The New Relationship Between Satire and Fake News

Contemporary American perceptions of what is or is not news seem to be in a dramatic state of flux. There is a growing body of research instigated by the rise of what has been ubiquitously referred to as 'fake news' (Jones, 2010; Baym, 2007; Borden & Tew, 2007; Jones, Baym & Day, 2012; Reilly, 2012). *Fake news* is an altogether inapt descriptive sometimes used to discuss television programs that are more commonly, and correctly termed, political satire. Although political satire has been practiced for millennia across any culture with an organized from of government and a correspondent social hierarchy (Habermas, 1989), there seems to have been a particularly virulent outbreak in America since 2000.

Fake News/Journalism

For media scholars, this burgeoning form of political information delivery has created shifts in commonly held perceptions of how the general electorate consumes and processes political information, along with notions of what constitute journalism and journalistic integrity. Currently, the most prominent purveyors of *fake news* have been spawned by the Comedy Central Network and include Jon Stewart of *The Daily Show*, Stephen Colbert of *The Colbert Report* and, more recently John Oliver whose television show *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver* premiered on HBO in April of this year. Jon Stewart's Peabody award (Baym, 2005), Stephen Colbert's oft discussed speech at the 2006 White House Correspondents' Dinner (Jones, Baym & Day, 2012) and a recent accusation of practicing journalism leveled at John Oliver by Asawin Suebsaeng of The Daily Beast (2014) have led to taxonomic complications as the lines between *true journalism* and *fake news* seem to be increasingly blurred.

As a result of the popularity of these shows and their seeming encroachment on the turf of political journalism, this paper explores the conflation of political satire and journalism as practiced by Stewart, Colbert and Oliver, and proposes a two-part study to examine perceptions of *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver;* first, to assess the extent to which viewers might categorize the show as a discrete form of journalism, or more specifically, a hybrid combination of political satire and political journalism; second, to assess viewer perceptions of possible differences in journalistic veracity between TWI and news programming identified as traditional based on side by side comparison.

Dynamics of Political Tension

According to Jones (2010) the rise of political satire in America is coincident with "a fundamental change in political communication in America." This paper will review literature exploring the recent rise in popularity of political satire with the intent of placing it in the greater context of the American 'culture war' that has become increasingly evident during the past few decades and is largely responsible for the changes in political communication to which Jones refers, and to explore the conflation of political satire and 'real news' or journalism by examining fluid definitions of each.

¹ The term 'fake news' seems to have originated with shows like Saturday Night Live, SCTV and The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour (Jones, 2012) that utilized a 'news style format" as a means of comic delivery. Although these 'fake news' segments sometimes injected observatory and satirical political humor into the performance structure, they differ from the political satire programming being explored and in most of the journal articles and studies cited here in categories such as length, format, delivery style and impact. In fact, as most of these studies

The political culture of America can be aptly described as amorphous, that is, as Jones (2010) suggests, "... shaped at any given time by numerous forces and behaviors that are never quite stable." That said, since the 1960s the medium of television has played the starring role in shaping and maintaining perceptions of what constitute legitimate forms of political discourse including regulations surrounding political reportage and the expectations of veracity therein (Jones, Baym & Day, 2012).

The tension that undergirds America's political dynamic is largely structured in terms of a 'two-party' system making 'group-choice' a deceptively simple construct. Outlets for mediated politics, where the discourse representative of the public sphere is ostensibly practiced and consumed, largely mirror that dynamic structure by identifying, either overtly or covertly, as left or right. This two-party structure makes political commercialization (i.e., the selling of political messages and ideas to a consumerist society) as seemingly simple as selling football jerseys to competing fan-bases.

It is important to note that, as with all overarching or primary metaphors (according to Lakoff (year) primary metaphors are central to the concept of framing); certain aspects of a vocabulary can be highlighted while others are sublimated. Referring to the American political system as 'two-party' down-plays the existence of a third group, that portion of the electorate choosing not identify with one of the major parties by either claiming independence or membership in one of a number of smaller political groups extant in the American political gestalt during any given period (e.g., Whigs, Libertarians, Greens, Know-nothings, etc.). This group, often referred to as the *swing vote*, become a crucial voting bock during national elections and tend to garner a great deal of attention.

Culture War

Grondin (2012) has identified recent changes in American political discourse, particularly in regards to its divisive nature, as reflective and part of a greater culture war, in which political discourse is firmly embedded. The concept of an American political divide based on cultural differences is not new. Although the etymology of term 'culture war' is difficult to pinpoint in American history, the concept can be traced to the economic evolution of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as industrialism gained ascendancy over agrarianism, pitting rural values against urban values. These 'values wars' erupted in earnest after they were identified and called out in the 1990s, first by Sociologist James Hunter (1991) followed by a speech at the 1992 republican convention in which presidential candidate Pat Buchanan issued a conservative call-to-arms, "There is a religious war going on in our country for the soul of America. It is a cultural war, as critical to the kind of nation we will one day be as was the Cold War itself."

Hunter (1991) recognized that a number of divisive issues were gaining attention (e.g., homosexuality, gun-control, abortion, etc.); and, that these issues were causing clearly discernible fissures prompting for absolutist sentiments, yea or nay, seeming to play out along party lines. While Hunter uses the terms "progressivism" and "orthodoxy" to define this polarity, others, like conservative pundit Bill O'Reilly (author of the aptly titled, "Culture Warrior"), have chosen to characterize these differences as "secular progressives" versus "traditionalists" (O'Reilly, 2006). Resultant of its ability to clearly characterize the duality of the social gestalt that is the American political argument, the concept of culture war offers an excellent lens through which to explore the burgeoning popularity of political satire as an expression of political discourse.

Over roughly the last twenty years social and technological changes have challenged long held and, according to Jones, "seemingly stable" assumptions regarding the communicative dimensions of American political culture. In 1989, with the support of the Supreme Court in *Meredith Corp. v. FCC*, the Fairness Doctrine, introduced in 1949 as a means of

ensuring that mediated news offered competing views on specific issues, was repealed opening the door for what eventually became known as 'hate radio' and the rise of personalities like Rush Limbaugh and Michael Savage (Burack & Snyder-Hall, 2012). The Telecommunications Act of 1996, ostensibly an overhaul of its 1934 predecessor, was aimed at opening up competition in telecommunication and broadcasting industries through deregulation Arguably, the deregulation ended up allowing the major players in the telecommunications industry to gobble up all the available bandwidth, squashing local competition and, according to Zinn (2009), allowed a few huge conglomerates control over the dominant sources of information dissemination in this country; in other words, the chief means of mass persuasion (Baum & Kernell, 1999).

News/Journalism

It is hard to imagine now that a little over thirty years ago, for most families, the available television media system consisted of three available network channels and an antenna on the roof. Cable channels had begun to surface but these were mainly local access channels. Dramatic changes in media delivery systems have rendered them virtually unrecognizable from their recent past. Despite the ubiquity of computers and cell phones and their complementary capacity for media delivery television is still the dominant force in American media platforms today. There are over 300 channels available via cable and satellite. Perhaps the Internet will overtake television at some point in the future but it will only to do so when it is able to affect something of a harmonic convergence with television. The reason is simple; television is visual. People want to see what other people are doing.

Horton and Whol introduced the concept of parasocial interaction in 1956 (Levy, 1979) and it is a theoretical paradigm that is still robust for explaining the relationship between the audience and the actor. According to the parasocial interaction hypothesis, audience members relate to visually mediated actors or agents as though these agents were members of their own peer group. This interaction relationship is especially potent with talk show hosts, journalists and spokespeople who appear on television regularly and use a casually accommodating communication style that prompts for the illusion of reciprocity (Levy, 1979). During the 1970s Walter Cronkite, anchor of the CBS evening news, was considered the most the most trusted man in America by a majority of television viewers (Dagnes, 2010). The regularly broadcast evening news offering from all three major networks, ABC, CBS and NBC, had a reputation for journalistic veracity and integrity earned over a three-decade span that each network dearly prized. The insinuation or appearance of journalistic impropriety was inevitably met with swift resolution.

In the 1970s cable television was an infant with great potential, provided the right parent would happen along to nurture it. It can be argued that Ted Turner was that parent. Turner turned his local Atlanta based cable channel, WTCG (Turner Communications Group) into a national contender as WTBS (Turner Broadcasting system) before creating CNN in 1980, bringing into existence, not just a 24 hour news service, but the concept of 24 hour programming that, if successful, would bring along 24 hours worth of advertising airtime. For the first time, news programming generated revenue, news paid. Turner's 24-hour programming concept was followed by the likes of ESPN and MTV among others and new genres were spawned (Dagnes, 2010).

Prior to the introduction of the 24-hour news channel, broadcast news was not considered a revenue-generating arm of broadcast companies, rather it was seen as a 'loss-leader,' an organizational department that does not make money but is rather seen and commoditized as a free service designed to seduce viewers and advertisers. The commonly held belief was that if news programming made money its content would quickly be up for sale and

no longer be deemed as trustworthy. It can be argued with relative ease that this has proven prophetic. Brock (2004) contends that FOX weaves enough apocrypha into its reporting on such a regular basis that it has become de rigueur, simply put, completely acceptable. According to a study conducted by the Program on International Policy Attitudes in association with the University of Maryland, Fox viewers become more misinformed about the world the more they watch the network (Ramsay, Kull, Lewis, & Subius, 2010). Fox News is gifted with the highest ratings in the news industry, the implication being, that fabricated news sells.

In post-modern America, a self-referential media is normative and resultantly, perhaps deliberately, confusing. It is not unusual for the news media to comment on how the media comments about the media commenting on the media. For example conservative talk show host Bill O'Reilly's commentary regarding Stephen Colbert's commentary of Bill O'Reilly's commentary regarding the President's handling of the growing ISIS dilemma in the Middle East (The Week, 2014) cannot help but fracture commonly and long held cultural perceptions about what is or is not 'news' or journalism.

It is difficult to pin down an exact definition of either Journalistic integrity or ethics. The notion of journalistic integrity is largely culturally, historically and situationally fluid (McQuail, 1997). What may seem like ethical soundness in one situation or period of history may not in others. In the first three quarters of the twentieth century national political figures enjoyed a greater amount of privacy than is afforded them today. Most Americans would have been shocked, for example, to find out that Franklin Roosevelt did not have the use of his legs although political journalists following the president certainly would have known. John Kennedy's numerous extra-marital affairs were also something that were considered off-limits for reportage. Although it seems that the boundaries between news and entertainment, as well as those between public affairs and popular culture, have become difficult if not impossible to discern it is not unprecedented. During his first term as president, Thomas Jefferson suffered unrelenting, savage attacks in the press including rumors about his relations with slave Sally Hemmings (Plaisance, 2000) and Andrew Jackson's wife, Rachel, was attacked in the press for bigamy. Although still challenging, the idea of veracity or accuracy in reporting is a little easier to calculate, and is a concept that has remained stable and the very lowest level of accountability we expect from the fourth estate.

Political Satire

Political satire should not be considered as mutually exclusive from journalism. A means of critique by scathing attack, satire as has long been a handmaiden of political journalism and journalists who occasionally cross its borders when reporting. Unfortunately, satire, as a form or genre is not generally understood. Most people would probably not be able to identify TDS, TCR or LWT as political satire. According to Coletta (2009), "satire is one of the most capacious and most misunderstood literary terms." Unfortunately for satire, its capacity for humor rests in its

² Salon, Source-watch and the Annenberg Foundation all cited other studies (at least six) that arrived at the same conclusion but I did not take time to verify them and cannot cite them myself. It is useful, however to know they exist.

³ Rachel had been married previously and believed the marriage to have been legally dissolved but the divorce proceeding had not been legally completed until after her marriage to Jackson. Jackson killed a man in duel for mentioning the matter in public.

⁴Coletta also suggests that, ironically, "much of the humor in popular culture is ironic."

connection to irony which is misused and misunderstood to an even greater degree than satire.⁵ Miriam-Webster (2014) offers simple definitions for both:

Irony: the use of words that mean the opposite of what you really think especially in order to be funny. Satire: a way of using humor to show that someone or something is foolish, weak, bad, etc.: humor that shows the weaknesses or bad qualities of a person, government, society, etc.

As a delivery vehicle for political satire and irony, Jon Stewart's TDS borrows techniques for presentation from the genres of news, talk shows and comedy. The result according to Baym (2005) is a "journalism of critical inquiry" that advances a "model of deliberative democracy," which is really supposed to be the responsibility of a free press (isn't it?). In 2005, Baym lumped TDS with the genre known as "late-night television." Perhaps, because Jon Stewart was relatively new to his position and the TDS had just recently began achieving accolades and elevated pop-culture status in 2005, there was no extant genre that included any animals fitting a similar description to pair TDS with.

Colbert's TCR relies on the host's deadpan delivery and maintenance of a character he based on Bill O'Reilly (who Colbert affectionately refers to as "papa-bear)." Like TDS, TCR combines borrowed presentational styles and both shows run four episodes week at approximately 22 minutes apiece accounting for commercial breaks (Kenny, 2014). The format of Oliver's LWT adheres more strictly to a 'news anchor' style (Kenny, 2014) although freedom from commercial interruption and his 'once a week' program schedule offers Oliver and his staff the opportunity to choose salient material from the week's buffet and practice meticulous research (Suebsaeng, 2014). The results have already proven fruitful; LWT is gaining audience and has been contracted for a second season.

Accusations of practicing a form of investigative journalism were leveled at Oliver (Bauder, 2014; Kenny, 2014; Suebsaeng, 2014, Ammori, 2014) following episodes of LWT that took swipes at the FCC's inability to deal with Cable Company shenanigans regarding net neutrality and bogus claims regarding scholarships made available by the Miss America organization to young women. Oliver's staff researched tax documents revealing that the pageant spent \$482,000 on scholarships after claiming to have given out 45 million dollars. "Forty-five million," Oliver said. "That is an unbelievable amount of money. As in, I literally did not believe that." Both stories prompted public responses from the FCC and the Pageant respectively. The combination of investigative research and the impact of LWT reportage have spawned a title for the new genre; "investigative comedy" (Bauder, 2014).

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⁵Alanis Morisette has become the poster-child for misuse of "ironic" as a term by famously suggesting that "raining on your wedding day" is somehow ironic. If the wedding had been moved indoors because of the rain and the indoor sprinkler system had malfunctioned, drenching the wedding party, irony would have been achieved. Sports broadcast personnel are perhaps the worst offenders when they suggest that it is ironic when a certain athlete is better at a sport other than the one he/she competes in professionally (Coletta, 2009).

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