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Comedy Against Corruption

How Late-Night Television has Become a Form of Resistance

When dealing with a presidential administration that simply labels contrasting parties as “fake news” how can media outlets provide proper coverage while simultaneously maintaining their credibility to the public? This is an emerging dilemma that requires immediate attention; yet the only individuals taking it seriously are those whose jobs are quite literally constructed for comedic effect. A new wave of late-night television has turned political satire into a trending conversation both on and offline as the average journalist continues to struggle with the confusion that is whether or not to report on obvious lies because news “has” to take equal action towards events. Although many are quick to write off satire as something insignificant, this is certainly not the case. Especially in the political sense, satire can strengthen the skill of skepticism through affording opportunities to think critically about what our leaders are doing. In examining the late-night comedy shows *Saturday Night Live* and *Full Frontal with Samantha Bee* it becomes apparent that the use of humor and irony is not only a form of resistance by the less powerful, but more importantly by those who have the power to make a considerable influence.

Over the course of more than forty years *Saturday Night Live* has left its mark as one of the longest-running American network television programs. The popularity of SNL is attributed to the arguably accurate satirical representations of contemporary culture and politics within its live comedy sketches. The 2016 election cycle was not the first time this cast of comedians came together to parody the political climate at hand, but it was the first case of dealing with a candidate and eventually a president elect who's consistently off-hand demeanor is already sardonic in and of itself. But it seems SNL is fully equipped for approaching this somewhat terrifying challenge with ease; and with a purpose in mind beyond giving viewers something to laugh about after a week's worth of wild headlines during the era of Trump.

SNL's notable recent skits include the reoccurring use of actress Melissa McCarthy performing an impersonation of the White House press secretary Sean Spicer. The initial skit based off Spicer's first press briefing immediately went viral after it aired on February 4th, 2017 and McCarthy was not only brought back on the following week for another round, but is also scheduled to host and perform again in a future episode slated for May 13th. So what is it about McCarthy's routine that has caused such an uproar? It could very well have to do with the sheer eeriness of similarities between her mock briefings and the real deal. SNL's "coverage" of the first, abrupt press briefing with Spicer after the inauguration allowed McCarthy to dominate her role in presenting the severe abrasiveness of the current administration. Not unlike the situation it was mocking, SNL's briefing skit begins with McCarthy loudly explaining how an apology is owed to this administration from the media on behalf of its apparently unfair reporting, before moving on to capture the superfluous, verifiably false focus Spicer placed on the size of the crowd at Trump's inauguration ceremony. McCarthy's enthusiasm further highlighted the absurd irony in this succession through using almost exact phrases from the first briefing. In his original

statements Spicer specifically says Trump was met with a “five-minute standing ovation at the end” prompting McCarthy to poke at the outrageousness of this point yelling that Trump received a “standing ovation which lasted a full fifteen minutes... and you can check the tape on that!” and then goes on to pompously mention that “everyone was smiling, everyone was happy... and no one, no one, was sad okay? Those are the facts forever!” McCarthy’s portrayal may appear exaggerated, but this is all a part of the genius behind SNL’s perfected skill of pushing viewers to question the fast-blurring line between satire and reality.

It requires less than fifteen spare minutes to watch both McCarthy’s first Spicer skit and the original for which it is making a mockery of. In executing these steps it becomes impossible to ignore how easy it is to produce a parody of something when to do so requires little to no change from the source. This is significantly evident in McCarthy’s portrayal of Spicer’s twisted response to questions surrounding Trump’s travel ban, oftentimes referred to explicitly as a “Muslim Ban” because of its undeniably negative mass effect on those individuals within the Muslim community. When asked about whether or not the ban was, well, a ban Spicer specifically stated that Trump is just “using the words that the media is using” and that he “thinks the words that are being used to describe it are derived from what the media is calling this”. Identically, McCarthy’s tangent has phrases like “he’s using your words when you use the words and he uses them back it’s circular using of the word and that’s from you,” and finishes with reporter, Glenn, looking as shocked as the real Glenn from the real briefing. Yet, a quick Google search would yield proof that in the weeks after this first press briefing both Spicer and Trump unambiguously referred to Executive Order 13769 as a “ban”. By the end of the skit, McCarthy’s annoyance with the press remains steadfast in accordance to Spicer’s own reactions. After feeling attacked by a question from the Wall Street Journal, McCarthy shouts “Don’t come

at me like that or we'll put you in the corner with CNN" before the camera moves to a corner where a CNN reporter is in a large cage wearing a diaper and screaming "WE'RE NOT FAKE NEWS!" Although the irony in this was present at the time of its production, unfortunately it was only the beginning.

In an article for *The New Yorker* titled "Is Trump Trolling the White House Press Corps?" author Andrew Marantz discusses the unusual, but calculated, process the current administration is putting into place in regards to taking away credibility from media outlets that put up even the slightest opposition. Marantz speaks with correspondents placed across the political spectrum and one in particular who explains the importance behind the "sense of predictability, [the] sense that eventually the substantive questions will be answered" during White House press briefings (Marantz). According to this experienced correspondent, Spicer's dedication to paving the way towards chaos through both a shouting match for being heard and a reluctance in getting picked because of differing opinions "makes everyone desperate and competitive and makes us look like a bunch of braying jackals... Which I don't think is an accident" (Marantz). Marantz deliberates on a particular happening after Trump's keynote address at the Conservative Political Action Conference on February 24th, 2017. During this address Trump called out CNN when he began to talk about his fight against "fake news" adding in statements such as "I love the First Amendment. Nobody loves it better than me" (Marantz). But then, not even a few hours later, Spicer conducted an off-camera meeting in which reporters from Brietbart and the Washington Times were allowed entrance while those from CNN, Politico, and the New York Times were denied a spot; allegedly because of their recent reporting on Trump's ties to Russia. Marantz concludes this fact with a quote from Spicer when he was asked in December of 2016 on whether or not he would ban reporters that he did not agree with

as press secretary. His response? “We have a respect for the press when it comes to the government, that is something that you can’t ban an entity from. That’s what makes a democracy a democracy versus a dictatorship” (Marantz). McCarthy did her homework before walking through the doors of NBC studios; she nails the hypocrisy behind key players like Spicer who are obviously afforded the dangerous opportunity to criticize the media yet write off any and all negative criticism towards their administration with one obscenity of the truth after another.

Although it has been on air for a little over a year and is only in its second season, *Full Frontal with Samantha Bee* has all the spunk one would expect from *The Daily Show*’s longest permanent correspondent. Bee’s segments are just as sarcastic as they are based in truthful coverage of current events in the political sphere. Unlike SNL’s purely satirical approach, *Full Frontal* uses actual news clips and verified information such as highlighted pieces of scholarly articles or researched data. It is only after the facts are in order that Bee delivers her rigmarole of sharp, humorous commentary. On March 29th, 2017 TBS aired “Governing is Hard: Trumpcare Edition” which features Bee outlining Trump’s inability to repeal Obamacare. Her opening statement is an overly eager “Let’s check in with the winning shall we?!” remnant of Trump’s promises that his presidency would produce so many “wins”, America would be sick of “winning”. The irony is heavy before Bee even has the chance to go into detail about this landslide loss.

After criticizing “president big boy truck” for his inability to close the deal, a strength he has bragged about substantially since day one, Bee provides details on Trump’s attempts to win over the House Freedom Caucus. She refers to this group as thirty or so conservative Republicans with the power to block anything, “most notably women and people of color”. Bee insinuates that this kind of “win” should have been a no-brainer for Trump, but with absolutely

no background in politics he made such grave mistakes as literally saying “Forget about the little shit,” when questioned about his policy plans in a meeting with members of the Caucus. To really drive home his incompetence for the position Bee includes snippets of Trump placing the blame for his healthcare failure on Democrats as opposed to recognizing that it was actually from “friendly fire”. Additionally Trump is shown recapping his inability to repeal Obamacare as a learning experience, which Bee quickly retaliates towards with “when it’s a matter of life and death for millions of people, the important thing is that you learned a lot! Good try, buddy! Grab an orange slice and a participation ribbon!” Such closing remarks quite obviously echo those made by more conservative-leaning individuals when it comes to ideals surrounding hand-outs in areas like healthcare and education.

Bee’s factual reporting behind each bit of aggressive humor strengthens her credibility through its provision of a platform for truth that is easier or more challenging to digest depending on the perspective. While the easier route does not dismiss the validity of Bee’s reporting, John Doyle of *Globe and Mail* argues that her bold, angry stance amounts to nothing beyond preaching to the converted. In his article “The Trump Era – is it both post truth and post satire?” he labels her use of insults towards Trump, like calling him “a crotch-fondling slab of rancid meatloaf”, as a waste because it “isn’t funny at all” and “has the subtlety of a sledgehammer” (Doyle). To be fair, Doyle does have a point in accusing pretty much all of the late-night show genre for sounding wildly similar when Trump is at the butt of their jokes. But, perhaps people with this perception are having a difficult time hearing a truth that does not personally affect them, because they do not care. At least not enough to take a step back and re-evaluate priorities. It seems obvious that if more persons added to the resistance and process of breaking down

oppressive structures, there would be much less of a reason to joke about the need to resist and break down oppressive structures.

However, personalities such as Bee herself are oftentimes the first to dismiss the idea that what they are doing makes an impact. She is quoted in response to the notion saying “I don’t think we move the needle at all. It would be very hurtful to the show if I started to believe that I had influence. It’s very hard to do satire when you take yourself too seriously” (Zoglin). While she is spot on about the light-heartedness required to find humor in the worst of circumstances, there is legitimacy to the thought that late-night comedy shows are changing how modern society views and interacts with politics and political discourse. A short video recently released by Vox network breaks down the arguably fundamental part comedians now play in the resistance against fake news and “alternative facts”. “Comedians have figured out the trick to covering Trump” brings up the tangible consequences surrounding inadequate news coverage as a result of journalism practices that force reporters to abide by showing all sides of the story, rather than showing the truth. Vox explains that when focus is placed away from the truth and solely on pointless debating, viewers become more easily “disillusioned” and “less likely to think that [they] can figure out the truth” (Vox). Additionally, research has shown that “the mere repetition of rumors and falsehoods makes audiences more likely to see those things as credible” (Vox). Sophia McClennen, the Associate Director at the School of International Affairs for Penn State, has written several books and pieces on how political satire can actually create smarter consumers. McClennen elucidates stating that “people think of satire as very partisan, but the point is that satirists are after good, rational thinking. What you see that the satirists have that would be lovely to see in the basic news media is this sort of defense of reason” (Vox). Both skeptics of satire and the power players of late-night can believe all they want that this television

genre carries no influence, but from many respects even a single changed mind in regards to social injustices can make a difference.

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