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VENOMOUS SPEECH

Problems with American Political Discourse on the Right and Left

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CHAPTER 16
An Alternative Sense of Humor: 
The Problems with Crossing Comedy 
and Politics in Public Discourse

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I am a huge fan of comedy, and if the explosion of comic discourses on the Internet and television across the last several decades are any indication, there are a great many people who feel similarly inclined. From presidential speeches filled with punch lines, to the buzz of many late-night talk shows dissecting each day’s news, we are living in a historical moment inundated with humor across such realms as politics, business, and technology.

While there has always been comedy in politics, the state of current American public discourse in this area is quite different than in the past. Prior to the 1990s, when figures like then-presidential candidate Bill Clinton went on the Arsenio Hall Show to showcase his talent playing the saxophone, politics and entertainment were seen as relatively separate domains. By and large, the public thought politicians were supposed to be serious, and the idea of humor and public affairs crossing seldom registered in the public consciousness—with some exceptions like Richard Nixon’s appearance on the variety show Laugh-In in 1968.

From the 1990s through the present, comedy and politics have become inseparable, with candidates like Arnold Schwarzenegger announcing their gubernatorial ambitions on The Tonight Show, and figures like Sarah Palin paradoxically both being mocked by and interjecting themselves into programs like Saturday Night Live. This evolving trend of what some have termed infotainment continues unabated through popular programs like The Daily Show.
Given the sheer volume of comic public discourse unique to our times, more critical attention to humorous communication is deserved.

In my work as a communication scholar, I have found a lot worth praising in these forms of public discourse—particularly how programs like The Daily Show and Colbert Report teach us to be better critics of public communication, stand-up comedians employ innovative, exacting observations that can enlarge our perspectives on a variety of topics, and online news parodies such as The Onion News Network use unique techniques that not only satirize political foolishness, but also invite us to consider numerous ethical insights about public affairs.

I am not alone in these observations. Noting the pervasiveness of comedy across societies, much has been written about the need for laughter as a positive way of approaching human existence, as a means of reducing physiological stress and creating constructive perspectives, and as an essential tool for building movements and communities. Additionally, Day argues that "the political discourse taking place in the satiric register currently appears far more vibrant than any of the traditional outlets for serious political dialogue," through their desire to challenge the standard formulas and narratives within the mainstream press. . . . They offer a method of influencing the political discussion, even just in minor ways, by poking holes in the preframed narratives, talking points, and public relations screens; and by providing to legions of fans relief, satisfaction, a sense of purpose, and connection with others.

Similarly, many other scholars have found comedy to be a promising democratic practice.

It might thus come as a surprise that this chapter is about some problems with crossing comedy and politics. Worse yet, its reader might quickly conclude that anything written against humor must be coming from a sour disposition, a desire to kill all joy in the world, or from what is a common invective designed to whip one back into better shape—simply lacking a sense of humor. Nothing could be further from the spirit of this chapter. The world would be a far better place if more people approached one another with tolerant comic perspectives; however, this chapter also proceeds with the understanding that every type of communication is limited to some extent. In fact, I would argue that to become more broadly appreciative of and discerning about the many constructive forms comedy has taken in contemporary public discourse, humor's potentially negative features or effects in some situations must also be understood.

We know that comedy can both liberate and limit communicators, and divide as much as it can unite audiences. Scholars have also found that not all
humor is created equal; when considered in context, humor can perform radical or conservative functions. But as Quirk reminds us, “these boundaries are not rigid, but under constant negotiation” between audiences and performers. Hence, in the same ironic spirit that I believe some of our best political comics would themselves recommend, I will partly truth-tell, partly speculate, and even partly play devil’s advocate in the following analysis for the sake of spotlighting and negotiating these considerations—to open space for what may be some needed qualifications, reservations, and other counteractants toward a climate in which comedy is mostly only celebrated. Ultimately, while I am one of the first scholars you would find supporting comedy, it is recommended that we take more seriously the idea that humor should be treated as only one, albeit important, mode of communicating among many others that might be chosen in public discourse.

In the following analysis, I identify several overlapping themes demonstrating the potential limitations of comedy in politics: regulation, simplism, instability, negativity, and distortion. These are not the only ways in which humor can be limiting, of course, but they survey at least a few important ways we might take more of a critical pause as we are confronted with (or engaged in) comedic discourses. These themes will be explained with reference to numerous contemporary examples at the intersections of politics and comedy.

REGULATION

As much as humor can promote critical reasoning, it can sometimes undermine our capacities to rationally reflect upon people, events, and the world at large—instead working to regulate or discipline our thoughts and behaviors. Scholars such as Morreale find that “humour can be beneficial . . . by promoting critical thinking,” especially as regards “a discrepancy between what people should be and what they are.” Comedy writer Marshall Brickman also asserts that “humor is a way of getting to essential truth. If you can get an audience to laugh together, it does a whole lot of great things. It solidifies them; it gives them a mystical experience of being in a crowd. It socializes people.” But there are times and places when humor can be equally oppressive in regulating actions; when laughter erupts in groups, for instance, members are often strongly urged to physiologically conform to such social behavior. In everyday conversations, I would speculate that there is likely no other type of communication in which we are pressed to follow along with others, or risk being alienated, more than when humor is invoked. Indeed, the literatures within social psychology are replete with such examples of “groupthink” and “social proof.”

Going a step further, humor can lead to insular practices that bypass our critical communication capacities. It is not only the physiological pressure of the laugh that invites analysis, but also the way that humor may shortcut our
abilities to also critique or say no to these demands. Quite simply, it can be a
way of arguing that not only makes a powerful point, but also regulates and
forestalls necessary rebuttals. For those trying to promote free speech, open
climates for discussion, or inclusive spaces for rational debate, this may be
a concern. Meyer referred to Ronald Reagan’s famous use of humor as such
a “velvet weapon,”9 or way of critiquing people and institutions less harshly
than more direct forms of speech. The very vividness of jokes may prevent
voices from entering public discussion, be used to trivialize rather than de­
bate an issue, or absolve communicators from the need to present evidence
for their claims. Recently, presidential candidate Rick Perry was asked by a
reporter to defend his claim that Social Security was unconstitutional. The
candidate diverted attention from the question by putting food in his mouth
and humorously remarking, “I’ve got a big mouthful” before walking away.20
Given how contemporary media are obsessed with covering political gaffes
and condensing discourse to sound bites and images, political communication
can be unjustly reduced to who can tell the best one-liner that will make an
evening news broadcast or Internet viral video. Argument scholars Perelman
and Olbrechts-Tyteca too find that: “Humor is a very important factor in win­
ing over the audience or . . . in reducing value, in particular making fun of the
opponent, and making convenient diversions.”21
Billig argues that many people have bought into common sense notions that
humor is necessarily healing, instead arguing that it mostly serves as a means of
social control and discipline. In other words, society has been too uncritically
accepting of humor’s positive functions, because laughter primarily functions to ridicule.22 Billig states: “If meaning has to be socially policed, then mockery
and laughter are the friendly neighbourhood officers, who cheerily maintain
order. And sometimes they wield their truncheons with punishing effect.”23
Grammatically speaking, since humor is mostly carried out under the
imaginative subjunctive rather than the objective indicative mood—and while
there is nothing “intrinsically morally objectionable about it”24—I would add
that sometimes a too easy alternation between imaginative discourse that is
just joking and more serious descriptive discourse can be used to discipline
audiences in subtle ways. Presidential candidate Michele Bachman made a
tongue-in-cheek joke about a very real, destructive hurricane being sent from
God to send a message to politicians in Washington D.C. to cut federal spend­
ing and amend the national budget. She responded to criticism of the joke as
insensitive (many people were killed in the natural disaster), with “of course
I was being humorous when I said that. It would be absurd to think it was
anything else.”25
Yet between Bachmann’s actual political position as a staunch antigov­
ernment advocate and the supposed exaggeration of the joke, the joke still
functioned to send a wink to her core audiences that the government needs
discipline, while also chastising Washington D.C. In other words, even if she really was just joking, those serious, disciplining messages were still retained in public discourse regardless of whether or not this was an attempt at humor. Of course, from the most lighthearted forms of entertainment to the most perceptive critiques of power, comedy can positively reorient our thoughts and behaviors—so I am not advocating that humor’s capacity to discipline be abandoned—to do so would be a complete relinquishing of comedy itself. Rather, this analysis simply suggests that comic conformity and regulation are more complicated than has been imagined and, hence, more awareness might be deserved in some contexts about how humor is used to regulate and discipline in less than constructive ways.

**SIMPLISM**

Related to the problem of humor and discipline, the issue of simplism—defined here as communication that has a difficult time dealing with complex topics—is also potentially problematic when comedy and politics are crossed. Politics is by its very nature a deeply layered subject involving complex interacting economic, social, psychological, communicative, and other factors. One need to only look at the intricacies and complications of an example like the American health care system to realize that policy making and public administration consist of an enormously complex network of people, events, texts, and practices.

Yet a look at many staples of mainstream comedy, such as *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno*, evidences much simplification deserving our attention. In particular, in an effort to fit each day’s news through the structure of a stand-up comedy monologue, a more nuanced and detailed understanding of politics is often bypassed. For years, Leno and other similar comedians have told jokes that simply reinforce stock stereotypes about, for instance, President Clinton as a womanizer and President Bush as unintelligent. There are likely truths in such comments, but the point is that there are often only a limited range of topics that are fodder for such (repetitious) comedy, at least in some mainstream discourses.

Moreover, the very structure of jokes also demands that a setup be succinct rather than full of exposition. This is why we more often hear jokes about subjects that are on the front pages of newspapers rather than an eighth-page story. For audiences to get the jokes, they must either be given new knowledge by a comedian in the setup or be able to anchor into some existing knowledge that they already have. As such, a bias worth noting is built into a joke’s form—it is far easier to tell jokes about topics that the audience already knows about, rather than have to explain a lot of new information. Thus, the setup–punch line joke structure can make it difficult for a communicator to impart complex
information, which might kill a joke. The very compactness and pace of jokes can also make for an impatience with slower, more methodological, or measured ways of approaching the world—which are critical to more complex ways of acquiring and disseminating information.

To be clear, I am not advocating that such short types of communication are always bad or devoid of meaning. As Jamieson clearly points out, a saying like “I love you” is a sound bite that is incredibly meaningful. Similarly, jokes can be powerful. My point is that only using jokes to communicate political information can forgo a lot of needed critical complexity. I am also not advocating that such compact examples of humor do not necessarily make contributions to public discourse. In my estimation, the more commentary we have in public communication from a diverse range of voices, the better—and comedians are constantly innovating with differing forms of humor, moving beyond simple setup-punch line structures to engage, for example, more advanced, improvisational interactive work with audiences.

This issue is merely raised to focus on how comedy can be a particular type of discourse that permits communicators to approach aspects of the world in some ways, while preventing them from seeing or approaching it from others. By way of analogy, just as a medium like PowerPoint is quite suitable for imparting some types of information, it could prove an utter disaster in others—think of what Abraham Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address would have looked like had it been delivered in PowerPoint format. In the same way, humor has important limitations with bearing upon the content and quality of public discourse.

**INSTABILITY**

One ongoing issue with humor involves its potential for unstable meaning. Different than more straightforward forms of communication in which a person may say directly what they mean and mean what they say, comic forms of rhetoric can be quite indirect. Instability thus refers to the difficulty different audiences may have with interpreting the meaning(s) of a humorous message. Some scholars such as Booth believe that tracking the stability of meaning-making in comic forms of communication like irony is critical to our very evaluations of such discourse.

Quite recently, for example, a study of viewer reactions to Stephen Colbert provided some evidence that many liberals think Stephen Colbert is liberal, while many conservatives viewed the parodic figure as a conservative. This line of research has actually been around for a while. One study found that Archie Bunker, a bigoted character on the famous American sitcom *All in the Family*, was interpreted differently by various audiences. Some audiences
supported the character’s racism, while others interpreted the show as making fun of this character’s ignorance (as producer Norman Lear had intended). In this case, the comedy was quite unstable, creating variable meanings for different audiences, regardless of what the show’s creators might have intended. Howitt and Owusu-Bempah note that “bigots appreciate the ranting of the bigoted characters as the truth, whereas non-bigots see them as bigotry.”

Given such examples, Billig says that we should all confront a sobering fact: racists have senses of humor too.

Studying comic characters like Ali G, Pickering, and Lockyer explain that unique spaces can be opened up through comic discourses, as the “open ambiguity of the person/persona distinction allow[s] a continual oscillation between actual insult and mock insult, and serious and comic registers.” But they also highlight how unclear these comic performances can sometimes be, particularly when “anti-racist critique [is] being misinterpreted as racist celebration,” begging critical questions about some comic impersonations: “Along what line can we distinguish subtle and pliable audience decodings from crassly literal acceptances of . . . comic impersonation? Where does studied multicultural undecidability and unstudied racial prejudice begin?”

Scholars share near-unanimous agreement that humor is a highly local and contextual phenomenon. In other words: “Nothing is inherently funny or unfunny. This is decided according to the social conventions operative in any social setting or circumstance.” This point helps us understand the disingenuousness of common remarks like “that is funny” or “that is not funny.” Rather, scholarship in this area highlights that when the meanings in humor are very unstable, people can read almost whatever they want into a comic message. In these instances, comedy can serve to reinforce, rather than challenge, people’s beliefs, values, and attitudes, even against a comedian’s very intent.

Comics themselves are almost always searching for “the discursive display of opposing interpretive possibilities” in a situation. For instance, when President Obama gave his annual comedy monologue during the 2009 White House Correspondents Dinner speech, he referred to the first lady Michelle Obama as “bridg[ing] the differences that have divided us for so long, because no matter which party you belong to we can all agree that Michelle has the right to bare arms.” The bare arms joke refers to two interpretive possibilities: Michelle Obama’s bare arms as a fashion icon and (tongue in cheek) her right to bear arms, presumably referring to the “right to bear arms” advocated by the National Rifle Association and many conservatives. Comic discourses thus have a built-in bias for exploiting multiple meanings. But at times, this way of approaching public discourse may leave too much room for audiences to negotiate and stabilize these meanings in terms that not even the producers of the content would have wished from their performances.
NEGATIVITY

Comic communication tends to filter public discourse through negative perceptions. In both writing and performance, practitioners themselves assert that a strong negative attitude or opinion provides fuel for comic material and insights.\(^{39}\) This understanding about how comedy works is not new. Aristotle felt the very essence of comedy “rested in some . . . defect.”\(^{40}\) Drawing on Freud, Billig similarly explains that “we laugh more at tendentious jokes than we do at non-tendentious ones, but we [instead] convince ourselves that we are laughing at the cleverness of the joke-work.”\(^{41}\) This is tricky rhetorical ground to unravel, for there are many ways that comic discourses can call for a constructive politics,\(^{42}\) and at the same time, the word negative almost always implies that a communicator has some better, positive vision of the way things should be. As Booth explains, in one sense, “affirming and denying are rhetorically interchangeable. Every protest implies an affirmative ground for protest; every affirmation implies many negations.”\(^{43}\)

The very title of Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert’s 2010 Washington D.C. Rally to Restore Sanity and/or Fear illustrates this paradox—in providing a negative critique of the way media and political institutions have been undermining public discourse through rhetorics of fear, their comedy simultaneously called for a restoration of sanity. Despite these nuances, there is still a sense in which comedy is primarily fueled by negative attitudes and opinions. When David Letterman or Stephen Colbert take to the airwaves each night, they are looking to place a tendentious attitude upon what is defected, problematic, or flawed with the world that day, slamming quick negative judgments and stark reactions upon public happenings. Research in psychology has found that human beings have an innate predisposition toward information that is negative,\(^{44}\) which I think partly explains why comic discourses are so good at gaining our attention and have such high entertainment value.

A comic’s negative consciousness can thus provide a superb, attention-getting source of critical commentary upon public events and processes. But this way of being, knowing, and acting in the world may also come with several costs, especially in creating some forms of social change. In other words, what may make for highly entertaining discourse in some situations can fall short in achieving the goals of other circumstances. In my opinion, two of the most telling recent examples of this phenomenon involve Jon Stewart. In the first, Jon Stewart’s now famous appearance on the CNN show Crossfire involved the comedian alternating between a comic and relatively serious disposition about problems with the show and much media communication writ large.\(^{45}\)

What was not acknowledged among many positive reactions to this event was that Stewart had some trouble maintaining a purely comic attitude to
make his points. His demeanor turned from that of an excoriating comedian to a concerned citizen at several points during the discussion. More recently, Stewart devoted a show to a bill committing federal funds toward health care for 9/11 responders. Some argued that the bill became law because of the comedian's efforts. During his interviews with some 9/11 responders on this show, what most struck me about Stewart's advocacy was the somber tone the comedian maintained throughout the segment, demonstrating that humor could not adequately address the problem being targeted.

These examples highlight a potential problem with chronic comedy in public discourse, when communicators fail to consider that a comic identity is only one among many options. This is a subtle point that really applies to all matters of human identity, but one in which the current glut and normalcy of humor in public discourse should make us take heed. Without getting into a thicket of theory related to this matter, much communication research finds that the most promising political identity for citizens is one that involves an ability to play multiple styles and selves, while adapting to a variety of audiences. These concepts may sound strange in a culture that often assumes people have single personalities and identities. But as Postman argues, role fixation, or playing a single role in all circumstances, is highly problematic for communicators. Making the point clearly, he writes:

We all know people who cannot transit from one semantic environment to another. Professors, for instance, are apt to remain Professors even in situations where none are required. And there are Political People who see Significance in someone's ordering scrambled eggs. And there are Comics who are always "on." And Moralists for whom there is no joy anywhere, only responsibility. And Cynics who will never let themselves be awed, or let anything be revered. Such people may be said to be self- or role-fixated, and, what is worse, they are apt to assert their fixation as a virtue. These people think of themselves as having strong character, but really it's impoverished, single-dimensional, lacking the courage to try out new selves and thus grow. (emphases added)

In order to meet the demands of an increasingly multicultural, pluralistic, globalizing age in which tolerance and the ability to work with a variety of peoples, cultures, and perspectives are beckoned, Lull too finds that individuals must become increasingly comfortable with expanding their communicative options, playing multiple roles, and continually trying new selves. I, too, have argued in a different context that—while some stability in these matters is reasonable and likely necessary—human identity is constantly argued into existence and should always be subject to further communication,
countering views of identity as about some unchanging self or single perspective. A chronic negativity and potentially related issues of chronic cynicism, resignation, or nihilism thus do not bode well for democratic citizenship.

The main point is that, while comedy is a type of communication that is generally adept at and, in many circumstances, better than just about any other form of speech at broadening our attention to a range of rhetorical styles and choices—and how symbolically created rather than natural each of these chosen or inherited human perspectives are—even a comic perspective can demonstrate a way of knowing, being, and acting that can bring a chronic negativity to public discourse, when situations may call for other communicative approaches.

DISTORTION

Comedy writer Mel Helitzer explains that all humor is grounded in a relationship between realism and exaggeration. In effect, comedy must always start in truths or reality and then be distorted or bent in "a transition from sense to nonsense." Billy Crystal’s joke: "In grade school, I was such a hit with my exaggerated mimicking and clowning that the teacher was charging a four-dollar cover and a two-drink minimum" illustrates the theory. Crystal starts from a reality about his being the class clown in grade school and exaggerates this truth for comic effect by asserting the classroom became like a comedy nightclub. This is one of the critical roles humor can serve over other kinds of public discourse—communicators can use comedy to push the boundaries of speech, getting their audiences to imagine unique examples or creative flights of fancy that may often be suppressed in more censorial communication forms or environments. In The Public and Its Problems, Dewey writes, "the function of art has always been to break through the crust of conventionalized and routine consciousness." In the same way, comic communication can break through human beings' normal patterns of thinking and reaction to express novel, playful insights about public life.

But as much as methods of exaggeration and distortion have for making positive contributions to public discourse, we can also imagine their potential for abuse. In particular, I would argue that in some contexts the comic method of exaggeration ends up committing what has traditionally been known as a straw person fallacy—where another person's image or argument is fundamentally distorted in order to easily knock it down. Nunberg's critique of how many conservatives have "turned liberalism into a tax-raising, latte-drinking, sushi-eating, Volvo-driving, New York Times-Reading, body-piercing, Hollywood-loving, left-wing freak show" makes exactly this point. Rush Limbaugh's attempt to entertain audiences through the denigrating term feminazis can also be faulted for seriously distorting the complexities of feminist movements.
and motives. This is not unique to the political right, as Rep. Steve Cohen (D-TN) also leveraged the term Nazis against Republicans in a recent Congressional debate.

Beyond distorting incivility, there may be some cases where the very selectiveness of these comedic exaggerations is a problem for public discourse. The fact that The Daily Show and The Colbert Report conduct interviews of leading politicians and public figures in order to edit them down to the funniest few minutes performs a vital function: throwing officials and others off-balance through humorous techniques that keep such figures accountable. At the same time, we should not lose sight of how the need to create laughter on these shows may sometimes take precedence over an ethical responsibility to accurately represent interviewees. As Baym finds, interview segments on The Colbert Report, "are 5-minute constructions assembled from actual interviews that last as long as 90 minutes. In the editing process, Colbert's staff pays little regard to accuracy or facticity."

I am not arguing that every person undergoing a comedic interview should necessarily be represented in ways they themselves would hope for: to do so would halt the very legitimate entertainment and potentially critical role that these shows play in public discourse. Rather, this point merely suggests that, for the sake of the comedic negative, these interviews can be incredibly selective in creating an image of political and other figures that bypasses some of the very good public commentary or work that these figures may have also carried out. If a lot of comedy rightfully results from an attitude about what is fair and what is not in the world (and I think most of it does), this issue should be a concern for comedians as well. Black has written about how people on television often find themselves the victims of narrative requirements that they had failed to imagine:

Expecting their own experience of themselves to be immortalized on film, they found instead what they regarded as a distorting selection of their behaviors chosen in obedience to requirements of plot and form, a selection that was alien to the ways that they had lived their moments... the dramatization of their lives was an interpretation.

The content and structure of comedic discourses can serve dramatic, entertaining imperatives that may similarly distort their targets beyond reasonable ends. In all forms of comedy, however, these boundaries have to be negotiated in public discourse. As with each of the other themes raised in this chapter, there are no universal rules about comedic distortion that should be applied across all circumstances. But we can at least remain more attentive to times when comic distortion may undermine political or ethical responsibilities. Ultimately, our best hope for understanding such practices
is to continue committing them to ongoing broadly informed public discussions.

CONCLUSION

Comedy and politics have become inseparable domains in contemporary public discourse. While I would normally largely argue that comedy can make outstanding contributions to our rhetorical environments, this chapter—recognizing that no type of communication is without some potential pitfalls in some situations—raises five themes that might give us more pause when we are confronted with humor. These themes provide us with an important take-away: comedy is not everything, it is only one, albeit important, form of communication among many that might be chosen in different circumstances.

I would make the additional point that comedy is an incredibly elusive, hard to pin down, evolving type of communication. To maintain the potential for the most boundary-spanning, expansive, creative comedy that can reinforce democratic norms or rightly challenge structures of power, I would argue that our default position should be to leave as much space as possible open for humorous free speech and liberating laughter in the public arena. Discussing the lines between offensiveness and humor, particularly edginess in comedic choices, Pickering and Lockyer urge that the public needs to consider ethical judgment as much as aesthetic innovation and risk in comedy, particularly if there is a possibility that people are harmed by it.61

They find that this problem is equally pressing because of the seemingly impermeable boundary that surrounds humor: simply by questioning comedy, one can be accused of lacking a sense for it or for being overly moralistic. Yet there can be multiple layers of meaning between a communicator and audience in any comic act, so much that prescriptive rules and moralistic pronouncements about comedy should remain tentative at best. Monty Python comedian Eric Idle spoke eloquently on the matter: “At least one way of measuring the freedom of any society is the amount of comedy that is permitted, and clearly a healthy society permits more satirical comment than a repressive one.”62 While maintaining an alternative sense of humor presented in this chapter—that humor is not always a cause for celebration—I think it is far more important that society allow room for the multidimensional performances, audiences, intentions, interpretations, evaluations, effects, and ultimate artistry of comedy in public discourse.

As a final related point, not all comedy is created equal. Others have made this argument, but it is worth reiterating in this context. In an extensive analysis, Peterson finds that genuine satire is “so rare that we might be tempted to conclude it is extinct.”63 He says that late-night talk show hosts like Leno, Letterman, and O’Brien are “evangelists of apathy,” and “late-nights antipolitical jokes are implicitly antidemocratic. They don’t criticize policies for their
substance, or leaders for their official actions . . . they declare the entire system—from voting to legislating to governing—an irredeemable sham." On the contrary, the author praises Comedy Central shows like The Colbert Report for presenting rare, genuine forms of innovative comic critique and valuable, democracy-affirming insights in public affairs.

I concur with these judgments and find it noteworthy how such television shows have also raised a great deal of money for nonprofit causes (Colbert, of course, revels in an ironic, self-congratulatory "Colbert Bump" that he claims his show has given to such causes) and has found increasingly inventive ways to mix comedy and politics toward such ends—recently even opening up a SuperPAC to both highlight and critique very mock-worthy campaign finance laws. As such, while some cause for concern may be found in the overlaps between comedy and politics, there is continuing parallel evidence that vast opportunities exist for these intersections to advance the public interest and even improve our communicative environments.

NOTES

10. Ibid., 1, 23.
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17. Cited in Mike Sacks, And Here's the Kicker: Conversations with 21 Top Humor Writers on Their Craft (Cincinnati, OH: Writers Digest Books, 2009), 155.


23. Ibid., 238.
35. Ibid., 198.
42. See Waisanen, "A Citizens Guide" and "Crafting Hyperreal Spaces."


52. See Waisanen, "A Citizen’s Guides."


54. Ibid.


64. Ibid., 10, 14.
