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# Mr. Stewart and Mr. Colbert Go to Washington: Television Satirists Outside the Box

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## **Mr. Stewart and Mr. Colbert Go to Washington: Television Satirists Outside the Box**

Jeffrey P. Jones, Geoffrey Baym, and Amber Day

### Abstract:

The political satirists Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert are largely celebrated for their nightly television programs, which use humor to offer useful political information, provide important forums for deliberation and debate, and serve as sites for alternative interpretations of political reality. Yet, when the two satirists more directly intervene in the field of politics—which they increasingly do—they are often met by a chorus of criticism that suggests they have improperly crossed normative boundaries. This article explores Stewart and Colbert's "out of the box" political performances, which include, among others, the 2010 Rally to Restore Sanity, Colbert's testimony before Congress in the same year, and his on-going efforts to run an actual Super PAC that raises and spends money to influence (and critique) the political process. Examining these and other examples of non-traditional, and clearly border-crossing political satire, we consider the ways in which such multi-modal performances--in and off the television screen--work together to provide information, critique, and commentary, as well as a significant form of moral voice and ethical imperative. In turn, we examine the responses from the political and journalistic establishment, which more often than not, constitutes a form of boundary maintenance that seeks to delegitimize such alternative modes of political engagement. Finally, we discuss the significance of the developing relationship between television entertainment and political performance for our understanding of contemporary political practice.

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## Biographical Information

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In the fall of 2010, days before the mid-term congressional elections, Jon Stewart, comedian and host of Comedy Central's *The Daily Show*, announced he would be holding a rally on the Washington mall. Stewart was serious in intent, calling his undertaking the "Rally to Restore Sanity." Although a somewhat tongue-in-cheek retort to Fox News commentator Glenn Beck's "Rally to Restore Honor" held two months earlier, Stewart's rally was crafted as a broader response to a political culture overly influenced by cable news, one he found dominated by hyperbolic partisan rhetoric, driven by ideological fervency, and comprised of scorched-earth tactics by both the political right and left. Stewart wanted to gather citizens in Washington to plead for, of all things, moderation in American political discourse. Yet his call for rhetorical temperance was met by an avalanche of criticism from mainstream journalists, who penned dismissive articles on the rally with titles such as "Just Who Does Jon Stewart Think He Is?" (Farhi 2010), "Stewart-Colbert: A Rally Signifying Nothing" (Zurawick 2010), "Rally to Shift the Blame" (Carr 2010), and "Dude, Can I Have My Parody Back?" (Stanley 2010).

A similar pattern of journalistic-led political boundary maintenance accompanied Stephen Colbert, host of Comedy Central's faux right-wing pundit talk show, *The Colbert Report*, in two of his most notable instances of direct engagement with official institutional

politics. These included Colbert's formal testimony before a congressional subcommittee on the topic of migrant farm laborer rights. There Colbert appeared in full parodic character, basing his testimony on a series of segments he did for his show. The press and members of congress subsequently argued that he not only embarrassed himself, but made a mockery of government. In the second instance, ongoing at the time of this writing, Colbert has formed a Super PAC, enabled by the recent Supreme Court *Citizens United* ruling that allows groups and corporations to raise and spend unlimited amounts of cash to influence elections. Colbert's Super PAC—"Americans for a Better Tomorrow, Tomorrow"—has raised monies from hundreds of thousands of contributors, and actually deployed political advertisements in Iowa prior to the 2011 Republican Straw poll. Although those ads asked Iowans to vote for Rick Parry (with an "a" -- the misspelling being intentional), the wider point has been to highlight the influence that unlimited and anonymous money can have on the electoral process. Colbert's Super PAC also functions to mock the *Citizens United* ruling itself, thus again using *public performance* to offer commentary both entertaining and ironic, yet also critically serious. And though press reaction has been more tempered than in the above two examples, here too some have festered about the possibility that Colbert's actions might confuse voters and create headaches for state election officials.<sup>1</sup>

Although both comedians have been praised widely for their work on television, their efforts to move "out of the box" and directly into the political field has been less well received by the political establishment. They have been criticized for an assortment of ways in which they supposedly are hurting democracy, be it by crossing the line between entertainment and politics, violating sacred ground, taking themselves too seriously, not taking politics seriously enough, wasting taxpayer money, or misleading voters. And while most observers of contemporary politics have come to realize that television entertainment can often function as a

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<sup>1</sup> Some in the press have also offered slight praise for Colbert early on. See Carr 2011.

valuable source of political commentary and critique—especially in light of Fourth Estate failures prior to the invasion of Iraq and the economic meltdown of 2008—once these comedic actors insert themselves into the world of “real” politics (not its television variety), many argue that they have crossed normative lines.

These rebukes demonstrate the ways in which traditional journalistic and political actors attempt to protect their own power and privileged speaking positions through the diminishing of political “outsiders,” marking some voices as legitimate and others as illegitimate, and similarly labeling political *actions* as admissible or inadmissible (Jones 2010: 43-62). Stewart and Colbert’s efforts to mobilize citizens on behalf of rhetorical moderation, to raise public awareness of the working conditions and lack of legal protections for those who pick our food, and to demonstrate what unchecked campaign financing looks like are deemed *illegitimate*, primarily because of *who* is delivering the message and *how* and *where* they do so.

The negative, and often fierce, reactions to Stewart’s and Colbert’s actions suggest that something intriguing is happening here and ask us to consider a number of important questions. These include: How can one assess and evaluate the direct political engagement of television satirists? What might Stewart and Colbert be trying to accomplish, beyond their stated outcomes, and how do those goals relate to their usual approaches to politics within the confines of their programs? In other words, by occurring outside the television box, what makes these actions *politically* different from what occurs on their programs? We contend here that answers to these questions are critical if we hope to understand a) the nature of these emerging non-traditional methods of activism and advocacy; b) how such tactics are related to the more sustained narratives these and other political satirists develop and offer within the context of their entertainment programs; and c) what such actions contribute to the expansion of public discourse and the wider public sphere. At the broadest level, answers to these questions help us explore the nature of political engagement in a “post-trust era” (Baym & Jones 2012; Imre 2012) in which publics have grown increasingly skeptical of traditional representative

institutions, including government and the news media, and have begun to look to new political actors for representation, leadership, and voice.

We begin with a brief examination of the tensions that structure this in-the-box/out-of-the-box dynamic, considering why the former is seen as legitimate while the latter not, and what satirists can accomplish by linking their on-program material with off-program political engagement. We then turn to detailed analyses of the three instances cited above (the Rally to Restore Sanity, Colbert's congressional testimony, and his Super Pac), as well as two other examples of cross-boundary satirical engagement. These include Stewart's advocacy for passage of the Zadroga Bill (popularly referred to as the 9/11 First Responders legislation) and the ways that grassroots political activists and networked social movements employ clips from the shows for issue and policy advocacy. In each instance, we examine the dialectical relationships between television entertainment content and actions within the more traditional political domain, and consider why this relationship matters for political practice and our understanding of contemporary political communication. Throughout the discussion, we explore the ways in which such multi-modal performances--in and off the television screen--work together to provide information, critique, and commentary, as well as a significant form of moral voice and ethical imperative that benefits from the dual performances.

### Satire In and Out of the Box

To date, much scholarly literature has explored the political significance of *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* (see Baym 2010; Day 2011; Jones 2010, for book-length assessments). Such analyses generally agree that the shows contribute to the informational needs of citizens within a democracy, provide important forums for deliberation and debate, and also serve as sites for political contestation—for challenging the authoritative discourses of journalistic and political actors, and in turn questioning the work of reality maintenance and construction (Carey 1988) in which such discourses often engage. Furthermore, the two shows demonstrate the

critical, and some might say *necessary*, function that satire and parody play as tools of interrogation and moral rebuke in the contemporary landscape of mediated politics. In the process, these shows resist the often-invoked, but overly simple characterizations of being “fake news,” mindless entertainment, or a dangerous distraction from the serious business of politics.

Interestingly, within the popular press both Stewart and Colbert have been recognized and increasingly respected as important political actors (for example, *New York* magazine dubbing the aught-aught years as the “Jon Stewart Decade”; *Time* magazine included him in its 2005 list of the “Top 100 Most Influential People”). Yet as we have noted, when the satirists have stepped outside the confines of their television shows and entered the formal political field, that chorus of support quickly turns to condescension and rejection. Marking such actions as *political* (as opposed to simply comedic), critics shift the interpretive frame from playfully entertaining to *serious* and *consequential*. With the shift in interpretative frames comes a shift in measures of assessment, with Stewart and Colbert here attacked for being:

*Entertainers* who lack the legitimacy to speak in the political arena. This is a familiar critique often made toward other celebrities participating in politics—from Bono and Angelina Jolie to Ronald Reagan and Arnold Schwarzenegger. Politics and entertainment are seen as necessarily distinct, and when Stewart and Colbert move outside their shows, they trigger such appeals for a return to normative segregation.

*Blasphemers* who violate the sacred grounds of democracy, both literally and figuratively, by holding a rally on the Washington mall, by subverting the seriousness and supposedly “irony free zone” of congressional hearings, or by disrupting elections with fake advertisements. Serious political actors must respect these zones, and Stewart and Colbert, as comedians who employ satire, irony, and parody, by definition do not.

*Partisans* who are characterized as “liberals,” and therefore pigeon-holed within the overly bifurcated American political system in which everyone, and every idea, must be on one side or the other. The content of their message is thus easily dismissed as ideologically biased, argued to have little value because, as partisans, it is simply more of the same.

Yet for Stewart and Colbert, transporting their critiques and performances into other arenas has numerous payoffs. First, public spaces become alternative venues in which to perform their material. Prior to the Rally to Restore Sanity, Stewart explained that he saw it as another format, similar to a late-night talk show or companion book (both Stewart and Colbert

have published printed works of satire): “a great construct to express the kind of dynamic that we like to express on the show” (Gross 2010). Likewise, Colbert’s well-discussed speech at the 2006 White House Correspondents’ Dinner, in which he lambasted George W. Bush as the president sat just a few chairs away, was in many ways an extension of the routine he performed on his first program (Jones 2010: 80-84; Baym 2007a; Day 2011: 80-81).

Second, through such external performances, they are able to establish the seriousness of their critiques, both on and off-screen. In his infamous encounter with the hosts of the now-defunct CNN political debate show *Crossfire*, Stewart explained, both seriously and combatively, that because he consistently critiqued their performance on his program, he thought it only proper that he do so in person and on *their* program. Through such encounters, Stewart and Colbert remind us that television is not an imaginary playland where critical commentary can be sequestered as mere entertainment. Instead, they are able to (re)assert the significance of their satire by making it *more* public, and therefore serious enough for non-fans to pay attention.

Third, by emerging from behind the curtain, they craft a Hegelian dialectic between the comedic (thesis) and serious (antithesis) to produce a cognitive rupture and reconfigured political moment (synthesis). That rupture, moving from *comedic performance* located within the entertainment world to *political speech* offered in the public square, produces a new political moment--an alternative mode of performative utterance. Theorists of performativity rightly assert that utterances never merely reflect reality, but rather enact it through performance. A minister uttering the words “I now pronounce you man and wife,” for example, brings into being the reality that he names. Similarly, when Stewart calls a public figure a liar by juxtaposing clips of her directly contradicting herself, he creates the reality of her duplicity by unearthing the evidence. Of course, as J. L. Austin asserts, context is everything (Loxley 2007: 9-13). While the material Stewart and Colbert offer on their shows can produce enormously powerful political moments--for example, Stewart’s 2009 evisceration of the CNBC host Jim Cramer--more often



than not, such nightly performances are easily overlooked beyond their loyal fan base. But extending the performances in venues beyond the television screen, they create political moments that demand response from news media as well as wider audiences. Thus, as theorists of performativity have argued (see Bell 2008; Loxley 2007) such actions help *establish* the reality of that which is spoken, be it Stewart's debate over legislative proposal or Colbert's persuasive messages within an election campaign.

Although the outcomes here, as political scientists might measure them, have been inconsistent, in each instance Stewart and Colbert have successfully created events that captured national attention and demanded response. Blurring the neat lines of division that would segregate politics from entertainment, as well as political life from popular life, these forays into the domain of traditional political action have unavoidably demonstrated that critical political speech can and will happen in myriad ways, across formats and venues, and beyond the control of traditional political actors. In turn, they provide acute political interventions that, despite their comedic face, demand to be taken seriously.

#### Rally to Restore Sanity and/or Fear

To date, the most prominent of these interventions has been the "Rally to Restore Sanity," held on the national mall in Washington, D.C., which Stewart first announced on the September 16, 2010, episode of *The Daily Show*. After arguing that the "loud folks dominate our public conversation" and then airing a video montage of overwrought political rhetoric found on cable news, Stewart invited his audience to come to the late-October rally to "spread the timeless message, 'Take it down a notch for America.'" Stephen Colbert, as might be expected, immediately followed with his announcement of a counter-demonstration called the "March to Keep Fear Alive." When Colbert later suggested he lacked a permit to conduct his own march, the two "agreed" to combine their rallies into one of "sanity and/or fear," thereby replicating the core principles that supposedly drive both programs. Now they would perform these principles

in a different venue that at the same time asked for far broader audience participation and intensive media coverage.

The rally was staged at the east end of the mall, with the U.S. Capitol serving as dramatic backdrop. The program included an array of musicians and celebrities, each with a role to play in crafting a narrative that manifested the theme of struggle between sanity and fear. For instance, Yusuf Islam (formerly known as Cat Stevens) performed his song “Peace Train,” which was continually (and intentionally) interrupted by Colbert and Ozzy Osbourne, who sang the Black Sabbath song “Crazy Train.” Finally, Stewart and Colbert compromised and joined with The O’Jays to sing “Love Train.” Stewart and Colbert also handed out medals to various celebrities, average citizens, and news organizations that had demonstrated sanity and restraint, on one hand, or a proclivity toward fear mongering and cowardice on the other. The performance additionally included a video montage of various cable news pundits, from the political left and right, engaging in excessive hyperbole, vitriol, and anger.

After two hours of performing their back-and-forth battle for narrative and ironic supremacy—with Stewart’s forces defeating a giant paper mache puppet in the likeness of Colbert (dubbed “Fearzilla”) as the penultimate ending—the rally concluded with what Stewart referred to as his “sincerity speech.” In it, he laid out an extended critique of a moment in time (“hard times, not end times”) in which news media—what he called the country’s “24-hour politico-pundit perpetual panic conflictinator”—had become a “fun-house mirror” that so distorted reality, citizens no longer knew how to “have animus and not be enemies.” The media had lost the ability to distinguish between the two, he argued, noting “the image of Americans that is reflected back to us” is “false.”<sup>2</sup>

This was, of course, the message of moderation, reason, and deliberation that he and Colbert regularly impart on their television programs. But here, the format of the rally was

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<sup>2</sup> For a full transcript, see <http://www.tbd.com/blogs/tbd-arts/2010/10/jon-stewart-speech-transcript-3955.html>

central to the critique. In significant fashion, it provided the opportunity for the audience to see and experience each other and themselves as fellow *citizens*, outside the media's fun house mirror rendering. The rally provided a massive forum for individuals to demonstrate their support of the critique and to be bodily counted as doing so. And many of the over 250,000 rally goers—quite a few with families in tow—did just that. They *performed* the political message by employing cheers, costumes (it was Halloween weekend), and an array of humorous, ironic, and even-handed signs and placards, some of which included “I’m using my inside voice,” “I’m mad as hell and I’m going to take a deep breath and count to 10,” and “What Do We Want?! Respectful discourse. When Do We Want It?! Now would be agreeable to me, but I’m interested in your opinion.”<sup>3</sup> Thus, attendees *enacted* the critique, making it tangible and bodily manifest, largely without animus and vitriol (respecting Stewart’s pre-rally direction to “not be a dick”), though often with a healthy dose of irony and tongues planted firmly in cheeks.

Through their actions, the audience too, like Stewart and Colbert, engaged in both satire and sincerity. Indeed, it was both of these elements by the on-stage and off-stage audience-performers that made the rally a powerful means for calling out the overdone and hyperventilated polemics of contemporary political discourse. It demonstrated the ability for hundreds of thousands of citizens to not take themselves too seriously while simultaneously being serious enough to show up en mass and respectfully insist that politics be done differently. The dialectic arising from this mix of seriousness and playfulness, passionate and even-keeled temperance, and patient impatience, made this, as a political statement, something powerfully new and different. But it was also something the mainstream political-journalistic establishment found difficult to understand.

As a performative action of more than a quarter-million people, the rally had to be recognized and responded to. But, journalists pondered, what were all these people doing there

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<sup>3</sup> The Huffington Post has cataloged over 800 pictures of signs carried at the rally. See [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2010/10/30/the-funniest-signs-at-the\\_n\\_776490.html#undefined](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2010/10/30/the-funniest-signs-at-the_n_776490.html#undefined)

and what did they hope to achieve? The rally largely fell outside the interpretive framework of those who do institutional-beltway politics because it was, in many ways, a reconceptualization of what political “protest” might look like. It was a politics by doing, but one that did not embrace the types of instrumental political ends that journalists privilege. As such, it was misread by many. On Sean Hannity’s show several days later, for instance, S.E. Cupp described the gathering as a “pro-government rally,” and when referring to the crowd, said “it was the kind of thing you want to say that you have been there. That is how in the tank these people are. It is absurd” (Hannity), as she assumed that everyone was there to support the Democratic Party. Some partisans on the left, too, seemed to miss the point, blogging after the fact that they were hoping that Stewart would step forward as some sort of galvanizing political leader.

If there was a weakness to the rally, it was that neither Stewart nor Colbert asserted an alternative interpretive framework to direct meaning-making (Stewart himself rhetorically asked the crowd, “So, uh, what exactly was this?” without providing a clear answer). Such interpretive openness, however, was in part the point, and is consistent with the fact that both Stewart and Colbert have gone to great lengths to avoid defining themselves. The ambiguity is part of the critique, which is that news media, and the ideological fringes they give voice to, articulate narrow political meanings that fail to represent accurately either reality or the ways that the majority of citizens actually think of matters. Like Stewart suggests of his own show, the rally promoted no agenda beyond sanity in public discourse. Similarly, the performers, on-stage and off, didn’t assert a discovery of new ways of doing politics. Instead, they proclaimed an ethical imperative that those who speak in the public’s name should cease behaviors destructive to the body politic. Stop, Stewart asserted, for this is not who we are. And the multitudes in attendance roared, in ways that journalistic accounts of the event can never adequately describe and that television ratings points of the two programs can never adequately represent (Jones 2010b).

## Moral Outrage and Legislative (In)Action

Jon Stewart has argued repeatedly that *The Daily Show* is an entertainment comedy show first and foremost, but admittedly one that people look to for commentary on public affairs. Yet at select times during his tenure as host, Stewart has chosen to embrace a rhetoric of moral outrage, a more literal approach than his typical reliance on satiric humor, thereby selectively capitalizing on his place as a political commentator of a different sort. In mid-December, 2010, after the rally and immediately before congress adjourned for Christmas holiday recess, Stewart conducted two programs in which he highlighted a stalled congressional bill that would provide federal dollars to address the health care issues of 9/11 rescue workers, known as “First Responders.” The bill had passed the House of Representatives, but was stalled in the Senate where Republicans were filibustering. The Senate had, nonetheless, found time to pass a tax cut extension for the wealthy. What is more, the major broadcast television news networks had not aired a story on the legislation in over two and a half months.

As a proud New Yorker, Stewart was incensed, and opened his December 16 show with a segment highlighting both the political intransigence and hypocrisy, as well as the journalistic disinterest. He exclaimed, “This is an outrageous abdication of our responsibility to those who were most heroic on 9/11.” In the program’s next segment, Stewart brought on four New York City first responders, all of whom had contracted cancer and other diseases from their work at Ground Zero. The four discussed the vicious cycle of how illness had pushed them into insurance struggles over health conditions not covered by their labor contracts, and then into financial disrepair. As one of the first responders described his co-worker losing his nose due to cancer, they all, quite powerfully, noted their “disgust,” “disappointment,” and “hurt” over the political process.

Stewart then engaged in a public shaming of two Senators in particular, Republicans Mitch McConnell and John Kyl, by asking the first responders to comment on clips of the two lawmakers. McConnell, for example, is seen offering a tearful farewell tribute to a departing

colleague on the Senate floor, to which one of the guests responds “Where is his human feeling for [us]?” Kyl is then seen explaining that there was no time left to deal with the bill because if senators and their staffs stayed at work, it would be “disrespecting one of the two holiest holidays for Christians.” Most poignantly, one of the first responders then comments, “You won’t find a single New York City firefighter who considers it a sign of disrespect to work in a New York City firehouse on Christmas eve or Christmas day.” Stewart concluded by ironically asking the responders if they too needed a “super majority” vote to decide whether to react to the burning towers on 9/11. To that, one responder quipped, “We barely made it, by one vote.”

Despite the months-long legislative logjam, the Senate passed the bill less than a week after the episode aired. Numerous politicians, journalists, and advocates agreed that Stewart’s program had played a critical role in the bill’s passage. New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg, for instance noted, “Jon shining a big, bright spotlight on Washington’s potentially tragic failure...was, without a doubt, one of the biggest factors that led to the final agreement” (Carter and Stelter 2010). John Feal, founder of a non-profit agency pushing for the bill, was even more direct: “It took a comedian to stress a serious issue to the U.S. Senate. So who are the comedians now? The U.S. Senate. The power that one man holds in the national media was evident in that show” (Jaffe and Miller 2010).

While Feal may overstate Stewart’s ability to direct the national conversation, there is little doubt that Stewart has demonstrated the reinvigorated power of satire to be not just a voice of political reason, but one of moral right as well. While it is also an exaggeration to say that Stewart had become “the modern-day equivalent of Edward R. Murrow” (Carter and Stelter 2010), the unique place he now holds as a trusted fount of reason and sanity grants him additional license to occasionally step directly into the political fray, with serious intent and demeanor, and challenge public actors on moral and ethical grounds. Increasingly, his comedic colleague Stephen Colbert is capitalizing on that special ability as well.

## “Whatsoever You Do for the Least of My Brothers”

Performed within the boundaries of his television program, Stewart’s efforts to influence legislative action were remarkably successful. Perhaps less successful from a utilitarian standpoint but more daring from a performative perspective was Colbert’s 2010 congressional testimony, where he appeared before a House subcommittee regarding legislation intending to facilitate greater legal protections for migrant farm workers. Invited by Committee Chair Zoe Lofgren (D-CA), Colbert’s testimony was aired live on C-SPAN3, circulated virally around the Internet, and critiqued harshly by the national news media. Fundamentally avant-garde, the testimony was an experiment in political performance that deeply challenged the boundaries of public discourse, offering new modalities of political argument while critiquing the status quo.

Yet the testimony itself—the out-of-the-box performance—was the culmination of a multi-modal engagement with the issue of migrant farm labor rights, begun in the television studio, enacted in the fields, and finally presented in the chambers of congress. Indeed, Colbert has paid consistent attention to the emerging “food justice” movement, despite wider media disinterest in questions of labor conditions, sustainability, and the economics of food production and consumption (Gottlieb & Joshi 2010). Several months before his testimony, he interviewed Arturo Rodriguez, the president of the United Farm Workers. That studio interview covered a range of issues related to immigration and farm labor, including Arizona’s restrictive anti-immigration law (a measure of which Colbert has been quite critical) and the UFW’s “Take Our Jobs” campaign, which invited Americans to spend a day in the field, to raise awareness of the struggles of migrant workers.

Agreeing to be, at the time, the fourth volunteer, Colbert proclaimed he wanted to “test my mettle as an immigrant farm worker.” First though, he interviewed Congresswoman Lofgren, an ally of Rodriguez and a co-sponsor of the AgJobs bill. In the persona he has honed in numerous interviews with congressional representatives (Baym 2007b), Colbert played dumb, struggling to understand why Lofgren is “so passionate about the rights of migrant farm

workers.” For her part, given the opportunity to publicize the issue, Lofgren explained she hoped the attention Colbert would generate would encourage millions more to volunteer. From there, in a segment titled “Fallback Position,” in which he ostensibly explores other potential career opportunities, Colbert spent a day packing corn and picking beans. Here, he literally performs his critique—enacting the role of the affluent and out-of-touch American, who enjoys a harvest of plenty, while remaining willfully ignorant of what Edward R. Murrow once described as the “harvest of shame.” Preferring to play the Facebook game Farmville to doing real work on the actual farm, Colbert ultimately flees the scene. Invoking the specters of class and ethnicity that run through the issue, Colbert calls for his driver “Pablo” to whisk him back to his life of luxury.

The day after that segment aired, Colbert testified before Lofgren’s committee. And like the rally (which would be held a month later), the event was controversial before it even began. Trading in the short and serious written testimony he had provided earlier, he offered a longer and more comedic performance for the committee and the C-SPAN cameras. As was his White House Correspondents Dinner address, Colbert’s testimony was carefully double-voiced, aimed in the immediate at the audience present in the room--the committee members, fellow witnesses, and those in the gallery--but also, and more importantly, at those who would see the testimony, or pieces of it, on-line. Thus designed both to play off the committee (whom he used as a collective “straight man”) and to resonate with wider audiences who would amplify the critique on-line, Colbert’s testimony challenged both decorum and underlying assumptions of how one is expected to speak within the legislative domain. Like all Colbert performances, the testimony was *discursively integrated*, blending voices and modalities – serious and silly, ludicrous and poignant – into an interwoven range of speech genres that once would have been thought fundamentally incompatible (Baym 2010).

In full character, he began with some purely inane jokes—the kind of juvenile and often surreal comedic aesthetic that flows throughout his approach to public affairs, and that critics



invoked to reject the testimony. He also offered several satirically-edged comments that used humor, irony, and incongruity to advance critique and construct *ethos*: a case for action based on a standpoint of compassion. From there, he then articulated a few quite rational, if brief, arguments about the problem of migrant labor. He addressed the issue from an *economic* perspective, suggesting the ineffectiveness of a free-market approach (“even the invisible hand doesn’t want to pick beans”); as well as a *legal* one, arguing that “improved legal status” might “allow immigrants recourse if they’re abused” and could in turn “improve pay and working condition on these farms.” Finally, when asked why he was spending time on this issue, when he could advocate for any cause, Colbert turned to explicitly *moral* language. Stepping entirely out of character, he explained:

I like talking about people who don’t have any power ... the least powerful people are migrant workers who come and do our work, but don’t have any rights as a result. ... You know, “whatsoever you do for the least of my brothers,” and these seem like the least of our brothers ... migrant workers suffer and have no rights.

Referencing a call for justice attributed to Jesus, Colbert here invokes a Christian ethic to authorize his argument on behalf of those who cannot speak for themselves.

The testimony thus challenged assumptions of discursive propriety – of how one can, and should, speak both of serious public issues and within the legislative domain. In response (and the response was nearly instantaneous) Colbert was largely condemned by the political and journalistic establishment, which worried that a funny man and a serious subject “collided ... on Capitol Hill” (CNN 2010). Drawing on the metaphor of *collision*, in all the violence the term implies, most commentators dismissed the testimony as empty “performance art” that sullied the sanctity of Congress. Ignoring the substance of Colbert’s argument and its moral appeal, critics instead argued that the testimony represented the “valorization of entertainment,” which necessarily entailed the “degradation of politics” (Wieseltier 2010).

Particularly outspoken was Utah representative Jason Chaffetz, the Republican committee member who refused to attend the hearing. “I returned to Utah rather than participating in the Colbert skit,” he said, rejecting the affair as “a joke” (Burr & Canham 2010). Once again we hear the normative assumption that comedy—and with it, pleasure and play—must be kept separate from the serious work of politics. And yet, Chaffetz seems inconsistent on the question, having appeared on Colbert’s program, where the two played video games together. Chaffetz, of course, is by no means the only candidate or office holder to use the friendly forum and publicly accessible language of comedy to build political profiles or influence the national conversation. Thus the concern that Colbert was unduly blurring the lines between politics and show business is specious. The two have long been blended—actors become politicians, Congressional speech is often theatrical, and much broadcast news is emptier performance art than Colbert’s. Indeed, Stewart and Colbert often provide more in-depth coverage of congressional action than does the nightly news.

What Colbert challenged, therefore, was the *assumption* that those entrusted with the people’s business—Congress and the news media alike—are *necessarily* engaged in more serious discourse. Ultimately, a minority of commentators recognized that deeper irony—that, as with the First Responders Bill, on questions of immigration and labor, lawmakers have consistently failed to be serious. For example, an op-ed piece posted on CNN.com lauded Colbert for focusing “the nation’s attention” on “congressional inaction on immigration reform.” Embracing Colbert’s moral argument, the author suggested Colbert was speaking on behalf of “the civil rights struggle of our day.” Recognizing that the problem demands voices from outside the political-journalistic establishment which might say something new, he concludes that if “a slightly irreverent comedian can help to prick the nation’s conscience and move us to finally rectify this long-standing injustice, then we welcome his intervention” (Carey 2010).

Of all of these forays outside the box, Colbert's latest intervention in the larger political debate—the creation of his own political action committee (or Super PAC)—has been the most amorphous, evolving, and difficult-to-define. *The Colbert Report* itself has been remarkable for its slipperiness of form, bouncing between trenchant political satire, in-joke character-based comedy, and playful audience interaction. The Super PAC one-ups this boundary muddling, further crossing lines between entertainment television and political reality, to dialogue directly with campaign finance law and its effects on the democratic process.

Colbert's Super PAC, "Americans for a Better Tomorrow, Tomorrow," is a reaction to and comment on the Supreme Court's 2010 *Citizens United* ruling, which lifted restrictions on the amount of money corporations and unions could spend in their attempts to influence elections, provided the money does not go directly to a political candidate. In the wake of the ruling, a plethora of so-called Super PACs (far more expansive versions of previously existing Political Action Committees) have been created with the sole intent of raising as much money as possible to pay for political advertising. By forming his own Super PAC and soliciting donations, with the nebulous promise to influence the 2012 election, Colbert is literally performing the debate.

From the start, the most sustained part of the experiment has been an extended civics lesson offered on the program itself. By interviewing his lawyer, Trevor Potter, and other policy experts, Colbert has explored campaign finance in far more detail than even the wonkiest of news reports. That such segments have been both informative and entertaining is a remarkable feat, achieved by channeling factual information through an ongoing storyline about Colbert's own ego and aspirations to have political influence equal to Karl Rove's. Nearly every Super PAC segment offers explanatory information about the *Citizens United* ruling, the nuances of the law, or how the new system is being used by various players (and Rove in particular). For example, one episode was devoted to Colbert's interest in the largely unrecognized type of organization legally referred to as a 501(c)(4). Colbert begins by celebrating his own Super PAC

and its many donors, whose names scroll on the bottom of the screen. He boasts about the amount of money he has raised, calling himself the “King of Super PACs” and musing that the previous king, “translucent-American Karl Rove,” must feel pretty bad right about now—that is until he (along with the audience) learns that Rove’s Super PAC, American Crossroads, intends to raise \$240 million for the year.

The segment continues to explain that American Crossroads initially had been unsuccessful, until Rove founded a sister organization called Crossroads GPS, which, as a 501(c)(4), does not need to disclose its donors. At that point, donations increased from \$200 to \$5.1 million in a single month. While pretending to support Rove’s aims, Colbert lays out his biting critique, opining that these organizations “have created an unprecedented, unaccountable, untraceable cash tsunami that will infect every corner of the next election.... And I feel like an idiot for not having one.” He then brings on the lawyer Potter, who talks Colbert through what amounts to an incredibly easy set-up of his own 501(c)(4), illustratively named “Anonymous Shell Corporation.” Potter explains that Colbert can use it to solicit anonymous donations, which he can use to pay for advertisements, or, most tellingly, to transfer funds to his supposedly transparent Super PAC. Suggesting that Rove must have done exactly this between the transparent American Crossroads and the anonymously funded Crossroads GPS, a now gleeful Colbert then asks Potter what the difference is between that process and money laundering, to which Potter replies “It is hard to say.”

The segment combines a great deal of explanatory discussion with clear critique. More than simply drawing attention to theoretical problems, it implicates real individuals as exploiting a deeply flawed system. All of this is leavened with just enough in-joke silliness to keep it flowing (including representing Rove as a ham loaf wearing a pair of glasses). Yet there are clearly real stakes at play: after the episode aired, several newspapers ran articles on it, with headlines such as “Stephen Colbert vs. Karl Rove: Who’s Better at ‘Money-Laundering’?” (Grier 2011). Rove himself sent Colbert a letter demanding an apology, to which Colbert happily

complied, but in a typically backhanded fashion that further advanced his critique of the system. By performing the process, therefore, Colbert has been able to spark wider interest and reaction from the political and journalistic establishment, constructing a spectacle that licenses journalistic attention and provokes response.

A textual device designed to advance a critique, yet far from existing solely in the world of fictional entertainment, Colbert's Super PAC is as real as any other in terms of its legal structure. So too has it successfully attracted actual monetary donations. Before he ever articulated precisely what would be done with the money, Colbert convinced a substantial number of fans to contribute cash, along with suggestions for action. This is not the first time that he has mobilized his fans for public mischief (Jones 2010, 224-232), but with the Super PAC, Colbert has the potential to reach a much wider constituency than his own audience. Americans for a Better Tomorrow, Tomorrow has, indeed, begun to develop a variety of commercials, some of which have aired briefly on select local television stations, holding out the tantalizing possibility of affecting the mainstream political debate. It is this uncertainty and open-ended possibility that makes the experiment potentially dangerous for entrenched interests, and *that* has also made fans giddy with anticipation.

Thus far, the commercials have moved in a variety of directions. They began by drawing attention to the millions of Super PAC dollars supporting Rick Perry in the lead up to the Iowa Republican straw poll (again garnering a bevy of journalist reports on the ads *and* the issue). Several then focused, seemingly tangentially, on the NBA labor dispute, using it as a way to point to the fact that Colbert's 501(c)(4) was being not so secretly funded by Dallas Mavericks owner and billionaire Mark Cuban (and, by extension, to the potential effect that a few shadowy and unscrupulous billionaires can have on public issues and debates). From there, with the help of former Louisiana governor, and unlikely Republican presidential candidate Buddy Roemer, the ads have focused on the efforts being made by a variety of political players to skirt the regulation stipulating that Super PACs not coordinate directly with candidates. Although these

ads are rich in ironic appeal for those who follow Colbert, what remains unclear is whether they will be able to move beyond in-group pleasure to speak to a larger audience.

In the many months between the Super PAC's founding and the 2012 election, Colbert must maintain a delicate balance of playing to his core audience while still attempting to make incursions ever further into the world of electoral financing and maneuvering. He thus has set himself up for high expectations (far different than those which apply to the average comedian), with many carefully watching the performative nature of the experiment and its ability to shape the reality it is commenting on. While the mood on fan discussion boards has been generally elated over the Super PAC project, a number of posters have expressed their displeasure with the ads they have felt are too obscure or are not making the critique obvious enough. And, in this case, while journalists have engaged in some of the usual boundary maintenance around this experiment, a number have expressed something closer to fascination, implying that he had better now deliver. David Carr of the *New York Times* writes "Maybe the whole system has become such a joke that only jokes will serve as a corrective. But if Mr. Colbert succeeds only in drawing out more humor, then the whole idea is a failure" (Carr). Now that the ground rules have been established and attention piqued, there is a growing expectation that Americans for a Better Tomorrow, Tomorrow will act as effectively as other Super PACs in impacting wider public debate, but in a reflective manner that will call into question the very nature of this new model of campaign financing. In other words, Colbert is using his moral voice to make a convincing case for why current campaign finance regulations are doing the country a disservice, so much so that viewers are now waiting for that critique to be enacted further inside the belly of the beast.

### Digital Activism

The final aspect of Stewart and Colbert's extra-televisual engagement with politics we briefly consider here shifts focus from the work of the comedians, to the ways in which their work is

being *used* by technologically enabled audiences. Just as Stewart and Colbert are moving outside the box in their efforts to influence the political process, so too are audiences—transforming from passive consumers to active users—increasingly transforming satirical television content into resources for real-world political action. Empowered by democratizing technologies of media production and distribution (e.g., Jenkins 2006), individual activists and advocacy organizations are reappropriating television satire—reworking, recontextualizing, and recirculating it on-line in service of a range of transformative agendas.

In contrast to an age in which television content was ephemeral, today every segment from both programs is stored on the programs' websites, accessible for on-line, on-demand viewing. More importantly, this digital archive offers individual users a number of tools to share segments—to e-mail them, link to them, and upload them to one's blog, Facebook page, or other social networking platforms. In turn, horizontally networked social activists concerned with any number of domestic issues are readily reappropriating those clips, incorporating them in emerging, multi-mediated forms of sociopolitical advocacy.

Baym and Shah (2011), for example, have examined the on-line flow of clips from Stewart and Colbert that deal specifically with environmental politics and policies. Tracking the distribution of ten individual video clips (primarily composed of interviews with high-ranking members of the Obama administration, corporate executives, journalists, and widely known movement leaders), the researchers found the clips reposted on hundreds of different websites, and hundreds of thousands of individual web pages, interested in environmental issues and practices. In turn, those websites—the ones specifically reappropriating the television content—were linked to by thousands of other websites with shared topical concerns. The result is the distribution of television content among an exponentially increasing, and highly interlinked network of environmental activists. Those stakeholders include issue-oriented media outlets, non-governmental civil society organizations, and a vast number of individual-level activists.

For these groups, the clips are used in a number of overlapping ways that together function to advance movement goals. First, they provide what scholars of social movements call *affinity* resources—means of constructing affective ties among like-minded, but geographically dispersed people (Bennett 2003). Second, they offer *informational* resources. The clips offer a wide range of information from a number of expert sources, in particular because Stewart and Colbert's programs tend to feature the work of authors and experts so prominently (unlike much of television). In turn, many of the websites that reappropriate clips add them to often highly narrow and issue-specific databases that include encyclopedic entries, media reports, and scientific findings (Bimber et al. 2005). Finally, the clips provide *discursive* resources—tools for the crafting of arguments within the civic sphere (della Porta 2009). Here websites from formal and informal advocacy organizations as well as from individual activists integrate the clips, and the arguments they offer into statements of policy preferences, rebuttals to potential opponents, and calls for action—both in the legislative domain and in the realm of everyday life. This usage of the televisual material demonstrates both the power of the initial critique as well as the level of engagement and interest in the political sphere found in the shows' audiences.

#### A Different Way of Doing Politics

*The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* have always been comprised of a mix of performances simultaneously serious and entertaining, including news reports, interviews, recommended readings, field trips, and satirical skits (among others). But over the last several years, the program's hosts have extended their performances off-program, directly intervening within the political arena. The ironic and satirical-yet-serious political messages, in conjunction with similar commentary on their programs, creates multi-modal performances that work together, as we have seen here, to call attention to specific political issues, ethical oversights, moral outrages, and problematic constructions of political life. Utilizing their own star power and respect as



political commentators, they employ the political stage to extend their critiques in ways that garner significant attention from news media and demand public response.

While their political performances may occur on stages outside the television studio, Stewart and Colbert are, in every instance, still performing for television cameras. By holding the rally, testifying before congress, and announcing the legal approval of the Super PAC on the steps of the Federal Election Commission's building, Stewart and Colbert engage an array of new audiences—including those attending to traditional news media—with their off-program critiques. Of course, news coverage is a double-edged sword, with journalists often being the leading critical voices opposed to the comedians' presence on these particular political stages. News media, thus, are often responsible for making such appearances "controversial" even before they have occurred. But again, controversy brings more coverage and new audiences to the performative critiques.

At the same time, in most instances, the news media offer fairly restrictive readings of the goals and purposes of such public engagements, especially given Stewart and Colbert's tendency to craft interpretively open performances. As political players, news media tend to employ an instrumental perspective, framing political engagement around questions of how it affects the formal political process (in terms of electoral strategies and outcomes, voter turnout, partisan agendas, legislative success, and so forth). Indeed, as we have argued here, such framing misses other, perhaps more significant aspects of what these performers are contributing to the public sphere by "taking the show on the road."

As political "outsiders," they craft a different way of *doing* politics: a rally that asks people to perform the critique, and to advocate for something that is in the best interest of the polity, not themselves as self-interested, rights-advocating individuals; congressional testimony that employs awkward and uncomfortable forms of address and presentation to make its point; establishing legally-sanctified political organizations for parodic, pedagogical, and performative purposes. Through the on-program and off-program performances, then, Stewart and Colbert

are able to say things that news media either can't or won't say. In the process, they offer extended civics lessons—on media literacy, on worker's rights and conditions, on campaign financing, on the failures of worker's compensation programs—in ways that, again, news media typically fail to do, or do so poorly. And, significantly so, they offer newer frames of interpretation or terms of debate than those already present in the political and journalistic establishment.

In response to Stewart's criticisms of NBC News for its persistent lack of coverage of the First Responders bill, NBC's anchor Brian Williams defended himself and his organization by saying, "Jon gets to decide the rules governing his own activism and the causes he supports and how often he does it—and his audience gets to decide if they like the serious Jon as much as they do the satirical Jon" (Carter and Stelter 2010). The response is telling in ways that cut to the heart of the argument. First, it highlights the ways in which contemporary journalism has failed the public. Beyond Williams' belying journalism's traditional muckraking, investigative, or advocacy role in uncovering social injustices, the performances discussed here demonstrate that advocacy and public responsibility are one and the same. The moral voice of those who monitor and comment upon political life should not be limited by form--journalistic or comedic--and if it takes comedians to point out the moral and ethical lapses of those who dominate political processes and the discourses that structure public life, then so be it.

Second, Williams' retort also highlights the repeated desire of establishment voices to separate the serious from the satirical, when in fact satire is, by definition, serious. Satire is the rhetorical means for humorously demonstrating the seriousness of political failures, which can be seen in the smart crescendo of humorous outrage, coined sentence-by-sentence, in Stewart's devastating deconstruction of political and journalistic hypocrisy within the First Responders program, or in Colbert's multi-faceted, cringe-inducing critiques in his testimony before congress, including his ending the speech, straight-faced and out of character, quoting Matthew 25:40.

Finally, the performativity of such speech acts means that Colbert and Stewart are not just reflecting or commenting on these political matters; they are adding to the constitution of that reality with their own unique contributions. And this is perhaps the most significant aspect of Stewart and Colbert's appearance on the public stage: it's not whether their audience "gets to decide if they like" the performances, as Williams contends (for fans already know what they have signed up for). It's what *other* audiences—journalists, politicians, voters, non-fans, religious leaders, citizens, etc.— *do* with that reality once the comedians cum political commentators have left the stage.

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