

**The Hidden Truthiness:
The Unexpected Effects of Late-Night Television Comedy and Satire
On American Politics and Culture**


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Presented to the American Culture Faculty
at the University of Michigan-Flint
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
Master of Arts in Liberal Studies
in
American Culture

April 25, 2017

First Reader



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PREFACE

This thesis began as a response to the multitude of questions I had during the 2016 election, particularly concerning the ways that Americans discovered political information. During the campaign, it was easy to see that a significant portion of voters distrusted mainstream media, due in large part to the repeated chant of “fake news” from Donald Trump. But, on the flipside, a large portion of voters continued to get their information from shows that weren’t really providing “news” at all. Since the election, the dance between Trump, the media and late-night comedy shows seems to be in a continual state of change. If I were to continue to research, nuances would continue to reshape the conclusion.

Mainstream media accounts for a great number of my sources, simply because it offers timely response to probing questions in a way that academic sources might take months to update. I chose sources that are generally “trusted” (or, were, until the “fake news” shouts began.)

ABSTRACT

Whether they serve as a gateway to traditional news sources, a microscope to dissect the problems in our country, a mirror to reflect the problems we ourselves bring to the table, a voice for the underdog, a communal place of respite for the weary or just the source of a laugh during trying times, late-night television comedy and satire serves numerous roles in how we receive and interpret political news. This paper discusses the ways in which truly “fake news” may become the voice of reason when traditional sources are being questioned.

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Introduction

History of Politics in Late Night Television

On September 26, 1960, John F. Kennedy and Richard Nixon went head to head in a historic presidential debate. Both candidates were well-spoken, well-prepared and presented remarkably similar agendas. Radio listeners considered the debate a draw. But it wasn't the pairing or the content that marked this debate, the first of six between the candidates, as historically significant. It was the medium. This was the first debate where the demeanor, charisma, and confidence of the candidates could be critiqued and analyzed, before the candidates even uttered a word. For the first time ever, a presidential debate was televised.

Media scholars argue that television may have cost Nixon the presidency. He is considered to have appeared "disheveled and worried," while Kennedy appeared "confident" (Danesi 168). The candidates were learning in a new way that appearances are important and being "likeable" is a measurable factor, particularly when addressing a television audience.

While the debates gave viewers (and voters) a look at the candidates in a structured setting and format, both Kennedy and Nixon recognized that television

programming afforded them other opportunities to present their message—and their personality—to voters: namely, late-night talk shows.

John F. Kennedy was the first major candidate to appear on a late-night television show, *Tonight Starring Jack Paar*. In June 1960, just months prior to the September debate, then-Senator Kennedy appeared on the show and engaged in some serious discourse about the threat of communism. Unlike many modern-day candidates who appear on entertainment shows, Kennedy played it straight, answering audience questions in a town-hall type format, with only a few light and humorous moments. (Kennedy awkwardly mentioned that he became an honorary “Indian” and that he now “roots for them” when watching Westerns on TV.)

Nixon, then Vice President, also made an appearance with Paar in the summer of 1960. Though considered to have looked stiff and uncomfortable during the first debate, Nixon’s *Tonight* appearance was more conversational and dotted with humor than Kennedy’s. Though the format was still formal compared to today’s late-night talk show standards, Nixon seemed to recognize the humanizing value of late-night television, as he went on to appear with Paar again in 1963, during which time he even played an original composition on the piano. The bar had been set, and the line between politics and entertainment started to blur, even if just slightly.

Chapter I
Late-Night Talk Shows
"The duty of comedy is to correct men while amusing them." ~Moliere

While controversial at the time, with their first appearances on late-night talk shows, Kennedy and Nixon set the stage for subsequent appearances by candidates for decades to follow. American politicians have increasingly used comedy and late-night talk show interviews to emphasize their non-political personae (Moy, Xenos, Hess 2005). The increased interest in late-night appearances by candidates is not without reason; a 2000 Pew Research Center poll indicated that 47 percent of Americans under 30 years old received at least some of their campaign news from late-night shows (Moy, *et. al*). While the number of younger voters relying on late-night comedy for election information appears to have peaked in 2000, a similar Pew Research Center poll conducted in 2016 indicated that more than a third (34%) of adults ages 18-29 still report the genre as a source for their election information, citing late night comedy as a resource more often than either local or national print news sources. Social media, which edged-out late-night shows as the top source of election information (35%) by the 18-29 age group, often included the sharing of posts and videos by late-night talk shows, comedy news shows and sketch comedy shows (Pew 2016).

If voters, particularly younger voters, are receiving a significant portion of their political news from shows that are intended to entertain, rather than to inform, are there consequences? Are there benefits? The answer to both is yes. Researchers from the University of Wisconsin – Eau Claire found that late-night television hosts regularly demonstrate political bias, usually leaning left, favoring Democratic candidates and policies (Duerst, Koloen, Peterson 2001). Monologues presented by late night hosts offer the best opportunity for exposure to the political biases of the shows or the hosts themselves, and are often fraught with a substantial amount of political content. Many times these mirror the content of actual news broadcasts with an emphasis on the humorous and comedic elements, rather than hard facts (Duerst, Koloen, Peterson 2001). Candidates can move and shape the content of conversation during interviews, thus deemphasizing negative or controversial topics. Viewers who rely on this type of programming for exposure to the important political and non-political stories of the day may be missing not only the benefit of hearing alternative perspectives, but a great deal of relevant information as well. A 2000 Pew Research Center poll found that those who identified late night talk shows as a regular source of information are the least informed audience. Forty-five percent of respondents knew little or nothing about the candidates or even who was seeking election, suggesting that late night television may not be adequate as a sole source of information (Pew 2000).

However, there are notable benefits to seeking political information via late-night entertainment. When candidates and politicians make appearances on late-night television programs, it does more than make them appear “likeable,”; it makes them

accessible to a wide and diverse audience. Michael Steele, former chairman of the Republican National Committee says, "Late-night television provides an opportunity for buttoned-up candidates to show a 'softer side' of themselves to a mass audience. One appearance on *The Tonight Show* will reach more people than your biggest mass mailing. It is smart politics to sit in the chair for six or 10 (sic) minutes" (Blake 2015). Aside from exposure to the candidates, the entertaining aspects of the interviews engage viewers who are typically less political than those who regularly tune into hard news shows for information. The apolitical viewer may be unlikely to seek out other, more traditional sources for news and information, making the late-night genre an appealing option. Particular policy considerations become more easily accessible to a wide audience in this medium. When politics is presented in an entertaining way, viewers are more engaged and are better able to recall and process policy facts (Parkin 2010). As noted, this seems to be particularly true among young voters. Exposure to political commentary, candidates and relevant news stories presented as comedy or satire may first occur through these late night channels, but a considerable segment of viewers then supplement political news from entertainment-based sources with information from harder news outlets, thus potentially serving as the gateway to a more informed electorate (Young and Tisinger 2006). Tuning into an entertaining political interview increases the likelihood that young people will engage in the political process, whether it is by taking place in a march or protest, signing an online or written petition about a particular candidate or issue, or by simply voting in an election (Becker 2013).

The benefits and consequences of political discussions taking place on late-night comedy are not limited to the viewers and the electorate. The image of the candidates and politicians themselves are affected, as viewers make decisions about their personae and credibility. Appearances on late-night talk shows allow candidates and politicians to control the dialogue to a greater degree. Candidates' interviews allow them to be more personal and potentially convey messages directly to an audience, bypassing the filter of journalistic dissection and sound-bites (Moy, Xenos and Hess2005).

Late-night hosts of the past (Johnny Carson, Jay Leno, David Letterman, and others) were carefully "balanced" in their assaults on political figures, in an effort to attempt to appear non-partisan, and appeal to a wide audience from all sides of the political spectrum. Bernard Timberg says of Johnny Carson, "As Everyman, Carson suggests he is directly on a beam with the sensibilities of his viewing public" (Timberg 1987), regardless of what those "sensibilities" might be. As Jay Leno explains, as soon as you declare your support for one party or the other, "you've lost half the crowd already" (Sella 102). However, if you look a little closer, you might be able to discern glimpses of Carson's political views. For one week in February of 1968, Carson handed the keys (and the audience) of the *Tonight Show* to entertainer, Harry Belafonte. The U.S had just launched the Tet offensive in Vietnam, major cities across the country were wracked with protests, and the Democratic party was coming apart. And, yet, Carson allowed Belafonte, well known for not only his calypso music, but also for being an outspoken activist, the opportunity to share his voice, his art and activism to a mostly white audience—a politically bold move. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. made an

appearance with Belafonte that week, as did Robert Kennedy. Less than two months later, King would be assassinated; Kennedy, too, would be assassinated a few short months later. During the interview with Dr. King, Belafonte quietly asks, “Dr. King, do you fear for your life?” King’s response sounds like a test-run of the speech on morality and mortality that he would deliver the night before his death. King says:

Not really. We have lived with this a number of years now. If I moved around concerned about this, it would completely immobilize me and I couldn’t function. And so I’ve come to the point where I take this whole matter philosophically. I believe in my soul that unmerited suffering is redemptive, and if something happened to me, maybe something else would come of it. The other thing is that now, with what is ahead and what I have to do, I’m more concerned about the quality of my life than the quantity of my life. In other words, I’m more concerned about doing a good job and serving God. Ultimately, it isn’t so important how long you live—it’s how well you live (King via Walsh).

Journalist Joan Walsh recalled the historical significance of Belafonte’s week of filling in for Carson 49 years after the event in a February 2017 issue of *The Nation*, saying, “Belafonte’s *Tonight Show* stint certainly thrilled black viewers everywhere. The scholar Henry Louis Gates Jr. recalls being a high-school junior in Piedmont, West Virginia, transfixed by seeing the entertainer on Carson’s throne. ‘Night after night, my father and I stayed up late to watch a black man host the highest-rated show in its time slot—history in the making,’ Gates wrote in a 1996 *New Yorker* profile of Belafonte” (Walsh).

Belafonte was given the opportunity to craft his guest list, but it wasn't without scrutiny, as Chiz Schultz, executive producer of Belafonte entertainment recalls. Schultz worked with Belafonte during his week on the *Tonight Show*. Shortly after Belafonte turned in his list, "we got a visit from an NBC VP," Schultz recalls. "He said, 'That's great—you're having Dr. King. But he's not gonna get into that civil-rights stuff, is he?' Harry just deadpanned, 'No, he's going to talk about opera.' That was really the end of it—Harry solved it with a joke, right there in the office" (Walsh 2017). Fifteen of the 25 guests who appeared on the *Tonight Show* with Belafonte were African American. The late-night comedy format allowed Belafonte to weave together a stunning blend of pop-culture and politics, both with the underlying message of unity and diversity during a tense time in history. The singer and activist Buffy Sainte-Marie, who'd lost television engagements over her antiwar and pro-American-Indian activism, made an appearance, as did The Smothers Brothers whose variety show was cancelled by CBS for its forays into liberal politics. With Belafonte, Tommy Smothers joked: "I want to thank CBS for allowing us to come on NBC and do some of our distasteful material" (Walsh 2017). Belafonte recalls the pointed decisions made when crafting his guest list, saying, "All of these people came with a social point of view. That was my goal: to articulate a particular point of view. We were at the peak of social and political struggle in the country. America was awakened. The viewership was astounding" (Walsh 2017).

Carson's controversial decision to turn the show over to Belafonte for a week, and Belafonte's vision of involving a diverse cast of politicians, entertainers, athletes

and activists, demonstrate the power of late-night talk shows to be a catalyst for relevant, important discussions. Belafonte said goodbye to the Tonight *Show* audience that week by saying, "I am fully aware of how many of you have been offended by the politics aired on this show this week. None of it was meant to offend. But all of this was consciously arranged by me to give you all a taste of what's being said in rooms that many of you may not know or enter. Thank you for listening" (Walsh 2017).

Chapter II
Satire News Shows
"Satire is parody with a point" ~ Stephen Colbert

Making fun of politics and politicians is certainly not a new phenomenon. Actually, while social satire can be found in the Bible (Paul of Tarsus, New Testament), its origins even predate biblical times. The earliest form of political satire emerged in 450 BC, with the Greek Dramatist, Aristophanes, who incorporated licentious humor, chorus, mime and even burlesque into his politically critical plays (Taplin, Platnauer 2015). Shakespeare was also known to throw a few political punches, particularly in *Richard III*, *Henry IV* and *Henry VII*, with characters like Falstaff, who points out the hypocrisy of those in power who speak so often on honor, and the physical description of Richard III.

There is also a long history of critically engaged political humor in American entertainment. While some has unsympathetically, yet humorously, attacked a particular person or policy, historically, much has expressed a fundamental contempt for politics, social ills, and the government in general. Mark Twain's satirical writings and many of H.L. Mencken's sardonic forays offer examples of this approach (Peterson 2008). Twain attacks the continuation of racism after slavery was abolished in "The

Adventures of Huckleberry Finn". Known for satirically reporting the Scopes "Monkey" trial, which dealt with teaching evolution in any state-funded school, Mencken heaped verbal abuse on everything and everyone he didn't like – ignorance, public officials, and fundamentalist Christianity, for instance.

Political satire started to become notably more visible on American television in the late 1960s. Shows like *The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour* (CBS) and *Rowan and Martin's Laugh-In* (NBC) offered viewers a first glimpse at a television host/comedian using a show to push back at or poke fun of the president, a politician or a political hot-button item. While *Laugh-In* may have firmly cemented its place in historical comedy history with Nixon's six-second appearance, uttering the famous catchphrase, "sock it to me," it was the Smothers Brothers who pushed the envelope of politics and entertainment during that decade, and, in the end, fell victim to the wrath of the censors as a result. According to David Bianculli of PBS, "At first, the censored bits were silly, like an Elaine May sketch about, ironically, censorship. But quickly, the jokes became political, and battle lines were drawn. CBS was like a stern parent, placing more and more restrictions on a rebellious teenager — and Tom (Smothers), especially, got more rebellious. He and brother, Dick, and the rest, including head writer Mason Williams put more meat and meaning into the program — or tried to" (Bianculli 2017). Bianculli continues, saying, "The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour influenced all satirical political shows that followed, from *Saturday Night Live* to Jon Stewart, Stephen Colbert, John Oliver and Samantha Bee."

Television's political satire evolved through the decades that followed, with *Saturday Night Live* hitting the scene in 1975. As I will examine in the next chapter, SNL created its own brand of skit-based sketch satire comedy, developing caricatures of presidential candidates and politicians that would shape their legacy in unexpected ways. Never shying away from politically-charged or sensitive topics, SNL would tackle race, religion, sex and scandals – sometimes all in the same show.

In 1996, the line between news and entertainment was blurred further by the emergence of two new cable news channels: *Fox News* and *MSNBC*. The explicitly partisan persuasion of each channel offered a mix of news coverage, commentary and entertainment segments like Chris Matthew's "Hardball Sideshow" and Bill O'Reilly's "Dumbest Things of the Week" (Lynch). During the same year, political satire took on an entirely new form, with new effects, due to the advent of the "fake news" show. Comedy Central's *The Daily Show* offered a new brand of satire, and audiences were intrigued. While it could be argued that the short-lived NBC series, *That Was the Week That Was*, pioneered the "fake news" concept during its seven-month run in 1964-65, it didn't push the political envelope in the way that the more modern iterations do, nor did it garner similar audience numbers. However, when Jon Stewart took over the reins of *The Daily Show* in 1999 (renaming it *The Daily Show with John Stewart*), he ushered in an arguably new era of relevance for political satire, and created a phenomenon that has been widely studied by those in entertainment and academia alike.

Stewart's new brand of satire was not only informative, engaging viewers and leading them to become more politically involved, as previously discussed (Becker), but

it is also credited with inciting action from policy makers by shining a light on otherwise overlooked topics and putting pressure on them to act. When Stewart repeatedly derided Congress for holding up benefits for 9/11 First Responders under the Zadroga Act, the increased coverage is credited with essentially shaming Congress into eventually passing the bill (Lynch 2012).

The popularity of Stewart's new take on political satire, or as Stewart himself calls it, "fake news," opened the door for others to follow. Regularly featured on *The Daily Show*, Stephen Colbert followed Stewart's success with his own brand of satire news, *The Colbert Report* (Comedy Central, 2005-2014). Unlike Stewart, Colbert featured a single-character political satire show that was unprecedented in television history.

As comedians, Stewart and Colbert have political power that is completely unique. Their position outside the journalistic mainstream allows them to raise issues and call out politicians in ways that traditional news sources shy away from, and they forged a strong following because of it. Daniel Lynch of the Harvard Political Review says, "Heirs to a long tradition of political satire, Stewart and Colbert enjoy special license to expose the folly of society's leaders. That said, they are also very much products of their times. Their prominence, not only as comedians but also as news sources, stands as a testament to widespread popular dissatisfaction with current politics and the mainstream journalists who cover it. They epitomize the breakdown of old distinctions between entertainment and political journalism" (Lynch). As Lynch notes, the timing of Stewart and Colbert's emersion may have played a critical role in

their success. With *Fox News* and *MSNBC* rising in popularity, the two comedians spoke out not only about politicians, policy and current affairs, but chided the divisiveness of the rhetoric coming from the new cable networks as well.

Colbert and Stewart's brand of political satire has been studied from numerous angles. While many scholars and pop-culture connoisseurs have looked at the effects of Stewart and Colbert on public attentiveness (Cao), perception and credibility (Littau and Stewart) and factual recall (Becker), many academics have taken a broader look at what the pair mean to political discourse in modern times. Paul Farhi of the *Washington Post* studied what he called "the academic world's obsession with Stephen Colbert," noting the dozens of scholarly articles, essays and books about Colbert's contribution to journalism, communication and even philosophy (Farhi 2012). Colbert's greatest contribution to political discourse is the ability to unite people by using satire to mock those in power and examine prevailing social attitudes, much like the great satirists before him. As Farhi notes, "Colbert is worthy of study because his single-character political satire is unique in the annals of television. His character, an egomaniacal right-wing gasbag, connects him to a long Western satirical tradition going all the way back to the Roman poet Horace and the ancient Greek playwright Sophocles, although neither of those guys had basic-cable gigs" (Farhi 2012). Colbert's appeal crosses disciplines, compelling political scientists to take entertainment television seriously, and mass communication academics to think more about politics. University of North Carolina professor of media studies, Geoffrey Baym, cites Colbert's self-created

super PAC – “Making a Better Tomorrow, Tomorrow” – as “an unprecedented example of information, entertainment and activism (Baym 2010).

Whereas hard news and traditional journalism relegate viewers to a passive role, literally saying, “that’s the way it is,” satire and “comic news” invite and encourage viewers to question whether that really was the way it was (Baym 2010). Stewart and Colbert required viewers to be engaged in the news and understand the content behind it in order to get the joke. Their shows encourage the active discovery of news from multiple sources by requiring viewers to come prepared to watch, rather than the passive digestion of news that is spoon-fed by someone self-elevated to the position of authority that come from sitting behind a news desk.

In addition to requiring their viewers to be informed prior to watching, rather than after, Stewart and Colbert expected them to do something else that is outside of the norm of television news: They asked them to be skeptical. The comic pair regularly dissected the flaws that plague the news media, particularly sloppy reporting, bias and the incessant need to be the first to break a story, teaching viewers to be aware and consume hard news reports with an eye that is not cynical but careful (Schwartz 2015). The duo known for revolutionizing “fake news” was calling out their traditional counterparts for producing “fake news” long before Donald Trump made the term a household phrase.

Stewart and Colbert’s call for critical thinking and holding the traditional news media accountable extended beyond their daily broadcasts. In 2010, they jointly hosted a rally in Washington D.C. In the days leading up to the “Rally to Restore

Sanity,” the news media was entirely confused about the intent of the event, questioning whether it was a statement against the government, tying it to the 2010 election, assuming it was a pro-liberal or pro-Obama event, and generally grasping at straws to make sense of the intent and the true message of the event. In truth, it was a lot of things to the estimated 75,000 people who attended, but at the end of the day, Stewart explained to the media what their savvy audience members knew: It was about the media itself. Stewart broke the news to the media and the rest of the public during his concluding remarks, saying,:

Unfortunately one of our main tools in delineating between the media and their approach broke. The country’s 24-hour political pundit perpetual panic conflictinator (sic) did not cause our problems, but its existence makes solving them that much harder. The press can hold its magnifying glass up to our problems, bringing them into focus, illuminating issues heretofore unseen or they can use that magnifying glass to light ants on fire and then, perhaps, host a week of shows on the sudden, unexpected dangerous flaming ant epidemic.

If we amplify everything, we hear nothing. There are terrorists and racists and Stalinists and theocrats, but those are titles that must be earned.

You must have the resume. Not being able to distinguish between real racists and Tea Partiers or real bigots and Juan Williams and Rick Sanchez is an insult, not only to those people, but to the racists themselves who have put in the exhausting effort it takes to hate. Just as the inability to

distinguish terrorists from Muslims makes us less safe not more. The press is our immune system. If we overreact to everything, we actually get sicker. And, perhaps, eczema (Stewart, 2010).

The effect of cable media insiders criticizing and trivializing the partisan antics of cable media colleagues resonated with their audience and the generally younger crowd that followed them out to the national mall. Viewers and “protestors” echoed Stewart in his message: America isn’t broken. Stop yelling at us and trying to convince us it is.



"Protest" signs from the "Rally to Restore Sanity", October 30, 2010. About.com

Chapter III

Sketch Comedy – *Saturday Night Live*

"Fools...speak wisely what wise men do foolishly" (As You Like It 1.2)

For the past four decades, Americans have tuned to NBC on Saturday nights to watch a constantly evolving, colorful cast of characters parody newsmakers and current events, satirize the headlines, and playfully mock pop culture - all within the context of a ninety-minute, live production. Over the course of the past forty years, *Saturday Night Live* has become an American media institution, creating characters for each generation of viewers that have developed into household names, from "The Coneheads," to "The Blues Brothers" and "Wayne and Garth." Throughout its history, *SNL* has been both lauded and criticized for taking on the sensitive subjects of the day. Issues of race, gender, sexual identity, religion, political "hot buttons" and global affairs were never off limits. While *SNL* consistently reflects what is happening in American current culture, it also simultaneously plays a role in shaping it.

From the beginning, *Saturday Night Live* served to rebrand the network and even the city in which it was positioned. In the mid-1970s, New York was in the midst of a financial crisis. It was out of money, in danger of defaulting on loans, and struggling to

make payroll for city employees on a weekly basis. In 1975, Mayor Abe Beame and his administration continued to deny the seriousness of the situation, though, in the end, the federal government had to step in and bail the city out with large loans in order to avoid bankruptcy (Marx 3). Crime and unemployment rates were higher than the rest of the country's, and the general attitude was that New York City was "scarier, dirtier, and more ruinous" than any other city in America (Murray 42).

NBC was facing a crisis of its own at this time. Faltering ratings, floundering identity and failed attempts to attract the younger viewer were sending the network into a tailspin. Of the nine new prime-time programs NBC rolled out at the start of the 1975 season, not one survived to see fall of 1976.

In the context of the city's financial and public relations crisis and a network desperately searching for a new identity, *SNL* appeared. Associate professor of Media, Culture, and Communication at New York University, Susan Murray, explains, "By focusing on the mid-1970s, a time when both the city and NBC were struggling, we can see how *SNL*'s New York backdrop and sensibility were deployed to create a space where New York, television comedy and NBC were all subtly (and sometimes not so subtly) rebranded, pleasing critics and city officials alike" (Murray 41). *SNL*'s title sequence, which showcases shots of NYC at night, makes the city appear to be alive, exciting and inviting, rather than dangerous and decaying – an image that, according to Murray, "had been reinforced by new reports, popular films, and television of this

period" (Murray 43)¹. The signature phrase, "Live from New York....it's Saturday Night!" highlights the show's connectedness to the city, and tells viewers that something great is about to happen there, serving to both set the stage for the city and the network as "young" and "fresh." From its inception, *SNL* has featured New York in the setting of sketches, the casting of hosts (including two former NYC Mayors, Ed Koch and Rudy Giuliani) and an abundance of New York-centric jokes. The national affection for the first season's cast served to play a part in the city's rebranding as well (and, less directly, NBC's). Murray notes that some of the program's stars, such as Gilda Radner were recruited to participate in the "I Love NY" campaign, which began in 1977 (Murray 50). A number of New York City mayors have used *SNL* directly as a public relations and city branding tool through appearances on the show, either as hosts or as guests. Murray explains, "Their appearances on the program have served to remind viewers of *SNL*'s connection to the economics and culture of the city and to mobilize that connection for specific political ends." Even in its formative years, producers, politicians and others recognized the potential for the show to inform and shape the opinion of the American public.

Much like the late-night talk show circuit, some politicians have attempted to utilize *SNL* as a platform to broadcast their agenda and improve or control their personal brand. Others have discovered the cultural power of the show with far less positive results. As author Jeffrey P. Jones notes, "From Chevy Chase's thin but arresting impersonation of President Gerald Ford in 1975 to Tina Fey's spot-on

¹ Murray cites films such as *Mean Streets* (1973), *Death Wish* (1974), *The Taking of Pelham One Two Three* (1974), *Dog Day Afternoon* (1975), and *Taxi Driver* (1976) as films released in the early to mid-1970s which used New York City as a dark, nefarious backdrop.

caricature of vice presidential candidate Sarah Palin in 2008, *Saturday Night Live* has been the go-to location in U. S. culture for humorous television commentary on presidents, presidential candidates and election events” (Jones 77). While “humorous,” the agenda-setting potential of *Saturday Night Live* has been studied by scholars of political science and media for decades. A wide array of literature on the subject focuses on the 2008 election season, particularly Fey’s portrayal of Palin, who, at the time, was a relatively unknown politician. Author Dannagal G. Young discusses *SNL*’s influence in defining Palin’s public image. Young argues that the rise of media coverage and “emphasis on candidate personalities” opened the door for *SNL* to essentially create Palin’s public persona (Young 338). Although Fey was no longer a cast member, media outlets started questioning her return as soon as Palin was announced as Senator John McCain’s running mate, simply because of Fey’s physical resemblance to Palin (Flowers 48). The media primarily focused on Fey’s satirical portrayal of Palin, shifting the discussion away from political issues to the actress’ fictional characterization. Young argues that, “Although the press initially set the political agenda by devoting coverage to the possibility of Fey playing Palin rather than on covering Palin’s background or political stance, *Saturday Night Live* utilized the intense press coverage to significantly shape Palin’s public image” (Young 302). Young further argues that in the 2008 vice-presidential debate, Palin was forced to debate not her opponent Joe Biden, but Fey’s impersonation of her (Young 258).

Through Fey’s satirical portrayal of Palin, *Saturday Night Live* strongly shaped the way Palin was received by both the press and the general public, with the public going

so far as to credit Palin with statements only made by Fey's version of the candidate. ("I can see Russia from my house.") Fey's spot-on impression of Palin's actual nervous body language became engrained in viewers' minds (Pfeifer 168). Although intended to provide a humorous take on the relatively unknown governor, statistics show that SNL truly set a political agenda, as Palin's favorability ratings continually declined in the two months following Fey's premier as Palin. Conversely, *SNL's* ratings increased with each of Fey's Palin sketches (Jones 86). *Saturday Night Live's* coverage highlighted critical issues surrounding Palin's nomination and led the media and the public to question her qualifications and knowledge about pressing political issues (Young 258).

Saturday Night Live's effect on candidates and their campaigns was not entirely negative. In some instances, the *SNL* parody of a political figure arguably made him or her more likable, and perhaps, more popular. Dana Carvey's portrayal of George H. W. Bush is a prime example. As Jones says, "When Carvey crafted a caricature that focused on Bush's seemingly strange lexical choice and awkward manner of speaking, he served up Bush as someone recognizable, familiar and unthreatening – a wacky neighbor or uncle who should be laughed at more than scorned" (Jones 83).

The cultural impact of *SNL's* interpretation of presidents and candidates doesn't end with the election or their term. Jones states:

With depictions of Richard Nixon as paranoid and brooding, Gerald Ford as bumbling, Jimmy Carter as smarter-than-thou, Ronald Regan as a secret mastermind, the elder George Bush as an awkward public speaker [EEK!], Bill Clinton as sex obsessed and the younger George Bush as dim-

witted and arrogant, these particular caricatures have become part of American cultural memory, in some ways becoming central to, if not defining of, each president's popular persona. (Jones 84)

Key phrases from *SNL*'s campaign and political sketches are further repeated by journalists, solidifying *SNL*'s popular contributions to the cultural lexicon. Phrases like "strategery," "lock boxes," "Not gonna do it," and "Stay the course" are often easier to recall and more solidly embedded in the public's political memory than the candidates' policies and positions (Jones 87). Jones reminds us, "The show also crafts political caricatures that have proven enduring in their longevity, and thus the show participates in crafting a form of televisual heritage associated with politicians in the popular imagination" (Jones 88). The language of SNL has become part of the American lexicon.

While *SNL* may not have been afraid to tackle the sensitive topic of the day, they weren't always as successful in recognizing their shortcomings, particularly concerning the diversity of the cast. Over the course of forty years, *SNL* has featured just over one hundred repertory players — fifteen of whom were black, two Latinos, and one who is Asian (Morris 2014). As Media Culture professor Racquel Gates points out, "Many of these gifted performers were relegated to marginal roles next to their white costars or dismissed after a single season....In spite of *SNL*'s well-deserved reputation as a force of social critique, the show has been erratic at best in its treatment of African American issues and cast members" (Gates 151).

African American cast members and guest hosts have seized opportunities to make political statements regarding race since the show's beginning. In its first season

in 1975, *SNL* original cast members Garret Morris and Michael O'Donoghue performed a skit telling a dark, brooding variation on the Br'er Rabbit tale. The result, as Evan Elkins explains is a "cracked-mirror version of racial humor, in which familiar signifiers of racialized context are present, but the focus of the attack deflects away from either African American stereotypes or *Song of the South's* racism" (Elkins 64). *SNL* proved it would not shy away from sensitive issues such as racial inequalities in corporate American in episode seven of that first season, when they featured Chevy Chase and guest host Richard Pryor in a surprising skit that involved "word association." The skit included escalating racial slurs that made the live and television audiences laugh and feel uncomfortable at the same time.

Arguably, the most noted African American *SNL* cast member, Eddie Murphy, also had the most profound impact on the way the show confronted the (primarily white) audience with racial issues in American culture. Murphy's amiable, nonthreatening demeanor confronted tough issues in a very non-confrontational manner. Reporting on Murphy's popularity in *Newsweek*, Gene Lyons noted, "When he smiles, he can get away with almost anything" (Lyons). As Raquel Gates further elaborates, "On the surface, Murphy's performances appeared to be tailored to appeal to mainstream white audiences. Many of his characters and sketches, however, contained aspects of subversive black humor that spoke to black audiences and black perspectives" (Gates 152).

The characters Murphy played on *SNL* during the 1980s served to remind audiences of the racial inequality that still existed in American during an era that was

characterized by “an emphasis on carefully coded rhetoric aimed at downplaying the continued significance of racism” (Gates 152). Because Murphy’s performances on *Saturday Night Live* were tailored to please both black and nonblack audiences, his characters seamlessly combined social critique and mainstream appeal (Gates 156).

While regular skits like “Mr. Robinson’s Neighborhood” and “Raheem Abdul Muhammed” allowed Murphy to combine comedy with social satire during his time as an *SNL* cast member, he continued the racial discussion with a “mockumentary” as a guest host in the late 80s². In “White Like Me,” Murphy goes undercover as a white man to investigate the reality of racial difference. His performance reflects the combination of crowd-pleasing humor and subtle social commentary that Murphy perfected as a cast member on *Saturday Night Live* (Gates 163). Murphy focuses on white privilege, systemic racism and the very notion of the “safe” black man that he had come to represent (Gates 165). The skit hit all the right notes, both with the critics and the audience, with black viewers nodding their heads with understanding and white viewers seemingly laughing with Murphy but all the while acknowledging the blatant racial disparities.

In February of 2008, *Saturday Night Live* changed the racial conversation once again, with a seemingly innocuous sketch about the “Democratic Debate” during the height of the presidential campaign. In the skit, Amy Poehler plays Senator Hillary Clinton, while Fred Armisen takes on the role of then-Senator Barak Obama, featuring

² The skit, “Mr. Robinson’s Neighborhood” was Murphy’s take on the iconic children’s television show, “*Mr. Roger’s Neighborhood*.” Murphy’s skit was set in the ghetto, and often featured Murphy’s character stealing groceries and ending with Murphy climbing out a window to the fire escape to avoid his landlord. “Raheem Abdul Mohammad,” a recurrent character on *SNL*’s “Weekend Update” sketch, was featured as a critic who attacked the moral majority.

closely cropped hair and barely perceptible light tan makeup (Beltran 191). The sketch became part of a controversy and discussion that producers may not have expected, due to Armisen appearing in "black face." Armisen, who is of German, Japanese and Venezuelan descent, was under fire for portraying Obama, who is of Kenyan and Anglo American heritage, but is most often referred to in mainstream media as black. While Armisen and cast-mate, Maya Rudolph, who is of African American and Jewish heritage, had both previously impersonated characters and public figures from diverse backgrounds, including Oprah Winfrey, Lucy Liu and Jennifer Lopez (Rudolph) and President George W. Bush, musical artist Prince and former governor of New York, David Patterson, (Armisen) with positive public reaction, reaction to Armisen's impersonation of Obama elicited sharp complaints. Some called it disrespectful, to not only Obama, but also to African Americans more generally for renewing a demeaning theatrical tradition (Beltran 191). However, others disagreed that the casting was problematic, and appeared to be only concerned with whether or not the performance felt accurate or was funny. Complaints continued when Armisen appeared again as Barack Obama in October 2008, this time joined by Rudolph playing Michelle Obama. Entertainment writers took the opportunity to criticize *SNL* for issues of employment equity, with Joel Keller, writing for AOL TV saying, "What this whole story does point out is that the staff is very under-staffed as far as African-Americans are concerned" (Keller in Beltran). Despite having the most diverse cast in the show's history, many felt the cast was still not representative enough of the American character. Regardless of

opinion, the controversy served as a reminder of the impact the show has on American culture.

Despite facing political scrutiny at times, *SNL* has also been noted for being an unlikely voice of reason during a chaotic time in the nation's history. In the sobering days and weeks following the September 11, 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center, Flight 93 and the Pentagon, American media was flooded with images of tragedy with 24/7 coverage of Ground Zero, reports on missing loved ones, replayed video of planes hitting the World Trade Center buildings, and even images of people leaping to their death from the burning buildings. New York City came to a stand-still. Broadway shut down. Late-night comedy shows, including *Saturday Night Live*, yielded to news coverage. Entertainment was the furthest thing from American's collective minds. However, in order to stimulate the rocky economy, New York City mayor, Rudy Giuliani and even President George W. Bush were asking Americans to shop, spend money, eat at restaurants, go to shows, and try to get back to "normal."

On September 29, 2001, just eighteen days after the attacks, *SNL* returned to the air, opening the episode with a somber, emotional musical performance by Paul Simon, a tribute to New York's first responders, and an exchange between New York Mayor, Rudy Giuliani, and *SNL* producer, Lorne Michaels. Americans tuned in that night, seeking a chance to smile, and yet, feeling a pang of guilt, looking for a break from the sadness while so many of their neighbors were suffering. Communication professor and author, Matt Sienkiewicz, recalls the exchange between Giuliani and Michaels as the moment America was given permission to laugh again saying, "As the

very serious opening segment came to a close, Lorne Michaels turned to Giuliani, embracing him as the embodiment of the pain and resilience of New York City. Then, Michaels asked the mayor if it was okay for the show to be funny from that point forward. Giuliani's response of "why start now?" has been noted by scholars . . . as representing an official government sanctioning of post-9/11 laughter" (Sienkiewicz 102).

Along with this "sanctioning of laughter" came uncharted territory for *SNL* and its fans. In a time of such seriousness, post-9/11 humor could not revel in frivolousness. Sienkiewicz says, "The events of 9/11 had forced *SNL* to consider what role it might play in a world in which nothing, including comedy, would get a free pass with regard to moral significance" (Sienkiewicz 103). During the September 29 episode, as well as others to follow, *SNL* "regularly broke out of comedic modes of address entirely, speaking sincerely to the audience, seemingly reminding viewers that *SNL* realized it now had to serve a purpose beyond just making people laugh. . . . The specter of something that truly did matter, something that irrefutably existed beyond the realm of the aesthetic free play embraced by the ironist, demanded a new mode of comedic address" (Sienkiewicz 103).

SNL recognized its ability to appeal to and comfort America through humor. Lynn Spigel points out the popularity of "event TV" geared toward giving U.S. broadcasting a connection with national unity and a communal sense of injury (Spigel 235). Breaking away from comedy momentarily during "Weekend Update," Tina Fey asked the audience to donate to the Twin Towers Fund. Sienkiewicz argues that *SNL*

moved "toward a different, more politically engaged mode of comedy suited to the changing climate of the first decade of the twenty-first century" (Sienkiewicz 104). By satirizing America's reaction to sensitive topics, *SNL* has put a mirror in front of the audience and asked them to recognize the effect of their behavior, whether it is merely absurd or even disturbing. Using irony to make a point, *Saturday Night Live* asks us to see both the strengths and the flaws of the American character.

Chapter IV

Discussion

As previously discussed, late-night television serves as a gateway to more substantive political news (Parkin 2010, Peterson 2008, Moy et al. 2005), a gateway to political action (Becker 2010) and a substantial source of information for young voters (Pew 2000, 2008, 2016). But does it do more than just inform and motivate? Can political comedy soothe voters weary of politics or the administration in power? Can it help heal a nation after tragedy? Does it bring about a sense of community? And, if it does, what kind of community is it forging – one with a sense of “us versus them” or one that makes us believe that we’re all in this together? Does it reflect the political atmosphere or shape the political atmosphere?

To start answering these questions, it’s important to take a closer look at the implied “bias” of late-night comedy and political humor as a whole. However, to label political comedy as “biased” may be somewhat redundant. History has shown that, by its very nature, political humor expresses a viewpoint. It gives voice to the underdogs, calling out the inadequacies of the powerful; it often points out that the emperor has no clothes. But, does late-night humor do this in a balanced way, as the voice of all

people, or does it have a tendency, as suggested by some, to slant "left" and serve as nothing but a source of confirmation bias for a specific audience?

The Center for Media and Public Affairs (CMPA) at George Mason University conducted a study of late-night political humor from January 1, 2010 to September 6, 2010, to determine if the hosts were slanted in their humor (Nivens et al 2010). The president was the biggest target of jokes, and during this time, Barack Obama was president. This was consistent with past studies. During the 2000s, George W. Bush was the prime target. Of course, the leader of the free world is an easy target, if only because he is the most identifiable politician on the planet (Dagnes, 2012). However, there was an identifiable slant to the programs. For instance, Stewart and Letterman each had Barack Obama as their top target, but beyond that, the majority of their jokes were aimed at Republicans: Glenn Beck, Sarah Palin, John McCain, and Michael Steele, in that order. Conversely, Leno and Fallon, who also targeted the president most often, then followed with jokes at left-leaning politicians: Al Gore, Joe Biden, and Bill Clinton. Sixty-seven percent of Leno's jokes were on the left. Seventy-eight percent of Fallon's jokes were launched in that direction. Ultimately, the study concluded that late-night comedians did offer a slant, though not particularly strong, and not necessarily in one direction overall (Dagnes 2010).

If a slant exists, does it reflect the views of the comedian/writers or their particular audience? CMPA president Dr. Robert Lichter noted, "Just as conservatives get their political news from *Fox* and liberals from *MSNBC*, conservatives are getting their political humor from *NBC* and liberals from *Comedy Central*" (Dagnes 2010).

Could the slant, then, suggest that liberals and conservatives appreciate a different version of entertainment or differ in their sense of humor? In short, yes. A 2011 study by Experian Simmons, a marketing research firm, interested in helping advertisers reach their audience effectively, analyzed the favorite television shows of people who identified as liberal, conservative or somewhere in the middle. The study, an analysis of nearly 1,000 television programs, revealed the shows with the highest concentrations of viewers from the left, right and middle. The study included cable, network and syndicated programs, and the rankings excluded news and music programs. The results suggest that what people find entertaining differs by political persuasion.

While four of the top ten television programs ranked by liberals were late-night programs (*The Daily Show*, *The Colbert Report*, *Late Show with David Letterman* and *Saturday Night Live*), late-night programs were not reported among the favorites of those who identified as conservatives or middle-of-the-road/swing voters (Simmons 2011). Shows on Comedy Central appeared most often on the liberal side, with three of top ten shows appearing on that network. Three networks: History, Discovery and CBS accounted for six of ten shows on the conservative side, each listed twice. Intended as a tool to assist companies reach their target audience, the Simmons study also provides valuable insight on the aesthetic and entertainment differences that appear down party lines.

With the Simmons results in mind, one might logically wonder if the strong representation of late-night programs in the liberal list suggest they slant left because

they have a liberal audience? Or do they have a liberal audience because they slant left? And why don't late-night comedians resonate with conservatives?

| Top 10 Indexing TV Programs, by Political Outlook | | | | | | |
|---|----------------------------------|-------|------------------|------------------------------------|-------|--|
| Outlook: Conservative | | | Outlook: Liberal | | | |
| Rank | Program | Index | Rank | Program | Index | |
| 1 | Hallmark Channel: Hallmark Movie | 120 | 1 | Comedy Central: The Daily Show | 212 | |
| 2 | Discovery: Swamp Loggers | 119 | 2 | Comedy Central: The Colbert Report | 201 | |
| 3 | TV Land: The Andy Griffith Show | 118 | 3 | Fox: Glee | 164 | |
| 4 | History: Swamp People | 117 | 4 | E!: The Soup | 155 | |
| 5 | Syndication: Cops | 115 | 5 | ABC: Modern Family | 153 | |
| 6 | Discovery: Man vs. Wild | 113 | 6 | NBC: The Office | 147 | |
| 7 | Syndication: Wheel of Fortune | 113 | 7 | CBS: Late Show w. David Letterman | 142 | |
| 8 | CBS: Blue Bloods | 112 | 8 | Comedy Central: Tosh.O | 142 | |
| 9 | CBS: The Mentalist | 112 | 9 | NBC: Saturday Night Live | 141 | |
| 10 | History: Ice Road Truckers | 111 | 10 | Travel Channel: Anthony Bourdain: | 141 | |
| | | | | No Reservations | | |

| Outlook: Middle of the Road | | |
|-----------------------------|------------------------------------|-------|
| Rank | Program | Index |
| 1 | In Sydication: Family Guy | 126 |
| 2 | Fox: Family Guy | 120 |
| 3 | In Syndication: Two & A Half Men | 119 |
| 4 | TLC: Cake Boss | 117 |
| 5 | Syndication: How I Met Your Mother | 115 |
| 6 | HGTV: My First Place | 115 |
| 7 | Adult Swim: King of the Hill | 114 |
| 8 | HGTV: Holmes on Homes | 114 |
| 9 | A&E: Dog the Bounty Hunter | 114 |
| 10 | Spike: 1,000 Ways to Die | 114 |

Experian Simmons 2011

We can look to the Experian Simmons study to support other research that indicates that liberals and conservatives have differing aesthetic tastes in television programming (Young 2017). When it comes to entertainment, conservatives prefer

stories with clear-cut endings. Liberals seemingly have more tolerance for stories with uncertainty and ambiguity (Young 2017). This leads liberals and conservatives to seek different kinds of humor, as becomes apparent in the Simmons results. Much like Lichter's observation that conservatives and liberals seek news from sources that will provide information that they want to hear, so, too, will they seek late-night television that laughs at the things they find funny.

Confirmation bias, or the tendency to seek or interpret information that confirms one's preexisting beliefs, is not just limited to news sources or political party. It clearly happens when choosing entertainment as well, particularly late-night television comedy and satire. However, it serves a purpose greater than just laughing at jokes that we would make ourselves, if we were funny enough. It creates a sense of community by bringing "together" a like-minded audience. Comedy has the ability to settle fears and unite like-minded people, even if the effects are only temporary.

As previously discussed, in the weeks following the 9/11 terrorist attacks, it was Saturday Night Live (and, specifically, Mayor Rudy Guilliani) that gave America "permission" to laugh again. Although initially hesitant, other late-night shows followed SNL's lead, with *The Daily Show* being the last to come back on air. Stewart directly addressed the challenge, but importance, for America to find humor in those dark days. In his opening monologue, Stewart said:

I'm sorry to do this to you. It's another entertainment show beginning with an over-wrought speech of a shaken host. TV is nothing, if not redundant. So, I apologize for that. It's something that unfortunately, we do for ourselves

so that we can drain whatever abscess is in our hearts and move onto the business of making you laugh, which we really haven't been able to do very effectively lately. Everyone's checked in already, I know we're late. I'm sure we're getting in right under the wire before the cast of *Survivor* offers their insights into what to do in these situations.

They said to get back to work. There were no jobs available for a man in the fetal position under his desk crying, which I would have gladly taken. So I came back here. Tonight's show is obviously not a regular show. We looked through the vaults, we found some clips that we thought might make you smile, which is really what's necessary, I think, right about now. (Stewart)

Stewart noted how difficult it was to be humorous in a time of tragedy, but he also hinted at a theme that became dominant in American public discourse, and the void that late-night television could fill in the months after 9/11: the need for humor in dark times (Kuipers). Americans believe in the healing power of humor. It is a central belief and it was invoked frequently in those dark days.

The Daily Show, staying true to its formula of poking fun at those reporting the news rather than the news itself, began to call out media coverage of "American's new war," calling its own coverage "America Freaks Out" and "Operation Enduring Coverage." When coverage of the attacks started to subside, coverage of the subsequent anthrax attacks gained nearly twenty-four hour coverage on hard-news channels, like CNN. *The Daily Show* responded by introducing its own CNN-style news ticker which displayed breaking news items such as "White Powder Found on Donut in

St. Louis," "91 Percent of Americans Want Mommy," and "Oh God Oh God Oh..." (Kurtzman 2001). By poking fun at the ways in which the media was taking advantage of the nation's fears and uncertainty, Stewart brought awareness to the media's tactics, and asked viewers to calm down and actively discern what truly was a "crisis," proving that the voice of laughter could also be the voice of reason.

The relationship between late-night television and politics shifted during the 2016 Presidential campaign. Whereas late-night comedy was accustomed to humorously dogging the political news of the day, one show, in particular, found itself becoming *part* of the political news of the day. In November of 2015, during the Republican primaries, then-candidate Donald Trump hosted an episode of SNL, giving the show its highest ratings in nearly three years (Hibberd 2015). Trump immediately sent out a glowing tweet about the experience:



Trump's engagement with the show would be far less complimentary later in the campaign. The following October, Trump sent the first of a series of tweets directly responding to specific episodes of the show and, in this case, actor Alec Baldwin, who began to appear as a regular guest, portraying Trump:



Donald J. Trump 
@realDonaldTrump · 16 Oct 2016

Watched Saturday Night Live hit job on me. Time to retire the boring and unfunny show. Alec Baldwin portrayal stinks. Media rigging election!

SNL has run skits about candidates on both sides during campaigns since the show began in 1974. This wasn't even the first time that *SNL* had spoofed Trump. Baldwin was the fifth actor on the show to satirize the wealthy New York businessman, following Phil Hartman, Darrell Hammond, Jason Sudeikis and Taran Killam (*SNL Archives*). But, this signified the first time that a candidate for President took to social media to criticize the show and the actor playing him.

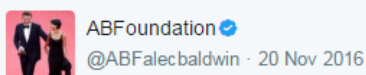
Whether as a response to the attention that Trump drew to the show, or the public's affection for Baldwin as Trump, *SNL's* ratings continuously improved throughout the campaign, as did Trump's disdain and angry tweets. The following month, just weeks after the election, then President-Elect Trump continued voicing his disapproval for the show, tweeting,:



Donald J. Trump 
@realDonaldTrump · 20 Nov 2016

I watched parts of @nbcSNL Saturday Night Live last night. It is a totally one-sided, biased show - nothing funny at all. Equal time for us?

This time, Baldwin tweeted a response, beginning a dialogue between Trump and the show that would extend beyond Twitter, into the skits themselves:



ABFoundation
@ABFalec baldwin · 20 Nov 2016

Replying to @realDonaldTrump

...@realDonaldTrump

Equal time?

Election is over. There is no more equal time. Now u try 2 b Pres + ppl respond. That's pretty much it.

Baldwin made twelve appearances as Trump between October 16, 2016 and the time of conclusion of research. Trump tweeted in response to five of the appearances, including one after his inauguration:



Donald J. Trump
@realDonaldTrump · Jan 15

.@NBCNews is bad but Saturday Night Live is the worst of NBC. Not funny, cast is terrible, always a complete hit job. Really bad television!

While Saturday Night Live has not tweeted in direct response to Trump's Twitter attacks, they have responded nonetheless by repeatedly inviting Baldwin back to appear as Trump, mocking the erratic behavior that is indicative of his tweets, seemingly taunting Trump with an ongoing series of unflattering skits. Once a mere reflection of Monday morning water cooler conversations, late-night television sketch comedy has cemented itself firmly as part of the ongoing political discussion taking place on hard news sources, at least for the time being.

Even beyond *SNL*, late-night comedy has been filling an important need in the Trump-era. Throughout his campaign, Trump labeled mainstream media and

journalism, “fake news,” “dishonest media” and has twice publically referred to the media as the “enemy of the people” (Kludt 2017). Shortly after making that statement, Trump’s team barred many mainstream media journalists from a press briefing, inviting only a selected few to participate. The relationship between journalists and the administration is tenuous, at best, and journalists are walking a line between delivering important, credible news stories and staying on Trump’s good side so as not to be completely cut off from receiving information. In this environment, late-night hosts fill a surprising and important role. They strike a balance between journalists and reporters, who are trying to be fair, impartial and unbiased, and activists, who may be too far left or right, with tunnel-vision clouding their judgement. Editorialist Jethro Nededog explains the role by saying, “The difference between late-night hosts and [reporters and activists] is that they package the information in ways that are more fun to digest, while also being blunt about their commentary” (Nededog 2016).

Whether they serve as a gateway to traditional news sources, a microscope to dissect the problems in our country, a mirror to reflect the problems we ourselves bring to the table, a voice for the underdog, a communal place of respite for the weary or just the source of a laugh during trying times, late-night television comedy and satire has multiple effects on the way we look at our country and ourselves. Its role has evolved and will continue to evolve, but it will undoubtedly not become less important. In a time when journalism is called “fake news,” truly fake news may become the voice of reason.

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