

Mauro P. Porto
Department of Communication
Tulane University
mporto@tulane.edu

Office: 219 Newcomb Hall
Office hours: Mon and Fri, 11:00 am. - noon
or by appointment
Phone: 862.3037

SATIRE TV AND THE PUBLIC SPHERE
(Advanced Topics in Television Studies – COMM 455)
Spring 2010

Course Description

This course explores the relationship between satire television and democracy in the United States. More specifically, it analyzes the rise of “infotainment” or “fake news” programming -- such as *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* and *The Colbert Report* -- and its impact on the public sphere. The course contextualizes this type of programming in terms of substantial technological and market changes in the television industry, which have led to the emergence of a “post-network” era. The development of a corporatized, multichannel television system has significant political consequences, including the blurring of the lines between news and entertainment. Fake news and parody shows emerge in this context, often interrogating the power of political and media institutions and offering audiences alternative and critical perspectives on social and political problems. However, while such rebellious and democratic potential of comedy is often celebrated, the course also investigates when and how television satire might contribute to reinforce stereotypes and dominant social norms. After comparing fake news shows to other genres, the course develops a detailed analysis of the political consequences of televised political parody, especially in relation to its role in the establishment of a democratic public sphere.

This course presumes basic knowledge of television terms and methods of media analysis. It draws on knowledge gained from other communication classes, especially the core seminars, to develop a critical and comprehensive analysis of the role of satire television in American politics and society. Communication majors who wish to take the seminar as a capstone course must also enroll in COMM 511 for 0 credits. Communication majors taking this course as their capstone experience are expected to apply skills and knowledge gained from other courses. They will therefore be expected to explore in more detail the linkages between media texts, cultural relations, and the political economy of media industries.

Course Goals and Objectives

There are two central goals in this class: first, the development of conceptual and analytical tools that will enable students to analyze the role of television satire in the construction of a democratic public sphere; second, students will learn how to develop a detailed and critical analysis of the history, contents, and political significance of televised political parody.

Our objectives to reach these goals include learning how to:

- apply theories and concepts to develop a critical and comprehensive analysis of the role of television humor in the construction of a democratic public sphere;
- identify key historical trends in the television industry and in the development of fake news shows;
- analyze the social and political significance of satire television;
- conduct research and gather data in library archives to apply the analytical frameworks of the course in the development of a specific case study.

Blackboard

Blackboard will be used for posting announcements, assignments, and other information. It will also be used for online discussions. The system can be accessed at < <http://mytulane.blackboard.com/>>. If you have problems using the system, you can call the help desk: 862.8888.

Course Texts

- Jeffrey Jones, *Entertaining politics: Satire television and political engagement*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2010.
- Geoffrey Baym, *From Cronkite to Colbert: The evolution of broadcast news*. Boulder: Paradigm Publishers, 2010.
- Jonathan Gray, Jeffrey Jones and Ethan Thompson (Eds.), *Satire TV: Politics and comedy in the post-network era*. New York: New York University Press, 2009.

The three books are available through Tulane Bookstore.

Required texts

Besides the three textbooks, we will also work with several articles and book chapters which will be available online at Blackboard. Assigned readings should be completed prior to the classes for which they are listed in the syllabus. All students should have hard copies of the texts and bring them to the respective sessions. Failure to do so will affect your participation grade.

Attendance

The class meets weekly, with two sessions on every Wednesday (the first from 12:00 p.m. to 1:15 p.m. and the second from 1:15 p.m. to 2:30 p.m.). Regular attendance is required and attendance will be taken in every session. You can miss four sessions (2 days) without penalty in your participation grade. Ten unexcused absences (5 days) will result in the final grade recommendation of a “WF.”

Use of laptops and cell phones

The use of cell phones and pagers is prohibited during class hours, unless the professor has given previous authorization for emergency situations. Chatting, e-mailing, internet browsing, or any activity not related to official class activity will affect your participation grade negatively and may result in other penalties. Laptops are permitted solely for the purpose of taking notes, but students who want to use them need to submit a written request in advance to the professor. If you are authorized to use a laptop, you will be required to submit your notes to the professor as an email attachment at the end of the class. The quality of the notes will not affect your grade, but the authorization to use the laptop can be suspended if they are not considered sufficient.

Evaluation

Your final evaluation will be based on the following:

- 1) Midterm exam: Students will take an in-class midterm exam which will cover the first two units (Parts I and II). A list of possible questions will be delivered to students in advance and two of the questions will be on the exam. The midterm is a closed book exam. Students should bring a pen and a blank blue book on the scheduled date for the exam;
- 2) Final paper: Students will be required to write a 14-page (cover page, tables, figures, and references excluded) final paper, spaced 1.5, with font size 12. Specific guidelines for the paper will be given later;

3) Participation: Students are expected to actively participate in class discussions. To have an effective participation, students should complete the assigned readings prior to the sessions for which they are listed in the syllabus and be ready to discuss them. Attendance will also be considered when assessing participation;

4) Readings summaries: Students should bring a one-page summary of the reading/s assigned for each session. They can be typed or hand-written, and should include the student's full name and the date of the session. Summaries will be graded as "sufficient" and "insufficient" and only the former will satisfy the requirement. If you deliver all summaries and they are graded "sufficient," you will receive full credit for this portion of your grade (you can miss up to four sessions without penalty). If you do not, your grade will be proportionally lowered down to a possible "F" (50 points). Summaries are due in the beginning of the respective session and therefore they cannot be sent by email or delivered after the respective class;

5) Analysis of a political satire show: Students will be in charge of developing a close textual analysis of five full episodes of a fake news show (such as *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report*). The results of the analysis should be presented orally in class and in a written report. The written report should be about eight-page long (cover page, tables, figures, and references excluded), spaced 1.5, with font size 12. Students will also prepare a 15-minute oral presentation of the report. Oral presentations should make use of visual support softwares (such as PowerPoint) and should also include some clips of the program. More specific guidelines for the written and oral components of the report will be given later.

Your final grade will be calculated in the following manner:

Midterm Exam	20 %	Participation	20 %
Readings summaries	15 %	Final Paper	25 %
Analysis of a political satire show	20 %		

Grading scale

A	94.0 to 100.0	B	84.0 to 86.9	C	74.0 to 76.9	D	64.0 to 66.9
A-	90.0 to 93.9	B-	80.0 to 83.9	C-	70.0 to 73.9	D-	60.0 to 63.9
B+	87.0 to 89.9	C+	77.0 to 79.9	D+	67.0 to 69.9	F	00.0 to 59.9

Academic dishonesty

Remember that plagiarism is a form of cheating. Do not present someone else's ideas without citing the source. This course adheres strictly to the Code of Academic Conduct of the Newcomb-Tulane College, available at: < <http://college.tulane.edu/code.htm> >

Course Schedule

PART I INTRODUCTION: HUMOR, THE PUBLIC SPHERE, AND THE RISE OF FAKE NEWS IN POST-NETWORK TELEVISION

January 13

Introduction to the procedures and contents of the course.

January 20

Session 1 – The concept of public sphere and its critics.

* Jurgen Habermas, “The public sphere: an encyclopedia article (1964),” *New German Critique*, Vol. 1, n. 3, 1974, pp. 49-55.

* Craig Calhoun, “Introduction: Habermas and the public sphere.” In C. Calhoun (Ed.), *Habermas and the public sphere*. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1994, pp. 1-9, pp. 21-29, and pp. 33-39.

Session 2 – Habermas’ more recent reflections about communication and the public sphere.

* Jurgen Habermas, “Political communication in media society: does democracy still enjoy an epistemic dimension? The impact of normative theory on empirical research,” *Communication Theory*, Vol. 16, n. 4, 2006, pp. 411-426.

January 27

Session 1 – Is there a place for satire in the public sphere? Towards a critical approach to humor.

* Michael Billig, *Laughter and ridicule*. London: Sage, 2005, chapter 8, “Laughter and unlaughter,” pp. 175-199.

Session 2 – Political functions of humor and satire TV: reinforcing or challenging the social order?

* Michael Billig, *Laughter and ridicule*, chapter 9, “Embarrassment, humor and the social order,” pp. 200-214.

* Jonathan Gray, Jeffrey Jones, and Ethan Thompson, “The state of satire, the satire of state.” In Gray, Jones and Thompspon (Eds.), *Satire TV*, pp. 3-19.

February 3

Session 1 – Shits in the television industry: The emergence of the post-network era.

* Amanda Lotz, *The television will be revolutionized*. New York: New York University Press, 2007, “Introduction,” pp. 1-19, and chapter 1, pp. 27-41.

Session 2 – The rise of fake news in the post-network era.

* Baym, *From Cronkite to Colbert*, chapter 1, pp. 1-20.

* Jones, *Entertaining politics*, chapter 1, pp. 3-15.

PART II THE PUBLIC SPHERE IN THE POST-NETWORK ERA: BROADCAST JOURNALISM, POLITICAL TALK, AND FAKE NEWS COMPARED

February 10

Session 1 – Transformations of broadcast journalism: from modern news to corporatized infotainment.

* Baym, *From Cronkite to Colbert*, chapters 2 and 3, pp. 25-59.

Session 2 – The demise of network news?

* Baym, *From Cronkite to Colbert*, chapter 4, pp. 61-77.

February 17

Session 1 – The transformation of televised political discourse: The rise of cable and partisan talk.

* Jones, *Entertaining politics*, chapter 3, pp. 43-62.

Session 2 – Fake news as a critique of traditional political television formats.

* Jones, *Entertaining politics*, chapter 4, pp. 63-92.

February 24

Session 1 – The Daily Show versus CNN as news sources.

* Jones, *Entertaining politics*, chapter 8, pp. 167-184.

Session 2 – The limits of fake news' critique of broadcast journalism.

* Aaron McKain, "Not necessarily not the news: Gatekeeping, remediation, and The Daily Show," *The Journal of American Culture*, Vol. 28, n. 4, 2005, pp. 415-430.

March 3

Session 1 – Stereotypes in the parody of international news.

* Michael Ross and Lorraine York, "First, they're foreigners': The Daily Show with Jon Stewart and the limits of dissident laughter," *Canadian Review of American Studies*, Vol. 37, n. 3, 2007.

Session 2 – **MIDTERM EXAM.**

PART III
THE DAILY SHOW AND THE COLBERT REPORT:
A CLOSE ANALYSIS

March 10

Session 1 - The Daily Show's rhetoric and political discourse.

* Amber Day, "And now ... the news? Mimesis and the real in The Daily Show." In Gray, Jones and Thompson (Eds.), *Satire TV*, pp. 85-103.

* Joanne Morreale, "Jon Stewart and The Daily Show: I thought you were going to be funny!." In Gray, Jones and Thompson (Eds.), *Satire TV*, pp. 104-123.

Session 2 – Student presentations.

March 17

Session 1 – The Daily Show as an alternative political forum.

* Baym, *From Cronkite to Colbert*, chapter 6, pp. 101-121.

* Jones, *Entertaining politics*, chapter 6, pp. 111-143.

Session 2 – Student presentations.

March 24

Session 1 – Parody and politics in The Colbert Report

* Jones, *Entertaining politics*, chapter 9, pp. 185-204.

* Baym, *From Cronkite to Colbert*, chapter 7, pp. 123-143.

Session 2 – Student presentations.

March 31 – No class. Spring Break.

PART IV
CONTEMPORARY CONTROVERSIES OVER SATIRE TV.
CONCLUSIONS.

April 7

Session 1 – Information acquisition and political cynicism: What is the role of satire TV?

* Dannagal Young and Russell Tisinger, “Dispelling late-night myths: News consumption among late-night comedy viewers and the predictors of exposure to various late-night shows,” *Press/Politics*, Vol. 11, n. 3, 2006, pp. 113-134.

* Roderick Hart and Johanna Hartelius, “The political sins of Jon Stewart,” *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, Vol. 24, n. 3, 2007, pp. 263-272.

Session 2 – Student presentations.

April 14

Session 1 – Presidential caricatures and The Chappelle’s Show: The limits of presidential humor and racial satire.

* Jeffrey Jones, “With all due respect: Satirizing presidents from Saturday Night Live to Lil’ Bush.” In Gray, Jones and Thompson (Eds.), *Satire TV*, pp. 37-63.

* Bambi Haggins, “In the wake of ‘The Nigger Pixie:’ Dave Chappelle and the politics of crossover comedy.” In Gray, Jones and Thompson (Eds.), *Satire TV*, pp. 233-351.

Session 2 – Student presentations.

April 21

Session 1 – Satire TV and the future of the public sphere.

* Baym, *From Cronkite to Colbert*, chapter 8, pp. 145-164.

* Jones, *Entertaining politics*, chapter 11, pp. 235-252.

Session 2 – Student presentations. Conclusions of the seminar.

FINAL PAPER DUE THURSDAY, MAY 6, 10:00 a.m. – noon.

Papers should be delivered at the instructor’s office: 219 Newcomb Hall. Late papers will not be received.