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## FROM THE COLBERT REPORT TO COUNTERFACTUAL ARGUMENT: REFLECTIONS ON PARODIC PUBLIC SPHERES

The dominant metaphor shaping American conceptions of argument in the political arena has been the notion of a "market place of free ideas" (Holliman, 2001, p. 158). The image of society as a marketplace of fair communicative exchange is undermined by many well-known factors, including political apathy among younger citizens, and the media's tendency to pursue profit-driven, sensational events at the expense of critical social issues (Davis & Owen, 1998; Bennett, 2004). As a result, many inequalities have emerged in the political marketplace, and ordinary citizens have lost their voice (Ballhug, 1989; Goodnight, 1991). One viable solution to this problem is the creation of spaces for citizen engagement, since "a healthy public sphere in which arguments are formed, tested, and evaluated helps an emergent democratic community shape its policy choices through the broad participation of an active and involved citizenry" (Holliman, 2001, p. 158).

In the following essay, we argue that the popular American television show *The Colbert Report* and its website foster the creation of postmodern public spheres well-suited to an interactive, intertextual, and networked age. The Colbert website message boards, in particular, contain many distinctive political discussions and posts that evidence a generative expansion of public argument. In fact, Colbert was given the 2008 "Wesley Person of the Year" award for "recognition of his pioneering role in utilizing the Internet as a significant tool for interaction with fans of 'The Colbert Report' . . . . Colbert embodies the true participatory spirit of the Web" (Stephen Colbert, 2008, para. 2).<sup>1</sup> We build upon our theoretical model that counts Colbert's communications as both a means and ends to *epideictic engagement*, rather than polarization or critical deliberation (Waisanen & Suzuki, 2007). Epideictic engagement opens "aesthetic space[s]" for "advocacy" that largely avoids the trappings of technical or expert spheres" (p. 9). Like Dell'Capri (2004), we believe distinctions between news and entertainment are often artificial, and may be best

conceptualized "in terms of the *transfer of information*" (p. 423).

Geoffrey Baym (2007a) takes a similar approach, finding that *The Colbert Report's* interview segment *Better Know a District*, in which Colbert interviews little-known Members of Congress, "interjects a measure of political content into a late-night landscape generally characterized by banal entertainment" (p. 359). At the same time, it offers "rank-in-file representatives an alternative television venue in which to craft affective ties with a constituency that pays less and less attention to traditional forms of political communication" (p. 359). We reflect upon several dynamics of including, or in Colbert's case, specifically *parodic public sphere* activity that informs, entertains, and opens space for deliberation.<sup>2</sup> This essay thus also joins into discussions about whether political comedians such as Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert influence democracy for good or ill (Baym, 2005, 2007a, 2007b); Bennett, 2007; Boies, 2006; Hartmann, 2007; Hart & Havelius, 2007; Jones, 2005, 2007; Lule, 2007; McLean, 2005; "National," 2004a, 2004b; Young & Tsingier, 2006).

We will first discuss three tests for the type of entertainment-oriented social critique exemplified by parodic public spheres. Second, we will review and connect Colbert's discourses to counterepublic theories, showing how interactivity is fostered within and between publics on Colbert's message boards. Third, we will explain how *The Colbert Report's* parodic allusions function as intertextual activations for public sphere engagement. We will then tie these themes together by asking the question: are non-arbitrary communicative encounters engendered through these discourses? That is, are there significant counter-factual potentials for public argument produced by Colbert? We conclude with the observation that Colbert serves a distinctly generative function for argumentation in American media and politics. We will draw most of our examples from video and discussion materials

covering the presidential primaries and election from November 2007 through May 2008 on *The Colbert Report* website (The Colbert Report, 2008), and the "political discussion" and "The Colbert Report" sections of the show's message boards (The Colbert Nation, 2008).

### Three Tests for Parodic Public Spheres

In an information age, a public sphere needs to clear three essential tests: is it attractive, healthy, and active? If contemporary society is marked by postmodern conditions for knowledge and belief, publics must struggle to find institutional trust and garner collective, practical wisdom. How can public spheres persist in such an age of incredulous knowledge? One possible answer is that a public sphere can function with or through entertainment. To begin with, if a public sphere is not attractive, youth in particular may avoid engagement. Studies show that many young people find much of politics unfamiliar, uninviting, and lacking in the immediacy offered by entertainment (Lenkins, 2007). In order to be attractive, a public sphere must also be inviting. Participants must perceive that free and open debate and goodwill between interlocutors is possible. For example, CNN's television program *Crossfire* operated through a polarized format of quasi-debate between liberals and conservatives. *Crossfire's* format may have entertained, but it lacked the aura of attractive goodwill that fosters involvement in a common public enterprise.

On the other hand, *The Colbert Report* operates through inviting discussions. The show has had such guests as presidential candidates Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton, former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, former Ambassador to the United Nations John Bolton, and a plethora of other politicians and journalists on the show for interviews. Colbert also discusses current issues with scholars, book authors, and media producers. Very few pass up the invitation to go on Colbert's show. In the interviews, almost all of Colbert's guests send a message of attractive public sphere engagement to their audiences. They open themselves up to Colbert's political critique and examination of personal and professional foibles, through the comedic goodwill of the show. *The Colbert Report* thus translates technical arguments (and often sheer obfuscations) into vernacular specificities that foster involvement, familiarity, and immediacy.

Second, if a public sphere is healthy, it avoids political myopia and largely resists being easily manipulated by the ideological agendas of governments, corporations, or the mass media. The public sphere should be healthy enough to provide a forum within which any liberal, moderate, or conservative is welcome to participate. Looking across the contemporary mediascape, it becomes obvious how few spaces exist for

healthy engagement free from overwatching ideological constraints. For instance, shows like Rush Limbaugh's radio program are mostly about the performance of pre-set opinions and political identity, rather than the processual construction of practical commonplaces. What critical deliberation does take place is typically within the party or movement. This phenomenon is by no means limited to radio or television. A computer programmer researching books on *Amazon.com* found there was basically no overlap in reading materials between liberals and conservatives (Enriquez, 2005). That is, conservatives read books by conservatives, and liberals read liberals. This is what scholar Cass Sunstein (2000) calls "deliberative enclaves" (p. 113) or echo-chamber politics.

By contrast, *The Colbert Report* creates healthy public sphere activity by expanding engagement beyond the echo-chamber of ideological interests, and both conservative and liberal audiences. This is not to say the Colbert is not just as much by ratings and profit as any other. Yet it is Colbert's service to comedy that seems to serve a transcending and unifying function for his audiences. As Baym (2007a) argues, Colbert critically confronts an "aesthetic totalitarianism" in the mainstream media, which "privileges affective spectacle over rational argument and actively seeks to undermine the deliberative process" (p. 359).<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, Colbert engages in a form of enchanting epideictic that opens space for interpretation within and between different public audiences. It is the function rather than the correctness of these interpretations that is most intriguing for public sphere theory. Colbert's postmodern performance appears to invite healthy advocates and responses. Though Colbert pretends to be a hard-core conservative, he invites both conservative and liberal guests to disclose and discuss public matters with generally civil and generative attitudes.

Finally, if a public sphere is not active, it can have no meaningful influence on possible courses of action taken within society. The public sphere does not necessarily need to change the world in revolutionary ways, but should at a minimum instruct and invite people to enact non-arbitrary, critical arguments about the past, present, or future of democracy. This leads us to ask, does *The Colbert Report* have rhetorical force? Whether or not parodic public sphere activity has sensitive impacts upon public life is an open question. We might distinguish the kind of active but polarizing engagement fostered through political-entertainment formats such as Michael Moore's controversial films (see Goodnight, 2005), from the interactivities produced through Colbert's political discourses. Moore partially failed to provide active forums for diverse people to communicate with each other, while engaging in political protest and advocacy. At best, public

spheres are active if they foster movement within and between private and public interests. While we argue that *The Colbert Report* both meets the tests for and fosters attractive and healthy public spheres, we will use the remainder of this essay to also discuss *if and how* the show could also be an *active force for meaningful argumentation* in contemporary society.

#### *The Colbert Report* and Counterpublic Theory

There is a consensus among scholars of public communication that rethinking the public sphere "more inclusively enables discerning the public sphere as a multiplicity of dialectically related public spheres rather than a single, encompassing arena of discourse" (Asen and Brower, 2001, p. 6). Fraser (1992) describes counterpublic spheres as crucial oppositional forces that disrupt the homogenizing processes of global culture and consumerism. She defines counterpublics similarly as "parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counter discourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs" (p. 123).

Many media scholars believe that the Internet is an appealing space for interaction. Poster (1997) argues that cyber-democracy institutes "new social functions" that "can only become intelligent if a framework is adopted that does not limit the discussion from the outset to modern patterns of interpretation" (1997, p. 202). Hence, we look at how *The Colbert Report* and the message boards on its website can serve the new social functions that media and communication scholars envision. We argue *The Colbert Report* not only fosters parodic public sphere activity, but also diversifying counterpublics.

Palczewski (2001) finds two problems with cyber-activism research. First, people tend to focus on the Internet's ability to transmit information, rather than foster interaction (e.g., Grossman, 1997). Thus, they tend to underestimate the potential democratic functions of online communication. Along similar lines, scholars also tend to focus on the relations between websites and the political sphere, ignoring the important constitutive functions and interactions activists use to structure online engagement. As Palczewski states, "While the Internet may not be able to generate counterpublics in the same way that social movements can, it can provide the means to open these counterpublics to others, to sustain counterpublics, and to encourage communication" (p. 178). As social movements seek to mobilize others of like mind, virtual communities are also a way in which the "creative powers of controversy can spread beyond local communities" (Riley, Klump, and Holliman, 1995, p. 259).

On the *Colbert* message boards, we find many examples of open communication, interaction, and a multiplicity of interests

engaged in conversation. At times, there are outlier posts that turn to ad hominem attacks to punctuate the discussion. Yet, in general, it is remarkable how generative and interactive the forums are in discussing both the show and political issues. In other words, *The Colbert Report* appears to act as a heuristic for website activity. One online post on Republican presidential candidate Mike Huckabee (a guest on *Colbert's* show), turned into a conversation about religion, politics, and the election (All *Colbert Fans*, 2008). Some argued that Huckabee should be supported, while others extended the discussion to consider how President George W. Bush's faith informs his politics. One self-described agnostic (following *Colbert's* comedic conventions?) said that he/she respected everyone's beliefs, but that if Bush is a messenger from God, "I think God would send someone with a richer vocabulary." Another participant requested evidence for the theory that religion and government should be separate, encouraging discussion among the thread participants on church/state matters.

Some thought that Huckabee was using *Colbert* to gain votes, and that Ron Paul was the only viable Republican candidate. Some argued that "only God can stop wars" while others stated that war is unthinkable as "Jesus spoke of peace and forgiveness." At one point, a forum participant from Denmark even joined in the discussion, arguing for the separation of religion and politics. The participant noted a seeming contradiction in Huckabee's pro-life stance with his willingness "to send American soldiers to die" in Iraq. This sparked a transnational discussion from other participants about how America differs from Denmark in its politics. Other threads had a range of participants discussing possible presidential and vice-presidential pairings, criticisms of the electoral process, and positions on various issues (Undiscovered, 2008, 2008), including a substantive interchange over educational policy (Clueless in America, 2008).

In other forums, counterpublics formed to discuss issues brought up on *The Colbert Report*. Some used the online threads to condense around candidates, using a combination of news stories, cartoons, and other message sharing (see parodic allusion and intertextuality in the next section) to build support for their election choices. In a Barack Obama forum, some participants built collective identity by discussing how their conservative parents and friends were going to vote for Obama, for instance (Official Obama thread, 2008). Online participants excitedly discussed the show's booking of Michelle Obama (Michelle Obama, 2008). The threads were also used to go beyond the show, with participants providing each other with extended background information for *The Colbert Report* guests such as Hillary Clinton (Official April 17, 2008).

*The Colbert Report* is a parodic public sphere which both invites people to enter into the world of political discourse, and

educates them about contemporary issues through comedy. Such strategies are, of course, a major tool of protest against the state. As Asen and Brower (2001) note, a number of theorists have explored "the social and cultural practices by which profoundly marginal populations register dissent or opposition through invention, grotesque humor, symbolic degradation, arrogance, and expressions of Schadenfreude" (p. 18). However, counter-site activities often entail risks. Again, Asen and Brower warn: "When engagement with counterpublic agents provokes too many risks such as the threat of poignant critique, loss of credibility, exposure of vulnerability or corruption, or instigation of antigovernment uprising, states may act by removing the agitator(s) from public view" (p. 19).

It is thus remarkable how *Colbert's* presence has grown in public since his White House Correspondent's Dinner speech critiquing both the media and the Bush administration in 2006. Through the speech, which was mostly distributed through the Internet by individuals and grassroots groups, rather than official media channels, *Colbert* indirectly embodied a counterpublic and *activated* publics to argue about major political issues (see Weisman and Suzuki, 2007). To look further at the way in which Stephen *Colbert's* discourses produce active engagement and movement within the public arena, we must also understand the nature of his parodies. In the next section, we'll turn to this major strategy.

#### Parodic Allusion in *The Colbert Report*

To understand how *The Colbert Report* works as a generative, parodic public sphere, we turn to the notion of "intertextuality" and "parodic allusion." Recently, scholars have employed the term intertextuality to describe two different phenomena—audiences as sites of textual production, and the expanding role of intellectual allusions in media (Ort and Walter, 2001). Television critic John Fiske (1987, 1989) argues that audiences often unconsciously create meaning by utilizing a vast knowledge of cultural codes learned from other texts to read a particular text. For Fiske, intertextuality is a postmodern sensibility shared by audiences—a reading formation that connects texts as fragments in larger webs of textuality.

An important intertextual strategy used by *Colbert* is *parodic allusion*. "Parodic allusion," note Ort and Walter (2001), "describes a stylistic device in which one text incorporates a caricature of another, most often, popular cultural text" (p. 435). They argue, "the aim of parody is to comment critically and/or comically on the original text usually by drawing attention to unspoken norms (Morson, 1981; Rose, 1993)" (p. 436). Parodic allusion thus

Seeks to amuse through juxtaposition—a goal that is enhanced by the reader's recognition of the parodic gesture. The audience is, in effect, transformed into the site of critical commentary; they are judged worthy by the text and subsequently themselves if they possess sufficient cultural knowledge to recognize the popular references. (p. 436)

*The Colbert Report's* parody uses specific allusions that invites viewers to exercise specialized knowledge. Audiences are thus *activated* to make inferences and connections that create perspective about or beyond the public issues and events covered. In one segment about the Pennsylvania primary between Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton, *Colbert* puts up a video of an Obama speech and states "everyone was asking, who would win, would it be decisive? Well, when all was said and done, there was a clear winner... Abernombic and Fitch." *Colbert* then highlights the sea of Abernombic and Fitch paraphernalia worn by the young people surrounding Obama. He goes on "that was the most successful product placement of this campaign, since John McCain's plug for Chuck-e-cheese [camera cuts to an image of John McCain waist-high in a sea of plastic balls]" (The Word - Iraq, 2008). These intertextual allusions deconstruct the tenuous relationship between politics and business, and provide critical commentary on the unspoken norms of contemporary campaigning. Overall, the parodic allusions on *The Colbert Report* link the world of politics with vernacular cultural commonplace to create new insights.

Additionally, there is a degree of relativity in these allusions that is perhaps unprecedented in politics. *Colbert* is constantly inviting viewers to examine the motivations and framings of mainstream news stories. He will often metacommunicate about the norms of newsmaking in order to bring the strategies of media production into public view. Responding to a news story that Rush Limbaugh called veterans opposing the Iraq war "phony soldiers," *Colbert* states, "now some veterans may have been offended, but Rush just calls this war like he sees it, from thousands of miles away in West Palm Beach." *Colbert* then tells us he has his own (marginal) radio show "where for three hours a day I shout whatever pops into my head and when it is over, I never give it a second thought [the words "or first thought" appear to the right of *Colbert*]." *Colbert* then shows a Fox News clip inferring that media watchdog organizations like *Media Matters* shouldn't post radio comments from figures like Limbaugh or O'Reilly on the Internet. *Colbert* quips, "[thus] allowing the general public to hear words that were meant for people that already agree with us [the words "Shrinking to the Chord" appear on the right of the screen]" (Medium matters, 2008). This kind of metacommunication is rather remarkable,

and quite distinct from the general inattention of the mainstream media to its own structural biases.

Audiences need intelligence and knowledge to appreciate fully the Colbert Report's comedy. The program begs interaction with other media such as television and newspapers. As old and new media collide and converge, audience interaction and participation are fast becoming the *sine non qua* of successful programming (Jenkins, 2007). The pace and scope of Colbert's parodic allusions activates audiences to critically decode political issues and interests, but to what extent might they actually be called *argument*? We finally turn to this question, and speculate on the potential for parodic public spheres like *The Colbert Report* and its offshoots to create meaningful argumentation. Above all, we find one particularly striking type of argument in the show—the counterfactual.

#### *The Colbert Report* and Counterfactual Argument

In its most basic sense, "A counterfactual statement is based on the occurrence of something that in fact did not happen" (Johnson, 2000, p. 65). Counterfactuals illustrate alternative options to causal arguments, generating hypothetical cases to show how a course of action may have been different. They have been used across a variety of disciplines, particularly history, where "A counterfactual hypothetically alters an event in the past, creating a new outcome" (Damenberg, 2008, p. 86). Counterfactuals have also been used "as an analytical method in the political and social sciences" and "in the fictional genre of alternate history" (p. 86).

In this final section, we examine the potential for Colbert's communications to carry rhetorical force, by briefly discussing some examples of counterfactual argument that are a standard feature of his show. We speculate on the question of whether or not non-arbitrary communicative encounters are fostered through the show. Does Colbert's show encourage passive, cynical, and ironic distance from political engagement, or could it often be making substantive arguments over consequential matters? As already shown, Colbert's parodic public spheres are healthy, attractive, and active. They foster public and counterpublics to communicate, often through parodic allusions. We find finally that *The Colbert Report* uses counterfactuals that both build upon these prior considerations, and provide evidence that Colbert often engages in an effective and distinctive type of postmodern argument.

One of Stephen Colbert's most common ways of addressing political issues is by imagining hypothetical cases. He often presents incongruous, alternative scenarios that create a great deal of humor for his audiences. At the same time, he makes arguments that speak to present issues through imaginary forward and backward shifts through time. In other

works, Colbert creates fictional statements with force, as when he critiqued the Bush administration with the question and poignant statement, "Is there an alternative to war against Iran? Of course – a pre-emptive strategic air strike against Iran," (Pension gulp, 2007).

In early 2008, Colbert returned from a lengthy hiatus, due to the continuing national television writers' strike. As the show began again without its writers, Colbert made a striking counterfactual point about television shows and union politics. Colbert starts his show with a tongue-in-cheek segment about how he does not need his writers given his "strong anti-union history" (The Word – (...), 2008). He relates, "I have always been anti-union. I have always been anti-union" because "labor unions are destroying America one mandatory bathroom break at a time." He further pontificates, "we got to get these kids back in factories changing bobbins . . . You know what prevents childhood obesity—a 19 hour shift at the mills." As an actor playing a conservative character, Colbert has a great deal of freedom to make meaningful hypothetical arguments beyond the proprieties and strictures of mainstream political discourse. What is perhaps most remarkable about this counterfactual critique is how Colbert *performs* both conservative and liberal arguments simultaneously, through his character, thus opening meaningful space for pro and anti arguments toward different causes to come sharply into focus. At the same time, Colbert makes a moral point through this counterfactual exaggeration, which clearly makes fun of conservative arguments that lack qualifiers about some of the historical benefits of unions.

Colbert engages in another counterfactual argument in a segment he ran on immigration. In this piece, Colbert stages a mock debate with himself. Through quick editing, two different versions of Colbert make pro and anti-immigration arguments to create a tongue-in-cheek hypothetical analysis, and using fiction to address this consequential issue. Colbert begins his moral argument with the absurdist claim, "[immigrants are] the reason you have to press 1 just to speak English. . . . I hate pressing 1, it takes so much time, time I could be spending with my kids" (Formidable opponent, 2006). The other Colbert then asks, "But how are you going to get rid of 11 million people?" The anti-immigration Colbert responds, "Simple, we'll build a giant water park and invite the illegals. . . . The top of the slide is in San Diego, but the bottom of it is in Jantex." One could view this segment as simply an arbitrary scenario created for the sake of comedy, until it is remembered that there are many people really advocating for the deportation of 11 million illegal aliens in the US. Colbert performs a counterfactual argument against this view, by staging this mock debate. In the end, Colbert becomes an advocate through play. Although this type of argumentation

goes against the facts, and is beyond the boundaries of typical political argument, it is expansive and productive in illustrating what the limits of a line of reasoning might entail, however far out.

Finally, Colbert combines a parodic allusion and counterfactual argument in a segment in which he spoofs the agenda-setting functions of the media in elections. He tells viewers that the media were very clear in telling the public that Clinton and McCain were going to be the presidential candidates in 2008. He continues,

Then Clinton and Giuliani in 08, then 4 days ago we were just as clear that it would be Obama and Huckabee in 08 . . . and then you go and vote for Clinton [in New Hampshire]. I mean, if you go on voting the way you want rather than the way we [the media] tell you what you want, well, then pundits are just going to have to stop telling you how to think. (Interview, 2008)

Colbert generates a hypothetical future case ("we're going to have to stop telling you how to think") that is anchored in a very real media phenomenon—punditry overload. Colbert makes a counterfactual argument by comparing an ideal (people should make up their own minds) to the real (the media tells us what to think). By doing so, the lines between "fact" and "fiction" are blurred to make a non-arbitrary, meaningful point about the communicative norms and practices of media production and consumption.

#### Conclusion

*The Colbert Report* is a critical space for political argumentation in the contemporary mediascape. In particular, Stephen Colbert creates generative space for his audiences, of all persuasions, to critically engage political issues in productive ways. As a driver for state-of-the-art parodic public sphere activity, *The Colbert Report* is an attractive, healthy, and active stage for public and counterpublic engagement. This engagement is often the result of intertextual, parodic allusions. More importantly, this engagement can rise to the level of consequential public argument, through the prominent counterfactual critiques that are a significant and unique feature of the show.

As other scholars such as Baym (2007a, p. 361) also find, Colbert engages in a politics of postmodern play, and contrary to what Habermas (1983) assumes, the *political-normative* does not have to be separated from the *aesthetic-expressive*. At issue are the ways in which parodic politics can be attractive, accessible, and even a source of pleasure for participants. As many scholars have also betrayed the need to make politics

fun again (Hollifman, 2001), we need to look to the ways in which figures such as Colbert appear to be paving the way.

This essay argues that Colbert's counterfactual play is a unique form of argument within the public arena. Colbert's rhetoric functions through a hybrid and entertaining form that transcends mere "wastebubble of ideas" metaphors. Since most communication scholars have moved from transmission to constitutive models of communication (Craig, 2001), we might note too how Colbert's reasoning does more service to the organic later rather than mechanistic former model. It fits with the contemporary project within our field to unearth and examine the ways in which the metaphor of *play* can inform argument study, practice, and pedagogy (Palczewski, 2002). In contrast to traditional war metaphors, Palczewski argues that play is a much more expansive trope for argumentation, allowing more room for cooperation, performance, persona, bodies, contexts, relations, presence, and discursive and presentational meanings. To situate argument as an attractive, healthy, and active pursuit, she believes "Argument is fun and arguers can be playful" (p. 16).

Colbert's arguments combine all of these variables, but especially a persona and performance that appears to generate much cooperative discourse, while concurrently launching trenchant moral critiques. As media and politics continue to intersect and evolve in a globalizing world, it is no surprise that new communication forms are arising to create space for public spheres that do not look like traditional public spheres. More specifically, looking to all the ways in which new *argument* structures are enacted remains a critical task for scholarship. In a media environment inundated with virality and imitation, *The Colbert Report* is a complex, hybrid, and innovative space for argumentation, which evidences the vital potentials for politics and entertainment to combine and produce meaningful messages.

- \*1. Colbert's collaborators with fans through viral videos, his 2006 White House Correspondents Dinner speech, the building of a massive Colbert fanbase on Facebook, his use of Google-bombing (where fans inundate the show website and Google so that terms like "American hero" will pull up *The Colbert Report* on the search engine, influencing the rank of the show online) all caught the attention of the International Academy of Digital Arts and Sciences, which bestowed the award.
- \*2. We select the word *parody*, rather than simply satire, irony, etc., to describe the show's emphases. Parody appropriates the style of an art form (Vorhaus, 1994). *The Colbert Report* appropriates the style or form of sensationalized newsmaking (Fox News, MSNBC, etc.) and Colbert's character himself is loosely intended to be an impersonation of the style or form of a conservative critic such as Bill O'Reilly or Sean Hannity.
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