Communication Quarterly
Volume 59   Number 5   November–December 2011

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Crafting Hyperreal Spaces for Comic Insights: The Onion News Network’s Ironic Iconicity

Don J. Waisanen

In 2007, the flagship humor publication, The Onion, launched the Onion News Network (ONN), a comic news organization producing online sketch videos. This article argues that ONN is a distinctive form of hyperreal social critique that uses ironic iconicity, rather than slapstick or the usual tomfoolery of much comedy programming, to invite rhetorical insights about contemporary media events and political practices. ONN’s videos draw attention toward communicative dynamics, creating spaces for alternative civic understandings through a televisural technique that imitates but also reconfigures the structure, delivery, or content of mainstream news broadcasts like CNN and Fox News. Although not without limitations, this ironic iconicity crafts a multimodal online rhetoric and demonstrates the contingency, recursivity, and judgment of news communication norms and practices.

Keywords: Comedy; Hyperreal; Ironic Iconicity; Onion News Network; Rhetoric

What do flashy graphics, sensationalized reports, and anchors with stylized speech all have in common? They are, of course, all characteristics of the modern news media, whether CNN, Fox News, MSNBC, or other mainstream networks. Yet, they are also some of the features that have been imitated without apology by the comic Onion News Network (ONN), whose realistic sketch video clips could easily be mistaken for segments from these channels. In fact, CNN actually hired one of ONN’s anchors (Sharp, 2008)! Since its inception, ONN has created hyperreal spaces for satirizing public foolishness at every level, leaving few cultural or political topics off its agenda.

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ISSN 0146-3373 print/1746-4102 online © 2011 Eastern Communication Association
DOI: 10.1080/01463373.2011.615690
ONN spotlights the rhetoricity of media practices, such as worn slogans in political campaigns, unwarranted narratives of progress in international reporting, and even the public relations (PR) industry’s incursions into mainstream news coverage. In doing so, ONN employs a distinctive rhetorical strategy of ironic iconicity for the digital age, illustrating a way in which entertaining discourses can craft moral insights about our world.

The Onion has become one of the largest humor-producing institutions in America over the past 20 years. It began as a small newspaper in 1988, and took its print version online in 1996. In the spring of 2007, it began ONN, offering a series of sketch news broadcasts on the Web. Whereas traditional print media are in a period of decline, The Onion has dramatically increased its audience over the past several years, with five million viewers to their Webby award-winning Internet site, and a circulation of over 1/2 million prints of its paper nationwide (Coye, 2008; Tower, 2008). With over one million views per week (Stephen, 2008, p. 7), ONN is now well-known among journalists for its unusually “brutal frankness” and “willingness to pierce orthodoxies” (Beato, 2007, para. 15). ONN’s originators intend for their sketches to do more than simply entertain. ONN’s director, Will Graham, is direct about the organization’s civic concerns: “Viral videos are democratising the elections, creating an online dialogue” (Kiss, 2008, “Election 2008,” para. 1). ONN’s head writer further believes that the organization’s public role is advanced by the Internet, which provides a space for doing material that would never make it on television (Sharp, 2008, p. 4).

ONN crafts hyperreal spaces in its videos, only slightly exaggerating its targets—that is, these videos are for the most part relentlessly true to the media forms they parody. Sharp (2008) observed that “ONN’s material is state of that particular art because their productions are almost indistinguishable from the programmes they’re imitating” (p. 4). In particular, ONN sets itself apart from other comic forms by casting straight actors and even real broadcasters rather than comedians in many of its sketches (Ho, 2009). The New York Times called ONN “a near-perfect facsimile of a deadly serious cable broadcast,” as its actors come “across as only slightly distorted [italics added] versions of the clichés that appear all day on CNN and Fox News” (Heffernan, 2008, paras. 1 & 5).

In this article, I argue that ONN is a distinctive form of hyperreal social critique that uses ironic iconicity, rather than slapstick or the tomfoolery of much comedy programming, to invite rhetorical insights about contemporary media events and political practices. ONN’s videos draw attention to communicative dynamics and create spaces for alternative civic understandings through a televised technique that mostly imitates the structure and delivery of mainstream news broadcasts like CNN and Fox News, while comically toying with expected news content. This ironic iconicity—or juxtaposition between veristic and slightly fantasized structure, delivery, and content—crafts a multimodal online rhetoric and demonstrates the contingency, recursivity, and judgment of news communication norms and practices.

This communication form is distinguished from the practices of comedy shows like Saturday Night Live (see Saturday Night Live, 2009), where social critique is often dampened by outrageous farcical exaggeration—and even The Daily Show and The
Colbert Report, where the anchors wink at their audiences and laugh at themselves in the knowledge that they are doing “fake news.” The ONN makes no such distinctions, walking a hyperreal line in its comedy through its mostly imitative, but slightly exaggerating, rhetoric.

ONN’s rhetorical strategy extends several foci within the communication literature. A number of studies have examined comic communication forms and the increasingly hybrid crossings of politics and entertainment in public discourse (Baym, 2005, 2007a, 2007b; Holbert, 2005; Jones, 2005; Pfau, Cho, & Chong, 2001; Smith & Voth, 2002; Waisanen, 2009). Lanham (2006) argued that attention is the central resource of the information age and that rhetoric allocates attention among the competing voices and agendas of our world. ONN constitutes such a model of attention allocation, as its creators leverage ironic discourses toward public issues. As such, this study supports Hariman’s (2008) contention that “political humor and particularly its core modality of parody are essential for an engaged, sustainable, democratic public culture” (p. 253).

Achter (2008) found that the traditional and online print versions of The Onion created a space for dealing with the 9/11 tragedies, challenging the values of news production during the period while encouraging citizen participation. Achter noted that, “if news parodies like The Onion can be understood as viable alternatives to the mainstream news, work remains to be done to further our understanding of how news parody figures citizenship as the news evolves in different forms” (p. 298). Moving beyond The Onion’s print legacy, the institution’s newer venture into online video sketches is examined.

I conducted a close reading of 25 ONN video clips covering broadly defined political issues, from the network’s inception in 2007 through 2009. These clips were largely selected from the archives of the In the Know, O’-Spen, and Election 2008 segments on ONN’s Web site. Not all of ONN’s videos deal with politics, but clips with political associations were searched for the sake of scope and focus. Overall, this study finds that these videos invite viewers to be more discerning about the rhetorical dynamics and demands of our age, as the comic technique of ironic iconicity constitutes a critical practice with contingent, recursive, and moral public functions.

ONN’s Ironic Iconicity

Iconic signs appear to purely imitate the world, independent of whether the objects they refer to actually exist (Peirce, 1955, p. 102). Leech and Short (1981) stated that iconicity “rests on the intuitive recognition of similarities between one field of reference … and another” (p. 242). In rhetorical studies, the concept of “iconicity” has been explored in several ways. Daughton (1995) said “iconicity” arises when “linguistic form and content are inseparable, and highly textured discourses may manifest an echoing of form and content that simultaneously reinforce the power of a message and grant power to the creator and receivers of that message” (pp. 24–25). She explained that sentence placement, length, word juxtapositions, chronology, sound, and rhythm are all potential forms of iconicity. The repetition
of the letter "s" in the sentence, "Sally's snakes slithered and slouched," for instance, shows how the form of a sentence can imitate what it describes (p. 25). Hence, form and content mutually reinforce one another.

Building from this work, Jasinski (2001) said that "ironic forms of iconicity" can highlight "the complex ways in which substance and syntax, or content and form, can interact," typically involving "a tension or a discordancy between what is being said and how it is being said" (p. 304). Weaver (1953) wrote that a "friction" is created "whenever a given unit of a system of grammar is tending to say one thing while the semantic meaning and the general organization are tending to say another" (p. 116). Even ancient theorists like Quintilian (1920) defined irony in terms of a speaker's discordant delivery, character, or subject matter: "[I]f any one of these three is out of keeping with the words, it at once becomes clear that the intention of the speaker is other than what he [sic] actually says" (p. 333).

It has been the direction of contemporary rhetorical scholarship to emphasize the interactions, rather than divisions, between form and content (Leff & Sachs, 1990). I do not mean to draw a simple bifurcation between form and content but, rather, demonstrate how the textual elements in discourses like ONN's videos interact in ways that are not always congruent. Distinctions between form and content can carry explanatory power, without forsaking their contributions to complete rhetorical products. Whereas iconicity imitates similarities between fields of reference, irony draws discidences between them to invite audiences toward reconstructed insights.

There are definitional differences and overlaps between irony, parody, and satire that concern my formulation of ironic iconicity. Hutcheon (1985) explained that parody is "imitation with critical ironic distance," rather than simple quotation or allusion (p. 37). It is typically manifested in "the visual arts" in "general iconic conventions" (p. 12), may or may not be satirical, and can be conservative or transformative in intent and effect. Parody, satire, and irony overlap and shift among one another. Irony goes beyond a text, however, functioning both semantically and pragmatically as "dissimulation and interrogation" (p. 53). In the former emphasis, irony's "patent refusal of semantic univocality matches parody's refusal of structural untextuality" (p. 54). In the latter pragmatic, evaluative function, irony shares more in common with satire, which is used to judge and correct external targets. As such, there are differences between parody, satire, and irony, but they also mutually implicate one another to varying degrees, depending on the texts.

ONN's videos certainly incorporate parody and satire, but they are situated on a nexus best explicated by the bi-textual and evaluative dimensions of irony. They are bi-textual in being both similar to and different than the news media, but interrogative in their treatment of the structure, delivery, and content of these broadcasts. A text's signals allow decoders to infer ironic intentions and evaluations (Booth, 1974; Hutcheon, 1985). ONN's videos imitate the expected codes of mainstream news-making while redirecting viewers with ironic signals of content, structure, or delivery that move beyond the iconic conventions.

In a classic clip from ONN, for example, flashy graphics appear across the screen, complete with such usual news features as sensationalistic music playing and a
scrolling news crawl at the bottom (i.e., the typical structure of a news broadcast). A news anchor then appears and speaks in a stylized tone (i.e., what we typically hear in the delivery of the news), but on the following topic: “As the presidential race heats up, a new survey finds that again, this year, the number one issue among voters, is bullshit” (i.e., the content of the broadcast has been comically tweaked; “Poll: Bullshit,” 2008).

The clip then continues like a standard split-screen news discussion between the newscaster and Kip O’Leary, from the “Shuttleworth Research Center,” who says:

> When it comes to electing the leader of the free world, voters look to issues like a candidate’s relationship to their ex-wife, did they ever smoke, where did they vacation, what is their exercise regimen? These are the kind of core bullshit issues that people really care about. (“Poll: Bullshit,” 2008)

The two talk about the photogenic nature of candidates as a bullshit media issue, and how a politician wearing a hard-hat at a factory could be “local, crowd-pandering bullshit.” At the bottom of screen the content is supplemented by the news crawl, “‘Bullshit’ Number One Issue for Voters in ’08.” The newscaster finally asks, “How can we in the news media do a better job of focusing on bullshit and really hounding candidates on these petty issues?”

During this interaction, the anchor and interviewee do not let up for a moment that this video constitutes “fake news”—aside from the actual words spoken and provided at the bottom of the screen, it could literally be a CNN or Fox News broadcast. In doing so, ONN denaturalizes the practices of seemingly “real” news broadcasts. The creators comically toy with the news content, creating an understated, critical juxtaposition between how the broadcast is being put forth and what is being said—an example of ironic iconicity for the digital age.

I find that ironic iconicity serves three rhetorical functions, centering on the contingency, recursivity, and ethical judgment of mainstream news broadcasts. These videos illustrate the very constructedness of seemingly “reality”-based, “factual” news programming, and play an important part in public discourse as sources of criticism and pedagogy. In the following sections, these three functions are demonstrated.

**Contingency**

Viewers of the mainstream news cannot fail to notice the certainty that informs much of its programming. Anchors report their stories as entirely factual and truthful, rather than as selected narratives. Moreover, facts and values are often muddled, as what seems like news is often advertising (Stauber & Rampton, 2002) or unreflective editorializing. Much of the news media has become increasingly parasitic, relying on other media or wire stories for their own reports (Weaver, McCombs, & Shaw, 2004), thus setting relatively monolithic news agendas. Through ironic iconicity, ONN invites attention toward practices of media sameness and certainty, illustrating instead the contingent nature of the public realm, and the idea that there are choices in such matters.³ ONN denaturalizes the common frames, clichés, and the worn
communications of the news world, providing viewers with ironic clues to the very situatedness of media structures and styles.

By imitating but also reconfiguring the typical structure, delivery, and content of the news media, ONN gives its audience a way to identify with what they have come to expect on the news while providing an alternative lens through which to view such events. The distinctiveness of this discourse lies in how heavily it is anchored in iconic news conventions, placing its irony in a (hyper)real framework that is not simply farcical and too contingent, however. In one video clip of a morning show (that bears a spot-on resemblance to the Today show or Good Morning America), a couple of upbeat anchors lament the death of the American army mascot “Liberty” in Iraq (“Pentagon Reports,” 2009). Clips of a dog mascot doing cartwheels in the midst of battle are shown. The newscaster relates that the mascot is carrying out a mission of “riling up soldiers involved in a long fire fight.” The anchor says that, after a brief hiatus, “Liberty was redeployed with a new mission, to put a positive spin on the conflict.” The news crawl states, “Liberty psyched up troops suffering from PTSD [posttraumatic stress disorder] so they could be redeployed.” In structure and delivery, ONN tells a story that looks and sounds exactly like what we would find on a typical morning show news broadcast. Yet, by playing this presentation of the story against what is said by the newscasters and the words appearing on the crawl, a slightly contingent discourse is crafted.

The horrors of war are juxtaposed against a deceptively cheerful PR mission, highlighting the contingent nature of such framings. This ONN video clip presents its viewers with an alternative possibility—that media stories may have some truth in them, but are never the whole picture—the images before us are but partial renderings, contingent choices among many. The sketch highlights the symbiosis of straight news and PR in modern media practices, bringing into view how powerful rhetoric is constructed and maintained.

The video also puts word and image in tension with one another, so that the more serious language and verbal delivery are inflected against a ridiculous visual of the mascot. At one point, Liberty jumps in front of an American soldier pointing a machine gun at an Iraqi woman, conveying how much Iraqi suffering and death is occluded by the news coverage we receive (“Pentagon Reports,” 2009). Pushing the PR point further, one of the anchors says that Liberty’s career “ended in heroics” after cartwheeling into an explosive device. This event has eerie connotations of the Pat Tillman incident in Iraq, where the American government launched a PR campaign to cover up the accidental death of a former professional football player serving in the military (see “What Really Happened,” 2008). At each point, the ironic iconicity highlights the contingency rather than the certitude of news stories by adhering closely to but also slightly violating common news performances.4

In doing so, the ability of the media to represent is questioned, as the hyperreal space of the clip interrogates the constructedness of fact and fiction in the news. These clips evoke the metacommunicative question of why we receive our political information through these news forms in the first place. These videos imitate and twist news conventions, interrogating the very legitimacy of broadcasts less reflexive
about these practices. Through ironic iconicity, audiences can relate to the material presented (i.e., the situation is not entirely absurd) while being invited to comically confront news choices.

In another ONN clip (see “No Values Voters,” 2008), ironic iconicity highlights the contingency of political slogans and clichés—an intentional focus of the writers and producers at the organization. Top editor of The Onion, Joe Randazzo, said in an interview that “cliché” is considered “a noxious hazard” to his staff (Tower, 2008, p. W08). In this clip, ONN reconstructs a slogan that has become well-known in American public discourse: “values voters” (i.e., groups who claim a moral mantle in their political voting). The clip shows an opposite, new group of citizens: the “no values voters” (“No Values Voters,” 2008). The straight-faced news anchor relates that this coalition is “committed to carrying out unspeakable acts of evil” (“No Values Voters,” 2008). A big sign at one of their political rallies reads “Focus on the Filth” (a contrast with the existent organization Focus on the Family). Again, the video’s form is structured and delivered exactly like a regular news story, but the words are put through a fantasized filter ironically signaling the partiality of claims like “values voting” in public life. ONN’s merely slight twist in this wording to “no values voting” reflects both its deep anchoring in public convention and irony’s “patent refusal of semantic [italics added] univocality” (Hutchison, 1985, p. 54).

The video (“No Values Voters,” 2008) stresses the contingency of this fractional morality and the potential for mischaracterizing others who, by the very invocation of “values voters,” may be seen as lacking in or not caring about “values.” In an interview in the clip, John Gerrity, a “no values voter,” says that in the campaign, there is a lot of “focusing on helping people and creating positive change and that’s very alienating for people like us.” Another interviewee, Corey Dornfeld, states, “I like that Obama did coke and McCain probably killed some guys in Vietnam, but for me it’s just not enough.” The actors nod in earnest agreement, creating an incongruity between the typical manner of news interviewees and what they are actually saying. The clip’s images reinforce a veristic form of news-making, as the camera angles create the impression of a typical person-on-the-street interview. In both the preceding examples, the interviewees are turned slightly to one side of the camera, as if they are talking to a reporter off the cuff. In the John Gerrity example, too, there is an edit in the middle of his remarks, imitating how news interviews are often shortened to fit the demand for quick sound bites rather than extended discussion.

At the same time, the sketch highlights the contingent nature of its own implicit claim that values voting is too totalizing a phenomenon by bracketing part of its mostly veristic discourse as invented. Ultimately, ONN’s slight foray into the fantastic points out how both their own videos and those of the mainstream news are constructions—making the everyday, seemingly “real” conventions of news (i.e., the iconic) both deeply recognizable but also ironically unusual and, thus, reversible.

ONN asks us to confront the contingent systems we rely on to take care of our daily lives. Processes and procedures are considered less than determinative through its iconic and ironic workings. In one clip where an electronic voting machine wins
the presidential election ("Voting Machines," 2008), we are invited to see the
imaginary as an avenue to the possible. The realism of the structure and delivery of
the clip (i.e., the graphics of election coverage, the demeanor of the anchors delivering
this news) meets a fictional topic (i.e., a machine is winning the presidential race),
ultimately asking viewers to consider their agency in a technological democracy.
The constant parallel between what is supposedly “real” and what is supposedly
“fiction” calls these categories into question, and also highlights that news stories
are constructed fields of argument, or choices among choices.

There are some caveats worth considering. Although viewers are invited to ponder
these alternative civic understandings, there is still some question of what they do
with them. I argue there are sufficient ironic signals of form and content in each
of these videos to draw most viewers toward the comic insights. It is hard to imagine
that many viewers would think a machine was actually elected president upon watch-
ing the prior sketch—or that anyone, whether for or against values voting, would fail
to be confronted with the premise of that particular clip. As Booth (1974) argued,
humans are adept at understanding irony. Watching ONN’s videos, however, viewers
may decide to engage civic issues further (e.g., let’s not leave democracy to voting
machines), or resign themselves in the face of this information (e.g., our government
is run by intractable processes toward which I could never make a difference). Some
research indicates that the latter possibility tends not to be the case with political
comedy programming5, and there is good reason to believe that, in effect, ONN
videos are no different.

ONN’s videos are likely subject to stable interpretations in their acknowledgment
of contingency as not completely radical or freewheeling (on the “radical contingency
position,” see Jasinski, 2001, p. 112). These sketches are firmly grounded in iconic
conventions that limit interpretation while also recognizing that traditions can be
changed to craft new readings on public matters. By imitating networks like CNN
in such a realistic manner, ONN recognizes that communication must often operate
within limiting frameworks. Just as rhetoric must find its way within structures and is
always embedded inside a matrix of forces, ironic iconicity illustrates how critical
capacities can be hindered or advanced under contemporary media conditions.
The next section discusses this recursive function in ONN’s video clips.

Recursivity

Recursivity exemplifies a process by which rhetors leverage past and present resources
toward innovation. Giddens (1979) wrote that “the duality of structure” is built on
“the essential recursiveness of social life, as constituted in social practices: Structure is
both medium and outcome of the reproduction of practices” (p. 5). Jasinski (2001)
translated this as “social life is recursive because it is repetitive,” engaging the nature
of and link between “repetition and change”6 (p. 481). A similar concept is found in
LaCapra’s (1983) “repetition with variation over time” (p. 44). In using a multimodal
form of ironic iconicity, ONN’s videos serve a recursive public function. By
maintaining an aura of realism while slightly twisting the elements of conventional
broadcasts, the videos illustrate the relationship between replication and variation in the media. As such, ONN uses its distinctive communicative technique (mostly through structure/delivery and content contrasts) to demonstrate the potential for creative rhetoric in online environments.

ONN recursively holds up the rituals and patterns of media discourses for public examination. Recursivity looks backward and forward, both accounting for past patterns that continue to structure the present and the future possibilities for working within these frameworks to create change. One clip on the 2008 presidential election reports on several “constructive criticism ads” created by candidate Obama (“Obama Runs,” 2008). In response to the negative campaign ads we usually see in elections, the new anchor states that the ads were produced to “gently point out inconsistencies” in McCain’s ads.

The newscaster cuts to an Obama video saying that McCain would make an excellent president, but that his healthcare plan “could be expressed more clearly than it is now... then again, McCain could probably continue what he’s doing now, and would surely win a lot of votes anyway” (“Obama Runs,” 2008). Through ironic iconicity, the segment maintains an allegiance to the conventions of past news-making in structure and delivery, implicitly evoking that genres do not arise out of nowhere. Yet, the content of the video is different than what we would normally expect to hear in campaign discourse (i.e., of “negative campaigning”). This semantic difference bi-textually underscores a vision that much news-making bypasses: that coverage of constructive criticism could be a possibility within the media. Thus, the video works within the news’s characteristic form while slightly altering its characteristic content to advance a new interpretation of a very public problem.

The same clip invites another insight about the relationship between communicative replication and variation, evidencing how structures also work to envelop and block social change. Between old resources and new possibilities, the video supports the idea that rhetorical change is not necessarily a linear process. The new anchor, unable to restrain herself from using a more dramatic, competitive framing of the ads, continues with, “Obama has clearly decided to take the gloves off and go negative,” and “he is really wearing his teeth now.” The media’s drive to cover negative aspects of the election emerges; rhetorical change can, thus, be short-lived, as new possibilities are curbed by repetitive frameworks from the past. The anchor shows another ad and remarks, “oh goodness, those are some scathingly helpful suggestions in that ad.” The juxtaposition between “scathingly” and “helpful” illustrates both the common news ritual of framing events dramatically, and the new normative possibility that the media might cover candidates’ civility more than their rhetorical violence.

In casting an ironic glance upon iconic news conventions, the constructive criticism clip bids some qualification over the liberatory potentials of online comedy. The reliance on tradition in recursivity is, to an extent, fundamentally conservative. It is not difficult to imagine that a Republican interpretation of the described Obama ads might serve to reinforce criticism of Obama as weak, even feminine. Although each video provides signals toward certain ironic reconstructions, it may not be
the case that all these videos are equal in their interpretive stability. Such are the
difficulties of irony, which are paralleled in recursivity. Aside from the recursivity in
the actual clips, ONN's profit model and corporate ownership place limits on
its own practices as an institution too. Still, *The Onion* is fervent about maintaining
a strict separation between its content development and advertisers (Tower, 2008),
allowing its producers more freedom to construct messages than many other media
companies.

At a minimum, the constructive ads clip teaches us about the micro effects that
even single word choices carry as recursive entities. These media processes are held
up for hyperreal critique, as the ONN clip performs an alternative scenario weighted
between old and new understandings. As such, ONN's ironic iconicity and recursive
function bear resemblance to the classical rhetorical concept of imitation. By
working within modern media conventions, ONN's makers unveil new ways to con-
cieve of policies and issues, although not without the potential threat that references
to tradition may also constrain innovation.

In an ONN segment called *In the Know*, which imitates the type of roundtable political
discussion seen in programs like *Meet the Press* and *This Week*, the innovative end
of the recursive equation comes through more strongly when the following question is
raised among conversants: "Are politicians failing our lobbyists" ("In the Know: Are
Politicians," 2009)? The five roundtable participants in the discussion use the kind of
dialogue, hand gestures, and nods of concern we typically see between such media
interlocutors. Playing their roles as journalists and policy wonks, too, we are treated
to no wacky, clownish sketch characters, nor to cartoonish delivery of their opinions.

They do, however, each assertively pursue the incongruous question posed to
introduce a critical idea—that rather than lobbyists working to gain the attention
of politicians, politicians may be working in the interests of lobbyists (see "In the
Know: Are Politicians," 2009). One of the discussants laments that "as soon as the
politicians get in office, they forget who put them there." Another asserts that he
would like to have a president who is represented by a "logo." By repeating the formal
expectations of such programming while making minor changes to its customary
content, the ONN clip recursively invites us to look anew at the harmful mixing of
public and private interests in the political arena.

There is reason to be hopeful about the rhetorical confrontations invited by ONN's
videos. Situated between contingency and constraint, ONN's ironic iconicity recurs-
ively points audiences toward a moral reconfiguring of media dynamics, crafting a
broader outlook for public discourse. Viewers are presented with critical, reflexive
observations rather than chimerical fantasies divorced from actual, recalcitrant media
practices. One such ONN video spotlights the inattention to international issues in
much American news broadcasting—and, presumably, its audience's general inability
or concern for understanding these issues ("In the Know: Situation in Nigeria," 2009).
Using the roundtable format again, the sketch recursively has all the elements of a typi-
cal talking heads political show, except for its modified content. The moderator begins
by putting out a great deal of detail about Nigerian politics (above and beyond what
we would expect to hear about another country), and then asks the participants for
their opinions on the situation. For a moment, the discussants sit in silence, searching for something to say (i.e., the contributors have no "content" on this issue), before each jumps in with an obviously unwarranted opinion about the country. One of the participants, Duncan Birch, has the words "Author: Africa: 2.0" under his name, and says "certainly that's a, an important question, one with no easy answers, a lot of issues are at play here."

Another interlocutor, Leslie Hillerman, then chimes in, "the reason that this situation is so volatile is because of the factors involved," without explaining further ("In the Know: Situation in Nigeria," 2009). Everyone in the group agrees with both of these vague assertions, and replies "yes" to questions they clearly have no idea how to answer. Leslie further says at one point "I have to disagree," just for the sake of saying it. This bit invites the point that, as long as a person knows how to deliver their answer well, supplemented by the professional structures of modern news graphics, and so forth, they can often get away with lacking substantive information in such discussions. The point is reinforced later in the segment when the author Birch is taken to looking up little known facts about Nigeria on his Blackberry.96

Television stations like CNN, Fox News, and MSNBC often modify very little of their news formats, covering the same stories as other networks, and engaging some stories for interminable periods, to the neglect of other news possibilities (see Davis, 2005). The pretensions of each of the participants in the discussion to knowing more than they do about the Nigerian situation highlights a communicative norm in the media—the drive to have an opinion, no matter what one actually knows (see "In the Know: Situation in Nigeria," 2009). Recursivity and certainty are mutually implicated in the epistemological ineptitude displayed by the discussants. Thus, the clip rhetorically deflates the culture of the political expert, crafting a hyperreal space that spotlights how technical languages (e.g., "this situation is so volatile . . . because of the factors involved") can mask private motivations that evade the public interest.8 In so doing, the vagueness and menial answers in the discussants' rhetoric exhibits the sketch's irony at work—inventing viewers toward a new textual interpretation chastising these media practices. This irony clashes with the iconic constructions of realism, urging viewers to see the usual roundtable punditry as now unusual.

The ironic iconicity in ONN's videos further serve a recursive function of showing how media communication both describes and is constitutive of reality—in a way that mainstream news networks are seldom reflective about. In a comment about the way violence is covered in the media, one ONN segment addresses a new video game called "Close Range" (see "Hot New," 2009). Everything about the coverage looks and sounds like a regular news report, except the content of the message, as the news anchor excitedly describes "the hotly anticipated video game in which players can repeatedly shoot each other point-blank in the face." A "tech trends" expert comes into the clip and states that it has been "hailed by critics as the most important game of the year. . . . Reviewers say it brings a new level of depth to gaming." The anchors then cut to clips of the game in which the viewer is treated to images of its violence (which look and sound exactly like a high-tech video game), mostly consisting of a man walking around shooting people in their faces.
The exaggerated content here (see "Hot New," 2009) certainly comments on the ludicrous levels of violence in modern media. Yet, more so, it uses ironic iconicity to demonstrate how media commentators, who think they are simply describing a new item in the world of technology, can also advance this phenomenon with their big smiles, stylized voices, and sensationalistic coverage of the game. The dissolving line between news and advertising is focused here, too. The amplified content brings the seemingly neutral reporting practices into view (i.e., that the news segment is simply describing a new game), showing them to be selections with bearing upon the public consciousness, and valued choices through and through.

In all these cases, imitation implicates rhetorical invention. By maintaining and altering typical media conventions, ONN's hyperreal spaces serve a recursive public function. More than simply showing the contingent and recursive possibilities of engagement in online environments, however, these clips also make some clear, relatively stable moral judgments.

Judgment

Comedy is sometimes perceived as lacking in rhetorical force or value. ONN videos, however, have merit as comic forms of moral critique and affirmation. Ironic iconicity is used in many ONN clips to amplify moral judgments about media and politics, playing an evaluative, satirical role in public discourse, and teaching us how normativity can be crafted online. Browne and Leff (1985) wrote that judgment is "the meeting ground between the flux of political circumstance and the reflexive principles that guide our sense of continuity in the public world" (p. 198). Despite the contingencies of political life, rhetoric as a discipline has long been concerned with the need for provisional moral judgments in public space (see Blumenberg, 1987). Through ironic iconicity, ONN's videos function as provisional judgments, navigating a reflective path between constructions of realism and fiction. They simultaneously walk a line between the truthful and the absurd, which is neither entirely monologic nor wholly fantastical—crafting hyperreal grounds for tentative, critical claims. At the same time, ONN's moral judgments help stabilize the ironic commentary in these videos, resisting the completely open interpretations for which many ironic texts are often criticized.

The structural characteristics of The Onion as an institution clearly play into such efforts. By using the Internet, rather than other media, ONN's critiques are not as susceptible to the censorship that such barbed advocacy can invoke. More than just propositional moral statements, the multimodal nature of these videos deepen their evaluations—that is, moral judgments are amplified and given presence through ONN's ironic iconicity. One sketch crafts a hyperreal space for a serious global issue, inviting its audience to consider the ethics of globalization ("New Portable," 2008). The video is a segment from a Bangladeshi news agency covering a new technology trend for (sweatshop) factory workers across the world—the "SmartStitch." A reporter comments that this "palm sized sewing device lets you bring your work station wherever you go." Real images of workers in factories are shown throughout
the clip, underscoring the horrific working conditions that people across the world face every day, and that any fiction here is not entirely fiction.

By looking like a news segment and using this network footage, the clip’s (“New Portable,” 2008) producers have us consider the appalling side of the global corporate economy and its control over many media outlets that occlude these particular facts, which many consumers would often rather ignore. Employees (or “slaves,” as the undertones of the clip suggest) all over the world are underpaid and often measured by the millisecond for their services (see Achbar, Simpson, & Abbott, 2003). The clip cuts to a factory worker who amplifies this point, saying: “Now I can keep sewin’ until I pass out from exhaustion” (“New Portable,” 2008). The dreadful implication of this imagined scene beckons our attention toward global dynamics and media practices that conceal the harsh realities of these phenomena. A moral confrontation is invited in this clip, and it is hard to imagine many viewers having other ironic interpretations than disgust. This irony invites viewers into a brief “second persona” (see Black, 1970) that recognizes how purchasing decisions implicate systemic issues. In other words, the irony aims to expose how icons like clothing can hide their very crafting.

Moreover, the clip (“New Portable,” 2008) interrogates narratives of progress that news institutions put into their international coverage. Formal media structures, such as institutional news gathering routines and economic constraints, greatly affect news content (Bennett, 2004). The structures of global journalism often occlude and sanitize considerations of serious issues like sweatshops from public view in favor of stories that draw profit. Communicating about these communication practices, CNN viewers are invited to judge the very conduits of information by which their understandings of the world are mediated. The makers of the video craft a hyperreal montage of rhetorical consequence that attests to the constructed boundaries between fact and fiction—an issue seldom addressed in news programming (e.g., Fox News claims to be “fair and balanced” in its “news” coverage). It calls for an ironic reconstruction between the form of the reporting and the serious nature of the topic that is direct in its indictment of global news programming.

These clips call into question the practices of public reasoning and representational processes in media and politics. One CNN video cuts to an actor playing the Deputy White House Press Secretary, who, despite his professional setting and delivery, manages to evade every question reporters hurl at him with largely incoherent, red herring statements (i.e., the content of the answers make little sense; see “Press Secretary’s,” 2009). The Press Secretary answers a reporter’s question with the following preamble: “Let me just say first of all that it’s really a sixty-four, that that sector is going to get any taps within the next tri-day, because as you know with the President diplomacy is all lightning rod.” To another he states, “What I said was it’s within the ballpark but it’s a turfball.” The reporter insistently asks for a clearer answer, to which the Press Secretary replies:

Uh, Michael I think I’ve made myself pretty clear here. . . . Today’s tri-day is tomorrow’s bi-day, and the President can’t just finagle a kerbride scapulator . . . as I used to say down on the farm it’s bagnum rrailrdate . . . so he’s really straddling both sides of the horseperson’s hoof, okay?
On one level, the clip engages the viewer in a moral proposal: Politicians have a public responsibility to answer their constituents' questions as best they can. From a meta-level, it is a public interrogation of political representation—a judgment against a culture of having spokespersons in the first place. ONN's visual representation is of a political representative who stands in for the president, who, in turn, stands in for the American people.

The iconic representation of the spokesperson is bi-textually and evaluatively clashed against his ridiculous jargon, creating a judgment on the mediated, representational process as a whole. Not only can a lack of clarity emerge as political information becomes further removed and filtered from its sources, but the ironic jargon focuses the representative as a hyperreal image creation himself, a crafted icon who represents (e.g., "the President") but also creates (e.g., "bagman raildrate") the administration. As such, the hyperreal space of the clip not only critiques evasive political practices, but tests arbitrary boundaries between fact and fiction, using the humor as a segue to a satirical, pedagogical point.

Parry-Giles and Parry-Giles (2008) found that, in Michael Moore's (Czarnecki & Moore, 2004) hyperreal Fahrenheit 9/11, the use of humor and entertainment created unstable, mixed ironic messages, calling into question the documentary's seriousness as a political text. Certainly, not all forms of humor or entertainment are rhetorically productive, but I find at least two critical differences in how moral invitations are made between texts like Moore's documentary and ONN's videos.

Unlike Fahrenheit 9/11 (Czarnecki & Moore, 2004), ONN clips invite awareness of their own hyperreal status, as manufactured texts amidst other manufactured texts—yet without losing sight of very real world problems. Parry-Giles and Parry-Giles (2008) explained that Moore's authenticating strategies attempt to create a discourse more real than that which was examined. In using ironic iconicity, ONN's videos are far more aware of visual representational claims, likely situating audiences in more reflexive and critical spaces than the political documentary. As mentioned, however, the distinctiveness of this discourse lies in how it is weighted in iconic news conventions, placing its irony in a framework that would be hard to categorize as simply farcical and non-serious.

Due to ONN's iconic, hyperreal emphases, there also appears to be less room for interpretive ambiguity in ONN's videos. The SmartStitch video (see “New Portable,” 2008), for instance, invites a relatively stable interpretation of moral disgust. Ettema and Glasser (1998) warned that "even as irony promises to be a mode of thought that is genuinely enlightened, it casts doubt on any effort to capture the truth of things in language" (p. 88). By being both iconic and ironic, ONN's videos work productively between and beyond these concerns—presenting clear moral insights about pressing public matters and the very hyperreal status of public news texts (including ONN's own). Easy divides between reality and exaggeration are rightly questioned without forgoing judgments about public problems. Ironic iconicity is not the only means of practicing criticism, but surely viewers are better off in this mode of thought than others that do not cast any doubt on the ability of language and visuals to capture truth.
In these ways, ONN’s video clips present us with neither completely totalizing nor utterly relativistic texts. They walk a hyperreal line, animating normative insights about media and politics, and exemplifying how comic constructions can be marshaled in support of particular ideas online. In the final section, I draw out several implications of these functions and findings.

Conclusion

This essay has argued that ONN’s video sketches craft hyperreal spaces for comic insights through the rhetorical strategy of ironic iconicity. ONN’s clips are weighted between contingency and judgment, creativity and constraint, evidencing a distinctive communicative form well-fitted to the demands of its online environment. There are several implications emerging from this analysis.

First, the findings from this study extend our understandings of hyperreality. The ironic iconicity of ONN’s videos join together an aura of factuality (largely through the structure and delivery of news reporting) with an aura of fiction (mostly through comic tweaks of the content expected in such discourses). These continual comic contrasts negotiate the hyperreal, interrogating the lines between fact and fiction in a way that mainstream news-making typically does not. That is, there is a heightened awareness in ONN’s clips of the challenge posed by hyperreality—that news constructions are rhetorical choices, among many.

With its directly iconic pictures, sounds, and reporting, the news is often assumed to be a place where the facts, truth, and real reside. ONN challenges this presumption by using a hyperreal communication form that highlights the very hyperreality of the news. This is not intended to bypass the existence of realities, but it is to argue that ONN confronts a metalevel consideration—that whatever the facts, truth, or the real, they are inevitably naturalized narrative selections, filtered through a veristic framework of political and media interests good at hiding their craftings (e.g., the Pat Tillman incident). ONN’s videos also show how media communication both captures and constitutes “reality,” in a way that other news organizations are seldom reflective about.

These videos invoke Eco’s (1986) insight that reality now “is not historical, but visual. Everything looks real, and therefore it is real; in any case the facts that it seems real is real, and the thing is real even if, like Alice in Wonderland, it never existed” (p. 16). Comic hyperrealism, far from some trivial activity, can be used as a means of critically engaging with media and political representations. As Parry-Giles and Parry-Giles (2002) explained, the visual state of contemporary politics is grounded in many image-based practices encouraging audiences to view people and events with a sense of realism and authenticity. They find that these practices often forgo meaningful, viable civic engagement, arguing “American politics is all about packaging and image, and to hope for otherwise is to indulge a fantasy and nostalgically pine for a time and politics that never were” (p. 15). ONN’s sketches similarly evidence how ironic iconicity can refocus our understandings of public events as constructions. ONN’s purpose is not to simply reflect the “real,” but rather to craft a laughable reflective path through the suasion of realism and fiction in public affairs.
Second, ONN’s clips are examples of multimodal rhetoric, showing us how the concept of ironic iconicity can be used in the digital age. These videos largely work by juxtaposing a visual and auditory realism against comic verbal fictions. In other words, ONN’s ironic iconicity engages in a rhetoric suited to the demands of its online media ecology (on media ecology, see “What Is Media Ecology,” 2009). ONN’s unique configuration of features teaches us that there are differences worth parsing out between comic formats, at a close level—a finding echoed by Holbert (2005). As such, not all comic rhetoric is necessarily created equal. Some research suggests that much contemporary comedy plays it safe, rarely using aggression to make important points about politics; furthermore, the entertainment industry does not often recognize how more aggressive, controversial comic forms really engage audiences (Gray, Jones, & Thompson, 2009). ONN’s popular videos meet this satirical criterion, using assertive verbal—visual—auditory rhetoric to critique news rituals and patterns. More importantly, the videos make relatively stable judgments on public affairs, employing an ironic form that is not completely contingent.

That these videos are on the Internet, and not broadcast on, say, Comedy Central, may allow the viewer to be more a part of the process. Rather than being streamed to audiences, viewers get to pick and have unlimited, immediate access to the clips. As the videos parody news experts who have control over the “news,” ONN performs what it preaches by granting audiences more control over their clips. Audience members can choose to rewatch the videos or send them to friends if they so choose. Thus, just as ONN subverts news culture in their clips, it also subverts the news through its choice of the Internet as a medium.

Finally, ONN videos teach us how past resources can be used to innovate provisional moral perspectives on public affairs. Rhetors always find themselves working within the structures of their time and place in history, but can also use their situations to evolve distinctive, more liberating forms of communication (see Campbell, 1995; Jamieson & Campbell, 1982). ONN sketches use ironic iconicity in this way, leveraging parts of the news that audiences have come to expect against unexpected juxtapositions. At the same time, we learn that recursivity is not necessarily a linear communicative process. Between replication and change, there are potential limits to such rhetoric in interpretations that swing back to the old as new rhetoric is advanced.

Hariman (2008) suggested that parody’s “duplication of speakers, styles, and genres provides a unique way to see ourselves as creatures of our own making” (p. 261). I would add that ironic iconicity constitutes a similar rhetorical technique for reflexively understanding how our social worlds are constructed. Yet, we should also note where “duplication” is lacking. The content of ONN’s broadcasts suggests that one key to the criticality of these kinds of discourses is in how they strategically deploy both imitation and alteration.

The print edition of The Onion has been a critical staple of American discourse (Achter, 2008; Warner, 2008). ONN’s videos also aim to check power, putting media standards under a comic microscope. Thus, the findings in this study refute Jenkins’s (2008) view that “comedy is a blunt instrument when it comes to mapping
alternative social policies” (“Postscript,” para. 6). It is certainly not the case that
ONN’s sketches create actual policies to put in the law books, but they do craft
broader outlooks for understanding the systemic political issues and social terrain
that we all inhabit (e.g., through cliché-busting). As hyperreal forms of judgment,
they generally help us conceive of public habits in alternative ways, offering society
pedagogical insights.

Not all humor is liberatory in hyperreal texts (Parry-Giles & Parry-Giles, 2008).
Yet, in an increasingly hybrid political terrain, finer distinctions between comic
forms like ironic iconicity and others give us theoretical traction in these matters.
It is worth mentioning that just as ONN’s videos are quite different in form and
function from many other comic formats, not all of their videos would appear
to rise to the same levels of political or media criticism. Further empirical investiga-
tions of these videos would be useful, particularly to gauge the effect of irony on
various audiences interpreting such texts (see Lamarre, Landreville, & Beam,
2009). ONN’s videos generally invite viewers to reflect on the rhetoric of media
practices through incongruities, which signal audiences to interpret its texts in this
way. Because irony can also be unstable, however (see Booth, 1974), there is, thus,
some remaining question of how wide and stable the contours of these hyperreal
spaces are for viewers, and who can or cannot make the reconstructions necessary
to such ironic insights.

On the whole, ONN at least encourages its viewers to be more discerning about the
rhetorical dynamics and demands of our age. It introduces ironic iconicity into an
arsenal of evolving comic forms in public affairs, and asks us to playfully engage
and rework our understandings of the media. Given the extent to which foolishness
continues to be advanced in the news, citizens can surely use every critical tool avail-
able to craft broader, more informed democratic spaces of their own.

Notes

[1] I draw on both artistic and philosophical definitions of the “hyperreal.” In art, the hyperreal
has been conceived of as “extremely realistic in detail” (see www.askoxford.com/results/
view=dev_dictfield-12668446?hyperreal&branch=13842370&textsearchtype=exact&sort
order=score&%2Cname) or “characterized by highly realistic graphic representation” (see
http://dictionary.classic.reference.com/browse/Hyperrealist). In philosophy, hyperreal
has been construed as “the generation by models of a real without origin or reality”
(Baudrillard, 1983, p. 2), which “effaces the contradiction between the real and the imagi-
ary” (Baudrillard, 1993, p. 71). In hyperreality, “images and signs begin to replace or stand
in for reality, . . . This visual culture, in representing the social world, permits fakes to appear
more realistic than reality” (Abercrombie, Hill, & Turner, 2006, p. 187). Both approaches to
the hyperreal agree about its spot-on depiction and seeming representations of the “real.”
Although hyperreal symbols and forms ring with authenticity and a spirit of “reality,” they
typically lack referents, dissolving the lines between fact and fiction. I take from the philos-
ophical approach that the hyperreal is also a way of looking at the very constructedness of
media images and signs.

[2] Kenneth Burke (1973) remarked that form and content are inseparable. Yet, Burke left
irony’s role in symbolic acts untheorized—that is, when form and content are put in tension
to create ironic reconstructions and insights. In ironic rhetoric, the means to such an end do not necessarily imply the inseparability of form and content.

[3] Aristotle (1910-1911/2010) wrote "the duty of rhetoric is to deal with such matters as we deliberate upon without arts or systems to guide us ... to present us with alternative possibilities... all our actions have a contingent character; hardly any of them are determined by necessity" (p. 9-10).

[4] Hariman (2008) looked at an Onion (print edition) headline and noted a "radical contingency: what is given now is shown as something that could be otherwise" (p. 234). Given the sheer irony of Onion News Network’s videos, I find that this contingency is not completely radical.

[5] Feldman and Goldthwaite-Young (2008) found that people watching comedy programs pay more attention to public affairs than others, using them as complementary resources for political engagement.

[6] As this concept can be hard to understand, Jasinski (2001) used the example of "language" to provide more background on the process of communicative reproduction as both medium and outcome: "Language (as a system) is reproduced every time someone (consciously or unconsciously) employs linguistic rules to produce discourse; the rules are both the medium of situated action (producing a sentence) and the outcome of that action (employing rules revitalizes them and continues their existence, thereby reproducing the system that the rules structure). . . . At the same time, no act can ever be an exact repetition or reproduction of any previous act or any abstract rule. Every utterance contains an element of repetition that is combined with an element of change or modification it perpetuates and alters the system (or systems) of which it is part" (p. 482). This demonstrates how "social knowledge is employed in, and reproduced (and modified) through, discursive practice" (p. 493).

[7] Jeff (1997) suggested that "imitation is not the mere repetition or mechanistic reproduction of something found in an existing text. It is a complex process that allows historical texts to serve as equipment for future rhetorical production. . . . Through a process similar to Kenneth Burke’s ‘exousic stretching’, imitation of the structure and language of an old text may help introduce radically new ideas” (pp. 201, 203).


References


