

Unburdened by Objectivity:  
Political Entertainment News in the 2008 Presidential Campaign

Rachel Cathleen DeLauder

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John C. Tedesco, Chair  
Rachel L. Holloway  
Beth M. Waggenspack

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ABSTRACT

This study analyzes 2008 presidential election coverage on *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* and *The Colbert Report* to determine how they confront the tension between the genres of news and entertainment. To this point, much of the scholarly work on political entertainment news has focused on examining its effects on viewers' political attitudes and knowledge. A rhetorical analysis reveals the actual messages they convey and the strategies they employ to discuss contemporary American politics. Through comedic devices such as satire and parody, *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* offer a venue for social commentary and criticisms of power at a time when traditional venues are dissipating, and these shows provide a place for serious political discourse that encourages dialogue that promotes civic engagement.

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## I. Introduction

With the introduction of new media outlets, traditional forms of communication are changing, and the nightly news is no exception. Increasingly, traditional news programs are incorporating commentary into their regular formats in an attempt to compete with the popularity of the opinion programming segments of cable news (Anderson, 2004). These pressures have driven news organizations to focus on content that is quick to acquire, simple to produce, and likely to increase ratings and, consequently, profits—especially opinion and entertainment content.

Some producers also approach the trend from the opposite side, relaying news from an ostensibly comedic angle instead of injecting entertainment into the traditional news format. Programs like *Saturday Night Live's* “Weekend Update” segment, *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, and *The Colbert Report* synthesize the delivery of news information with humor and satire, capitalizing on the popular combination. Spoof programs such as these are popular sources of information about current events (Jones, 2010), but this might be a cause for concern if audiences abandoned traditional news programs entirely in favor of the increasing examples of political entertainment news. Although a conventional term seems yet to be decided, scholars of the communication literature typically refer to these programs and others that blend political and entertainment content as either “political entertainment” or “entertainment news,” so the two most popular uses have been combined, and *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* will be labeled “political entertainment news” for the purpose of this study.

Critical concerns about this trend in news reporting escalated during the 2008 presidential election campaign, when presidential and vice-presidential candidates or their caricatures appeared on some form of television entertainment program nearly every night. A large majority of this coverage occurred on programs considered political entertainment news. Political

entertainment news coverage of the election became such a popular commodity that *Saturday Night Live (SNL)* created a special Thursday-night edition of its "Weekend Update" segment (Lafayette, 2008), which mimicked the format and setting of a traditional news program. Parody sketches of vice-presidential candidate Sarah Palin in particular, played by *SNL's* Tina Fey, became almost more familiar than her own media appearances during the campaign (Poniewozik, 2008; Teinowitz, 2008) and boosted *SNL's* Nielsen ratings by 50 percent (Burbank, 2008).

With researchers and citizens questioning the role of political entertainment news programs and their function in society, it is increasingly important to examine the discourse they produce, especially if, as research suggests, the shows may impact one of the most crucial and defining events in the political process. To this point, much of the scholarly work on late-night comedy has focused exclusively on examining the effects on viewers' political attitudes and knowledge (Compton, 2006; LaMarre, 2009). A rhetorical analysis of the content of political entertainment news will provide valuable information on what these shows are saying about contemporary American politics and how they say it.

Citizens came to know and form their opinions about the candidates in election 2008 with the help of their televisions. The messages portrayed in these controversial and highly popular programs play an important cultural role for audiences, as research has shown political entertainment news programs can have an impact on viewer attitudes and the political image of candidates (Compton, 2006). In the case of *SNL's* portrayal of vice presidential candidate Palin, Nielsen ratings report 9.5 million viewers for a skit airing September 27, 2008, a number which still paled in comparison to the more than 25 million views Fey's *SNL* skit received on the Internet (Burbank, 2008). This proves that, while political entertainment news programs may not intentionally attempt to sway public opinion of a candidate for political reasons, they are highly

visible to the public, and any effects that may occur have the potential to reach a large segment voters.

This study analyzes the presidential election coverage of two political entertainment news television shows, *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* and *The Colbert Report*. It seeks to answer the question, “What role did these shows play in the 2008 election?” by examining the messages they project to (and reflect from) the American public, and determining what functions these shows serve in the political culture. The study presents background information about entertainment news, its scholarly relationship to civic engagement, and campaign 2008; explains the benefits of a cultural approach to the study of entertainment media; and explores the functions humor can play in popular and political discourse.

The analysis examines a random sampling of episodes of the two shows, using any political content that addressed the presidential or vice-presidential candidates or campaigns. The episodes have been analyzed inductively in search of patterns, recurrent themes, and rhetorical strategies of humor, according to the constant comparative method of grounded theory. The results of this rhetorical analysis reveal that *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* created a space for voters to engage in dialogue with politics. Through various humor strategies, the hosts provided a critical commentary of government that encouraged viewers not only to subscribe to their particular ideological perspectives but also constructed a social identity for viewers to inhabit.

Political entertainment news may be considered trivial in terms of cultural importance compared to more serious media genres like traditional news. However, political entertainment news reaps the benefit of fewer textual constraints and is able to provide a more accurate, colorful, and comprehensive representation of exactly what is happening in a culture at a given



point in time. Roderick Hart (1997) defends the study of entertainment discourse by offering the following considerations:

(1) Rhetoric is the most powerful when it is not noticed, and nobody notices popular culture; (2) people are easiest to persuade when they are in a good mood, and entertainment creates such moods; (3) some of our most basic values come to us when we are young, and the young consume entertainment voraciously; and (4) the mass media disseminate entertainment far and wide, thus affecting millions. Perhaps the only thing sillier than studying popular culture, then, is not studying it at all. (p. 204)

Thus, the study of political entertainment news shows like *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* provides a perspective that not only is missing from current communication research but also may be more nuanced, authentic, and close to the truths that lie at society's cultural core than the statistical representations quantitative research can provide.

## II. Context

### A. Political Entertainment News

In their study on 1996 presidential campaign adwatches in the news media, Tedesco, Kaid, and McKinnon (2000) describe the social responsibility theory of the press: the idea that the media's chief role is to provide citizens with the information necessary to make informed and rational decisions about their government. While all citizens may not sympathize with this theory (including members of the press), the U.S. government has supported it with a history of legislation.

In the 1920s, Congress made laws to protect radio and television bandwidths from exclusively commercial interests (Lull, 2000). Deemed resources belonging to the public, broadcasting networks were required to act in the public interest, broadcasting nightly news programs that represented a fair and balanced coverage of events that were important for an

informed electorate. Today, government monitoring agencies have relaxed restrictions, allowing television networks to develop into political and economic juggernauts in an effort to permit competition with their increasingly popular cable competitors (2000). With this increase in power, obligations to the public have eroded into slim segments on political issues trumped by blocks of entertainment programming (Dahlgren, 1995). News programs dedicated to entertainment news, such as *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report*, have increased in number, and the celebrity culture formerly relegated to the tabloid papers frequently appears on nightly news programs alongside reports on presidential primaries and the Iraq War. Leaders in the entertainment and broadcast industries have even become members of the government organizations tasked with regulating their own companies (Lull, 2000). Complicating this misbalanced power structure between authoritative facts and opinionated commentary even further is the convergence of media, as more and more organizations and formats are acquired by communications monopolies like AOL Time Warner, Disney, and Viacom (2000).

Although the content of news programs seems to be trending away from hard news stories, the public still expects media organizations to offer comprehensive and objective information about political matters that are reported. Jackson and Jamieson (2004) find this function a crucial aspect of the media-society relationship. They argue that the public has a right to demand not only objective coverage, but also a thorough investigation of the claims made by individuals and organizations, especially when in reference to matters of government. Jackson and Jamieson call reporters "custodians of fact," and argue that their role is and should be discovering the truth in the statements politicians make and presenting them to the public in an objective, non-partisan manner (2004).

The perceived accuracy of news content has fallen sharply in recent years, with 63 percent reporting in 2009 that news stories are inaccurate, compared to only 34 percent in 1985

(“Press Accuracy,” 2009). The watchdog function of the press is compromised when news outlets and their journalists fail to thoroughly question political authority, as both the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* admitted to doing in regards to their coverage of the Iraq War (Jones, 2006). Audiences also recognize when political entities blur the lines of trust by co-opting media that are normally reserved for entertainment in service of their own partisan purposes, as the Bush administration did with their use of television’s *America’s Most Wanted* and *JAG* to support their message about its war on terror (Jones, 2010).

Especially in the United States, professional journalists who pass judgment on the content they report can be considered a disgrace that mars the face of their trade. This attitude has driven formal critique into more marginalized journalistic venues such as talk shows, satire, late-night comedy, and blogs. Zelizer (2008) suggests this critical shift to less authoritative and informationally privileged forms of media stems from a demand for criticism as a necessary journalistic engagement, and that outsourcing this function of journalism to non-traditional media “points to a healthy accommodation of the critical voice in ways that have been largely missed by thinking about journalism as a certain kind of value-free information relay” (p. 89).

Evidence of a shift in footing for traditional television news broadcasts is augmented by comparison to the increasingly popular political-comedy hybrid programs such as *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* and *The Colbert Report*. These shows use classic rhetorical strategies like parody and satire to turn a reflexive eye toward the mass media industry and its impact on the nation’s political atmosphere. Both shows mimic traditional news programs in format and style, serving as parodies that offer a critical view of the news media in general. They identify with news programs exclusively through parody; ultimately, these political entertainment news shows function as hard-hitting social commentary that is not compartmentalized and relegated to the

end of the broadcast, but woven throughout and used as a rhetorical tool to advocate a particular cultural perspective.

The proliferation of news parodies (including the two shows under study, *Saturday Night Live*'s "Weekend Update" segment, and occasional depictions of newscasters on animated comedies such as *The Simpsons*, *Family Guy*, and *South Park*, among others) is evidence of the news' social authority (Druick, 2009), and the commentary on news media that they present can provide a candid look at the news' social and political impact, making the programs an important subject for study. The existence of these news parodies, coupled with their popularity and increase in number, as evidenced by the specially programmed Thursday evening edition of *Saturday Night Live* during the 2008 campaign, indicates the presence of an ongoing tension between the official, authoritative take on reality and the parodies' playful, irreverent alternative (Druick, 2009).

News parodies like *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report*, as well as other programs that use comedy to enact social and political commentary, respond to contemporary culture through allusions, based on an ongoing series of active engagements and discursive shifts (Gournelos, 2009). These shows comment on what Jon Stewart calls "the absurdity of the system," simultaneously defying and relying on news conventions for their genre violations and targeted responsive critiques. Their critical attacks transcend simple textual responses to become part of a constant, reflexive assessment of contemporary culture (2009).

### **i. *The Daily Show*.**

*The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* is a 30-minute political entertainment news show that appears Monday through Thursday nights on Comedy Central at 11 p.m., a time slot that competes directly with most local network news programs. The show is also rebroadcast on Comedy Central the next evening, and all episodes are available for online viewing at the show's

website, <http://www.thedailyshow.com>. Each episode features a satirical run-down of current events, fabricated in-depth reports on topical issues, and interviews with a celebrity, politician, author, or other public figure. It was created in 1996 with host Craig Kilborn, who was replaced in 1999 with comedian and actor Jon Stewart (“The Daily Show,” n.d.). Stewart limited the show’s affiliation with musicians and actors and increased the appearances of politicians, authors, and university professors, taking the show in a decidedly more political direction (Gournelos, 2009). Ratings rose consistently after Stewart’s arrival, and the show has proven a ratings juggernaut with an estimated 1.2 million viewers for the 11 p.m. run and an additional 800,000 for the second airing the next evening in 2004, according to Comedy Central (Baym, 2005). By 2006, 19 percent of Americans reported watching at least sometimes (Baumgartner & Morris, 2008).

In 2004, Stewart made a guest appearance on CNN’s political commentary show *Crossfire*, which has been cited as a defining turning point in *The Daily Show*’s history that has led to increased credibility and authority in the popular media sphere (Gournelos, 2009). During his interview with hosts Paul Begala and Tucker Carlson, Stewart criticized them for “hurting America” with their over-simplified portrayal of American politics and destructive influence on political discourse (Folkenflik, 2009). Video of the appearance went viral, reaching millions more viewers than the original airing in a matter of days on Internet video clip sites like YouTube, where it was supposedly seen by the network’s chief executive officer, who subsequently cancelled *Crossfire* shortly after Stewart’s provocative confrontation (Gournelos, 2009). A similar incident occurred in 2009 on Stewart’s own show, when he interviewed Jim Cramer, host of CNBC’s entertainment-style stock market advising show. In this interview, Stewart raked Cramer across the coals, accusing CNBC of misleading the public regarding the 2008 economic recession and representing the Wall Street corporations who caused the crash

instead of the private individuals that make up his viewing audience (Folkenflik, 2009). Like the *Crossfire* exchange, Stewart's highly visible attack on the news network's journalistic authority voiced critical questions that other media, constrained by the genre conventions of news and political talk, did not have the freedom to ask (2009).

Although *The Daily Show's* approach to current events may be unique, its format closely imitates the various segments of a serious news program, with an opening run-down of the day's headlines, an in-depth report on a major news topic delivered by Stewart acting as anchor or one of the show's "senior correspondents," and a guest interview with a celebrity, author, or politician with something relevant to say about a topic on the current news agenda. Stewart "uses the news desk format for a highly self-reflexive, left-leaning commentary on news, through an absurd performance of right-wing subjectivity that mock-antagonizes its viewers (and often guests as well)" (Druick, 2009, p. 304).

*The Daily Show* has received much critical acclaim for its unorthodox political coverage. In addition to thirteen Emmy Awards and two Peabody Awards for "Indecision 2000" and "2004," its special-segment coverage of the presidential elections (Academy of Television Arts and Sciences, 2006), *The Daily Show* was nominated for a Television Critics Association award for Outstanding Achievement in News and Information in 2003 and 2005; it won the award in 2004 (Fox, Koloen & Sahin, 2007). Stewart has also received much attention: in 2005, *Time* magazine named him one of the 100 most influential entertainers in the world (Baumgartner & Morris, 2008).

Indeed, *The Daily Show* has become a recognized source of political information for those who study media, a status it has earned by consistently covering political current events. A study by Fox, Koloen, and Sahin (2007) found that, while *The Daily Show* displayed considerably more humor than substance on its program's presidential campaign coverage, when

compared with the campaign coverage of broadcast news programs, it proved to be equally as substantive as measured in both coverage time per story and coverage time per broadcast. Although Stewart and the show's producers consider it a comedy program that happens to cover political events, it has set a precedent for shows billed primarily as news programs that employ irony and comedy, such as MSNBC's *Countdown with Keith Olberman* and *The Rachel Maddow Show* (Quart, 2009).

*The Daily Show* is marketed as a preferred alternative to traditional news broadcasts ("The Daily Show," n.d.). A description on the *Daily Show*'s website reads, "If you're tired of the stodginess of the evening newscasts and you can't bear to sit through the spinmeisters and shells on the 24-hour cable news network, don't miss 'The Daily Show with Jon Stewart,' the nightly half-hour series unburdened by objectivity, journalistic integrity, or even accuracy" ("The Daily Show," n.d.). However, neither Jon Stewart nor the show's producers claim to present a functional source of news by traditional journalistic standards; instead, they proudly tout their reputation as a bearer of "fake news" (Baym, 2005).

While *The Daily Show* emulates many of the visual and structural elements of a news program, Stewart's critical, emotionally involved approach to the content would be inappropriate in the news genre (Druick, 2009). With its daily format, the show is able to engage in a running commentary on news coverage of the day's events, often using footage from other news programs to impart a critical commentary and to deconstruct the scripts of mainstream news. As Druick (2009) suggests, "in replaying and actively responding to these clips, [news parody] shows construe the news as an utterance, a construct materially situated and produced rather than somehow disengaged from the social world. This serves to politicize it as a speech genre" (p. 304). Thus, *The Daily Show*'s evaluative treatment of traditional news draws attention to its

constructed nature, allowing the audience to view the news as a strategic communication with a political objective.

**ii. *The Colbert Report.***

*The Colbert Report* began in 2005 as a spin-off of *The Daily Show*. Before starting his own news parody directly following *The Daily Show* at 11:30 p.m. Monday through Thursday on Comedy Central, *Report* host Stephen Colbert played one of several *Daily Show* “correspondents” (Druick, 2009). Colbert parodies cable news pundits using a persona he describes as a “well-intentioned, poorly informed, high-status idiot” (Jones, 2010, p. 79). He focuses especially on the characteristic and formal stylings of Fox News’ popular *O’Reilly Factor* host Bill O’Reilly, whom Colbert refers to endearingly (yet satirically) as “Papa Bear” on the show (Baumgartner & Morris, 2008). Like *The Daily Show*, Colbert’s program offers a discussion of the day’s political and cultural events, followed often by an in-depth, skit-like segment on an issue or series of issues and a guest interview (which Colbert conducts completely in character). Unlike his counterpart, Jon Stewart, Colbert almost never steps out of character to provide context for his satirical statements that represent right-wing talk show hosts and conservative talking points. This presents a more pure and encompassing parody, but it also opens up the possibility of confusion for the audience about his underlying objectives (Young, 2006; LaMarre, Landreville & Beam, 2009).

Colbert’s comedy hinges on his character’s rejection of facts as determining values in political dialogue (Baumgartner & Morris, 2008). He uses this approach to parody the “hyper-partisan tone” popular among conservative political talk show hosts (2008), such as O’Reilly, Sean Hannity, and Glenn Beck. Colbert makes direct reference to O’Reilly’s “No Spin Zone,” declaring his show the “No Fact Zone” (Baym, 2007) to comically criticize O’Reilly’s frequent rejection of rational argument. His abandonment of facts, logic, and rational argument is often



most amusing when juxtaposed with the serious intentions of his guests, often non-fiction authors or politicians forced to play the straight man as a foil to Colbert's absurd character. In the segment called "Better Know a District," Colbert interviews (seemingly unwitting) Congressional representatives in his fluid and inane conversation style (2007), his obvious goal to pester the interviewees to the point of frustration with his absurd and illogical contradictions.

*The Colbert Report* draws higher ratings than many news shows, averaging 2 million viewers a night, and a high visibility among 18- to 29-year-olds (Baym, 2007). As a result of its popularity, the show has bestowed what it calls the "Colbert bump" on candidates who make guest appearances, for example, boosting public awareness for Mike Huckabee, candidate for the Republican presidential nomination, in 2008 (LaMarre, Landreville & Beam, 2009), in addition to providing a marked swell in fundraising for Democratic congressional representatives (Baym, 2010) and supposedly assisting in the re-election of each of the 27 representatives featured in his "Better Know a District" segment during the 2006 mid-term elections (Baym, 2007).

While many viewers clearly appreciate Colbert's comedy, research suggests that the ambiguous nature of his conservative pundit parody can obscure its primary intention (Young, 2006; LaMarre, Landreville & Beam, 2009). In a study examining how audiences process ambiguous satire offered in *The Colbert Report*, LaMarre, Landreville, and Beam (2009) found that participants on both sides of the political spectrum find the show funny. However, in a test of political ideology's influence on perceptions of the show's political messages, the authors found that self-reported individual ideology significantly predicted perceptions of Colbert's personal ideology, or in other words, conservatives were just as likely as liberals to report that Colbert's political views matched their own. Conservatives were more likely to report that the host "only pretended to be joking and generally meant what he said" and that he "disliked liberalism," while liberals were more likely to report that "Colbert used satire and was not serious when offering

political statements” (p. 212). Perhaps a testament to both the show’s elevated cultural status and the confusion surrounding its use of parody, Colbert’s invitation to speak at the 2006 White House Correspondents Association Dinner resulted in embarrassment, as the host lambasted conservatives, the political media, and President George W. Bush in a biting satirical performance that conservative guests appeared not to expect (Jones, 2010).

### **iii. Audience.**

Both *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* rely on young adults for a large portion of their audience ratings (“Too Much,” 2007). Early adulthood is an important stage in life for developing political knowledge and awareness, and finding one’s place in the political world (Barnhurst, 1998; McDevitt & Kiouisis, 2007). This is why the shows’ popularity presents a cause for concern among civic engagement scholars and entertainment news critics, as evidence has emerged of a growing generational disinterest among young adults in traditional forms of political news such as newspapers and network television news broadcasts, which younger audiences seem to find tedious and irrelevant to their daily lives (Barnhurst, 1998; Jones, 2010). While young adults may watch nightly news programs, they are more aware than the preceding generation of the commodified production of media, treating the news as just a “reality-based variety show” that fills a slot in their media diet (1998). Thus, young adults, with their increasingly apathetic attitude toward the news, make a perfect partner for political entertainment television, which shifts effortlessly between intensely serious subjects and frivolous mocking play.

A cultural study by Barnhurst suggests that young citizens are seriously committed to developing a personal understanding of the political world and their role in it (1998). Their search for truth in politics is largely discursive, emanating from interactions with others, personal

discussions, popular culture, and mediated content (1998), and news journalists no longer hold a presiding command over what is and is not considered political or how it should be interpreted.

The role of the audience is crucial in rhetorical humor, because its members test the rhetoric's success: if a joke falls flat, without a laugh, it probably also failed as a rhetorical act (Rybacki & Rybacki, 1991). Self-professed comedians and "fake" journalists like Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert use their positions as hosts of candidly commercial political entertainment news programs to lambaste network and cable news personalities for the supposedly irresponsible nature of their broadcasts, which the hosts accuse traditional news anchors of lacing thickly with veiled opinionizing and shoddy journalism. While broadcast journalists are traditionally charged with objectivity and responsibility for providing accurate information to the public, Stewart and Colbert evade liability for these same offenses because of their up-front declarations of superficiality (literally in Stewart's case, via parody in Colbert's).

In fact, these shows appear to be quite effective at informing citizens about political news and current events, or at least draw a highly informed audience. According to a survey conducted by the Pew Research Center, *The Daily Show* and its spin-off program *The Colbert Report* have slightly more highly educated viewers (54 percent) than audiences of National Public Radio (51 percent), daily newspapers (43 percent), or CNN (41 percent), and significantly more high-knowledge audiences than local television news (35 percent) and network morning shows (34 percent) ("Public Knowledge," 2007). Additional studies have shown that exposure to political comedy programs is positively associated with higher education (Cao, 2008) and that audiences with higher levels of education are more likely to have high levels of political knowledge.

There is much debate about the operative role of political comedy shows, and critics (Anderson, 2004; LaMarre & Landreville, 2009; Putnam, 2000) fear that audiences might be abandoning more traditional news programs in favor of the increasing examples of political

entertainment news, a phenomenon they view as a problem for journalists, citizens, and democracy as a whole. However, Jones (2010) suggests that the increasing popularity of satirical presentations of news is due to a larger cultural shift. He claims that the critical backlash resulting from the popular success of these programs is an effect of the ongoing philosophical adjustment from the rigid absolutes of modernism to the integrated pluralism of postmodernism. Jones views the genre-bending nature of the shows that combine comedy and serious political talk as a new direction of political communication, capable of conveying serious information and poking fun at the same time (2010). Similarly, Baym (2005) says of *The Daily Show* that it “can be better understood not as ‘fake news,’ but as an alternative journalism, one that uses satire to interrogate power, parody to critique contemporary news, and dialogue to enact a model of deliberative democracy” (p. 261).

Rather than consider these shows’ methods a violation of long-established journalism ethics, Baym suggests the programs are an example of a new phenomenon sweeping mediated communication that he calls discursive integration (2005). He describes this as “a way of speaking about, understanding, and acting within the world defined by the permeability of form and the fluidity of content” (2005). A symptom of an increasingly postmodern society, Baym’s concept of discursive integration can be seen in the commercialization of formerly non-commercial content (such as advertiser-associated content on traditional news broadcasts) and the satirical integration of serious topics and comedic forums (like the “Weekend Update” segment of the *Saturday Night Live* sketch comedy program). Baym argues that traditionally disparate messages and media are becoming inseparable and indistinguishable from one another, which he sees as an opportunity for creativity, not a detriment to political engagement and human intellection (2005).

Although contemporary audiences are sophisticated and see through the manipulations of media and government officials more clearly than past audiences (Quart, 2009), there is some concern for the disaffected attitude of the fans of political satire. A study conducted by Baumgartner and Morris (2006) on “the *Daily Show* effect” found that watching the show had a negative effect on viewers’ sense of external political efficacy (belief about the responsiveness of government), which could damage civic participation and lead to political cynicism. However, the same study concluded that the show had a positive effect on internal political efficacy, or the belief that one can impact the political system (2006). Similarly, a study conducted by Polk, Young, and Holbert (2009) found *Daily Show* viewers to be more politically interested, attentive, and involved than non-viewers, and that viewers of *The Daily Show* had a stronger sense of political efficacy than non-viewers. Studies like these illustrate the expectations political entertainment news shows face from both the media and scholars: either to lead the way into a new era of journalism, as in Baym’s discursive integration theory, or to drive the public deeper into political apathy and discontent.

#### **iv. Television and civic engagement.**

Historically, journalists have been considered guard posts of the political public sphere in the United States, because of their role in informing the citizens of a representative democracy. The institution of journalism is expected to convey public affairs information faithfully, truthfully, reliably, accurately, and dispassionately, acting as a surrogate for the citizenry, who cannot enjoy the same direct access to government and political events. As a result, the public is expected to function in a more reasoned, responsible, and engaged manner (Zelizer, 2008).

Civic engagement has long been thought of as a central feature of a healthy and functional democracy. However, recent years have seen fluctuations in traditional measures of political interest and knowledge, especially for young adults in the United States—two key

factors that have a strong relationship to political participation (Kaid, McKinney & Tedesco, 2007). Current trends indicate that young people are once again turning to the ballots, with percentages of young voter turnout rising over the past three presidential elections, culminating with 52 percent of voters 18 to 29 participating in election 2008, according to the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (McKinney & Rill, 2009). While this data is encouraging, it is important to consider why citizens, young voters especially, decide to participate in government.

In order to participate in their democratic system, citizens must feel motivated and develop a sense of political efficacy, or “an individual’s feeling that he or she has the ability to influence the political process” (Kaid, McKinney & Tedesco, 2007, p. 1096). Delli Carpini claims that motivation for civic engagement comes from a combination of sources: a sense of inherent responsibility, satisfaction derived from a feeling of solidarity with community, identification of a personally relevant public problem, and a sense of political efficacy (2000a).

Motivation is not the only ingredient that is important for civic engagement, however. Citizens must also receive, recognize, and seize the opportunity to participate in public life. In recent years, civic engagement has been threatened by an emphasis on individual forms of participation. Young adults are encouraged to serve their communities through personal volunteerism such as tutoring or working at a food bank. While this type of engagement is certainly important, the societal or political impact cannot compare with more concerted forms of community engagement, such as joining a political action group, organizing a petition, or voting. The former type of engagement focuses on addressing isolated problems on a personal level, whereas the latter is intended to address the same types of problems systematically on a larger scale via public policy. What this emphasis on individualized engagement costs is an experience

with, and resulting trust in, politics as a means of social change—a principle that is crucial in a representative democracy (Delli Carpini, 2000a).

There have been contrasting arguments among communication scholars regarding the impact of media on the civic and political engagement of young people. Some argue that shows like *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* represent an emerging form of journalism that relies on humor to attract audiences and satirize objectionable politics and news practices (Baym, 2005; Jones, 2010). Others argue that the cynicism these shows breed among viewers, especially young ones, is detrimental and damaging to the country's civic culture (Putnam, 2000).

However, the link between cynicism and disengagement may often be exaggerated. De Vreese, among others, claims that, while the media may promote increased levels of cynicism among audiences, the idea that this cynicism leads to political malaise is unfounded (2002). Baumgartner and Morris (2006) found that viewing *The Daily Show* did result in an increase in cynicism but also found that it led to increased confidence in the ability to understand politics. Moy, Xenos and Hess (2005) noted that exposure to late-night comedy shows such as *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno* and *The Late Show with David Letterman* can enhance political participation, especially among politically sophisticated individuals. In addition, Pasek, Kenski, Romer, and Jamieson (2006) have found that both entertainment and informational media use facilitates civic engagement and promotes political awareness.

In terms of traditional news, Esser and de Vreese (2007) found that, while mediated communication has been blamed for the increasing disconnect with public affairs, exposure to newspapers, television news, and Internet news all contributed positively to voter turnout for elections in the European Parliament, and that consumption of news media may actually boost participation among both European and American youth. Although there has been evidence that negative campaign advertising may discourage potential voters from participating in an election,

de Vreese (2002) found that strategic news coverage (defined as coverage of candidate personalities, disagreement between parties, and an emphasis on public polls) fueled cynicism and negativity among television viewers, but that it did not have a detrimental influence on voter turnout or mobilization.

Indeed, cynicism may be no more than “an indication of an interested and critical citizenry” (de Vreese, 2005), a symptom of the healthy skepticism of an informed public. De Vreese argues that we must consider that citizens have the capacity to be politically engaged and informed while simultaneously critical of their government. He suggests that the media promote political engagement rather than political apathy and alienation (2005).

The problem may lie in how scholars define engagement. Citizens interact with politics, political candidates, and public affairs information largely through media, meaning that civic engagement is more frequently textual than organizational or participatory in a physical sense (Jones, 2010). Because individual members of the polity do not typically have the opportunity to interview and discuss the issues with government representatives in person, they rely on media, especially news and television that displays political content, to act as surrogates. This results in the development of a dependent relationship. But simply because traditional news and political talk programs dutifully deliver this information to the public, it does not mean they are the only game in town. Research shows that young citizens especially find political information presented by television news lacking in credibility and that presented by newspapers irrelevant to their interests (Jones, 2010). Instead, this age group is leading a search for political information that speaks to them and their concerns for public life that originate from personal relationships with family and friends, as well as from popular media. Therefore, if entertainment news programs often address the same information as traditional news programs, in addition to humorous



content that is targeted at young people or more personally engaging, it might explain the turning away from traditional news media that has been observed in young citizens.

This discursive understanding of citizenship through a relationship with media is not often reflected in engagement literature, but it nevertheless represents a form of engagement. Jones suggests that political entertainment news is capable of engaging citizens because television provokes conversation that citizens use to construct their own political opinions based on the narratives provided. He adds, “in the era of media convergence, including social networking, streaming video, e-mail, blogging, and so forth, the conception that television is synonymous with passivity is no longer tenable” (Jones, 2010, p. 25).

Media scholars have studied both *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* in terms of their effect on civic engagement. However, this study provides a close examination of the two shows' discourse that shows how they contribute to audience members' civic engagement by offering a venue for dialogue with other citizens, media organizations, and government. By criticizing political officials and the news media, these shows present an alternative perspective that competes with the perspectives provided by those two types of political power, and the commentary they provide constructs a space where political discourse can take place.

## **B. Campaign 2008**

The 2008 presidential campaign was historic in many ways. It was the first time in U.S. history that one of the major parties nominated a black American in either spot on the presidential ticket, and it resulted in the nation's first black president. It also included many other notable moments, including a very heated Democratic primary between two candidates from minority groups, the much-anticipated presidential run of Senator Hillary Clinton, and the surprise nomination of an obscure female nominee for vice president on the Republican ticket. In addition, politics enjoyed a resurgence in popularity among the media, especially in

entertainment venues like late-night comedy, in relatively new media outlets like the Internet, and in social media networks such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube (Jones, 2010).

The Republican Party was disadvantaged from the beginning of the race. Its presidential candidate, Arizona Senator John McCain, faced a number of factors that had a detrimental impact on his campaign, including a negative party image, the unpopularity of the incumbent president, a historic economic collapse, and public disapproval of the Iraq War (Kenski & Kenski, 2009). In addition, benefitting from the unfortunate circumstances of his opponent, Barack Obama, Democratic senator from Illinois, had some clear advantages, including a staggering all-time fund-raising record of \$741.7 million (compared to McCain's \$367.1 million), a favorable public perception of his performance in the three televised presidential debates, and overwhelmingly positive media coverage (2009). In fact, while only 33 percent of media coverage was positive for McCain, Obama received 68 percent positive media coverage—the most positive coverage received by any candidate in the twenty-year history of such studies, according to the Center for Media and Public Affairs (2009). In the end, Obama won the popular vote with 52.87 percent to McCain's 45.62 percent, out of 131,370,793 votes counted—a clear margin of 9.5 million votes (Leip, 2009). His Electoral College win was even more decisive, with 365 votes compared to McCain's 173 (2009).

#### **i. The candidates.**

In the early phase of the 2008 presidential election campaign, the candidates collectively raised and spent more funds than any other candidates had done for the same period in a presidential campaign (Trent, 2009). The primaries and caucuses began earlier than ever before (January 3 in Iowa), extending the period of media coverage and pushing the critical, character-defining introductions of candidates even earlier in the campaign. There was an unusually high

number of candidates campaigning for their party's nomination because, for the first time since 1952, no sitting president or vice president would appear on either party's ticket (2009).

Individual politicians have increased appearances in entertainment programming, which often judges individuals based on character rather than information about particular issues (van Zoonen, 2005). This proved true in the 2008 campaign, as the news media spent a great deal of time focusing on personal characteristics of the candidates, and issues of ageism, racism, gender, and religious discrimination appeared early on and continued until the election (Trent, 2009). The candidates were associated with particular characteristics and traits that were representative of past actions, stereotypes, roles, identity groups, or, in some cases, simplified or inaccurate constructions popularized by the media. Senator Barack Obama was often associated with the terms "black," "aloof," "professorial," "socialist," "elitist," "inexperienced," and "liberal," while Senator John McCain was noted as "moderate," "maverick," "compromising," "out-of-touch," "too old," "patriot," "war hero," "just another Bush," "tottering," and "senile" (Denton, 2009, p. 101-102).

While little media attention was paid to Democratic vice-presidential nominee Joseph Biden, relative political unknown Sarah Palin, the Republican nominee for vice president and the governor of Alaska, endured an enormous media barrage. The personal traits associated with her in the media were often more divisive, personal, and inflammatory than those of the other candidates, including "working mother," "conservative," "token," "gimmick," "hockey mom," "hunter," "beauty queen," "pretty," "ditsy," and "stupid" (Denton, 2009, p. 102, p. 113). Accurate or not, these monikers provided a cognitive heuristic that voters could use to evaluate the candidates, and the popular media turned to them repeatedly to humorously interpret campaign events as they unfolded.

## **ii. The campaign in popular media.**

Entertainment and political entertainment news programs provide a dominant cultural framework for the public to make sense of politics, and van Zoonen (2005) argues that “politicians must commute between politics and entertainment to maintain status and relevance to the audience’s everyday culture” (p. 69). Politics have become much more ubiquitous in popular culture in recent years, including in news coverage of electoral campaigns (Jones, 2009). While political traditions have influenced the character of television news, the news also shapes national politics, compelling politicians to deliver sound bites, talking points, personalized issues, and tightly packaged messages (e.g., Dahlgren, 1995; Tedesco, 2004). Sixty-eight percent of voters turned to television for their campaign news coverage, giving the medium an extremely important role in the 2008 presidential race between John McCain and Barack Obama (Wenger & MacManus, 2009). The sheer volume of media coverage of campaign 2008 made it “the most thorough, extensive, and aggressive” coverage of a presidential campaign in history (Mears, 2009, p. 423).

While the structure of the aired debates and political advertisements themselves remained largely the same as in past campaigns, Obama broke new ground with the more than \$250 million in television ad expenses, including the 30-minute biographical infomercial that simultaneously spanned seven network and cable channels late in the campaign (Kaid, 2009). The cross-network extended advertisement was a ratings success with 33.6 million viewers, more than watched the final game of the U.S. Major League Baseball World Series that year (Jones, 2009). The news media, on the other hand, focused on fast-paced, immediate information cycles and their usual non-substantive coverage, which consists largely of campaign tactics, poll results, and candidates’ chances for winning (Gulati, Just, & Crigler, 2004).

Internet media also played a large role in the general campaign coverage. The social media video site YouTube was an especially popular source of campaign content, so much so that many journalists named 2008 “The YouTube Election” (Jones, 2009, p. 173). In addition to the viral video clips of professional television content such as the Palin-Couric CBS News interview and David Letterman’s railing against Senator McCain for snubbing him for his scheduled appearance on *The Late Show with David Letterman*, many user-generated videos drew significant attention on the site. In particular, the “Obama Girl” video that surfaced early in the primary season of the campaign became immensely popular, spawning a series of sexually charged, music video-style imitators touting other candidates, and eventually being named one of the top YouTube videos of 2007 (2009).

The candidates and their spouses seemed more willing than ever to appear in the popular media in campaign 2008, making 110 guest appearances on late-night talk shows alone, compared to only 25 in campaign 2004 (Jones, 2009). Appearances included spots on talk shows hosted by Tyra Banks, Ellen Degeneres, Oprah Winfrey, Martha Stewart, Rachael Ray, Jay Leno, David Letterman, Jimmy Kimmel, Conan O’Brien, Bill Maher, Jon Stewart, Stephen Colbert, and Larry King (2009). Entertainment programs are popular among political candidates because they provide maximum public exposure, compared to the short sound bites and journalistic paraphrasing of traditional news, and entertainment shows are often free to discuss the issues without having to face difficult questions from interviewers (Dahlgren, 1995). This was not true, however, for John and Cindy McCain’s appearance on ABC’s daytime entertainment talk show *The View*. They faced such penetrating questions about misleading campaign ads from the show’s normally agreeable hosts that the appearance prompted *New York Times* columnist Frank Rich to say of the media event, “You know the press is impotent at unmasking this Truthiness when the

hardest-hitting interrogation McCain has yet faced on television came on *The View*” (Jones, 2009, p. 170).

In another important campaign moment for the popular media, *Saturday Night Live* received more than 7 million YouTube hits on its parody of Katie Couric’s interview with Republican vice-presidential nominee Sarah Palin, played by *SNL*’s Tina Fey (Kaid, 2009). Indeed, *SNL* became one of the most influential sites of public commentary, because it shifted the focus from the serious context of journalism to a humorous perspective that offered up a fresh and poignant view of the people and issues at stake in the campaign (Jones, 2009). In doing so, *SNL*’s satirical commentary on the botched interview “cemented a largely negative and damning public perception of the candidate” (Jones, 2009, p. 171).

Entertainment shows had help in gaining authority and significant influence over the election coverage, however. Claims of bias toward one candidate or party plagued many of the traditional broadcast and cable television networks, which put them on the offensive front against competitors and caused them to spend time and effort defending themselves from critics. According to a Pew Research Center study, 70 percent of citizens surveyed thought national media organizations made a concerted attempt to sway the election in favor of a particular candidate, and one-third of citizens surveyed felt it would be more advantageous for a candidate to have a reporter be partial to him or her than to have more campaign funds (“Most Voters,” 2008).

The perception of increasing bias in the news media drove audiences to look at entertainment programs as a more comparable traditional news alternative than in past elections (Jones, 2010). While they may not have influenced results as much as some of the other forms of coverage available, entertainment shows were in an advantageous position to impact audience perceptions of the candidates. For example, after Sarah Palin’s less-than-flattering performance

in her interview with Katie Couric, the spoof version of the event performed by *SNL*'s Tina Fey and Amy Poehler was seen by millions of people—many more than watched the original CBS News interview (Kaid, 2009). Fey's performance was so popular that Palin "felt compelled" to answer to the publicity by appearing on a later episode of the *SNL* program, where many believe her unflattering portrayal cost her supporters (Wenger & MacManus, 2009, p. 431).

*The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* are two highly visible specimens of political entertainment news media that spent a significant portion of their time discussing politics in the 2008 election. This study looks at the two as important examples of media during a time when the popular media played an important role in the election. By engaging with these political entertainment news programs, citizens could engage indirectly with the content they addressed: not simply the "who/what/where" of political events presented by traditional news but also the "how" and the "why" embraced by social critics.

### **C. Cultural Approach to Media Study**

Communication scholars have produced much significant research on political comedy television, some touting its effectiveness at delivering current affairs information and encouraging civic engagement (Baym, 2005; Brewer & Marquardt, 2007; Fox, Koloen & Sahin, 2007; Livingstone & Markham, 2008) and some decrying these political entertainment news shows as dangerous distractions that damage the integrity of "the fourth estate" (Anderson, 2004, Putnam, 2000). One thing is certain: non-traditional political content can no longer be ignored. Some of the literature takes an optimist's view of the phenomenon: at least citizens are watching *something* of a political nature, and those drawn in by humor may garner an interest in politics that leads to increased civic engagement (Jones, 2010). Other scholars invoke media malaise theory (Putnam, 2000) disparaging these untraditional attempts at political communication for the harm they must do to the rational-critical public sphere: fragmentation of messages,

disappearance of shared experience, customized information, increased partisanship, and the erosion of community (Jones, 2006).

Political comedy and entertainment or “fake” news shows have been accused of replacing traditional news and talk programs, misinforming citizens, propagating cynicism, and even challenging democracy (Jones, 2010). But some of those who question the usefulness of political entertainment news programs have made the mistake of comparing them directly to the news programs that they parody, finding the similar content lacking chiefly because it integrates serious public affairs information with humor. Rather than hold political entertainment news and other non-traditional media up to a standard they cannot meet, Jones suggests a cultural approach to what he calls “new political communication,” one that recognizes its importance as it is used and defined by viewers. This perspective values communication as ritual, studying how audiences engage in communication as a means of communion and social integration—not exclusively for the purpose of accumulating information (Jones, 2006).

Jones argues that the study of mediated citizenship is dominated by three faulty assumptions: that news is the appropriate sphere of political communication, that the media’s most important function is to supply citizens with information, and that political engagement requires physical activity (2006). These assumptions, he claims, are based on an instrumental view of mediated political communication—one that focuses on news as a tool for informing an engaged and rational citizenry that dutifully devotes time and effort to the practice of politics. Critics using this perspective would certainly find political entertainment news and new media like blogs and Internet discussion boards lacking, as their existence is an imposition on the traditional and revered source of political information, the news. Instead, Jones (2006) advocates a cultural approach that will take into account the numerous and complex ways people connect



with political media in their public and private lives, which are not always serious and intentional:

In a single given day, a citizen might engage in all of the following activities that offer a mediated relationship to the conventional political arena through differing texts about politics: read a newspaper in the morning over breakfast, watch a morning news show while getting dressed, listen to talk radio in the car while driving to work, read politically charged emails, scan a news magazine in the office lobby, hear a political protest song in the car, see a political advertisement on a billboard on the way home, watch a political drama on DVD during the evening hours, then turn to a satirical faux television news show while getting ready for bed, only to retire for the evening by reading a political biography. An examination of the interplay between these activities will probably illuminate how this complex intermixing of media affects average citizen understandings of and relationship to politics. (p. 373)

The first assumption, that news is the first and only proper sphere for political communication, may soon be rendered obsolete, whether it is true or not. According to the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, audiences are increasingly turning away from traditional news broadcasts and looking to other sources for their *mélange* of political information, such as political comedy shows, partisan talk programs, online newspapers, and innumerable others (“Key News Audiences,” 2008). Cable news overtook network news as the most popular source of national news among regular viewers in 2002, and every time slot of network news has been in decline, including morning shows, newsmagazines, local, and nightly news programs (2008).

Even still, the traditional view of the news as most credible, informative, and objective has been long held in American culture. It is viewed as “the central and most legitimate

institution in a democracy to keep a check on power, to uncover facts, to seek truth, and to present reality in a fair and unbiased manner” (Jones, 2006, p. 367). The news media wield power in that they provide a complex and multi-dimensional framework of meaning made up of symbols, stories, rituals, and worldviews that audiences draw from to make sense of the world (Zelizer, 2004). They also have enjoyed a privileged relationship to political power in the U.S. democracy, including access, supplied content, and other entitlements, as a result of their charge to inform the public.

The second assumption observed by Jones in the mediated citizenship research is that the primary function of political communication media is to provide political information. Evidence of this assumption is visible in the criticism news outlets receive when they offer too many “light,” human interest stories or incorporate less-than-serious topics in their broadcasts. A recent survey from the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press found that the news media purportedly spend too much time on trivial subjects such as celebrity news, according to about 40 percent of citizens polled (“Too Much,” 2007).

Of course, informing the public of political news is a centrally important responsibility of the press, and citizens often use the news for this purpose. However, it is far from the only reason. Audiences also patronize traditional political news programs such as *Meet the Press* because they affirm audience members’ personal political and moral values and because they contribute to individuals’ perceived identities as active, responsible citizens. As Jones (2006) puts it, “the fact that citizens have made Fox News—with its overt ideological bias, manipulative patriotic displays, spectacle performances by cheerleading pundits, and jingoistic rhetoric—the highest rated cable news show in America suggests that perhaps some of them want or desire more from political communication than just ‘information’” (p. 369). News programs can move beyond information to provide context for and incite dialogue about the topics they cover, and

the commentary aspect political entertainment news programs such as *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* may perform a similar function.

The third assumption Jones noted in political media studies is the view that political engagement is achieved mainly through some sort of physical activity, such as voting, writing to a representative, organizing a political rally, or campaigning for a candidate. While all of these actions are certainly important, the significance of less overt actions should also be considered. For example, political engagement can mean formulating, solidifying, or changing an individual's mental construction of political reality. The messages viewers receive from news programs provide referents to help make sense of the political and social world beyond direct experience, and these messages together with a personal system of values form an individual's concept of government (Jones, 2006).

To avoid these three flawed assumptions, Jones (2006) suggests a cultural approach that views political communication such as political entertainment news beyond a means to an end (persuasion, education) and instead in terms of the roles it plays in the lives of citizen consumers. He argues that scholars should focus on what audiences derive from the abundance of political content that they come into contact with daily and how they might use it to make sense of society and government.

*The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* provide political information that is just as substantive as that provided by traditional news (Fox, Koloen, and Sahin, 2007; Jones, 2010). Beyond bare information, they supply citizens a conversation that challenges power and invites them to participate in the discourse. Thus, the shows not only encourage political engagement among viewers but also create their own category of engagement by generating content that can engross audiences both politically and socially. A cultural approach to the rhetorical study of popular media and the election forces the analysis to dig deeper than a descriptive study to

consider how the humor and content of these programs fit into the social context of audiences' everyday lives and determine exactly what functions the shows perform there.

### **III. Theoretical Foundations and Method**

#### **A. The Rhetorical Functions of Humor**

Humor is a powerful instrument of persuasion, leveling social statuses, conserving culture, and entertaining audiences all at the same time. It is capable of addressing even the most serious subjects, and rhetors can apply it with anything from a heavy, stinging hand to a subtle corrective touch. Political humor, especially, is a reaction to a perceived imbalance in power, and citizens often employ it to reduce social tension and render tolerable their government and those who govern (Schutz, 1977). Although political humor often challenges the particular party or individual in power, a rhetor's ability to direct an audience's laughter at a particular group, institution, or idea is a form of power in itself, even if the audience is unable to recognize the humor as a form of subversive coercion (Berger, 1993).

Humor can present a compelling form of social commentary, providing a socially approved outlet for the criticism of power (Rybacki & Rybacki, 1991). One reason direct challenges to power become acceptable when couched in a humorous form is that humor and other types of entertainment are considered trivial, incapable of conveying a serious message and unworthy of effortful cognitive processing (Young, 2008). Laughter is valued for its ability to diffuse or "make light of" a situation, therefore its role in serious politics is often discredited (Schutz, 1977).

There are several theories about *why* humor is funny, which can help elucidate the functions that it performs in a serious political context. In his review of humor in the communication literature, Meyer outlines the three most cited theories as relief, incongruity, and superiority (2000). According to the relief theory of humor, people laugh because they sense that

a joke has reduced a source of stress, making the laugh a consequence of a release of nervous energy. Relief theory emphasizes the cathartic functions of humor, and for this perspective, political jokes help citizens cope with a collective anxiety about public matters (Lukes & Galnoor, 1987). Incongruity theory states that people laugh when surprised by some unexpected twist, such as a familiar pattern that is disrupted. Incongruity requires cognitive effort on the part of the audience in order for its members to experience the humor (Meyer, 2000). Satire, irony, and parody fit well into the incongruity theory of humor, as they deal in double meanings and point out flaws with indirect statements. Finally, in superiority theory, people laugh when they feel triumph over the target of humor because of his or her mistake, misfortune, or ridicule (Schutz, 1977). Humor that is obscene falls within the boundaries of superiority theory, as its reference to basic biological drives strips away superficial cultural constructions like political power and reveals human commonality, leveling the audience with the subject of ridicule (Schutz, 1977). It is the superiority theory that explains how humor can be used as a social corrective to discipline those who step beyond the boundaries of social custom (Meyer, 2000).

While some scholars use one of these three theories exclusively to explain the humor phenomenon, Meyer (2000) argues that they are most useful when applied to specific situations according to best fit. He describes the theories in terms of their relation to the humor functions of identification, clarification, differentiation, and enforcement, as follows: “relief humor for relaxing tensions during communication in disconcerting situations or relating to a controversial issue, incongruity humor for presenting new perspectives and viewpoints, and superiority humor for criticizing opposition or unifying a group” (p. 316). Table 1 illustrates the theory/function relationships.

Humor’s identification function builds support by creating a bond between rhetors and their audiences, resulting in enhanced credibility for the speaker. Much political humor

strengthens identification by simultaneously forming a connection between those who support the humor's implicit values and alienating those on the other side of the ideological divide, releasing political tension between the sides in the process (Meyer, 2000). Comedians often stimulate identification with their audiences by using comic invective to mock or verbally attack an errant public figure and satire to comment upon their transgressions, suggesting a shared ideal.

Rhetors use the clarification function of humor to summarize their position on a specific issue through memorable phrases or concise wit (Meyer, 2000). The comic devices of wordplay and irony are especially useful to this function, as they point out incongruities in a line of reasoning in an implicit manner, promoting an alternative idea that must be clear enough for the audience to arrive at on their own. Late-night comedians such as David Letterman and Conan O'Brien often employ this clarification function in their opening monologues, using irony or understatement to humorously simplify complicated subjects like the inner workings of the congressional lawmaking process or reasons behind the economic recession.

Like the clarification function of humor, the differentiation function delineates the views and values of the rhetor; however, instead of making them clearer through simplification of a message, differentiation explicates the rhetor's message by comparing it with an opponent's (Meyer, 2000). Politicians often use humor to differentiate themselves from other candidates, using invective or witty wordplay to attack their opponents' characters. Humor that differentiates one person or idea from another "transcends and objectifies the immediate situation, promoting the use of reason and making differences clearer and less colored by previous experience or emotion" (Meyer, 2000, p. 322).

Enforcement, Meyer's (2000) final function, allows a rhetor to impose social norms subtly by "leveling criticism while maintaining some degree of identification with an audience"

(p. 320). Satire's conservative function, discussed above, is an example of humorous enforcement; by publicly revealing a person's vices or an idea's flaws, a satirist invites public correction, endearing the audience to a set of standards or cultural mores that his or her victim was accused of violating (Schutz, 1977). Schutz argues that cultural enforcement through humor is an important element of a healthy democratic society because it allows citizens to participate vicariously in the rhetor's symbolic aggression, encouraging them to express negative emotions in a socially permissible manner and granting the political system stability at the same time that it views itself critically (1977).

In entertainment programs, humor invites the audience to identify with the rhetor or the ideals that the rhetor is trying to promote. For political entertainment news shows, humor is an essential tool used to shape perspectives of reality through social enforcement and construct an audience that will identify with and accept the ideological tenets laid out by the humor's clarification and differentiation functions. Thus, these shows bring the four functions of humor together in a powerful piece of rhetoric. In the case of this study, this power is potentially amplified by the importance of the subject matter, and one must consider the potential for seemingly trivial jokes to affect audience members' impressions of the candidates and the election campaigns.

## **B. Forms and Comedic Devices**

### **i. Satire.**

Satire uses ridicule and verbal aggression to reveal the faults and transgressions of a target. The rhetor holds these faults up for public scrutiny, encouraging the audience to participate in symbolic corrective action through laughter, and therefore to infer and implicitly accept the rhetor's value system (Billig, 2005; Rybacki & Rybacki, 1991). Satirists are both comedians and social critics, employing other comedic devices such as irony, parody, and

wordplay to comment upon a society's conventions in a moral and often directly political manner (Berger, 1993). While satirists most often approach subjects in a negative manner, they ultimately “wish the world well,” railing, chastising, and ridiculing a person, group, or idea to advocate a return to moral senses (Bloom & Bloom, 1979). Although satire is a tool for commentary, its humor prevents the messages from seeming too didactic or sanctimonious.

Schutz (1977) describes the process as follows:

Humorously seducing the audience into his own chain of logic, [the satirist] leads them to a reexamination of basic premises or values from which their social thinking proceeds. Suddenly, with a burst of laughter, they are confronted with a more “rational premise for viewing the satirized situation—one that can overcome the disparity between the now comically absurd or ridiculous and the dimly perceived more “rational” or “natural” way (p. 77).

To be satire, a positive remedy must be inferred—the satirist does not present an overt solution to the problem in question or explicitly state the intended standard of judgment for those he ridicules, but instead prods the audience into extrapolating its own conclusions (Schutz, 1977).

The dual-message nature of satire requires more involved cognitive processing from its audience (Young, 2008), which must be “sophisticated, sensitive, and sympathetic” enough to understand and appreciate satirical humor (Gring-Pemble & Watson, 2003, p. 138). Rhetors who employ satire as a critical technique run the risk of audience members failing to “get” the joke, or worse, taking the overt message at face value (Raskin, 1985).

## **ii. Parody.**

While satire is a commentary on the social world, parody is a reflexive critique of a particular discourse or genre of discourse. A parody is an irreverent caricature of an original discourse that the rhetor has exaggerated, distorted, or reconstructed with some twist; however,



enough essential elements of the original discourse must be preserved so that the audience can still recognize the referent. If the audience is unable to recognize or is unaware of the original discourse, both the humor and the rhetorical message of a parody will fail (Rybacki & Rybacki, 1991). The subject being parodied must be familiar to an audience and must have distinctive characteristics (such as the structural elements of traditional news programs) for a parody to function (Berger, 1993).

Parody works by reflecting a sincere, organic situation in a way that objectifies it, revealing the mechanized nature of the original (Hariman, 2008). As Hariman (2008) explains, “When language is placed beside itself, limits are exposed. What had seemed to be serious is in fact foolish, and likewise the powerful is shown to be vulnerable, the unchangeable contingent, the enchanting dangerous” (p. 251). The parody brings attention to the form of a particular piece of discourse, robbing it of its ability to deliver a message undetected and calling attention to its function as a vehicle for that message. When a piece of discourse is set beside a parodic image of itself, not only that piece of discourse but its entire system is destabilized and put into perspective, where its audience can better evaluate it (Hariman, 2008).

### **iii. Irony.**

Like parody and satire, irony is another comedic device that requires moderate cognitive effort to appreciate. Unlike more conspicuous forms of humor such as sarcasm, which possesses clear cues and has an obvious target, “irony’s humorous effect is derived by the cognitive reconstruction of the intended meaning of a statement” (Polk, 2009, p. 204). Therefore, irony occurs when the audience recognizes the incongruity between a statement and reality, and makes the mental connection between what was said and what a rhetor actually meant (Gring-Pemble & Watson, 2003). As a rhetorical device, irony calls attention to the duality of language by

questioning, opposing, or contradicting a text's obvious or common-sensical meaning, inviting readers to read between the lines (Glasser & Ettema, 1993).

Irony is often used in satire and parody within individual jokes to make a larger critical point. For irony to occur, the audience must understand a joke's literal meaning or reference, perceive an incongruity, discern possible implicit meanings, and evaluate which is most likely for the rhetor to have meant (Gring-Pemble & Watson, 2003). Thus, to understand irony, an observer must not only take into account his own perspective, but also the perspective of the rhetor, using contextual cues to make informed judgments. When a statement is recognized as absurd, false, or illogical, the audience must somehow determine whether the rhetor also considers it so, in addition to whether the rhetor has reason to expect the audience to agree (2003). Because of the complex nature of irony, it is a risky form of rhetorical humor to use, but like satire and parody, it can deliver the most positive results when successfully appreciated by the intended audience.

#### **iv. Wordplay.**

Wordplay is a game of language played between the rhetor and the audience (Rybacki & Rybacki, 1991). Puns, riddles, double entendres, language-twists, meaning-shifts, and malapropisms are all examples of wordplay, which entertains its word game participants by offering a sense of superiority for making sense of the turn of phrase. The act of "getting" a wordplay joke delivers a feeling of mastery of language, and when this comedic device is used to ridicule a public figure, as in much political humor, it also provides a satisfaction at seeing the normally powerful person humbled by his or her ineptitude at the game of language (1991). Political jokes ridiculing mis-statements made by Vice President Dan Quayle or the "Bushisms" of President George W. Bush are examples of wordplay. While wordplay deals in double meanings, it is less complicated than satire or parody and does not inherently carry the same sense of criticism of its subject.

#### **v. Invective.**

The most straightforward of the comic devices described here, invective is a personal attack, usually of a public figure, employed to a humorous end (Rybacki & Rybacki, 1991). It is often a simple form of abuse, ridicule, or insult masked in a humorous guise (Schutz, 1977). The denigration of a public figure is the most popular and universal type of political humor, based on the opposition of a script (that a person in political office is powerful and competent) and its negation (that the person, in fact, is not) (Raskin, 1985). Invective is especially popular in American political humor, as Americans tend to appreciate anti-political and anti-government jokes. However, the audience must accept the comic invective as a good-natured challenge, or they will reject the rhetor's joke as undue and offensive (Rybacki & Rybacki, 1991).

#### **C. Sample**

This study uses a random, representative sampling of eight episodes of *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* and *The Colbert Report* during the eight-week hot phase of the campaign, between the last day of the Republican National Convention (the second of the two major-party conventions) on September 4 and the day before election day on November 3 (the last pre-election broadcast for the shows). The analysis consists of a close textual examination of only the political content that addresses the presidential or vice-presidential candidates or their campaigns, excluding skits, segments, or interviews that deal with non-presidential candidate coverage. This limited selection of eight total episodes allows for a focused study of the form, content, and commentary in the two shows and how they make use of humor to get their messages across. The episodes selected represent the typical style and content found in *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report*, with varying degrees of coverage of the presidential campaign.

The first-run episodes within this period for each of the programs were assigned a number in a spreadsheet, and a random-number-generating equation was used in Microsoft Excel

to select one of the episodes for every two weeks, in order to observe content as it reflected the evolution of the campaigns. A list of the results of this random sampling is given in Table 2.

#### **D. Grounded Theory**

Grounded theory was selected because of its inductive approach and inherent applicability, especially useful in the study of popular cultural discourse (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Grounded theory is useful because it generates theory that is derived directly from the discourse itself, rather than imposing an external model upon it. Instead of applying a model to test a hypothesis, grounded theory begins with data collection (usually observation), during which key points are noted and categorized accordingly. The constant comparative method is a part of this process, in which data is recorded, then catalogued into fewer and fewer categories until all the data can be explained in the smallest number of relevant categories possible.

Each episode was viewed in entirety to determine the presence and running time of content that mentions the candidates or campaigns, either visibly or audibly. The selected segments were then viewed again as many times as necessary to determine recurrent themes and patterns, according to the constant comparative model of grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Categories were then formed according to common elements and representative exemplars were selected for discussion.

For all applicable material, the analysis listed the topic and content of individual jokes as well as any relevant features of their delivery, including visual elements, comedic devices, and cultural references the hosts made that audience members would have to know in order to understand a joke. This analysis recorded general content about the candidates and political parties, the comedic devices used to deliver this content, and observations about what the shows were saying about the campaign. Following Glaser and Strauss' (1967) classic constant

comparative model, the study coded incidents of relevant material into as many categories as emerged at first (based on groupings such as comedic devices, structural elements of the shows, strategies, and terms used to describe candidates) and then compared them to previously occurring incidents between categories and between the two shows. Many of the jokes and components identified featured properties from more than one category; in these cases, the relevant categories were considered and the discourse was analyzed according to the dominant category presented, as suggested in Lindlof and Taylor's (2002) summary of the constant comparative method. The number of categories was then reduced until the essential elements of each incident could no longer be explained by any of the other categories. The strategies were also interpreted according to whether their main critical focus addressed the news media or one of various political entities. This process ultimately resulted in four categories: contradiction, denigration, exaggeration, and physical humor (see Table 3, "Categories of Humor Strategies in Campaign Coverage").

The four strategies found are a result of whittling the initial categorizations of humor and content down into elements of the discourse that stood out as important, either through signals from the rhetor or by nature of the gravity of the message or subject in question. Segments of the analysis that pointed out hypocrisy among the media or political officials, featured conflicting video clips, or employed irony to illustrate inconsistencies were consolidated into the strategy of contradiction, as this seemed to be the chief rhetorical aim of each of those actions. Examples of invective, mocking an individual or group, or just blatant personal criticism were labeled denigration because of their emphasis on defaming a particular person or subject. Elaborately creative parody segments and instances of verbal hyperbole were considered exaggeration, which was a common strategy used on both shows to elucidate the irrationality of whatever was the subject of the exaggeration. Finally, the last strategy, physical humor, was needed to provide a

category for those instances where a sex, excrement, or other base corporeal joke was not employed in the service of a parody or invective, but seemed to exist for simple shock value.

The most interesting aspect of the analysis was the strategies the hosts used to get their messages across. The four final categories revealed through the constant comparative method were selected because of their relevance to the rest of the catalogued material (everything coded from the sample was employed in service of the hosts' humor strategies), and because they provided the most insight about what functions these shows performed for audiences during the election campaign.

The devices of humor that inform this analysis are based on the five comedic devices outlined by Rybacki and Rybacki (1991)—satire, parody, irony, wordplay, and invective—which can be combined and used interchangeably for a stronger, more complex comedic effect (Berger, 1993). The devices were used as a guide to help catalog the types of humor that appeared in the sample. While the comedic devices complemented the two shows' four humor strategies that were discovered as a result of the grounded theory analysis (the device parody often appeared during segments that used an exaggeration strategy and the device invective was often used in service of the denigration or physical humor strategies), the devices were used only for organizational and identification purposes, while the strategies provided more information about humor's functions in the discourse and the reasons the rhetors might have chosen a particular type of humor. While the comedic devices were useful for organizing the types of humor present in the sample (as they do in the following analysis), these four humor strategies were much more useful for interpreting the meaning of the humor and discerning its function in the discourse.

#### **IV. Analysis**

Both Stewart and Colbert favored certain strategies for delivering their commentary and critical messages to viewers. As Table 3 shows, Stewart shifted frequently between the strategies

extracted from the discourse (a complete listing of humor strategies used in the sample appears in Table 4). He presented content in different ways, through different segments of the show, and via different cast members acting as correspondents. Often an entire episode was devoted to a particular topic (e.g., the latest presidential debate) and the show addressed various aspects of the topic with its diverse humor strategies, forming a comprehensive and thought-provoking account. Colbert, however, relied mostly on exaggeration, which is a strategy consistent with his show's parody format. His show focused on creating absurd narratives to exaggerate a theme about a candidate or issue, jumping wildly between popular culture references rather than switching between various strategies or cast member perspectives.

### **A. Satire**

To recall the definition provided in the theoretical foundations, satire uses ridicule and verbal aggression to reveal the faults and transgressions of a target, for the purpose of conserving a set of values the rhetor believes the target to have violated. This concept of values conservation is visible in *The Daily Show's* ridicule of cable and broadcast news journalists—the farther their practices stray from journalistic ideals of providing a truthful and fair account of events, behaving independently of corporate and government institutions, and acting in an accountable, responsible manner (“Code of Ethics,” 1996), the more vicious Stewart's satire becomes. Although satire runs the risk of alienating audience members who fail to get a joke, Stewart is able to avoid this danger by providing viewers with a political context, which he accomplishes by periodically inserting commentary, moving in and out of character, and laughing at himself. These contextual clues aid viewer interpretations of his material by offering himself as an unambiguous source, even though the intent of his jokes may at times be vague and complex (Baym, 2005; Young & Tisinger, 2006; LaMarre, Landreville & Beam, 2009).

For Stewart, satire was the chief tool for undermining campaign messages in the sample, as seen in a segment about McCain called “Reformed Maverick” (Bodow & O’Neil, September 5, 2008). He challenged the Republican campaign’s presentation of McCain, playing upon his constructed reputation as a “Maverick Reformer” fond of “straight talk” and unafraid of changing the “status quo” by showing a short mash-up film, which he jokingly claimed was played at McCain’s nomination at the 2008 Republican National Convention. The film included contradicting video clips of ideologically moderate public statements from “The Wild Years” of the candidate’s early senatorial career contrasted with more right-leaning statements made since 2006, when he began campaigning for the Republican presidential nomination. After four pairs of incongruous video clips concerning fringe politics, *Roe v. Wade*, Bush administration tax cuts, and the war in Iraq, the video voiceover suggested that by “abandoning everything he’d always stood for” to appeal to more conservative members of the Republican Party, McCain had finally become “a winner.”

In addition to criticizing candidates and their political parties, both Stewart and Colbert use satire to censure the news media. Stewart in particular rails against cable news organizations for what he has called their dishonesty, their “partisan hackery,” and their failure to live up to their responsibility to the public discourse (Begala, Carlson & Stewart, 2004). Stewart often introduces a current topic or event and plays footage taken from news organizations like Fox News, CNN, or MSNBC. He splices clips together to concentrate on a particular aspect of the newscast, such as viewer polls, video and graphics techniques, or emotional appeals. He then often adds a melodramatic parody of the news coverage (using humorous voices or speech patterns, extravagant gestures, or props), followed by an exasperated display of disbelief and disappointment from Stewart, or on some occasions, direct commentary about what he presents as the incompetence or irresponsibility of the news organizations.



In an episode of *The Daily Show* from September 5, 2008 (Bowdow & O’Neil), five of the correspondent characters interview citizens at the Republican National Convention for a satirical piece on “small town values.” The segment begins with a video mash-up of speakers at the convention praising citizens of small towns and their supposedly superior moral standing. In one of the short man-on-the-street interviews that follows about the meaning of “small town values,” a woman tells correspondent John Oliver, “I am from a small town, so I can tell you exactly what that means...It’s real people, real values, uh, common sense.” In a deadpan tone, Oliver replies “Can you be more generic?” The woman, realizing her interviewer is not sympathetic, turns silent, and the studio audience laughs at the awkward pause as the meaninglessness of the Republican Party’s newest catch phrase is laid bare (Bowdow & O’Neil, September 5, 2008).

In an episode from the *Daily Show* that aired six days before the election, Stewart uses satire to rail against MSNBC and Fox News teams for interrupting coverage of what he calls “the most important election of our generation” to cover a high-speed vehicle chase in Florida for one hour, asking, “*Why* would you cut away from the biggest story of the year to watch a van that is dri—oh.” (Video cuts to a photo of a white van similar to the fugitive vehicle from the news footage, with a “Joe the Plumber” graphic superimposed on the side.) Stewart continues, “It’s his van, oh, I didn’t realize. That guy...that guy’s everywhere!” bringing up another story that he has accused the media of mishandling in past episodes (Bodow & O’Neil, October 29, 2008).

## **B. Parody**

Parody, as defined above, is a reflexive critique of a particular discourse or genre of discourse. It must be a familiar, recognizable representation to create humor; this is likely the reason both *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* are styled to match news programs so closely, including their graphics, set design, hosts’ appearance, and verbal delivery style. The

shows exploit their news-style appearance to comment upon the shortcomings of the genre through parody, juxtaposing what is being covered in the news with what writers and producers think the news *should* be covering. The two shows compare “the decontextualization and blindness that run rampant on traditional news programs to coverage that is far more faithful to historical processes or multiple sides seen in dialogue” (Gournelos, 2009, p. 154). By imitating the format of news programs while spurning their content, the two shows borrow authority and credibility from the revered news tradition even as they simultaneously destabilize it.

While Stewart tends to use satire and a variety of humor strategies to transcend the discourse and elucidate a critical message for the audience, Colbert more often operates from within the discourse, exaggerating discourse presented by other media until it is so ridiculous that the audience becomes conscious of the absurdity of the original message. Where Stewart openly ridicules politicians and members of the media for what he considers their hypocrisy (among other transgressions), Colbert uses parody to play along, acting as the naïve victim of political manipulation until it becomes clear to the audience that everyone is exploited by media messages, to some extent.

Colbert blends invective and parody simultaneously in his role as an exaggerated conservative television pundit. He explicitly attacks Democrats and their candidates in an attempt to mimic cable news hosts like Bill O’Reilly and Glenn Beck—a move that implicitly mocks via parody the pundits and the conservative values they perpetuate. In a segment called “Shakespearean Candidates,” Colbert and Harvard University Shakespeare expert Stephen Greenblatt discuss the candidates in terms of which Shakespearean characters they most resemble (Colbert & Hoskinson, October 2, 2008). Ever playing the loyal Republican supporter, Colbert compares McCain to the passionate, powerful (yet doomed) warrior-king Macbeth, who is plagued by a ghostly specter in his association with the currently unpopular President George

W. Bush. Colbert compared Obama to Hamlet, attacking him because of his public reputation as an elitist, egghead prince with no backbone who refuses to make up his mind and act.

In an episode near the end of the campaign, Colbert uses exaggeration to display how engulfed the media has become with political talking points as he pretends to be unable to avoid repeating those associated with Obama winning the election, even when trying his best to promote McCain. He starts out by making fun of the “unscientific” polling that has become popular in the news media as the race draws to a close, favoring instead his own “Da Colbert Code” (modeled after Dan Brown’s popular book *The Da Vinci code*), a method by which he claims to find the answer to unanswerable questions by looking for connections in seemingly random information. To answer the question, “Who will be our next president?” he begins at “whoever is the better patriot,” which brings him to the New England Patriots football team, quarterback Tom Brady, *The Brady Bunch* character Greg Brady, and on to other absurd associations in rapid succession, until landing at “There was a farmer had a dog, and Bingo was his name-O-bama! No!” He continues with four more attempts at ending with John McCain as the answer for who will serve as the next president, even beginning with obviously Republican talking points like “maverick,” “P.O.W.,” and even “Senator John McCain,” but each time Colbert ends with a word or concept that leads him straight to Obama. Apparently frustrated by his failure to arrive at a conclusion of “McCain” even by fixing his own game, he shouts, “Jimmy, quick! Before I say that name again, just go to commercial! We’ll be right Barack!” illustrating that, no matter what he tries to talk about, the Democratic campaign messages seem to have seeped into his head, rendering him unable to escape their perpetuation even intentionally.

In another example of parody on *The Colbert Report*, Stephen Colbert introduces a new segment by pointing at the camera and shouting “Boom! This is the Threatdown!” at which point

the studio lights flash, a commanding red “Threatdown” graphic fills the screen, and police sirens sound. Colbert declares that threat number four is “The Obama Channel,” a channel on Dish Network that has been playing a two-minute ad from the Obama campaign on loop for twenty-four hours. Threats three to one that follow are bulls, bears, and zombies, respectively. Colbert offers this series of visual and textual jokes as an exaggerated imitation of the melodramatic way cable news networks often present threatening news, in order to add excitement to broadcasts (Colbert & Hoskinson, October 7, 2008).

On *The Daily Show*, parody was most often used by the correspondents instead of Stewart himself, aside from the parody of news media that his show’s format represents. In an episode of *The Daily Show*, “Senior Senior Correspondent” Wyatt Cenac constructed a parody of a popular news media tactic. He mediated a senior citizen debate-watching panel, which began as a civilized opinion measuring session (as are often featured by traditional news outlets during presidential debates) that degenerated quickly into an embarrassingly chaotic shouting match after he encouraged the seniors to dispense with their overly complicated feedback analyzing devices and just “shout out what you’re feeling” (Bodow & O’Neil, September 29, 2008).

Often multiple media personalities would grasp some inane yet trivial campaign moment and exaggerate it to the point of absurdity, which became so familiar it defined the subject and became part of his or her public image. One example stemmed from McCain’s interview with ABC’s Charlie Gibson, when the candidate attempted to bolster Palin’s foreign policy credibility by mentioning Alaska’s proximity to Russia. *Saturday Night Live* picked up on the comment, twisting it into a vacuous exclamation in Tina Fey’s parodic depiction of Palin: “I can see Russia from my house!” The meme traveled well in the popular media. Like his treatment of many popular themes, Colbert took the comment and constructed a metaphor that he expanded upon to the point of absurdity. In a story about the international race to claim energy resources in the

Arctic, Colbert called for an “American Arctic expert” positioned between Canadian and Russian competitors, and went on to describe Sarah Palin as the answer, “armed with a hunting rifle and a tube of lipstick,” bringing barrels of oil back to the United States on “her husband’s snow machines.” Colbert then attempted to summon Palin by blowing into a hollowed animal horn and compared the candidate to the comic book hero Batman, whose “bat signal” was an illuminated moose head graphic (Colbert & Hoskinson, September 18, 2008). But, during the entire scenario, Colbert never mentioned the election, the “Russia from my house” joke, or the fact that Palin is a vice-presidential candidate, meaning that audience members would have to be aware of these facts and Palin’s figurative connection to Russia to understand the metaphor and the jokes.

Like satire, parody carries the risk of alienating an audience. Parody can be entertaining simply because its explicit message is absurd. For example, an audience member could enjoy Stephen Colbert’s irreverent style of topical humor even if he or she does not understand that there is a deeper level to his comedy, on which he mocks the sensationalism and hyper-emotionality of conservative cable news pundits. The more outrageous and exaggerated his performance, the more attention may be drawn away from the implicit message, which might be the most culturally important (Baumgartner & Morris, 2008). Colbert’s strict, dead-pan parody is more ambiguous than that of Stewart, who provides more political context on his show with overt commentary and by moving in and out of character, therefore Colbert’s parody may cause more uncertainty among viewers.

### **C. Irony**

Irony is a contradiction between what a rhetor says and what is actually intended. *The Daily Show* exemplifies irony in a segment about John McCain’s nomination acceptance speech at the Republican National Convention (Bowdow & O’Neil, September 5, 2008). Jon Stewart

introduces the story and shows video of McCain talking about his honorable war record, then cuts to a clip of convention-goers listening intently while wearing stick-on bandages on their cheeks depicting a tiny purple heart. When the clip is stopped, Stewart pretends to fly into a rage, shouting, “How dare the Republican National Convention delegates mock John McCain’s service and sacrifice to this country with some derisive Purple Heart Band Aid! That is bulls—t! That—” (he pauses a moment to touch his earpiece, as though he were receiving information from a producer) “I’m sorry, those are the Republican delegates mocking John *Kerry’s* Vietnam war wounds in 2004.” Then Stewart laughs to himself and continues, “You know what? Actually, actually that *is* funny” (Bowdow & O’Neil, September 5, 2008). So, while he provides context for the irony and uses it to inject satirical commentary on the hypocritical behavior of the Republican delegates, Stewart’s initial mock outrage is not genuine, and the audience’s laughter demonstrates their understanding of his implied meaning.

In the sample and throughout the 2008 election campaign, Stewart would often play in succession video clips of candidates on the campaign trail as they repeated their various talking points, rendering their words as contrived and insincere, and revealing their public appearances as a series of performances in a larger campaign strategy. In a particularly critical segment using irony, Stewart calls attention to what he portrays as both sensationalism in the news media and injudiciousness in the McCain campaign. He sets the scene by showing clips from MSNBC, CNN, and Fox News claiming that Governor Palin has “gone rogue” on the campaign trail, also playing a mocking video mash-up of news footage, popular suspense films, and a voice-over exaggerating how dangerous and shocking Palin’s actions have supposedly been. Mimicking the featured news reporters’ excitement with his voice, he examines what Palin has done to deserve such coverage in the news (Bowdow & O’Neil, October 29, 2008):

*Jon Stewart:* Palin has gone rogue! She has got to be pulling some pretty crazy sh—!

*News footage:* She disagrees with the campaign's moves to pull out of Michigan.

(Cuts back to Stewart, with a straight, somewhat surprised face.)

*Stewart:* ...and then pulled out the campaign's still-beating heart? And showed it to them?

*News footage:* She let loose with some implied criticism of McCain campaign tactics like those controversial robo-calls.

(Cuts back to Stewart, with a wrinkled brow and confused look.)

*Stewart, quietly:* ...and blew up a warehouse?

*News footage:* They say she is quote "going rogue"—not following orders, speaking for herself without running it past their people first.

*Stewart, half-smiling, in a deep voice:* May God have mercy on our souls! (*Returns to normal voice with a mocking tone*) Is that what "goin' rogue" is in politics? Talking? You know, maybe this is what the McCain campaign gets for plucking an untested, telegenic person out of obscurity and sending them to answer questions about the issues of the day. Lesson learned!

*News footage:* Joe "the Plumber" Wurzelbacher will be taking to the campaign trail on McCain's behalf.

(Cuts to Stewart, who pauses for a long moment to dramatically cover his face with his hands in dismay while the studio audience laughs.)

In this clip, Stewart uses irony to call attention to the behaviors he wants to point out as outrageous violations of journalistic or political standards and relies on the many tools at his disposal (news footage, video mash-ups, doctored photos, parody, body language, and direct commentary) to deliver biting satire.

#### D. Wordplay

Wordplay is a game of language that delivers a sense of superiority for making sense of the turn of phrase. *The Colbert Report* has an entire segment featuring wordplay, called “The Word,” in which Colbert delivers a series of statements that are contradicted by a series of phraseological twists displayed in a graphic on the right half of the screen. Both shows use wordplay often throughout. In an episode of *The Daily Show* (Bowdow & O’Neil, September 5, 2008), Stewart plays upon the Republican campaign’s presentation of John McCain as a maverick reformer by making a segment called “Reformed Maverick,” which features a movie-trailer-style video mash-up showing the vast differences between McCain’s positions on political issues in 2004, when he claimed to support Republican President George W. Bush, and 2008, when he made attempts to distance himself rhetorically from the unpopular president (Bowdow & O’Neil, September 5, 2008).

In one episode of *The Daily Show*, the media’s obsession with Governor Palin “going rogue” on the campaign trail was mocked in a graphic displayed above Stewart’s right shoulder, which depicted the candidate on a magazine cover styled to match the appearance of the fashion magazine *Vogue*, only the title was replaced with the word “Rogue” instead (Bowdow & O’Neil, October 29, 2008). This literally mocked Palin’s “rogue” actions and figuratively mocked the news media for its obsession with the idea (including the notion that the situation could merit an entire magazine on the subject), but it also noted Palin’s celebrity status with the visual pun of her appearance on the cover of a large-circulation popular magazine.

In addition to candidates’ personal attributes, the shows also repeated familiar talking points established by the Democratic and Republican campaigns. Unlike the traditional news media and the cable pundits, however, Stewart and Colbert called attention to the campaign messages themselves using wordplay. Both hosts made humorous mention of Obama’s slogans



for change and “hope,” as well as the Republican campaign’s accusations of Obama’s supposed socialism tenets and affiliation with former “domestic terrorist” Bill Ayers, in addition to its attempt to align McCain and Palin with the term “maverick” and the party’s everyman representative mouthpiece, Joe the Plumber.

### **E. Invective**

As defined above, invective is a personal attack, usually of a public figure, employed to a humorous end. Like wordplay, invective is often injected throughout larger, more complex jokes and skits on the two shows. For example, in his coverage of the vice presidential debate, Stephen Colbert notes that he hasn’t even seen the debate yet, but that he “predicts a gaffe by Joe Biden,” who is known in the media for his sometimes embarrassing verbal stumblings (Colbert & Hoskinson, October 2, 2008). In the same segment, Colbert pokes fun at Sarah Palin’s lack of foreign policy knowledge by saying (facetiously) that she thought the people of Pakistan were officially referred to as “alpacas” (Colbert & Hoskinson, October 2, 2008).

Both hosts use invective frequently, weaving it into long, more complex satirical jokes. In a segment called “Intrepid Heroes,” Stewart callously attacks Senator McCain’s age when covering the town hall-style presidential debate (Bowdow & O’Neil, October 16, 2008). Joking that the town hall format was an unfortunate one for the candidate, he played clips from the original broadcast of the debate that showed McCain from the back as he slowly sauntered around the arena-style set, which, taken out of context, looked like he was wandering around confusedly. The news media had remarked that the town hall debate might be visually unflattering for McCain because of his uneven shuffle, which was reported to be the result of a war injury. Stewart took advantage of his distinctive walk and a few unfavorable camera angles to joke that he was drifting as a result of senility, an idea that he supported by calling attention to

the quote from an earlier interview (Martin & Allen, 2008) wherein he could not recall how many houses he and his wife owned.

Political humorists often use invective to emphasize a particular attribute or mannerism of a candidate and manipulate it to make a point relevant to the campaign. References to the presidential and vice-presidential candidates on *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* often involved thematic jokes that the hosts would return to repeatedly when presenting news of the campaign. Both Stewart and Colbert regularly ridiculed John McCain's age throughout the campaign coverage, and an episode of *The Daily Show* (Bodow & O'Neil, September 29, 2008) from the sample dealt with ageism in coverage of one of the presidential debates. The show played a succession of video clips in which McCain tried to emphasize Obama's lack of experience and highlight his own successful years in politics. The video cut quickly back to Stewart, who carried the idea even further and mocked McCain's advanced age by impersonating McCain in a very serious and authoritative voice, saying, "I *am* Father Time" (Bodow & O'Neil, September 29, 2008).

## **V. Discussion**

### **A. Humor Strategies**

Both *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* employ various comic devices above to make fun of political entities and media establishments using the topics of the day. By taking subjects from the realm of the "serious" business of politics and traditional journalism and engaging them through various strategies of humor, these two shows consistently create their own distinct perspective of current events—an interpretation that differs significantly from those promoted by either political officials or traditional media organizations. The following section applies the four humor strategies (exaggeration, physical humor, contradiction, and denigration)

deduced using Grounded Theory to material found during analysis of the sample in order to elucidate the uses of humor that appeared during the two shows' campaign coverage.

**i. Exaggeration.**

In terms of difference, *The Daily Show* uses a variety of comic devices and rhetorical strategies to explore the discursive material, while also providing a running commentary on the shortfalls of the news media and political leaders. However, *The Colbert Report* deals with the same content more subtly, focusing strongly on exaggeration strategy as a vehicle for its commentary and using parodic imitation to bring implicit criticism to the subjects its host pretends to champion. Where *The Daily Show* weaves together different humor strategies to make a cohesive (if absurd) narrative of support for its critical arguments, *The Colbert Report* concentrates mostly on exaggeration, with host Stephen Colbert playing a single, consistent role that criticizes media and politics from insider perspective of his character. In a manner more lighthearted and silly than Jon Stewart's cutting satire, Colbert constructs his persona as an unwitting victim of media and party-line manipulation—he mindlessly repeats terms and talking points claimed by the Republican Party to expose the exploitative potential of partisan rhetoric; blindly supports conservative political standpoints, even when they contradict larger conservative tenets; and pretends to lament his own susceptibility to Democratic campaign strategy when he finds Obama is winning the presidential race.

Also, rather than provide a critical imitation of traditional news, Colbert's parody targets conservative political pundits like those who appear on cable news networks during their "non-news" programming hours, such as O'Reilly, Hannity, and Beck. As a result, he has even more freedom than Stewart in how he can manipulate content, because the genre he parodies is less strictly maintained and more loosely structured. Unlike journalists, there is no standard ethical code political pundits adhere to, and the structural elements of their shows are themselves diluted

reproductions borrowed from traditional news programs (the oversized, centrally located desk; the split-screen graphics; the show's serious, yet exciting introductory score; and a set design that glorifies the host and his expert-authority status).

While Stewart most often begins with a news-style delivery to provide exposition and set up his jokes, Colbert has complete liberty with his content, as he professes an aversion to facts and displays a penchant for creative hyperbole. This is a critical defining factor of his comedy, as supported by the fact that almost all of his content fell into the exaggeration category of humor strategies. Colbert occasionally abandons the entire meaning or referent of a subject in order to revel in the sheer entertainment his stories provide, as in the episode mentioned above wherein he describes several popular themes associated with Palin in the media, without ever referring to their original circumstances or sources (Colbert & Hoskinson, September 18, 2008). Colbert employs devices like invective and strategies such as denigration to openly criticize the Democratic Party and its candidates, but for his main targets—the conservative media and Republican candidates—he uses parody, working from inside the text to comment upon the subject matter covertly. This exaggeration strategy, often using parody as a tool, seeks to use enforcement, one of Meyer's four functions of humor (2000), to reinforce the messages of both shows; when the audience laughs at an outrageous exaggeration of a familiar figure or concept, its members implicitly support the rhetor's attempt to correct the behavior at the core of the exaggeration, thus enforcing the correction through public ridicule.

## **ii. Physical humor.**

While Colbert can take more liberty with his content, creating ridiculous narratives that jump around and build upon each other in an absurd and disjointed manner, Stewart is not completely a character situated within a parody, and his more direct commentary style allows him to be flexible with his comedic strategy. Two of the four total humor strategy categories

found in the sample appeared in episodes of *The Daily Show* that were not present in *The Colbert Report*: physical humor and contradiction. While Colbert presented a wide array of jokes and scenarios that ranged in tastefulness, the times that he included sexual innuendo or low humor never strayed from the service of his parody, always just a small bit in his larger parodic narrative. What separates Stewart's physical humor into its own category was his shift to a different end. Stewart invokes physical humor through references to crude jokes or images that would be familiar to his audience. When he compares one of the presidential debates to a viral pornographic Internet video ("two candidates, one cup," from Bowdow & O'Neil, September 29, 2008) or delivers a series of butt jokes to mock Republican spokesman "Joe the Plumber" (Bowdow & O'Neil, October 16, 2008), Stewart intends to level their status to that of a common person. His strategy of associating public figures that are normally considered powerful and authoritative with base corporeal functions exercises the identification function of humor. By employing physical humor, he challenges their power and undermines their authority, comparing them to bodily functions universally experienced by all persons and reminding audiences of their corporeal existence outside of the artificial structures of power (Raskin, 1985), thus helping them to identify with both the public figures and the show.

### **iii. Contradiction.**

Stewart also draws upon contradiction to highlight the hypocrisy of both political entities and media organizations. In the segments where he plays recently recorded videos of a candidate's rhetoric followed immediately by or even interspersed with older footage of the same candidate directly contradicting the earlier message (as shown in "John McCain, Reformed Maverick," from Bowdow & O'Neil, September 5, 2008), Stewart shows politics as what he calls a "purposefully obtuse" spectacle (Baym, 2010, p. 111), in addition to undermining the credibility of the candidates. The very fact that *The Daily Show*, a self-proclaimed "fake news"

show, is able to unearth footage that seems to catch political officials in such blatant lies also undermines the credibility of the traditional news media, who fail to acknowledge either the archived footage or politicians' former conflicting positions. Instead of stopping at simply discrediting authority figures, Stewart weaves these instances into a larger narrative about the deficiencies of the news media and the problems with their relationship to political power.

#### **iv. Denigration.**

Denigration appeared as a humor strategy in both shows, who used it to highlight the faults of a person or group and bring them down to a lower social or political status. In most cases, the denigration tactics were directed at a public figure (e.g., a candidate), political entity (e.g., the Republican or Democratic Party), or a cultural authority (e.g., the news media). For these, the strategy attacked those in positions of power in order to scrutinize their methods and motives with the ostensible goal of demanding an open, accountable government that would be reasonable and responsible to the citizenry. Stewart often stated these ends outright, while Colbert's parody led the viewer to the same conclusion through use of irony and satire.

However, denigration was not used exclusively on public figures, as seen in the segment of *The Daily Show* in which two correspondents severely ridicule a focus group of undecided voters for their inability to commit to a candidate only days before the election (Bodow & O'Neil, October 16, 2008). By attacking a non-politicized group of citizens for what the correspondents label the stupidity and irresponsibility of their indecisiveness, *The Daily Show* deviates from its strategy of using invective to mortify people in positions of power. Instead, it ridicules them for failing to share the standards that the show promotes—of informed yet opinionated engagement with politics. The polarizing humor presented on the show assumes an audience that is politically knowledgeable and presumably committed to either one side of the

political spectrum or another (in most cases, probably a reflection of Stewart's liberal tenets). In denigrating outsiders who do not subscribe to this same fundamental standard, the show creates a space where the superiority function of humor unites viewers as members of the "in" crowd, who not only get the jokes but also cultivate a false sense of heightened political involvement compared to their peers. Thus, the denigration strategy of the show reinforces the political beliefs of its audience members and indulges their sense of pride in political engagement.

### **B. Cultural Significance**

Whether implicit or explicit, Stewart and Colbert's critiques of media represent a profound difference between their shows and either the traditional news or talk-show pundits they imitate. The hosts use humor to advocate a renewed space for rational-critical debate. Their criticism seems to stem from an unspoken affirmation of the old public information model upheld by news icons like Walter Cronkite and Edward R. Murrow, and the disapproval they bear for the contemporary news media represents the industry's ostensible failure to either meet or sustain those standards of objectivity and truth-seeking that many still consider important to the citizenry's political engagement. They object to the commercialism and political pandering that appears to have crept into newscasts because, as Baym notes, they view news as more than the mere transmission of information about current events, but as an important form of communication, a conversation that simultaneously reflects and shapes the culture (Baym, 2010).

However, cultural media scholars such as Baym (2005; 2010) and Jones (2006; 2010) claim that while the traditional news organizations of high-modernism certainly provided a valuable service to citizens, they offered perspectives much more narrow than the ones presented by today's multifaceted information media. Perhaps what Stewart and Colbert seek, then (and

hope that their audiences will demand), is something located between the two, which could respect the principles of objectivity and truth in reporting, but also speak for the voices of a wide range of diverse and marginalized citizens. Similarly, despite protests about their authenticity, these shows require that society move beyond the arbitrary false dichotomy of “news” or “entertainment,” creating hybrids that reflect the complex and multidimensional nature of their content: public affairs information situated deeply in what Baym (2010) calls a “discursively integrated age” (p. 104).

On *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report*, the news works from inside the entertainment, not only juxtaposing the two formerly distinct paradigms, but also shaping and recontextualizing them in new and different ways. The humor devices and strategies the shows use to point out hypocrisy, destabilize imbalances of power, and unveil artifice are not available to traditional news programs because they violate generic standards—the same generic standards that grant news organizations their cultural and political authority. These political entertainment news programs use their ability to shift between genres to their advantage, culling material from broadcast and cable news, political talk programs, the Internet, films, television dramas, and other outposts of popular culture and weaving them together to form new discursive narratives that both reflect and potentially alter social realities.

If traditional news represents a philosophically modern way of perceiving public affairs information, political entertainment news offers a postmodern answer to the problems a modern approach presents (Baym 2010; Jones, 2010; Van Zoonen, 2005). Where traditional news strives for objectivity in reporting “facts” according to some official account of reality, political entertainment news recognizes and celebrates the many perspectives that are often left out by fusing contradictory content and styles (such as humor and politics) in ways that augment each, revealing new and unexamined aspects of political and entertainment culture.



An informed public has long been considered a pivotal necessity for democratic government. As one of the chief mechanisms for providing civic information, traditional news has been privileged to receive extraordinary access to politics and government figures, with the goal of using that access to provide accurate and valuable coverage of public affairs events and processes. Simply watching the news is an important part of civic engagement (Delli Carpini, 2006b), and Stewart and Colbert provide a unique venue for supplementing that engagement. In an age of media fragmentation and corporate competition, traditional news programs have had to adapt to survive, and *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* serve as exemplary models of the results of this adaptation. While the shows criticize news media and government officials for failing to uphold the traditional moral and cultural standards set during “the Golden Age” of public affairs media (Baym, 2010), at the same time, they represent a successful transference beyond the black-and-white, true-and-false of an outdated news structure that claims the authority to ascertain truth, as if there were only one version that matters for the informed electorate.

Questions of genre and journalism ethics are irrelevant for political entertainment news. Stewart himself makes no claims upon labeling *The Daily Show* as a news show, instead insisting that it is a comedy program that deals with news topics (Begala, Carlson, & Stewart, 2004). *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* are not news and should not be held to the same standard as the journalists who make it their work to access political officials and report the process of government to the citizenry. Stewart and Colbert seem to have carved a unique place into the media culture that allows them to fuse together countless aspects of daily life, both political and not, in a way that many people seem to find relevant and engaging. Media critics should continue to move beyond the false dichotomy of news versus entertainment and examine how these shows

act in and upon the public sphere, how they engage (or disengage) citizens, and what role they are playing in the political culture.

## VI. Conclusions

This study has examined the role of humor in the 2008 U.S. presidential election through the discourse of two popular comedy shows whose hosts make no ostensible claims to relevancy or even fact. It is limited in scope by a small sample size and the subjective nature of qualitative research. However, like the two shows under study, it has been an attempt to examine important political concepts in the multifaceted context in which they often appear for audiences, a mish-mash of the hosts' humor, outrage, frustration, and reason that reflects the kaleidoscopic nature of postmodern life.

When studying rhetorical discourse, it is important to consider the circumstances in which the discourse appears. Despite many efforts to determine effects of political entertainment news on civic engagement, few studies have yet examined *how* these shows might accomplish these effects, or why they apply humor to subjects as serious as news and public affairs. This study has shown that, through comedic devices such as satire and parody, *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* perform a great service to society by offering a venue for social commentary and criticisms of power at a time when traditional venues are dissipating. While not factual, authoritative, upstanding, objective, or many of the other qualities frequently associated with traditional news, they somehow provide a place for serious political discourse that many believe is currently suffering in decline—and they manage to be funny while doing it.

The discourse on these shows differs from other news parodies and commentary sections of traditional news programs because of the way *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* reach out to their audiences. Fans of *The Daily Show* and members of the “Colbert Nation” (the URL of the show’s website and the nickname that unifies Colbert’s many devotees) identify with these

shows because they represent a candid, reasoned approach to public affairs couched in the form of humor. The strategies Stewart and Colbert use reinforce a certain set of political beliefs about accountability and transparency of government, and the hosts use these beliefs to construct the audience itself. By laughing at jokes made at the expense of an erring senator or irresponsible journalist, audiences substantiate the ideals those jokes stand for, thus participating in an activity they consider both political and honorable.

Beyond mere entertainment or simple information about current affairs, *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* provide a venue for audiences to engage in dialogue with other fans, with the hosts, and even with the politicians and public figures who appear on the show, whether in person or just in video footage. The imaginary discussions with unwitting political officials, commentary on typically one-way communications such as news broadcasts and political press conferences, and other irreverent forms of play in which the hosts engage the discourse in humorous public banter promote a discussion with public affairs that is not present or even possible on entertainment or traditional news programs. The two shows examined in this study serve as a forum for political discourse, and they invite the audience to participate through obtaining political knowledge, sharing comments, and questioning government and the news programs that mediate its interactions with constituents. In doing so, they most certainly function as advocates for civic engagement.

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## Appendix A

*A. Table 1. Theories of Humor and Their Rhetorical Functions*

Theory	Relief	Incongruity	Superiority
Functions	Identification	Clarification	Identification
		Differentiation	Enforcement
			Differentiation

B. Table 2. Episodes Selected for Study

<i>The Daily Show</i>	<i>The Colbert Report</i>
September 5	September 18
September 29	October 2
October 16	October 7
October 29	October 30

C. Table 3. Categories of Humor Strategies in Campaign Coverage

Category	Properties	Example	Total Incidents	Daily Show	Colbert Report
Contradiction	Incongruous video clips, past actions, points out hypocrisy or dishonesty	Video of McCain clinging to identity as war hero to win over voters compared with video of Republican convention-goers mocking Kerry for using same tactic in 2004 race	4	4	0
Denigration	Personal mocking, media frames, uses irony/satire to imply contradicting reality	Correspondents openly criticize undecided voters for wavering at late point in campaign that has been highly polarized in media	8	6	2
Exaggeration	Creative narrative, sometimes out-of-context, reveals absurdity	Palin compared to super hero-like Arctic explorer, personally charged with saving U.S. oil supply from Russian and Canadian competitors using lipstick and snow machines	15	6	9
Physical Humor	Sex/excrement jokes, media frames, devalues power	Series of jokes about visible butt cracks in regards to newly recruited Republican spokesman Joe the Plumber	2	2	0

D. Table 4. *Humor Strategies in Sample*

Category	Textual Content	Episode*	Critical Focus
exaggeration	McCain as war hero, Bush/mistake, fake movie trailer	DS 9/5/08: Intro	political entity (McCain)
contradiction	wasteful spending, war veteran, comparisons to Bush/Kerry	DS 9/5/08: John McCain's Big Acceptance Speech	political entity (McCain)
exaggeration	compromising values for win, play on "maverick reformer"	DS 9/5/08: John McCain, Reformed Maverick	political entity (McCain)
denigration	ask convention-goers to define small-town values, rural/Southern culture, hospitality	DS 9/5/08: The Best F#@king News Team Ever - Small Town Values	political entity (Republican Party)
contradiction	RNC interview with Dan Rather, mistakes McCain's name	DS 9/5/08: Moment of Zen - John Bush Is His Own Man	political entity (Republican Party)
contradiction	debate, suspension of campaign, economy	DS 9/29/08: Indecision 2008 - WWI	political entity (McCain)
physical humor	porn/excrement joke, news anchor's poor word choice	DS 9/29/08: Indecision 2008 - WWI	
exaggeration	debate, lack of economic ideas, parents joke, Father Time	DS 9/29/08: Indecision 2008 - WWI	political entity (candidates)
denigration	tries to determine debate winner, represents fake interest groups	DS 9/29/08: Bee-Riggle-Oliver - Sideline Pundits	news media
denigration	senior citizen voters, opinion analyzers, senseless analysis	DS 9/29/08: Senior Citizens Watch the Debate	political entity (voters), news media
contradiction	town hall debate, McCain's age, campaign ads, terrorist accusations, defending choice of Palin	DS 10/16/08: World War III	political entity (candidates)
physical humor	Joe the Plumber, butt-crack jokes	DS 10/16/08: World War III	political entity (campaign spokesperson)
exaggeration	Joe the Plumber, media obsession	DS 10/16/08: Joe the Plumber's House	news media
denigration	undecided voters, differences between candidates, emphasis on opinion	DS 10/16/08: Undecided Focus Group	political entity (voters), news media
exaggeration	myth surrounding Obama, positive coverage, race over	DS 10/29/08: Obama Magic	political entity (candidate), news media
denigration	high-speed car chase, bad coverage decision	DS 10/29/08: Goin' Rogue	news media
exaggeration	move trailer-style mash-up, rogue campaign actions, media overreaction	DS 10/29/08: Goin' Rogue	news media



denigration	self-deprecation, exclusive interview, Mario Lopez	DS 10/29/08: Mario Lopez Interviews Barack Obama	news media
exaggeration	arctic trip to get oil, hunting, lipstick, snow machines	CR 9/18/08: Smokin' Pole	political entity (Palin)
denigration	candidates vying for Cheney's most powerful position in govt.	CR 10/2/08: Intro	political entity (Bush/Cheney)
exaggeration	VP debate, Palin poor on foreign policy, distract media from Palin's mistakes	CR 10/2/18: Stephen Shoots an Audience Member	political entity (Palin/Biden), news media
exaggeration	compares candidates to Shakespearean characters	CR 10/2/08: Shakespearean Candidates	political entity (candidates)
exaggeration	Obama's own TV channel, baseball	CR 10/7/08: Intro	political entity (Obama)
exaggeration	media fawning over Obama, terrorist claims, town hall debates	CR 10/7/08: Stephen's Town Hall	political entity (candidates), news media
exaggeration	Obama channel, change, unavoidable ads	CR 10/7/08: Threatdown - Zombies	political entity (Obama)
exaggeration	hope-opera, celebrity, ads as TV drama	CR 10/30/08: Obama Infomercial	political entity (Obama)
denigration	Obama conflates black TV sitcoms	CR 10/30/08: Tip/Wag - Apple Computers	political entity (Obama)
exaggeration	McCain's age, before TV	CR 10/30/08: Tip/Wag - Apple Computers	political entity (McCain)
exaggeration	excessive polling, random code, Obama inevitable	CR 10/30/08: The DaColbert Code	news media

\*Note: Abbreviations include *The Daily Show* (DS), *The Colbert Report* (CR).