late-night comedy shows in subsequent years, but visiting these shows became virtually a mandatory campaign stop for presidential candidates after Bill Clinton famously appeared on *The Arsenio Hall Show*. Clinton was ridiculed for his 1992 saxophone-playing appearance on *Arsenio*, but after he won the presidency, other politicians clamored to appear on late-night comedies, hoping for a boost in public opinion and the coolness factor (Baym, 2009; Gray, 2009). Almost two decades later when Jon Stewart lunched at the White House with Barack Obama, television comedy shows could make or break a politician's trajectory. Obama's adviser Austan Goolsbee said the meeting was a chance for the White House to explain its side of the story after Stewart had criticized the Obama administration on a number of issues (Samuelsohn, 2015).

That Jon Stewart was invited two years later for a second visit with President Obama illustrates that late-night comedy and political satire television continued to shape public opinion. Arguably, two of the most potent programs were *The Daily Show* (1996 – present) and its spin-off, *The Colbert Report* (2005 – 2015). Both shows strongly influenced political opinions (Baym & Jones, 2012; Compton, 2011; Feldman & Young, 2008; Jones, 2010). *The Daily Show* (*TDS*) gained prominence in the years following the September 11, 2001, terror attacks, and *The Colbert Report* (*TCR*) debuted during the height of the war in Iraq. It was an era in which journalists admittedly failed to adequately scrutinize the George W. Bush administration’s justifications for invading Iraq (Kurtz, 2004), and government propaganda that painted a rosy picture of the situation in Iraq despite the escalating violence was a regular feature of television news (Pilger, 2010). Viewers turned to Stewart to point out politicians’ inconsistencies and hypocrisies, and to mock the news media for its vacuous reporting. *TDS* also gave politicians and authors a chance to present their opinions and talk directly to the audience (Achter, 2008; Jones, 2010; Waisanen, 2009).

Jon Stewart’s common-sense interrogations of government officials and the fourth estate – through interviews and commentary on video clips that he played on his show – helped him build a unique persona as the most trusted newsperson in America (Baym & Jones, 2010). Likewise, Stephen Colbert’s show filled a role as media and politics critic. His character parodied the bombastic Fox News host and political pundit Bill O’Reilly, and criticized right-wing media and the Republican administration by pretending to sympathize with them. The show made a splash in its first episode while introducing the concept of “truthiness,” which describes truth based on gut feelings instead of on facts (Jones, 2010). “Truthiness” addressed the distortion of truth in some cable news shows and in Bush administration propaganda.

Jon Stewart ended his run on *TDS* on August 6, 2015, and South African comedian Trevor Noah took his place as anchor. *TCR* went dark on December 18, 2014, as Stephen Colbert transitioned to host CBS's *The Late Show*. Although *TDS* still airs on the Comedy Central network, Noah attracts only a little more than half of the number of viewers that Stewart captured at his peak, and he has not yet built the political clout and image that Stewart so carefully crafted (O'Connell, 2016). The loss of Stewart as host of *TDS* coupled with the cancellation of *TCR* has left a hole in the heart of political satire. New voices in satire have emerged and are gaining attention, but have yet to attain the same level of influence as Stewart and Colbert. A large body of scholarship on *TDS* and *TCR* emerged during the Stewart/Colbert era, but very little academic work on other television political satires has been published since the two Titans left their shows. This thesis, then, explores the current state of satirical television news shows. The paper first traces the emergence of political satire on television, and the political circumstances and media environment that led to the creation of such shows. Using the theory of discursive integration as a foundation, the thesis then takes an in-depth look at *TDS* and *TCR*, and at the scholarship about the shows, then investigates current political satire in the post-Stewart/Colbert era. The thesis explores current political satire in the context of the shows that came before it, again using discursive integration as a theoretical underpinning. The goal of the thesis is to gain an understanding of where current satire fits in the historical context of television satire, and how newer shows have pushed discursive boundaries established by *TDS* and *TCR*.

### **The Nature of the Beast: Theoretical Approaches**

Any exploration of political satire must ask fundamental questions about what the genre is and how it functions. These questions are perhaps best answered through a theoretical lens. Russian literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin's work has provided a foundation for many scholarly

explorations of television satire (Baym, 2005; Jones, 2010; Meddaugh, 2010; Waisanen, 2009). Bakhtin wrote about the traditions of medieval carnival, a significant feature of which was parody (Achter, 2008). This culture of parody – what Bakhtin called “the people’s second life, organized on the basis of laughter” (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 8) – functions as an outlet for average people to mock and comment on powerful elites. Carnival culture often uses “grotesque” bodily functions as one of the ways to debase the upper echelons of society to humanity’s most rudimentary level. These acts of parody provide a means for ordinary people to comment on social issues because, through comedic parody, they can address issues that are taboo in the circles of elites who are powerful in a society. Parody can be an act of resistance against the powerful status quo.

Mikhail Bakhtin theorized that the tradition of medieval carnival offered “a social space outside official life” to suspend notions of power structure and allow “egalitarian contact among citizens” (Meddaugh, 2010, p. 379). This theory can be applied to political satire shows that look at political and news media discourse from this outside space and both laugh at and critique it. For example, *TCR*’s recurring segment, “The Word,” was based on Fox News commentator Bill O’Reilly’s “Talking Points” feature. Stephen Colbert was graphically framed in a visual scheme that featured written commentary that appears while Colbert spoke. Unlike with O’Reilly’s version of this graphic technique, Colbert appeared to be unaware of the content of the written commentary. The setup allowed Colbert to offer commentary that mimicked either political or news media discourse, while the written commentary debunked his point of view. This dual presentation allowed the audience to become insiders because they were able to see the written commentary to which Colbert’s character was seemingly oblivious. This insider positioning

contrasts to the public's traditional role as outsiders who are fed talking points. (Meddaugh, 2010).

Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert became two of the most recognizable political and media critics and satirists in America (Waisanen, 2009). They used rhetorical criticism – often with a large dose of ridicule — to focus on empty talking points that are regularly found in politicians' speech and pundits' commentary. (Waisanen, 2009). The incongruity between the video clips the shows presented and the perspective the comedians brought in their commentary highlighted the absurdity of political double-speak. To highlight the incongruity in political talk, Stewart and Colbert used three comic-frame strategies that have been described as parodic polyglossia, satirical specificity, and contextual clash (Waisanen, 2009). Drawing from Mikhail Bakhtin's concepts of heteroglossia and the polyphonic voice, the term "parodic polyglossia" describes the way in which Stewart and Colbert used a multitude of voices in the course of their satire. In Colbert's case, he often delivered his verbal commentary juxtaposed against written commentary. The two hosts also frequently mimicked the people they targeted in their humor or created new characters with false voices. The second critical strategy, satirical specificity, refers to Stewart and Colbert's method of demystifying and sometimes debunking public discourse. The third critical strategy, contextual clash, refers to the satires' invention of unreal situations in order to contrast with the ideas they critiqued (Waisanen, 2009). For example, when Colbert interviewed the founder of an immigration watchdog group, the host told him that the audience members had been screened for illegal immigrants and Mexicans; the camera then showed a blond woman dressed in traditional German garb holding beer steins (Waisanen, 2009). The absurdity of the situation Colbert created stood as a critique of his guests' stance on the immigration of white Europeans versus the immigration of Mexicans.

Mikhail Bakhtin's ideas provide the basis for scholar Geoffrey Baym's theory of television satire, "discursive integration" (Baym, 2005, 2007). Bakhtin theorized that as society becomes more heterogeneous, there are multiple types of discourse that inevitably blend into a "hybridization" (Baym, 2009). Baym describes this hybridization as "discursive integration" – marked by "permeability of form and fluidity of content" (Baym, 2005, 2009). Stewart and Colbert's heyday came about in a media landscape in which "it becomes impossible to identify with any precision the divisions between news and entertainment, public affairs and popular culture, affective consumption and democratic discourse" (Baym, 2007, p. 361). Discursive integration is perfectly illustrated in Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert's satire, which is described as "serious comedy" (Baym, 2009, p. 27). The concept of serious comedy refers to "a collage of once-disparate forms and techniques that results in an unpredictable and continuously shifting ensemble of politics, information and humor" (Baym, 2009, p. 35).

Discursive integration, perhaps the most useful theory to come from Mikhail Bakhtin's work, can be illustrated in an analysis of the recurring *TCR* segment "Better Know a District," in which the host interviewed members of the U.S. Congress. The series functioned as a rare venue for members of Congress to reach an audience in a television environment that pays them little attention (Baym, 2007). The "Better Know a District" segment worked on multiple and sometimes contradictory levels that illustrated the discursive integration concept, and referenced national issues such as minimum wage, immigration, gay marriage, and education (Baym, 2007). Stephen Colbert interrupted an in-depth discussion, however, with silliness that poked fun at himself and at the lawmakers. Democratic leader Rep. Nancy Pelosi warned fellow members of Congress to avoid appearing on the show, lest Colbert make fools of them as he did of Georgia Republican Lynn Westmoreland. Westmoreland had sponsored a bill that would require

courthouses to display the Ten Commandments, but when Colbert asked him to recite the Commandments, the congressman was unable to recall them all (Baym, 2007). These “Better Know a District” segments are an example of discursive integration because there is a blend of comedy, seriousness, parody, and critical inquiry. These segments are just one example of the complexity of form that was a hallmark of *TDS*, and particularly of *TCR*.

### **Terminology: Describing the Form**

The complexity of form in discursively integrated political satire shows might be the reason that scholars are not on the same page when it comes to the terminology they use to label the shows. Several terms are used interchangeably to describe shows like *TDS* and *TCR* — infotainment, soft news, fake news — and sometimes satire shows are grouped with late-night comedy. Some of these terms are problematic, and none provide a precise definition of the shows. For example, Jon Stewart often referred to *TDS* as “fake news” (Baym, 2005), but that phrase has taken on new meaning since the 2016 U.S. presidential election. Fake news has entered the national conversation since fictional stories about the 2016 presidential candidates and election disguised as legitimate reporting circulated on social media sites such as Facebook and search engines such as Google (Wingfield, Isaac, & Benner, 2016). The Trump administration also has used the term “fake news” to describe unfavorable stories that are factually correct. Therefore, the description of satire shows that feature factual news stories should not be conflated with fictionalized stories aimed at deceiving readers.

The meaning of “infotainment” is not static, either. One definition describes infotainment as a show that combines comedy and news (Browning & Sweetser, 2013), but another as “a negative term used to lament the transformation of serious information sources into commercial entertainment products” (Jones & Baym, 2010), or as “news lite,” when television news

networks offer punditry, banter and light-hearted stories instead of hard news (Baym, 2005, p. 273). So “infotainment” is a broad term that covers more than a political satire. Another broad term frequently found in the literature is “soft news” (Baumgartner & Morris, 2006; Coe et al., 2008), which presents news in a comedic form, such as *TDS*, or a partisan frame, such as *The O’Reilly Factor* (Coe et al., 2008). Soft news also refers to traditional network late-night shows like *The Tonight Show* (Brewer & Marquardt, 2007). Journalist also use the term “soft news” to refer to light feature stories, as opposed to more serious stories (Patterson, 2000).

Although the terms “parody” and “satire” are sometimes used interchangeably, there is a difference between the two concepts (Gray, Jones, & Thompson, 2009). Parody is a form of satire that imitates a specific aesthetic form. For example, *TDS* and *TCR* replicated the look and mannerisms of cable news networks, from the sets and graphics to the clothing and body language of television journalists. Stephen Colbert based the character he portrayed on a real-life right-wing cable news commentator (Baym, 2007). Parody’s purpose is to critique that which it imitates (Gray et al., 2009). Satire, on the other hand, involves exposing some aspect of observed reality to ridicule by comparing it to implied, accepted norms (Druick, 2009; Gray et al., 2009). Because satire is a balancing act between humor, facts, criticism and sometimes silliness, it can be described as “artful political critique” (Caufield, 2008, p. 5).

Political satire such as that found in *The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour* (1967-1969), *Saturday Night Live* (1975 - present), *TDS* and *TCR* invite viewers to both laugh at and question political and media elites, and ponder current issues. The shows encourage viewers “to play with politics, to examine it, test it, and question it rather than simply consume it as information or ‘truth’ from authoritative sources” (Gray et al., 2009, p. 11). Therefore, the shows may be called “parodies” based on their structure, but their content is often satirical.

Placing television satire on a spectrum that indicates how deeply the show explores issues is useful for the purposes of this thesis. One end of the spectrum provides a cursory commentary on personal characteristics of media and political elites rather than on their actions. *Saturday Night Live* provides an example of this cursory satire, which provides quick laughs but offers little information and does not explore the issues (Gray et al., 2009). The satire in *Laugh-In* could also be described as cursory; although the show did bring up serious issues such as the Vietnam War, usually the quick-paced, riotous, vaudeville atmosphere allowed for quick jabs at the satirical object rather than a deeper look (Erickson, 2000). The other end of the spectrum of satire is more in-depth because it delves into issues and provides sometimes extensive information in addition of making jokes about the characteristics of media and political elites. Shows on this end of the spectrum, like *TDS* and *TCR* differ from other late-night humor shows and shows that feature more cursory satire because they use “satire to convey a coherent political message” (Caufield, 2008, p. 5). This multi-dimensional satire is of particular interest because of its potential to educate its viewers and to discuss issues that the news media have not.

### **Serious comedy, serious influence**

Serious comedy shows increasingly have wielded their influence on their audiences, and on political and media culture. Young adults ages 18-29 have been moving away from traditional news toward satirical programs such as *TDS* (Pew Research Center, 2000, 2004). Therefore, scholars have attempted to determine the effects of this shift from traditional news to discursively integrated comedic satire. Studies of political satire shows have examined whether the shows increase knowledge about the issues they target, and if the shows increase cynicism and the effects that might have on voter participation (Baumgartner & Morris, 2006; Cao, 2008).

Political satire shows influence not only individuals, but also they can influence the national conversation about important issues. For example, Stephen Colbert brought the decidedly unglamorous issue of campaign finance into focus by taking audiences on his informative and comical journey of creating a Super PAC. Although Colbert's Super PAC did not engage the population outside of the show's regular fan base, it did capture news media attention and resulted in a more widespread focus on campaign finance laws (Day, 2013). The vast majority of studies of satire shows' influence have focused on individual viewer's immediate reactions, but another important area of study that is under-represented in the literature is how the shows call attention to important issues through capturing media attention (Day, 2013).

Another feature of these shows that lends them importance is their guest lists. Politicians, heads of state, journalists, and authors are among the highly influential people who have made appearances on political satire shows (Baym, 2005). World leaders have recognized that these shows are a means to reach audiences they would like to influence.

### **Value Judgments**

A nagging question consistently lurks – though often below the surface — around studies of political satire television: Are these shows good or bad for society? The answer to this simple question is complicated. The basis for scholars' concern lies in the conventional wisdom that voters must be informed if a democracy is to thrive (Cao, 2008). There has been some dissent in the academic community about the idea that the shows contribute to a more informed electorate (Cao, 2008). These shows act as gatekeepers by bringing up issues that audiences seek more information about from the news media (Xenos & Becker, 2009; Young, 2006). Viewers of late-night comedy, including *TDS*, paid more attention to network and cable news shows than non-

viewers (Feldman & Young, 2008), which could be because the shows lead viewers who do not habitually follow politics to seek more information on specific issues (Cao, 2010), such as foreign policy (Baum, 2004), and science and the environment (Feldman, Leiserowitz, & Maibach, 2011). But young news parody viewers are better at recognizing political information from the shows than at recalling it (Hollander, 2005). This finding falls in line with the scholarship that associates recall with the print medium and recognition with the medium of television. The findings suggest that viewers who use satire shows as primary sources of political information lack depth of knowledge on political issues, though they do glean some information from the shows.

The debate about whether satire shows, by poking fun at and criticizing political leaders, increases audience cynicism is related to concerns about whether the shows negatively affect voter participation. Watching *TDS* caused viewers to have negative views of the presidential candidates in the 2004 election and increased their cynicism (Baumgartner & Morris, 2006). *TDS* also raised viewers' beliefs that they understood the complexities of events covered in the show, while lowering trust in the news media and public officials. These findings have led to predictions that the shows are likely to reduce political participation in the future. But if cynicism is thought to reduce voter participation, an elevated sense of efficacy for viewers of *TDS* could increase voting (Hoffman & Young, 2011). Political participation through belief in efficacy has been found to be higher among college students who viewed both traditional news and satire shows than it was among those who viewed traditional late-night comedy shows (Hoffman & Young, 2011). This finding corroborates studies that suggest that viewing political satire increases voter participation.

But any blanket statement about the effects of these shows on viewers is bound to be misleading, because the effects are not monolithic; rather, different demographics respond to the shows differently. Viewers turn to satire shows for a variety of reasons, including for entertainment and for information. Some viewers trust satire television more because they see the shows as being less biased than other current-events programming. Therefore, viewing motives are complex and not as easily categorized as some studies would suggest (Young, 2013). For example, four key factors have been found to determine who watches the *TDS*: age, affinity for political humor, and exposure to satirical sitcoms and to liberal television news (Hmielowski, Holbert, & Lee, 2011). Furthermore, *TDS* was found to increase political knowledge in two demographics, the young and the highly educated (Cao, 2008). The show did not increase knowledge among older viewers and viewers who were less educated.

Another complication arises when attempting to measure the effectiveness of the messaging in discursively integrated satire shows. A study of how audiences perceived Stephen Colbert's satirical character raises questions about whether the intent of satirists is lost on audiences. An experiment suggested that young viewers did not understand Colbert's satirical intent. The criticism implicit in his depiction of a right-wing blowhard pundit was lost; instead, they viewed Republican figures and positions more favorably after watching Colbert. Like many parodies, Colbert's satire worked on two levels: a direct message (that he supports conservative views) and an indirect message (that the views of the pundits he is mocking are ridiculous) (Baumgartner & Morris, 2008). The study of young viewers reveals that they appear to respond more to the explicit message because after viewing, they tended to be more sympathetic to Republican views than to the implicit criticism of the right in Colbert's satire. This finding suggests that the appeal of the humor in the explicit message draws attention away from the

implicit message and, therefore, leads young viewers to sympathize with the right-wing attitudes in Colbert's direct message (Baumgartner & Morris, 2008). The ambiguity in complex satire like that of Colbert has led audiences to draw different conclusions about the meaning of his parody based on viewers' political leanings (LaMarre, Landreville, & Beam, 2009). Audience members who self-identified as conservative took Colbert's comments at face value and concluded that Colbert, too, was conservative. Liberals, on the other hand, took Colbert's ultra-right-wing character as a joke and determined that his message was liberal. But conservatives and liberals both found the show to be funny. These findings support the idea that audiences see what they want to see when they find ambiguity in a political message.

Aside from concerns about how effective satire shows like *TDS* and *TCR* might be in communicating a message or in enhancing viewer knowledge and voter participation, journalism scholars have raised concerns about the fact that there is no normative ethical standard for political satire. If satire is, indeed, "artful," establishing a standard for an art form would be futile. But scholar Lance R. Holbert has taken a normative theoretical approach to consider how political satire – as "a legitimate form of political communication" (Holbert, 2013, p. 306) — should function. Holbert asks what role political satirists should play in public affairs and what are the ideal functions of their messages. This approach treats satire more like scholars treat journalism because normative theories are applied to journalism to establish ideal journalistic practices. Holbert asserts that this theoretical approach will put empirical studies of satire's effects into better context because this approach would help researchers to determine if their findings are good, bad, or indifferent based on ideal effects of satire. Based on his literature review, Holbert determines that whether satire is good or bad for democracy remains unclear.

Holbert evaluates political satire through the lens of competing concepts of democracy – republicanism, pluralism, and elitism – in the same way he suggests the news media can be evaluated. In a republican system, the media has three tasks that should be performed as positive norms: “to promote civic virtue; to expose corruption or the ulterior motives of those who wield influence in the marketplace of ideas; and to create space in which debate can properly take place” (p. 312). Scholars disagree on whether satire promotes civic virtue, some saying it promotes cynicism and others saying it promotes critical thinking that is valuable to democracy (Brewer & Marquardt, 2007). Holbert states that political satire is good at uncovering political figures’ vice and corruption because of satire’s defining function of uncovering folly. On the third point, Holbert again finds that the academic literature is unclear about whether satire creates a space for debate that would ideally be “informed, objective, and inclusive” (p. 313). In a pluralistic democracy, in which different interest groups advocate their ideas, Holbert finds that satire is generally not compatible with pluralistic ideals. He says that instances in which Jon Stewart has advocated for certain ideas, such as when he went on CNN’s *Crossfire* to chastise the hosts for their style of debate, Stewart was not in his role as satirist. Furthermore, Holbert cites instances in which Stewart targeted liberal politicians as an example of how satirists can and should discuss public figures no matter what group they represent. Holbert finds that under an elitist ideal of democracy, satire functions in a normatively positive way because it lives up to elitist ideals: exposing corruption and advocating for institutions and the political system.

### **Jesters, Fools, and Satire Television**

Exposing corruption and absurdity in the political system has been the job of satirists for millennia. The tradition of jesters and fools traces back centuries across continents and cultures (Fox, 2011). The most important role of jesters is to call attention to folly in current social and

political life. Jesters historically held a status unique in their cultures because they could speak truth much more openly with fewer consequences than other citizens, even when they targeted powerful government or church officials. Some European fools actually were highly educated and could comment on current events with a knowledge-based background (Fox, 2011).

Likewise, today's satirists are freer than journalists to criticize, and satirists also use humor to illustrate public folly; therefore a parallel is seen in the roles of jesters and today's satirists (Fox, 2011).

But centuries of tradition aside, when satirists took up the mantle of the jester and began to skewer public officials on tightly controlled, highly homogenous television networks in the late 1960s, censors and network executives were shocked and perplexed. *The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour* broke new ground for a comedy/variety show by skewering supporters of the war in Vietnam and daring to bring legislators and President Lyndon B. Johnson and later, Richard Nixon, to task for not ending the bloodshed (Muldaur, 2002). *The Smothers Brothers* debuted on CBS as a variety entertainment show, featuring music and comedy sketches in the tradition of other famous television comedy acts such as George Burns and Bob Hope. At the time, there were only three major networks – CBS, NBC and ABC. Entertainment and news divisions were kept strictly separated, and the entertainment division focused on escapism, with shows like *Bewitched* (1964-1972) and *The Beverly Hillbillies* (1962-1971). As the Vietnam War and civil-rights movement escalated, *The Smothers Brothers* gradually developed its critical satirical voice (Muldaur, 2002).

In addition to songs and comedy sketches that commented on issues, *The Smothers Brothers* also featured “editorials” with comedian Patrick Paulsen sitting at a desk reading from a script (Osborne-Thomson, 2009). Although this sketch is clearly a parody of a newscast, Paulsen

was introduced by one of the Smothers brothers as “vice president,” suggesting that the character behind the desk represented not only the network news hegemony, but also political powers. His commentary was a parody that presented an absurdly callous viewpoint, particularly toward violence and the war. In his commentary about the draft, Paulsen said:

One of the arguments against the draft: We hear it is unfair, immoral, discourages young men from studying, ruins their careers and their lives. Picky, picky, picky. ... Now we don't claim the draft is perfect, and we do have a constructive proposal for a workable alternative. We propose a draft lottery in which the names of all eligible males will be put into a hat and the men will be drafted according to their head sizes. Tiny heads will go into the military service, and the fat heads will go into government (Muldaur, 2002).

The Smothers brothers' trouble with network censorship became common and was highly publicized (Danelo, 2013). The more blatant the challenges to government policy and network standards, the worse the conflict with censors became until finally CBS canceled the show in 1969 (Feil, 2014; Muldaur, 2002). The brothers attempted to revive their show on other networks in later years but never experienced the same success as they did with their original show (IMDB.com). But the program's experimentation with satire had helped to carve a place for such commentary about the most serious issues facing a contemporary society, a place that would be inhabited more than thirty years later by *TDS*.

Joining *The Smothers Brothers* was *Rowan & Martin's Laugh-In* (1967-1973), a comedic variety skit show that featured political barbs and liberal ideology. Both shows provided viewers with an alternative perspective on the news, and were at the time the only way viewers could get a fresh perspective on the political world. In the 1960s and 1970s, the news divisions of three

major networks – NBC, CBS and ABC – were the gatekeepers of political information. They had a standardized, professionalized approach to news that left little room for dissent or alternative voices. *The Smothers Brothers* and *Laugh-In* provided platforms for viewpoints that were rarely heard elsewhere on television. (Feil, 2014; Muldaur, 2002).

*Laugh-In* was a fast-paced, mod style of vaudeville skit comedy that made quick quips about issues such as the Vietnam War and civil rights (Danelo, 2013). The show presented skits that were sometimes anti-establishment, in a party, mod atmosphere (Feil, 2014). Despite its edginess, *Laugh-In* had broad appeal to various demographic groups and was NBC's highest rated show in its second and third seasons (Feil, 2014). The atmosphere of *Laugh-In*, with its dance parties and night-club routines, is seen by some scholars as detracting from its subversive quips because the silliness dulled the message (Gray et al., 2009). But the show proved that comedy that was satirical, edgy, and youth-oriented could be successful. *Laugh-In*'s most enduring legacy is that one of its writers, Lorne Michaels, went on to develop *Saturday Night Live*, which entered its 42nd season in 2017.

### **Saturday Night Live**

*Saturday Night Live* was a hit from the moment it burst on to late-night television (Reinhold, 2006). Parodies of political figures and celebrities were central to the comedy sketch show, and these impressions have had an effect on politicians' images (McClennen & Maisel, 2014). Chevy Chase's parody of a clumsy, bumbling President Gerald Ford is thought to have hurt Ford's election chances in the 1976 presidential race (Compton, 2008). *Saturday Night Live*'s politician parodies have influenced politics to varying degrees depending on the election cycle. For example, the show had strong effect in 2000, capitalizing on the personality quirks of presidential candidates Al Gore and George W. Bush, but had less of an effect in 2004, with less

memorable parodies of the candidates (Voth, 2008). Tina Fey's 2008 impersonation of Republican vice presidential nominee Sarah Palin resonated in the public sphere because the news media had been reluctant to criticize the under-qualified candidate (Michaud Wild, 2015). The Palin parody highlighted the governor's failures in interviews and debates, and her questionable claims about her foreign policy knowledge (Michaud Wild, 2015).

But despite these forays into politics, *Saturday Night Live (SNL)* has not had a political agenda (Jones, 2009). The more popular the show became over the years, the more producer Lorne Michaels presented "neutered" political critiques in an effort to appeal to diverse audiences without offending their sensibilities (Gray et al., 2009). In its political parodies as well as in its recurring news parody segment "Weekend Update," *SNL* does not provide in-depth commentary on issues (Voth, 2008). "Weekend Update" has kept news parody in the public consciousness but generally has offered quick-jab, superficial silliness instead of exploration of issues (Gray et al., 2009; Tally, 2011). Furthermore, "Weekend Update" focuses on the week's news as a set-up to jokes, and though some of the sketches literally parody news programs, *SNL* usually targets the subjects of news rather than the media itself (Tally, 2011).

### **Animation and Late-Night Comedy**

After *The Smothers Brothers* and *Laugh-In* were off the air, the edgiest satire on television could be found less on variety shows and more in sit-coms, especially those created by producer Norman Lear. *All in the Family* (1971-1979), *Maude* (1972-1978) and *Good Times* (1974-1979) confronted hot-button issues such as racism and sexism. The 1980s saw less satire on television, but a new form of satire show emerged with *The Simpsons*. The animated sitcom about an average American family sends up suburban and family life, and it led the way for

edgier animated shows like *Family Guy* (1999-present), *South Park* (1997-present), and *Lil' Bush* (2007-2008).

Some satire and political humor could be found on late-night shows such as *The Tonight Show* (1962-present) and *The Arsenio Hall Show* (1989-1994) (Gray, 2009). Politicians saw the value in appearing on these shows. Although shows like *SNL* have long made fun of presidents' mannerisms (Baym, 2009), Bill Clinton's scandalous affair with a White House intern and resulting impeachment in the mid-1990s provided comedy gold that late-night comedians could not resist. The Clinton scandal dominated late-night television for years (Niven, 2003) and provided fodder for satirical animated shows like *South Park* (Jones, 2009). Between Clinton saturation and the contested 2000 presidential election, politics and politicians occupied a considerable space in satire and comedy shows. The politicization of comedy helped set the stage for *TDS*, and so did the state of television news in the late 20th century.

### **The Eras of Television News**

The surge of influential political satire shows in the 2000s has roots not only in preceding satirical comedies, but also in the evolving television news environment (Baym, 2009). The evolution of television news can be understood best by dividing its history into three eras: the network news age, the cable news era, and the current era of media fragmentation. Political satire's history on television is traceable alongside that of news because satire reacts to the news media environment. The wall between news and entertainment divisions during the network age was based on limited outlets whose gatekeeping practices took place in an age during which news was not expected to be profitable, and there was little competition or room for ideas that blended entertainment and news. Information, commentary and debate from "unauthorized sources" were not part of the network landscape (Baym, 2009).

As cable television added more choices, boundaries between news and entertainment – which were somewhat arbitrary to begin with — became less distinct (Jones, 2010). Cable television expanded the competition, and profit became central to cable news channels. Thus, the public-service oriented journalism of the network era devolved into corporatized, focus-grouped cable era beginning in the late 1980s (Baym, 2009). Cable news networks increased their focus on “soft news,” in an attempt to draw more viewers (Patterson, 2000). The emphasis on profits in cable news led journalists to fear losing access to sources and advertisers; as a result, critical journalism receded from the forefront (Baym, 2009; Fox, Koloen, & Sahin, 2007; Jones, 2010). Cable news focuses on drama, building stories based on personalities rather than on issues (Baum, 2004). News shows tend to treat politics as a wrestling match, often featuring screaming pundits, and cable news tends to obsess about political horse races, covering polls in depth months before elections. To further the blurring of the boundaries between fact and opinion, entertainment and news, and truth and fiction, the Internet has expanded news choices exponentially (Baym, 2009).

The changes from network news values to those of cable and online news have led to a division among journalism scholars. Some scholars who lament the decline of journalism see the success of political satire shows as making the problems in journalism worse. Satire’s critics are concerned that the shows further blur the traditional boundaries between entertainment and news (Bennett, 2007). The fact that viewers in the ages 18-29 demographic get their news from political satire shows is also a concern among scholars who view the comedy shows as less informative than traditional news shows (Baumgartner & Morris, 2006). The facts might not support this criticism, however, because a content analysis of *TDS* and network news reveals that the satire show’s coverage of the first presidential debate and the political conventions in 2004

was as substantive as the coverage on the news shows (Fox et al., 2007). The study defines substantive coverage as that which focuses on political issues and candidate qualifications rather than on who is leading in polls or on campaign trappings such as photo-ops.

On the other hand, defenders of shows such as *TDS* and *TCR* reason that informational media should no longer be based on an outdated network-era idea of news versus entertainment; instead, there is a continuum from pure news (fact-telling) to the carnivalesque (Baym, 2009). Facts are facts, but exploration and context do not belong solely in the realm of the news media. Further fragmentation of media on the Internet has rendered a firewall between news and entertainment virtually impossible because there are so many sources of exploration and context of public issues.

As competition for viewers – especially viewers in the younger demographic that appeal to advertisers – heated up, cable television channels became more open to taking risks than the networks had been, and they provided space for more experimental programming (Baym, 2009). The politicization of late-night comedy, plus the popularity of shows like *SNL*, were part of a convergence of once disparate genres, so a show that blended comedy, parody and current events seemed to be part of the natural tendency of hybridization found in cable television (Baym, 2009). The stage was set for Stewart and Colbert.

### **The Stewart/Colbert Factor**

*TDS* made its on-air debut in 1996 as a parody of local news shows (Tally, 2011). Tall, blond, handsome comedian and former sportscaster Craig Kilborn hosted the show and cultivated a smart-mouthed, fraternity-guy persona (Tally, 2011). The news format provided a frame for jokes, and the show featured no politicians or politically oriented writers, and only one

guest journalist. Entertainers were the primary guests (Tally, 2011). The show functioned more as a spoof than the political, media and social critique it would become under Stewart.

Craig Kilborn left *TDS* to host CBS' *The Late, Late Show with Craig Kilborn* (1999-2004) (Keveney, 2004). When Jon Stewart took over *TDS*, his persona contrasted with that of Kilborn. Stewart presented himself as a Woody Allen type – a short, neurotic, Jewish regular guy who used self-effacing humor to emphasize his regular-guy qualities (Tally, 2011). Within a year, Stewart made his mark on the show with his candid and witty interviews with politicians, authors, and journalists. (Tally, 2011). The field reports also changed. Stephen Colbert, who was a “correspondent” from 1997-2005, said Stewart wanted to move toward field pieces that reflected headlines rather than “character-driven pieces – like, you know, guys who believe in Bigfoot” (Tally, 2011, p. 157).

Criticism of television journalism became central to Jon Stewart's mission (Tally, 2011) and became the basis for Colbert's right-wing pundit character. Stewart summed up what he thought journalism ideally should do:

You could create a paradigm of a media organization that is geared towards no bullshit – and do it actively – and stop pretending that we don't know what's going on. And stop pretending that it's a right/left question. I don't buy that the world is divided into bi-chromatic thought like that (Young, 2008, p. 247).

Stewart played video of public figures speaking, then gave his own discourse in reaction. A dialogic contrast frequently featured on *TDS* (and *TCR*) was the juxtaposition of two clips of the same person speaking from different times that revealed public figures contradicting themselves. *TDS* has been described as a form of “alternative journalism” (Baym, 2005, p. 261) that uses satire to question power, parody to criticize the news media, and dialogue that promotes

deliberation on public issues. Jon Stewart exercised his ideal of no-bullshit journalism because he did not attempt to display the type of objectivity many news organizations employ when they present the viewpoints of representatives from both sides of the political spectrum. The parodies were less interested in presenting each side in equal measure; instead, they pointed out absurdity wherever it may be found (Baym, 2005). An example of this contrast between the parodies and mainstream news is the way they present public figures speaking. News shows conventionally play polished sound bites of politicians speaking fluently. *TDS* (and *TCR*), by contrast, often presented video of politicians stumbling over words and making gaffes (Baym, 2005). Stewart (as well as Colbert) operated with an assumption that there is a common-sense reality that should be applied to public discourse. In the interest of objectivity, the mainstream news media often avoids interrogating public figures with the type of common-sense logic that Stewart employed. Stewart presented his arguments alongside the statements of public figures, allowing the audience to compare and test the logic of both (Baym, 2005).

Some scholars and writers considered Jon Stewart to be a journalist in his own right, though Stewart always denied that his show was journalism (Pew Research Center, 2008; Tally, 2011). *The New York Times* columnist Maureen Dowd called Stewart and Colbert “the Cronkite and Murrow of an ironic millennium” (Dowd, 2006). Stewart certainly had a direct influence on journalism, and made the critique of television news central to his show (Young, 2008). Stewart’s criticism of CNN’s pundit show *Crossfire* led to its cancellation (Young, 2008). Stewart wanted journalists to point out absurdities in politicians’ tendencies to evade tough questions with talking points. During an appearance on *TDS*, Stewart asked television journalism legend Ted Koppel if Koppel would be willing to abandon traditional notions of objectivity to call out politicians on their “BS,” and Koppel responded, “no” (Young, 2008, p. 246).

Whether Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert were journalists in their own right, they played a role in supporting what traditionally has been considered good journalist practices because they criticized television news when it failed to live up to the profession's ideals (Borden & Tew, 2007). The comedians pointed out when the news media failed in its role as gatekeepers by focusing on the trivial and sensational. On the issue of factuality, Colbert and Stewart usually bought into television reporting as fact based, but the hosts criticized instances when journalists took facts out of context, or when a fact was subjected to radically different interpretations among the cable news networks (Borden & Tew, 2007). And Stewart in particular often pointed out when journalists attempted to be objective to the point that they did not correct the record, instead allowing partisans they interviewed to misrepresent facts (Borden & Tew, 2007).

Jon Stewart's show began a "new political television" (Jones, 2010) that counters fakery in politics and the media (Jones, 2010). Stewart advocated for the news media to move away from bipartisan issue framing and to reject talking points in favor of critical inquiry. Stewart wanted to "expose political spectacle" for what it was, as opposed to participating in the spectacle, which he accused the news media of doing (Tally, 2011; Young, 2008). Because satire operates by pointing out absurdities, it is the perfect communication form for undermining scripted political spectacle (Young, 2008).

Because *TDS* and *TCR* did not approach objectivity in the same way as the news media, many studies of the shows' content have attempted to determine whether the programs had partisan leanings. The results are far from uniform. For example, a content study from 2004 suggests that *TDS* took a more balanced approach in its criticism of both political sides than in either 2005 or 2007, the years examined in two other studies (Brewer & Marquardt, 2007; Pew Research Center, 2008; Young, 2004) It is important to note that all three content analyses took

place during a Republican administration. As one scholarly report states, “*TDS* ... is generally thought to take a more liberal perspective. This is due in large part to the fact that it pokes fun at those in power and, until recently, the majority of those in power were conservatives” (2008, p. 205). These comments echo the Pew report, which offers possible reasons for why Republicans were subject to more criticism than Democrats:

One explanation is that the show’s writers and producers and Stewart himself are simply liberal, and in the course of offering their comedy are also offering their own political views. Another possibility is that the agenda is fundamentally more anti-establishment than anti-Republican. The party that controls the White House has the preponderance of power, and thus gets the preponderance of the satirical skewer (2004, p. 13).

Longitudinal studies that cover both Democratic and Republican presidencies would further help to answer questions about the political leanings of the commentary on satire shows. But in Colbert’s case, commentary evolved into participation.

### **Outside the Box, Outside the Studio**

The idea of discursive integration is that various styles of communication – news, interviews, comedy, critical inquiry – are blended in satire shows like *TDS* and *TCR*. But in some cases, the performance does not end at the studio doors. Stephen Colbert was not on the studio set of his show when he gave perhaps his most controversial and celebrated performance. He raised eyebrows on both sides of the aisle at the White House Correspondents’ Association Dinner in 2006 when he performed in character and ripped into the Bush administration for issues such as the Hurricane Katrina response and the Iraq War, and into the news media assembled in the audience (Baym, 2009). President George W. Bush became visibly angry

during the performance, and the audience at times seemed shocked and confused about whether to applaud. Some of Colbert's lines hit Bush and the media in one swipe:

The president makes decisions; he's the decider. The press secretary announces those decisions, and you people in the press type those decisions down. Make, announce, type. Just put 'em through a spell check, and go home. Get to know your family again. Make love to your wife. Write that novel you've got kicking around in your head. You know, the one about the intrepid Washington reporter with the courage to stand up to the administration. You know, fiction! (Baym, 2009, p. 124).

Some critics panned Stephen Colbert's performance, but the public ate it up via viral videos. Colbert never confined his fictional character solely to his show. He testified in character on behalf of migrant farm workers in a 2010 House committee meeting after having aired segments on his show in which he attempted to perform hard labor alongside the migrants (Jones, Baym, & Day, 2012). He blurred the lines between a fictional character and real politics when he created a Super PAC and when he ran for president in his home state of South Carolina in 2008 (Hardy, Gottfried, Winneg, & Jamieson, 2014; Osborne-Thomson, 2009).

Stephen Colbert's was not the first satirical presidential campaign to come out of a television show. Comedian Pat Paulsen, frequent guest on *The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour*, ran in 1968 (Osborne-Thomson, 2009). Both Paulsen's and Colbert's campaigns responded to crises in America, and both focused on politics in their current media environment. Paulsen toyed with the real presidential candidates' coy response to questions of whether they would run, and the comedian mocked their polished manipulation of the television medium. His clueless bumbling and slapstick humor contrasted with the grandiose images on the set surrounding him.

He directly mocked stage-managed political appearances: After delivering a “fireside chat” that was supposed to be from his own “common, ordinary home,” a stage hand enters and tells him he has to leave the set so Nixon can use it (Osborne-Thomson, 2009, p. 71). Paulsen’s fake candidacy looked beyond the pre-packaged, polished façade of the politicians and, in a serious moment, he told viewers: “I hope you will look for a candidate who offers the best hope of world peace and a man who is interested in equality and justice along with law and order” (Osborne-Thomson, 2009, p. 72).

Stephen Colbert announced on *TCR* that he would run in his native South Carolina as both a Republican and a Democrat, during a deeply divisive 2008 election. Colbert parodied the excessive money in politics by blatantly accepting a campaign “sponsorship” from Doritos. Fans quickly took to the Internet and began online petitions in an attempt to get Colbert on the ballot. Unlike Patrick Paulsen’s fake campaign, which took place exclusively on *The Smothers Brothers*, Colbert branched out beyond his Comedy Central show, writing an in-character guest column for *The New York Times*’ Pulitzer Prize-winning writer Maureen Dowd, and appearing on *Meet the Press* (Osborne-Thomson, 2009). These appearances illustrate how the mainstream media went along for the ride, engaging with Colbert’s character and bringing an air of legitimacy to his satire by allowing him to appear in respectable journalistic spaces. Both Paulsen and Colbert used their candidacies to parody the televisual, scripted, grandiose appearances of the serious candidates (Osborne-Thomson, 2009).

The theory of discursive integration is about blurring the lines between once-separated styles of communication. When satirists step outside the studio to perform and advocate for causes, another boundary is blurred, the one between television and reality. Perhaps it is fitting, then, that this theory also be applied to real-world action – satirists’ public performances or

advocacy projects can be considered another element – along with the recurring elements of monologues, and field and studio interviews. For example, when Stephen Colbert broke his wrist in a fall while entertaining a *TCR* audience before a 2007 taping, he created rubber “WristStrong” bracelets that were sold on the show’s website, with the proceeds going to The Yellow Ribbon Fund for wounded veterans (Silver, 2010). Jon Stewart and Colbert also hosted the 2010 “Rally to Restore Sanity and/or Fear” in Washington, D.C., as a response to right-wing pundit and conspiracy theorist Glenn Beck’s “Restoring Honor” rally. Stewart and Colbert’s event drew more than 200,000 participants (Tavernise & Stelter, 2010). The performances did not support a particular candidate or party, but addressed frustration with perceived lack of action in Congress and countered the paranoia about the Affordable Care Act that ran rampant in far-right circles (Tavernise & Stelter, 2010). The rally itself could be described as discursively integrated because it featured comedy, music, and serious speeches.

## PART 2: AFTER STEWART AND COLBERT

Since Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert left their shows, there has been a void in many ways in political satire television. For example, the type of media criticism that was a staple of their shows is no longer central to *TDS*, nor is it a regular feature of newer political satire shows. When Trevor Noah took over for Stewart, he cited changes in news media consumption as a reason to no longer focus on critiquing cable news. Noah stated in an interview that audience moves toward online news sources and away from cable news networks was the reason he did not want to continue Stewart's mission of television news criticism (Hibberd, 2015). Noah has been described by more than one critic as a "lightweight," who laughs at his own jokes and, unlike Stewart, is slow to move a monologue from silly to serious, if he makes the move at all (Parker, 2016; Timberg, 2016). *TDS* under Noah also often features musical performances in its third segment instead of interviews. But Noah gained some ratings momentum during the 2016 election season (O'Connell, 2016). The bi-racial South African also has drawn praise for his commentary and inquiries about race relations (Graham, 2016). Although he got off to a bumpy start in some ways, Noah is still developing his satirist persona.

The competition among television's late-night satirists is fierce. Most hosts had previously worked either for *TDS* or *SNL*. Larry Wilmore, who occasionally appeared on *TDS*, replaced Colbert in Comedy Central's 11:30 p.m. time slot with *The Nightly Show*; however, the show was canceled after 20 months (Graham, 2016). Wilmore, an African-American, often focused on racial issues in his monologues and in round-table discussions, a break from *TDS*'s format for a show structured much like Bill Maher's HBO show *Real Time*. The reason Comedy Central gave for the cancellation was that Wilmore's show did not "resonate" (Graham, 2016).

Former *SNL* writer and “Weekend Update” host Seth Meyers, who now hosts *Late Night with Seth Meyers* weeknights at 12:30 a.m., frequently includes a segment on his show that resembles *TDS*’s opening monologue segment. “A Closer Look” is set up similar to *SNL*’s news parody, but instead of a series of one-liners about a variety of topics, Meyers focuses on one issue for about eight to ten minutes. Beyond “A Closer Look,” Meyers’ show follows a typical late-night variety format. Meyers does not bring anything new to the news parody format, but he does provide information and commentary in much the same way as Jon Stewart did. About half as many viewers watch *Late Night* as watch the show that airs before it, *The Tonight Show with Jimmy Fallon* (Zap2it.com, 2016). The ratings difference could be because Meyers’ time slot is after midnight.

While Trevor Noah looks for his satiric voice and Seth Meyers seeks a larger audience from a disadvantaged time slot, two other discursively integrated satire shows have emerged with unique approaches to the form: HBO’s *Last Week Tonight* with John Oliver (2014-present) and TBS’s *Full Frontal with Samantha Bee* (2016-present). The shows resemble *TDS* in some ways. Oliver and Bee, both former *TDS* correspondents, deliver commentary on current events alongside a screen that shows photos and graphics, and their commentary is interspersed with cut-aways to related video clips. These show segments are discursively integrated because they feature a combination of once-distinct communication forms: serious commentary; juvenile jokes; news photos; digitally doctored pictures and video clips. But Oliver and Bee have taken their shows beyond the now-familiar structure of *TDS*.

### ***Last Week Tonight***

John Oliver has been described as the best and most popular satirist on television in the post Stewart/Colbert era (AFP, 2017; Hiatt, 2017). Oliver took over for Jon Stewart on *TDS* for

two months in summer 2013 while Stewart directed a movie, so Oliver had a proven track record as an interviewer and host when HBO offered him a show (Guardian TV, 2013). Viewership of *Last Week Tonight (LWT)* has risen steadily, and the show won the 2016 Emmy for Outstanding Variety Talk Series for its third season (AFP, 2017). The most obvious difference between *LWT* and *TDS* is that *LWT* is on the air once a week. With fewer shows, *LWT* focuses less on the news of the day and more on, as Oliver states, “incredibly complicated stories that we know are basically timeless” (Hiatt, 2017). The complicated nature of the stories helps account for the longer running time of Oliver’s main segments, from around 15 to 22 minutes. The fact that so many of his long segments have millions of YouTube views in the age of the short attention span is testament to Oliver’s appeal and to the skill of the *LWT* writers.

Whereas *TDS* and *TCR*, as well as *SNL*’s “Weekend Update,” were rooted in newscast parody, John Oliver’s show is not a true news parody. He does sit at a desk and speak to the camera while images appear on the screen as he speaks, and the show cuts away to video clips; however, Oliver’s mannerisms are less formal than those of a newscaster. He does not rely on papers or tablets on his desk; he often wears patterned shirts that are less formal than the wardrobe of newscasters; and he talks with his hands and leans forward as he explains stories in depth. The introduction to *LWT* graphically resembles the plates in a dictionary, with images related to his past segments and fake Latin words underneath the images. The introduction suggests the cerebral qualities of the show. In addition to using news stories, *LWT* hired researchers who had worked at *The New Yorker* and the investigative website *ProPublica* to dig into sometimes mundane but important topics such as net neutrality, civil forfeiture, scientific studies and student debt. Particular areas of focus have been finance (with segments on auto lending, retirement plans, credit reports and Puerto Rico’s debt crisis) and criminal justice (with

segments on the death penalty, prison, police accountability and public defenders). Oliver has said that his goal is to present stories that have not received much media attention (Folkenflik, 2017). These stories usually do not readily lend themselves to comedy, so Oliver said the show's job is to make them funny (Folkenflik, 2017; Hiatt, 2017). Generally, the more serious the segment's topic, the sillier the show's jokes are (Hiatt, 2017). For example, to illustrate his criticism of The Supreme Court's policy of not allowing cameras in the courtroom, Oliver presented The Supreme Court for Dogs. The segment played audio from the court while the camera showed dogs dressed as Supreme Court justices.

A 2016 segment on Donald Trump is by far John Oliver's most popular, with 62 million Facebook views, 31.5 million YouTube views, and six million viewers watching the February 28 episode on HBO (*Last Week Tonight*, 2016, February 28; Stelter, 2016). Oliver deconstructs the Trump "brand" — the image of success the real estate mogul-turned-reality-television-star-turned-presidential-candidate has carefully cultivated. The 22-minute video delves into details about Trump's business failures, lies and sometimes bizarrely egotistical behavior (*Last Week Tonight*, 2016, February 28). Oliver plays video clips of Trump supporters stating the reasons they like him: They think him to be honest, a straight-talker, tough, a brilliant businessman, and believe that he was self-funding his campaign. Oliver then systematically debunks each pro-Trump claim, drawing on Trump's past Twitter posts; videos of interviews, speeches and commercials for Trump products; news articles; still photos and architectural renderings from failed real estate developments; and information from sources such as lawsuits and the Federal Election Commission; and rhetorical criticism of Trump's overly simplistic language.

John Oliver offers two particularly illustrative examples of Donald Trump's dishonesty, both of which involve lies that Oliver says he witnessed firsthand. One falsehood was given after

Trump tweeted an attack on Oliver's former *TDS* boss Jon Stewart for using a stage name instead of his given name, "Leibowitz." Trump's May 2013 tweet was seen in some media circles as anti-Semitic (Hiatt, 2017). Two years later, Trump tweeted that he had never attacked "dopey" Stewart for his name and "would never do that." The second lie was Trump's tweeted claim that he had turned down an invitation from Oliver's show. Trump had, in fact, never been invited, by Oliver or anyone on his staff. After that fact had been pointed out to Trump, he then claimed in a radio interview to have been invited to *LWT* "four or five times." Oliver alternated between mocking Trump and using self-deprecating humor while pointing out the dishonesty of the then-candidate for the highest office in the land. In addition to the comedic and informational value of these two "gotcha" revelations, the lies also reveal the extent to which satire's influence had made its way into political and popular culture. Trump, ever mindful of his public image, tried to save face after coming under fire for attacking the popular Stewart, and he tried to use his claim that he turned down Oliver's invitation as a way to make himself seem more grandiose than the critically acclaimed Oliver.

Interspersed between these discursive elements are tangential jokes, which are a common device John Oliver uses in his segments. His technique is to offer information, then often employ an off-the-wall metaphor to bring laughs. The farther into his segments he gets, the rate of these silly digressions tends to decrease and the seriousness increases. For example, about four minutes into the Donald Trump segment, after recounting the lies about being invited on the show, Oliver says:

I'm not even sure he knows he's lying. I think he just doesn't care about what the truth is. Donald Trump views the truth like this lemur views the Supreme Court

vacancy (a picture of a lemur eating a banana appears): “I don’t care about that in any way. Please fuck off, I have a banana.”

But further into the segment, Oliver gets serious and makes his point about Trump directly:

If he’s actually going to be the Republican nominee, it’s time to stop thinking of the mascot and start thinking of the man. Because a candidate for president needs a coherent set of policies. Whatever you think about Marco Rubio and Ted Cruz, at least you basically know where they stand. But Trump’s opinions have been wildly inconsistent — he’s been pro-choice and pro-life; for and against assault weapon bans; in favor of both bringing in Syrian refugees and deporting them out of the country — and that inconsistency can be troubling.

The last minutes of the Trump piece are part of what made it a viral sensation. Returning to Donald Trump’s criticism of Jon Stewart for not using his original surname, John Oliver revealed that one of Trump’s ancestors had changed the family to Trump from the “less magical” Drumpf. Oliver then announced that his show had filed paperwork to trademark the name Drumpf. Oliver and his staff also had obtained rights to the website donaldjdrumpf.com, where they sold at cost red baseball caps like the ubiquitous ones Trump and his supporters wore on the campaign trail. The hats on the Drumpf website, however, replaced Trump’s campaign slogan, “Make America Great Again” with “Make Donald Drumpf Again.” The caps sold out in just a few days (Stelter, 2016).

John Oliver actually later complained that the main point of the piece was being drowned out by the popularity of the Drumpf part of his detailed takedown of Donald Trump (Hiatt, 2017). This complaint is in keeping with Oliver’s goal, which he described in an interview:

If you're just making fun of personalities and sound bites, then you're just attacking the window dressing, and there's only shallow satisfaction in that. ...

It's what I liked most about *The Daily Show* – that Jon would really try and reach beyond just the fun sound bites. You could absolutely have fun with them, but that was the dessert. Those are the things that you could use to get people to listen to the main thrust of what you're saying (Hiatt, 2017).

The emphasis on issues rather than on personal traits and foibles sets shows like *LWT* apart from the more cursory satire of *SNL* and traditional late-night comedy shows. The fact that the main segments in each *LWT* episode are around 18 to 20 minutes allows Oliver to delve into issues more deeply than any other television satirist. In the short attention spans that come with digital age, this strategy would seem to be a recipe for disaster. The fact that Oliver has succeeded in appealing to so many viewers is testimony to the talents of all those involved in making the show, and the show's deep dive into seemingly mundane issues of public policy has stretched the boundaries of television satire. John Oliver has drawn praise for his show's efforts to educate viewers. *Bloomberg Business Week* editor Ellen Pollock said of Oliver being named one of the magazine's "Top 50 Most Influential Figures in the Financial Markets":

John Oliver is probably the best educator on financial markets this nation has ever seen. ... He's made a real point of doing it. He tackles complicated subjects and explains it for everybody. So everybody who watches the show – aside from laughing a lot, sort of comes out a better-educated person about the markets (*CBS This Morning*, 2016, October 1).

*LWT*'s format can vary somewhat from show to show. Each episode features a main story that takes up most of the half hour, and sometimes shorter segments fill out the show.

Occasionally John Oliver will interview public figures. He interviewed astrophysicist Stephen Hawking and traveled to Russia to interview classified-information leaker Edward Snowden. And other discursive elements appear. The show might include a spoof of a commercial. For example, following a lengthy segment about cellphone encryption, an iPhone commercial was turned into a confession from the phone's engineers that Apple's technology was usually only barely ahead of hackers' abilities to breach security (*Last Week Tonight*, 2016, March 13). Unknown actors portrayed Apple employees, but sometimes famous actors make cameos in satiric segments. Following a segment about the 911 emergency system, *TDS* alumnus Rob Riggle and *Reno 911* star Wendi McLendon-Covey appeared in a spoof of a public service announcement that illustrated the technological inadequacy of the nation's emergency communications system (*Last Week Tonight*, 2016, May 15). Another example of the variety of discursive elements featured in any given episode of *LWT* is the performance of composer/rapper Lin-Manuel Miranda (*Last Week Tonight*, 2016, April 24). Miranda appeared at the end of the show's April 24, 2016, segment about Puerto Rico's debt crisis and performed an original rap that advocated for Congressional action to help relieve the debt burden in his native commonwealth.

*LWT* also sometimes acts in the real world to help illustrate stories. John Oliver did a segment on predatory lending, then illustrated how simple it was to start a debt-buying company by creating one of his own called Central Asset Recovery Professional, Inc., or CARP, also the name of a bottom-feeding fish (Merry, 2016). He then bought \$15 million of medical debt for less than \$60,000 and forgave it all on his show (*Last Week Tonight*, 2016, June 5). At the end of a segment on crooked televangelists, Oliver illustrated how simple it is to start a tax-exempt church by opening one of his own (*Last Week Tonight*, 2015, August 16). These illustrative

antics are similar to Stephen Colbert's Super PAC stunts in that they are designed to educate about complicated issues by showing how ridiculous laws can be.

Beyond providing laughs and educating viewers, John Oliver also advocates for causes. Both Jon Stewart, when he lobbied Congress on behalf of ailing September 11 first responders, and Stephen Colbert, when he illustrated the plight of migrant farm workers, stepped outside of their roles as entertainers and added a new dimension to political satire that had not been seen before. In addition to forgiving medical debt and presenting Lin-Manuel Miranda's musical plea for aiding Puerto Rico, Oliver also detailed how viewers could check the facts in stories circulating on social media, given the Trump administration's disregard for truth. To that end, *LWT* made an outside-the-studio move by creating two commercials to "sneak some useful facts into (Donald Trump's) media diet" (*Last Week Tonight*, 2017, February 12). The commercials, which were played on *LWT* and were purchased to air during morning cable news shows that Trump reportedly watches, feature a man dressed as a cowboy. In the ads, the cowboy explains facts that Trump has either disregarded or does not appear to know. The first ad appears to be a commercial for catheters until it transitions to the cowboy explaining the nuclear triad:

There's two things I know: I don't like pain when I cath, and the nuclear triad consists of land-based missiles, submarine-launched missiles and aerial bombers.

... In case you're the kind of person who might really need to know that (*Last Week Tonight*, 2017, February 12).

Another commercial features the cowboy listing facts about issues (and non-issues) such as war crimes, race, which forks are which in a place setting, and how the unemployment rate is determined. These commercials are both discursively integrated part of John Oliver's show and free-standing satirical statements designed to criticize Trump directly, and they illustrate the

creativity of a show that takes some of the best elements of *TDS* and adds its unique style of informative comedy and advocacy.

### ***Full Frontal***

Like John Oliver, Samantha Bee was a *TDS* correspondent, but Bee had a long wait before she got to host her own show, *Full Frontal* (*FF*). She was in the conversation when speculation over who would replace Stewart on *TDS* was at its height, but she was passed over for Trevor Noah (Fienberg, 2016). Late-night television would remain a boys-only club until Bee received an offer for a show from TBS. Bee set the acerbic tone for her show in her response to an all-male *Vanity Fair* cover about late-night television that was published just before *FF* debuted in 2015. She tweeted the same magazine cover photo, but the image had been doctored to add her head on a centaur's body, shooting laser beams from her eyes (Peyser, 2016). The image and the message were bold. Bee was not trying to fit in with the image of other hosts. The show's introduction suggests the irreverent tone of the satire: Bee walks down a darkened corridor to an iron gate that rises to reveal giant, computer-generated images of the Statue of Liberty, Jesus, and Thomas Jefferson. Bee, appearing to be much smaller than the images, looks up at the images with a slightly nervous expression, as though she is preparing for a confrontation. The *FF* set is simply a large, curved screen that Bee stands in front of to deliver fast-paced, often vulgar commentary. Like similar satire shows, *FF* often uses clips from news reports and then the host comments on them. The show also uses doctored photos to make visual jokes, and occasionally the program offers field pieces, either with correspondents like *TDS*, or with Bee's own interviews. These discursive elements are not unique to *FF*; what is new is Bee's perspective and, like Oliver, her emphasis on advocacy for political causes.

The fact that Samantha Bee is a woman is usually front and center when journalists write about her (Fienberg, 2016; Nussbaum, 2016; Peyser, 2016), and she brings a seldom-heard perspective to some issues, whether they are gender-related subjects or not. For example, Bee aired a segment focusing on former North Carolina Governor Pat McCrory, who lost his contentious 2016 bid for re-election to Democrat Roy Cooper. Before Cooper could be inaugurated, McCrory called for a special legislative session, where he and the Republican-dominated legislators passed numerous laws to severely limit Cooper's power. Bee responded to the news, saying:

Most people might think that this is a partisan power grab. What? Only people with eyes and ears that are connected to their think box. I mean, sure, it's a little odd that, before signing any new law, Governor Cooper will be required to get a transvaginal ultrasound, but that's just so he can hear the bill's heartbeat (*Full Frontal with Samantha Bee*, 2016, December 19).

During this comment, a doctored photo of a woman receiving an ultrasound with Governor Cooper's anguished face superimposed onto the woman's body appeared. Samantha Bee made two satirical comments in one: she pointed out the ridiculousness of the blatant partisanship of North Carolina Republicans, and she reminded viewers of one of the state's most controversial laws – legislation that would force women who sought abortions to undergo an invasive, medically unnecessary transvaginal ultrasound before the procedure. Although the North Carolina ultrasound law was overturned, the state has since passed controversial legislation restricting transgender and abortion rights, and by reminding viewers of state legislators' penchant for questionable action, Bee put the new restrictions on the governor in context (Chappell, 2015; Purdy, 2017).

Reproductive rights are a frequent theme on *FF*, and Samantha Bee delved into the little-known history of the anti-abortion movement (*Full Frontal with Samantha Bee*, 2016, May 23).

The segment contains video of Bee dressed in 1970's attire pretending to be a reporter outside the Supreme Court the day the *Roe v. Wade* abortion ruling was handed down. Bee says:

The decision was endorsed by the Southern Baptist Convention, whose official news outlet said “religious liberty, human equality and justice are advanced by the Supreme Court abortion decision.” So there you have it, folks: The Republican-appointed justices have spoken, the debate has been settled, and we’ll never have to argue about it again (*Full Frontal with Samantha Bee*, 2016, May 23).

The segment then returns to present-day Bee in the studio. This unique discursive element highlights the ironic fact – explained in the rest of the segment – that the religious right’s opposition to abortion was based more on political convenience than on moral objections. The fictional flashback is another example of a unique discursive element being integrated into the show’s regular features.

The tone of Samantha Bee’s fast-paced satire is unapologetically cutting. Creative insults are inserted within her political polemic, and her most frequent target is Donald Trump. Responding to a fan request, the show aired a montage of the staff’s favorite previously aired barbs against Trump into an “Official Trump Thesaurus” (*Full Frontal with Samantha Bee*, 2016, November 5). In the montage, Bee refers to Trump as:

A backfired wish that Republicans made on a cursed monkey’s paw; agent-orange, bigoted See ’n’ Say; demagoguing bag of candy corn; muddled asshole yearning to scream free; crotch-fondling slab of rancid meatloaf; tax-cheating, investor-swindling, worker-shafting, dictator-loving, pathologically lying,

attorneys general-bribing, philandering, mobbed up, narcissistic serial con artist  
(*Full Frontal with Samantha Bee*, 2016, November 5).

The marathon 2016 election campaign coinciding with the beginning of Samantha Bee's feminist-leaning satire was a stroke of luck for the show. Donald Trump's attitude toward women and toward his opponent Hillary Clinton incited many women to take to the streets to protest (Przybyla, 2017). Bee seized on one particular debate comment that riled many women; Trump referred to Clinton as a "nasty woman." On the next *FF* episode that aired after the debate, Bee wore a T-shirt with "Nasty Woman" printed on the front and announced that she would sell the shirts online and donate all net proceeds to Planned Parenthood (*Full Frontal with Samantha Bee*, 2016, October 24). Shirt sales have thus far raised more than \$700,000 for the organization. Bee also seized on another comment Trump made to produce shirts for men. Trump referred to immigrants he wanted to ban from entering the United States as "bad dudes" (*Full Frontal with Samantha Bee*, 2017, February 1). *FF* arranged to sell men's T-shirts with "Bad Dude" printed on them, with proceeds going to the Karam Foundation, which provides emergency aid and resources to Syrian refugees (*Full Frontal with Samantha Bee*, 2017, February 1).

Bee also announced on *FF* that she is planning an alternative to the annual White House Correspondents' Association dinner April 29, 2017, which will feature comedians roasting Trump and will likely air on TBS (Itzkoff, 2017). Bee said her event is to "ensure that we get to properly roast the president" (Itzkoff, 2017). Bee's satirical voice is likely to reach an expanding audience as long as the resistance to Trump and his policies continues, and as long as Bee continues to experiment with new discursive elements.

### **PART 3: CONCLUSION**

The mainstream of television satire has developed many tributaries since Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert began to make waves in the early and mid-2000s. Technology and the growing popularity of political satire — along with the massive gap Stewart and Colbert left when they departed their shows — have diffused and diversified the sources of television satire. No single satirist today has the same type of influence of either Stewart or Colbert. John Oliver is without a doubt the most widely-viewed issue-oriented satirist, but his weekly show does not generally focus on the daily news cycle. The news cycle is more central to *FF*, but Samantha Bee's feminist perspective is less mainstream than the broader satire of Stewart and Colbert. And, like *LWT*, Bee's show is weekly, so it is not the day-to-day conversation piece that daily shows have been. *SNL* is as popular as ever, with its viral parodies of Donald Trump and company, providing satire that is more visceral than informative. Trevor Noah is still searching for his voice and audience. Seth Meyers's satirical segments have yet to gain any real traction, either, and his segments are ensconced in tried and true discursive patterns that Stewart established.

Diehard fans of Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert could look at the remaining field of talented hosts and their shows and feel disappointment. No one extracts the bullshit from the days' political news four nights a week in quite the same way as Stewart and Colbert, and no satirists have put on the mantle of unrelenting news media critic that was so central to the Comedy Central duo's mission. But the second generation of satirists are pushing boundaries and incorporating discursive elements in their shows that are new and enthralling. John Oliver has taken the task of educational satire to a level beyond either Stewart or Colbert, focusing on important but mundane issues in an insightful and hilarious way. When a video on civil forfeiture gets 9 million YouTube views, and one on infrastructure gets 8 million, something extraordinary

is happening. And when a woman's viewpoint on abortion can be delivered in an informative and, miraculously, funny way, boundaries are, clearly, being pushed beyond what likely could have been imagined when Stewart ushered in a golden age of television satire.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

This thesis is limited to a broad overview of television satire shows over six decades. The study is meant to fill in a gap in the research by tying together the Stewart/Colbert era with the shows that are on the air currently. Whether the high level of interest in studying political satire will continue remains to be seen because to date only a few research studies on the newer shows have been published. But with these new programs comes a need for research into the audiences and into the shows themselves. For example, *LWT* lays out a tremendous amount of detailed information that is interrupted by random jokes. Research on how well viewers process this heavy cognitive load would help reveal how well satire can convey complicated information.

Studies of how audiences process the uniquely biting comedy on *FF* would also be informative, as would gender-based research on audience responses to the feminist-leaning show. In addition to such audience studies, content analyses are also needed. Fact-checking studies would be valuable in determining if the information in the shows is trustworthy, and an exploration of the new discursive elements in these shows would add to the vast body of research on *TDS* and *TCR*. An investigation into the effectiveness of political satire shows' advocacy for political causes also is warranted.

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## VITA

Amanda Martin was born in Knoxville, Tennessee. She earned bachelor of arts degrees in writing communication and music, with a concentration in voice, from Maryville College. Her senior thesis about military themes in William Shakespeare's *Othello, the Moor of Venice* and Giuseppe Verdi's opera *Otello* earned Maryville College's Edwin R. Hunter Award for Excellence in Research in English in 1996, as well as the College Music Society Southern Chapter's award for Outstanding Student Paper in 1997.

After a year of post-graduate study of musicology at The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, she began working as a copy editor and page designer at newspapers including *The News Sentinel* in Knoxville.