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Satirical News and Political Subversiveness: A Critical Approach to The Daily Show and The Colbert Report

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Arts degree in Media Studies

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by

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Abstract

Television shows like *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* are often venerated for their satirical criticisms of mainstream media and for their pedagogical value as critical resources for political consciousness. The programs are said to provide interrogations of contemporary forms of power while fostering more active, collaborative and politically engaged audiences. This thesis interrogates such claims by introducing a critical reading of the shows. It engages in dialogue with scholars working within a Culturalist approach to media and politics by demonstrating the importance of a Marxist-inspired approach to the study of satire news. Attention is given to the political-economy of satirical programming with a specific focus on its kinship with mainstream news media. Equal consideration is given to the programs' branding strategies, including savvy forms of 'cool' consumption and the commodification and exploitation of online fan-labor that increasingly complicate the shows' pedagogical value.

Keywords

critical theory, Media Studies, political economy, *The Daily Show*, *The Colbert Report*, fandom, cool, new media, branding, exploitation

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Introduction

In 2004, Jon Stewart of Comedy Central's *The Daily Show* (TDS) appeared on CNN's *Crossfire* with conservative Tucker Carlson and liberal Paul Begala and criticized the hosts for being "partisan hacks" while pleading that they "stop hurting America." The 14-minute segment was an instant viral sensation; 10 years later, it has garnered more than 8 million online views (Crossfire 2004). In 2008, fellow political satirist Stephen Colbert from *The Colbert Report* (TCR) received the "Webby Person of the Year" award for "recognition of his pioneering role in utilizing the Internet as a significant tool for interaction with fans of 'The Colbert Report'. . . . Colbert embodies the true participatory spirit of the Web" (Who's Honoring Stephen Now? 2008). The 'Webby' is presented by the International Academy of Digital Arts and Sciences (IADAS), a judging body which includes "executive members, leading Web experts, business figures, luminaries, visionaries and creative celebrities" (Webby 2015). The award, which honors 'excellence on the Internet', was given to Colbert for prompting a 'Google-bomb' campaign that same year, a technique used to manipulate search results by deliberately cross-linking certain words to certain websites, making colbertnation.com the first hit for those searching for 'greatest living American' (McCarthy 2007a). The host also incited Wikipedia vandalism when he encouraged his legion of fans to intentionally falsify different entries on the site. The mass collaboration was meant in part as a commentary on the constructed reality made possible by peer-to-peer information resources. The comic also started the "1,000,000 Strong for Stephen Colbert" Facebook group as part of his fake presidential run; the online rally became what might have been the fastest-growing Facebook group to date reaching over 1 million followers within a week of its creation (McCarthy 2007b). Finally, in 2010, Colbert and Stewart teamed up for the "Rally to Restore Sanity and/or Fear" on the Washington Mall. The media event drew close to 215,000 people, consisting of various musical and comedic acts interspersed with Stewart's call for his audience to both enjoy the entertainment and become politically engaged.

These examples evoke the central themes that this thesis sets out to explore: Do satirical news programs provide critical interrogations of contemporary forms of power? And do satirical news programs foster more active, collaborative and politically engaged

audiences by modeling this kind of critique? The explosion of Satire TV as a tremendously prolific genre of programming in the last decade parallels other forms of mass-customized programming like Reality TV and coincides with the evolving role of television in an age of technological, economic and cultural convergence (Gray et al. 2009). But while the convergence of interactive digital technologies, the proliferation of channel availability, growing forms of mass customization and the increasing competition for fragmented audiences has placed rising pressures on the production of flexible, hybrid and polysemic forms of programming like Satire TV, the democratic and political implications of these developments are highly contested.

The valorization of satirical news programs has become something of a small cottage industry in recent academic publishing within Cultural and Media studies. Many scholars in these fields have argued for the legitimacy of this cultural form as an important site of critical-democratic agency and as an index of oppositional culture (McKain 2005; Boler 2006; Jenkins 2006; Gray et al. 2009; Waisanen 2009; Jones 2010; Baym 2010; Day 2011; Van Heertrum 2011; Baym and Jones 2012). Such programming is said to provide more critical, deliberative and inclusive forms of participation conducive to a new public sphere. Exactly what sorts of claims are being made for the critical function of this genre in today's media environment? How have these scholars posited its role as a stimulating critique of political spin and media spectacle? In what ways are these claims linked to their distribution in digital form and circulation in online participatory communities? As a guiding thread of this research, these questions ultimately get at two related concerns: the role of satire news as a form of media critique and simultaneously, its role as a *pedagogy* of media critique. The notion of 'critique' continues to play an important role in scholarly claims about the value of satirical news. The cultural form has been described as a type of "immanent social critique", a "sociopolitical critique", an "epistemological critique", a deconstructive critique and even a tepid form of Marxist critique (Tally 2011: 151, Morreale 2009: 105, Jones 2013: 400, Jones 2010: 20). At the same time, by allegedly providing a platform for critical discussion and open debate they are linked to the broader distribution of discursive resources that, through the auspices of digital technologies, facilitates the "conversation of democracy" (Baym 2010: 174). To hear some of the more cheerful scholarly accounts, one would think that a

millennial generation of savvy super citizens is leading the march towards new forms of collaborative critique and democratic engagement.

This research critically assesses such claims in two parts. First, it identifies the conceptual underpinnings of the literature in question and argues that it is idealistic, culturally reductive and technologically deterministic. Second, it demonstrates the applicability and necessity of a Marxist-inspired approach to the study of satire news by historicizing the cultural form and assessing its critical function. Such an approach is informed by the analysis of media, communication and culture in "the context of domination, asymmetrical power relations, exploitation, oppression and control as object of study" (Fuchs 2011: 97). A critical and integrated perspective thus seeks to emphasize the necessary interconnectedness of various social spheres like the economy, politics, culture and the public sphere, while insisting that meaning-making practices must be understood in relation to their material conditions. This case study demonstrates how a cultural 'object' like satire news is always embedded in an expression of larger social processes. Attention is given to the political-economy of satirical programming with a specific focus on its kinship with mainstream news media. Equal consideration is given to the programs' branding strategies, including savvy forms of 'cool' consumption and the commodification and exploitation of online fan-labor that increasingly complicate the shows' pedagogical value.

Chapter 1 provides a brief and preliminary introduction to satirical news with a specific focus on TDS and TCR. It then reviews the claims made for these programs as salient forms of contemporary critique and as critical-pedagogical tools for engaged citizens. It details the specific *form* this critique takes from the perspective of oppositional politics in order to contextualize and better assess its contribution to public discourse. Chapters 2 and 3 provide the theoretical and methodological context of this research by mapping two perspectives on culture, media and politics in the relevant scholarship. Chapter 2 situates the claims made for satire news theoretically and details some of their foundational assumptions about the relation between ICTs, public sphere theory and democratic dissent. Chapter 3 defends a critical Marxist perspective, arguing that the theory and method provides a more nuanced approached to the study of cultural forms. In doing so, it also seeks to confront the

caricatures of this approach in the literature on satire news, which for the most part has been quick to dismiss and downplay its potential contribution (Gray 2006; Jones 2010; Day 2011; Van Heertrum 2011). Importantly, it argues that judging the critical and democratic role of a cultural form like Satire TV *requires* an integrated approach; the latter is, as Beverley Best suggests, "the test, [...] the kind of ground against which our more declarative statements on the culture of advanced capitalism will be measured" (Best 2012: 201). Chapter 4 then historicizes satirical news and assesses its critical potential based on this framework.

1 Poking Holes in the Spectacle: Satire News and Oppositional Culture

1.1 A Brief Introduction to Satire News

Comedy Central, the network that hosts both TDS and TCR, was formed in 1991 by the merger of two competing channels owned by media giants Time-Warner and Viacom (Reeves et al. 2007: 89; Gray et al. 2009: 25). Like many new cable channels, it initially relied on inexpensive original programming (brief film clips, taped stand-up shows) and syndicated content, but after the Time-Warner and Viacom merger the network schedule was dominated mostly by re-purposed content (Reeves et al. 2007: 89). There was an obvious economic imperative to this practice: re-purposing previously taped specials or stand-up shows was cheap, not to mention the relatively inexpensive cost of taping live comedy skits (Reeves et al. 2007: 90). Despite its small success by the mid-1990's, Comedy Central still lacked a clear and established brand identity marketable to cable operators. For some scholars, a key development in the late 1990s and early 2000s provided the network with the opportunity to build its brand as the top comedy destination in the US. The network began to develop satirical programming based on politics and current events. It launched shows like Bill Maher's *Politically Incorrect* in 1993 and in 1996 TDS made its television debut featuring ESPN sports news anchor Craig Kilborn.

At the time, the show's content was mostly focused on celebrity promotion and the entertainment industry more generally. The program's format was similar to most evening talk shows, with sketches and comedy skits, a monologue from the host and an interview segment with a chosen guest. In 1998, Kilborn left the program and Jon Stewart become host of the show in 1999. The 22-minute episodes quickly took on their now recognizable political content, relying on parodied news formats to offer innovative and intelligent programming. Each episode also included an informal interview segment with

Stewart; guests ranged from well-known celebrities and public officials to journalists, scholars and authors. In 2003, Time-Warner was bought out for $1.22 billion by Viacom and Comedy Central became part of Viacom's MTV networks division (Reeves et al. 2007: 93). With the increasing popularity of Stewart's show, the network was actively looking for similar programming to follow it in order to attract similar audience demographics for a full hour. Stephen Colbert, who began as a correspondent on *TDS* was given his own spin-off show in 2005 where his parody of an arrogant right-wing Conservative pundit (read Bill O'Reily) offered ironic over-the-top rants about current events and interviews with public figures. *TDS* was slotted in at 11:00pm four nights a week in the U.S. and Canada on cable television, followed by *TCR* at 11:30pm (EST).

Since it began to receive scholarly notice in the early 2000s, the critical attention gained by both *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* has been split. Pundits and scholars from different schools of thought have made much of the genre's supposedly debilitating effects on civic life, with many suggesting that they produce cynical, anti-political and alienated citizens (Hart & Hartelius 2007; Baumgartner and Morris 2006, 2008, 2011). Critics often fault satirical news shows for their candidness, their use of vernacular discourse to discuss current events, but most importantly, for their alleged mockery of serious issues (Morin 2006; Samuels 2010). Most of these arguments have already been substantially critiqued by the scholars I have chosen to focus on in this study.[1] Therefore, my starting point is to assume that there are good reasons to take satire news seriously and to interrogate the claims made regarding the genre's critical role in public discourse. Crucially, I argue that describing what I refer to as the 'critical function' of satire news requires understanding the genre as both a form of media critique and a pedagogy of critique. The argument of this chapter relies on the fact that these modalities of critique are mutually reinforcing, that is, from the perspective of the literature in question, it is difficult to speak of one without invoking the other. I argue that the two modes of critique are used by scholars to legitimize and justify the other. I will show how

[1] For instance, Gournelos (2009); Jones (2010); Baym (2010); Day (2011)

the programs' generic and tactical features are used to legitimize its critical-pedagogical potential through the auspices of digital media and at the same time, how the genre's resonance with actively engaged online communities becomes a signifier of the programs' importance as a site of social critique. I focus primarily on the work of three scholars, Jeffery Jones (2010, 2013), Geoffrey Baym (2010) and Amber Day (2011), although I draw on others (Jenkins 2006; Gray 2006, 2009; and Gournelos 2009) when necessary.

1.2 Interrogating Power

A common claim made by those defending the critical potential of satirical news is that such programs offer a discursive space – a subversive 'outsider' position – that enables a sustained critique of dominant media narratives and their symbiotic relation to the daily operations of politics and news reporting. In this section, I outline three related ways in which some scholars mobilize the critical function of satire news: 1) as a type of media and political critique; 2) as a constructive critique that enacts a model of democratic deliberation and 3) as an epistemological critique of dominant right-wing discourses. These claims have in common that they assume that recognizing how mediated appearances are constructed by a spectacularized political and media industry is *necessarily* critical and democratic. The subsequent section then discusses the genre's *form* and the tactical work that it produces in the contemporary media environment.

The promise of satire news is in part, predicated on the assumption that it functions as a critique of news media and political spin. Satirical programming has proved to be a source for "the routine challenge, contestation, and rebuke of political and media power" often providing a challenge to the "news media's regime of truth" and its largely "uncontested authority and license from which [it] operates as the arbiters of truth and reality in regards to political life" (Jones 2013: 397). By 'regime of truth', Jones has in mind the work of Michel Foucault, who argued that every society harbours discourses that "function as true; [...] mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true from false, [...] techniques and procedures which are valorized for obtaining truth [and] the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true" (Jones 2010). According to Jones, the news media are the primary arbiters of truth that set limits on

what counts as valid. However they are increasingly coming under pressure from different sources and forms of political information. This claim speaks to satirical programming's level of critical engagement; according to the argument, their critiques simultaneously respond "to the *structure* of the news as well as the *content* of the news" (Gournelos 2009: 154). Programs like TDS and TCR often poke fun at specific media follies, but they also implicitly critique *how* those follies are constructed and reproduced on a consistent basis.

'Fake news' shows provide "a thoroughgoing social *critique* of the media", displaying a "*critical* disdain" for mainstream news" and ultimately attacking it for its "poor performance and for being more of glossy show" (Tally 2011: 151; Gray et al. 2009: 18). As Baym argues, it is the "disinterest in the real, the construction of televisual spectacle at the expense of accurate understanding for which the parody pieces most criticize mainstream news" (Baym 2010: 114). If these "brutal critiques" target news media that "routinely craft, construe, and convey, the 'realities' of political life" they also extend to "the world of politics" where they provide scathing commentary on the public relations spectacle that often passes for reasoned debate (Jones 2013: 397). Satirical news programs thus 'unmask' or 'debunk' the artificial and manipulative nature of political and media spectacles. They are not simply, as Amber Day suggests, a form of mimicry, but rather they "act as comedically critical filters through which to process the suspect real world of reportage and debate" (Day 2011: 86). Ultimately, the programs "play a diagnostic function, identifying much that is wrong with news in its current form" (Baym 2010: 115). The thrust of these claims is that, in relying on satire as a way into public discussion, these 'fake news' shows can penetrate the chaos of contemporary public discourse and offer substantial critiques and forms of accountability.

Stewart and Colbert's critiques of the media's 'regime of truth' are also epistemological critiques, that is they challenge "right-wing discourse that [have all but] abdicated factual evidence (Baym 2009: 126, Jones and Baym 2010: 286). It is after all, useful for those in power to thoroughly debunk deliberation, dismantle truth claims and thus neutralize the possibility for critique. In this sense, part of the important

contributions made by satirical news shows, is "their absolute refusal to approach such attacks on truth with a straight face" (Jones and Baym 2010: 285). On the one hand, Stewart parses what conservative networks like Fox News churn out as 'facts' and exposes them as "highly ideological [i.e. partisan] version of the day's event's" that masquerade as established truths (Jones and Baym 2010: 286). On the other hand, by parodying the "lunacy, bombast and irrationality of the far-right's most important voices" Colbert lays bare the poverty of what often passes for reasoned deliberation. It is no wonder that 'truthiness', his term for "the substitution of emotion for rational thinking, of the valuation and celebration of perception, certainty, and feeling irrespective of the facts" is his program's "thesis statement" (Jones and Baym 2010: 287). It is in this sense that Jones and Baym argue that Stewart and Colbert are seeking to "uncover the real behind [the] fakery" of media narratives and as such, their critiques are meant to confront a "fundamental epistemological challenge being waged by the far-right" (Jones and Baym: 288). This critique is also an implicit demand for accountability, which renders the programs more authentic or sincere than the usual decontextualized and cobbled-together spin of media rhetoric.

The academic defense of satirical news also endorses the genre as a democratic watchdog. While news media continue to be the central institution with the mandate of both monitoring the conduct of government and facilitating the dissemination of accurate information, Stewart's brand of satirical reporting mounts a "persistent, penetrating, and much needed critique" of the latter's failure to live up to the task (Jones 2010: 235). As another commentator argues, they provide a "sociopolitical critique that collapses the distinctions between news, politics, and entertainment" and a "constructive critique" of democratic processes that mimics traditional news' 'watchdog' function; the two are simultaneous (Morreale 2009: 105, 113). The key claim is the extent to which the rhetorical and aesthetic form of the programs – their combination of cheeky political commentary, with the occasional scatological reference, blending the "mimetic and the real" and blurring the boundaries between 'traditional' and 'fake' news – allows the programs to challenge and interrogate contemporary forms of power (Day 2011: 43).

It is significant then, that the success of satire's critical interventions is predicated on its use of "humour as the license to confront political dissembling and misinformation and to demand a measure of accountability" (Baym 2010:111). On the surface, satirical news is marked by a postmodern "border-crossing hybridity" blending "information and entertainment, politics and pop culture, and reasoned conversation with spectacle" (Jones and Baym 2010: 281). The shows, although having the appearance of pastiche, actually exhibit "quite a modernist agenda, a critique of news and an interrogation of political power that rests on a firm belief in fact, accountability, and reason in public discourse" (Jones and Baym 2010: 281). TDS and TCR are thus Trojan horses for rational-critical deliberation operating under the facade of a depthless postmodern pastiche. Thus the appearance of a detached irony belies the substance of their critique and ignores "their ability to dig deep and not only show the manipulative nature of politicians [...] but the ways in which the mainstream media fails to do its job" (Heertrum 2011: 129). Fake news shows like TDS and TCR not only "introduce oppositional perspectives through comedy and satire" but they also "speak truth to power" and demand a measure of accountability (Foy 2008: 13). This point is made explicit in Day's work when she argues that the "blend of satire and political nonfiction enables and articulates a critique of the inadequacies of contemporary political discourse, while demonstrating an engaged commitment to the possibility of a more honest public debate (Day 2011: 43). The critical 'strength' of parodic news shows is thus the way in which they use comedy and satire for rational and deliberative purposes and ultimately, how they operate as a check on power. The programs may foster audience discussion and encourage alternative viewpoints, but they also enact a model of deliberative democratic discourse.

The Aesthetics of Critique and The Tactics of Satire News

In order to assess and judge the claims made for the critical function of satire news, it is necessary to be clear on the *type* of work this critique is meant to accomplish in public discourse. What aesthetic motifs does it rely upon and what sorts of oppositional tactics best describes its political interventions? I will argue that the methods employed towards oppositional tactics are simultaneously used to legitimize satire news

as a pedagogy of critique; the two in this case are mutually reinforcing claims that need to be understood together. Satirical television itself is not new and there is of course much to be gained by situating the programs in the context of longstanding traditions of confronting forms of power through comedic deconstruction and parody. In this respect, Jones, Baym and Gray argue that what distinguishes the current cultural landscape, is both the proclivity towards satirical forms of programming and their resonance (Gray et al. 2009: 19-28). This cultural resonance is, according to their argument, more obvious today in part because of the media environment in which the genre can thrive. Moreover, there are important cultural continuities in the function of satire that make it possible to delineate its common tactics of denaturalizing the familiar through humor. The concern of this work is the extent to which such forms of subversion are increasingly colonized for hegemonic purposes.

Both Stewart and Colbert – albeit in different ways – operate by "over identifying with the subject or discourse as a way of breaking traditional interpretive frames" and are thus capable of turning "hegemonic discourses upon themselves" (Jones and Baym 2013: 12). TDS relies substantially on the selection and editing of news footage, or what is referred to by Jones and others as 'critical redaction'. Redaction means editing, and the selective editing of news video is central to the show's commentary and humor. Critical redaction draws on theories of intertextuality and performativity where the aim is to extract "elements of established culture and rearrange them for a new or altered purpose" (Gournelos 2009: 20). These critiques are commonly expressed and increasingly popularized through forms of 'culture jamming'. Indeed for many, the program functions as a form of "political culture jamming" used to disseminate "dissident images with messages designed to provoke [...] a type of *détournement* or *subversion*" of dominant hegemonic representation (Warner 2007: 22).

For Jones and several others, the implicit assumption made by satire news is that "commercial media inhibits [sic] audiences' ability to see interconnections, cumulate information, organize it into patterns, and draw conclusions about actions and consequences within the social system." (Jones 2010: 126). The impetus behind

oppositional tactics like culture jamming is to draw those connections and to use parody and irony as a way of turning forms of mass culture against itself. It is for this reason that some have argued that satire news embodies a form of "immanent social critique"; they adopt a standard critical procedure that tries to demystify the behind-the-scenes functioning of the media by using the latter's own operating procedures (Tally 2011: 151). Satire news thus mobilizes "incoherent or absurd aspects of dominant culture in order to make a sustained, powerful critique of the dominant more feasible" (Gournelos 2009: 28). The programs mine the "raw materials provided by the average cable TV system" and deploy them to expose lies, political inconsistencies and rhetorical contradictions (Baym 2010: 106). Ultimately, they perform a type of "*critical* deconstruction" of dominant media and political discourses (Jones 2013: 400). Thus, there is a critical and aesthetic motif of 'unmasking' and 'debunking', one which enables "an audience, a community, [or] a polity, to recognize the naked emperor and, through their laughter, begin to see realities that have been obscured." (Gray et al. 2009: 17).

A further point reiterated often by Jones is that TDS's critique is made explicit by stringing together video montages of contradictory or outright dishonest moments from public figures. The cobbled-together 'texts' immanently *produce*, new and alternative discourses. As Jones puts it, "in these mashups, Stewart no longer narrates the video, but instead lets the artistry of creative and critical redaction do the talking for him" (Jones 2010: 126). The key claim made by both Baym and Jones is that, this type of critique is not just a negation of dominant discourses; the crux of the argument is the idea that redaction constructs new material from 'established' discourses. As Jones puts it quoting media scholar John Hartley, "redaction should be seen as a productive, not reductive process (Jones 2010:116).

Drawing on Hartley, Jones argues that "redaction is the creation of something new and meaningful from existing materials" (Jones 2010:116). Accordingly, it is through this redactive process that TDS is "engaged in a form of constructing 'news', and in turn, reporting something that is 'new'" (Jones 2010: 116). This redactive feature comes part and parcel with its 'watchdog' function, that is, "an alternative form of news reporting is

located in the redacted video itself" and thus "it is here where Stewart changes the conversation from accommodation and spectacle to confrontation and accountability. (Jones 2010: 117) In other words, TDS processes "the extant materials into new forms, offering a different means through which such materials should be viewed and processed" (Jones 2010: 128). The edited video content, coupled with Stewart's running commentary, are an attempt to "hold the powerful accountable by exposing their lies, demonstrating their propaganda techniques, and challenging their rhetoric" (Jones 2010:114).

1.3 A Pedagogy of Critique

In his description of what he describes as "experiments in convergence", Baym argues that the critical benefit of satire news is not simply its ability to interrogate forms of power, but also its role as a pedagogy of critique. What exactly is meant by 'experiments in convergence'? Some claims relating to Henry Jenkins' (2006) 'convergence culture' will be critically examined in the following chapter. For now, it suffices to note that, 'convergence' is an umbrella term that describes "technological, industrial, cultural, and social changes in the ways media circulates within our culture" (Jenkins 2006: 282). It is meant to index new textual practices characterized by the flow of media content across multiple platforms and collaborative audience behaviors that coexist with "multiple media systems" and "multiple media industries" in a mutually beneficial relation (Jenkins 2006: 282). Drawing on Jenkins, Day argues that fragmenting audiences into niche markets ultimately, allows for the possibility of developing controversial material like satire news, which is characterized by targeted, specialised and "intensive narrative investment" (Day 2011: 53). Following Yochai Benkler, Baym grounds his claims about satirical news in the assumption that "the driving engine in new media is not so much mass appeal but rather deep engagement among a narrow and highly committed subset of people" (Baym 2010: 149). According to Day, these niche media markets "are increasingly based on irony, parody, skepticism, and 'TV-literate' critical reading protocols", which rely on and construct both a "television that is self-aware" and media-savvy audiences (Day 2011: 53). Programs like *TDS* and *TCR*, so the argument goes, interrogate forms of power while critiquing the status quo, but they also provide their

audiences "with models of how to construct *critical* texts", (Baym 2010: 152). In this sense, they become pedagogical tools, 'critical maps' that orient and represent dissenting voices; this position which hastily conflates forms of textual deconstruction with democratic accountability is echoed in much of the literature.

Satire news' brand of parodic/satiric humor is, by definition, not prescriptive, but diagnostic. In other words, rather than offer political alternatives, they function as "guide[s] through the morass of political hype [...] highlighting the artifice of contemporary political discourse" (Warner 2007: 37). Jenkins suggests that the shows "challenge viewers to look for signs of fabrication" and where "news is something to be discovered through active hashing through of competing accounts rather than something to be digested from authoritative sources" (Jenkins 2006: 227). Jenkins reiterates this point in another piece, arguing that TDS and TCR, "foster a kind of civic literacy, teaching viewers to ask *skeptical* questions about core political values and the rhetorical process that embody them" (Jenkins 2009: 203). Meanwhile, in his dialogue with Baym, Jones suggests that satire news offers "the tools to think more critically about various speakers' claims and the intentions that lie behind them" (Jones and Baym 2010: 287). He also argues in a later work that the programs "offer lessons in how to pay critical attention to rhetorical language that politicians use for repetition and amplification across media outlets" (Jones 2010: 123). Gray et al. argue that "parody can *become* an important contributor to political discourse, encouraging critical viewing and a healthy cynicism about the mediation of politics" (Gray et al. 2009: 18). Morreale argues that the forms of provocative inquiry exhibited by satire news "foster critical thinking and invite evaluation of aspects of the social and political world that might otherwise remain unquestioned" (Morreale 2009: 107). Ultimately, they function as a primer in "rhetorical criticism" (Waisanen 2009).

At root, these claims equate recognizing the constructed nature of media representations and political rhetoric as necessarily critical and democratic, but in this case, with the added claim that the satirical genre is teaching citizens *how* to do so. As Baym puts it, the programs "offer a deconstruction of the day's bullshit that asks the

audience to be skeptical of what passes for communication in our discursive landscape" (Jones and Baym 2010: 287). Audiences privy to TDS and TCR, he argues, are led to "question just who is guarding the henhouse, and what role television news media play in distracting the public's attention from sources of power that can do real harm, both political and economic" (Jones 2010: 235-236)

The notion that satire news can function as a 'guide' is a telling descriptor. It suggests a form of mapping, one way of representing and orientating audiences in an increasingly fragmented and chaotic media landscape. This claim is important, because it not only suggests that TDS and TCR provide the means or 'tools' by which to learn and mimic a type of media critique, but that by extension, they are helping to "shift the public's role in the political process" (Jenkins 2006: 208). Underlying this claim is the figure of the citizen journalist-albeit with an ironic twist-whereby hoards of devoted fans are now equipped with the critical wherewithal to navigate and assess competing media narratives in the public sphere. The sheer amount of news and information available to both TDS and TCR is, according to the authors, evidence of the declining (or changing) role of "traditional news outlets in filtering the flow of news" (Baym 2010: 106). In a culture of convergence, where the diversity, availability, and accessibility of information is in perpetual circulation, TDS and TCR have taken the mantel of critical compasses for savvy audiences refusing to be duped by mainstream media. Programs like *TDS* and *TCR* are thus said to provide "good training grounds for monitorial citizens", who can develop "new *critical* skills in assessing information" (Jenkins 2006: 227). By monitorial citizen, Jenkins has in a mind a "collaborative concept" that is meant to capture a form of collective accountability where citizens "monitor situations" and access knowledge on a "need-to-know basis" (Jenkins 2006: 227)

'Sorting Out Order from the Chaos'

For many scholars, the success, resonance, and ultimately the critical impact of satirical news is exacerbated by its extension into and convergence with new media technologies. TDS and TCR have been completely integrated into mobile cross-platform

developments and are streamed online both through Comedy Central's official site and independent streaming. Clips from both shows are easily and widely circulated through platforms like YouTube or aggregated and shared using the shows' Facebook and Twitter pages, where fans are then redirected to Comedy Central's home site. In this "age of networked social media" as Baym puts it, the critical phenomenon of satirical news is "amplified as people are able to e-mail links to TDS and TCR, post clips to Facebook pages, and embed segments on personal and organizational blogs" (Jones and Baym 2010: 290). Or as Day puts it more succinctly, technology has made satirical critique "easy" (Day 2011:24). More to the point, it is both the satirical genre itself which favors this type of seamless integration and the internet's proclivity towards editing, mixing, mashups and other redactive techniques. Thus, while the genre provides intensive audience investment, it does so in an efficient and self-contained manner that allows the content segments of the shows-usually ranging from thirty seconds to eight minutes-to be easily repurposed. The crux of the argument rests on this repurposed content since "what starts on television [...] becomes on the Internet a node within a wider network of information and discussion, one an interested audience can use as a launching point for deeper exploration" (Baym 2010: 146,150). The incessant circulation of critical *content* in digital networks produces a *form* of critical-democratic inquiry, where an index of civic engagement is the participation in online communities that encourage skeptical and inquisitive discourses that challenge and interrogate power structures.

Satirical news programs are also tendentially critical because they fit neatly with emerging paradigms of online collaboration and engaged fanship. As Day suggests, email inboxes, Facebook updates and the internet more generally are "a crucial component of the success of the majority of satirists" (Day 2011: 24). It is, as she continues, "relatively simple to create a variety of pointed ironic commentaries on media discourses as it unfolds" (Ibid). Jones seconds this point when he argues that, "citizens [...] are now empowered to participate in the production of political video content— repurposing news interviews or other 'serious' political content for their own political critiques and commentaries through video mash-ups and other remediated materials" (Jones 2010: 13). Audiences for satirical news programs display a "level of engagement and imbrications"

by interacting with their favorite texts, creating "their own paratexts", and crafting "their own social commentaries, often drawing on irony to do so" (Day 2011: 27). The point however, is that in an increasingly crowded media environment, "redaction has become a primary means through which citizens begin to sort out order from [the] chaos" and that "combined with the power of digital technologies, [...] we have even become a redactional society."(Jones 2010: 116).

Again, what has accelerated the genre's integration into cross platform mobile development is not simply its *content*, but equally "its grasp of emergent media *communities*" (Gournelos 2009: 161). The satirical performance is, according to Day, "tailored to this new media universe and makes use of the new technologies as tools of critique and commentary" (Day 2011: 26). Evidence for this can be inferred from the fact that "there is a growing body of fans who revel in reading the news ironically, in parodically poking fun at the straight news media, and in knowingly laughing at the flawed nature of contemporary public discourse" (Day 2011: 86). More to the point, the tactics of satirists are, accordingly, the tactics of critical fans: in online discursive spaces, editing, parodic or ironic juxtaposition, video mashups, forms of redactive cross-examination are all methods of actively "hashing through" competing narratives (Jenkins 2006: 227). What matters then, is not just the critical content, but "the ways in which media convergence allows parody to iterate outside and beyond the scope of the text itself" (Gournelos 2009: 162)". As Baym puts it, Stewart and Colbert "become discursive resources, raw materials to be reappropriated in a new kind of public sphere" (Baym 2010: 194). In other words, the genre's rhetorical features (redaction, parodic overidentification) are used to legitimize its critical potential through the auspices of digital technologies.

2 Perspectives on Media, Culture and Power I: Postmodern Public Spheres and Convergence Culture

This chapter contextualizes the value judgments on the merits of satirical news by articulating their theoretical orientations and some of their foundational assumptions. It situates the works of scholars like Jones (2010, 2013), Baym (2005, 2010) and Day (2011) within a postmodern approach to the public sphere and theories of convergence culture (Jenkins 2006). Current debates about the public sphere, the function of publicity and the role of media and popular culture, owe part of their genesis to Jürgen Habermas' original conceptualization in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1991). The chapter briefly sketches his argument with an eye to its specific relevance for understanding the critical function of satirical news shows. It then maps out the postmodern criticisms of Habermas' work before demonstrating their integration into emancipatory claims about convergence culture advocated by Jenkins (2006) and others (Benkler 2006). In other words, proponents of convergence culture claim that digital media enhance democratic ends precisely because they *appear* to materialize the conditions of a postmodern public sphere. Ultimately, the purpose of articulating these sets of assumptions is to demonstrate the dialectal relation between arguments for the critical function of satire news and convergence theory. That is, the critical component of satirical television becomes a means by which to exacerbate and *justify* political claims about the participatory nature of digital media while the success and critical impact of the programs is attributed to their integration in digital technologies

2.1 Habermas and the Refeudalization of the Public Sphere

Habermas envisions the bourgeois public sphere as a space for critical dispute, dialogue and opinion formation ideally accessible to all citizens. According to his thesis, “the bourgeois public sphere” is “the sphere of private people come together as a public” (Habermas 1989: 27). It presumes a form of intersubjective rationality, based on the premise that private individuals come together publically to make judgments about politics with the end-goal being mutual understanding. For Habermas, the public sphere is to serve a critical function in mediating the relations between civil society and the state.

As Peter Dahlgren succinctly puts it, “in ideal terms, Habermas conceptualizes the public sphere as that realm of social life where the exchange of information and views on questions of common concern can take place so that public opinion can be formed” (Dahlgren 1995: 7). His aim is to "derive the ideal type of the bourgeois public sphere from the historical context of British, French, and German developments in the 18th and 19th century" (Habermas 1992: 422). Thus, his original thesis oscillates between a sociological account of the brief emergence of a bourgeois public sphere and the normative principles deduced from its historically specific circumstances.

Habermas identifies in part the 18th Century literary gathering points in British salons and coffeehouses as the birthplace of the modern public sphere. The rise of the press and the expanded production, distribution and circulation of books, journals, periodicals and pamphlets provided a context in which individuals (mostly men) could come together to critically examine cultural and literary productions. Habermas finds in this historical moment a set of norms and practices oriented around the changing function of the category of publicity. He argues that these emerging meeting points were characterized by the bracketing of social status based on a temporary parity between individuals. Habermas estimates that this fostered a novel form of critical rationality where the “authority of the better argument” superseded social hierarchy (Habermas 1991: 36). The formation of a new political consciousness emerged as topics of public discussion shifted from literary and artistic debate to topics concerning politics and economics. Crucial to these practices was the suspension of "laws of the market [...] [and] laws of the state" (Habermas 1991: 36). In other words, the emerging public sphere operated unimpeded from state and market constraints. Habermas' argument is here less empirical than normative; rather than being "actually realized in earnest", his point is that the idea of the public sphere "had become institutionalized and thereby stated as an objective claim" (Habermas 1991: 36). One consequence of this institutionalization of the public use of reason was the development and emergence of new spaces of critique and questioning.

According to Habermas, the critical discussions fostered in various social centres "presupposed the problematization of areas that until then had not been questioned"

(Habermas 1991: 36). This development was embedded in the logic of commodity production and the emerging capitalist society. Under this mode of production, "commodities [...] became in principle generally accessible" which allowed the "domain of common concern" to become "the object of public critical attention" (Habermas 1991: 36). While the salons and coffee houses provided important initial gathering points for face-to-face discussions, developments in printing technologies enabled the circulation of journals, periodicals and other texts that helped cultivate a sense of rational public engagement. More importantly however, for Habermas, "the critical discussion stimulated by the periodical press eventually had a transformative impact on the institutional form of modern states" (Thompson 1995: 70). Public practices of critical reasoning constituted an effective means by which citizens held state power accountable; as Habermas puts it, the gathering of private individuals as a public compelled "public authority to legitimate itself before public opinion" (Habermas 1991: 25). Habermas also identifies the early commodification of culture with the emergence of the principle of open, unconstrained and inclusive access to public dialogue. As he puts it, "the same process that converted culture into a commodity [...] established the public as in principle inclusive" (Habermas 1991: 37). This does not mean that everyone actually had equal access to the public sphere but rather that institutionalized public discourse prohibited the arbitrary exclusion of individuals; everyone, in theory, "had to *be able* to participate" (Habermas 1991: 37). In this context of inclusive and critical discussion, "public opinion battled with public power" (Habermas 1991: 51).

Habermas's study of the bourgeois public sphere is a work of immanent critique and to a significant degree, it reiterates a pessimistic account of mass culture commonly associated with his Frankfurt School mentors Adorno and Horkheimer (2002). This critique is informed by a dialectical recognition of capitalism's dynamism and contradictions. A clear example is his treatment of the modern media. Having traced the socio-historical emergence of the public sphere, he then describes its immediately shifting role under the development of 19th and 20th century capitalism. Habermas considers the "preeminent institution" of the public sphere to be the press and he argues that the periodicals clearly exemplify the shift in the function and meaning of publicity from critical to consumer-oriented manipulation (Habermas 1991: 181, 237). As market

logics increasingly permeate the public sphere, "rational-critical debate [is] replaced by consumption" (Habermas 1991: 161). As he writes, "for about a century the social foundations of this sphere have been caught up in a process of decomposition" (Habermas 1991: 4). The public sphere, according to Habermas was “replaced by the pseudo-public or sham-private world of culture consumption” (Habermas 1991: 160). His diagnosis of 'refeudalization' indexes increasingly instrumental and commercialized forms of public discourse.

Consumer-oriented publicity is instrumental to the extent that the media become primarily geared towards the *selling* and *promoting* of material and symbolic goods. As he argues with reference to the press, once "the marketing of the editorial section became interdependent with that of the advertising section" the media became another "gate through which privileged private interests invade the public sphere" (Habermas 1991: 185). The instrumental character of the press operates in conjunction with its increasing commercialization as the latter becomes a "considerable saleable commodity in its own right" (Crossley and Roberts 2004: 6). Contemporary media industries compete for audiences constructed and addressed *as* consumers which are then sold to advertisers for profit. This kind of commercialized press is for Habermas, a "manipulable" press (Habermas 1991: 185). Based on his dialogical model of public life, individuals require a level of accurate information to be able to freely deliberate. At the same time, the 'public' is now "held together through the medium of the press and its professional criticism" (Habermas 1991: 51). A public sphere inundated with celebrity scandals, gossip, and the spectacle of political punditry exacerbates political cynicism by ensuring that citizens are "all but excluded from participation in public debates and decision-making processes in any meaningful [i.e. rational] sense" (McGuigan 2005: 101). The function of publicity directed towards constructing and manipulating legitimacy for powerful interests can no longer be expected to operate as arbiter for the exposure of domination.

Appearing to anticipate the rhetoric of a digital public sphere, Habermas is clear that while the *scope* of the public sphere is "expanding impressively, its function has become progressively insignificant" (Habermas 1991: 4). The increase in available information means very little when that information is geared towards specific

commercial and state interests. Still, Habermas retains the notion of publicity as "an organizational principle" (Habermas 1991: 4). As he puts it in a later reflection, the question is to what extent, under current political and economic conditions, does a "public sphere dominated by mass media provide a realistic chance for members of civil society [...] to bring about changes in the spectrum of values, and topics, [...] to open it up in an innovative way, and to screen it critically" (Habermas 1992: 455). Despite his bleak original assessment, the 'critical use of public reason' and the concept of 'the public sphere' remain indispensible for modern democratic societies and questions of collective emancipation.

2.2 The Habermasian Public Sphere: A Postmodern Critique

Habermas' original account of the public sphere has been subjected to a number of criticisms from various theoretical perspectives, most of which are by now quite standard (Calhoun 1991; Fraser 1992; Thompson 1995). The recent literature on satire news relies on a postmodern approach to the public sphere (Baym 2010; Jones 2010; Day 2011). Much ink has been spilled debating Habermas' original thesis, to say nothing of defining a term like 'postmodern'. In this work, I refer to Crossley and Roberts' (2004) tripartite division of public sphere schools to map the relevant literature. Proponents of the postmodern approach tend to stress the multiplicity of public spheres rather than emphasize social unity. They rely on a politics of difference instead of prioritizing rational-consensus. And they focus on the complex ways in which media and popular culture can contribute to democratic ends. This section parses these claims as they are pertinent to the work on satire news.

The Multiple Publics Critique

A postmodern approach to the public sphere argues that the supposed openness of the bourgeois public sphere was historically predicated on the exclusion of women, visible and other minorities (Fraser 1992; Thompson 1995). According to the argument, this exclusion undermines any notion of a 'unified' or 'general' public, and it also erodes

"the normative foundations of Truth" built into the principles of the public sphere (Crossley and Roberts 2004: 14). The postmodern approach invokes the legitimacy of multiple truth-claims from competing publics, insisting that public discussion is "ordered by different kinds of knowingness" and that a plurality of perspectives on any given issue is "preferable to a single modern public sphere oriented solely to deliberation" (Ibid; Fraser 1995: 295). The appeal to multiple, differentiated publics is an answer to the exclusionary character of a unitary public sphere. Day argues that "if we expand the definition of what constitutes a public sphere, the concept provides a framework for thinking about the competition of multiple voices in multiple, overlapping publics" (Day 2011: 16). In other words, this position advocates for a conception of a “public sphere with open boundaries” and concedes that politics exceeds the socially sanctioned spaces where civic engagement can take place (Crossley and Roberts 2004: 14). To restrict ourselves to such spaces, as Day argues, is to miss a "plethora of concurrent political, meaning-making sites, some of which have much more resonance and appeal for a great number of people. (Day 2011: 20).

Despite its emphasis on a plurality of worldviews, the postmodern approach retains a binary distinction between centre/periphery and inside/outside. Contemporary satirists are, in this argument, located on the 'periphery' (Day 2011) or on the 'outside' (Jones 2010). Accordingly, programs like TDS and TCR function as "a kind of public sphere, [...] a discursive arena in which a range of people come to discuss a variety of issues of social and political significance" (Baym 2010: 142). Such programming mediates informed public discussion by encouraging alternative narratives to enter the mainstream. Day for example argues that "types of counterpublics are coalescing around these forms, as people look to the satirists as representatives who will push their particular worldview into the wider public sphere (Day 2011: 10-11). According to this argument, these shows mainly promote what Nancy Fraser calls "weak publics, publics whose deliberative practice consists exclusively in opinion-formation and does not also encompass decision-making" (Frasier 1992: 75). In providing alternative critiques of the media, the programs thus lead to "the competition of different worldviews within public culture" (Day 2011: 14). Shifts in public conversations thus entail incremental shifts in

social justice where different worldviews compete for public visibility and legitimacy with each claim expanding the plurality of available perspectives. The theoretical developments of this position have yielded approaches that now take for granted the political legitimacy of forms of dialogue that exceed Habermas' critical-rational ideal. Crucial to this approach is a shift in precisely what counts as 'political' and more specifically, 'political communication'

The Affective Critique

A postmodern public sphere seeks to include all forms of expressions, practices and sites of contestation that ought be considered 'political'. From this perspective, Habermas' ideal public sphere privileges rational discussion and thus marginalizes other modes of political communication since it requires "its space of discourse to be *de-libidinized* in the interests of serious, productive and *rational* discourse." (Thompson 2009: 223). A postmodern approach thus suggests ways of analyzing and critically evaluating affective communication as a legitimate form of discourse conducive to democratic life (Gray 2006; Baym 2010; Jones 2010; Day 2011). This means understanding supposedly 'non-rational' rhetorical expressions like irony and satire as forms of political communication and arguing that they be taken into consideration into normative models of democratic communication in the public sphere. According to the argument, because Habermas "resists theatre, rhetoric, narrative, festival or pomp from entering into the political" it leads to a rather "impoverished account of how communication in fact works and impedes the imagination of alternative forms of participatory media" (Peters 1993: 565). A postmodern public sphere is one that encourages the inclusion of a wide range of expanding modes of discourses. Differing messages and communicative forms are mobilized by different groups of people to raises issues of common concern and express varying perspectives.

If one begins with the normative premise that rational dialogue is the benchmark by which to judge contributions to public life, then by all appearances, satirical news programs come up rather short. The discursive hybridity of the programs is such that the

'rational-critical' and 'aesthetic-performative' consistently overlap and feed off the other. Privileging the former overlooks the fact that public engagement often takes a predominantly affective mode. For Baym, cultural forms like Satire TV push "the boundaries of political discourse [...] that can engage with politics in more imaginative and accessible ways" (Baym 2010: 59). This accessibility is premised on the programs' ability to seamlessly incorporate different discursive registers into their segments. This integration is made manifest by the programs' content where everything from the "significant to the ridiculous, from pointed examinations of war, foreign policy, and presidential politics, to lighthearted and sometimes inane commentary on entertainment celebrity" is potentially up for grabs (Baym 2010: 125). For Day, the interview segments on both TDS and TCR demonstrate that "seemingly irrational discursive exchanges in the registers of parody, satire, [and] nonsense" are legitimate forms of political communication (Day 2011: 20). While Habermasian standards of rational-critical discourse are rarely met on television, programs like TDS and TCR typify a mode of public engagement that combines earnest deliberation with humour and absurdity.

The Populism Critique

Habermas privileged the institution of the press based on its ability to mediate the democratic criteria of critical publicity. Yet by stressing critical rationality and over relying on a narrow conception of what politics *ought* to be, theorists working from a Habermasian position tend to mistakenly emphasize "news as the most important form of political discourse, because in their formulation, it is the primary means through which individuals can make rational democratic choices based on information (Gray et al. 2009: 16). Postmodern theorists are often keen to point out that Habermas himself admits that his early analysis of mass culture and the press was "too simplistic" and "too pessimistic" (Habermas 1992: 438). The latter concedes that "the ambivalent relaxation of the distinction between high and low culture, and the no less ambiguous 'new intimacy' between culture and politics" must be taken into account in analyses of the public sphere (Habermas 1992: 439).

From a postmodern perspective, a significant problem with Habermas' original thesis is "the wholesale endorsement of a culture industry model of media communication" (Day 2011: 17). For instance, Day argues that Habermas and other 'critical pessimists' conceptualize and reduce audiences to empty vessels passively manipulated by mass media texts that serve the interests of those in power. It relies implicitly on a 'hypodermic' model of communication, where the meaning of mass media texts are simply created by producers and then imposed onto naive audiences. Critics in this case often equate satirical humour with insignificance, where forms of popular entertainment pacify and insulate a public from the serious demands of democratic citizenship; in these arguments, comedy and humour represent "the opposite of seriousness and rational deliberation" (Gray et al. 2009: 8). This framework leaves very little room for agency, diversity and contestation by individuals who seek to contribute to and integrate the meaning of cultural texts into their everyday lives.

As per reception theorists like John Fiske (1987), audiences bring their own idiosyncratic experiences to cultural forms that are always already polysemic and open. As such, viewers can accept, reject or negotiate a text's dominant meaning. As an explanatory model, the cultural context of reception acknowledges the countless ways in which audiences "splice together political meanings from myriad media representations" actively constructing their political views "though discursive interactions with television and others in their everyday life" (Jones 2010: 33). On the one hand, the postmodern positions argues that cultural forms like satire news act as conduits for the *expression* of popular dissent. By undermining dominant or mainstream narratives through their political and media critiques, they provide a means by which oppositional viewpoints may gain exposure and potentially alter the public conversation. On the other hand, like all other cultural texts, these programs are continuously open to re-appropriation and negotiation by individuals looking to incorporate these models of critique into their daily political judgments.

2.3 Convergence Culture and the New Public Sphere

To better understand the claims that have been made for the critical function of programs like TDS and TCR, it is necessary to recognize how postmodern theories of the public sphere are connected to narratives that populate some of the recent debates on television and digital media. The rapid rise of social media platforms since the early 2000s has triggered a number of enthusiasts celebrating the potential of the Internet to empower users and develop new iterations of the public sphere (Jenkins 2006; Benkler 2006). The argument extends to the convergence of television and digital media where it is suggested that the seamless flow of content across diverse media channels is allowing citizen-consumers to renegotiate their relationship to powerful corporate and state interests. Darin Barney has argued that much of the impetus for these celebratory narratives resides in the "technical configuration of the medium itself", where the internet's "interactive capacities" and "decentralized architecture" supposedly undermines centralized forms of control and requires a level of active (rather than passive) engagement (Barney 2004: 108). Claims about the critical function of satire news are embedded in these celebratory narratives, most of which are then cited as evidence for the popularity and critical function of the genre. It is therefore crucial to trace how, in a changing media environment, the appeal to digital technologies functions as evidence that forms of alienation, standardization and homogeneity associated with critiques of mass society like Habermas' are supposedly overcome.

Horizontal and Networked Public Spheres

For Baym and other advocates of convergence theory (Jones 2010; Day 2011), the "true measure" of shows like TDS and TCR lies increasingly in "the extent to which they resonate and integrate with an expanded public sphere" (Baym 2010: 164). Here an 'expanded public sphere' is concomitant with claims about the inherently democratizing features of digital media. Drawing on Jenkins (2006) and Benkler (2006), Baym insists that in a "convergent age, the public sphere is a collaborative venture, *between* public affairs media of all types and, more importantly, *among* citizens themselves" (Baym 2010: 174). A defining feature of the rhetoric of convergence theorists is its assumption of a "fundamental discontinuity between old and new media" (Andrejevic 2004: 24). In

this "new networked public sphere", one-way forms of communication associated with 'old media' like radio and television are superseded by the internet's networked (and thus decentralized) architecture (Baym 2010: 160). This 'rupture' is attributed in large part to the way digital technologies supposedly undermine top-down and centralized forms of political and media power. Baym argues that the current historical conjuncture points to the development of a "horizontal public sphere comprised of mutually interlocking networks of deliberation, contestation, and argumentation" (Baym 2010: 174). Here Baym owes a measure of debt to Jenkins and Nicholas Negroponte's (1995), who argue that "the monolithic empires of mass media are dissolving [and] that media barons of today will be grasping to hold onto their centralized empires tomorrow" (Negroponte 1995: 57-58; Jenkins 2006; 4).

What is 'new' and 'expanded' about this revised public sphere is the extent to which online media platforms like blogs and social networking provide a *means* through which audiences engage in cultural and political participation, "crafting in the process a new form of participatory culture (Jones 2010: 23). A core assumption here is that the endless proliferation and circulation of critical forms of discourses is *necessarily* conducive to political ends. For example, since TDS' culture jamming tactics function as important critical and pedagogical interventions, they also tend to "ensure cultural diversity and corporate responsibility" (Jenkins 2006: 247). The claim equates dissent with participation in dialogue, where the expression of various viewpoints from different social groups inherently serves democratic ends. Along these line, both Day (2011) and Gray (2006) argue that satirical news "acknowledges that much of the media is failing to create a public sphere, but the talk *about* that failure builds its own public sphere" (Day 2011: 21). The "eager fandom" surrounding both TDS and TCR "indicates that there is a desire to continue circulating these critiques and that there is pleasure in that shared circulation" (Ibid.).

Discursive Integration

Since postmodern theorists concede that multiple public spheres have historically "oscillated between entertainment and information", it makes little sense to cling to strict standards of rational-critical debate that Habermas would suggest is required in a democratic public sphere (Crossley and Roberts 2004: 14). Baym's concept of 'discursive integration' endorsed by both Jones (2010, 2013) and Day (2011) is key in contextualizing the relation between multiple types of discourses and a new media environment. Discursive integration is Baym's umbrella term that designates new ways of "speaking about, understanding, and acting within the world defined by the permeability of form and the fluidity of content" (Baym 2005: 262). The latter Baym states, "recognizes that informational formats have indeed adopted the techniques and intentions of entertainment, but it also highlights the fact [...] that entertainment programs increasingly are adopting the focus and forms of news" (Jones and Baym 2010: 283). Satirical programming like TDS and TCR provide insight into this discursive context by relying on a mixed-bag of rhetorical forms on a nightly basis; from the perspective of convergence theory, they epitomize a discursively integrated environment (Baym 2005: 262). For Baym and other postmodern liberals like Jones and Day, "the styles, standards and assumptions of multiple and at a times incompatible discourses are continuously placed and re-placed in new and often momentary arrangements" (Baym 2010: 15-18).

At root, discursive integration is about what *counts* as political communication and the sorts of claims that can be deduced from the current discursive landscape. This sets Baym's concept on par with postmodern theories of the public sphere that argue for the legitimacy of emotional (or aesthetic/performative) communication as forms of political expression. What distinguishes this specific conceptual iteration is the way it comes part and parcel with political-cultural claims about digital media. In other words, discursive integration *follows* from a convergent media environment. Scholars like Jones, Baym and Day are keen to emphasize the 'hybridity' of such a discursive landscape, often hastily aligning the fluidity of rhetorical content with democratically progressive ends. As Baym puts it, in a convergent landscape, the melding of different discourses associated with "news, politics, entertainment, and marketing [...] into previously unimagined combinations [...] may be opening spaces for significant innovation" (Baym 2005: 262).

Baym hesitates to specify what he has in mind by innovation, but presumably he is drawing attention to what I have been calling the 'critical function' of satire news. This critical function-the simultaneous ability to interrogate forms of state power, to challenge dominant media narratives and help enable critical literacy skills--is not just a tangential effect of the programs' integration into convergent media; this function is a constitutive feature of the digital landscape itself.

User-Generated Content, Active Users and Popular Culture

What underlies this paradigm shift in the media industries is a supposedly profound reconceptualization of the audience. For convergence theorists like Jenkins, "audiences, empowered by new technologies occupying a space between old and new media, are demanding the right to participate within culture" (Jenkins 2006: 24). What makes this position particularly attractive for techno-enthusiasts, is the way in which it further invokes a critique of the passive spectatorship associated with a refeudalized public sphere. The discontinuity between 'old' and 'new' media is here extended to theorize a new form of popular agency. One finds this celebratory iteration over and over again in different guises. For instance, Gray et al. argue that satirical news provides "a valuable means through which citizens can analyze and interrogate power and the realm of politics rather than remain simple subjects of it" (Gray et al. 2009: 17). Jenkins argues that “old consumers" of mass media products were "isolated individuals [whose work was] silent and invisible" whereas "new consumers are more socially connected [...] noisy and public" (Jenkins 2006: 19). For Day, proponents of convergence theory "explicitly critique the long cherished model of the media consumer as a passive receiver, arguing that people act as 'citizen-consumers' all the time, speaking back to and through the media field around them (Day 2011: 26).

Accordingly, the skills acquired through daily interactions with digital media and popular culture have important "implications for how we learn, work, participate in the political process, and connect with other people around the world" (Jenkins 2006: 22-23). That fans are acquiring a host of different 'skills' is a clear indication that the relegation of

audiences to the role of passive receptors of manipulated media messages is outdated. Baym argues that if audience theorists like Fiske restricted their analyses to textual destabilization through play, convergence theorists like Jenkins and Benkler "rightly argue that the web and digital media are truly enabling the emergence of the user as a new category of relation to information production and exchange" (Baym 2010: 150). In other words, for proponents of convergence theory, this shift in power is both interpretive (as per reception theory) *and* material. It takes for granted the construction of meaning *through* 'active' consumption but it also *grounds* resistance to power in the technology itself. Their critique of mass media thus comes part and parcel with digital media and fan cultures.

Proponents of convergence theory like to reiterate that digital technologies generate "alternative sources of power", and that popular culture is the primary means by which audiences learn "how to use that power" (Jenkins 2006: 4). From this perspective, satirical news programs like TDS and TCR are extremely adept at cultivating a sense of political engagement with their audiences. Moreover, the point for Jones-and for other proponents of convergence theory-is that "much of the new political television programming [...] is now widely available on the Internet" (Jones 2010: 12). The critical function of satire news is thus helping to nurture a public sphere in large part because of its seamless integration into digital platforms. The content and form of the programs mirror the media environment in which they operate and become further politicized in the process. The upsurge of digital media allows for unprecedented forms of active participation where audiences treat the shows' content "more as a resource to be worked with than as a product to be passively consumed" (Baym 2010: 150). For proponents of convergence theory that stress a symbiotic relation between producer and consumer, politics and popular culture, access to critical and engaging content like satire news through multiple distribution platforms is reinvigorating democratic politics.

2.4 Conclusion

This chapter showed that the value judgments on the critical merits of satirical news rely on a postmodern approach to the public sphere. This perspective is also in line with

proponents of convergence culture who argue that changes in the media landscape since the late 1990s have shifted the balance of power away from media conglomerates and closer to audiences. These respective positions are not reducible to the other, but in this specific argument, they tend to be mutually reinforcing. Together, the first two chapters of this thesis have shown the symbiotic relation between claims for the critical function of satire news and convergence theory. The critical component of satirical television becomes a means by which to exacerbate and justify political claims about the participatory nature of digital media while the success and critical impact of the programs is attributed to their integration in digital technologies that empower users to challenge power structures. There are several assumptions implied in this relation that rely on idealistic and reductive perspective on culture, media and the public sphere. The public sphere is not just "the expansion of perspectives" or a metaphorical space in which "the conversation of democracy" can take place (Jenkins 2006 ; Baym 2010). Habermas stresses that political communication must rely on a common and "necessary material resource base"--in other words, the command and even accessibility to the *means* by which mediated communication can take place (Garnham 1992; Fuchs 2014b). An investigation into the material interests served by the command of the necessary communicative resources made available does not belittle important forms of agentive projects enabled by satirical television. In fact, as I argue in the following chapter, the approaches must be in constant productive dialogue.

In conjunction with this last point, the scholarship on satire news falls short in suggesting ways to *critically* map the relative importance of different social spheres. Cultural and Media Studies approaches to satirical news are in this view culturally *reductive* to the extent that they isolate their objects of analysis from the broader 'social totality' (Fuchs 2011: 29-34). This means, amongst other things, a selective reluctance (or refusal) to consider political-economic questions and the *social* relations of production surrounding the cultural form in question. It is difficult to see how book length claims for the 'critical function' of satire news can neglect such enquiry by focusing almost exclusively on the autonomy of culture as an isolated sphere. Thus, the rationale for challenging recent scholarship on satire news is quite straightforward: since the notion of

'critique' figures so prominently in their analyses, it seems feasible to evaluate their claims using a critical and Marxist approach.

Scholars like Jones, Baym and Day tend to confuse paying lip-service to political-economic concerns with providing a critically integrated analysis. For instance, one should pause for a moment of reflection when it is suggested by Jones that satire news programs challenge political-economic power in the spirit of Marxist critique (Jones 2010: 20). The tongue-in-cheek remark is a telling example of the level of engagement with critical and Marxist media scholarship from this academic perspective. Similarly, Day argues that Habermas' position on mass culture is too "narrow and pessimistic", a position that echoes Hartley's complaint that Marxist political economy is "too challenging, knowing what [is] wrong in advance" and assuming "single-cause determinations of entire systems" (Day 2011: 17; Hartley 2012: 46, 55). The tendency to rely on reductionists accusations is a way of eschewing-or severely downplaying-economic questions. An obvious case in point is the extent to which proponents of this view bracket questions of ownership and the broader question of the role of media in capital accumulation and ideology, often treating them as isolated and autonomous spheres. Baym for example likes to cite Marxist political economist Robert McChesney (1999) but then argues – with reference to the participatory nature of Web culture – that "the real significance of sharing [...] lies deeper than questions of corporate revenue streams" (Baym 2010: 153). Meanwhile, Jenkins explicitly dismisses the "critical pessimism" of political economists altogether, suggesting that they rely on a rhetoric of "victimization and vulnerability, seduction and manipulation, propaganda machines and weapons of mass deceptions" (Jenkins 2006: 247). This caricature of Marxist theory as a pessimistic, reductive and prescriptive approach that enlightens a mass of passive dopes, needs qualification and definitional clarity.

The following chapter addresses this task by drawing on contemporary scholars working from a Marxist perspective (Best 2010, 2011, 2012, 2014; Fuchs 2011, 2014a, 2014b; Schiller 2007). In providing this response, the chapter articulates a theory and method that *integrates* work from critical political economy *and* critical theory (Best 2010, Fuchs 2011, Nixon 2012, McGuigan 2012). This integration is not new, and I

certainly make no claims to synthesize complex debates in Marxist scholarship. Rather the thesis is informed by a commitment to a critical dialectical method that, in the spirit of Raymond Williams' sociology of culture, seeks to *historicize* the object of enquiry by revealing the ways in which it is "embedded in wider economic processes [and] expresses dominant and concurrent structures of feeling" (Best 2012: 194). The point is to illustrate that the caricatures of Marxist critique in the literature on satire news are erroneous, and to demonstrate the conceptual utility of a critically integrated approach for the analysis of contemporary cultural forms. This "multidimensional" method is then used to analyze the critical function of satirical news in the final chapter.

3 Perspectives on Media, Culture and Power II: Critical Media Theory

The previous chapter argued that the conceptual framework used by cultural theorists to study satirical news is idealistic, culturally reductive and technologically deterministic. Based on celebratory assumptions about the democratic potential of digital media, these scholars reason that expanding the normative parameters of the public sphere *necessarily* expands the range of possible expressions, and thus, the potential for critical voices. The supposed benefits of this 'expansion' is evidenced in part by the emergence of satirical programming and the fan communities that circulate and deploy the critical resources made available for their own political endeavors. There is however a need for a more comprehensive and critical approach to the study of satirical news, one that situates the cultural form in the context of asymmetrical power relations and forms of exploitation. Drawing on the concept of commodity reification, the chapter defends the explanatory utility of a critically integrated approach to media and communication grounded in Marxist theory. The method stresses the interrelation between signifying practices and commodity production, between cultural and economic processes, and between legitimation and material exploitation (Best 2010, 2012, Fuchs 2008, 2011, Nixon 2012, McGuigan 2012, 2014). The chapter also articulates the *stakes* of such a method by illustrating that the frequent criticisms of Marxist analyses in the literature in question are misleading and often superficial.

3.1 Commodity Reification, Aesthetics and New Media

In order to situate satirical news in its material context of production, circulation and reception, it is necessary to be clear on certain foundational concepts of any critical theory of media and culture. This section is concerned with the process of commodity reification and articulates its various modalities in contemporary brand management and new media practices. It draws on concepts from both Critical Theory and Critical Political Economy.

Commodity-Reification, Spectacle and the Aestheticization of Consumption

Marx's analysis of the commodity at the start of *Capital: Vol. 1* is one example by which he articulates the political and representational economies that are immanent to the capitalist mode of production. As Frederic Jameson notes, in this first chapter, Marx identifies "the indispensible notion of the commodification of labor power, [and] the demonstration of the structural and unavoidable embedding of exploitation and alienation within capital production as such" (Jameson 2009: 261). This analysis of the commodity form considers the extraction of surplus-value and the legitimation of existing social relations as interrelated features of a total social process. Another way to articulate this dialectic is to suggest, as Best does, that "capitalism designates a certain regime of *representation* as much as it does a regime of accumulation, that it constitutes a particular mode of *perception* as much as it does a mode of production" (Best 2011a: 499). A critically integrated approach must be cognisant that these features are constantly interrelated.

Marx describes the *fetish* of commodities in part as the 'obfuscation' of their own social production, which is the real source of their value. The 'secret' of commodities is their history, the complex web of human and material relations that produce them. As Marx writes, "the commodity form and the value-relation of the products of labor within which it appears, have absolutely no connection with the physical nature of the commodity and the material relations arising out of this" (Marx 2011: 165). This 'secret' must be further qualified in that it does more than merely congeal the production process of commodities. Commodity fetishism designates capitalism's structural tendency to conceal the extraction of surplus-value, which as Marx demonstrates, is always a matter of exploitation, power and struggle over value. Fetishism conceals "that portion of unpaid labor-power, the fundamental extortion that fuels capitalist movement and growth" (Best 2014: 285). Crucially, this 'obfuscation' is intrinsic to the commodity-form itself and "inseparable from [its production]" (Marx 2011: 321). Commodities take on these 'mystical' qualities by virtue of their false equivalency in market exchanges, an exchange

made possible by the representational form of money. As he writes, their value, is in the end nothing but "a definite social relation between men, that assumes, in their eyes, the fantastic form of a relation between things" (Marx 2011: 321).

For Marx, commodities are endowed with a 'phantom' objectivity, an appearance of autonomy that *represents* social relations (and thus objectifies them). Capitalism's self-generating representations-the fetish character of commodities-are misleading in at least two ways: "social relations and phenomena appear to be given, natural, timeless, and immutable when they are, in fact, products of certain historical circumstances and developments; second the interconnectedness of phenomena goes unrecognized in light of their appearance as isolated facts" (Best 2010: 50). Georg Lukács' theory of reification finds in "the riddle of commodity-*structure*" capitalism's incessant need for increased forms of rationalization and fragmentation (Lukács 1971: 83). The features of commodity reification--fragmentation, rationalization, specialization, bureaucratization--are all means by which the movement of capitalism renders static was is actually constantly in motion. Thus, "reification refers to the function of segmenting and breaking up into atomized parts" (Best 2010: 217). The stress here is on the process "by which daily life is systematically reorganized on all its levels [...] by that total quasi-programming process that is rationalization, commodification, instrumentalization, and the like" (Jameson 2009: 331). This process is given a new twist by Guy Debord's concept of the spectacle (1967) which is mobilized to describe the genesis of a society of image-production and consumption, in short, a post-war consumer society.

Contemporary market societies in the Global North are characterized by the increasing consumption of affect, or the 'aestheticization of consumption'. This refers to the "increasingly secondary importance of the physical commodity and the prioritizing of the commodity's image for the consumer in consumption practices" (Best 2010: 161). The meaning and value of commodities appear to emerge from the function and materiality of the stylized image they are meant to convey. For Best, this is an extension, generalization and intensification of Debord's proposition that the 'image' is the most recent form of commodity reification. In Debord's analysis, the spectacle is the

accumulation of commodities beyond the point of necessity, in which use-value is superseded by exchange-value. It is, as he puts it, "the moment when the commodity has attained the total occupation of social life" (Debord 1967: §42). Debord describes commodity fetishism as "the domination of society by 'intangible as well as tangible things" now replaced "by a selection of images which exist above it, and which simultaneously impose themselves as the tangible par excellence" (Debord 1967: §36). Following Debord, Best argues that "with the intensifying prerogative of the spectacle, the aestheticization of consumption, and the priority of the role of affect in commodity production, the market consequently becomes the sphere of the second-order fetish" (Best 2010: 217). Contemporary consumer societies now have whole industries of advertising, brand management and marketing whose job it is to develop and manage the use-value of commodities. The result is the fetishisation of "the already fetishized commodity in exchange" (Best 2010: 217).

The strategies, ubiquity and intensity of branding practices are an extension of a promotional logic identified by Andrew Wernick as the dominant contemporary cultural condition (Wernick 1991: 181-198). The spectacularized consumption of commodities *as* images indicates that "everything in contemporary society takes on an aesthetic dimension" and thus, everything also takes on a promotional impetus (Best 2010: 161). From this perspective, branding, advertising and popular culture are integral aspects "of a wider process of cultural commodification" (Wernick 1991: 181). The importance of aesthetic and communicative practices in contemporary consumer cultures is intrinsically linked to changes in the mode of production characterized by strategies of 'flexible accumulation' identified by David Harvey (1989). Harvey describes a shift in the modality of capitalism that relies on accelerated turnover time and flexible 'just-in-time' production (Harvey 1989: 338-339). The precariousness of an environment constantly 'in flux' requires the appearance of stability. In this regard, brands work to "fix, albeit temporarily and tentatively, cultural meanings around consumption, producing aestheticized modes of justification for life under capital" (Hearn 2008: 199). Through repetitive imagery, branding instrumentally imposes an additional meaning onto 'objects' while seeking to link consumers to new sets of social relations in consumption.

Contemporary brand management provides "an environment, an ambience, which [tries to] anticipate [...] the agency of consumers" (Arvidsson 2005: 245). This involves, amongst other tactics, "intertextual, physical and virtual spaces that pre-structure and anticipate the agency of consumers" (Arvidsson 2005: 247).Whether such endeavors are successful or not is always important and certainly unpredictable, but given the amount of resources at the disposal of networks and media conglomerates, it should not detract from questioning and critiquing the priority of these tactics that increasingly seek to colonize all facets of existence.

Jenkins notwithstanding, contemporary promotional tactics have less to do with victimization and manipulation then with "an overarching shift in social priority" (Schiller 2007: 161). Branding strategies are rigorously instrumental and fetishistic not simply because they mystify the value of commodities and enthrall supposedly unsuspecting consumers. Under contemporary post-Fordist capitalism, brands also generate value by capitalizing on "the productive sociality of consumers" (Arvidsson 2005: 251). This management involves "putting public communication to work under managed forms, by providing a context where [brands] can evolve in a particular direction" (Arvidsson 2006: 67). Brands like TDS and TCR are crucial for networks like Comedy Central as a means of exploiting, channeling and aggregating audiences for the purpose of revenue extraction. Brands not only function as aesthetic appendages to specific products, "but to the context of consumption [...] a specific way of using the object, a propertied form of life to be realized in consumption" (Arvidsson 2005: 244). Such efforts have only intensified as media conglomerates and networks diversify their content and reach through cross-platform dissemination.

Commodification, Interactivity and Internet Fetishism

Convergent media platforms are not just convenient portals for creative signifying practices, sociality and the circulation of meaning; they are also intensive sites of capital accumulation. This suggests that the adoption of ICT in popular programming like satire news-to say nothing of politics and mainstream news media-has been driven primarily by

forms of corporate monitoring that seek to measure, package and repackage audiences at the expense of democratic imperatives (Davis 2009). The internet, as Dan Schiller argues, "was not created to deliver us into an era of playfulness and personal freedom [but] as a complex historical extension of the domination and inequality that continue to define our divided societies" (Schiller 2007: 173). From the standpoint of Comedy Central, the development of satirical news and its integration into diverse media platforms continues to serve the "enlargement of profitable revenue extraction" (Schiller 2007: 140). Schiller insists that today's Internet extends and intensifies this process of commodification by further "differentiating and segmenting [audiences] into target groups" and by sustaining a "trend toward more comprehensive corporate monitoring and metering of transactions" (Schiller 2007:141)

Mark Andrejevic (2004, 2007) has extended Dallas Smythe's (1977, 1981) audience commodity thesis to consider the exploitation of digital labour practices. In the context of broadcast media, Smythe theorized that audiences labour in the interests of media conglomerates that aggregate them and sell them for profit. In a rather strict sense, this process denotes the sheer instrumentality of 'content' production as a means by which to gain audience loyalty and retain their allegiance in order to package them for advertisers. In another sense, it also presupposes the engagement of audiences in a process of production. The point is not that audiences are potentially manipulated or duped by ideological content, but that in spite of this potential, they actively contribute to the production of value by watching television or listening to the radio. This value is then appropriated by media industries and sold as a commodity to advertisers. New media technologies have taken up this mantle and amplified Smythe's original thesis.

Drawing on Harvey's configuration of capitalism as a regime of 'flexible accumulation', Andrejevic posits an instantiation of this mode of production where interactive digital technologies facilitate the 'mass-customization' of consumer goods. This process increasingly relies on "forms of consumer surveillance that allow for individualized marketing and production" (Andrejevic 2004: 2). In this sense, his work is particularly useful to this study because it considers the complex interrelations between

reflexively savvy audiences, digital interactivity, corporate surveillance practices and targeted advertisement (Andrejevic 2004, 2007, 2013). With respect to online brand management, fan communities and data mining, Andrejevic urges us "to consider the ways in which the commercialization of [online] platform[s] turns our own activity back upon ourselves in the service of priorities that are not our own" (Andrejevic 2013: 164). The internet, he reminds us, "is a medium well-suited to an era of media reflexivity-one in which the populace is increasingly savvy about the constructed character of representation" (Andrejevic 2013: 14). The process of mass-customization is concomitant with contemporary branding practices described above.

This exploitative feature of the Internet is fetishized over and over by narratives that deploy the concepts of 'interactivity' and 'participation' as a means to justify the increasing forms of surveillance and the commodification of fan-labour. In the case of satire news, there is much talk about the participatory benefits of "reading the news ironically" through social networking sites but little talk about who owns these sites and how these "ironic commentaries" are appropriated and put to work as a means to expand the satirical brand (Day 2011: 86, 24). Ultimately, it neglects proprietary issues as a necessary dimension of participation, amounting to a reductive line of reasoning where interaction equals participation and participation equals democratic empowerment. Andrejevic argues that the "celebration of participation *per se* as empowerment" is in fact a disavowal of politics and critical analysis because it confuses engagement with opposition (Andrejevic 2013: 59). In other words, it presupposes that the "need to oppose [dissipates] once we can participate" (Andrejevic 2013: 59). The same can be said to hold true for critical forms of discourse like satirical news programs.

What does this imply for the study of satirical news, its relation to the public sphere and new media? Following Garnham (1992) and Fuchs (2014), I argue that the importance of Habermas' study is its insistence on grounding the public sphere in its political-economic and hegemonic context. The concept of the public sphere cannot be dissociated from its relation to other spheres of life like political economy, culture and technology. This point is often deflected in favour of a more limited critique of

Habermas' insistence on critical-rationality as the ideal of political communication. In this regard, the theoretical value of the postmodern public sphere as a measure of democratic and political communication remains shortsighted, despite attempts to expand the concept's normative reach. It is one thing to accept the legitimacy of affective communication (laughter, irony, sarcasm, anger) as a form of meaning-making conducive to democratic life. It is another thing to uncritically infer from this a level of engagement that ostensibly challenges power structures.

3.2 Dialectics and the Social Totality: On Method

Marxist approaches to the study of media are frequently criticized for their allegedly reductive and prescriptive analyses of cultural forms. Here the process of commodification detailed above tends to suggest a homogenizing, one-dimensional and pessimistic analysis. So keen to avoid the kind of economic determinism they attribute to critical political economy, scholars like Jones, Baym and Day over-emphasize the autonomy of cultural forms and isolate satirical news from the broader *material* context in which they circulate. The trouble, is that the value judgments conferred onto a cultural genre like satire news tend to overstate their political-cultural clout. In doing so, they neglect a range of practices and social relations that could provide insight into the contemporary historical context. As Beverley Best argues, "the fetishization of cultural activities [...] as autonomous is achieved at the expense of a comprehension of the whole" (Best 2010: 45). This section is primarily informed by Raymond Williams' sociology of culture and Best's work on a Marxian aesthetic of political economy. It articulates a dialectical and totalizing method of analysis and defends it based on the premise that interrogating and critiquing the structural process of commodity reification requires the category of totality.

Cultural Materialism and the Aesthetics of Political Economy

In *Marx and the Dynamic of the Capital Formation* (2010), Best sketches the outline of what she refers to as "a speculative Marxist method – a theoretical or aesthetic, Marxism" (Best 2010: 216). As the previous section demonstrated, the process of

commodity reification functions, "as a structural necessity of [capitalism's] reproduction, to thwart integrated and totalizing explanations of the social world" (Best 2010: 5). It produces forms dominant perceptions of the social world that necessarily conceal their mode of operation and reproduction. The principle task of a "Marxian aesthetics of political economy is [...] the renovation of a collective and historical mode of perception and representation", a project that Best identifies with the movement of Marx's critical method. The method of "totalization refers to a practice of representation [...] the practice of mapping an object of analysis with the goal of delimiting the object as widely as possible" (Best 2010: 191).

The totalizing, dialectical and aesthetic orientation to Marx's method of analysis renders the crude distinction between culture and the economy impalpable. According to her analysis, Marx's representational preoccupation with *mapping* capitalism as a social formation presupposes the intrinsic relation between economic and supposedly 'non-economic' (i.e. cultural) activities (Best 2010: 42-48). As Best concludes, from the perspective of totality, "it makes no sense [...] to speak of a strictly ideological or economic phenomenon, as these things, while never collapsing into one another [...] are not exclusive. (Best 2010: 45). Rather than understanding communicative, symbolic and signifying processes as 'peripheral' to the analysis of capitalism, "such cultural dimensions should [...] be understood as that core element of capitalism they have actually always been (Fornäs 2013: 16). In fact, as I demonstrated in the previous section, Marx's analysis of the commodity presupposes an intimate dialectic between material and cultural processes, between signification and material exploitation.

A similar dialectical motif and concern has been identified in the sociology of Raymond Williams (Best 2012; Fuchs 2014a; McGuigan 2014; Nixon 2012). Williams' integrated understanding of culture and political economy is articulated in his recasting of Marx's base-superstructure metaphor in *Marxism and Literature* (1977). He opposes the formula on two accounts. First, the manner in which it theorizes social causality is unidirectional, effectively amounting to the reduction of cultural activity "to a direct or indirect expression of some preceding and controlling economic content" (Williams

1977: 83). Williams' work challenges this kind of 'single-cause determinations' by demonstrating the materiality of cultural and communicative practices. They are not "dependent, secondary, superstructural" but integral to the capitalist mode of production (Williams 1977: 19). Second, the base/superstructure metaphor is critiqued for its tendency to conceptualize the social world in terms of concrete and isolated 'spheres'. As he states: "what matters [...] is not only the element of reduction; it is the reproduction [...] of the separation of culture from material social life" (Williams 1977: 19). In this sense, Williams explicitly critiques forms of economic reductionism, a point that tends to fly in the face of cultural theorists like Jones, Baym and Day who continue to reiterate caricatures of Marxist thought.

In line with Best's articulation of an aesthetic of political economy, Williams demonstrates the extent to which this method of analysis was already articulated and put into practice by Marx himself. For Williams, "the force of Marx's original criticism had been mainly directed against the separation of 'areas' of thought and activity (as in the separation of consciousness from material production) [...] the common abstraction of 'the base' and 'the superstructure' is thus a radical persistence of the modes of thought which he attacked" (Williams 1977: 78). Thus, Williams' argument for a "full concept of determination" as "the setting of limits" and "the exertion of pressures" shares a number of affinities with Marx's political economic method (Williams 1977: 87). Williams is quite clear on this point; as he argues, "determination of this whole kind – a complex of interrelated process of limits and pressures – is in the whole social process itself and nowhere else" (Williams 1977: 87). Because signifying practices are considered to be material, giving "causal primacy to the material cannot be the same as saying that economic relations of production and reproduction have a privileged role in explaining exactly what is going on" (McGuigan 2014: 182). Furthermore, according to Fuchs, the features of contemporary consumer economies that include the aestheticization of consumption and the selling of information, communication and audiences *as* commodities "requires rethinking the separation of the economy and culture" (Fuchs 2008). He argues, drawing on Williams and Marx, that "modern society [...] is made up of many interacting and interdependent spheres" which include the economy, politics,

everyday life, the public sphere, and the media, but "it is unlikely that all spheres and actors [...] have the same power" (Fuchs 2014a: 67). There are, as he puts it, "indications that the economic sphere has in capitalism always been the dominant [...] sphere" (Fuchs 2014a: 67). Wernick's work also substantiates this point, arguing that "the superstructural domain of expressive communication has been more and more absorbed [...] as a direct aspect of the sale of everything, into the integral workings of the commodified economic base" (Wernick: 1991: 185).

Totality, History and Culture

As both Williams and Best labor to show, the social totality is not a reductive and homogenizing concept. Postmodern theorists of convergence often misconstrue this totalizing orientation as such, but as Best argues, "totality refers to the systematicity of radical difference that constitutes a particular historical conjuncture" (Best 2010: 207). In other words, a totalizing critique is not the negation of difference but rather the acknowledgment of its condition of possibility. From this perspective, "totality is [...] simply another name for history" (Best 2010: 49). Drawing on Jameson (1971, 1981), Best argues that to insist on the category of totality is to "insist on a historical perspective [...] the invisible (except in its effects) structure into which human agents are born and which becomes for them the objective situation to which they are not free not to react" (Best 2010: 49). The category of totality expresses "a particular orientation to method", a way of historicizing an object of analysis through a process of defamiliarization and estrangement (Best 2010: 4).

> "defamiliarization and estrangement are the aesthetic expressions of the Marxian analytical movement of *historicization*, or the exposing of the historical conditions of the seemingly natural, ahistorical, and immutable social object, as well as, exposing the ensuing ideological consequences of the sedimentation of certain ways of seeing, situating, and understanding the social world" (Best 2010: 218).

Andrejevic articulates this dialectical point in a somewhat different but related manner: the challenge, he says, is "not simply to re-imagine infrastructural arrangements, but also

the knowledge practices with which they are associated" (Andrejevic 2013: 165). In other words, in line with Marx's analysis of the commodity-form, this approach concedes that the analysis of how capital is imagined, represented and fought over is "an indispensible aspect of the analysis of capitalist society" (Best 2014: 285).

Best offers a concise working definition of totality as an articulated network of the production process in market society. Social totality is on the one hand, *produced* by individuals on account of their collective participation in capitalist social relations and on the other hand, the very process by which individuals *are* produced, to the extent that they are born into objective structures "to which they are not free *not* to react" (Best 2010: 43-49). Yet she stresses that, "with respect to the relationship between cultural forms and wider social processes, Williams' sociology of culture requires that we not rest too comfortably [...] on the determining force of either social structure or intentional human agency" (Best 2012: 200). In other words, to argue for a relational conception of culture and economy is to theorize them as a *social totality*. This position does not, as Day puts it rather crudely, "*expect* a political text to unilaterally start a revolution" (Day 2011: 18). As Williams maintains, all cultural forms can serve as indexes of large social processes with "as much hermeneutic success as more sober cultural forms" (Best 2012: 192). A holistic, material analysis of any cultural form does not "rest on the question of its general identity with the dominant movement of the mode of production" (Best 2012: 198). It is not a question of merely pointing out the infrastructure, but drawing connections between "culturally endorsed" practices and texts, their link to "other economic practices" and the manner in which "these practices are sustained, challenged or legitimized" (McGuigan et al. 2014: 179). Satirical programming is not a simple reflection of economic process, but as Best puts it, its general identity with the capitalist mode of production "is the requisite ground for the definition of its particularity" (Best 2012: 198).

Williams insistence on understanding culture, communication and consciousness as materially and socially produced is important because the neglect of his work and method typifies a common disregard that fragments much cultural and media studies

scholarship (Best 2010). To attend to the structural process of commodity reification is not akin to neglecting agency or reducing the complexity of symbolic forms to proprietary concerns. Such caricatures in the literature reviewed tend to reify approaches to media and culture that are not *necessarily* incompatible. According to McGuigan, "it is always necessary in order to grasp the ontological complexity of culture in circulation to consider the relations between culture and political economy (McGuigan et al. 2014: 172). To continue to criticize and fragment approaches into different intellectual camps is, as Best suggests, "to reproduce the old-fashioned but not obsolete war of categories between structure and agency that continues even today by way of certain formal names such as Cultural Studies versus Critical Theory or, Cultural Studies versus Political Economy" (Best 2010: 202). Williams' materialist method, and Best's articulation of a Marxian aesthetic of political economy demonstrate the necessity of "holding these apparently competing conceptions of modern culture in the head simultaneously (Best 2010: 202). This thesis is inspired by such a commitment. Using satirical news as a cultural object, the intention was (and is) not to gloss over extremely complex debates in media studies but merely to qualify some of the most glaring caricatures.

3.3 The Question of Power: What Makes this Approach *Critical*?

If the measure of being critical is the ability to 'contribute to the conversation' by recognizing the artifice of contemporary media politics, then by all accounts, satirical news is succeeding. However, what does it mean when being critical amounts to simply "pushing alternative narratives" or "outsider" discourses to the mainstream (Day 2011: 21)? What does it mean to invoke the necessity of creating a "feeling of community in resistance" when that community relies almost exclusively on the ostensibly democratic features of interactive media (Day 2011: 22)? This study takes the position that to be critical requires more than this. It also argues that the programs' 'critical function' only *appears* as such based on the particular conceptual and methodological framework used by some scholars. In this regard, there is a need to articulate the stakes of a critical and dialectical approach to media and culture. What exactly makes this method *critical*? Why

is this important? And ultimately, how does this change our understanding of satire news? This final section is concerned with providing a tentative answer to the first two questions, leaving aside the remaining one for the final chapter.

A dialectal analysis of culture is critical in at least two ways that are relevant to this study. In its totalizing and aesthetic orientation, Marx's method facilitates an understanding of the complex interplay of cultural, economic, political and technological forces within a social *totality*. As Best argues, the characterization of cultural forms "as fragmented and atomized is an obstacle to understanding how the social world actually works in capitalist societies, that is, in a more complex, holistic and interconnected way" (Best 2010: 3). The dialectical orientation of Marx's method "has a critical function" to the extent that it challenges such ways of perceiving and conceptualizing the social world (Best 2010: 3). The intended shock of defamiliarization is produced by "recognizing material relationships and interconnections between various, apparently discrete and autonomous social spheres of practice in production-relationships and interconnections that have historically been submerged in popular perception and conventional representational practices" (Best 2010: 6). The trouble with the scholars in question, is that their premise for the 'critical function' of satire news ultimately rests on idealist, deterministic and uncritical assumptions about the public sphere, popular culture and digital media. This remains a significant shortcoming insofar as it *isolates* the function of satirical critique from the broader social totality in which it circulates. As the previous chapters demonstrated, it is relatively easier to make claims for the critical intervention of satire news when these programs are viewed strictly in the context of cultural and political communication. That the 'critical function' of satire news *changes* from an integrated perspective does not imply that the programs are "simply dismissed" as either irrelevant or manipulative (Day 2011: 17). The trouble with scholars like Jones, Baym and Day is that they hastily assume that a critical perspective automatically trumps the *legitimacy* of the cultural object in question. The previous sections of this chapter have shown that this is an erroneous assumption.

A dialectical approach to culture and media also enables scholars to discern and critique technologically deterministic assumptions embedded in the analysis of cultural forms like satire news. Such assumptions inevitably shape the extent to which some cultural forms are valued over others. In the case of satire news, I argued that there is a substantial relation between theories of convergence culture and the claims made for the programs' critical value. In this sense, to be 'critical' operates as an alibi for uncritical and deterministic assumptions about the democratic potential of digital media. To give one more example of this logic at work: following Baym's (2005) analysis of the TDS, media scholar Ted Gournelos argues that, "it is not only parody and satire that are at stake [...] but the fact that the impact and implications of these productions are often made so powerful because they are placed at the conjunctions between convergence and traditional media" (Gournelos 2009: 152). Part of the importance of satirical news for critical scholars is that it typifies in *form* and *practice* a recurrent ideological narrative that celebrates the critique of 'old' media in order to praise the liberating features of interactive technologies. As Andrejevic argues in the context of Reality TV, and as I laboured to demonstrate in the previous chapter with regards to satirical news, "it is precisely the equation of interactivity and participation that allows the celebrants of new media to herald the demise of what Habermas describes as refeudalization" (Andrejevic 2004: 218). I return to this point in sufficiently more detail in the final chapter.

A critical and dialectical approach does not simply *demonstrate* the interrelations between different social spheres (economy, culture, politics, technology), nor does it merely *counter* techno-deterministic assumptions with historical analyses that stress contradiction and complexity. It also shows *why* these positions serve the interests of some over others. It calls attention to the asymmetrical relations of power that enable the deployment of satirical 'critique' in order to commodify and profit from it. Rather than trumpeting the critical benefits of satirical programming, it calls attention to the interests served by their representation *as* 'critical'. There is a need to be cognizant of the ways in which this form of satirical critique is put to work in the service of ends that contradict and set limits on its intended promise. Instead, one finds in the literature, familiar ways of flattering the agency of audiences that are supposedly neglected by pessimistic critical

scholars. The definitional configuration of 'critical' is thus *one* way of attributing an inordinate measure of agency to contemporary consumers, and with the advent of interactive media, to the 'user-producer'. It functions as an inflationary concept that valorizes specific forms of contestation while deflecting attention from their social context. Here, to be critical is to expose the artifice of contemporary media spectacles, to chastise politicians for their follies, and by extension, to expand the range of perspectives through dialogue. The result, as Andrejevic suggests, is that the particular reflexive modality of audiences "aligns itself with the exaltation of the compensatory world of popular culture" (Andrejevic 2007: 252). Audiences privy to satirical programming are encouraged to be more critical, which implies a level of savvy reflexivity, which in turn is evidence of increased forms of empowerment and popular agency. In this case, the result is a rather one-dimensional analysis bolstered by the fetishisation of a specific type of critique on account of its *formal* similarities (redactional qualities) with interactive media.

Best's interpretation of Williams' method proves indispensible for a critical analysis since it reiterates the importance of a dialectical and productive tension between structure and agency. She maintains that, "the moment we identify the force of human intention [...] in a social narrative, [...] we must resituate that instance of willful human agency with respect to the attendant forces of social structure that overdetermine it" (Best 2012: 197). This means that sites of critical agency are always possible, that audiences are not passive dopes, but that "all struggles necessarily have an economic dimension" (Fuchs 2014a: 67). To relate a cultural form like satirical news to its broader context within the social totality is to be cognizant that such a context is one fraught with "domination, asymmetrical power relations, exploitation, oppression and control" (Fuchs 2011: 113). Cultural analyses that simply celebrate popular culture and their forms of agency are quite limited and grossly misleading if they absolve themselves from such concerns.

To historicize satirical news, is to refer it back to its conditions of possibility, its historical context – the social totality – which "offers up [this object] as one of its cultural

forms" (Best 2012: 194). To call into question the allegedly 'critical function' of satire news is to demonstrate how this function is embedded in existing relations of power that limit, absorb and ultimately acclimatize to its tactical interventions. On the one hand, the benefits of a dialectical and critical approach is that it grounds and contextualizes "celebratory claims of rupture and transformation" by considering precisely the historical continuities that make the appearance of novelty and change possible (Andrejevic 2009: 36). Is satire news really *that* critical? And how 'radical' is this media environment that appears to cater so seamlessly to its type of critique? On the other hand, it considers precisely what is novel about a cultural form like satire news that "makes such continuity possible" (Andrejevic 2009: 36). In what ways does satirical news typify and enable existing relations of power? What sorts of collective desire does this mode of critique express? What forms of agency are discernible and in what ways are they exploited? As I argued in the previous two chapters, the literature on satire news is noticeably silent on most of these points.

3.4 Conclusion

The aim of this chapter was to emphasize the conceptual utility and necessity of a critical approach for the analysis of cultural forms by qualifying some of the more simplistic assumptions about Marxist theory. It relied substantially on Best's Marxian aesthetic of political economy and Raymond Williams' sociology of culture as a way articulating the theory and method that informs this study's approach to satirical news. It detailed the logic and shifting modalities of commodity reification at work in contemporary market societies including branding practices, intensified forms of aestheticized consumption and the exploitation of digital fan-labor. The chapter also stressed how a critical and totalizing method is non-reductive, complex and presumes the integration of various 'spheres' like the economy, culture, the public sphere and technology. Finally, it called into question the casual manner in which the concept of 'critical' is deployed as an alibi for popular agency and uncritical celebrations of digital media, by clarifying the stakes of a Marxist approach to media and culture (i.e. what makes it *critical*). The final chapter seeks to demonstrate the applicability and necessity of a critical dialectical perspective to the study of satire news. The aim is not to categorically dismiss the merits of the literature in

question but to show that the claims made for the critical function of these programs fail to measure up to their respective ideals. I do not claim to exhaust the complexity of the cultural form in question since, as Best reminds us, "the method of mapping a totalized point of view, is *never* complete" (Best 2010: 191). However, given the substantial amount of scholarly work devoted to celebrating and cataloguing all the ways in which satire news is critical, it seems feasible to provide a different figure of the cultural object by attending to the structural restraints that function as the programs' material backdrop.

4 The Promise of Satire News: A Materialist Assessment

The tendency to extol the critical and pedagogical function of satire news simply refuses to consider the actual conditions under which this potential is being deployed and enabled. This chapter addresses this gap and provides a critically integrated assessment of the genre's modalities of critique. The chapter is divided into two main sections. The first addresses the role of satire news as a form of media and political critique. It calls into question the level of autonomy given to satire news by focusing on the programs' political economic and genre constraints. It argues that this context compromises the 'radical' or 'critical' pretensions made on behalf of the programs. The second section gives equal consideration to the programs' branding practices and strategies, including savvy forms of 'cool' consumption and the commodification and exploitation of online fan-labor that increasingly complicate their pedagogical value.

4.1 Is Satire News Really That Critical?

The political-economic context of TDS and TCR can inform the degree to which satirical news programs challenge hegemonic discourses. Importantly, public affairs parody is dependent on the dire state of mainstream news for its editorial content. The current state of the media and its relation to Post-Fordist models of production has been well-documented by political economists and critical media scholars. The continuing expansion of cable television and satellite delivery systems, the increasing speed and instantaneity of information transmission provided by digital platforms and the emergence of cheap, portable and easy-to-use mobile devices have all contributed to significant declines in profitability for mainstream news (McChesney 1999; Schiller 2007; Compton and Benedetti 2010; Davis 2013; Pew 2014). The increasing availability of mass forms of customized information has resulted in audiences migrating away from conventional media outlets. One of the results has been aggressive efforts to consolidate corporate media ownership and to increasingly rationalize the working conditions of journalists as a means of both cutting costs and limiting profit-making risks. This vertical and horizontal integration contributes to a decline in public service journalism and exacerbates a crisis of legitimacy in democratic institutions (McChesney 2011). Market demands for more news has led to what Aeron Davies calls a "systemic dependency on

information subsidy and supply" (Davies 2013: 96). This means that journalists are increasingly dependent on a shrinking range of resources that are progressively more susceptible to instrumental and promotional logics. They are also continuously under pressure and expected "to produce more and more with fewer and fewer resources" (Davis 2013: 96). This has had tangible effects on critical-public dialogue since as Davis puts it rather crudely, "what exists is increasingly watered-down, under-researched and checked, cannibalistic, rehashed, and highly dependent on PR materials" (Davis 2013: 98). Professional journalistic practices have long been critiqued for the way they operate as alibis for the reproduction of a dominant and consensual political culture (Hall et al. 1978, Hackett and Zhao 1998). The reality is that claims to professional autonomy and objectivity are in part, "a promotional confidence trick of the industry itself", that is, despite clinging to ostensibly democratic values, it functions in the service of big business.

TDS and TCR exist within the same political-economic context and are not exempt from this media environment. Satire news, like mainstream news, is bound by similar market pressures, most obviously, its ability to package and sell audiences based on content. Viacom is one of the most powerful media corporations dominating the market with a near monopoly on the American culture industry (McChesney 1999; Bagdikian 2004). Narrowcasting practices that fragment audiences into niche markets may allow for the possibility of developing controversial material characterized by specialised and "intensive narrative investment" (Day 2011: 53). Amongst other things however, TDS and TCR allow their parent networks to attract and commodify the coveted 18-49 demographic. Niche-cable networks like Comedy Central rely on the specificity of their audience – an audience more likely to appreciate and expect contentious forms of programming. Satiric programming becomes a marker of "distinction for both [Comedy Central] and audiences alike—forms of smart (or puerile) television that provide distinctive appeal and a seemingly unique perspective on the world not found elsewhere on television" (Gray et al. 2009: 14).

Meagan Boler argues that "political satire cannot be dismissed simply as a medium complicit with the monstrous media power that sustains it, because it is precisely

this often-stated complicity with power that makes the truth of the fake news so effective" (Boler 2008: 399). There is merit to this claim, and the point is not to dispute the fact that redaction creates new textual content and alternative meanings; a clip satirically deconstructed by Stewart and his team will signify differently running on Fox News. However, the notion that satire news provides a "way of talking about politics in a language that sits outside discourses of power" is grossly misleading (Jones 2010: 251). The argument that a certain institutional freedom abstains satire news from the conventions of journalism downplays the extent to which the genre filters content through its own set of rhetorical norms that are no less 'neutral' and 'natural' than their journalistic counterpart. For one, the limits of parody and satire constrict how and when stories are selected for deconstruction. As Stewart has put it in his celebrated Crossfire appearance, his program thrives on 'the absurdity of the system' (Crossfire 2004). It is true that certain professional affordances like the "fair-use shield" enables 'fake' news to report on and critique media and politicians (Boler 2008: 24). To quote McChesney, TDS and TCR are not required "to adopt the asinine professional practices of mainstream journalism, especially the requirement to regurgitate [...] whatever people in power say" (McChesney 2011: 1). This 'relation' would be unthinkable for professional journalists, who continue to rely on long-standing mechanisms of professional norms of 'objectivity' to gather and report sources. However the scholars considered in this study tend to go a little further in their assessment. For Gournelos, satire news is not simply relying on mainstream news, it "inhabits the news [...] *as it could exist*" and responds to both its content and *structure* (Gournelos 2009: 154). In other words, satirists like Stewart and Colbert "sift through contemporary news stories to find elements in which 'the absurdity of the system' becomes most manifest" and juxtapose it to what "they *think* should be news" (Gournelos 2009: 154). What they *think* however, is informed by a certain conception of politics and a number of assumptions regarding the role of the media and civic life, none of which guarantees a critical or progressive discourse. In other words, is satire news really all that counter-hegemonic?

One salient feature of contemporary political culture is the reduction of evidence based claims to a matter of politics – "an ersatz democratization of competing claims in which the criteria for adjudication are themselves called into question" (Žižek 1999;

Andrejevic 2013: 83). An increasingly dominant political strategy in advanced capitalist democracies has been the emergence of 'post-truth politics' (Andrejevic 2013: 9; Fallows 2012). The concept designates "a cynical and ultimately conservative realism" that correlates with Colbert's critique of *truthiness* (Andrejevic 2013: 137). Here the epistemic grounds for adjudicating between competing facts is compromised and challenged by argumentative banter. In addition to the political economy of media, the surfeit of affect and information provide a context in which such political strategies become plausible. Post-truthism is as Andrejevic argues, a "small-c conservative strategy" and a common target of satirical critique (Andrejevic 2013: 9). The result however is often mixed and ambivalent at best. This can be partially explained by understanding the conception of politics typified by both TDS and TCR. The result is that the humor on TDS and TCR tends to ingratiate power structures rather threaten them.

A depoliticized centre-left pluralism operates as the backdrop for the rehabilitation of conflict on the programs. It is a form of antagonism that provides biting criticism while invoking a populist appeal to common-sense values like tolerance, moderation and trust. The points of contention for TDS and TCR tend to be a polarized citizenry marked by a decline in civil public discourse and the absurdity of political echo-chambers that pass for democratic deliberation. Critical scholarship has demonstrated that in practice, this liberal position tends to be complicit with neoliberal market values because it accepts its basic terms of condition (Dean 2006, 2009; Žižek 2008). The same can be said with regards to the programs. In addition, as Anderson and Kincaid have noted with regards to TCR, there is an often unacknowledged "pro-corporate propriety embedded in the [show's] discourse" (Anderson and Kincaid 2013: 182). For instance, Colbert has had a longstanding running gag with Apple in which he pleads for free products on air. In 2012, Apple used the satirical host to unveil its latest iPad at the Grammys, to which an amused Colbert asked rhetorically, "Does this make me look cool?" (Grammys 2012). In 2014, he satirized the promotional extravaganza surrounding the announcement of Apple's new iPhones, Apple Pay and the Apple watch. Colbert ridiculed the company's zealousness over its own products and poked fun at the obvious similarities of each ostensibly 'new' device. It is tempting to read this skit as a critique of Apple's self-involvement and hyper-marketing practices. However, a more circumspect

reading would see it as an inadvertent form of semi-subversive promotion. This is evidenced by Apple integrating Colbert into their branding efforts just weeks after the skit was aired. The host made a 'surprise' cameo appearance at an iPad event where he conference called Apple software head Craig Federighi (Colbert: Apple).

The programs' often complacent discourse is far from radical democratic goals. This is typified in several 'out-of-character' interviews by both hosts and most succinctly, in Stewart's self-described "sincerity speech" in the 2010 Rally to Restore Sanity and/or Fear (Rally 2010). In his concluding remarks, Stewart extolled the virtues of tolerance, level-headed discourse and political moderation. The hosts mobilized a vision of the "70 and 80 percenters" (an obvious reference to the Occupy movement two years earlier); "why would you work with Marxists actively subverting our constitution" posed Stewart, "or racists and homophobes who see no one's humanity but their own?" (Rally 2010). In several parodic skits, and following the dominant themes from the 2010 speech, TDS' coverage of the Occupy movement in 2011 was remarkably in line with a number of mainstream news outlets. The political struggles were consistently individualized and the protestors often ridiculed and framed as selfish moochers barely capable of articulating reasons for being there (Cissel 2012; TDS Occupy 2011). Another example can be gleaned through Stewart's recent interview with conservative Fox News anchor Bill O'Reilly. In response to the Fergusson riots in Missouri, Stewart invited O'Reilly on his program for an extended interview segment. The stated purpose was to promote O'Reilly's latest book, Killing Paton. Stewart quickly admitted that he had yet to read the book and confessed that the 'real' reason O'Reilly was on the show was to engage in an open dialogue on white privilege in America. According to O'Reilly, “America is now a place where if you work hard, get educated, and you're an honest person, you can succeed." He then went on to dispute the claim of white privilege by suggesting candidly that *all* Asian Americans "make more money." Bewildered, Stewart responds with a confused stutter before moving on. O'Reilly quickly retorts: "sorry to confuse you with facts" (TDS O'Reilly 2014). By the end of the interview, O'Reilly scoffs at one of the audience members heckling him: "You think I'm sitting here because I'm white? What are you a moron? I'm sitting here because I'm obnoxious, not because I'm white!" (O'Reilly 2014). His response is met with a surprising applause from an audience that until then,

had chastised most of his comments. Near the end of the interview, O'Reilly finally concedes that "being white" is a "factor" and Stewart erupts in applause: "this was a beautiful moment in healing, between not just black and white, Jew and Irish, tall and short; this was a historic moment, [...] your humility has moved me" (O'Reilly 2014). Presumably, to have a conservative mouthpiece like O'Reilly own up to the reality of white privilege was a testimony to the power of reasoned dialogue.

The interview is complex, and like most of the programming, quite paradoxical. It interweaves issues of race, urban gentrification, class and economic inequalities. It is peppered with a conservative rhetoric regarding the contingency of 'facts', neoliberal values and a pluralist plea for tolerance and mutual understanding. Yet, what really stands out in the interview is Stewart's attempt to find common ground by using humor as a way of defusing an otherwise antagonistic situation. As he puts it, "acknowledging the reality" of white privilege goes a long way towards "healing that resentment" (O'Reilly 2014).

Satirical news programs simultaneously constitute, maintain and respond to a growing populist distrust of media institutions and politicians. As Boler argues, audiences respond to satirical critique "because it pokes holes in the edifice of lies that have been built" (Boler 2008: 22). The success of the programs' is not reducible to their entertainment or comedic value. As Jones puts it, satirical news is "a discourse situated within the fissures of a discontented political culture" (Jones 2013: 297). These shows resonate for a number of democratically laudable reasons, and yet, satire news continues to be praised by some scholars precisely because its politico-cultural imaginaries are homologous with their own liberal-pluralist assumptions. Stewart's closing remarks to O' Reilly typify this framework when he praises level-headed civility. Moreover, scholars like the ones reviewed in this research tend to overstate satire news' autonomy based on misleading (or one-sided) assumption about the contemporary media environment. The spin, gloss and "bullshit" so vilified by satirical news and scholars is the part mistaken for the whole (Gournelos 2009: 155). As the support and resources afforded to journalists shrink, so do the range of issues covered and so does the "overlapping knowledge base" required for meaningful political discussion (Andrejevic 2007: 205). Following

McChesney, we can argue that critiques of media and journalism are also about the labor involved in producing news and the systemic pressures generated by the working conditions in media conglomerates. As he puts it:

> "As [...] mainstream journalism shrivels, as newsrooms downsize and close up shop, what Stewart and Colbert have to work with may improve as low-hanging fruit susceptible to satire, but the range of issues shrinks. And the ability of thoughtful Americans to turn to these programs as some sort of corrective to and substitute for mainstream news diminishes" (McChesney 2011: 2).

The result is a kind of ironic metacoverage that filters and re-circulates content to niche audiences who already anticipate the content of the programs.

Scholars tread murky waters when they start to romanticize the prevalence of satire and its intended effects. For instance, Gray et al. argue that it is in historical "periods of social and political rupture [...] or mind-numbing manufactured realities (such as celebrity culture, media spin, and news management) [that] satire becomes a potent means of enunciating critiques and asserting unsettling truths that audiences may need or want to hear" (Gray et al. 2009: 15). Baym mimics this argument and suggests that "it is in such times that satire most readily appears" (Baym 2005: 268). This kind of argument however, tends to reify satirical news by extrapolating from its rhetorical features an 'essential' form of critique that rears its head when 'the going tends to get tough'. To hear some of the more upbeat defenses of TDS, one gets the impression that Stewart is a modern-day Diogenes, simply following in a long lineage of satirists dating back to the Greek Cynics of antiquity (Bárcenas 2009). Yet, as Jameson instructs us with regards to pop cultural genres, "the generic forms and signals of mass culture are very specifically to be understood as the historical reappropriation and displacement of older structures in the service of the qualitatively very different situation of repetition" (Jameson 1979: 137). In other words, satirical news as a *genre* must be understood in its historical specificity which requires close attention to the development of novel ways of capitalizing on public discontent.

This section has demonstrated that the political economy of satire news exerts structural pressures that complicate the genre's role as critical purveyor of media and

politics. Satire news may operate outside beltway politics, but its hypertextual and redactive performances operate firmly within the hegemonic cultural imaginary. Far from seriously critiquing the 'structure of news', TDS and TCR are embedded in its perpetuation. Far from providing a high level of counter-hegemonic discourse, the programs are often complicit in the reproduction of what Best calls a "dominant perceptual modality" (Best 2010: 182). As Anderson and Kincaid argue, "the comedy on TDS and TCR remains an irreverent, contradictory, pacifying and potentially volatile force" (Anderson and Kincaid 2013: 183). Yet, what about the claims made for the programs' pedagogical value? Surely there is a strong argument to be made that teaching audiences how to deconstruct and poke fun at media texts through digital technologies is a laudable democratic goal? In her interview with Geert Lovink, Boler remarks that her studies of political satire suggest a cultural contradiction between "media savvy and skeptical viewers who are aware that all truths are constructed [...] and a recurrent theme of demanding truthful accounts from media and politicians" (Boler 2008: 130). Her point is well taken: it is easy to chastise TDS and TCR audiences for their alleged complacency and fashionable cynicism and much harder to square that proposition with the fact that their allegiance to the shows express (in whatever capacity) a desire for accountability. My intent is not to dispute this claim, but to explore the ways in which this 'demand for truthfulness' is monetized.

One of the most significant gaps in the literature on satire news is its neglect of aestheticized forms of engaged consumption and the exploitation of online fandom. What sorts of repercussions does this have on satire news' pedagogical merits? Is it really leading to a generation of young savvy audiences keeping the powerful in check? A critical media theory tries to grasp "the efficacy of speaking truth to power", that is, it considers the likelihood that in the current social context, the exposure of artifice through satirical humour is increasingly anemic as critical strategy and an important source of value for corporations (Andrejevic 2013: 6). The collective desire for some measure of accountability and the frustrating recognition that, as Boler writes, "we are being lied to", operates in conjunction with promotional strategies that increasingly work to ingratiate and channel this desire towards other means of value extraction (Boler 2008: 131). New media have been pivotal in this regard; satire news is big business that increasingly relies

on the value-enhancing labor of its online audiences and sophisticated data mining technologies that look to aggregate and monitize viewers by monitoring their online activities. This claim is not just an 'optional' vantage point amidst a buffet of possible sites of academic inquiry but the material backdrop that works to constrain and profit from what little remains of the genre's pedagogical value.

4.2 Branding and the 'Aesthetics of Cool': Valorizing Satirical News

The exponential success of satirical news programs likes TDS and TCR since 2005 coincides with the increasing promotional mandate of social media platforms like Facebook YouTube, Twitter and Tumblr. Despite some scholars being quite forthright in their rhetoric of digital empowerment, the fact is that cable television and online viewing systems like YouTube are increasingly interdependent; indeed, they rely on similar political-economic conditions and cultural trends. Rather than being replaced or overthrown by new media platforms, cable and satellite television "are quickly becoming part of social media's logic" and vice-versa (Van Dijk 2009: 111). For scholars like Jones and Baym, the legal battles between Viacom and Google/YouTube over content distribution is evidence of the 'power of social media' to exert pressures on stubborn media conglomerates who refuse to get 'hip' with online sharing and collaboration. For years, Comedy Central fought to remove its intellectual property (most notably satire news) from social media platforms, claiming copyright infringement. Yet, by 2007, video snippets of the programs were fully integrated into its YouTube Channel in addition to being archived for free viewing on the company's website. By 2009, both TDS and TCR shut down their respective message boards and aggregated that content to their Facebook pages. Snippets from both shows are now widely circulated and promoted through platforms like YouTube or collected and shared using the shows' Facebook and Twitter pages. In 2010, TDS brokered a deal with SnapStream Media Inc., while TCR followed suite in 2011. The company provides a video capture, search and editing system that records hours of television and uses closed captioning to aggregate searches for key words and phrases. The company's CEO Rakesh Agrawal refers to it as "a cross between a DVR and a search engine" (Alumnus Spotlight 2015). According to Pat King, one of

TDS's senior producers, the technology has enabled programs like satire news to cut production time by more than 60 percent (Maglio 2014). As the technology expands and converges with a client's social media presence, the ability to monitor, track, record, assess and intervene in promotional activities grows significantly.

Some scholars may interpret these trends as insignificant in light of the genre's subversive and pedagogical function. However, what they signal and reflect is a longer historical tendency to offload labour costs and find novels ways of monetizing critical discussion and forms of dissension. This shift in corporate priority is not evidence of benevolent or progressive politics at work, but a recognition, amongst other things, that "the valuable combination of UGC (user-generated content) and PGC (professionally-generated content) attracts the interests of advertisers" (Van Dijk 2009: 121). Since 2006, which coincides with the hiring of then director of digital marketing Don Steele, there has been a deliberate and instrumental shift towards promotional tactics that directly rely on the creativity and savvyness of audiences. Not coincidentally, Steele continues to work for Comedy Central, but his former job title has been changed to Senior Vice President of multi-platform marketing and fan engagement. This shift is subtle but suggestive. In television marketing circles, Comedy Central is considered an innovator in its approach to fandom as it continues to rely substantially on its satirical programming as a creative draw-point. This final section considers satire news' pedagogical promise alongside its promotional aesthetic and online branding strategies. One way of doing this and resituating satirical critique back into its social, industrial and promotional context, is to pay close attention to what I refer to as the 'aesthetics of cool'. This term is drawn primarily from the work of Arvidsson (2006) and McGuigan (2009; 2011; 2012). I argue that the critical function of satire news - its tactics, interventions and pedagogical merits - goes hand-in-hand with this constitutive trend. The concept of 'cool' is applied largely as an organizational schema, an aesthetic category used to interrogate the popular genre in relation to different “spheres of social practice" (Andrejevic 2004: 24). It suggests that satire news draws on a series of interconnected cultural imaginaries - digital empowerment, democratic interactivity, savvy critique, populist distrust of news media - and deploys them as a means of capitalizing on its brand of comedic programming.

'Dare to Watch Our Programs': Cool Seduction and Satire News

Missing from the social history of satire news is its relation to contemporary branding practices and the implications this holds for its ostensibly democratic and pedagogical function. There is a rather straightforward rationale for using the concept of 'cool' as a way into the discussion: it appears in both popular and scholarly discourse as an apt description of satirical programming. For example, Newsweek once referred to TDS as "the coolest pit stop on television" (Peyser 2003). Empirical research conducted with fans of the programs have all substantiated such colloquial claims. Extensive quantitative interviews suggests that the programs are repeatedly perceived "as a cool brand" by most youth (Cassino et al. 2009: 100). In fact, the studies found that the *perception* of the genre as 'cool' is often given priority over its political viewpoint and content (Cassino et al. 2009: 140). Federighi boasted that he had the "coolest job on earth" because he was able to conference call Colbert for their iPad event (Colbert: Apple). What exactly does 'cool' refer to in the contemporary moment? The concept's usage is associated with "a kind of achieved defiance", an individualized sensibility that "produces and assembles" a type of hedonic opposition combined with a rebellious cynicism (Arvidsson 2006: 77).[2] McGuigan identifies the process of cool seduction as a dominant promotional aesthetic of contemporary capitalism. He draws insights from the work of Thomas Frank (1997), Boltanski and Chiappelo (2005) and Pountain and Robbins (2000) to provide a working definition of his concept as "the incorporation of disaffection into capitalism" (McGuigan 2009: 1). He has in mind more than a shift in managerial ideology, but a dominant "semiological framing of cultural meaning" that increasingly extends "into the texture and common sense of everyday life" (McGuigan 2011: 11; McGuigan 2012: 431). Succinctly put, 'cool' refers to the construction of forms of acquiescence that are embedded in the promotion of commodities and increasingly, in customized brand 'experiences'.

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[2] Pountain and Robbins (2000) provide a useful genealogical history of the concept.

The function of 'cool' can be gleaned by paying attention to the changing aesthetics and corporate priorities of Comedy Central since 1999. The network typifies a shift from the ‘life-style advertising' of the 1960s to forms of 'interactive' brand management. The 'life-style' advertising model, with its emphasis on anticipating "a certain attitude, mode or feeling" is a residual precursor to contemporary branding practices (Arvidsson 2006: 61-64). The products of life-style advertising place a strong emphasis on the active construct of meaning by consumers. It relies on "evocative and narrative [forms of] address that focus on the emotional and psychological characteristics, needs, and fears of consumers" while at the same time remaining flexible enough to allow them the freedom to identify themselves with the brand in question (Ewen 2001; Best 2011: 79). Satirical news shows rarely encourage audiences to buy merchandise (T-Shirts, books, DVDs etc.) although certainly they can do this. Stewart and Colbert have endorsed authors, artists and public figures, but seldom have they explicitly promoted the shows' own product lines. This is directly linked to the promotional strategies of the network; there continues to be a deliberate effort by Comedy Central to avoid marketing itself as a 'lifestyle' channel. Because a heightened media literacy and consumer savviness makes audiences "less likely to accept traditional hard sell advertising messages, [...] a growing importance is attached to the ability to create the brand as a mediatic ambience" (Arvidsson 2006: 76). Irony and reflexivity are standard operating procedures for networks looking to ingratiate their younger audiences. For programs like TDS and TCR, the goal is not necessarily to promote its content but to actively construct a context where knowledge practices and experiences - ways of thinking, interpreting and critiquing - are redirected and monetized. This was explicitly stated by top executives at Comedy Central in 2001: "Comedy Central is not a lifestyle channel [...] Dare to watch our programs and you might think in a different way" (Endrst 2001). The discourse has remained relatively the same since then with an added qualification. The goal, as Steele puts it, is to develop an "organic relation to the platforms they use so that we can become part of the conversations they have" (Steele 2013).

The process of 'cool seduction' has nothing to do with the intellectual capabilities of viewers, but with the deliberate construction of savvy subject-positions that continue to address audiences as consumers rather than citizens. Crucially, McGuigan also

identifies this process as a "salient feature" of techno-utopian rhetoric (McGuigan 2012: 434). In advanced consumer societies, the mythology around mobile gadgetry and digital interactivity is intimately complicit with the flattery of audiences as 'non-dupes'. In considering the rhetoric of interactivity and marketing, Andrejevic argues that critiques of contemporary mass media are often "accompanied by an uncritical celebration of the inherently progressive virtues of participation" (Andrejevic 2004: 111). Satire news reflects and partakes in this narrative and uses it as a marker of distinction. Lots of scholarly work places a significant emphasis on the programs' abilities to teach audiences how to expose the lies, misinformation and absurdities of the dominant political and media culture. This exposure is then correlated with what Baym refers to as an "emerging cultural milieu defined by the increasing proclivity toward participation in content production and a more acute critical consciousness" (Baym 2010: 164). Some like Benkler, extrapolate this logic even further, suggesting that interactive technologies cater to audiences that are "less susceptible to manipulation by others than they were in the mass-media culture" (Benkler 2006: 130). Or as Van Heertrum puts it, "youth today are not naive dupes that critical theorists saw in the 50s"; satire news encourages and is complicit in a level of savviness that contradicts sweeping indictments of mass culture (Van Heertrum 2011: 127). There are reasons to be skeptical of this argument, some of which have already been mentioned in the previous chapters. For one, this assumption relies on a fallacious opposition between passive recipients of 'old media' and active participants of 'new media' as a way of celebrating the 'critical' agency conferred onto users of digital technologies (Andrejevic 2007; Van Dijck 2013: 42-46). The move from 'interactive participation' to 'critical consciousness' is certainly not obvious. At the same time, the argument shares close affinities to Comedy Central's branding rhetoric and strategies. There is thus a need to be cognizant of the ways in which satirical critique is put to work in the service of ends that contradict and set limits on its democratic promise.

Satire News and 'Content Experience': The Work of Savvy Critique

The cultural currency of satirical programming is converted into economic capital in part by exploiting the value-enhancing labor of its key demographic. Drawing on Colbert fandom studies, Baym reiterates the sense of 'empowerment' experienced by

'active' viewers of the programs (Burwell and Boler 2008). He provides a quote from a devotee of the show who suggests that "other fandoms are just passively running alongside the limos of their objects of fanship; we're doing tango with ours" (Baym 2010: 151). The ambivalence of this assertion is lost on Baym who points to it as a sign of active political engagement. Ironically, the statement can just as easily be construed as encouraging a type of cultural smugness often attributed to critical theorists. Fans of 'other' programs are dupes blindly worshipping their hosts; here at ColbertNation, we *really* are empowered to think critically and participate in the programming. Yet, the broader material context is sidestepped in trying to figure out if and when audiences are passive or active. As Andrejevic argues, "the advent of interactive media highlights what has been true all along: that *all* audiences are active, although perhaps not in the progressive sense the term has come to imply (Andrejevic 2008: 25). Fan 'engagement' like Wikipedia vandalism, participating in online voting contests and 'liking' Facebook pages are not necessarily evidence of democratic empowerment, although, under specific circumstances, it may be true. More certain, is that they contribute to "the brand equity of commodity-signs" where loyalty to the programs adds "to the ethos of [the] brand", its symbolic and cultural capital (McAllister 2011: 162). Steele is quite frank about this strategy. As he says, "we're more than just TV, we're a brand" and this means "allowing [fans] to [market our products] for us" (Client Spotlight 2013). Consideration of the programs' pedagogical value must account for this fact.

The merit of Baym's and others' work, is that they highlight the ambivalence of satirical texts and the importance of contextual practices as different groups mobilize the same video clip towards diverse and contradictory ends. But to extrapolate from this a level of critical engagement akin to political activism elides an analysis of the political economic context in which appropriation occurs. Arvidsson's work demonstrates how the incorporation of disaffection and critique – a key component of the concept of cool – is increasingly amenable to forms of online interactive exploitation. With regards to the 'aesthetics of cool', he writes:

> coolness refers to the capacity on the part of consumers in their collective production of meaning [...] to produce private and apolitical forms of resistance or

> evasion in relation to the power of marketing and other institutions of consumer culture. [...] capturing cool is a matter of incorporating and profiting from the resistance that consumers spontaneously produce (Arvidson 2006: 73).

Satirical news typifies this logic in form and instrumentalizes consumer resistance by providing a context in which savvy disillusionment can be appropriated for commercial gain. None of this denies that such efforts can be unsuccessful. Yet it is clear that the primary marketing focus, one of the means by which the satirical brand gains value, is on the construction of a context of 'critical engagement', one that encourages active participation and practices of 'denaturalisation' through humour.

The threshold and level of tolerance for biting forms of public commentary may have grown, but the relations of power that underwrite them are still 'determined' (in Williams' sense) by the same economic imperatives. In an online economy that requires mass-customized forms of interaction and fan engagement, forms of ironic redaction are increasingly integrated into the development of the brand. As Arvidsson demonstrates, this strategy is directly tied to the "transformation of informational interfaces" available to marketers, that is, the technological ability to procure information from consumers (Arvidsson 2006: 64). Satire news, by mobilizing the rhetoric of digital empowerment and equating populist savvy with critique, expands the reach of its brand while gaining incredible access to detailed information about their customers. This is a residual effect of a broader shift in audience measurement by Viacom. Drops in cable ratings are directly related to ad revenue, and for a company whose networks (like Comedy Central) are tailored to young media-savvy audiences, the ability to track and analyse audiences who use multiple platforms is crucial. In 2014 Comedy Central reported a 15% decrease in ratings, but CEO Phillipe Dauman, insists that the numbers are misleading and a result of an outdated Neilson ratings system (Szalai 2014). As he puts it in reference to Viacom, "we are in a transitional moment where the existing measurement services have not caught up to the marketplace [...] they are trying to catch up [...] I'm sure they will eventually [but] in the meantime we are not waiting for that" (Szalai: 2014). In an effort to distance the company from a dependence on ratings for revenue, Viacom's aim is to negotiate at least 50% of its ad sales using alternative systems like in-house audience

analysis units. Not surprisingly, Comedy Central is at the frontline of this shift. The network already relies on its own 'embedded' research team which has the advantage of making data presentation easily accessible to advertisers. It also means that Comedy Central spends inordinate amounts of labour-time employing individuals to explore the conversations on social media platforms and intervene as they see fit. The recent adoption of a technology like SnapStream greatly facilitates this process. The network employs sophisticated data mining techniques to comb through the plethora of commentary on their programs' different platform pages. Steele describes this as the aggregation and use of "data discovered affinity" to better market their brand (Client Spotlight: 2014). Because they are topical, 'cool' and smart, satirical news programs are treasure troves for their network because they generate inordinate amounts of audience response and interaction.

At the same time, online fan sites devoted to extending, discussing and sharing the program's satirical brand of critique are doing so under contrived circumstances as the shows become increasingly shaped by social media's handful of interfaces. Research on Facebook's proprietary algorithms have demonstrated that the 'like' button and other similar features implicitly filter and work in favor of some users over others (Bucher 2012; Van Dijck 2013). The problem, according to Van Dijck, "is that users cannot know exactly how this filter works" (Van Dijck 2013: 49). Interestingly, a notable feature of Steele's conference talk was his candid awareness of how all this seemed to work and crucially, how to benefit from it. For example, rather than just linking a YouTube clip to their Facebook page, TDS and TCR are now streamed using Facebook's video player. The reason is relatively straightforward: Facebook's algorithm gives priority to its native video player because it facilitates consumer data collection and targeted advertising. For Comedy Central, this means significant increases in visibility, or as Steele puts it "more love" from the platform (Digital Summit 2013). “Underneath this user-centered rationale of connectedness,” argues van Dijck, “is the owner-centered logic of connectivity” (van Dijck 2013: 50). In the process, following van Dijck, everyday cultural practices of satirical news fans swapping stories and video clips “become algorithmically mediated interactions in the corporate sphere” (Van Dijck 2013: 65).

For Steele, the more you pander to Facebook, the better you will do on their algorithm and the same is true for other competing platforms. This is a strong reminder that there is clear difference between the available resources of a single online user and that of Comedy Central. Steele's familiarity with how to use and 'manipulate' different social media platforms is not knowledge that fans of TDS and TCR are privilege to and even if they were, they certainly lack the resource 'clout' to seriously benefit from it. This is the exact opposite of satire news 'freely iterating' outside the confines of the television screen and morphing into critical online resources for democratically engaged citizens. Social media platforms are sites of institutional mediation that change the context of satirical criticism. They are not neutral; they tend to work for the purposes of advertisers and corporations. This does not exclude the possibility of activist engagement through satirical news but it does suggest a deceptively instrumental approach to content distribution that dictates "whether, when and how items are presented to particular audiences for attention" (Turrow 2011:18).

Satire news' pedagogical promise is its ability to map and orient savvy audiences by encouraging them to 'perceive' the hidden realities that are obscured by commercial media. Yet, if satirical redaction is the creation of new and meaningful content from existing materials, the aesthetic modality of 'cool' signals the deployment of this content towards ends that continue to serve dominant corporate interests. Extending Todd Gitlin's (1995) work on political 'insider talk', Andrejevic suggests that the flattering of savvy audiences "becomes a strategy for protecting artifice by exposing it" (Andrejevic 2004: 16). A similar logic is at work in the circulation of the satirical commodity. The process of cool in brand management involves more than just the ironic appropriation of forms of cultural resistance. It goes beyond the fact that some scholars tend to easily conflate forms of textual deconstruction with democratic accountability. It is also about putting a certain savvy form of critique to work for the purposes of the brand. Tactics like overidentification, redaction, demystification and debunking are specifically well-suited to interactive technologies. In fact, what makes satirical programming so valuable for producers is its kinship with the logic of social media platforms since, as Van Dijck argues, in an interactive online economy, "the user's role as a data provider is infinitely more important than his role as a content provider' (Van Dijck, 2009: 49). The

overfetishised emphasis on 'critique as exposure of artifice' – of which satire news is but one example – is deployed as a means to extend the promotional circulation of its particular brand. It provides a 'context of critical consumption' that instrumentalizes forms of culture jamming while capitalizing on the creativity of its audience to add value to its brand. The result is not the formation of savvy super-citizens pulling the wool over our eyes, but the circulation of a carefully crafted version of critique operating in tandem with other forms of discourses.

4.3 Conclusion

This chapter provided a critical and multi-dimensional analysis of satirical news programs, specifically focusing on the programs' critical function. It demonstrated that the genre relies on an already truncated resource base for collective deliberation and filters it through its own editorial and genre conventions. This selection is directly related to their accountability to audiences as consumers of the shows and to marketing agencies who consistently seek to "put the right ad in front of the right person" (Turrow 2011: 161). This is in part predicated on increasingly sophisticated forms of data collection that mine the shows' platforms in order to measure consumer behavior. The shows' pedagogical function, i.e., their ability to foster 'monitorial' citizens that critically deconstruct media texts doubles as a source of unpaid labor that enhances the brands' cultural capital. The integration of fan-labor into the brand's aesthetic construction suggests a far more complex dialectic between marketing and pedagogy, and it is certainly not obvious that one necessarily leads to the other; as Andrejevic reminds us "the move from marketing to social activism is neither simple nor automatic" (Andrejevic 2007: 50). Some, like Day are particularly enamored by satirical news' "community building function", but this chapter argued that forms of contemporary brand management are increasingly adept at tapping into cultural discontent in order to build communities that function in the service of their product (Day 2011: 13). This is a situation in which the concept of community is equated with the market and is quite distinct from democratic and collaborative endeavors.

Conclusion

This project focused on the satirical news programs TDS and TCR as a case study because they demonstrate some of the implications of increasingly commodified forms of critical interventions. In doing so, it showed how satirical news is an index of the broader social context in which it circulates and how it can serve as a "selected form of societal self-representation" (Andrejevic 2007:238). The aim of this thesis was twofold: on the one hand, to defend the explanatory utility of a Marxist-inspired approach to the study of media, culture and politics and to critically assess some of the claims for the critical function of satirical news. Andrejevic argues that the promise of participatory media, "remains complicit with an emerging paradigm of mass customization that rehabilitates individuation only to commodify it." (Andrejevic 2004: 111). Satire news is a small, but no less significant offshoot of this trend.

There are limits and possible objections to this study. For one, it is specific to a particular level of market development characterized by relatively less overt forms of state censorship. It is important, if not evident, that the role of new media and its relation to satire in semi-authoritarian and authoritarian states will differ from those, like this study, emerging in more affluent and liberal-democratic states (Miazhevich 2015). The study is also specifically focused on satire *news* rather than political satire more generally; it is important not to conflate the two regardless of their shared affinities. Still, the aim was to demonstrate and delineate the structural and cultural trends that constitute the material conditions for such programming. The necessity of such an approach is demonstrated by the increasing popularity and transnational format of satire news and Comedy Central's desire to develop this type of programming in other markets where internet penetration rates are high (Germany, Holland and the UK). The content and type of humor changes according to national and local contexts, but the format and rhetorical criticism is remarkably similar.

The thesis rejects the simplistic assumption that satire news is turning its audience into cynics, or to quote O'Reilly, 'stoned slackers' (O'Reilly). Nor does it concede that

satire is inherently conservative, radical or as Chris Hedges puts it, "dead" (Chris Hedges 2013). Such judgments are no less applicable to the genre as they are to popular culture more generally. The scholars I considered in this research are certainly not without merit. Satire news provides fertile grounds for analyzing emerging forms of civic disillusionment and constructive forms of cynicism. Yet, as Best reminds us, a critical-dialectical analysis "must resituate [an] instance of willful human agency with respect to the attendant forces of social structure that overdetermine it" (Best 2012:). The thesis identified a failure to account for this in the literature in question and sought to help close this gap.

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