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Teaching Political Humor:
Entertainment, Exaggeration, and Echo Chambers

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Overview

This three-part lesson plan aims to deepen students' understanding of how mediated humor impacts public perception of political events and political players. The activities are designed to work with current events or issues preoccupying the political-cultural landscape at the time of class instruction. The lesson plan is adaptable for online instruction.

The first and (optional) second class periods focus on the function of political parody and draw heavily from Jason T. Peifer's (2013) analysis of Saturday Night Live parodies of Sarah Palin. Peifer's concepts of parodic reflection, refraction, and creation are easily translatable to parodies of contemporary political figures, like Donald Trump, and help students analyze the critical distance that makes parody humorous. The third lesson explores the circulation of humor and how comedians create echo chambers that amplify select perspectives.
All three lessons have been successfully implemented in Political Communication and Communication Theory courses. The third lesson is especially well-suited for a media literacy course.

Rationale

It is difficult to imagine a political environment void of humor. The capacity of humor to gain attention, enhance memory, and influence public opinion has been recognized since the time of Ancient Greece and Rome (Benacka 2017). Poking fun at politicians, their fallibility and their hypocrisies, plays a central role in U.S. political ritual. However, scholars frequently debate the specific impact of political humor on what citizens think, say, and do.

On one hand, political humor is framed as an essential democratic endeavor that rallies audiences and provides a check on political power (Hall 2015). From this perspective, humor is valued for increasing engagement with politics (Hoffmann and Young 2011), uniting audiences around common goals (Meyer 2000), and encouraging affective responses that clarify, confirm, and connect people to substantive issues (Jones 2004).

On the other hand, political humor is criticized for weakening democratic processes and goals. Humor's enforcement of group norms, for example, tends to paint oppositional actions as irrational, deservedly or not (Meyer 2000). Roderick Hart and Johanna Hartelius (2007) chastise political comedians for fostering high levels of public cynicism, which threatens public trust in politicians and political institutions (see also Baumgartner and Morris 2006). This distrust is amplified in a neoliberal media environment that uses strong ideological viewpoints to move products, connect with audiences, and increase profits for media producers (Jamieson and

Cappella 2008; Jones 2014). Other studies show political humor to have little effect on public knowledge (Baek and Wojcieszak 2009) or, worse yet, give audiences only the *impression* of being informed (Hollander 2005).

With these points in mind, the following lesson plan takes humor seriously. It meets students at a familiar cultural site, since young people are likely to retrieve political information from comedy shows (Pew 2004). In order for students to recognize the impact of humor on their own political practices, instructors must help students understand how their individual preferences and perspectives fit within a larger political media landscape.

General Timeline

Day 1 – Framing and Political Parody
Day 1 introduces students to different forms of political humor (e.g., satire, irony, and parody) and teaches students to recognize them in practice. This day's reading expands student understanding of media framing to include political comedy. This lesson lays the groundwork for future related topics such as intertextuality, misinformation, and fact-checking. Students work in groups to discuss forms of political comedy and collaborate on a parody project to be completed during Day 2 (optional).

Day 2 – "Who Said It?" Activity and Fact-Checking Exercise (Optional*)
In Day 2, groups analyze a comedian's parody of a political figure, identify the frames at play in the parody, and discuss the intertextuality of the imitative text. Using fact checking skills,[1] students then create their own "Who Said It?" quiz that highlights the differences between original and imitative texts.

(*Alternatively, this activity could be completed outside of class and presented on an online discussion board.)

Day 3 – Entertaining Echo Chambers
Day 3 explores the circulation of political comedy. Students identify an echo chamber in which a comedic interpretation of a contemporary event is amplified and circulated by other expressive forms, such as hashtags and memes. Students consider the blurred lines of entertainment and information, and they discuss the implications of echo chambers on public discourse.

Detailed Lesson Plan

Materials Needed: Students need access to the internet via their smartphones or computers all three days. Earphones are helpful for managing noise in the classroom. Instructors might consider meeting in a computer lab on Day 2 and Day 3, although I have not found it necessary in my experiences running the activity.

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[1] This timeline assumes that the instructor has covered fact-checking in an earlier class. If not, instructors can modify this lesson to include strategies for fact checking as part of the assignment.

Day 1 – Framing and Political Parody

Read:

Peifer, Jason T. 2013. "Palin, Saturday Night Live, and Framing: Examining the Dynamics of Political Parody." *Communication Review* 16, no. 3: 155-177. https://doi.org/10.1080/10714421.2013.807117

Learning Objectives:
1. Recognize satire, irony, and parody in practice, and understand the different and overlapping uses of each comedic form
2. Understand how comedy frames information and influences audiences' sense-making processes
3. Analyze the critical distance in parody that generates humor and recognize the differences between original and imitative texts
4. Reflect on one's own susceptibility to comedic frames

Opening Comments: Open class with a quiz or a discussion of Peifer's essay and the framework it provides for analyzing parodic texts.

Lecture notes
- Peifer explains that when actors imitate a text, they select and give salience to certain moments/characteristics of the original text and, consequently, make them more memorable for an audience.
    - Drawing from political humor theory, Peifer reminds readers that "the differences" between original and imitative texts are what "generate[sic] the humor of the parodic text" (157). Parody's power and influence lies in how it reflects, refracts, or creates political realities in this imitative process.
- Explain to students that the class will investigate how humor works and how humor effects our understanding of political events and people.
    - At this point, ask students to identify currently circulating parodies of political figures that they find humorous. Students will return to this list throughout the three-day period.
- Define satire and irony for the students. Communication scholar, Dannagal G. Young, writes that satire is communication that "questions the existing political or social order, usually by juxtaposing the existing imperfect reality with visions of what *could* or *should* be" (2018, 3).
    - Irony supports satire and parody, and Young identifies irony as "present when a text exposes a gap between what is stated and what is meant" (2018, 4).
    - The instructor may want to clarify the difference between irony and sarcasm, as well, with sarcasm as a statement (often ironic) used to cut or elicit a reaction.

Small-group Discussion

Facilitation notes
- Explain to students that parody, irony, and satire work in conjunction more than separately.
- Ask students to break into groups of three or four people and add to their individual lists examples and people who use each type of humor.
    - Students typically struggle with irony the most. Identify comedians that create a situation in which irony is revealed. Skits taken "to the streets" provide good examples (see Sacha Baron Cohen "Who is America?" or Jimmy Kimmel "News Street Interviews").
    - Ask students to think of a comedian who utilizes all the different types of humor in their skits/shows.

In-Class Activity: Show the class a condensed version of Katie Couric's interview with the 2008 Vice Presidential candidate, Sarah Palin. The instructor may need to provide some context for the issues discussed in the interview, such as the Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac "bailout" that occurred prior to the interview. Watch the first twelve minutes of the clip.
CBS Exclusive: Gov. Sarah Palin: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-ZVh_u5RyiU

Facilitation notes
- Ask students to respond to the interview. On what issues does Palin take a strong stance? Where do you agree or disagree with Palin's points? How do you feel about her interview style?
    - In my experiences, students will react in two primary ways: 1) they struggle to get excited about the topics discussed between Palin and Couric, or 2) they have already formed an opinion of Palin and find the interview to confirm that preexisting belief. You will reflect on these dispositions later in the class.
- Now, watch the SNL parody of the interview. *CBS Evening News: Katie Couric Interviews Sarah Palin—SNL*: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8HsyEvr5Pnw
- After the class initially reacts to the parody, break students into their groups. Guide the groups through the following exercise:
    - Identify moments from the original text (the Couric interview) that were selected and given salience by the Fey-Poehler imitative text. Include phrases, topics, and nonverbals that are imitated in the parody.
    - Ask: How are each of these items repeated? Does the parody mirror Palin's mannerisms and words? In other words, do they provide a "reflection" that uses the existing rhetoric and sentiment? Does the parody "refract" the reality of the interview, what Peifer calls "tweaking, twisting, and exaggerating the original behavior of Palin" (167)? When does the parody "create" a new and meaningful reality that is completely different from the original text?

        ○ Remind students of the frames that Peifer claims to emerge from multiple SNL parodies of Palin including the folksy frame, the female beauty frame, the faith frame, and the competence frame.
- ▪ Ask students to categorize observed items into these frames.

Class Discussion: Reconvene as a whole class and ask students to reflect on their assessment of the original Couric-Palin interview.

Facilitation notes
- Ask: How did this parody help them to make sense of what they were seeing?
- Ask: How have these parodies influenced their existing perception of Palin?
- Ask: After going through the exercise, has their interest in Palin's political influence changed?
  - ○ Point to research that shows that political comedy influences an audience's perception of a politician's competence and/or ability to lead (Baumgartner and Morris 2006; Becker 2012; Becker and Haller 2014).

Preview Day 2: Ask students if their experiences with political humor and these anecdotal instances support research showing humor to improve audience *memory* of presented arguments.

Lecture notes
- You can mention that Greek and Roman orators recognized this benefit of humor (Benacka 2017).
- Ask students to reflect on their reception of the Palin and Fey texts. Do they remember the interview and parody equally well? What parts of the parody stuck with them?
- Show students the online quiz from *The Guardian*, "Spot the Spoof – Who said *that?*"
  - ○ The quiz challenges takers to tell the difference between Palin's words and Fey's comedic interpretation of them. I typically complete this quiz as a class. https://www.theguardian.com/world/quiz/2008/oct/21/sarah-palin-tin-fey-quotes
  - ○ During the quiz is a good time to mention that Fox News used a picture of Fey when talking about Sarah Palin (https://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2011/06/fox-news-tina-fey-sarah-palin/351459/) or provide a more contemporary example, such as when a Dominican Republic newspaper used an image of Alec Baldwin to accompany an article on Donald Trump (https://www.cnn.com/2017/02/12/politics/dominican-newspaper-confuses-baldwin-trump/index.html)

Assign Homework: Have students return to the list they made at the beginning of the class. Ask students to pick one parodic representation of a political figure for their small group to analyze. Imitated presidents, presidential hopefuls, white house correspondents, political activists, international leaders and diplomats, government officials, senators, and representatives work well for this assignment.

Facilitation notes
- At this point, you can ask students to complete the entire Day 2 activity in an online format, due the following class period.
- You can also assign Day 2, Part 1 as homework, then complete Day 2, Part 2 in class (this format works best, in my experiences).
- If you prefer to complete the entire assignment during class time, be sure to assign students the "homework" of watching two or three parodies of their group's chosen political figure before next class period.

Day 2 – "Who Said It?" Activity and Fact-Checking Exercise (Optional*)

Learning Objectives:
1. (Carry over from Day 1) Understand how comedy frames information and influences audiences' sense-making processes
2. (Carry over from Day 1) Analyze the critical distance in parody that generates humor and articulate the differences between original and imitative texts
3. Consider the role of intertextuality in political parody
4. Develop a process for fact-checking comedic sources

In-Class Activity (Part 1): This activity applies Peifer's (2013) framework to other parodic texts, allowing students to update the discussion to issues and people more relevant to their interests. To complete Part 1, groups work through the following steps and present their findings to the class in an informal presentation. Instructors can modify the list below into a student handout.

Facilitation notes
- Construct a list of the imitative texts of a political figure that each member watched for homework. Spend a few minutes making sure that everyone in the group has seen the same videos.
- Take 10-15 minutes to "catch up" on clips that members may have missed. Students can watch the clips from their phones or computers using earphones.
- Identify an original text that inspired at least one of the parodies the group watched. As a group, find articles and clips that help to contextualize the original event.
    - Ask: Did the president give a press conference that was imitated by Jimmy Fallon? Was there a televised Senate hearing that Trevor Noah criticized? Did SNL re-enact a Democratic primary debate?
    - Compare the original and imitative text.
        - Ask: How are phrases, exchanges, and nonverbals repeated and given salience?
        - This analysis should focus on the group's chosen political figure, but also consider the entirety of the event on the meaning of the performance.

- Return to the collection of parodies generated by the group. Discuss what is intertextual about these performances (e.g., mannerisms, language choices, topics).
  - Ask: When do the actresses/actors implicitly or explicitly reference other events or texts?
- Identify at least two frames that exist across the chosen parodies.
  - Ask: Write out examples of the different ways these frames are reinforced in the parodies.
  - Ask: What are these frames doing? Are they creating, refracting, or reflecting a reality about this politician? What do you think is the potential or actual effect of this framing on public opinion of the political figure?

In-Class Activity (Part 2): In the second half of the class period (approximately 30 minutes), task students with writing a "Who Said It?" quiz similar to the Fey-Palin quiz in *The Guardian* introduced during Day 1. Students should aim for five questions.

1. First, isolate five quotes from the parodies.
2. Next, research whether or not the politician actually spoke those words. Students can verify by viewing and comparing the quotes to the original text and by using fact-checking sites such as Snopes.com, Reported.ly, PolitiFact.com, and FactCheck.org.
3. Write the findings into the quiz. First, present the quote. Then, ask "Who said it?" The possible answers to this question should be 1) the political person, 2) the parodic representation of the political person, and 3) both.

Informal Presentations and Closing Discussion: Allow each group to orally present their quiz. The audience should answer the quiz questions on a sheet of paper before sharing their answers as a class.

Facilitation notes
- Each group presents where they found their information and addresses whether or not the "fake" quotes reinforce the two frames they identified in their collection of parodies. The group shares with the class the differences they found between the original and imitative texts they studied.
- If you run out of time on Day 2, the quizzes can be electronically completed and/or discussed online as homework.

Day 3 – Entertaining Echo Chambers

Learning Objectives:
1. Clarify how the echo chamber effect amplifies perspectives and ideologies
2. Understand how late-night comedy influences political discussions
3. Explore the cumulative effect of humor on public discourse

Read (Optional):

Robert S. Lichter, Jody C. Baumgartner, and Jonathan S. Moris. 2015. "Introduction: Politics is a Funny Business" and "Political Humor: Prospect and Retrospect." In *Politics is a Joke!: How Comedians are Remaking Political Life*, 1-18 and 205-217. Boulder: Westview Press.

Opening Discussion: The Lichter, Baumgartner, and Moris (2015) reading provides students a framework for this day's lesson. The authors focus on late-night comedy, but situate their study within a rich history of political humor and in conversation with broad findings, interests, effects of political humor on public discourse. If you choose to assign the reading, begin class by discussing memorable moments in political history discussed by the authors such as Thomas Nast's political cartoons or Bill Clinton's appearance on the Arsenio Hall Show. These examples are effective at gaining the students' attention and framing the day's activities.

Facilitation notes
- In the introductory chapter, the authors argue that late-night comedy creates an echo chamber effect. Ask students to add to this claim with their own experiences.
    - Potential questions for students include: In what context have you heard the term "echo chamber effect" discussed? Where have you seen the echo chamber effect at play in your own social media feeds? How do you guard against hearing your own ideas bounced back to you? How do algorithms and filter bubbles contribute to the echo chamber effect?
- This discussion should be an ongoing conversation throughout the semester in any media or political course and feel free to "bookmark" topics to return to at a later date.
- Remind students of the list of comedians they made on Day 1.
    - Ask: What do they like (or dislike) about these comedians? Who are they likely to search on YouTube to watch? Ask students to reflect on how they seek out and retrieve political comedy. At least a few students in the class will "follow" one of these comedians.

In-Class Activity: Divide students into groups of four or five people. Students will walk through the following steps in order to trace an echo chamber amplified by political comedians. Instructors can modify the list below into a student handout.
1. Identify a recent issue or event that circulated through multiple late-night or online comedy shows. For the sake of time, the instructor may want to share a list of events from which students can choose. For example, in Fall of 2018, my Political Communication course analyzed the Nike Ad featuring Colin Kaepernick, Brett Kavanaugh testimonies, and Trump's presidential text. In Fall of 2019, we focused on the impeachment probe of President Trump.
2. Find an original source that shows how this issue/event started, or as close to original as possible. Students need to see how the issue/event was presented *prior* to late-night critiques of it. The group members must agree on the "facts" of the situation.
3. Then, each student researches one comedian on their phone/computer who joked about this issue/event (e.g., Noah, Kimmel, Colbert, Handler, Fallon, Minhaj, Maher,

Miller, Ferguson, Wilmore, Oliver, Meyers, Bee, Corden, etc...). This part of the activity should take approximately twenty minutes to complete.

4. The students share how their comedian framed the event and the group looks for reoccurring themes among their texts. Does a dominate frame emerge? How does each comic support their interpretation? What evidence do they provide? What does the comedian assume the audience believes to the true? What gets exaggerated or emphasized in their interpretation? What gets left out?

5. Finally, the group spends a few minutes searching online for memes or hashtags related to this issue/event to find "evidence" that others have adopted this way of framing the issue/event.

General Discussion: Reconvene as a class and ask each group to discuss the implications of their informal research.

Facilitation notes

▪ Lichter, Baumgartner, and Moris argue that "comic stereotypes" of political speakers emerge from the late-night comedy echo chamber (206).
   ○ Ask students what stereotypes they encountered in this study. Were the stereotypes unique to the politicians or a recycled "evergreen" joke that doesn't "grow stale over time" (206). What do you think is the potential or actual effect of this framing on public opinion of the issue/event? How does this framing effect *you* (for better or for worse)? Spend some time discussing the effect of echo chambers on public discussion and disposition. Do echo chambers distort information? Do they reduce complex issues to simple punchlines? Or, conversely, do they deepen a conversation? Do they allow for a more sustained analysis of a problem?

▪ *Politics is a Joke* may seem outdated to students who watch political comedy on YouTube, only.
   ○ Ask students to reflect on the relevance of the authors' closing thoughts on more contemporary shows. For example, how do comedy shows, like *Between Two Ferns*, afford politicians opportunities to laugh at themselves or present a "human side" to an audience (209)? Which comedians seem to be participating in "real politics" by attempting to influence elections and promote certain political policies (212)?
   ○ Point out the enduring (and sometimes predictable) role of humor in U.S. political rituals.

▪ At this point, students typically want to discuss the "liberal bias" of the political comedy they just viewed. To engage in this conversation, return to the original discussion of humor types.

▪ Research shows that satire suits the philosophy of liberalism "to question everything" and to challenge power structures (Dagnes 2012, 5).
   ○ Ask students to consider how the *form* of humor used lends itself to certain ideological stances. Are all comics liberal or does comedy itself work well with liberal critiques of power? If satire dominates liberal comedy, then what comedic

form best delivers conservative ideologies? Why are there so few conservative comics?

- o In a political communication class, this discussion is an excellent segue into a section on conservative talk radio, the role of journalism in democracy, or for-profit conservative and liberal entertainment complexes.

Author Biography

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