

Dismissal, Co-option, and Miscues: The Illusory Impact of the *Colbert Report* among the People, Politics, and Mainstream News Media

Dawson R. LEWIS III

拒否、功績、誤解：
コルベールレポートが民間人、政治、
および主流な報道の間に及ぼす幻想的な影響

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Abstract

Despite a narrow audience base, Stephen Colbert reached iconic status as host of the *Colbert Report*. Politically, however, he registered no meaningful nor long-lasting impact by any relevant metric--voter turnout, poll numbers, or policy shifts in the media or government. Comparative historical and content analysis will demonstrate how Colbert's satirical and character code-switching undermined his effectiveness.

概要

少ない基盤の聴衆者にもかかわらず、スティーブン・コルベールはコルベールレポートの案内役としての象徴的な存在となりました。しかし政治的には、投票率、投票数、メディアや政府の政策転換などの関連する指標の中に有意義で長期的な影響はありませんでした。歴史的な面と内容の分析で比較すると、コルベールの痛烈で、巧みな言葉の展開が彼の影響力を覆すことを証明しました。

キーワード：Irony, satire, media, politics, comedy, punditry, fake news

Introduction

On October 17, 2005, Stephen Colbert made his debut on the *Colbert Report*, drawing an impressive 1.13 million viewers in the premiere episode. While the *Colbert Report* targeted many of the same issues and people as its parent program, the *Daily Show*, it immediately set itself apart with its unique format. Rather than The *Daily Show* host Jon Stewart's straight man approach, Colbert adopted a deadpan satirical persona modeled after the bombastic political pundits who began appearing on news networks in the late 1990s. His show and character, whom Colbert described as "a well-intentioned, poorly informed, high-status idiot" were fashioned to accommodate an indirect satirical format that alternatively entertained, chastised, angered, and enlightened.¹

By the show's finale in December 2014, his campaign of self-aggrandizement had resulted in two presidential campaigns, and his name adorned a Virgin Airlines airplane, a Ben & Jerry's ice cream flavor, and a treadmill on board the International Space Station. His dual roles as entertainer and educator won him numerous accolades, including Grammy, Peabody, People's Choice, Writer's Guild, and multiple Emmy Awards. Between 2011 and

2012, Colbert's Americans for a Better Tomorrow, Tomorrow Super Pac raised over \$1 million and secured his second Peabody Award for its illuminating coverage of a controversial but poorly understood issue in modern politics.

Regarding policy-level influence, the literature indicates the *Colbert Report* exerted little to no definitive impact on the way politicians, the media, or the public at large related to one another. Durfree found no significant correlation between watching the *Daily Show* or *Colbert Report* with political participation--voting, volunteering, or general participation--among any demographic.² Conservatives have only pushed further to the right and currently control the White House and both houses of Congress. Political punditry is no less prolific. Data gathered by the *Washington Post* (2016) revealed that, in an eight-day span, 602 different pundits appeared on CNN, Fox News, and MSNBC. Most importantly, research suggests that political satire in general and the *Colbert Report*, in particular, was frequently lost on the audience.

This paper offers a three-part explanation for the *Colbert Report's* minimal impact on mainstream media, political accountability, and voter behavior. The *Colbert Report* was deflected by the media, co-opted by politicians, and largely misunderstood by the audience. Comparative historical analysis indicates that Colbert's influence fell short for some of the same reasons that earlier iterations of political parody failed. Colbert could not change mainstream news media because the news networks simply reframed and deflected satirical attacks away from themselves; he could not make politicians more accountable because politicians co-opted his show for their own benefit; he could not mobilize the electorate because his satire was too ambiguous and presumptuous for an increasingly partisan populace.

Literature Review

Time magazine substantiated Colbert's relevance by identifying him as one of The 100 Most Influential People in 2006 and 2012, and many scholars seem to agree. Over the past decade, a raft of research has examined the type and degree of the *Colbert Report's* influence. Studies have examined whether the *Colbert Report* made its viewers more cynical or skeptical and have come to conflicting conclusions.³ Henry Jenkins and Jody Baumgartner have separately concluded from independent surveys that the *Colbert Report* made viewers more cynical towards politics. Other studies have concluded that parodic news shows arm viewers with a healthy skepticism.⁴ Still others have found no correlation at all.⁵

Other scholars have explored the *Colbert Report's* educational value to voters. An Annenberg Research study discovered that parodic news shows do provide educational benefits to their viewers, especially to the less politically informed.⁶ However, Baumgartner and Morris found that the *Colbert Report* made viewers feel less politically efficacious.⁷ Heather L. LaMarre, Kristen D. Landreville and Michael A. Beam argue that Jon Stewart's juxtaposition as the rational voice among his ironical correspondents brought the audience in on the joke. Colbert, on the other hand, spouted the same conservative vitriol as real conservative pundits and never dropped character. As a result, conservative viewers often believed Colbert was genuinely conservative. The researchers conclude that understanding satire demands substantial cognitive effort, and the passive environment of television discourages engagement, which raises the possibility of misinterpretation by the audience.⁸

Christine Davies' concludes that, while culturally and socially significant, jokes have never been at the

vanguard of major change. She traces the “wit as weapon” myth to WWII, when much of Europe was occupied by the Germans. Inhabitants of occupied countries convinced themselves that “resistance jokes” were a valuable contribution to the war effort and not merely pathetic attempts at “salvaging a few crumbs of national self-respect.”⁹ Davies similarly finds no relationship between the explosion of jokes in the 1980s about the Soviet Union and its sudden collapse in 1991. Rather, the Soviet Union crumbled under the strain of its own self-contradictory economic system, a failure to modernize, confident Western leaders, nationalist sentiment and military competition in developing countries, and other institutional factors. Jokes served as a “thermometer, not a thermostat ... they [did] not feed back into and change or reinforce the social processes that generated them in an important way.”¹⁰ In short, humor did not facilitate political change.

The subversive element of satire also makes it cool, and politicians are eager to capitalize on the image. Steven Kercher explored the liberal satire that boomed during the two decades following WWII. His narrative history begins with the cartoonists, directors, and writers whose virulent liberal critiques were lost amidst the anti-communist fervor sweeping the nation in the early Cold War years. As Groucho Marx said, “Humor is verboten... The restrictions--political, religious, and every other kind--have killed satire.”¹¹ Once the terrors of McCarthyism had subsided in the late 50s, satire made a comeback, but Kercher questions its effect on politics even at its height as “doing little more than reinforce the prejudice of upper-middle-class Americans who enthusiastically supported Kennedy Camelot.”¹²

Ted Gornelos and Viveca Greene believe the twenty-first century has witnessed a paradigm shift in which soft news has played a more active role. They argue that in this century’s “media saturated and heavily managed and branded political atmosphere ... attacking the constructed brand identity of a politician is a meaningful act.”¹³ In 2008, *Saturday Night Live*’s Sarah Palin parodies drove the media to question Palin’s competence. News outlets initially reticent to attack Palin sensed the sea change from online public opinion. After CBS, NBC, CNN, and ABC began discussing the segment, they “became complicit in *SNL*’s critique of Palin’s brand image.”¹⁴ Of course, this implies that the satirist is relentless in his or her attack.

Media and Political Deflection

Irony is a work whose explicit and implicit messages contradict one another. Satire is humorous irony with a didactic purpose, promoting change through humorous reproach. Satire can take several forms--Juvenalian or Horatian, direct or indirect. Satirists employ these forms to achieve different ends. Juvenalian satire is caustic while Horatian is light-hearted. Joseph Heller’s novel, *Catch 22*, a bitter condemnation of war, exemplifies the former, while *Saturday Night Live*’s political segments exemplify the latter.

The harshness of Juvenalian satire can galvanize adherents but can, likewise, embitter and entrench their adversaries. By its nature, Juvenalian satire pushes the bounds of propriety, which invites the opponents to spurn the satirist for vulgarity. When Mark Twain published *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, a novel attacking the racist South and Jim Crow, libraries across the country ostensibly banned the book for its depravity rather than its challenge to race relations.¹⁵ In 2006, Colbert gave a speech at the White House Correspondents dinner in which he lambasted the president but not as viciously as he attacked mainstream news media:

Over the last five years you people (journalists) were so good over tax cuts, WMD intelligence, the effect of

global warming. We Americans didn't want to know, and you had the courtesy not to try to find out. Those were good times, as far as we knew. But, listen, let's review the rules. Here's how it works. The president makes decisions, he's the decider. The press secretary announces those decisions, and you people of the press type those decisions down. Make, announce, type. Put them through a spell check and go home. Get to know your family again. Make love to your wife. Write that novel you got kicking around in your head. You know, the one about the intrepid Washington reporter with the courage to stand up to the administration. You know, fiction.¹⁶

The next morning, *C-SPAN*, *the New York Times*, and the *Chicago Tribune* neglected to mention the issue. The major newspapers that did address Colbert's speech dismissed it as empty and rude. Richard Cohen of the *Washington Post* wrote, "[Colbert] was, like much of the blogosphere itself, telling like-minded people what they already know and alienating all the others."¹⁷ Similar media coverage of the *Colbert Report* demonstrates that mainstream news outlets enjoy the power to frame issues in ways that absolve them of responsibility. Given that the media had a vested interest in mitigating Colbert's rebukes, the news networks were unsurprisingly reluctant to mention the speech. In the end, they did, but they defanged Colbert's satire by couching the discussion in nebulous concepts of political access and journalistic responsibility.¹⁸

Unlike Juvenalian satire, Horatian satire can ease tensions through levity, but that same levity can also trivialize an issue or unintentionally absolve its target of responsibility. In the 1960s, the show *That Was the Week that Was* (*TW3*), garnered praise for its enlightening political satire, much like Colbert. Also, like Colbert, the show was criticized by conservatives as disrespectful, but it was also criticized by liberals who found its one-liners and cheap gags juvenile and counter-productive. Similarly, *The Colbert Report* included purely humorous segments, such as Colbert's running joke of attacking various cities named Canton.¹⁹ Even the end of Colbert's White House Correspondents speech devolved into a lengthy, absurd, pre-recorded sketch, featuring Colbert as the White House press secretary. Colbert's need to strike a balance between comedy and didactics meant sacrificing a measure of one for the other, allowing opponents to delegitimize his satire by taking the moral high-ground.

Political Co-option

The *Colbert Report* suffered to an even greater degree from code-switching. When Colbert had the greatest opportunity to lampoon politicians, he often retreated into light comic banter. The phenomenon of satirists aiding politicians began in the 1960s with John F. Kennedy who recruited the foremost satirists of the day, including Mort Sahl, Herbert Block, and Bill Mauldin. Other liberal satirists who did not join his camp, nonetheless, rarely laid into him with anything more than some merry teasing. Avery Schreiber conceded, "We were on his side, so it was really hard to come with anything that would make fun or pick the guy apart."²⁰ In the end, if they did nothing but echo the idolatry ringing from the left wing, which is to say, they simply got out of the way. In the 1980s, many U.K. television satirists served as speechwriters for Members of Parliament. John O'Farrell, writer of the envelope-pushing British show, *Spitting Image*, wrote, "Here we are invited to ... the centre of government to hobnob with the establishment that we originally set out to undermine."²¹

The era also proved another fact that would become a genuine campaign tactic: politicians could target specific demographics on television. The first president to understand the importance of appearing hip and in on

the joke was John F. Kennedy. Since then, late-night comedy and soft news have served as platforms for the stump speech. While Colbert did not write speeches for politicians, in December 2014, he gave up his desk to the president who spent the next several minutes pitching Obamacare before Colbert spent another eleven minutes without questioning any of the president's policy statements.²² Interviews with Mike Huckabee and Nancy Pelosi featured a similar format, permitting the politicians to "create their own brand image."²³ Consequently, Colbert not only neglected to participate in the politicians' branding but he also permitted them to assimilate the show's young, liberal demographic.

Audience Misinterpretation

Indirect satire's contradictory explicit and implicit messages always risk confusing the audience, but Colbert compounded that risk by cycling between Juvenalian and Horatian satire, as well as what has been termed here as higher and lower orders of satire, often within a single segment.

Contrary to direct satire which communicates its message to the audience by referring to the object of ridicule in the third person, indirect satire ridicules through parody or caricature. Most stand-up comedians and late-night television hosts, including Trevor Noah on the *Daily Show* and John Oliver on *Last Week Tonight*, employ direct satire. Literary satirists, such as Voltaire and Swift employed the indirect satirical voice in their respective works, *Candide* and *Gulliver's Travels*. Gruner writes, "the less direct the satire ... the more likely it is to be entertaining; and the more direct the satire, the less likely it is to be entertaining."²⁴

Audiences are far more likely to misinterpret indirect satire because there are no cues the audience can use to decipher the true meaning, in which case, many viewers allow the ambiguity to confirm their own biases. In 1971, Norman Lear began producing the show, *All in the Family*, which featured Archie Bunker, a working-class racist father. Lear intended to satirize racism, but a 1974 study concluded that the show tended to reinforce racists' beliefs.²⁵ LaMarre, Landreville, and Beam have found that the *Colbert Report* provoked the same unintended response among conservatives who believed Colbert was a genuine conservative.

These results tacitly assume liberals understood the satire simply because the conservatives did not. Sacha Baron Cohen proved that not only the true targets of the satire but also those who would presumably agree can misread the implicit message. Kazakhstan and Jewish communities lambasted Cohen for his satirical portrayal of a moronic anti-Semite in his movie *Borat*. Cohen countered, "The joke is not on Kazakhstan ... the joke is on people who can believe that the Kazakhstan that I describe can exist."²⁶ Without cues, however, viewers can only rely on their own experience and judgment, which are often flawed or insufficient.

The *Colbert Report's* complex satirical format made determining the actual meaning even more difficult. His show often consisted of not merely one, but two or more implicit messages or explicit messages. At the higher order, the character and show remained an indirect satirical critique of the media, conservative pundits, and, when Colbert was running for office, politicians, as well. The lower order consisted of topical humor, which also contained implicit and explicit messages.

The higher order satire could only be understood by those who were familiar with conservative punditry. For example, the recurring "Threat Down" segment often featured bears as the number one threat to America. On the lower order, the viewer could grasp the implicit message that bears are not a legitimate existential threat. The

absurdity of the claim made it funny, but it also freed viewers from the task of probing deeper. The audience sought entertainment, and the bear joke served. On the higher order, Colbert was satirizing pundits like Lou Dobbs who fomented about illegal immigration.

Colbert also frequently mentioned, “I don’t see race. People tell me I’m white, and I believe them.”²⁷ At the lower order, the viewers could clearly see that Colbert was white and that promoting racial solidarity by pretending to be color blind was amusing. On the higher order, Colbert was also criticizing conservative pundits like Bill O’Reilly and Ann Coulter who diminish the race question by either dismissing the issue or accusing liberals of racism for even mentioning it.²⁸

One of the most satirically complex running segments was “The Word.” The segment was based on the *O’Reilly Factor*’s “Talking Points Memo” feature, in which O’Reilly provided political or social commentary while rolling captions summarized the content. In one episode, Colbert introduced the word “truthiness” to satirize the Bush administration’s lack of evidence-based support for the Iraq War and Harriet Miers’ nomination to the Supreme court. Meanwhile, a series of explicit and implicit, Juvenalian and Horatian satirical captions accompanied or responded to Colbert’s commentary. In this case, lower order Horatian satire was laid atop Juvenalian satire, which itself was nested within a higher order Juvenalian satire.

Besides the narrative complexity of the *Colbert Report*, many of the show’s viewers could not have appreciated the higher order satire because they did not stay abreast of right-wing pundits. Researchers of selective exposure have found that viewers of partisan news (including the *Colbert Report*) do not seek political opinions that contradict their own views.²⁹ A *Pew Research Center* poll confirmed that those who watched the *Colbert Report* were statistically unlikely to watch conservative shows, such as the *O’Reilly Factor* or *Hannity*. Only 14 percent of *Colbert Report* viewers self-described as conservative. Similarly, only 8 percent of *O’Reilly Factor* (the show on which the *Colbert Report* was modeled) fans were liberals.³⁰ This disparity indicates that most of the *Colbert Report*’s audience was unfamiliar with the origins of the show’s content. Perhaps, unsurprisingly, viewers in Baumgartner’s study also reported feelings of political ignorance after watching an episode; that is, Colbert’s humor left them more confused about politics.³¹ The researchers were careful to refrain from speculating as to why participants felt less politically adept after being exposed to the *Colbert Report*, but as shown above, the most likely explanation is that viewers did not recognize the origins of the higher order satire.

Conclusion

According to a well-trodden truism, “the best satire is that which is indistinguishable from reality.” However, the purpose of satire is to castigate. The media subverted Colbert’s power to shame by either deflecting his critiques or dismissing him as an inappropriate buffoon. Colbert freely relinquished that power to politicians by lobbing softball questions during face-to-face interviews. Lastly, The *Colbert Report* likely gave too much credit to an only partially informed audience and, therefore, missed the mark with most of its higher order satire. The comedic success of the lower-order content lulled viewers into the mistaken belief that they understood the extent of the joke. It appears, therefore, that the joke was on the viewers.

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