



## Developing a Normative Approach to Political Satire: An Empirical Perspective

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*See the companion work to this article*

*"Developing a Normative Approach to Political Satire: A Critical Perspective"  
by Megan Hill in this Special Section*

This article offers a formal normative assessment of political satire. It summarizes social scientific research on the influence of political satire and findings on the normative implications of political satire within a democratic framework. Two cogent lines of empirical research, persuasion and understanding, receive special attention. Political satire's potential to generate normatively positive democratic effects is examined according to three competing theories of democracy: republicanism, pluralism, and elitism. Reports of its relatively small effect prevent clear normative judgments on satire as good or bad for democracy. However, its relationship to internal political self-efficacy merits further investigation. At the system level, political satire might generate significant normatively positive effects in the republican and elitist democratic frameworks. Examples of U.S. traditional political satire reveal the boundaries within which satire functions and their impact on the normative roles of this potentially important form of political discourse.

Normative theory has been used to assess journalism as a profession and describe the role of the press in democratic societies (see Christians, Glasser, McQuail, Nordenstreng, & White, 2009). This type of theory focuses on values and objectives, rather than detailing specific processes of influence (Stromback, 2005). Normative theories of journalism detail "ideal functions of the press, what the press should do" (Benson, 2008, p. 2591). In the broader context of political communication, normative theory has also been used to better understand deliberation (e.g., Habermas, 2006) and more general day-to-day activities of citizenship (e.g., Meijer, 2001). Because of the important role communication plays in democratic life, normative theorists have painstakingly detailed how various political communication acts should present themselves in an ideal form (i.e., the communicative acts citizens should strive to achieve) and outlined how idealized versions of these activities aid democracy (Althaus, 2012).

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All legitimate forms of political communication—including this article’s focus, political satire—should be subjected to normative assessment. Williams and Delli Carpini (2011) offer a foray into this topic, arguing that the legitimation of political entertainment media forces mass communication scholarship to wrestle with a set of normative-based concerns about the role or purpose of political satire in a democracy. Based on this line of argument, the following normative queries are central to developing such research: What are the ideal message functions of political satire in a democracy? What role(s) should political satirists play in a democracy? There are several different ways to address these questions epistemologically, and this article will outline an empirical perspective. These broad-based lines of inquiry also require assessment, so this article also sketches what such a research agenda would entail.

Debate abounds over whether various political satire outlets (e.g., *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*) are helping or hurting democracy (see Hart & Hartelius, 2007; Young & Esralew, 2011). Heated exchanges over satire have a long history and predate democracy itself (Feinberg, 1967). However, these discussions, especially those centering on the messages appearing in today’s media environment, are difficult to resolve without some anchor from which to judge what political satire can or should look like as a democratic ideal. A normative theory approach to the study of political satire will provide a stable foundation for more fruitful discussions of this potentially influential form of political communication.

Outlining a normative approach to political satire is no easy task. Satire derives from the Latin term *satura*, which roughly translates as “a mixed bag.” Any one act of political satire is an amalgam of varied message types (e.g., irony, sarcasm, parody) that undergo a seemingly infinite number of permutations (Holbert & Tchernev, in press). Theorists have identified some classic types of political satire (e.g., Juvenalian, Horatian, Minnepian), but a wide variety of message elements nest within each of these classifications (see Knight, 2004). A normative theory of political satire should be inclusive, allowing sounder, more uniform judgments of any one act of political satirization. Viewing political satire through this lens is distinct from making hedonically oriented aesthetic judgments (e.g., whether it is funny) and should be more systematic than focusing on a single message element (e.g., punch lines). This article proposes an empirically based normative approach to political satire that focuses on not only the content the satirist provides, but also the boundaries a satirist must function in to fit the definition of satirist (Caufield, 2008). The language of this approach will permit a more detailed and substantive conversation about this most complex, misunderstood form of political expression. Indeed, such a roadmap is all the more necessary as political satire continues to proliferate within our political communication environment.

### **Situating a Normative Approach to Political Satire Within the Field**

A rich tradition of empirical research has focused on political satire (see Compton, 2011), with several offshoots sprouting in the last decade alone (Delli Carpini, 2012; Young, in press). Two lines of inquiry have dominated the landscape of empirical research on this form of political communication: First, numerous effects-based studies have assessed its persuasive impact. Second, several studies have focused on what can best be defined as a series of understanding-based questions. The research projects in this latter group center on the type of political information offered through various political satire outlets, and on whether the knowledge generated by consumption of this material affects democratic outcomes. The two lines of research share some commonalities with a normative perspective, but a

research agenda grounded in normative theory clearly separates itself from both of these important, but distinct, lines of research. As Althaus (2012) has stated, "normative analysis can offend the sensibilities of empirical political communication scholars" by shifting the focus from "what is" to "what should be" (p. 98). A purely normative approach to political satire asks different research questions and generates unique knowledge, compared to the persuasion- or understanding-based perspectives on satire that dominate the current literature.

### ***Persuasion***

In the empirically based message-effects tradition, the most basic question we can ask of any message is this: Did the message change attitudes and/or behaviors? Just as "a mixed bag" has defined satire, so too is this description apt for an assessment of empirical findings of early works on the potential persuasive influence of political satire. Gruner (1965, 1966) found that his satirical stimuli produced little in the way of attitude change, and Pokorny and Gruner (1969) found no evidence that a piece of satire enhanced the effects of traditional, rhetoric-based appeals. Building on this line of research, a series of studies by Powell (1975, 1977a, 1977b, 1978) included audience-based perceptual variables (e.g., ego involvement, issue salience, evaluations of satire's truthfulness, perceptions of argument quality) in an attempt to pinpoint specific conditions within which political satire may have an effect (direct or indirect) on traditional persuasion-based outcomes. The findings from the Powell studies are decidedly mixed and were not deemed replicable. In summary, the initial persuasion-based inquiries produced few tangible results.

Given this lack of findings, empirical study of political satire as persuasion lay dormant for more than a quarter century. Only recently has a new, more refined series of studies made its way into the literature. To be sure, classic studies of political satire's ability to generate attitude change have appeared recently (e.g., Neuberger & Krcmar, 2008), but most of them have focused on specific message elements that exist within satire. Various works have focused on heuristics (i.e., cognitive shortcuts) like the partisan cues (Xenos, Moy, & Becker, 2009) that are often present in satire, the comedic elements in a piece of socially or politically relevant humor (Nabi, Moyer-Guse, & Byrne, 2008), the object of a piece of political satire (Becker, in press), and the differential effects of unique types of humor (e.g., irony, sarcasm) that can exist in any one piece of political satire (Polk, Young, & Holbert, 2009). These studies serve to more precisely identify both the conditions under which specific types of satirical messages generate influence (e.g., low involvement of viewers) and the need to look at a broader and more complex range of influence (e.g., sleeper effects).

In addition, recent empirical works on the persuasive effects of political satire have sought to better link the study of political persuasion with more theoretically grounded approaches to humor (see Young, 2008), and to expand the range of outcomes the consumption of political satire can generate (e.g., alteration of mental models; see Esralew & Young, 2012). Other work has attempted to step beyond the treatment of political satire as monolithic. Building on the basic notion that satire comes in many different forms, some initial research has focused on the potential of unique types of satire (Juvenalian, Horatian, etc.) to produce differential persuasive effects (e.g., Holbert, Hmielowski, Jain, Lather, & Morey, 2011). Also, as political satire rarely offers a "call to action" (i.e., a direct appeal to engage in a specific type of

behavior), empirical evidence has been supplied to argue a need to focus not just on actual influence, but on the perceived influence of satire as well (see Becker, Xenos, & Waisanen, 2010; Holbert, Tchernev, Esralew, Walther, & Benski, in press).

### ***Understanding***

In addition to studies of political satire as a potentially persuasive act, a critical mass of scholarship is devoted to the relationship between political satire and political knowledge (see Compton 2011). The study of political knowledge in relation to political satire has taken many different forms, with the former serving as a predictor, an outcome, a mediator, or moderator of the latter in various studies. In all, a very complex picture emerges for the relationship between these two variables.

The most basic and immediate research question undertaken in this vein is the degree to which various forms of political satire impact political knowledge levels among citizens. Cao (2008) finds little statistically significant relation between late-night entertainment talk show exposure (i.e., monologues as a form of political satire) and political knowledge, but age and education moderate this relationship (see also Hollander, 2005). Having studied the cognitive processing of this type of media content and its impact on learning, Kim and Vishak (2008) revealed that political entertainment media produces online, rather than memory-based processing, and that political entertainment media prove to be inferior to traditional news in generating "political information acquisition" (p. 355). Baek and Wojcieszak (2009) found late-night comedy viewing to be linked with modest knowledge gain, but only for knowledge items that were low-hanging fruit for all but the most politically engaged citizens. Cao (2008) has also shown that political satire outlets can impact knowledge among the less politically engaged (see also Baum, 2003). Overall, the relationship between consumption of political satire through various media outlets and political knowledge is weak at best and often moderated by a range of third variables (e.g., age, education). However, it is noteworthy that for this type of political media use, the greatest gains in political knowledge are usually found among those who generally are not very interested in politics (and thus may not consume much political media). Xenos and Becker (2009) attribute the latter conditional effect to political comedy's ability to generate enhanced subsequent attention to news content (i.e., the gateway hypothesis).

In addition to the knowledge-related work offered above, political knowledge has also been explored as a moderator of consumption of political humor on various democratic outcomes (e.g., Young, 2004, 2006). Much work in this area centers on specific roles played by internal political efficacy, which can be treated as akin to a citizen's level of *perceived* knowledge (i.e., I am smart enough to take part competently in various political processes; see Morrell, 2003). Hoffman and Young (2011) assess political efficacy's role as a central mediator in the relationship between the use of various political satire outlets and political participation. Holbert, Lambe, Dudo, and Carlton (2007) find viewing *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* to be especially detrimental to perceptions of traditional TV news (i.e., lowered perceptions of political gratification obtained from TV news) among those with low internal political self-efficacy. Baumgartner and Morris (2006) also found particularly detrimental effects of this type of media use among those who rate themselves low in self-efficacy, but Hoffman and Thomson (2009) found that for late-night TV viewing, self-efficacy played a key mediating role in a series of positive but indirect

democratic effects. Becker's (2011) analysis revealed mixed results for the predictive value of various forms of political entertainment engagement (e.g., online political humor [positive], *Saturday Night Live* [negative]) for internal political self-efficacy, while Baumgartner and Morris (2008) offered experimental data showing that watching *The Colbert Report* reduced internal political self-efficacy. Overall, certain apparently clear links between political satire and internal political self-efficacy need to be explored further.

Beyond the myriad effects-based studies on the relationship between political knowledge and the consumption of political satire is content analysis devoted to the nature of the political information offered in such programming. Fox, Koloen, and Sahin (2007) found the political information offered on *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* to be every bit as substantive as that found in national TV news broadcasts. Fox (2011), based on an assessment of the nature of the messages offered on programs like *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* and *The Colbert Report*, has argued that "although the court jester as he was once known no longer exists, the need for him may be greater now than ever" (p. 148). Young (2004), along with Niven, Lichter, and Amundson (2003), found that late-night political jokes told by hosts like David Letterman and Jay Leno tend to focus more on politicians' personalities than their policy stances. Overall, there appears to be some solid evidence that whereas political satire can offer substantive information, the ways of consuming this type of political media content do not lead to strong levels of political knowledge generation (see also the empirical evidence on the discounting effect of humor; Nabi et al., 2007; Young, 2008).

### **A Normative Approach to Political Satire: Compare and Contrast**

In the field's existing research agendas, a normative approach to political satire can be advanced on three levels. First, a formal normative evaluation of existing effects research (on persuasion, understanding, or otherwise) will improve understanding of the value of work already undertaken by a host of scholars. As Althaus (2012) has noted, "The relevance of empirical findings can be determined only when the researcher clarifies why those findings are important, and judgments of importance are almost always predicated on some type of normative claim" (p. 98). The problem is that the opening arguments of many media effects studies, including most empirical work on political satire's influence, fail to explicitly state what normative assumptions/claims drive their assessments of whether a given outcome is good, bad, or indifferent for democracy. Normative assessments of a given set of findings are often only implied, or laid out more concretely only in the closing discussion section. Points of normative interest are thus relegated to secondary status. Many empirical works on political media entertainment's influence address normative concerns but do not grant them proper status in research agendas. Second, a normative approach can assess whether the size of a given outcome (i.e., small, medium, or large; Cohen, 1988) has reached a significant threshold. For example, a study of news may ask whether consuming this type of media content generates political knowledge (deemed by many to be a democratic good). From a normative perspective, however, a more important question is whether it can be clearly determined that news consumption generates *enough* political knowledge to be deemed a democratic good (i.e., is the effect large enough to be worth discussion?). For the sake of argument, I will use the traditional zero-order correlations ( $r$ ) of .10 or less as a determinant of small effect, between .10 and .30 as an indication of moderate effect, and anything above .30 as large effect. Third, and most importantly with respect to

the role of a given type of media outlet for political communication, a normative evaluation is applicable in a context of differing approaches to democracy (i.e., different types of democratic theory). These advances in developing a normative approach to the empirical study of political satire are addressed in the following section.

### ***Normative Assessment of Existing Effects***

As outlined above, to date the two major lines of empirical effects-based research on political satire concern whether the use of this type of political media content is (a) persuasive and (b) generating political knowledge. Little of the debate about whether political satirists should be persuaders and/or informers, with both roles having normative implications, addresses whether this type of discourse actually persuades or educates. And, if satirists do persuade or educate, does the size of effect derived from the use of this type of political media content reach a threshold sufficient to deem it good or bad for democracy? Addressing these empirical questions (i.e., whether and how much) will move this line of research higher up along the Althaus (2012) hierarchy of normative assessment.

**Persuasion.** At best, the persuasive effects of political satire appear to be minimal. This holds true for jokes extracted from late-night monologues (e.g., Young, 2008), political comedy routines (e.g., Nabi et al., 2007), and late-night satirical sketches (e.g., Baumgartner, Morris, & Walth, 2012). The effects sizes found in various studies are usually small; only occasionally does the outcome reach the moderate range. Holbert et al. (2011) found that whereas more biting forms of political satire (e.g., Juvenalian) are perceived as rhetorical arguments and function more like them in terms of generating persuasive influence, the more popular and universally accepted forms of political satire in today's media system (i.e., Horatian) produce short-term, heuristics-based persuasive effects that do not stand up well to counterpersuasion. These studies focused primarily on persuasive effects in relation to political candidates and their policy stances.

As for other attitude objects, a fair number of studies have examined the persuasive influence of political satire on attitudes to or perceptions of traditional news. This category of attitude objects has more pronounced effects (Compton, 2011), which become particularly sizable among those who are low in political self-efficacy (see Baumgartner & Morris, 2006; Holbert et al., 2007). The modus operandi of satire is the presentation of human folly—it is a message type that attacks by way of “amusement and contempt” (Knight, 2004, p. 3). The news industry is clearly deserving of criticism, a point that has been a recurring theme for several decades (Fallows, 1996; Patterson, 1994; Rosen, 1996). Accordingly, much ire is directed at the news industry, and some of the more popular forms of political satire (e.g., *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*) have adopted the genre of the nightly television news broadcast as a vehicle for multifaceted, consistent critique of today's journalism. Regarding the impact of political satire consumption on attitudes toward and impressions of traditional news, the key issue is whether the levels of cynicism generated about the news industry are sufficient to deem such consumption a democratic ill. Although some have argued that cynicism generated by political satire is reaching dangerous levels (see Hart & Hartelius, 2007), no empirical evidence points to the type of systemic effects that impact how citizens adopt information gathering processes (e.g., news consumption) within a democracy. While there is little evidence of a strong association between exposure to political satire and consuming traditional news

(Hmielowski, Holbert, & Lee, 2011; Young & Tisinger, 2007), the former retains strong relationships with use of other types of public affairs media content (e.g., liberal news-talk).

More pertinent here, however, is the lack of long-term, longitudinal research designs (see Hansen & Pfau, 2011; Iyengar & Vavreck, 2012) that would allow researchers to better address whether satire consumption's normatively negative effects on news use are taking hold among the citizenry. Many experimental studies on the persuasive effects of political satire involve subjects consuming a single message. How much of an effect can we expect from a single piece of satire? Overall, the persuasive effect of a program like *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* is most likely slow, steady, and cumulative, not the result of a single persuasive act. Experimental designs need to assess the types of effects likely to influence the citizenry, and future experiments need to allow for multiple exposures and assessment of more delayed effects. Although designs of this kind are considerably more complex, costly, and unwieldy to administer, substantial benefits may be derived from such hard work.

**Understanding.** The effects of political satire on the generation of political knowledge also appear to be minimal. There is little evidence of true knowledge gain derived from consuming political satire. Meaningful zero-order correlations between consumption of political satire and pre-existing political knowledge have sometimes been found (e.g., Young, 2004), but cross-sectional data is problematic because of clear causality concerns. Many scholars have argued that political satire asks a great deal of an audience (Gray, Jones, & Thompson, 2009). Consumers of this content must use existing political knowledge to extract any true meaning from what is often a set of implicit political statements. Therefore, it may well be the case that political knowledge is driving the consumption of political satire rather than satire generating knowledge—otherwise, how would anyone obtain political gratification from satire? Empirical data indicate a lack of the type of deep processing of political satire required for true knowledge gain (Kim & Vishak, 2009; Nabi et al., 2007; Young, 2008). In sum, regarding normative assessment of the empirical evidence of the relationship between political knowledge and the consumption of political satire, there is clearly a relationship that warrants attention, but the connection between the former and the latter are not strong enough to draw firm conclusions from a normative perspective.

Outside of the direct study of political knowledge in relation to political entertainment media, the study of self-efficacy (i.e., perceived political ability) appears to offer more consistent results (perhaps due to the fact that internal political self-efficacy is subject to less measurement error than standard political knowledge indices) in terms of meaningful associations with a variety of political entertainment media experiences. A wealth of studies with various designs and research agendas appear to affirm a consistent connection of some kind between this democratically important individual-difference variable and political entertainment media consumption (Baumgartner & Morris, 2006, 2008; Becker, 2011; Hoffman & Thomson, 2009; Hoffman & Young, 2011; Holbert et al., 2007). The study of internal political self-efficacy seems to hold much promise in relation to the study of political entertainment media effects. Some of these effects reveal themselves to be normatively positive; others are clearly not democratic goods.

**Summary.** To date, empirical evidence on the effects of political satire consumption indicates that this media activity is decidedly neutral in terms of normative value. Overall, the persuasive effects appear to be mixed, and whereas a weak but normatively positive association holds between political

knowledge and political satire, what could be defined normatively as a negative relationship prevails between self-efficacy and political satire effects (although some findings in this area point to potential positive effects as well). At present, there is no clear evidence that political satire use is necessarily good or bad for democracy. Much evidence of political satire's effects remains to be collected. Future research efforts should forthrightly present a set of normative statements to explain why the assessment of a given effect is important for a well-functioning democracy. In addition, this area of study would be well served if social-scientific researchers assigned exact threshold values (i.e., effect size) for judging the normative (in)sufficiency of a given effect. It is also important for empirical researchers to develop designs suited to assess a broad range of effects of political satire. Only in this way will the study of political entertainment media be "interpretable, cumulative, and socially significant" (Bennett & Iyengar, 2008, p. 709).

### ***Normative Assessment of Satire within Competing Systems***

The above normative assessments, which concerned different lines of research on empirical political entertainment media effects, were focused on specific values (e.g., how educated the citizenry are, or how critically it consumes news media), but these individual values are nested within larger, more comprehensive perspectives of how a democracy should function. The many different approaches to the concept of democracy (see Terchek & Conte, 2001) include more liberal works by Rawls (1971, 2001) and Friedman's (1962) more conservative views. Unique democratic theories work under distinct assumptions, and with those assumptions come different normative ideals. More specifically, unique ideal roles are played by a host of different types of political communication acts within these varied democratic systems. Based on Baker's (2002) *Media, Markets, and Democracy*, Althaus (2012) outlines the normative roles of traditional news media according to three distinct theories of democracy: republicanism, pluralism, and elitism. These same three theories of democracy can be used to assess the normative value of political satire at a social systems level.

### ***Republicanism***

As defined by Baker (2002), a well-functioning republican democracy retains a healthy and respectful marketplace of ideas where citizens deliberate to make the best decision possible based on a set of known options that come to light through reasoned debate. Within this framework, political media have three tasks that are defined normatively as positive: (1) to promote civic virtue; (2) to expose corruption or the ulterior motives of those who wield influence in the marketplace of ideas; and, (3) to create space in which debate can properly take place. These ideals have undergirded several movements meant to improve or reshape the news industry, most notably the rise of public journalism (see Haas, 2007).

Given these three normative roles for political media, what type of normative assessment can researchers offer on the possible roles of political satire? Hart and Hartelius (2007) have contended that with regard to the promotion of civic virtue, political satirists do a disservice to democracy because the more popular forms of political satire offer an electorate the Siren of cynicism. However, Jones (2010) has argued that the type of thinking and alternative perspective-taking that consumption of political satire induces in citizens reflects a civic virtue. Day (2011) has also stressed that political satirists are reflective,



critical thinkers and that presentation of this type of discourse is normatively positive for a citizenry. In short, this issue has engendered much debate but little empirical evidence. Some maintain that more popular forms of political satire do nothing to promote civic virtue (and may in fact work against it), while others argue forcefully that the type of discourse political satire offers is itself a civic virtue that citizens would do well to emulate (see Young & Esralew, 2011).

If the second role of political media in a republican democracy—exposing corruption or human vice—is a democratic good, then under this approach to democracy, political satire can clearly be defined as conducive to a normative good. As stated earlier, the *modus operandi* of political satire is the presentation of human folly (Knight, 2004). It follows that political satire has a role to play in improving a republican-oriented democratic system.

The third point concerns the creation of forums for proper debate. From a republican perspective, the ideal debate is “informed, objective, and inclusive” (Althaus, 2012, p. 105). As in the case of promotion of civic virtue, much scholarly back-and-forth addresses whether certain popular forms of political satire provide this type of space, but there is little empirical evidence on the matter. In terms of informativeness, content analysis by Fox et al. (2007) has indicated political satire is just as substantive as broadcast television news, but a key question here is whether the latter is rightly a normative benchmark for what we consider “informative” (see also Brewer & Marquardt, 2007).

Objectivity has long been treated as an ideal in journalism (see Holbert & Zubric, 2000), but there are parallels within political satire. For example, Feinberg (1967) has argued that a satirist should see all who are in power as equally worthy of satirical ridicule (Feinberg, 1967). Allotting all major political actors, no matter their political identification, equal opportunity to be satirized corresponds with specific aspects of objectivity (i.e., balance). However, the empirical question is whether political satirists hold to this ideal. Content analyses conducted by PEW Research Center in 2008 would indicate that late-night satirists like Jon Stewart may gravitate toward ridicule of Republicans more than Democrats (Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2008), but this type of work needs to be assessed over a long period of time. Because this particular content analysis was conducted entirely during the presidency of George W. Bush, broader, structural forces may have worked to create the impression of a liberal bias. Nonetheless, if political satirists remain true to their role as equal-opportunity critics, then some normatively positive outcomes derive from this style of political communication.

As for inclusivity, some have argued that political satire offers few explicit statements. Many of the political points, stances, and perspectives offered by political satirists are implied, requiring audience members to fill in the blanks to generate meaning from the messages (Holbert & Young, in press). Sander (1971) maintains that political satirists often end up becoming quite cynical about the people who consume their material. Satirists expect audiences to fill in the blanks, and when they are unable to meet those expectations, satirists become disenchanted with their craft. Given the complexities of political satire as a message style, it is, arguably, far from inclusive. However, different message elements (e.g., irony, sarcasm) nested in various satirical messages vary in their level of accessibility (Polk, Young, & Holbert, 2009).

Overall, in relation to a republican approach to democracy, political satire has a clear normatively positive role as a presenter of human folly, but when it comes to promoting civic virtue and creating a forum for proper debate, the jury is still out. On both points, high-quality arguments variously define political satire as either a democratic good or an ill, but little actual empirical evidence supports either conclusion. At best, the empirical evidence we do have is decidedly mixed.

### ***Pluralism***

The pluralistic approach to democracy centers on the benefits derived from competition among distinct interest groups. A key concept in this approach to democracy is *advocacy* (see Baker, 2002). Different interest groups advocate their position within specific rules that allow for at least a modicum of fairness, and the group able to generate the most power through a force of will wins. Of utmost importance under this model is that citizens recognize which positions serve them best and which macro-political entities (e.g., political parties) represent those political stances. In this framework, political media should (1) inform interest groups when something important to them becomes part of the political debate, (2) provide the information needed to generate political action, and (3) serve as a means for political elites (i.e., leaders of specific political groups) to learn about what their various constituencies desire.

Regarding the first of these three tasks, those whose primary intent is to let members of a specific political group know something is of importance to them should not be characterized as political satirists. Most assuredly, it happens that a political satirist may imply that a specific segment of the population may want to pay attention to a given matter, but to remain an equal-opportunity attacker, a political satirist should not be a consistent advocate of any one political group's positions over a sustained period of time. A satirist who slips from the former to the latter can no longer be deemed a "satirist," being better defined as an advocate who uses humor. Jon Stewart is a solid example of someone who has, by and large, remained a satirist for a sustained period of time. Although often defined as decidedly "liberal," *The Daily Show* remains an equal-opportunity attacker. Stewart's commentary on the 2012 Democratic convention exemplifies his firm understanding that his primary role is to present human folly. Stewart encapsulated the theme of the convention's first day (September 5, 2012) as "America is the greatest, self-reliant, mom and dad eagle creator that has ever existed in the history of Jesus" (Albanese, 2012). He was pointing clearly to the Democrats' pandering, a basic human weakness found on both sides of the political aisle. *The Daily Show* obviously sees itself as having license to publicize those instances when democratic values and behaviors are out of step with one another, regardless of which political party exhibits these signs of human frailty.

In many people's minds, Stewart's role as a satirist may be conflated with his role as social, political, and media critic. On several occasions Stewart has publicly stated his opinions about various political actors or news media outlets (e.g., CNN's *Crossfire*), but these statements are often made outside his role as satirist. For instance, when Stewart told *Crossfire* hosts Paul Begala and Tucker Carlson what he thought of their show and how it affected U.S. political discourse, he offered these thoughts as a concerned citizen and guest on the program. Although the CNN hosts wanted Stewart to jump into the role of satirist, he refused, and they paid the price with the show ultimately being cancelled. On some occasions Stewart has shed his role as satirist on his program, most notably in advocating what came to

be defined as the "First Responders' Bill" (Carter & Stelter, 2010). However, such instances are rare; the program most often steers clear of explicit forms of advocacy.

A key component to the second element of the pluralism tradition, providing information needed to spark political action, is letting people know how, when, and where they can act to be politically engaged. Traditionally, political satire contains no specific "calls to action" (Holbert, Hill, & Lee, in press). If a person known as a political satirist makes such calls with the intent to advocate for a particular political position, then that person has relinquished that role for the period of time in which the call to action is made. In the case of Jon Stewart, such a relinquishment was most evident in his Rally to Restore Sanity, held on the Washington Mall in Washington, DC, on October 30, 2010. Stewart argued that after 15 years as a political satirist, he had earned the right to step out of that role and offer a specific call to action. However, once that time had passed, he stepped back into being a political satirist, abiding by the constraints of this role and thus refraining from any specific calls for political action.

A recent and unique case that bears mention relative to whether satire can function as a "call to action" is the Colbert Super PAC (<http://www.colbertsuperpac.com>) now shut down and archived. This satirical presentation of the functioning of a Super PAC (political action committee) held an overt call to action (e.g., send Colbert money to fund the Super PAC). However, the Colbert Super PAC remains definable as satire in that this entity's primary purpose was presentation of the human folly in U.S. campaign finance laws. Colbert did not use the Super PAC to advocate a particular position. Instead, he created the organization to make people aware of the bizarre manner in which these supposedly "independent" yet influential groups function, relative to traditional political parties and campaigns. All major political actors, Democrats and Republicans alike, use Super PACs. Colbert was exposing the hypocrisy of the United States' situation in relation to these organizations, but he stopped short of explicitly stating that people need to rise up to end the practice or that one end of the political spectrum is necessarily better or worse in embracing this folly.

Finally, no one has made a case that political satirists perform the role of informing other political elites about national opinion on major issues of the day. Political elites have their own organizations for collecting these data (Bennett & Manheim, 2006), and they rely heavily on traditional news and public opinion (i.e., polling) organizations for this type of information. Elites do not use political entertainment media in general, or political satire in particular, to gauge the "pulse of the nation."

In general, satirists, if they are to remain satirists, offer relatively little normative value to a pluralistic democratic system, especially in comparison to their relatively meaningful role in a Republican democratic framework. Individual satirical messages may serve to reflect advocacy of a political position (e.g., arguing against a specific health care plan; see Holbert et al., 2011). However, over time and across messages, a satirist who wishes to remain a satirist should not (1) inform interest groups, (2) generate political action, or (3) serve political elites. Satirists should not treat any of these functions as primary. If and when they do, they should no longer be deemed satirists.

### ***Elitism***

The elitist framework for democracy generates the most interesting scenarios for a system-level normative assessment of political satire. According to Althaus (2012), infortainment is all that is needed for this democracy to function properly. That this approach to democracy reflects leadership by the few is self-explanatory: Experts are in charge. As a normative ideal, the experts with the most knowledge and the greatest virtue (i.e., lack of corruption) hold the most powerful positions in the social system. To this end, political media are to (1) expose corruption and lack of expertise (as in the republican framework) and (2) advocate for the legitimacy of the political system and its institutions.

As already stated in reference to the republican approach to democracy, political satire can certainly be a normative good, if it is important to expose the human folly of political leaders. Performance of such acts of exposure is the driving force in a wide variety of political satire. Thus, in an elitist democratic system, political satire has a place to hang its hat, in that it has potential to be a normative good. The less obvious normative perspective on political satire offered under this framework concerns the latter issue of political legitimacy. Legitimacy is the primary focus of Hill's essay (this issue), which takes a critical approach to the normative assessment of political satire. In that article, Hill argues that it is important to differentiate between different types of satire. More specifically, she points to potential differences between Horatian versus Juvenalian satire. Horatian satire (e.g., much of what is offered on *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*), she contends, provides audiences with message escape routes in case the satirist's critical perspectives generate too much cognitive dissonance. These escape routes allow this message type to be deemed light and witty. By contrast, the more biting and acidic Juvenalian satire (e.g., Michael Moore's *Fahrenheit 9/11*) harshly attacks its target and does not let up. Consumers of this message style are not afforded any opportunity to fall back into the perspective/ideology that prevailed prior to exposure to the satire. The upshot, Hill argues, is that as a message style, Horatian satire contains subtle yet important elements that ultimately reflect support for the status quo. Conversely, more Juvenalian forms of satire offer little indication of support for the legitimacy of political actors and institutions.

### **Summary Judgments**

Regarding political satire's potential for normative value with respect to different approaches to democracy, the greatest potential normative value for political satire exists under a more elitist democratic system. Within a pluralistic democratic framework, however, political satire in its purest form (i.e., what it should be) may retain relatively little normative value. The democratic system of republicanism represents a middle ground on which political satire has some potential to be influential in a normative sense. The last of these three democratic theories appears to be the dominant framework in which scholars debate whether various types of political satire are good, bad, or indifferent for democracy, and it also seems to be the dominant perspective providing context for the meaning of empirical research on the effects of political satire.

From an empirical perspective, this area of research needs more consistent and explicit presentation of the normative assumptions under which researchers function, as well as acknowledgment that these assumptions exist within a specific type of democratic theory. It also needs new study designs that will allow for proper testing of a broader range of political satire effects—more specifically, assessment of whether political satire is producing small, cumulative, long-term effects—before any final normative judgments can be offered. Normative theory has much to offer the empirical study of political communication (Althaus, 2012). Not only can it stand on its own as a legitimate line of research, but it can also enhance existing lines of research that are more grounded in effects-based traditions (e.g., persuasion, understanding). I hope this essay will serve to bring normative theory more firmly into the fold of the empirical study of political entertainment media. This area of research would do well to call normative theory its own.

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