

75. Audience Roles in an Infotaining Public Sphere: Polarization, Critical Deliberation, or *Epideictic Engagement*?

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There are two prominent views about the prospects for the Internet as a new public communication space that demands “not channel-flicking passivity but active engagement and dialogue” (Lister, Dovey, Giddings, Grant, & Kelly 2003, p. 177). The first position is that, as Martin Lister et al. explained, “the Internet, through democratizing the means of media production, revives the participatory nature of the idealized public sphere. It encourages us to take part in debate and offers us the chance to ‘talk back’ to the media, creating dialogue instead of passivity” (p. 177). The second “public sphere” position, Lister et al. argued, “extends from this specific function of extending access to media to the construction of the net as a new public sphere capable of representing new subjectivities” (p. 177). Extending these positions, we consider another audience role in a contemporary Internet sphere. Given the way in which entertainment and politics, or “infotainment” (Duerst, Koleon, & Peterson, 2001, p. 5), are crossing in our (post)modern age, there is a need for scholars to account for the interactivities of specifically *epideictic* public spheres.

Forensic and deliberative models of public spheres tend to focus on negative polarization, or ideals of rational-critical deliberation. An important critique of Habermas (1989) notes his “exclusion of aesthetic concerns” from his writings on the ideal speech situation, where “‘writing poems and telling jokes’ are secondary to authentic illocutionary acts” (Aune, 1994, p. 129). Another critique is “that Habermas lacks the cardinal intellectual virtue of irony” (p. 130), or a theory that incorporates poetic imagination above and beyond concerns for truth and universal validity. We argue that new forms of *epideictic* public sphere engagements are undertheorized, and that audience debates dealing with new communicative models of infotainment, provide a space in which to examine these issues. *Epideictic* deals with praise and blame (Aristotle, 1991). In particular, *epideictic* can function as a means to combine display and moral political critique — a form which at least goes back to ancient Greece (Poulakos,

1987). Epideictic is distinguished by its performative nature (Oravec, 1976). It is a rhetoric that engages in “communal definition,” often through means of “entertainment” (Condit, 1985, pp. 290-291).

We examine blog responses to Stephen Colbert’s (2006) White House Correspondents’ Dinner speech, to show how infotainment opens up aesthetic, epideictic spaces for engagement in public life (see also Jones, 2004). We will first review audience theories in rhetorical and media studies, to highlight some current characterizations of media engagement. Then, we will present a case study of audiences in an epideictic, infotaining public sphere. Finally, we will draw conclusions from the analysis.

Audience Theories

While most scholars agree that the role of audiences in the Internet age is vitally important, relatively little attention has been directed to the role that they play in the public sphere (e.g., Porter, 1992; Myers, 1999). Studies focusing on audience readings of public addresses are also rare (Ceccarelli, 1998; Jones, 2004). Aristotle (2001) recognized the distinction among types of audiences — the young, the wealthy, the powerful, and so forth — describing the types of emotions that are important for persuasion (e.g., Suzuki 2000). Thomas Farrell (1983) stated that “it is the rhetorical audience [the ‘one who decides’] that functions as the efficient cause for the enactment of rhetoric as a practical art” (p. 161).¹ It is important to recognize the roles that the rhetorical audience can and should play in making judgments about social matters in a public sphere.² In doing so, rhetoricians should engage in a “close reading of reception evidence” (Ceccarelli, 1998, p. 408).

There are three reasons to examine audiences in relation to epideictic and new communicative infotainment models. First, there is a growing concern that critical reasoning has been replaced by *mere opinion, unwarranted emotions, and subjective comments* in the Internet age. Infotainment formats are often assumed to advance these negative qualities in public life (Postman, 1984; Putnam, 2000). In addition, some are concerned that it is increasingly difficult to uphold Enlightenment values with cultural fragmentation and the diversities of genders, sexualities, ethnicities, and classes in contemporary life.³ Thus, the Internet is said to create communities that are segmented from one another, rather than unified or interactive.

Second, there is widespread concern new media audiences tend toward *polarization*. Rather than interacting with people of different opinions, contemporary media audiences are said to expose themselves only to views consistent with their own. For instance, Joe Saltzman (2004) noted: “Surveys

show that a large percentage of the American public now picks its new media on the basis of how closely they represent their personal and political views” (p. 55). Moreover, as public deliberation shifts increasingly to the Internet, signs abound that the “*Daily Me* age” is coming upon us. Mitchell and Suzuki (2004) explained, “The *Daily Me* is an online newspaper of the future that gives readers the ultimate in editorial control” (p. 160). They observed, “By programming powerful content filters, readers are able to select exactly what kind of stories appear in their customized pages on the Internet” (p. 160). Cass Sunstein (2000) sees this trend accelerating rapidly in the near future, with possible grave consequence for deliberative democracy. Sunstein (2001) warned that proliferation of *Daily Me* type filtering has the potential to create isolated “deliberative enclaves” (p. 113), where like-minded people hunker down together in cyberspace to hear echoes of opinions consonant with their own.

Lastly, there are also ongoing concerns about how the *mainstream media erodes public engagement*. In particular, the mass media’s “permanent posture as a hostile, knee-jerk adversary, spewing out unremitting negativism and snide attacks on their motives and character have, they say, taken the *pleasure* [italics added] and satisfaction out of public service” (Shaw, 1996, p. A1). Hollihan (2001) argues that even in talk shows reporters “do not calmly discuss issues with an eye toward possibly finding common ground; they instead rudely interrupt each other, yell, and shout, with each participant striving to be more sharp-tongued than the others” (p. 92).

Answering to each of these concerns, and looking to the roles audiences play in an infotaining Internet sphere, we analyze the everyday politics of three different political blogs responding to, and making meaning out of Stephen Colbert’s (2006) White House Correspondents’ Dinner Speech. Through broad Internet searches for responses to Colbert’s speech, we chose these blogs as representative examples of reception evidence across the political spectrum. In particular, we focus on themes from Law Professor Ann Althouse’s (2006) blog, which generated a debate of forty-five comments on the speech between liberals, conservatives, and others. This blog represented common ideas across all the blogs we searched. We also draw from responses to the speech at the generally liberal-leaning blog *Jossip.com* (Hausleib, 2006), and the conservative-leaning blog *Hotair.com* (Malkin, 2006).

Colbert’s speech was made famous by its wide, grassroots distribution through the Internet in 2006, after having little initial coverage in the mainstream media (Froomkin, 2006). Three weeks later, Internet discussions propelled the speech to the top album downloaded on iTunes (Cohen, 2006). Colbert’s performance provided a focal point for a *different kind of engagement* than typical typologies of polarization or ideal Habermasian critical deliberation account for. We define

the parameters of this kind of engagement as an alternative to simple Internet segmentation or unification. We argue the blogs evidence an *epideictic engagement* — which provides a collaborative space of invention (or epideictics *about* epideictic) and conversational node drawing from the unstable, curious enticements of the Colbert speech.

The Colbert Speech Blog Debates

We identified several themes debated across the Internet postings. The bloggers primarily discussed Colbert's *audience/s*, the *forum* of the White House Correspondent's Dinner Speech, the kind of *communication form* Colbert was engaging in, and the *targets* of Colbert's discourse.

Audience/s

Many of the debates across the blogs engaged in a reflexive analysis about Colbert's audience/s. That is, these audiences were interested in how audiences themselves were influenced by the speech. Few of the journalists and politicians at the event laughed at Colbert's speech (Fromkin, 2006). Yet even this issue became a point of contention, as bloggers across the political spectrum argued over the real degree of laughter, and whether or not Colbert's epideictic speech was itself worthy of praise or blame. Blogger Peter Hoh argued, "I can hear much more audience laughter than I heard the first time I watched this" (Althouse, 2006, para. 76). Blogger Bodie stated, "Colbert went in knowing that he was not going to be getting laughs from this audience" (para. 75). One of the key points of engagement centered on whether Colbert's presidential satire was intended for his direct or indirect audience/s. Ann Althouse explained that despite (her perception) that Colbert didn't do well with his immediate audience, "he did what he had to do to maintain his credibility with his real audience, those who watch "The Colbert Report" (para. 3). Going into greater detail, Blogger Brendan argued, "the audience wasn't so much humorless as annoyed" (para. 48). Walt continued, "[Colbert] made the press feel a sense of blame for helping generate false headlines that answered the question 'Why did we go to war?' ... he knew his audience perfectly" (para. 69). Importantly, conservatives tended to rely on the immediate audience's response to Colbert's speech, mostly advocating that Colbert bombed (Malkin, 2006). More liberal bloggers relied upon evidence from indirect audiences, on the Internet and television, to conclude that Colbert's speech was a success.

Forum

Tellingly, blogger Finn Christiansen wished that network television stations (and not just C-Span) would have broadcast this event; "It would let people see

that while two groups can be antagonistic toward each other ... it is still possible to laugh and enjoy each other's company" (Althouse, 2006, para. 12-13). The dinner speech was an epideictic forum for the display of entertainment and satire that many agreed were missing from the mainstream media. At the same time, the appropriateness of Colbert's speech in this forum — with high-level journalists, politicians, and the President present, also presented grounds for contestation. Many, like blogger Wade_Garrett, admired Colbert for having the "confidence ... to say anything he wants and have the game to pull it off" (para. 29). Johnny Nucleo retorted that Colbert's speech was only confident "in the showbiz sense, not in the truth to power sense" (para. 51). Others (especially self-described conservatives) found Colbert's comments highly inappropriate. Hamsun56 argued that while the performance was clever, the appropriate level of comity in the comedy was likely violated for this forum (para. 22). Conservative Brian Hobbs was "a big Colbert fan... However, [Colbert] went over the top at the dinner" ("Comments," Malkin, 2006, para. 1). Many other conservatives focused on Colbert's classlessness in giving the speech, some even proposed that he should have been escorted away. Bloggers also debated the rhetorical possibilities or constraints Colbert faced in going "live" in this forum, versus being on his Comedy Central show. Blogger Brendan, for example, argued "Colbert screwed up by playing the event like a comedy central roast" (Althouse, 2006, para. 48).

Communication Form

Many of the blogs debated what kind of communication form Colbert was engaged in through his speech. Was it merely entertainment, a serious political critique, or something else?⁴ Some, like blogger realist, thought the point of the speech was for Colbert to "speak truth to power. ... It was rife with truth" (para. 57). Blogger sparky wrote "humor is not the same thing as satire. ... the lack of Colbert coverage came about because most people don't enjoy being satirized" (para. 77). Hamsun56 pointed out that other bloggers concerned with the appropriateness of the speech were missing Colbert's irony (para. 19). The bloggers even attempted to define the nature of Colbert's persona. Jrrice commented that "Colbert is satire literally personified" (Hausleib, 2006, para. 4). On the other hand, Ann Althouse argued, Colbert "isn't a stand-up comedian. ... he's an actor" (para. 2). Interpreting the act as serious political critique, blogger The Viking emphasized that "If Colbert had been able to deliver body blows this effective before Bush ... started the never-ending military industrial story of America as Middle East Crusader, we'd be a healthier nation" (para. 20). Conversely, on conservative website *Hotair.com*, interpretations largely centered on Colbert's speech as entertainment, with many arguing that the speech was predictable and unfunny (Malkin, 2006).

Targets

The bloggers also deliberated on the targets of Colbert's speech. For conservative blogger Allahpundit, "the media is swooning over Colbert's performance. . . . the media loves to be criticized from the left (Malkin, 2006, para. 9-11). For blogger MA, "the whole point of his routine was to slam the mainstream media for its pro-Bush bias" (Althouse, 2006, para. 9). For TWM, in "no way was it slamming [the media] for being pro-Bush" (para. 18). The debates continued among the bloggers, who engaged in their own praise or blame of Colbert's epideictic. Colbert's speech opened a space to discuss the purported left or right wing bias of the media. In addition, many of the bloggers debated the nature of Colbert's own politics in attempting to decide who he was targeting. Many thought Colbert's speech still evidenced a conservative bent. Blogger Walt argued, however, that "as for some of the previous comments who think Colbert is truly right wing, that . . . proves Colbert is one of the finest comedic actors in my generation" (para. 71). Overall, the blogs about Colbert's speech show the roles that an audience plays when engaged with an epideictic-centered, infotaining public sphere.

Epideictic Engagement

We believe Colbert's speech opened up an aesthetic space for epideictic engagement and advocacy that largely avoids the trappings of technical or expert spheres (see Goodnight, 1982). The "accessibility" of developing genres of political entertainment releases process-oriented, laity-driven, meaningful cultural sites for deliberative democracy (Jones, 2005, p. 175; see also Boler, 2006; Baym, 2005). Through the Internet, audiences of various political persuasions engaged one another over communal definitions of Colbert's epideictic. New communicative models of infotainment tend to blend "postmodern stylistics" with a "modernist ethos of rational critical dialogue" (Baym, 2007, p. 93). In these terms, audiences can play roles outside the contours of purely functionalist accounts of rational-critical public spheres, to which many scholars normatively subscribe (Jones, 2004).

In an infotaining public sphere, we find audiences using *epideictic engagement*, above and beyond polarization or critical deliberation. Epideictic engagement may not carry the teleological weight that rhetorical constructions of a forensic past or a deliberative future may hold for a society. Yet, at a minimum, its curious enticements allow public/s a conversational (and largely civil) means for differing advocates to dialogue. Aesthetically hybrid, it also acts as a catalyst into a variety of topics and concerns. Audiences, as well as speakers, can

appropriate combinations of entertainment and political critique to consider public issues of importance.

Epidictic engagement incorporates the ironies and aesthetic considerations from which (post)modern political worlds are increasingly assembled. Habermas largely underestimated the part that irony and aesthetics could play in public spheres (Aune, 1994). This is surprising, since the best epidictic gives “amplification” and “enhancement” to arguments (Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1969, p. 51). In epidictic engagement, public/s coalesce around the attention-catching nature of entertainment, juxtaposed with political matters. We might specially note how the ironies and aesthetics of the Colbert speech spurred the blog audiences to engage in *meta-communication*, or communication about communication. Colbert’s epidictic motivated the bloggers to engage in a reflexive consideration about the nature of political audiences, how Colbert’s communication fared in relation to the rhetorical occasion, the form of communication practiced, and Colbert’s intentions and strategies for his rhetorical targets. In a time when communication scholars and others are rightly concerned with the public’s level of media literacy, perhaps one of the most interesting outcomes of the blog debates was how the enticements of the speech prompted talk *about* media and communication.

Epidictic engagement partially allays the three concerns raised about audience roles in an Internet age. It firstly provides an alternative between fears that the Internet and other new media will simply devolve into mere emotions and opinions, rather than critical reasoning. In the Colbert blogs, we find subjective opinions and emotions merged with attention to important political matters, such as the status of the Iraq war, or access to the mainstream media. A hybrid space for subjective comments *and* critical reasoning was created. Secondly, while matters of praise and blame can certainly fuel polarization, Colbert’s speech enticed bloggers into an active communicative mode that, despite disagreements, led the bloggers to examine the intricacies of culture and politics in the performance. It is an example of democracy enacted through creative citizenship (Asen, 2004), that controverts quantitative exclamations about the decline of public engagement (Putman, 2000). Finally, as much as the mainstream media may be said to erode public life, the Colbert speech blogs show how audiences are constructing interpretations of public events among one another and on their own terms. Furthermore, the epidictic dinner speech gave audiences grounds to discuss possible shortcomings of the mainstream media.

Our work extends theories on audiences, epidictic, and the burgeoning communicative realm of infotainment. We also hope this essay is an entry point for greater scholarly conversations on the possibilities or limitations for Internet audiences in (post)modernity, where there are often no clear distinctions between

infotainment and what is taken as serious discussion. While we examine a text as the finished product of work in modernity, in (post)modernity we view political life *in process*. Studying infotainment provides an ideal introduction, or a clue to, understanding meanings about what is happening processually in many contemporary public spheres. In so doing, charting the conceptual waters of epideictic engagements will continue to remain a critical task for social innovations in our mediated democracy.

Notes

¹ Indeed, “rhetorical analysis begins with the question of audience” (Aune, 1994, p. 17).

² Farrell (1983) stated, for instance, that audiences can play a: “(1) *general role*: to conceptualize itself ‘as a recurrent social actor engaged in a process of formalizing and adjusting proofs on different practical matters’; (2) *enlightening role*: ‘to present the major issues of both deliberative and also forensic discourse as points of ‘difference’ or disagreement’ [note the absence of epideictic]; and (3) *critical role*: to weigh ‘practical alternatives’” (p. 172).

³ Lister et al (2003) explained, for example, “As a ‘public’ communicative space the Internet does indeed appear to offer highly specific and limited engagement — whatever your politics, whatever your fetish, a corresponding website and ‘sense of community’ can be found on line. ... ‘critical reasoning’ is replaced by opinion and subjective comment” (p. 178).

⁴ Determining the nature of Colbert’s infotaining speech and similar phenomena is a task that many scholars are currently trying to ascertain; see Pfau, Cho, and Chong (2001).

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