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The Limits of Political Satire

BY RYAN JAFFE on SEPTEMBER 11, 2018 • (0)

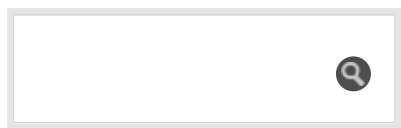
In the age of Trump and the myriad of politically charged humor shows, there seems to be an oversaturation of late night political satire. Television from 10:00 p.m. to midnight seems to be solely dedicated to mocking and attacking political figures. Comedians like Trevor Noah, Jon Stewart, Stephen Colbert, and Samantha Bee have made their careers from poking fun at everyone for their political missteps and misinformed proclamations to the public, from the media themselves to the President of the United States.

Political satire has served a unique and useful purpose by shaping the minds of the public and keeping politicians in check. Stand-up comedians point out the absurdity in the status quo that the general public is sometimes unable to see. Early stand-ups like Lenny Bruce and George Carlin pushed the boundaries of words people could or could not say in the public. Bruce, a comedian in the 1950s, was frequently [thrown in jail](#) for his acts containing “dirty” language, and his provocative style of comedy sparked discussion surrounding the limits of the first amendment. Comedians recognized that bad words without context are just words, and the public determines their vulgarity. George Carlin ripped into the governmental establishment and criticized every facet of it, and paved the way for his contemporaries to make careers out of characterizing politicians as buffoons and puppets for the rich.

Social and political satire in literature can be much more subtle while having the same effect on the audience. Allegorical stories and parables that rely on tongue and cheek humor are prolific. Writers like Ray Bradbury, George Orwell, and Kurt Vonnegut tore into a society where totalitarian control seemed inevitable with humor that was more twisted and dark, almost to a point where it was more upsetting than comedic. There is humor in hopelessness, and when the world is too grim, comedians and writers accept the status quo, and choose to laugh.

After George Carlin created a market for biting and remorseless political commentary, comedians like Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert created programs that focused solely on politics. Parody news shows were new, fresh, and tweaked the practices of a traditional talk show. Stewart offered the perspective of a rational and angry liberal upset with the stupidity embedded in politics, while Colbert played the character of a right-wing family man who detested big government. Paired next to each other on Comedy Central, Americans were able to laugh and learn about the missteps of our nation through the eyes of a left and right wing citizen. Satire in its purest form is not partisan. It is vicious and cuts through the noise of general political commentary. Humor unites people across party lines when each side can laugh at their own follies just as loud as their “enemies’.”

A common complaint against these shows is that they disrespect our political officials. The comedy gets more biting and personal as time passes, the criticism is real and the jokes can come few and far between. In Sacha Baron Cohen’s controversial new show, “Who is America?,” the comedian disguises himself in order to trick political figures into doing things that they would not otherwise do. Some politicians have



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claimed that [his methods are unfair](#), with former Congressman Roy Moore and State Representative Jason Spencer threatening [legal action](#) against Cohen after being fooled themselves. After Mr. Spencer appeared on the show, he [was forced to resign](#) over his behavior on camera, which included racial stereotyping and yelling obscene racial slurs. It is easy to see why other politicians would fear someone like Cohen; they are potential targets.

Are there any limits to political satire? No, there aren't. Politicians and comedians should be held to a different standard. A comedian's job is to make jokes and a politician's is to lead the country. If a joke can tear down a career, let it. A true leader can push past and even laugh at their own blunders, as long as they understand how to fix them. Any censorship of a satirical piece of work is wrong and unconstitutional. Republicans and Democrats can both agree that the freedom of speech and press is the cornerstone of a democracy.

Comedians make a living by telling jokes, and if their jokes aren't funny, then they will not be in a position to create successful satire. The only constraint on political satire is the free market. If the public believes a comedian is too offensive, then they will just stop listening to them. [Kathy Griffin](#) was publicly blacklisted for posting a photo of herself holding a decapitated head made to look like Donald Trump. Her satire was misconstrued as inciting violence against the president and was quickly condemned, ultimately turning into an epic failure. Comics can scream into a crowd mocking the president because that is their right, but that does not mean that their material will not have an impact. A satirist's goal is to incite change through their commentary. Without a goal, the jokes are just well-timed complaints.

There are parody news programs on almost every channel, but is that such a bad thing? Cable news is a sad hour filled with disheartening stories and offers almost no positive glimpse into the future. On the other hand, the comedy of the political theatre creates a haven for us to laugh at our own flaws. As long as our persistent laughing doesn't turn ourselves into the punch line, let the jokes rage on.

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