

Satirized for Your Consumption

Ben Schwartz

We live in an age of satirical excess. If economists were to diagnose it, they might well call it a comedy bubble. We currently have six late-night talk show hosts, all nattily clad, life-of-the-party, white-guy topical jokers—Conan, Kimmel, Fallon, James Corden, Seth Meyers, and (come September) Colbert—to sum up, and send up, our day for us. We have four comedy news-commentary shows—Maher, Larry Wilmore, John Oliver, and (for a little while longer) Stewart—and fake news from SNL’s *Weekend Update*, *The Onion*, *Click-Hole*, and several lesser lights. Vines, viral Funny or Die clips, podcasts, Twitter: each new media platform generates stars of its own, ranging from seasoned comedians to everyday office wits—often, people who have no intention of seeking careers as professional humorists. It would be easy to sniff in condescending high-gatekeeper form and talk of the low signal-to-noise ratio of truly funny people to not, but with 280 million active users on Twitter alone, that still leaves a pretty big signal.

And as often happens with bubbles, it burst. Last year, American satire took one of the stranger turns in its long history of mocking, ridiculing, and joking about our target-rich republic. We’re used to comedians speaking truth to power, to cruelly topical comedy sketches and a steady diet of merciless political cartoons. But in 2014, comedy was stolen from the professional jokesters by their traditional targets and became, unexpectedly, the new language of power, policy, and politics.

That’s a bold claim, but consider a few representative instances. In June, just a few months before the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence released its report on CIA-coordinated torture, CIA administrators joined Twitter’s online community with a



stream of ironic, self-referential jokes. In March, President Obama appeared on *Between Two Ferns*, a faux public-access interview show hosted by a star of *The Hangover* comedies, Zach Galifianakis. Filled with funny, rude insults from both the president and his paunchy foil, Obama’s guest spot brought the then-troubled Affordable Care Act rollout to the attention of Galifianakis’s young, millennial audience, who signed up in large numbers.

At Christmas, *The Interview*, a lowbrow foreign-policy comedy from Judd Apatow, Seth Rogen, and James Franco, presented the imagined assassination of a sitting foreign leader, North Korea’s Kim Jong-un, as slapstick fare. But as its premiere approached, the film provoked a series of improbable, real-life plot twists that steered it away from an Apatow buddy comedy and into a geopolitical farce owing

more to the imagination of a Terry Southern. First came a massive computer hack on the movie's backer, Sony, which evolved into mysterious terroristic threats on our nation's theaters. The United States then accused North Korea of the hack and threats, and the Obama White House instituted a new round of sanctions on the rogue dictatorship.

In an end-of-the-year press conference, President Obama scoffed at North Korea for overreacting to something as absurd as *The Interview*—Kim Jong-un, he implied, couldn't take a joke. But given the Obama Administration's own history of comedy-policy, we might well ask: Who did the president think he was kidding? It's a serious question. After all, our own government leaders don't exactly laugh out loud when citizens kid about assassinating them; we live in a country where writing a farce about killing a U.S. president, or even snickering about it online, could have the NSA hacking your computers, land the Secret Service on your doorstep, and put you in federal prison.

If North Korea is guilty as charged by our FBI, the biggest punchline of all is that Kim Jong-un may not be so crazy for taking America's new brand of weapons-grade humor so seriously. These days, we have a smirking CIA, a healthcare overhaul that was sold via vaudeville sketch, a State Department that, as we shall see, vetted and approved *The Interview*, and a president whose signature moment is the night he cracked jokes at a White House Correspondents' Dinner while a U.S. Navy SEAL team invaded Pakistan to assassinate Osama bin Laden in his home. Kim Jong-un may have embarrassed Sony execs and punked *The Interview's* release—but who's to say he didn't get the joke?

A Greater Fool Theory

It's a common complaint that the abundance of porn online has sexualized our culture, or that mean-spirited Internet trolls have coarsened our national conversation. A similar argument can be made about online comedy, which has humorized our lives. In the 1990s, Maureen Dowd seemed cheeky when she peppered her *Times* pieces with pop-culture gibes. Today, reading her column feels a lot like dialing up with a modem—you can't believe you ever thought it was fast. News, politics, policy, and cultural debate now reach us couched in jokes. Professional, un-

funny journalists fret that young people get more of their information from *The Daily Show* than from traditional sources, and the only time you heard about NBC's *Nightly News* anchor Brian Williams, before he became our first casualty of imaginary RPGs, was when he appeared on *30 Rock* or Jimmy Fallon's show to slow jam the news. Comedians have so fully mastered the language of reporting that when serious people get taken in by absurdist *Onion* stories, no one is surprised. "Not the *Onion*" has become inside-the-Beltway shorthand for any offbeat development in daily politics that seems like farce but isn't.

The comedy culture all around us is also, increasingly, the framework of public debate. Several of the most heated arguments about feminism in recent years have comedy as their starting points, first in the long list of never-serious *Are Women Funny?* think pieces, and then in the online firestorm over comedians telling rape jokes. Arguably, the phrase "rape culture" came to the attention of many people by way of humor, thanks to celebrity comedians like Patton Oswalt (who dislikes rape jokes, and argues that there is a rape culture) and Anthony Jeselnik (who tells rape jokes, and thus proves there is one). Allegations that Bill Cosby is a serial rapist went from impolite celebrity gossip to a loud national conversation only after comedian Hannibal Buress brought them up in his standup routine.

When Bill Maher first adopted the tagline "satirized for your protection," it was an edgy brag, not a humble one, meant to convey that his show, *Politically Incorrect*, would not allow the news of the day to remain safely spun. Twenty years later, a better slogan for the humor of the Information Age would be "satirized for your consumption." Forget stodgy speeches that begin with trite one-liners to break the ice. As the traditional targets of satire seek to demonstrate their relevance to our wit-wired lives, full-on comedic performance has become their principal disarming strategy. Soon after President Obama appeared on *Between Two Ferns*, Hillary Clinton banded talk of a 2016 run at the presidency—on Jon Stewart's show, not on *Meet the Press*. And when a recent blizzard in New York fizzled out earlier than forecast, leaving little snow but many transit closures, Mayor De Blasio charmed the city by reading aloud from the *Onion's* dystopian parody of his snowmongering.

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But humor from
the CIA? That's
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And then, of course, there's the CIA. When the agency opened its official Twitter account, it did so with a wry quip about its own institutional inability to tell the truth: "We can neither confirm nor deny that this is our first tweet."

Not unpredictably, spy watchdogs and intelligence monitors raised a hue and cry over the agency's puckish foray into social media. The CIA, after all, relies on the cover of official secrecy to torture and assassinate, to pay off unscrupulous leaders and bagmen, to choreograph coups d'états, and to prop up client states abroad. There's nothing inherently funny about such activities. More important, it was more than a little jarring to see the CIA lay claim to the language of satire. We assume satire is for the truth teller, not the truth *obscurer*. When George Orwell created the irony-laden government-speak of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, his joke pivoted on one key distinction: we as readers, and not the gray and earnest administrators of Oceania, recognize its bleak absurdity for what it is. But now the CIA has shown, in our satirized era, that it, too, is in on the joke.

The strident detractors of the anonymous smart aleck(s) behind the CIA account had a point: when the official spokesmen of the national security state greet you with a smirk and a good one-liner, you'd probably better be skeptical of their motives. Dark humor about the CIA is nothing new. But humor *from* the CIA? To mug for us, à la James Bond wise-cracking as he tosses Generic Foreign-Accent Bond Villain #243 out of an airplane? That's something new.

A Nation of Class Clowns

As the CIA proved last summer, it's quite easy to co-opt the potentially subversive language of satire. In the past, comedians, or their staff writers, appeared to have a rare gift for wit and getting laughs; the funniest kid in class always stood out. Now, we are a nation of class clowns. Social media gives us all a platform to preach and vent, but also to crack wise on a global stage. And these everyday wits are just as sharp and funny as the professionals, with some, such as Alison Agosti and Tim Seidell, hired off of Twitter to write for the likes of Seth Meyers and Larry Wilmore. Wit is much more common than previously thought, and what determines a professional humorist, it seems, isn't rare comic genius, but mainly the willingness to move to New York or Los Angeles and suffer the entertainment industry.

Take the case of Dave Chappelle, who has recently returned to show business proper after a long absence. Chappelle quit his sometimes brilliant Com-

edy Central sketch comedy show in 2005, after two seasons, and kept a comparatively low profile for years. In 2014 he returned for a stand-up comedy tour, beginning at Radio City Music Hall.

Nine years is a long time to be away, and on Chappelle's return, he found the comedy world changed. Social media, podcasting, micro-films, and serious Internet-backed financing (e.g., Netflix, Amazon, and Yahoo) had arrived, offering alternatives to movie studios and television networks. Comedians like Louis C.K. and Maria Bamford had begun to offer their own comedy specials online, directly to their fan base, with no network or media executives acting as financial or censoring middlemen.

To keep up, Chappelle launched his own Twitter account, and quickly attracted more than 463,000 followers. But like so many celebrities who sign onto Twitter, he found that there was already someone pretending to be him, a fake Dave Chappelle account, complete with original jokes. The Fake Chappelle had racked up more than 120,000 followers. That's incredible for an account clearly labeled as a counterfeit.

It's easy enough to start a fake celebrity account. Twitter allows you to use any name you like (say, Dave Chappelle), post any picture as your avatar (say, Dave Chappelle's), and go about pretending to be anyone you want (say, Dave Chappelle). Some do it as a fan's homage, some do it to mock a hated celebrity and make obnoxious statements in his name, and some hope to deceive the celebrity's followers, for who knows what dishonest purpose. Chappelle found his fake tweeter was something else, something quite unexpected. As he told Jimmy Fallon on *The Tonight Show*, "It turned out, Jimmy, the guy was like, hilarious. . . . I was like, this guy's funny . . . and then, like a week or two into it, he just turns evil!"

Real Chappelle saw Fake Chappelle starting Twitter feuds with an account associated with Katt Williams, a comedian friend of the real Dave Chappelle. The Williams account responded unpleasantly, which, Chappelle told Jimmy Fallon, "hurt the real Dave Chappelle's feelings." Only, as Chappelle learned later when he ran into Katt Williams and braced for an awkward meeting, it turns out that Katt Williams has no Twitter account. Fake Chappelle was feuding with a Fake Katt Williams. Such was the comedy world, circa 2014. You could read it as just another instance of Internet celebrity identity theft, or of an Internet upstart forcing a celebrity into a moment of public embarrassment. But the discovery that Fake Chappelle is actually funny? Funny enough

to attract 120,000 followers? That, too, is something new in the comedy bubble.

Who's the Punchline?

This rapid-fire Twitter tutorial had to be particularly unsettling for Chappelle, who's been struggling for some time to rescue his material from the clutches of bad-faith fans and imitators. His realization that truly evil people were co-opting his humor was a key factor in his decision to quit his show and put his career on hold. In much the same seamless-yet-disturbing way that the CIA adapted its official voice to mimic Twitter's wit and snark, some of the people Chappelle attacked regularly—racists—had taken to adopting his humor. In a 2006 CNN interview, Chappelle explained that he once was filming a skit for his show in blackface and noticed a white person nearby laughing uncontrollably. But, as he recalled, it didn't seem that the onlooker was laughing with him. "The way he laughed, it made me feel like this guy's laughing for the wrong reasons. . . . It stirred up something in me that was like, I don't want to subject anyone else to." After his show became a hit, Chappelle discovered that some of his white fans were grievously misunderstanding—or more likely, intentionally distorting—his satirical intent. Early on in the second season of his show, he offered this anecdote:

Last season we started the series off with this sketch about a [blind] black white supremacist. Very controversial. Yes, very—it sparked this whole controversy about the appropriateness of the "N-word," the dreaded "N-word." And you know—and then when I would travel, people would come up to me—white people would come up to me, like, "Man, that sketch you did about them niggers that was hila—" [Chappelle does a double take in shock here.] "Take it easy! I was joking around!" I started to realize that these sketches, in the wrong hands, are dangerous.

Worse still, Chappelle's name came up in a lawsuit filed by the city of Baltimore against Wells Fargo for its subprime mortgage loan programs, which, the suit alleges, targeted African Americans. In a moment of wince-inducing irony, one employee's complaint described how a Wells Fargo loan officer quoted Chappelle while he pushed black families into foreclosure:

Dave Zoldak, who succeeded Dave Margeson as my branch manager in 2005, used the word "nigger" at the office. Although Wells

Fargo knew Mr. Zoldak used racial slurs, it promoted him to area manager after I complained about his discriminatory comments. On October 21, 2005, I complained in my email to Mr. Zoldak directly about his use of the word "nigger" and speaking about how African Americans lived in "hoods" and "slums." Mr. Zoldak replied that he had used the slurs in a humorous way, just as the African-American comedian Dave Chappelle did on television and thought that I would find the use of these terms humorous.

It's hard to picture a more grim co-opting of Chappelle's comedy at the height of his show's popularity—the Wells Fargo incident occurred in 2005, the same year Chappelle walked away. But the co-opting of satire, and specifically, the racist misapplication of comic material, has long been a problem in American humor. In 1832 the first minstrel star, Thomas D. Rice, of Manhattan, went onstage with black makeup on his face and took the name of a folk character, "Jim Crow." No modern audience would tolerate his performance: the casually offered racial slurs, the ugly stereotyping, the racist imagery. But there was a twist to Rice's humor. He interpolated anti-slavery lyrics into the music he appropriated from African Americans:

*Should dey get to fighting,
Perhaps de blacks will rise,
For deir wish for freedom,
Is shining in deir eyes.
And if de blacks should get free,
I guess dey'll see some bigger,
An I shall consider it,
A bold stroke for de nigger.
I'm for freedom,
An for Union altogether,
Although I'm a black man,
De white is call'd my broder.*

In a barbaric era of American history, during which the very humanity of African Americans and Native Americans was disputed, Rice was, in these early days, an ambiguous symbol of progressivism. "It's hard to know who's speaking here, T. D. Rice or Jim Crow," writes historian John Strausbaugh in his study of race comedy, *Black Like You: Blackface, Whiteface, Insult, and Imitation in American Popular Culture*. "Maybe both. That's the importance of the blackface mask: Rice, as a White man, probably would not have stood up before an audience of Five Points rowdies and openly advocated a violent revolt

by ‘de nigger.’ But as Jim Crow he could. And the same Bowery boys who put on blackface themselves to hurl brickbats at their Black neighbors cheered the idea of Blacks (in the South anyway) rising up.”

If Rice’s ambiguous Jim Crow helped make minstrelsy a national fad, he could not stop pro-slavery imitators from going onstage and appropriating his own very much appropriated act. They turned his plea for freedom into a tool of oppression. And in a further convolution, Rice’s popularization of the Jim Crow character went on to supply the name for the post-Civil War South’s century of terrorism against African Americans.

As for Chappelle, one can only imagine what he must have thought upon learning that his humor about race was serving as an alibi of first resort for a Wells Fargo manager seeking to couch a business model of displacing African American families from their homes in the language of a Comedy Central sketch. Small wonder Chappelle walked away to rethink his career. Satire can be seen as throwing down the gauntlet. That doesn’t mean that the other side won’t just pick it up and throw it back at you.

In Chappelle’s imitators, one can see evidence of a larger trend in American humor: increasingly, the established culture seeks to inoculate itself from the complaints of the satirist by appropriating the satirist’s voice. Comedians have always traded on the role of the prototypical outsider—a role often coveted by savvy politicians, who hope to distance themselves from establishment Washington in the minds of voters. The Obama administration, for one, has managed to fuse wiseguy wit with policy like no other White House. And Obama’s recent comedy-show appearances—including an entertaining visit to *The Colbert Report*, to take over Colbert’s “Word” segment—have helped demolish any hard-and-fast distinctions between insiders and outsiders in the world of satire.

With *The Interview*, state-sponsored satire went next level. Certainly, slapstick foreign policy comedies are nothing new. A partial (and quality-neutral) listing of significant entries in the genre includes Douglas Fairbanks’ *His Majesty*, *The American* (1919), Will Rogers’ *Ambassador Bill* (1931), The Four Marx Brothers’ *Duck Soup* (1933), Wheeler and Woolsey’s *Diplomaniacs* (1933), The Three Stooges’ *You Nazty Spy!* (1940), Chaplin’s *The Great Dicta-*

tor (1940), Kubrick and Southern’s *Dr. Strangelove* (1964), Woody Allen’s *Bananas* (1971), Falk and Arkin’s *The In-Laws* (1979), Ramis and Murray’s *Stripes* (1981), Elaine May’s *Ishtar* (1987), Sandler’s *You Don’t Mess with the Zohan* (2008), and Sacha Baron Cohen’s *The Dictator* (2012).

Some of these movies drew political ire in their day, but nothing close to *The Interview*’s notoriety. Yes, isolationists called Chaplin a warmonger in the highly charged days before World War II. But when

Will Rogers praised Mussolini by name in 1931’s *Ambassador Bill*, it was ignored—he was a cowboy comedian, after all, not a real ambassador. *Duck Soup*, produced by Herman Mankiewicz, a serious satirist, is a burlesque of World War I that posits that the war was fought for bankers and millionaires (a cynical bit of common wisdom in the Depression). Mankiewicz later co-wrote *Citizen Kane*, in which he and Orson Welles argue that their Hearstian title character started the Spanish-American War to sell newspapers. But unlike the controversial *Citizen Kane*, *Duck Soup* was

seen as light, silly fare. There’s no record to suggest that the Marx Brothers farce netted so much as a single outraged letter from aggrieved Wilsonians or veterans groups. Kubrick and Southern tacked on a disclaimer from the military that the events depicted in *Dr. Strangelove* could never happen—but that only makes the movie seem more subversive. The military never seriously tried to ban the movie from commercial release.

Yet *The Interview* was taken to be a true reflection of American foreign policy, both by our foreign policy professionals and (according to the FBI) by North Korea’s. Rogen, Franco, and Apatow—the marquee comic talent of the film—wound up sidelined as the least interesting aspect of the whole debacle. Consider *The Interview* from Kim Jong-un’s point of view. He sees the ongoing convergence of U.S. power and comedy, the CIA on Twitter, and Obama performing stand-up comedy after ordering the Bin Laden assassination. He can scarcely fail to notice that comedy is now the means by which people in the upper circles of U.S. power communicate with the public. He duly notes that the movie’s corporate coparents are based in Japan and the USA—North Korea’s two chief historical enemies. Then, he learns, via Sony’s hacked emails, that CEO Michael Lynton and other executives behind *The Interview*

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consulted with former and current State Department officials, who vetted and encouraged this regime-change comedy. As *The Daily Beast* reported, a North Korean defense analyst for the RAND Corporation, Bruce Bennett, heartily approved of the horribly violent death of Kim Jong-un in the movie's finale. Bennett wrote, "I believe that a story that talks about the removal of the Kim family regime and the creation of a new government by the North Korean people (well, at least the elites) will start some real thinking in South Korea and, I believe, in the North once the DVD leaks into the North (which it almost certainly will). So from a personal perspective, I would personally prefer to leave the ending alone."

And as *Politico* reported, Bennett wasn't alone in this view.

The leaks reveal that on the same day Bennett wrote his review, a top Sony official emailed Bennett to say a U.S. government official supported Bennett's assessment.

Sony CEO Michael Lynton wrote back, "Bruce —Spoke to someone very senior in State (confidentially) . . . He agreed with everything you have been saying. Everything. I will fill you in when we speak.

Yes, if you came from a dynasty as violent and paranoid as Kim Jong-un's, where all culture is state controlled, and if you had an adversary like our comedian president, you might take *The Interview* seriously too.

Odd Comics Out

Rogen, Franco, Chappelle: in 2014, it's the comedians who lost ground in this comedy bubble. Their work quickly moved out of their control and became something they never intended. We often hear talk of satire's devastating impact on its targets. But this age of humorous excess has shown that satire, even when delivered in the sharpest and most unforgiving forms, hardly makes a dent. The proliferation of satirists has multiplied the amount of funny material out there. But it has diminished the belief that satire, political or otherwise, can serve any real purpose beyond amusing us.

This, too, is a new consequence of the comedy bubble. We once had all day to absorb the news, and the political parries and counterparries arising from the news, before late-night comics went on to turn it all into jokes. By that time, TV satirists could provoke that cathartic (if clichéd) response from their viewers: "Finally, somebody said it." Today, by 11:30 p.m., when the late-night shows go on, millions of us

online have already said it, sometimes hilariously. Now the late-night comedian's job is not to speak for us, but to top us. Some shows have hired writers from Twitter, and others crowd-source jokes online (@midnight) or feature "tweet of the week" segments (Ellen).

Johnny Carson once had this field all to himself. As the *New York Times* wrote of Carson when he died in 2005:

His credibility with the American public was such that his monologues were carefully monitored by politicians mindful that no one who became a frequent target of Johnny Carson could long survive in public life. It didn't help Richard Nixon when Mr. Carson's monologue produced some of the funniest Watergate jokes around. Nor did it help when Mr. Carson trained his sights on former Senator Gary Hart, a Democrat from Colorado who found allure both in the presidency and in women he didn't happen to be married to. Mr. Carson's jokes about Mr. Hart's extramarital activities were surely not the only reason his political fortunes evaporated in 1988, but they were repeated often enough to have played some part.

"Survive in public life?" It's doubtful Carson had the impact the *Times* describes; the creepy behavior and considerable hubris of Messrs. Nixon and Hart were far more instrumental in their undoing than any late-night monologues lampooning their excesses. It could also be said that the cautious Mr. Carson rarely got out ahead of the public, preferring to wait until the Nixons and Harts were already punchlines before speaking up. Presidents and their communications offices monitor every major show that comments on them, but while they are always ready to mount a charm offensive to influence the work of prime-time network journalists and *Times* op-ed columnists, they don't expend much energy pushing back against late-night comics.

For one thing, the fallout from satirical attacks is far more easily managed. Nixon found this out during his 1968 appearance on *Laugh-In*, arranged by the show's arch right-wing head writer and Nixon friend, Paul Keyes. By then, Nixon's awkward public personality was old news to comedians and cartoonists. Since the appearance of being able to take a joke greatly benefits a politician, Keyes took advantage of Nixon's greatest television negative, his Tin Woodman stiffness, by showing the ultra-square Nixon struggling mightily with the show's then-hip punchline, "Sock it to me!" Nixon's halting efforts—"Sock it

to me?”—are still funny to see, nearly five decades later.

The larger lesson here is that presidents don't fear comedians. They go on these shows to take advantage of their big audiences, and get points in the process for being a good sport. The confrontations always end up cute. “Nixon said . . . that appearing on *Laugh-In* is what got him elected—and I believe that. And I've had to live with that,” the show's producer, George Schlatter, has humble-bragged. Schlatter might rest a little easier at night knowing that the cultural and political tide that brought Nixon back to power was far bigger than *Laugh-In*—just as the *New York Times* obituary desk would do well to recall that far larger historical forces than a series of Carson monologues brought down Nixon's presidency.

Presidents score points for being good sports, but no one pauses to ask, *What about the comedians?* For the most part, these encounters between the ruling class and the funny caste deflate the fiction that jesters speak uncomfortable truth to power. After the ceremonial presidential visit to a comedy set, a once “devastating” satirist is then revealed to us as merely a professional entertainer. These visits are now an accepted part of our electoral vetting process; every four years, every serious party nominee stops in to chat with the late-night talk show hosts who mock them.

As the politicians show us that they can take a joke, they also reveal that the whole thing is *only* a joke. We often describe our great political satirists as “devastating” or “eviscerating” their targets, and call them “brave” for speaking out. But more often than not, our comedians are ignored by the nation's rich and powerful, who may dislike them, but who never really suffer much for what they say. Has there ever been a time when our newspapers and media haven't been full of sharp political cartoons or gibes? A time without a Franklin, a Washington Irving, a Twain, a Nash, a Mr. Dooley, a Mencken, a Mort Sahl, a Garry Trudeau, a Jon Stewart? Donald Trump insists on answering seemingly each and every insult hurled at him by nearly anyone on Twitter, but his is the behavior of an egomaniac who feels personally threatened by public ridicule—and is one reason (on a very long list) why Trump will never be president.

In some high-profile exceptions, American satirists have suffered for their art, if never anything like the *Charlie Hedbo* crew. Lenny Bruce got sent to jail and died broke, drug addicted, and unable to work. The Smothers Brothers lost their CBS show, and after 9/11 Bill Maher lost a network—a blessing in dis-

guise, since moving to HBO gave him the freedom he needed.

What impact does even the boldest satire have on the powerful? A high-water mark of contemporary satire is generally acknowledged to be Stephen Colbert's 2006 performance at the White House Correspondents' Dinner. There, with President Bush in the audience, Colbert delivered a masterfully ironic faux-conservative tirade in his sublimely boorish O'Reilly persona, advising the president to ignore America's clear disapproval of him. “We know that polls are just a collection of statistics that reflect what people are thinking in reality. And reality has a well-known liberal bias.”

Whether the unnerved audience in the room laughed or sat aghast as Colbert built momentum has been a subject of some debate, but either way, it was a great moment of awkwardly pointed satire. Colbert's performance made people uncomfortable because he was saying all this directly to Bush's face—what more dramatic instance could there be of a comedian speaking truth to power?

But then . . . what? After all, Colbert wasn't at the dinner to topple the administration. He was there to entertain it. Bush watched him, chuckled politely, and, somehow resisting the devastating power of Colbert's monologue, managed not to resign on the spot. As for Colbert, he returned to work, unharmed, by all accounts, by the NSA.

Fans of political satire tend to think that if only someone dares speak out, something will change, the powerful will flip out, and, faced with a hilarious and unanswerable exposure of their misdeeds, the polls will reverse policy. One need only consult Bush's own performance at the 2004 Radio and Television Correspondents' Dinner to disprove that notion. In that monologue, the president turned the truly scandalous nonexistence of WMDs in Saddam Hussein's Iraq into comedy. Presenting a jokey White House photo album, Bush showed a picture of himself haplessly searching under his Oval Office desk. “Those weapons of mass destruction have got to be here somewhere,” he narrated. If Colbert's shtick represented a new level in speaking satirical truth to power, so did Bush's performance of co-opting that same satirical mission—by admitting he was not only wrong about Iraqi WMDs, but utterly incompetent for ever believing they existed.

That Colbert said what needed to be said, and Bush admitted what needed to be admitted, did nothing to derail the next four disastrous years of the official U.S. occupation of Iraq. Instead, the expectant moments merely dissipated, as intended, into memorable entertainment. Colbert made that point

with unmistakable clarity in 2014 during the farewell edition of *The Colbert Report*. For his final show, he filled his soundstage with celebrities and political figures, including George Lucas, Katrina vanden Heuvel, Toby Keith, and Henry Kissinger. As a group they sang “We’ll Meet Again,” the World War II-era song used to ironic effect in the closing credits of *Dr. Strangelove* as the film’s superpowers enter a nuclear holocaust. But the spectacle lacked anything like Kubrick and Southern’s bite. By appearing on stage with icons of the far right and left, Colbert let his audience know that he never really meant it. His mugging faux-O’Reilly persona turned out to be shtick wrapped inside more shtick. The star-studded ensemble also made it quite clear that CBS hasn’t hired a lefty demagogue, as right-wing detractors had loudly insisted when the news broke that the Comedy Central host was ascending to the Letterman chair. In the new Colbert era, Dr. Kissinger, a cold warrior only one small step removed from Peter Sellers’s *Strangelove*, will occupy the same celebrity cultural real estate as George Lucas.

In other words, it was always just a joke. Eight years after publicly eviscerating President Bush and calling out the biggest foreign-policy blunder in a generation, Colbert backed away from any truly subversive satirical intent. And President Bush? He was in the news late last year, too, to unapologetically reaffirm his support for perhaps the ugliest aspect of his administration—his torture policy. He even refused the usual presidential luxury of deniability and enthusiastically re-endorsed the policy and those who executed it. In 2014 it was Colbert who was distancing himself from his legacy, not Bush.

The White House Show Starring Barack Obama

This key limitation of political satire is one reason President Obama could safely appear on *Between Two Ferns*, an often hilarious parody of community

cable-access shows. We have always appreciated quip-ready presidents like Kennedy and Reagan, but selling policy in insult-comedy sketches—well, this too was something else. Sitting face to face with President Obama, Zach Galifianakis, playing his part as the vacuous stoner host of the show, asks him,

“What is it like to be the last black president?” It’s a funny, pessimistic joke about American racism and its current miserable state, one that cruelly deflates the loose pundit talk of a new “post-racial” America.

When Galifianakis asks what Obama would think of a third term, Obama replies, “It would sort of be like making a third *Hangover* movie. It didn’t work out too well, did it?” Throughout the interview, Obama and Galifianakis loft rude and funny jokes at each other. From Galifianakis’s side, he gets some distinctly biting and mean laughs, which helps to burst the dignity bubble that envelops

the American presidency. As with the 2006 encounter between Colbert and Bush, the exchange at first triggers shock: Is this mumbling *schlub* really saying that to the president? But once Obama proves he can take it, and hits back hard, he comes across as cool enough to pitch the ACA to Galifianakis’s hip, twenty-something fans, a demographic that had thus far failed to register for coverage under the law in significant numbers.

The performance was rightly hailed as a masterful Oval Office manipulation of youth culture. Thanks in part to *Between Two Ferns*, the ACA was satirized for our consumption, and millions reportedly consumed. In seeking out Galifianakis and his cult show, the White House grasped something essential about the conduct of political satire in our day: it feeds on the audience’s expectation that real consequences might result from encounters between comedy and power. And like other such feverishly hyped dustups, this one drew a crowd—and ensured that, in the end, the jokes only helped to shore up two high-profile careers.

Still, even as presidents mug their way into the view of young constituencies, and even as Mayor De Blasio twists the *Onion* to his will, some satirists are



punching out of today's comedy bubble, or trying to. In 2014, John Oliver emerged as one of the few comedians who maintained his edge while influencing, or at least distracting, real-world policymaking. His net neutrality episode, in particular, revealed that even in today's satire glut, a comedian can inspire an audience to take civic action. Net neutrality, which the FCC is on the verge of retiring in favor of a dual-tier model that reserves speedier net access for those who can pay for the privilege, is not a new issue. And unfortunately, it's a boring, complicated subject—Kryptonite to the usual comedy delivery systems. But in June, Oliver devoted thirteen solid minutes of his show—about half of it—to net neutrality, advancing a hilariously compelling argument in its favor and turning his jokes into a cogent explanation of what is at stake. Before he could ridicule the FCC's policy, he had to unpack its missteps in detail. Informing the audience, skewering illogic, and building it all into a truly devastating finale the way Oliver did: that's more than just throwaway jokes on Twitter. After the initial HBO broadcast of the segment, it went on to net 7.7 million views on YouTube.

When media watchdogs fret over young people getting their news from comedy shows like Oliver's and *The Daily Show*, they forget to mention that these comedians often spend three times more airtime on a topic than a network news anchor will the same night. Try and find thirteen minutes on the vagaries of net-neutrality policymaking on any "serious" network news broadcast.

To close his longform piece, Oliver called on the Internet's legion of utterly horrible, culture-coarsening, snarky trolls and anonymous commentators to use their venom for good, *just this once*, and contact the FCC. If Dave Chappelle went into semi-retirement over such people, and if Rogen, Franco, and Apatow never saw the new policy-comedy aspect of the modern era coming at them, Oliver understands this new comedy world perfectly. His fans reportedly overloaded the FCC site, which crashed. It's one of the few instances, it's worth noting, in which political satire has had a demonstrable, government-stopping effect. Whipping up Internet rage mobs is easy (any mention of Gaza, gun control, or Woody Allen will do the trick). What's hard is helping millions of people understand a critical policy issue that

they perhaps hadn't reckoned with before. Oliver's plea actually took.

To say that Oliver's stunt tipped Obama's hand in favor of net neutrality is a bit much. But the Internet-savvy White House, which finally came out in favor of neutrality after the 2014 midterms, had to have taken notice. Oliver's detour into comedy-advocacy showed that fans of a satirist can, at least every once in a while, make a very loud agitprop noise, one that puts the policymakers on the defense for the short term and that informs the public for the long term.

Can satire hope to achieve much more than this in today's comedy-Costco world? Most of the time, it's enough for us to feel that our cultural, political, or otherwise ideologically backward foes have been verbally drubbed before we turn in for the night. How else to explain Twitter's legions of quipsters? They're certainly not getting paid for their work. Seth

Meyers coined a word for such cathartic moments, *clapter*—i.e., that rather hollow and perfunctory moment when a partisan audience is loudly applauding and cheering a political joke for merely hitting its target, more than actually laughing. Our late-night talk shows give us that much in truckloads: snark about Bush's excessive vacation days, say, or imitations of Obama's condescending professorial rhetorical style.

When satire has its greatest impact, it alters our perceptions, or gives us a language to answer

and describe what we see going wrong. In 1964, Britain was in its own satire boom and had its own Colbert-Bush moment. Comedian Peter Cook starred in the revue *Beyond the Fringe*, which featured his impression of then prime minister Harold MacMillan. Imitating anyone as dull as a PM was a novel idea in swinging, early 1960s London, so much so that MacMillan himself came in to see Cook do it. Cook rose to the occasion, departing from the script to speak to MacMillan as MacMillan—to the man himself. Unlike Bush at the time of the Colbert encounter, MacMillan had not yet, until Peter Cook arrived, been seen as a joke. After watching Cook's show, a young Eric Idle, then nineteen, was thunderstruck. "They attacked everything that I had just spent nineteen years being oppressed by," he recalled.

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Royalty, police, authority, teachers, every single authority figure was completely pilloried and destroyed and my life just changed. . . . The government had been in power thirteen years. And the slogan was “You’ve Never Had It So Good.” And so when Peter Cook did Harold MacMillan on-stage it completely made them a figure of fun and redundant . . . it was no longer possible to take them seriously. And I think that satire can, occasionally, do things like that.

Beyond *the Fringe’s* impact on British humor, from that legendary revue on, is incalculable, from the Pythons up through John Oliver. Fifty-odd years after Idle witnessed Cook’s MacMillan, in the heart of our own comedy-saturated age, Jon Stewart came to a similar conclusion about satire while promoting his

new (quite serious) drama, *Rosewater*. When NPR’s Terry Gross asked if he considered satire to be a weapon, Stewart replied, “Satire, or what we do on the show, certainly has its limitations, but I think we try to utilize it to the best of our ability. . . . I don’t see it as a weapon as much as I see it as a conversation . . . against dogma. . . . I see all of these shows as in some ways a weapon against complacency.”

In the right moment, in the right place, satire can still alter perception and change the conversation. The difference today is that politicians and policy apparatchiks now understand this as well as the comedians. Whether satire is “devastating” or not, whether the powerful can survive it or not, perhaps isn’t the point. There’s no joke or movie that can topple a president. Or maybe there is, and that’s why the CIA went on Twitter—to find it.

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