News with a Twist:

Satire in *Saturday Night Live, The Daily Show*, and *The Onion*

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Abstract

This thesis examines modern satire and “fake news” and the American public’s opinion on its relevance. Through a description of *Saturday Night Live*, *The Onion*, *The Colbert Report*, and *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, it discusses the history of contemporary satire and its presentation of news in opposition to the standard, mainstream news media. Beginning with the history of satire and detailing the difference between a horatian and juvenalian satirist, this thesis shows the progression of satire into what it has become today. Satire has persisted as a literary technique throughout history, and its rhetorical manipulation of language and consequent persuasive capabilities lead satire to its current role in the mainstream media: as “fake news” construction that has become a relied-upon source of accurate and trustworthy reporting.
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I. Satire in History

Satire has not always existed as a solely comedic rhetorical device, yet contemporary media has adopted the literary form through comedic genres to create an active audience. Traditional news media delivers information, but that information often has a biased twist or is stated in a way that is intended for the viewer or reader to simply absorb and believe, rather than question and interpret. The presentation of news with a satirical twist forces the audience to reflect on what is being presented and question the integrity of traditional journalistic practices as a whole.

The historical path of satire exemplifies its pervasiveness. What can now be defined as a genre that ridicules something’s vices or shortcomings through irony or sarcasm, the classical Roman satirist Quitus Hoatius Flascuss theorized that satire “seeks to laugh men out of their follies.”\(^1\) Horation satire playfully criticizes, rather than outright condemns. With a sympathetic tone, horation satire has a lighthearted attitude that avoids vulgarity and crudity. It is not a direct, blatant attack; it’s a jab said with a smile to produce a smile. Mark Twain’s *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and the situational comedy *The Simpsons* follow the horation model, as do much of modern satire.

In contrast, Roman juvenalian satire as written by Decimus Junius Juvenal in the late first to early second century is rough, acidic, abrasive, and intended to provoke a reaction. Preferred by Elizabethan satirists, the juvenalian

satire was a way in which an author could complain about things occurring in the world. According to Dustin Griffin, author of *Satire: A Critical Reintroduction*, “most of the practicing satirists in England from 1590 to 1620 thought a satire should be rude, derisive, harsh—written in the kind of language one might expect from a woodland satyr.”  

Through pessimistic indignation, juvenalian satire makes no attempts to disguise its scorn for social evils and political misdoings; it strives to inflict wounds. As more personal and polarizing, juvenalian satire often takes a political form. Both Jonathan Swift’s “A Modest Proposal” and Seth McFarlane’s cartoon “Family Guy” approach satire from a juvenalian perspective, as do the documentaries created by Michael Moore. Stephen Colbert’s blistering speech at the 2006 White House Correspondents Association dinner that ripped apart president George W. Bush and criticized the Washington, D.C. establishment was a juvenalian satire that was simultaneously funny and serious.

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2 Griffin, p. 10
II. Satirical Rhetoric

Satirical rhetoric has two groups of focal points: inquiry and provocation, and play and display. The satirist’s goal is to “insist on the sharp differences between vice and virtue, between good and bad, between what man is and what he ought to be,” says Griffin. A satirist therefore has to either exaggerate or simplify, but maintain the essential truth. Every part of a satire has a purpose, and therefore its rhetorical uses are important. Essentially, “by conducting open-ended speculative inquiry, by provoking and challenging comfortable and received ideas, by unsettling our convictions and occasionally shattering our illusions, by asking questions and raising doubts but not providing answers, satire ultimately has political consequences.” Modern inquiry rhetoric is designed not simply to ask questions. The point of inquiry is not to find the answers to the questions raised, but to realize the potential one has to be reflective and inquisitive.

If inquiry is a positive exploration of the truth, provocation is its negative counterpart. Inquiry builds; provocation tears down. Through criticism of false understanding, satire can break down a false belief. The way in which satire provokes is through the use of rhetorical devices to create a calculated difficulty. Griffin says, “Satire has traditionally been considered a form that cultivates obscurity, using elliptical syntax, cryptic or abrupt allusiveness, brevity, and

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3 Griffin, p. 35
4 Griffin, p. 159
roughness of rhythm.”\textsuperscript{5} Complicated rhetoric requires the concentration of its readers or listeners, and therefore challenges their intelligence and ability to think independently. Paradoxical rhetoric allows the satirist to display rhetorical ingenuity in promoting their own unorthodox opinion or for stimulating thought in the audience. This use of complicated rhetoric to motivate the audience flows into the subsequent concepts of display and play.

While a rhetorical performance in satire can and does move the audience to utilize their own aptitude, satiric display additionally yields to the satirist’s demonstration of rhetorical prowess. Satire is not solely meant to convey a message; if it were, the message could simply be stated without the use of manipulative language. A large part of the appeal of satire is performance. It is designed to gain the approbation and appreciation of its audience because of its sheer brilliance in the use of language and wit. Satire is as much showy and ornate as it is persuasive, and one does not detract from the other.

Aristotle made three distinctions among traditional rhetoric. Deliberate rhetoric is legislative, and attempts to persuade an audience to take action. Judicial, or forensic rhetoric, is concerned with the justice or injustice of a certain situation or accusation, and is primarily used in a court of law. The third form of rhetoric is epideictic. This is the form with which satirical display is concerned. Epideictic rhetoric is demonstrative, and is used in speeches, letters of recommendation, obituaries, or political speeches in which the focus is on the skill of the orator. The subject itself does not hold as much relevance as the

\textsuperscript{5} Griffin, p. 52
language manipulation and the writer’s talent. The use of epideictic language does not remove the point of the piece and seek only praise, however. As important as it may be for the satirist to have his or her skill recognized, the end goal of the satire is to bring the subject matter into the desired disrepute. As Griffin aptly states, “Anybody can call names, but it requires skill to make a malefactor die sweetly.”

As much as display is related to play, the two are not necessarily concurrent. While an audience is required for a satirist’s display, play requires simply that it incurs joy. Friendly rivalries have been in existence since satire’s creation. What Erasmus described in 1506 as “a bout in the wrestling-school of wit,” rivalries between satirists aren’t the rivalries found between the Boston Red Sox and the New York Yankees. Jon Stewart’s mock rivalry with his former correspondent Stephen Colbert is in jest and allows the two to publicly expand their satirical repertoire. While Jon Stewart is often criticized for not living up to journalistic values, the satirist would use play as his defense. What a critic calls irresponsibility is Stewart’s literary freedom to modify his presentation for the purposes of entertainment.

The concepts of inquiry and provocation and play and display show that satire is not a form of rhetoric with a specific ending. Rather than conclude or pronounce, it seeks to explore and unsettle. It strives to create an audience that is actively involved in its surroundings.

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6 Griffin, p. 73
III. Modern Satire’s “Fake News”

The idea of modern satire often becomes fuzzy. A satirist always has a concrete point of view. Caricature and parody are not synonymous with satire, but the two are often used within the satirical genre. Humor and satire do not always go hand in hand. A television show that merely makes the audience laugh is not necessarily satire, while a show that seeks to improve society by ridiculing its imperfections would be satirical. In that aspect, satire has a goal of the betterment of society before it has the goal of entertainment, but the two are not necessarily separate. The most effective satire entertains.

Entertainment lends itself to the contemporary development of satirical “fake news.” As observed by Jeffrey P. Jones in Entertaining Politics: Satirical Television and Political Engagement, “fake news” has appeared in large part due to a “fundamental change in political communication in America.” The evolution of this genre has led to a reevaluation of the relationship journalism has with politics and culture, and the social responsibility of journalistic outlets. Rather than separating the serious and the political, entertainment television and politics have become integrated.

Political satirists use formal and rhetorical elements to strip apart meaningful issues and reframe them for public consumption. These fake news narratives change the dominant political discourse to be more easily understood. By engaging with contemporary journalism, the political satirist takes the facts

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of an event and presents them truthfully and simply, while often emphasizing absurdity. Through making politics easy to digest, fake news encourages involvement with politics and the real news.

In the interest of magnifying flaws inherent to the contemporary journalistic system, satirical fake news completely subverts traditional reporting conventions in favor of a system ridiculing its subjects. Through using a similar-enough discourse, fake news satire sticks to the system that is already in place while at the same time exposing the often-empty or fluffy reporting that comes from much of the mainstream media. By relying just enough on conventional standards, fake news becomes a constant exposé, allowing the viewer or reader to critically examine what is being presented. Current fake news programming such as Saturday Night Live, The Daily Show with Jon Stewart, The Colbert Report, and The Onion adopt this satirical rhetoric in order to refuse the audience’s passive response to mainstream media, and to persuade the public to become an active thinker in issues such as political campaigns, world or national news, or current events.
IV. Saturday Night Live

What is known today as *Saturday Night Live* premiered on October 11, 1975, under the name *NBC's Saturday Night*. Created by Lorne Michaels and developed by Dick Obersol, the show aimed to fill a gap in late night television that occurred when Johnny Carson requested the weekends off from filming *The Tonight Show starring Johnny Carson*. Ebersol and Michaels took three weeks to develop the idea for the show at the request of NBC president Herbert Schlosser. The idea began in 1974, and by 1975, the talented cast of Dan Aykroyd, John Belushi, Chevy Chase, Jane Curtin, Garrett Morris, Laraine Newman, Michael O'Donoghue, Gilda Radner, and George Coe had been assembled. Following its premiere, the show became an instant hit, resonating with a wide audience. The show’s blend of political satire and social humor was viewed by 30 million people each week, and the cast members became instant stars. Television content as a whole was changed by the impact, and comedy’s place was secured as a “serious voice in the American political landscape.”

Created at the scandalous end to Nixon’s presidency and the conclusion of the Vietnam War, Michaels’ show was nearly compelled to comment on the political, newsworthy events of the day.

The viewership of *Saturday Night Live* has actually drastically declined since its premiere in 1975, yet SNL remains culturally relevant. While viewers aren't regularly tuning in to watch a complete episode, online replays hosted by

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sites such as Hulu or Netflix keep *SNL* as a part of mainstream conversation. Despite the fact that some of the show’s sketches may have a Nielsen rating hovering around 5 percent, millions of people participate in the conversation that certain sketches provoke.\(^9\)

*Saturday Night Live*’s premise entails sketch comedy presented through the form of a parody of contemporary culture and politics. One of the typically political sketches is the cold open, occurring at the beginning of the show. As the show’s opening, the cold open sets the scene for the subsequent hour, and is used to draw viewers in. It concludes with the introduction to *Saturday Night Live*, in which one of the cold open actors breaks character and yells, “Live from New York, it’s Saturday Night!”, one of the recognized staples of the show.

The cold opens present an important moment from national or world news with an often-ridiculous spin. One of *SNL*’s most popular cold opens occurred during the 2008 presidential election, in the premiere of *SNL*’s thirty-fourth season. On August 29, 2008, John McCain announced that his vice presidential nominee in his campaign for the presidency of the United States would be Sarah Palin, Alaska’s governor. There was a noticeable resemblance between Palin and seasoned *SNL* actor and head writer Tina Fey, and rumors began to fly that Fey would impersonate Palin at some point on the show before the November 4\(^{th}\) election. Fey had left the show in 2006 to pursue the comedy 30 Rock in which she took on the role of writer and main character, but Lorne

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\(^9\) Nielsen ratings are the primary audience measurement system used to determine audience size and composition of television programming in the United States and around the world. A Nielsen rating of 5 means that 5 percent of households watching television were tuned into *Saturday Night Live.*
Michaels decided to have Tina Fey return to the SNL stage to play the role of her gubernatorial doppelganger. On September 13, 2008, the waited-for sketch aired, entitled “A Nonpartisan Message from Governor Sarah Palin & Senator Hillary Clinton.” Amy Poehler, another SNL player, played the role of Hillary Clinton, and the sketch was written by Fey, Poehler, and the SNL head writer at the time, Seth Meyers.

The sketch presents a fictional speech in which Sarah Palin and Hillary Clinton discuss sexism in the 2008 presidential election. They discuss the differences between the two women and their dislike of being grouped together because of gender. The sketch makes references to real aspects of Hillary Clinton’s Democrat presidential campaign and Palin’s campaign to be the Republican vice president alongside John McCain. The episode in which this sketch aired is currently the second-most watched episode of Saturday Night Live. Throughout 2008, the video amassed fifty-six million viral video views.¹⁰

Tina Fey and Amy Poehler returned two episodes later, this time with Poehler playing Katie Couric, interviewing Fey’s Sarah Palin. This sketch was essentially a condensed, slightly manipulated version of the original interview, but with Fey’s impeccable comedic timing. By sticking to reality, the audience was able to see through the politically correct orientation of the initial Couric interview, and land on the general idea that Palin struggles with interviews and would make an abysmal Vice President. Pulling quotes directly from the real interview allows for the show to have a real political influence instead of simply

¹⁰ Reilly, p. 271
seeking to provide entertainment with a made-up mockery. With each reprise, the audience number grew. By the fifth episode of the season, SNL secured the real Sarah Palin, and Alaska’s governor made her debut on late night television. During the first half hour of this episode, the show had 17 million viewers. Through these close-to-reality sketches, SNL viewers were able to step back from the agenda of the mainstream news and personally evaluate the 2008 presidential campaign.

The final Saturday before the 2008 presidential election featured presidential candidate John McCain as a guest on Saturday Night Live. McCain’s decision drew him away from appearances in important swing states, but made the crucial point of placing him directly in the living room of millions of voting Americans. The critical moment placed emphasis on likeability rather than a political agenda: by appearing on SNL, McCain needed to convince the country that he could be just as friendly, humorous, and personable as his opponent Barack Obama. In an election year where personality often seemed to dictate votes, McCain needed to find an outlet to show a likeable personality, and SNL was the perfect stage. With appearances by such important members of the political realm, Lorne Michaels’ show gained prominence and legitimacy.

Saturday Night Live has become a campaign stop staple. Not only does it tend to help a candidate reach a wider audience, but SNL has become necessary for candidates to showcase their political viewpoints in a way that will resonate with the modern, younger audience. In the 2000 presidential campaign, both George W. Bush and Al Gore dedicated a campaign stop to an appearance on SNL.
Candidate Ralph Nader commented on the apparent absurdity of needing to appear on a comedic entertainment show to compete in the election, saying, “Here you have this serious presidential campaign, and all of us had to go on these comedy shows like ‘Saturday Night Live,’ because that was the only way we could have more than a sound bite a reach a large audience.”

“Weekend Update” is a parody that has been with SNL since its inception, and adds to the shows relevance as a source of news. Chevy Chase was the first Weekend Update anchor, after a brief instance in which Lorne Michaels himself was slated to be behind the Update desk. The segment has always had a familiar format: the delivery of a genuine news story, followed by a punch line showcasing the absurdity of the news. Chase used his real name when introducing and signing off on Weekend Update, adding to the genuine feel of the news segment. His sign-off of “I’m Chevy Chase, and you’re not,” is in the style of a genuine newscaster. All Weekend Update anchors since have used their real name. Because the segment is attached to a real person, that person’s fame, likability, and recognition allows for the segment itself to gain the same. A fan of Chevy Chase would become a fan of Weekend Update, and likewise a Weekend Update fan becomes a Chevy Chase fan. It is the popularity of both the anchors and the segment that has allowed for Tina Fey and Amy Poehler to become breakout SNL stars, and for Jimmy Fallon and Seth Meyers to become the hosts of their own late night television shows. Chase left SNL after the first season, and was replaced by Jane Curtain joined by Bill Murray. The two hosted Weekend

\[11 \text{ Reilly, p. 196}\]
Update until 1980, when many of the initial SNL players left to pursue other endeavors.

Weekend Update came in the middle of the SNL broadcast, and served as an incentive for viewers to not shut off their television halfway through the show. NBC executive Don Oblimeyer shared that view, saying, “That’s part of the brilliance of Lorne’s construction of the show – that you have this thing at midnight that would hold people there for the first half hour, even if some of the sketches in the first half hour weren’t that strong.”

The appeal of the segment that kept viewers in their seats was its close ties with reality. The name “Weekend Update” was modeled after a real NBC news broadcast. The stories were real. The name was real. The anchors were real. Everything was real, but the presentation was different, and therefore appealing. Michaels said, “I didn’t want anything that was a funny name or implied comedy. It was to be a news broadcast and satirical, but the top stories were to be the top stories.” And so it was. Rolling Stone magazine concurred with the show’s genuinity, saying “The show’s slice of life quality, fired by a zest for realism, gives ‘Saturday Night Live’ its cutting edge of truth.” In a time when news media had become downtrodden and disheartening, Weekend Update began to allow people a release through laughter and comedy. SNL writer Neil Levy commented on Weekend Update’s purpose: “America wasn’t laughing,” he said. “And this show came along and said it’s okay to laugh, even to laugh at the

12 Reincheld, p. 192
13 Reincheld, p. 192
14 Reincheld, p. 192
bad stuff.” Americans were still getting the news, but they weren’t getting a daily dose of depression with it, and SNL believed the country was better off that way.

Weekend Update allowed for an opinion to be voiced that wasn’t the opinion of Fox News or CBS News or any of the traditionally turned-to news outlets. The opinion, to an extent, was that of a large majority of Americans. The writers of the show focused on satirizing politics because that was what Americans were interested in. Michaels said, “I think people in Washington started to pay attention to it very early on because it was frankly about them, and so the influence was pretty early, but it was very definitely a priority and very important to me that the show be taken seriously.”

Just like a real newsroom, the SNL newsroom had Associated Press stories coming in through the wire services, along with pictures that the writers chose to show in the broadcast. The room was filled with newspapers, and televisions were set to real news broadcasts. Writers combed through stories, looking for large caliber stories that could be presented with a twist, or for small, unknown news events that could strike the viewer as ridiculous. Never was something reported that was not based in fact.

In 1995, Barry Hollander conducted research that found that late-night entertainment television programs increasingly played a part in people’s knowledge of politics and public affairs. There was a large amount of people who got their news from Weekend Update, and solely Weekend Update, so the

15 Reincheld, p.192
16 Reincheld, p. 192
writers had to factor this into the stories that they chose and the way they presented them. In order to understand the joke, the target audience had to have at least a basic knowledge of the event or story, but the writers did not want to have to fully explain news events before getting to the punch line. They therefore chose stories that the target audience would presumably have at least some understanding of or interest in. As with all writing with a presumed audience, the audience’s level of knowledge must be determined in order for the writing to have its desired impact. Jimmy Fallon, co-anchor of Weekend Update from 2000 to 2004, expressed a sentiment similar to many of Weekend Update’s viewers: “Honestly, when they asked me if I wanted to do it, I had no idea about the news or anything. I don’t read. Now I found out the news through setups we do for jokes.”

The satirical value of Weekend Update allowed for discussions to begin, rather than news to be presented with one side. By showing a different aspect of what many took for granted, Weekend Update was a forum for the American public to regain a sense of subjectivity. Americans don’t have to be removed from the news, we can play an active part in its interpretation, and Weekend Update allows for that to occur. Despite the fact that the show is often inherently liberal in taste, the values of the writers and players do not come before the truth of the subject matter.

Pushing the boundaries became a part of Saturday Night Live. Airing at 11:30 p.m., the show has more freedom to get away with edgier, more risky

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17 Reincheld, p. 193
jokes. Instead of holding itself to the standards of professional journalistic language, SNL modified its dialect to reflect how its audience would talk. As a result, the show became more relatable and enticed a wider audience. By pushing those boundaries of speech and comedy, SNL’s political satire was able to be risqué and outrageous. As Jonathan Swift’s “A Modest Proposal” reflects, the more outrageous the satire, the better the point of the piece is conveyed. Mark Twain, Jonathan Swift, and other satirists of history helped to establish Saturday Night Live’s place in American politics.

Weekend Update and Saturday Night Live create relevance of news in the media. The structure and satirical material of the show is more appealing to young viewers, and young viewers are becoming part of the voting generation. SNL has spent forty years creating a satirical environment in which other forms of satire in the media can exist and evolve. Satire has become something to take seriously, and it is out of that evolution that shows such as “The Daily Show” and “The Colbert Report” have gained success.
V. The Daily Show with Jon Stewart

“The Daily Show” adopts a technique of news broadcasting in which it seeks to first and foremost entertain, but to simultaneously inform through the use of satirical narrative techniques. A late-night Comedy Central talk show hosted by Jon Stewart, “The Daily Show” airs at 11 p.m. Monday through Thursday, and is styled as a fake, satirical news program targeting mainstream news, particularly politicians. “The Daily Show” first aired on July 21, 1996. Jon Stewart adopts a “straight man” persona, in which his opinionated yet straight-faced character is surrounded by exaggerated characters with extreme opinions. It has been home to genuinely important political events, such as John Edwards’ announcement of his presidential candidacy in 2003. Featured guests have included the likes of President Barack Obama, Vice President Joe Biden, former Presidents Jimmy Carter and Bill Clinton, former British Prime Ministers Tony Blair and Gordon Brown, and former Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf. It is currently the longest running show on Comedy Central, and has won 18 Primetime Emmy Awards. As it gains prominence, “The Daily Show” also gains attention and interest from viewers looking for more than entertainment, but for news.

Multiple content analyses have found “The Daily Show” to contain as much substantial political content as the campaign coverage by broadcast networks, and a study by Brewer and Marquardt found that over half of the
stories on “The Daily Show” deal with either a political topic or world affairs.\textsuperscript{18} Through these increasingly popular studies, it is shown that entertainment dealing with politics has the ability to change the outcome of political events. One particular study by Holbert in 2005 argued the necessity of distinguishing between “various types of political entertainment TV programming based on the degree to which (1) the political content is primary or secondary in the programming and (2) the outlet offers explicit versus implicit political messages.”\textsuperscript{19} This distinction separates “The Daily Show” from late night entertainment such as The Tonight Show with Jimmy Fallon or Late Night with Seth Meyers. While Fallon, Meyers, or others such as David Letterman or Jay Leno rarely exclusively deal with politics or global news, “The Daily Show” is entertainment devoted entirely to current, newsworthy events presented in an entertainingly satirical way.

A multitude of presidential hopefuls have appeared as guests on “The Daily Show,” allowing them to showcase their ideals, talents, and endeavors. More important than these appearances, however, is the way in which Jon Stewart presents these politicians when they are not guests on the show. Much of the fodder for “The Daily Show” comes from the speeches made by politicians, acts passed by Congress, or other common actions performed by these politicians that can be manipulated into humor. More often than not, this humor

\textsuperscript{19} Hmielowski, Holbert, and Lee, p. 99
comes from a negative point of view. It is rare that Jon Stewart will commend a politician's actions on his show, because the comedic value does not come from commendation. It stems from making a mockery of someone or something, and that person is often a bumbling politician. No matter how many times a politician appears on “The Daily Show” to defend him or herself, the lasting impression comes from the comedic skills of the host and his manipulation of rhetoric to make a point.

Political satire often focuses on increasing the importance of a particular aspect of a politician. Barack Obama has the distinguishing feature of slightly-larger-than-normal ears, so his parody portrays him with ears that Dumbo would be proud of. Sarah Palin once made the remark that she could see Russia from her Alaskan residence, and that is now a quip that most imitators rely on. George W. Bush is not the most eloquent speaker, and impersonations elevate that to turn him into a nearly illiterate fool. Comedy, particularly satirical comedy, often elevates a usually negative aspect of a person, and jokes tend to come from that aspect rather than a political standpoint. In that sense, “The Daily Show” has the power to affect citizen’s perceptions and assessments of politicians. In addition to mocking politicians, “The Daily Show” often mocks the political process as an entity. Such mockery creates a cynical audience; and research has shown that the general public is becoming more cynical as a whole. This cynicism leads to the issue of a lack of trust between the public and the news media. While this distrust can lead to young Americans becoming less
likely to take politicians and the media for their word, it can also detract from political discourse as a whole and in turn lead to less productivity.

Baumgartner and Morris created a study hypothesizing that “Young viewers’ cynicism toward the news media and the electoral system will increase with exposure to campaign coverage on “The Daily Show.” They created three groups out of 732 students. The first viewed a video clip of selected coverage of the two major presidential candidates in 2004 an their campaigns on “The Daily Show.” The second group viewed a clip of the same length and topic, but contained segments from election coverage on CBS Evening News. Both clips accentuated negative aspects of the candidates, but the major difference between the two was the “Daily Show’s inclusion of sarcasm, humor, and satire. The third, control group did not watch a video. Following the viewing (or lack thereof for group three) the groups completed a questionnaire.

In testing entertainment value, the questionnaire asked participants to agree or disagree with the statement “I enjoyed watching the video clip today,” on a scale of 1 to 5, 5 being strongly agree. “The Daily Show” group average a 4.54, while the CBS Evening News averaged a 3.86. To evaluate cynicism, the study asked participants to agree or disagree with the statement “I trust the news media to cover political events fairly and accurately,” and the participants were asked “Overall, how would you rate the performance of the media in covering politics in America?” The results showed that “The Daily Show” has a

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negative influence on trust and ratings of the news media. Those who did not see “The Daily Show” clip at a 48 percent chance of disagreeing with the statement that they trust the media, and those that did watch Jon Stewart had a 59 percent chance of disagreeing with the statement.

Although viewers of “The Daily Show” tend to distrust the media and the electoral process, they simultaneously are more confident about their own ability to understand politics, whether or not that perception is inflated. Through simplifying politics with humor and jest, such entertainment shows can lead to political learning for uninformed viewers. An important factor of this simplification is that it shows viewers that they are not incompetent or unintelligent; the system is. A comedic presentation in which complexities are ignored becomes a double-edged sword, however. Viewers believe that they are more knowledgeable and therefore don’t seek additional information, but as a result of this, they are more often than not an uninformed voter.

An important factor of “The Daily Show” is its target audience. They are young. 80 percent of the regular viewers are between the age of 18 and 49, but Jon Stewart speaks to Americans between the ages of 18 and 24, and data from the Pew Research Center shows that nearly half of that age group at least occasionally watches “The Daily Show.”\textsuperscript{21} This college-aged and post-grad group views news differently than previous generations, particularly in that they don’t read newspapers or magazines or sit down to watch the 6 p.m. news. In a survey conducted between 1994 and 2004, it was found that the 18- to 24-year-old age

\textsuperscript{21} Baumgartner and Morris, p. 344
group spent about 35 minutes following news on a daily basis, as opposed to the average of 51 minutes. 25-percent of that age group actually reported that they pay no attention at all to hard news. While 15 percent of Americans over 45 reported that they learned something about the 2004 presidential campaign from “The Daily Show” or “Saturday Night Live,” 54 percent of those between 18 and 24 reported that at least some of their campaign knowledge came from those sources. Because these are the places in which many young Americans are getting their news, they have as much relevance as the traditional news media.

Despite its political orientation, “The Daily Show” is soft news. Hard news presents the facts; soft news presents the facts designed to entertain. In “The Daily Show Effect,” Jody Baumgartner and Jonathan Morris address the soft news form of entertainment, saying, “these programs feature lower levels of public affairs information and focus more on drama, sensationalism, human interest themes, and personalities.” Jon Stewart has relied on his role as an entertainer to wriggle out of criticism of his journalistic style. When criticized for not conducting thorough interviews with his guests, Stewart and his writers have responded saying that they do not have journalistic responsibility, and as comedians, their role is to entertain before it is to inform. Some “Stewartisms,” or “Daily Show” quotes designed to entertain, include the following:

- “Religion. It’s given people hope in a world torn apart by religion.”

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22 Baumgartner and Morris, p. 344
23 Baumgartner and Morris, p. 341
• “Yes, the long war on Christianity. I pray that one day we may live in an America where Christians can worship freely! In broad daylight! Openly wearing the symbols of their religion... perhaps around their necks? And maybe -- dare I dream it? -- maybe one day there can be an openly Christian President. Or, perhaps, 43 of them. Consecutively.”

• “We must, together as a nation, stop watching Fox.”
VI. The Colbert Report

Stemming out of “The Daily Show” is “The Colbert Report.” Stephen Colbert was a correspondent on Jon Stewart’s show, and in 2005, Comedy Central gave him his own show. Following the same model as Stewart, Colbert presents a news segment satirizing conservative broadcasts such as those that often appear on Fox News. Colbert created a caricature of the over-zealous political conservative, and that character refuses to bend to liberal ideology. The show was pitched by Colbert and Stewart by reportedly using the phrase “Our version of the O’Reilly Factor with Stephen Colbert.” Through rigidly conforming to every conservative ideal, Colbert showcases the ludicrousity of the real people like his character who exist in the political realm. The show has been nominated for seven Emmys, and in 2013, it won the Emmys for Outstanding Variety Series and Outstanding Writing for a Variety Series.

“The Colbert Report” has followers affectionately referred to as the “Colbert Nation,” and Stephen Colbert has mobilized this group to contribute to his efforts, whether they are seemingly ridiculous or beneficial. In 2006, he won an online poll to have a bridge named after him in Hungary. In his first episode, Colbert created a word called “truthiness,” or “the quality by which one purports to know something emotionally or instinctively, without regard to evidence or intellectual examination.” The word was named as the American Dialect Society’s 2005 Word of the Year, and the New York Times chose it as one of nine other words that captured the spirit of the year. Truthiness was voted to be Merriam-Webster’s 2006 word of the year, and it was even used in the New York
Times’ crossword puzzle in June of 2008. Perhaps the most renowned Colbert stunt, however, was his 2008 presidential bid.

On October 16, 2007, he announced his candidacy on his show, stating his intention to run both on the Republican and Democratic platforms in an effort to highlight the exclusionary nature of campaigning, but he would run only in the state of South Carolina. Due to the $35,000 fee to run as a Republican in South Carolina, he eventually ran as only a Democrat. On November 1, 2007, the executive council of the South Carolina Democratic Party voted 13-3 to keep his name off the ballot and refunded his $2500 filing fee. By November 5, 2007, Colbert he officially dropped his Presidential bid. The fact that Colbert garnered support as a potential presidential candidate at all shows the extent of his influence among young viewers. When speaking with NBC’s Meet the Press host Tim Russert, Colbert said, “I don’t want to be president. I want to run for president. There’s a difference.”24 Ian Reilly, author of “Satirical Fake News and/as American Political Discourse,” delineates that difference: “Colbert’s infiltration of the ‘real’ world of politics reveals the satirist as less interested in winning the race than in unraveling the elitist, inside the beltway culture of presidential politics.”25

Colbert himself questioned why he was being taken seriously. Although it was glaringly obvious that the Comedy Central star’s presidential run was an effort to make a mockery out of the system, he was granted interviews with hard-hitting media outlets normally reserved for genuine presidential

24 Reilly, p. 266
25 Reilly, p. 266
candidates, such as the aforementioned Meet the Press or the New York Times. If these sources of news were looking to only report on the news instead of sell newspapers or advertising slots, they would have never granted interviews with the facetious Colbert. His appearances in the mainstream media make the viewer start to question the authenticity and influence of these sources.

Colbert’s fake presidential bid revealed the extensive economic background required to even consider an electoral campaign. By tearing down the American idealism that promotes the idea that anyone can run for President, Colbert showcased inequality. Without economic resources and political connections, a presidential bid is a pipe dream. Despite the fake nature of his bid, Colbert managed to root the presidential election in reality for the majority of the American public by showing that politics are often limited to an elite few with extensive financial support.

The essence of Stephen Colbert’s character is that his entire persona is a joke, but a joke that speaks to the “truthiness” of politics. None of Colbert’s caricature is a reality, but what his audience garners from his show is not the conservative ideology he is promoting, but the exact opposite.
VII. The Onion

Another popular form of satirical news media is *The Onion*, a print satire. Founded by University of Wisconsin-Madison juniors Tim Keck and Christopher Johnson in 1988, *The Onion* now circulates to around 200,000 people and has about 11 million unique online visitors per month, although at its print peak it circulated to 500,000. The college juniors sold the newspaper to Editor-in-Chief Scott Dikkers and Advertising Sales Manager Peter Haise for less than $20,000 the year after its creation. In 1996, *The Onion* created theonion.com, which allowed it to reach a wider audience, and the website propelled *The Onion* to fame beyond simply a freely distributed parody newspaper. In 2001, the company relocated from Madison to New York City.

*The Onion* has grown from a print media to a form covering multiple aspects of news presentation. In 2006, the company launched their YouTube channel parodying American news, and it currently has over 600,000 subscribers. In 2007, the Onion News Network was launched, with a 24-hour video portrayal satirizing the news. In 2008, *The Onion* received Peabody Award acknowledging the journalistic endeavors for the Onion News Network.

*The Onion* is an example of how an uninformed reader can misconstrue satire for reality. Because the Internet allows for stories to be shared freely, the article is often separated from its original source. Because of this, many readers have difficulty distinguishing between what is real and what is fake, particularly when articles are shared on social media sites. Here are some headlines that have duped readers in the past:
• “Taylor Swift Now Dating Senator Joseph McCarthy”
• New Study Finds 85% of Americans Don’t Know All the Dance Moves to National Anthem”
• “Lonely Teacher, Outcast Student Begin Somewhat Endearing Sexual Relationship”
• “Justin Bieber Found To Be Cleverly Disguised 51-Year-Old Pedophile”

_The Onion_ also encourages a new kind of journalistic relationship, in which all of the articles published on their “Spoof” section online are freelance, sent in from readers. Through the style of journalism, readers can grasp multiple points. In an article titled “Middle East Conflict Intensifies as Blah Blah Blah, Etc. Etc.”, _The Onion_ “challenges the notion that journalistic reportage makes cultural consonant messages readable and culturally dissonant messages unsayable.”26 The article shows the trivial nature of journalism that strives to always accurately and objectively convey reality, as it cannot always do so. In describing the conflict in Afghanistan in the following excerpt, the author subverts traditional standards of journalism:

A certain number of U.S. troops were also killed somewhere in some tragic fashion, while a much greater number were wounded. Meanwhile, impoverished or oppressed supporters of whichever faction carried out the attack or ambush probably celebrated, angering an angry U.S. public that is already angry. Locals are calling for an investigation into excessive force or outright corruption by military or political officials on one of the 15 sides of the various conflicts, although the implicated party has categorically denied wrongdoing, just like they always do, without fail, every time this happens, which is daily, it seems.27

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26 Reilly, p. 263
27 Reilly, p. 263
Through this form of criticism, *The Onion* allows for reevaluation of the language used about foreign policy and conflict in the Middle East. Even if the point of this article doesn’t reach the reader, he or she can still register that the author is mocking journalistic reporting.

In February 2008, the *Onion News Network* aired a video segment titled “Diebold Accidentally Leaks Results of 2008 Election Early.” After some of the public’s anxieties about electronic voting machines came to light, the segment jumped on the election fraud fear. Similar to many *Onion* stories, the ONN story revealed the rhetoric that politicians and journalists use to create a positive spin on something as undemocratic as complete election fraud. Like Tina Fey’s portrayal of Sarah Palin, *The Onion* relies on the real, genuine framework of journalism to reveal sensationalist journalism and its attempt to influence the American public. Rather than relying on hyperbole and the dramatic, the most effective satire is that which is difficult to distinguish from the real thing.
VIII. The Psychology of Humor

The essence of print and broadcast news satire is manipulation. Perceived humor has a multitude of indirect effects on an audience’s perception of argument quality. Psychological research has shown that messages delivered with humor are both persuasive and memorable.28 As the satirist strives to bring about a certain point of the view in the mind of his or her audience, persuasion is a key aspect of a satirical message.

An important aspect in the success of modern satire is one’s affinity for it. J.D. Hmielowski, R. Lance Holbert, and Jayeon Lee studied this affinity in “Predicting the Consumption of Political TV Satire: Affinity for Political Humor, The Daily Show, and The Colbert Report.” There are multiple existing scales to measure humor, however many lack validity and the ability to support psychometric testing. Hmielowski and company sought to measure a person’s affinity for political humor in particular. They found that incongruity is common in satirical news, in which people laugh at social inconsistencies, but only those that fall between the mundane and the unacceptable. While an inconsistency is funny, one that is too extreme and thought provoking tends to not make an audience laugh. People also find things funny when they gain a sense of triumph or superiority over others. In the study of political humor, people can laugh at the mistakes of politicians or opposing political parties due to the ability they have to elevate themselves above the subject matter. People will also use humor to attain social goals, in that they will seek out others that share a similar sense

28 Baumgartner and Morris, p. 345
of humor, and can form connections by mocking politicians. Political humor with a common target is a uniting factor for society.\textsuperscript{29}

In the study, Hmielowski, Holbert, and Lee created an “Affinity for Political Humor” scale (AFPH). They found that because satire does not approach the topic of politics with the same lens as newsrooms do, the content is entirely distinct from news and is therefore studied differently. The study numerically supported literary claims that political TV satire is in part about being entertained, but can also educate and persuade. The study additionally demonstrates a relationship between viewing political satire and liberal cable TV news, as opposed to conservative news. As a satirical angle appears in liberal news shows such as \textit{Hardball with Chris Matthews}, \textit{Countdown with Keith Olbermann}, and \textit{The Rachel Maddow Show}, the two genres tend to offer inside jokes among liberal opinion leaders, which viewers appreciate. Contrarily, CNN and Fox News lack satirically oriented material. This speaks to the pervasive nature of contemporary satirical news. While \textit{The Daily Show}, SNL, and other forms of fake news are gaining substantial recognition as legitimate sources of news, genuine news programming is providing more entertainment that it has previously.

In relation to affinity for political humor, it is important that the audience members have a basic understanding of the topic of the satirical message, as that will influence the overall persuasive capabilities of the satire. There is a separation between the subject of the satire and those that are laughing at the

\textsuperscript{29} Hmielowski, Holbert, and Lee, p. 101-102
subject’s expense. Because the satirist and the audience are on the same side of that divide, they need to have the same basic understanding of the concept in order for the joke to land.
IX. Suspicion and Satire: The Element of Trust

While satire has always been around, it rises to prominence when there is a need for it. It was popular in first- and second-century Rome, in the late sixteenth century in England, the seventeenth century in France, and again in England in the eighteenth century. In America, satire has steadily risen to popularity from the 1970s and has grown in the twenty-first century. By the mid-2000s, nearly a quarter of Americans between the ages of 18 and 29 attributed their news source to the online programming of shows like Saturday Night Live and The Daily Show.\textsuperscript{30} With a heated presidential election every four years, the fodder for satirical news programming doesn’t need to be sought; it presents itself. A highly-charged political atmosphere has citizens glued to the news, and when the news becomes redundant and clearly sensationalized, satire steps in to cut to the truth.

The importance of satire can boil down to trust. When the public can no longer trust the journalistic integrity of the mainstream news media, it ironically turns to fake, satirical news sources to get the truth. These caricatures of real people have the ability to shed light on politics and national and international news more than the facts themselves do. While the news media may often attempt to change an event to suit their needs, political satirists are trying to reveal rather than disguise. Fake news does not have to abide by the conventions of journalism, and therefore has more freedom to surpass standards that may

make traditional reporting inaccessible to the average citizen. He speaks for “Everyman,” so Jon Stewart’s powerful place in the media dictates that he must be able to be trusted. In a poll conducted by Time Magazine in 2009, Jon Stewart was voted the most trusted newscaster in the post-Cronkite era. Competing against Brian Williams, Katie Couric and Charlie Gibson, Stewart triumphed with 44 percent of the vote.31 By using the language that the everyday American communicates with, Stewart, Stephen Colbert, Weekend Update hosts, and writers for The Onion establish relatability, and in turn, gain trust with the American public.

Jon Stewart and company have become newsworthy and reliable. The aura of authenticity that surrounds fake news seems paradoxical, but paradox is one of satire’s very aims. Modern political satire has come to represent insightful conversations, progressive thinking, and political discourse not allowed for by the traditional media. Fake news has become the voice of the people, and satire has become a medium through which important political issues can be conveyed. As Stephen Colbert said on the premiere episode of The Colbert Report, “The 'truthiness' is, anyone can read the news to you. I promise to feel the news...at you.”

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31 Crittenden, Hopkins, and Simmons, p. 175
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Works Referenced


