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FAKE NEWS: POLITICAL SATIRE IN THE AGE OF PRESIDENT TRUMP

by

D. Landon Graham

**Capstone submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for graduation with**

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Abstract

This thesis examines Donald Trump's disruption of political satire. The history and format of the White House Correspondents' Dinner provides a framework for understanding the shifting relationship between the president's administration, the journalists who cover that administration, and political comedians. These three groups cross paths at the White House Correspondents' Association's annual dinner, which the president traditionally attends and where a headlining comedian entertains guests with a monologue. Trump's decision to skip the Correspondents' Dinner set the stage for a renegotiation of the traditional relationship between president, press, and performer. As President Trump continues to attack both journalists and late-night hosts, the two groups continue to discover common ground. The work of comedians looks increasingly like news reporting, and late-night shows have developed a format based on extensive research and journalistic storytelling. These comedians, however, insist they are only comedians, and dismiss the idea that they are responsible for any political outcomes. Controversy surrounding the 2018 Correspondents' Dinner centered on this question of the role of comedy. Tracing the history of the 2006, 2011, and 2017 Correspondents' Dinners provides a context for examining Michelle Wolf's consequential monologue at the 2018 Correspondents' Dinner, which highlighted both the potential and the limitations of political satire in Donald Trump's political world.

For Katherine—a young satirist

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Finally, I must acknowledge my family of comedic performers. As the oldest sibling, I am often the victim of their satire. But they insist it comes from a place of love. I am grateful to them and, of course, to Morgan, who edits my writing, always believes in me, and laughs at my jokes.

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“I Don’t Think We Should Fake It”: Skipping the Correspondents’ Dinner

On the 100th day of his presidency, Donald Trump took the stage at a campaign-style rally in Pennsylvania and shouted to his supporters, “You notice now everybody’s using the word ‘fake news?’ Where did you hear it first, folks?!”¹ Trump’s implication that he coined the phrase “fake news” and made it popular highlights his antagonism toward the news media. That he was holding a rally in Pennsylvania in the first place underscored the tension between the president and the press; on that day, Trump could have enjoyed an extravagant dinner with the White House Correspondents’ Association at its annual event honoring Washington journalists. But he declined the invitation via Twitter and went to Harrisburg instead.²

He informed his supporters at the rally that “a large group of Hollywood celebrities and Washington media are consoling each other in a hotel ballroom.”³ His assumption that the media needed consolation after his win indicates his belief that the news media collectively opposed him and his presidential campaign. The rhetoric also assured his base in Harrisburg that he was on their side in a struggle against the mainstream media and politicians. As supporters behind him waved signs reading “DRAIN THE SWAMP,” Trump emphasized that he “could not possibly be more thrilled than to be more than 100 miles away from the Washington swamp . . . with much better people.”⁴

Trump’s trip to Harrisburg marked the first time that a sitting president had skipped the White House Correspondents’ Dinner in 36 years.⁵ Administration staff also skipped the dinner

¹ Caroline Kennedy, “Trump Rallies his Base on his 100th Day,” *CNN*, April 30, 2017.

² Donald Trump, Twitter post, February 25, 2017, 1:53 pm, <https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/835608648625836032?lang=en>.

³ “Trump’s Entire Speech on 100th Day,” *CNN*, April 30, 2017, <https://www.cnn.com/videos/politics/2017/04/30/donald-trump-100-days-rally-full-speech.cnn>.

⁴ “Trump’s Entire Speech on 100th Day,” *CNN*.

⁵ Maquita Peters and Domenico Montanaro, “Trump will be First President in 36 Years to Skip White House Correspondents’ Dinner,” *NPR*, February 25, 2017.

in a show of solidarity with their boss. Sean Spicer, then-White House press secretary, explained that with “the relationship [with the press] and the coverage we have gotten, I don’t think we should fake it.”⁶ Spicer did indicate, however, that Trump would potentially attend future dinners if things improved. But in 2018, Trump skipped the Correspondents’ Dinner a second time.

Trump’s refusal to associate with the press stems from his belief that journalists report fake stories and treat him unfairly.⁷ On Twitter and in his rally speeches, he has frequently referred to specific news media like the *New York Times* and *CNN* as “the enemy of the American People!”⁸ Snubbing the White House Correspondents’ Association’s dinner gave Trump a chance to retaliate against what he and his administration viewed as unfair treatment by journalists.

Trump’s break with Correspondents’ Dinner tradition represents a shift in the government’s relationship with news and entertainment media. Although past presidents have taken issue with the way they are portrayed in the news, Trump displays an unprecedented level of animosity toward news media.⁹ Trump’s attacks calling the press “fake news” have changed the way journalists and comedians view their own work, and his decision to skip the annual White House Correspondents’ Dinner has made the Correspondents’ Dinner a staging ground for a renegotiation of the relationship between the White House, the news media, and late-night comedy shows.

⁶ Joe Concha, “Spicer on Skipping Correspondents’ Dinner: ‘I Don’t Think We Should Fake It,’” *The Hill*, April 12, 2017.

⁷ Donald Trump, Twitter post, May 20, 2016, 9:11 a.m., <https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/733691591198703616>.

⁸ Donald Trump, Twitter post, February 17, 2017, 1:48 p.m., <https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/832708293516632065>

⁹ Kurtis Lee, “Other Presidents have Battled the Press. But Never Like Trump,” *LA Times*, February 19, 2017.

“I Wonder if They Know We Were Joking”: Fake News on the *Daily Show*

Fake News used to refer to what Jon Stewart did on *Comedy Central*. He sat behind his desk in a suit and tie, a map of the world behind him, and delivered his satirical version of the news. In a departure from the format of traditional “fake news” shows, however, Stewart did not read made-up headlines for comedic effect. From his early days at the *Daily Show*, Stewart saw that “you can satirize news media conventions just by embodying the form in slightly exaggerated or subtle ways,” but “making the story itself have purpose—that’s when I felt we got something.”¹⁰ He wanted to create more than a news parody. Instead, he saw the possibilities for creating a show with a unique voice and a point of view. Stephen Colbert described how the shifting concept of political humor during his time at the *Daily Show* influenced his own perception of what satire could do. “I didn’t do political humor,” he said. “Political humor to me meant, ‘Hey, Ted Kennedy’s drunk again!’ Then Jon came in with a real desire to have a satirical point of view about the substance of the ideas, not just the actions of the people.”¹¹ Stewart envisioned a satirical show that examined the hypocrisy of politicians and viewed news media outlets through a critical lens.

A desire to have a point of view about the news shifted the show toward a more journalistic approach. Ed Helms, an early *Daily Show* correspondent, expressed the tension between comedy and journalism. “I love journalism, real journalism,” he said. “I think it’s an exciting profession, and there were times even during *Daily Show* segments when I would think, ‘God, I wish I could just put the comedy aside and really dig in with this person.’”¹² Helms’s

¹⁰ Chris Smith, *The Daily Show (The Book): An Oral History* (New York: Grand Central Publishing, 2016), 7.

¹¹ Smith, *The Daily Show (The Book)*, 21.

¹² Smith, *The Daily Show (The Book)*, 126.

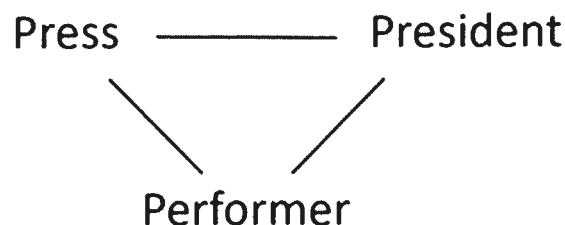
comment highlights the way *Daily Show* comedians saw the potential for real reporting alongside their jokes. And for many viewers, the fake news became the news.

The *Daily Show*'s format of fake news grew in popularity to the point that crowds would greet Stephen Colbert as he tried to film field pieces for the show. The sudden popularity surprised Colbert and prompted him to question, "I wonder if they know we were joking?"¹³

As President Trump continues to attack the press as "fake news," the role of late-night political comedians is shifting once again toward reporting and journalism.

The Failure of a Fiction: A History of the White House Correspondents' Dinner

The relationship between the president and the press involves some tension, but the Correspondents' Dinner presents an opportunity, once a year, to relieve that tension and celebrate the First Amendment. The president takes an opportunity to perform a few self-deprecating jokes and make a few good-natured jabs at news media and political figures. A comedic performer functions as a mediating figure, keeping everyone entertained and bringing president and press together, if only for one night of the year. Everyone agrees to set aside the inherent tensions associated with their roles as journalists and politicians to come together and celebrate the First Amendment in style.



¹³ Smith, *The Daily Show (The Book)*, 84.

But this format is founded on fiction. Sarah Huckabee Sanders referenced the fictions of the dinner as she explained why the president and his staff would not be attending in 2017. Like Spicer, she referenced the unfairness of reporters in covering the Trump White House, and added, "I think it's kind of naïve of us to think that we can all walk into a room for a couple of hours and pretend that some of that tension isn't there."¹⁴ Sanders identifies the inherent awkwardness of a dinner where journalists wine and dine with the powerful political players they cover. She indicates that some tension will always exist whenever the press and the president attempt to ignore their antagonism and enjoy an evening together. Or, as Jon Stewart succinctly described it, the Correspondents' Dinner is "where the White House press corps and the government consummate their loveless marriage."¹⁵

The format and fictions of the dinner lead to its failure. After Michelle Wolf "delivered the most consequential monologue so far of the Donald Trump era"¹⁶ at the 2018 Correspondents' Dinner, Trump tweeted that "the White House Correspondents' Dinner is DEAD as we know it. This was a total disaster and an embarrassment to our great Country and all that it stands for. FAKE NEWS is alive and well and beautifully represented on Saturday night!"¹⁷ In the wake of Wolf's monologue, the format of the Correspondents' Dinner faced a crisis.

Masha Gessen argues in the *New Yorker* that Michelle Wolf "called bullshit on the role laughter has been performing in Trump's America" and exposed the fiction that journalists and

¹⁴ Peters and Montanaro, "Trump will be First President in 36 Years to Skip."

¹⁵ The Daily Show with Jon Stewart, "Intro-Correspondents' Dinner," *Comedy Central*, May 1, 2006.

¹⁶ Masha Gessen, "How Michelle Wolf Blasted Open the Fictions of Journalism in the Age of Trump," *New Yorker*, April 30, 2018.

¹⁷ Donald Trump, Twitter post, April 30, 2018, 5:10 a.m., <https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/990926480329859073?lang=en>.

politicians can “laugh at one another and themselves and not take offense.”¹⁸ But Wolf was not innovating with her controversial monologue. Rather, she was following a tradition of breaking the format of the Correspondents’ Dinner. Before I turn to an examination of what made Wolf’s monologue controversial and consequential, I will consider the 2006, 2011, and 2017 Correspondents’ Dinners to provide a historical backdrop for Wolf’s performance.

2006

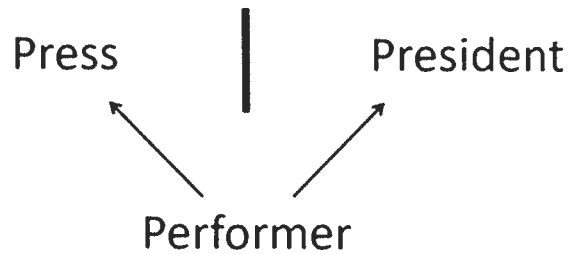
Although Wolf’s 2018 monologue was shocking to many, and Trump’s decision to skip the Correspondents’ Dinner was unprecedented, they were hardly the first to disrupt the traditional format of the dinner. Stephen Colbert changed perceptions of the comedian’s function at the dinner with his satirical roast of President George W. Bush and the press corps in 2006.

Associated Press reporter Mark Smith anticipated Colbert’s satire as he introduced Colbert that night. “Mr. President, usually you and the politicians are the ones in the crosshairs at this dinner,” Smith said. “Tonight, no one is safe.”¹⁹ Smith suspected the evening would not follow the traditional Correspondents’ Dinner format.

Colbert certainly did not intend to bring anyone together through laughter. His perception was that journalists were already too cozy with the administration, and his performance attempted to rebuild friction between the groups.

¹⁸ Gessen, “How Michelle Wolf Blasted Open the Fictions of Journalism.”

¹⁹ “2006 White House Correspondents’ Dinner,” *C-SPAN*, April 29, 2006, <https://www.c-span.org/video/?192243-1/2006-white-house-correspondents-dinner>.



In character as the blowhard conservative pundit from his show, the *Colbert Report*, Colbert sarcastically praised President Bush and the administration's policies. His monologue was received so harshly that White House aides walked out during his performance.

As Mark Smith had anticipated, Colbert continued to break with Correspondents' Dinner tradition by taking the second half of his performance to sharply criticize the press. Still in character, he complimented journalists for their good work avoiding reporting on important topics that would be depressing to read about. He reminded them of their responsibility as reporters, explaining how their job should work: "The President makes decisions. He's the decider. The press secretary announces those decisions, and you people of the press type those decisions down."²⁰

His assertion that journalists should simply run a spell-check on the administration line and go home resonated with Americans who felt like journalists had not done their job checking the administration. The invasion of Iraq was widely unpopular, and many believed the press had failed to adequately investigate and report on it.

The reaction to Colbert's performance in the ballroom was lukewarm at best. Understandably, the journalists at the dinner did not appreciate the barbs aimed directly at them. The laughs were muffled, as were reports on the performance the next day. The consensus was

²⁰ "2006 White House Correspondents' Dinner," *C-SPAN*.

that Colbert had flopped. Colbert made light of the cold reaction on his Monday show, playing clips from his performance overlaid with the sound of crickets chirping.

Jon Stewart's reaction on his own Monday show was more enthusiastic. He described Colbert's performance as "balls-a-licious,"²¹ and the public agreed. News organizations avoided showing the video of Colbert's monologue, but the public shared Stewart's assessment that Colbert's performance was gutsy and smart, and the video remained in high demand on the internet.

In the face of popular opinion, Richard Cohen argued in the *Washington Post* that what the blogosphere thought was a breakthrough satirical performance was really just rude. Cohen chided the public for mistaking Colbert's performance as representative of political courage. He also wondered why "presidents come and suffer through a ritual that most of them find mildly painful, not to mention boring . . . They don't have to be there—and if I were Bush, next year I would not."²² Cohen's advice to presidents who don't want to be forced to laugh at their own expense: don't show up.

But Frank Rich argues in the *New York Times* that Colbert's performance accomplished the essential task of redefining the separating line between the president and the press. "Washington wisdom had it that Mr. Colbert bombed because he was rude to the president," Rich writes. "His real sin was to be rude to the capital press corps."²³ Rich concurs with Colbert's assessment that the press was failing to challenge the president, using the 2007 Correspondents' Dinner as evidence. That year, President Bush declined to perform a comedic routine, citing the week's tragedy at Virginia Tech as preventing him from being funny. Rich

²¹ The Daily Show with Jon Stewart, "Intro-Correspondents' Dinner."

²² Richard Cohen, "So Not Funny," *Washington Post*, May 4, 2006.

²³ Frank Rich, "All the President's Press," *New York Times*, April 29, 2007.

points out that the obvious follow-up question asks why killings in Iraq had not prevented Bush from being funny at previous dinners. But the formality of the event prevented journalists from doing their job and making note of the discrepancy, Rich argues, since “the revelers in the ballroom . . . could not . . . challenge Mr. Bush's hypocrisy; they could only clap.”²⁴ Instead of maintaining an independent voice, the press, trapped at their own dinner, became complicit in the administration's policies.

Stephen Colbert's performance in 2006 was not only a breakthrough performance for him as a political commentator, but also a reconstruction of the triangular relationship between president, press, and performer at the Correspondents' Dinner. The press wasn't laughing, but the public was. And if reporters failed to keep themselves and the administration accountable, Colbert asserted that satirists would.

The year after Colbert's blistering performance, the White House Correspondents' Association hired Rich Little, a comedian known for impersonations, to perform at the dinner. Little began his performance by conspicuously noting, “I am not a political satirist. I'm not up here tonight to make any point politically, believe me.”²⁵ Little's routine of impersonations was entertaining and innocuous. His performance restored the function of the dinner, allowing the assembled journalists and political players to laugh and have a good time together.

2011

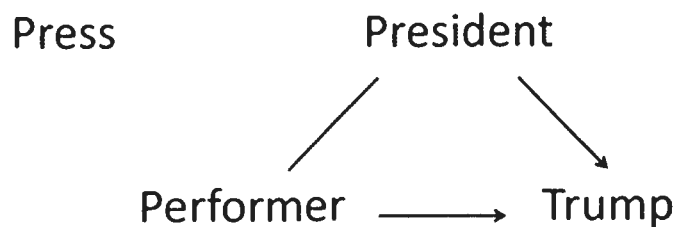
The format of the 2011 Correspondents' Dinner was disrupted by both the comedian and the president. Seth Meyers, a veteran of *Saturday Night Live*, was the anchor of the show's fake

²⁴ Rich, “All the President's Press.”

²⁵ “2007 White House Correspondents' Dinner,” *C-SPAN*, April 21, 2007, <https://www.c-span.org/video/?197644-1/2007-white-house-correspondents-dinner>.

news segment, *Weekend Update*, when he was invited to perform at the 2011 dinner. Instead of satirically roasting the president, Meyers joined forces with President Obama to put an outsider in the hot seat: billionaire celebrity Donald Trump.

The shift disrupted the function of the dinner. Instead of a mediated exchange of humor between the president and the press, the evening became a celebrity roast.



The choice made sense in light of the “celebrification” of the Correspondents’ Dinner. News organizations traditionally invite celebrities as their guests to the dinner because the presence of A-listers looks good for the networks and increases public interest in the event. The celebrity guest list continued to grow during President Obama’s tenure, partly due to celebrity involvement in Obama’s campaigns. Obama signaled the growing influence of celebrities by joking that his “core constituency” was “movie stars.”²⁶ Hollywood moved in closer to the world of politics, and that move was reflected around the tables of the 2011 Correspondents’ Dinner. The crowd of celebrities muffled the message of celebrating the First Amendment.

In keeping with the trend of bringing stars to the dinner, Donald Trump was invited as a guest of the *Washington Post*. Trump’s reality TV show *Celebrity Apprentice* and his reputation as a proponent of birther conspiracy theories gave Obama and Meyers plenty of comedic material.

²⁶ “2011 White House Correspondents’ Dinner,” C-SPAN, April 30, 2011, <https://www.c-span.org/video/?299256-1/2011-white-house-correspondents-dinner>.

Obama took a sarcastic approach. Trump had indicated an interest in pursuing the presidency, and Obama suggested that Trump didn't have what it would take to be commander-in-chief. "All kidding aside," he addressed Trump in a mock-serious tone, "obviously we all know about your credentials and breadth of experience."²⁷ That line alone was met with laughter from an audience that could not take Trump seriously. Obama played the straight man as the audience ridiculed Trump with every laugh.

Obama's satire made Trump's humiliation public. The laughter that filled the ballroom in response to Obama's performance was based on the consensus that Trump was ridiculous. Not only was he humiliated in public, he was humiliated by the public.

Meyers then got up and drove home Obama's implication that Trump was too ridiculous to be president. "Donald Trump has been saying that he will run for president as a Republican," he said, "which is surprising, since I just assumed he was running as a joke."²⁸

The public humiliation angered Trump. As the two headliners of the evening mocked him, the *C-SPAN* cameras frequently panned to Trump sitting at the *Washington Post* table. He sat motionless and expressionless, staring straight ahead. He maintained the stone-faced expression as the surrounding tables full of celebrities and political figures erupted in laughter. At the end of the dinner, Trump left quickly, and the next morning he told an interviewer that "Seth Meyers has no talent."²⁹

Trump's seething response to the satire has prompted speculation that the humiliation of that evening cemented his decision to run for president. Adam Gopnik writes that perhaps "Trump's own sense of public humiliation became so overwhelming that he decided . . . that he

²⁷ "2011 White House Correspondents' Dinner," *C-SPAN*.

²⁸ "2011 White House Correspondents' Dinner," *C-SPAN*.

²⁹ Michael Barbaro, "After Roasting, Trump Reacts in Character," *New York Times*, May 1, 2011.

would . . . pursue the Presidency after all, no matter how nihilistically or absurdly, and redeem himself.” Gopnik assumes that the dinner will be remembered as the moment when “Trump’s ambitions suddenly turned over to the potent politics of shame and vengeance.”³⁰

Maggie Haberman and Alexander Burns also argue in the *New York Times* that the evening of public humiliation drove Trump’s political ambition. The Correspondents’ Dinner, they claim, “captured the degree to which Mr. Trump’s campaign is driven by a deep yearning sometimes obscured by his bluster and bragging: a desire to be taken seriously.”³¹

2017

In light of Donald Trump’s intense desire to be taken seriously, it is unsurprising that he decided to skip the 2017 dinner and instead hold an event with some of his staunchest supporters. As Trump described the “Hollywood celebrities” and “Washington media” gathered at the Correspondents’ Dinner, his Pennsylvania crowd booed and jeered until Trump reminded them that the dinner was being held “without the president,” causing the crowd to erupt in laughter.³²

The scene at the 2017 Correspondents’ Dinner marked a stark contrast to Trump’s raucous rally in Pennsylvania. With the president gone, most celebrities decided to skip the dinner too, and *Bloomberg News*, *Vanity Fair*, *People*, and the *New Yorker* all dropped sponsorship and cancelled their after-parties. Photographs at the Washington Hilton showed empty hallways that in previous years had been packed with celebrities and politicians.³³ The

³⁰ Adam Gopnik, “Trump and Obama: A Night to Remember,” *New Yorker*, September 12, 2015.

³¹ Maggie Haberman and Alexander Burns, “Donald Trump’s Presidential Run Began in an Effort to Gain Stature,” *New York Times*, March 12, 2016.

³² “Trump’s Entire Speech on 100th Day,” *CNN*.

³³ Amy Argetsinger, “The Rise and Fall—or Maybe Rebirth?—of the White House Correspondents’ Dinner,” *Washington Post*, April 26, 2017.

recalibration of the dinner was captured by one journalist in attendance. “Last year, I was at a table with Kendall Jenner,” she said. “And this year I’m at a table with Madelaine Albright.”³⁴

The star guests of 2017, in the absence of the president, were Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein, the *Washington Post* reporters who broke the story of the Watergate scandal. They didn’t tell any jokes, instead opting to sincerely encourage the journalists in the room to keep up the good work.

The lower profile of the dinner meant that the Correspondents’ Association didn’t worry about scheduling and advertising a headlining comedian in advance of the event. They contacted Hasan Minhaj, a little-known *Daily Show* correspondent, just two weeks before the event to ask if he wanted the gig.³⁵

With no one from the White House in attendance, Minhaj had to navigate the most blatant disruption to the format of the Correspondents’ Dinner in 36 years. The result created an increased camaraderie between the comedian and his comparatively small audience of journalists.

Press



Performer

Trump

Minhaj struck a more reflective tone in his monologue than is typical for Correspondents’ Dinner performances. After noting the *Daily Show*’s ineffectiveness at inspiring political change, claiming “it has left zero impact,” he told his audience that he had “realized something: Maybe it

³⁴ Amy Argetsinger, “The Rise and Fall.”

³⁵ Amy Argetsinger, “The Rise and Fall.”

is because we are living in this strange time where trust is more important than truth.”³⁶ He then argued that, while journalists may be doing good work with truth, they had lost trust. “I don’t have a solution on how to win back trust,” he said, “but in the age of Trump, I know that you guys have to be more perfect now more than ever . . . Because when one of you messes up, he blames your entire group. And now you know what it feels like to be a minority.” Minhaj’s comparison of the media’s situation to that of minorities allowed him to offer, from his “three decades of being brown,” his advice that “if you want to survive in the age of Trump, you got to think like a minority.” Minhaj warned journalists that one of the most difficult aspects of being a minority is that “when you actually manage to do great work, you get hit with the most condescending line in the English language: ‘Hey, you’re actually one of the good ones.’ Then you have to smile and say thank you. Kind of sucks, doesn’t it?” With his rhetorical question granting journalists temporary minority status, Minhaj underscored the newfound feeling of understanding and appreciation that journalists and comedians had for one another. In the absence of President Trump, and at the tamest Correspondents’ Dinner in years, Minhaj exuded a “we’re in this together” attitude. “Your work is invaluable,” he said. “I mean that as a fake journalist. I’m rooting for you.”³⁷

Minhaj did his best to roast Donald Trump in absentia and ended his performance by commending his audience of journalists for the important work they do—something Stephen Colbert would never have done 11 years earlier. “I want to thank you all. I want to thank Woodward and Bernstein for inspiring a generation of journalists,” Minhaj said. “And I would like to thank Donald Trump for inspiring the next.”³⁸

³⁶ “2017 White House Correspondents’ Dinner,” *C-SPAN*, April 29, 2017, <https://www.c-span.org/video/?426363-1/hasan-minhaj-headlines-white-house-correspondents-association-dinner>.

³⁷ “2017 White House Correspondents’ Dinner,” *C-SPAN*.

³⁸ “2017 White House Correspondents’ Dinner,” *C-SPAN*.

Jon Stewart provided his own inspirational message for journalists in the age of Trump by sharing some relationship advice. He stopped by Stephen Colbert's desk at the *Late Show* and asked to speak directly to the media. After offering his sympathies for the "breakup," he advised the media to move on. "It's time to get your groove back, media," he said. "Cause let's face facts, you kind of let yourself go a little bit these past few years."³⁹ Stewart's approach to encouraging the media provides a contrast to Minhaj's method at the Correspondents' Dinner. Minhaj worked to create common ground with members of the media. He compared the journalists at the Hilton to marathon runners and identified himself as the support team "at the half-mile mark giving you tape for your nipples." With this analogy, Minhaj placed himself along the route, supporting and encouraging journalists in their work. Stewart, on the other hand, maintained his position as an uninvolved observer of the race, allowing him to more substantially criticize news media for their breathless and constant coverage of Donald Trump. And he argued that "this breakup with Donald Trump has given you, the media, an amazing opportunity for self-reflection and improvement."⁴⁰ Warning the media against constantly obsessing about Trump or whether or not "he's being mean to you," Stewart instead recommends doing "something for yourself. Take up a hobby. I recommend journalism."⁴¹ Stewart's sarcastic sympathy for the news media continued the method he had developed at the *Daily Show* of turning his critical lens on the media as well as government officials. But Stewart didn't have a show anymore, and *Daily Show* alumni like Hasan Minhaj and Samantha Bee turned 2017 into a celebration of the hard work journalists do to preserve a vibrant democracy.

³⁹ The Late Show with Stephen Colbert, "Jon Stewart to the Media: It's Time to Get Your Groove Back," *YouTube*, February 27, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cmdFne7LnuA>.

⁴⁰ The Late Show with Stephen Colbert, "Jon Stewart to the Media."

⁴¹ The Late Show with Stephen Colbert, "Jon Stewart to the Media."

Alternative Reality: Samantha Bee's Impersonation of a Host

As the popularity of the 2017 White House Correspondents' Dinner declined, Samantha Bee offered an alternative. Her event, conspicuously titled "Not the White House Correspondents' Dinner," aired on *TBS* at the same time as the actual Correspondents' Dinner. The network claimed that "the evening is sure to bring plenty of surprises, music, food, and laughter—and if you're not careful, you just might learn something. Specifically, you'll learn how screwed we'd be without a free press." Hasan Minhaj showed solidarity with journalists, and Samantha Bee made it her mission, with some level of condescension, to educate an uninformed public about the necessity of a free press.

Bee's event put the format of the White House Correspondents' Dinner on display. The floor was set up with tables for the journalists and other guests of the dinner, while 2,500 fans of *Full Frontal* filled the concert hall seating to witness the event unfold. The guests of honor seated at a central table were from the Committee to Protect Journalists. Bee's opening monologue included instructions for viewers on how to donate money to the CPJ. While journalists at the real Correspondents' Dinner at the Washington Hilton gathered in self-affirmation, at the "Not the White House Correspondents' Dinner," Bee did that work for them. She gathered her fans to inform them about the importance of a free press and celebrate the contributions journalists make to democracy. She also informed them about the Correspondents' Dinner itself. By highlighting the format of the Correspondents' Dinner, Bee showcased some of the ineffective and even counterproductive aspects of truth-to-power comedy.

To promote the "Not the White House Correspondents' Dinner" weeks before the event, Bee made a video with fake clips featuring her as the entertainer at previous Correspondents' Dinners. Her roasts of past presidents showcased the awkwardness of the format of the

Correspondents' Dinner and the difficulty of calling attention to important political issues through jokes. In a black-and-white clip of her roast of President Truman, Bee jokes, "Knock, knock. Who's there? Not Nagasaki anymore" And after a silent reaction from the audience, Bee looks up and tentatively offers the classic, ". . . Too soon?"⁴² The joke satirizes many of the hallmarks of a stereotypical Correspondents' Dinner joke. It is a knock-knock joke, which speaks to its level of mundane predictability. The gag assumes that no one is answering because they were blown up by an atom bomb. The joke is topical, accurate, and profoundly unfunny. Bee's inquiry of "too soon?" is not naïve—it is the point of telling the joke in the first place. It is less a knock-knock joke and more a knock-knock news headline.

Bee continues her satire of the Correspondents' Dinner in her roast of President Reagan. Decked out in 80s fashion-sense and sucking a lollipop, Bee's mindless character delivers her punchlines in a nasal monotone: "The president says the most terrifying words in the English language are, 'I'm from the government and I'm here to help.' That's funny, I thought they were 'you have AIDS and the government doesn't care.' Ba-dum-bum."⁴³ This bit responds to another stereotypical aspect of Correspondents' Dinner jokes; Bee quotes something the president said and then mocks it in a similar format. Bee's addition of "Ba-dum-bum," indicating that the joke is indeed a joke, highlights a limit of the truth-to-power style of Correspondents' Dinner humor. The audience does not appreciate most of the jokes. Bee makes the difficulty of the staid audience clear in her impersonation of a Clinton-era Correspondents' Dinner host. After her obligatory Clinton sex-scandal jokes fall flat, she pauses for a drink of water and says, with a nervous laugh, "Oh thank you so much, you're a great crowd, really lively."⁴⁴ Roasting powerful

⁴² Full Frontal with Samantha Bee, "Not the White House Correspondents Dinner: Sammy Bee Roasts the Presidents," *YouTube*, April 29, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rThBu45gR4E>.

⁴³ Full Frontal, "Not the White House Correspondents Dinner: Sammy Bee Roasts the Presidents."

⁴⁴ Full Frontal, "Not the White House Correspondents Dinner: Sammy Bee Roasts the Presidents."

people to their face makes for a tough crowd, especially when the laugh-lines are really just inconvenient statements of fact. The Nagasaki and AIDS jokes display the humorless aspect of truth-to-power comedy. No one laughs when the punch lines become headlines.

Bee's satire of the comedian's role at the dinner highlighted her assumption that comedy is powerless to affect political outcomes. In the only alternative White House Correspondents' Dinner clip set in the future, Bee appears with long hair and a pale face, wearing a plain Victorian-style dress, on a flickering dystopian screen. She begins the comedy bit by saying, "Thank you, President Pence, for allowing me a rare exception to the No-Public-Woman-Chatter Law."⁴⁵ By indicating that the future is bleak, at least from *Full Frontal's* progressive, feminist perspective, Bee questions the ability of comedy platforms to create real political change.

Continuing to impersonate the Correspondents' Dinner, "Not the White House Correspondents' Dinner" featured Will Ferrell's impersonation of George W. Bush, which he revived from a popular run on *Saturday Night Live*. On stage in front of Bee's audience, Ferrell performed the tension between president and press with folksy mannerisms and a twang in his accent. "I'll be honest," he said, looking at the journalists sitting at the tables in front of him. "I never liked you guys in the press. Our relationship was sometimes strained. You guys would always sneak up on me with 'gotcha' questions, like, 'Why are we going to war?' Gotcha! 'Why did you not respond to Hurricane Katrina?' Gotcha! 'What is your middle name?' Gotcha!" And in a direct jab at President Trump, Ferrell added, "I just wish someone had told me that all you have to do is say 'fake news' over and over again."⁴⁶

⁴⁵ Full Frontal, "Not the White House Correspondents Dinner: Sammy Bee Roasts the Presidents."

⁴⁶ Full Frontal with Samantha Bee, "Not the White House Correspondents' Dinner, Pt. 7: Special Guest George W. Bush," *YouTube*, April 29, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bdp0am6tGLY>.

As he was reenacting the tension between president and press, Ferrell created a rapport with his audience of journalists. He swaggered across the stage and, in an implicit comparison to Donald Trump, asked his audience of journalists, “How do you like me now?” He nodded and smiled smugly as they cheered. In character as President Bush, Ferrell effectively recreated the fiction that the press can laugh and have a good time at a fancy dinner with the politicians they cover.

Bee’s dinner offered a civics lesson for the audience and glowing praise for journalists, all within a parody of the White House Correspondents’ Dinner. Her event even involved a fake president, which was more than Hasan Minhaj had to work with in the ballroom of the Washington Hilton. But Bee’s event ultimately showcased the limitations of comedy at the Correspondents’ Dinner: truth-to-power political humor sometimes isn’t funny. And with President Trump away, Bee’s dinner turned inward and devolved into an evening of self-congratulation.

Alternative Reality: Donald Trump’s Impersonation of a President

While Samantha Bee and Will Ferrell honed their comedic impressions at “Not the White House Correspondents’ Dinner,” Donald Trump developed his own impersonation of the President of the United States. His performance of the role is one of the essential fictions that, according to Masha Gessen, shapes our political arena. Within the fiction story that Gessen describes, “Trump performs the role of President, albeit poorly, and those in the media maintain a strained civility in their coverage of him.”⁴⁷ But Gessen argues that this pretense of civility,

⁴⁷ Gessen, “How Michelle Wolf Blasted Open the Fictions of Journalism.”

while maintaining a level of respect for the office of the president, casts “a pall of unreality over most media coverage.”⁴⁸ The press struggles to cover our reality-TV-show president.

Trump and his supporters relish his unpresidential behavior. At a Pennsylvania rally during the campaign for Pennsylvania’s 18th Congressional District, Trump responded to recent criticism in the press of his speaking style. He returned to a common theme from his own campaign, asking supporters, “Remember what I used to tell you: how easy it is to be presidential?” He then implied that if he were to act in a presidential manner, “you’d be so bored.”⁴⁹ To prove his point, he played the role of a presidential president for his audience, stepping back from the podium and then approaching it again in a staid, robotic manner. “I’m very presidential,” he announced in a monotone. “Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for being here tonight.” Then, to respond to criticism of his speaking ability, he claimed that such a presidential performance was actually below his level of ability, because it is “much easier than doing what I have to do.”⁵⁰ Despite the surreal irony of watching the President of the United States pretend to be the President of the United States, Trump’s claim that “this got us elected” carries some weight. As he reminded the crowd that he could easily become presidential but chooses not to, someone shouted, “You’re one of us.”⁵¹

Trump’s influence over his supporters, coupled with his insistence that the “fake news” media treats him poorly, has increased antagonism toward journalists. As the *Boston Globe* began coordinating an effort by newspapers from across the country to publish simultaneous editorials defending the free press against attacks from Donald Trump, a man made phone calls

⁴⁸ Gessen, “How Michelle Wolf Blasted Open the Fictions of Journalism.”

⁴⁹ “President Trump Mocks Being Presidential,” *CNN*, March 10, 2018, <https://www.cnn.com/videos/politics/2018/03/10/trump-pennsylvania-speech-mocking-presidential-sot.cnn>.

⁵⁰ “President Trump Mocks Being Presidential,” *CNN*.

⁵¹ “President Trump Mocks Being Presidential,” *CNN*.

to the *Globe* calling them “the enemy of the people” and threatening to kill all the *Globe*’s employees.⁵² He was arrested the same morning that Trump tweeted, “I just cannot state strongly enough how totally dishonest much of the Media is. Truth doesn’t matter to them, they only have their hatred & agenda.”⁵³ As Trump’s political situation worsens, he increasingly blames and attacks the news media, leading to an increase in threats and violent attempts against journalists.⁵⁴

In the wake of Trump’s unprecedented antagonism toward the press, journalists use events like the Correspondents’ Dinner to reaffirm the value of their work. Bob Woodward’s speech at the 2017 Correspondents’ Dinner reminded attendees that “like presidents and politicians, sometimes, perhaps too frequently, we make mistakes and go too far. When that happens, we should own up to it. But the effort today to get this best obtainable version of the truth is largely made in good faith.”⁵⁵ Carl Bernstein noted that the job of journalists is simply “to put the best obtainable version of the truth out there.” He then added, “Especially now.”⁵⁶ Woodward brought the message home: “Mr. President, the media is not fake news.”⁵⁷ The problem with articulating the unobvious message of the evening was that the intended recipient was not in attendance. Trump had preempted Woodward’s lecture and gone to Pennsylvania; in his absence, Woodward was left addressing a crowd of journalists who cheered his statement, fulfilling the self-congratulatory nature of the 2017 Correspondents’ Dinner. Woodward could do no better than Minhaj at roasting the president in absentia.

⁵² John Cassidy, “Trump’s Attacks on the News Media Are Getting Even More Dangerous,” *New Yorker*, August 31, 2018.

⁵³ Donald Trump, Twitter post, August 30, 2018, 4:11 am, <https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/1035122954697433088>.

⁵⁴ Cassidy, “Trump’s Attacks on the News Media.”

⁵⁵ Jennifer Calfas, “Read the Advice Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein Gave at the White House Correspondents’ Dinner,” *Time*, April 30, 2017.

⁵⁶ Calfas, “Read the Advice Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein Gave.”

⁵⁷ Calfas, “Read the Advice Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein Gave.”

Comedians joined journalists in 2017 to extoll the virtues of a free press and show solidarity with journalists. Hasan Minhaj and Samantha Bee highlighted the heavy workload of rigorous reporting and Bee encouraged viewers to support the Committee to Protect Journalists, or, in another condescending jab at her audience, “you could support journalism by actually buying a newspaper.”⁵⁸ The “actually” betrays the assumption that viewers aren’t buying or reading newspapers and therefore need to be entertained into supporting journalism and democracy. These serious efforts by comedians to support journalistic enterprise and freedom of the press make sense given their shared reliance on the free speech protected by the First Amendment. But their active support of news media is a drastic change since the days of Jon Stewart’s *Daily Show*, and the change likely would not have occurred if not for Donald Trump’s election to the presidency. His rants against journalists and news media caused comedians to soften and hedge their own criticisms of news media. By leaving town on April 29, Trump brought comedians and journalists together at the 2017 Correspondents’ Dinner events to regroup and reevaluate the role of journalism in a changing democracy.

“DEAD as We Know It”: Michelle Wolf’s Correspondents’ Dinner

Responses to the 2017 Correspondents’ Dinner questioned the role of a free press in American democracy; responses to the 2018 Dinner questioned the role of comedy.

Michelle Wolf criticized the Correspondents’ Dinner more than Minhaj had done the year before. Wolf began her monologue by echoing what “a porn star says when she’s about to have sex with Trump, ‘let’s get this over with.’” As the audience groaned, Wolf said, “Yep, kiddos,

⁵⁸ Full Frontal with Samantha Bee, “Not The White House Correspondents’ Dinner, Pt. 9: Show Close and Committee to Protect Journalists,” *YouTube*, April 29, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VG4XP3Z_LKU.

this is who you're getting tonight."⁵⁹ She disparaged the venue and setting of the dinner by running through a few straightforward reactions to the facts: "We're at a Hilton; it's not nice. This is on C-SPAN; no one watches that. Trump is president; it's not ideal."⁶⁰ Throughout the evening, Wolf remained unapologetic about her crass and direct style. After an uncomfortable response to her joke about the yarn "pussy hats" of the Women's March, a self-satisfied Wolf reminded the Correspondents' Association that they "should have done more research before you got me to do this."⁶¹ Wolf's unapologetic "this is what you get" performance displayed contempt for the event and the journalists and government officials in attendance.

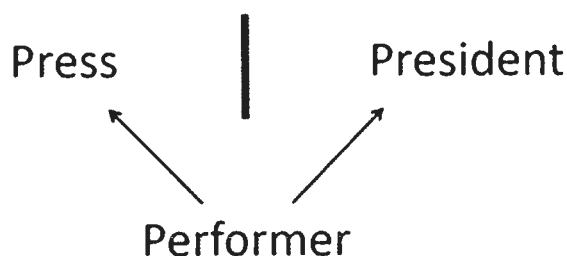
Wolf also criticized the press more than Minhaj had. While Minhaj made a few quips at the expense of various news networks, he ended his monologue by praising and showing solidarity with reporters. In contrast, Wolf maintained her criticism of the news media through the end of her monologue. Echoing Jon Stewart's 2017 assessment of the press's "breakup" with the president, Wolf asked, "Did you used to date him? Because you pretend like you hate him but I think you love him." She then outlined her straightforward reasoning for her perception of the press's love of President Trump, setting herself apart as the only one in the room who would address the issue. "I think what no one in this room wants to admit is that Trump has helped all of you," she said. "He couldn't sell steaks or water or vodka or college or ties or Eric, but he has helped you . . . sell your papers and your books and your TV."⁶² Like Stephen Colbert 12 years earlier, Wolf saw a cozy relationship between the president and press, and, as a comedic performer, took the opportunity to redefine the boundary between the two groups.

⁵⁹ "2018 White House Correspondents' Dinner," *C-SPAN*, April 28, 2018, <https://www.c-span.org/video/?444555-1/comedian-michelle-wolf-headlines-white-house-correspondents-dinner>.

⁶⁰ "2018 White House Correspondents' Dinner," *C-SPAN*.

⁶¹ "2018 White House Correspondents' Dinner," *C-SPAN*.

⁶² "2018 White House Correspondents' Dinner," *C-SPAN*.



Wolf also indicated her willingness to pick up the slack where news media was failing to fulfill its responsibilities. Her last line, which Masha Gessen calls “the most shocking of her entire monologue,”⁶³ was a straightforward piece of news reporting: “Flint still doesn’t have clean water.”⁶⁴

Some media reactions were predictable. Brian Kilmeade, a co-host of “Fox & Friends,” remarked immediately after Wolf’s performance that he saw the monologue as “an attack to impress Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert.” But “in terms of the people here,” Kilmeade noted, Wolf’s straightforward and crude comedic style was a “totally offensive, horrible choice. In fact, it’s the reason why the president didn’t want to go.”⁶⁵

Although the president was not in attendance for Wolf’s monologue, Sarah Huckabee Sanders, the White House press secretary, attended as a representative of the White House. Several prominent reporters believed that Wolf’s jokes directed at Sanders crossed a line. Andrea Mitchell tweeted that “an apology is owed,” and Mika Brzezinski wrote that the mockery of “a wife and mother . . . for her looks is deplorable.”⁶⁶ Immediately after Wolf’s monologue, several

⁶³ Gessen, “How Michelle Wolf Blasted Open the Fictions of Journalism.”

⁶⁴ “2018 White House Correspondents’ Dinner,” *C-SPAN*.

⁶⁵ Michael M. Grynbaum, “Michelle Wolf’s Routine Sets Off a Furor at an Annual Washington Dinner,” *New York Times*, April 29, 2018.

⁶⁶ Grynbaum, “Michelle Wolf’s Routine.”

White House reporters went up to Sanders and expressed sympathy.⁶⁷ The reaction of these journalists did little to disavow the perception that the Correspondents' Dinner is a glitzy event where reporters schmooze with the government officials they cover.

Donald Trump's assessment that the Correspondents' Dinner "is DEAD as we know it"⁶⁸ was precipitated by an official statement from Margaret Talev, then-president of the Correspondents' Association, who acknowledged the "dismay" of several members regarding "the entertainer's monologue," and indicated that Wolf's remarks were "not in the spirit" of the Association's mission to maintain civility and respect.⁶⁹ This official disavowal of the comedian they hired to perform at their dinner begs the question: what did the Correspondents' Association expect? James Poniewozik argues that the uproar about Wolf's monologue says less about the quality of her comedic performance and more about the Correspondents' Dinner, which "seems not to know what its purpose is."⁷⁰ Michelle Wolf was right—the Correspondents' Association should have done their research.

While the Correspondents' Dinner arguably seems unclear about its purpose, comedians are becoming clearer about theirs. In defense of Michelle Wolf, comedy writer and performer Adam Conover wrote an "official response from America's comics" in the *New York Times*: "If you don't want comedy, don't hire us."⁷¹ Conover outlines three guidelines of comedy that he has found helpful in creating quality, purposeful comedy: "1. Be funny. 2. Tell the truth. 3. Make

⁶⁷ Grynbaum, "Michelle Wolf's Routine."

⁶⁸ Donald Trump, Twitter post, April 30, 2018, 5:10 a.m., <https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/990926480329859073?lang=en>.

⁶⁹ WHCA, Twitter post, April 29, 2018, 7:03 pm, https://twitter.com/whca/status/990773612226412545?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed%7Cterm%5E990773612226412545&ref_url=http%3A%2F%2Ftime.com%2F5259517%2Fmichelle-wolf-whca-dinner%2F.

⁷⁰ James Poniewozik, "Michelle Wolf Did Her Job. It's the Correspondents' Dinner That Is the Problem," *New York Times*, April 30, 2018.

⁷¹ Adam Conover, "Michelle Wolf Did What Comedians Are Supposed to Do," *New York Times*, April 30, 2018.

people in power uncomfortable.”⁷² Conover’s third guideline distinguishes a new brand of truth-to-power satire from the older harmless-jokes-about-politicians style of comedians like Rich Little who assure audiences that they have no intention of making any political arguments. Conover advocates for a more purposeful comedy that does maintain a political point of view and directs its barbs at the people in power.

After Stephen Colbert’s blistering performance at the 2006 Correspondents’ Dinner, the Correspondents’ Association hired Rich Little to perform his uncontroversial impersonations the following year. In yet another echo of 2006, following Michelle Wolf’s controversial 2018 performance, the Correspondents’ Association chose to hire not a comedian but a historian to deliver a lecture at the 2019 Correspondents’ Dinner. Ron Chernow promised the lecture wouldn’t be boring, but noted that he has “never been mistaken for a stand-up comedian.”⁷³

“For More on This, It’s Time for a Closer Look”: Seth Meyers’s Journalism

Seth Meyers was never comfortable performing his monologues in a stand-up comedy style. Instead, as the host of NBC’s *Late Night*, Meyers has developed a journalistic desire to get the story. When Meyer’s moved to *Late Night*, his producer Mike Shoemaker encouraged him to build the show by relying on his storytelling skills. As Meyers began running out of his own stories to share, the recurring segment “A Closer Look” gained traction. Shoemaker described the segment as a continuation of the storytelling, “except that the story is about what’s going on in the world.”⁷⁴ The segment digs deeper than traditional late-night gimmicks. “A Closer Look” consists of ten minutes of researched, cohesive reporting on a single story with jokes. Often that

⁷² Conover, “Michelle Wolf Did What Comedians Are Supposed to Do.”

⁷³ Emily Heil and Paul Farhi, The White House Correspondents’ Dinner Breaks Decades-old Tradition by Not Featuring a Comedian,” *Washington Post*, November 19, 2018.

⁷⁴ Dave Itzkoff, “Seth Meyers Confronts the Trump Era on ‘Late Night,’” *New York Times*, January 25, 2017.

story centers on Donald Trump and his administration. Meyers says it can be exhausting on a Sunday to realize that on Monday he has to go to work and report another story about Trump, but then Trump “does stuff that’s important and you want to talk about it because it’s important.”⁷⁵

As the content of *Late Night* shifted toward a more journalistic feel, so did the setting of the show. Meyers originally tried to fit the mold of a traditional late-night host, but quickly realized that was a mistake. He soon gave up performing monologues and segments in stand-up style and moved behind his desk for the entire show.⁷⁶ The move, reminiscent of sets like the *Daily Show* and the *Colbert Report*, lent Meyers the news-anchor image that was more familiar to him from his work on *SNL*’s “Weekend Update” and signaled a shift toward a more serious delivery of the day’s news. The shift increased the show’s success, and Meyers told *CNN*’s Van Jones that “the nice thing is audiences are willing to engage in comedy shows in a way they haven’t in the past, insofar as they’re willing to get a degree of the news from a comedy show.”⁷⁷ Meyers quickly stressed that people should get the news “from the news first,” but his message indicated that, even if he wouldn’t call himself a journalist, he is willing to use his late-night platform to report “a degree of the news.”

The shift to a more serious tone also distinguished Meyers from *The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon*, which airs just before *Late Night* on NBC. Fallon maintains a more traditional late-night show, focused on the celebrity guests who visit to promote their work, and many of the recurring segments are innocuous games Fallon plays with the guests. His political jokes rarely venture into the realm of satire. In September 2016, when presidential candidate

⁷⁵ *Washington Post*, “A Day of Making ‘Late Night with Seth Meyers,’ *YouTube*, July 20, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sT1Lef5AnsY>.

⁷⁶ Itzkoff, “Seth Meyers Confronts the Trump Era.”

⁷⁷ *CNN*, “Seth Meyers Explains Why He’s Tough on Trump,” *YouTube*, June 16, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vKAPPTw9uS8>.

Donald Trump visited the *Tonight Show*, Fallon's lighthearted sketches with Trump drew criticism. The moment that inspired the most frustration occurred during their interview when Fallon asked if he could do something "that's not presidential . . . now that we're both just civilians" and proceeded to mess up Trump's hair.⁷⁸ Trump played along with the gag, prompting critics of Fallon to claim that he had "humanized" Trump.⁷⁹ Some assumed that the *Tonight Show* interview increased Trump's chances of becoming president.

The episode raised questions about how much responsibility comedians have for political outcomes. The answer that most comedians opt to give is that they are only telling jokes to get laughs and the political subject matter is incidental to that comedic drive. During an episode of the *Tonight Show*, Seth Meyers and Jimmy Fallon laughed about the possibility that their experiences with Trump had increased his political success. Fallon reminded Meyers that when Trump was on his show "I messed his hair up, and . . . I got a pretty big reaction."⁸⁰ Meyers indicated his disappointment that after the interview some people assumed that Fallon was responsible for Trump's win. "I'm so insulted by that," Meyers said, "because *I* am the reason he won. Look, I made fun of him in 2011. That's the night he decided to run."⁸¹ Meyers countered criticisms of Fallon by insisting that his own performance at the 2011 White House Correspondents' Dinner ignited Trump's desire to become president. As the two comedians laughed and argued about who was responsible for President Trump, they effectively dismissed the idea that either of them could actually take responsibility for the election results. "It's not the outcome I wanted," Meyers said, with sarcastic seriousness, "but it's history. I got a man elected

⁷⁸ Meagan Flynn, "'He seriously messed up my hair': Trump, Jimmy Fallon in Hair-tousling Sequel," *Washington Post*, June 25, 2017.

⁷⁹ Meagan Flynn, "'He seriously messed up my hair.'"

⁸⁰ The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon, "Seth Meyers on Baby Teeth, Late Night Fails and President Trump," *YouTube*, February 9, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fxRu05RwpXQ>.

⁸¹ The Tonight Show, "Seth Meyers."

president. I want my points.”⁸² Meyers deployed a basic satirical skill, disarming the criticism by caricaturizing it. When Van Jones asked if he had any regrets about his Correspondents’ Dinner performance, Meyers smiled and deflected blame: “Obama also told jokes about him that night, and looking back I do think it was his fault.”⁸³

Trump Stand-Up: A New Brand of Presidential Entertainment

While comedians have tried their hand at reporting the news, Donald Trump has tested the waters of comedy, albeit in his own Trumpian way. His style is markedly different from his predecessor. Obama frequently appeared on comedy shows and enjoyed his opportunities to speak at the White House Correspondents’ Dinner. Trump’s entertainment acumen, in contrast, stems from his time as a reality TV host. Seth Meyers notes that Trump approaches the work of a president “more as an entertainer than he does as a politician.”⁸⁴ Meyers even sees the way that Trump’s rally speeches parallel the sets of stand-up comedians. As Trump tries out slogans and lines at his rallies, he gauges the crowd’s reaction and “the stuff that works goes into the act as a recurring bit.”⁸⁵ Trump’s eye for entertainment drives his political strategy.

Amy Chozick argues that Trump won the presidency and could win again based on his “uncanny grasp of must-see TV.”⁸⁶ Trump keeps viewers, and voters, glued to the screen. The prime-time ratings at *CNN* and *MSNBC* have doubled and tripled, respectively, since 2014. “Whether you’re rooting for the antihero or cheering for his demise,” Chozick writes, “chances

⁸² The Tonight Show, “Seth Meyers.”

⁸³ CNN, “Seth Meyers.”

⁸⁴ CNN, “Seth Meyers.”

⁸⁵ CNN, “Seth Meyers.”

⁸⁶ Amy Chozick, “Why Trump Will Win a Second Term,” *New York Times*, September 29, 2018.

are Trump TV has you under steady—some would say unhealthy—hypnosis.”⁸⁷ Trump capitalizes on the excesses and chaos that lend his presidency the veneer of reality entertainment.

Shock value is an essential aspect of reality TV. Mike Fleiss, who created “The Bachelor,” jokes that every episode should advertise “*The most shocking rose ceremony ever!*”⁸⁸ Trump uses similar superlatives to describe his presidency. During a speech at the United Nations he claimed that “in less than two years, my administration has accomplished more than almost any administration in the history of our country.”⁸⁹ This superlative reality-TV statement was met with laughter from his audience of diplomats. Surprised, Trump smiled awkwardly and doubled down on his statement, “So true!”⁹⁰ The laughter of the United Nations gave late-night hosts an opportunity to quip about the president’s stand-up comedy skills, but it also showcased Trump’s presidential comedy with an implicit reminder that his entertainment is not innocuous. Each melodramatic episode of Trump’s presidential reality show affects political outcomes in the United States and around the world.

The entertainment value of a Trump presidency contributes to Trump’s political success. The chaos keeps the ratings up. And the comedic factor of Trump’s performance may have been overlooked by journalists and political scientists. When asked by a comedy writer why he would be voting for Donald Trump in the 2016 election, a Boston cab driver responded, “Because he makes me laugh.”⁹¹

⁸⁷ Chozick, “Why Trump Will Win.”

⁸⁸ Chozick, “Why Trump Will Win.”

⁸⁹ BBC News, “President Donald Trump Gets Unexpected Laugh at United Nations,” *YouTube*, September 25, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eN2jqTilLOM>.

⁹⁰ BBC News, “President Donald Trump Gets Unexpected Laugh.”

⁹¹ Chozick, “Why Trump Will Win.”

“Jokes Are Broken Now”: The Limits of Fake News

Comedians insist the impact of their work is limited, even when award ceremonies attempt to acknowledge their importance. In 2015, Jon Stewart’s *Daily Show* received a Peabody Award for its 16 years of political satire. Introducing the award, comedian Keegan-Michael Key cited the *Daily Show*’s reporting and satire, noting that the comedians at the *Daily Show* “didn’t just spoof. They exposed hypocrisy, and they became their own news source. Viewers . . . tuned in to experience the needed truth that often comes with smart, biting satire.”⁹² Key argued that the comedy of the *Daily Show* provided a compelling voice within the media landscape, but Stewart pushed back against the idea in his acceptance speech. “I’m shocked and somewhat disappointed at the just terrible conditions in the world that you all are addressing through your work,” he told the journalists in the room, “because I thought that we, over our 16 years, had healed a lot of this through witty repartee.”⁹³ Stewart’s sarcastic surprise over the *Daily Show*’s failure to solve the world’s problems exhibits his belief in the limitations of comedic discourse. He thanked journalists for doing real journalistic fieldwork while his team made jokes in front of green screens, telling journalists, “You are what we all aspire to be.”⁹⁴ It apparently takes a serious award ceremony, but even Jon Stewart can sincerely compliment the news media.

Daily Show alumnus John Oliver is another comedian who insists he is only a comedian. He uses the platform of his show, however, to educate and inspire action. As a result of a story Oliver did on net neutrality, the FCC received 45,000 new comments and complaints. For that story, and for “bringing satire and journalism even closer together,” Oliver’s show *Last Week*

⁹² Peabody Awards, “The Daily Show with Jon Stewart – 2015 Peabody Award Acceptance Speech,” *YouTube*, July 25, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iSB4nYwimBw>.

⁹³ Peabody Awards, “The Daily Show.”

⁹⁴ Peabody Awards, “The Daily Show.”

Tonight received a 2014 Peabody Award.⁹⁵ The award commended Oliver for his ability to focus on important stories, “at times becoming an investigative journalist.”⁹⁶ But in an interview with *PBS NewsHour*’s Jeffrey Brown, Oliver dismissed the idea that he has any influence as a comedian. When Brown asked if Oliver had been surprised at how many people responded to his story on net neutrality and wrote to the FCC, Oliver replied with skepticism, “I don’t know if I really have any power.”⁹⁷ As Brown argued that the public response to the show indicated a certain amount of comedic power, Oliver maintained that the amount is insignificant. “I have no moral authority,” he said, “I’m a comedian.”⁹⁸

Seth Meyers argues that Donald Trump’s political success has dispelled the idea that comedians exert any level of influence over political outcomes. When Meyers was the head writer of *SNL* in 2008, the show’s political sketches, which included Tina Fey’s spot-on impersonation of vice-presidential candidate Sarah Palin, received a lot of credit for having “buried the political aspirations of Sarah Palin.”⁹⁹ But Meyers noted that Donald Trump “took that tenfold and obviously it didn’t make a difference.”¹⁰⁰ In comparing the two examples, in which comedians supposedly sunk Palin’s chances but were unable to prevent Trump’s election, Meyers reasoned that “it might just be coin flips here as far as what comedy does.”¹⁰¹

Hasan Minhaj also referenced comedic limitation at the 2017 Correspondents’ Dinner. After several jokes at the expense of the absent administration, he said, “On the *Daily Show*, we

⁹⁵ “Last Week Tonight with John Oliver (HBO),” <http://www.peabodyawards.com/award-profile/last-week-tonight-with-john-oliver>.

⁹⁶ “Last Week Tonight with John Oliver (HBO),”

⁹⁷ “Comedian John Oliver on Making Fun of Serious News,” *PBS*, July 14, 2014, <https://www.pbs.org/video/comedian-john-oliver-on-making-fun-of-serious-news-1412634815/>.

⁹⁸ “Comedian John Oliver,” *PBS*.

⁹⁹ CNN, “Seth Meyers.”

¹⁰⁰ CNN, “Seth Meyers.”

¹⁰¹ CNN, “Seth Meyers.”

do these jokes all the time . . . It doesn't matter."¹⁰² Minhaj argued that the show's jokes failed to convince Trump supporters to reconsider and that his comedic efforts had done nothing to slow Trump's momentum. Minhaj also implicitly included his Correspondents' Dinner monologue, which aired on *C-SPAN*, in the category of ineffectual comedy. "It's almost as if the *Daily Show* should be on *C-SPAN*," he quipped. "It has left zero impact."¹⁰³

While comedians lament their apparent inability to change the course of American politics, Donald Trump's presidential reality show continues to entertain people into political action. Journalists and comedians are unused to dealing with a head of state whose primary political asset is his eye for entertainment.

The history of political humor under President Trump has played out at the White House Correspondents' Dinner. Trump's unconventional presidency has caused journalists and comedians to reassess their roles in a democracy with a leader who attacks free speech. Trump's decision to snub the Correspondents' Dinner upended the traditional balance between president, press, and performer.

As a result, Trump's presidency has highlighted some of the limits of satire. Michelle Wolf's crass and straightforward monologue in 2018 exposed what Masha Gessen calls "the fiction" that all the guests of the Correspondents' Dinner "inhabit the same reality, and that both the humor and the objects of the humor are innocuous."¹⁰⁴ Rather than provide an evening of innocuous entertainment, Wolf opted for humor with a political agenda. In return, her routine was renounced by the journalists who had hired her, and the Correspondents' Association decided to quit inviting comedians to their dinner.

¹⁰² "2017 White House Correspondents' Dinner," *C-SPAN*.

¹⁰³ "2017 White House Correspondents' Dinner," *C-SPAN*.

¹⁰⁴ Gessen, "How Michelle Wolf Blasted Open the Fictions of Journalism."

Comedians may be right about the limits of their political satire. During “A Closer Look” segment about Deputy Attorney General Rod Rosenstein’s alleged suggestion to wiretap the president, Seth Meyers noted that so many jokes comedians had made about a Trump presidency had come true. “Don’t make jokes,” he concluded. “Jokes are broken now.”¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁵ Late Night with Seth Meyers, “Rod Rosenstein Chaos; Trump Attacks Kavanaugh’s Accuser: A Closer Look,” *YouTube*, September 24, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DOI4uK7wKHQ>.

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Reflective Writing

During the 2012 presidential election, I returned to my freshman dorm most afternoons after class to watch the previous evening's episode of the *Daily Show*. Jon Stewart's election coverage was in full tilt, and he spent most of each episode satirizing both media coverage of the election and the candidates, especially Mitt Romney. As I watched, I wished I could contribute as the *Daily Show's* "chief Mormon correspondent."

Stewart never called me back, but those afternoons spent watching the *Daily Show* and the *Colbert Report* sparked my interest in the way Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert blended discussion of serious, current political topics with jokes.

My Honors thesis, "Fake News: Political Satire in the Age of President Trump," provides a capstone for my undergraduate education and an academic expression of my ongoing interest in "fake news." The topic of political satire blends my undergraduate majors of English and Political Science. My study of Political Science provided background for my thesis research on the history of the First Amendment in the United States, political media in democracies, and the effects of satire on political outcomes. My study of English provided background for analyzing media messaging and satirical rhetoric.

The Honors capstone contributed significantly to my overall education at Utah State by providing a continuing project that I was excited about. While undergraduate coursework allowed me to study a broad variety of topics, each course and related projects ended with the semester. Writing a thesis allowed me to explore a topic of my choice across semesters, taking more time than a traditional course would allow to consider how to narrow the focus of the project, revise, and create a strong final product. I learned that working on a project over an

extended period of time is an essential academic skill, and writing an Honors capstone thesis helped me learn how to approach the challenge.

The mentor relationship was essential to this project. Dr. McCuskey, in his class on contemporary literature, a 1984 discussion group, and conversations in his office, showed me how English can be political and how my interest in political satire could find a home in the English department. He also helped me learn the importance of focusing the topic of my thesis. I came to him with a lot of different ideas about every late night host on TV, Trump's media and political careers, and the entire history of the *Daily Show*. Through our conversations in his office, Dr. McCuskey helped me develop a focus on the White House Correspondents' Dinners, along with a framework for examining Trump's disruption of the format of the dinner. The experience taught me how to research an extended project based on one specific question and how to build a framework for beginning to answer that question. The project also benefited from Dr. McCuskey's standing admonition to write with precision and clarity. I hope it has, at least on some level, lived up to the standard.

Examining primary sources for this project broadened my understanding of research. The word "research," deservedly or not, carries a very boring connotation. As a result, my research for a thesis on political satire left me feeling a bit like the writers of the *New York Times*'s "Best of Late Night," a column which they describe as "a rundown of the previous night's highlights that lets you sleep—and lets us get paid to watch comedy."¹⁰⁶ Their smug job description highlights a preconception that watching comedy is not serious business. But I think there is an important place for serious academic study of political satire and its effects on democracy, and researching late-night comedy has some unique challenges. The sheer volume of satirical output

¹⁰⁶ "Best of Late Night," *New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/column/best-of-late-night>.

makes it even more essential to have narrowly focused research questions, particularly now that Netflix has begun creating its own informational/comedy shows (Hasan Minhaj's new Netflix show is an interesting example—he describes it as a “woke TED Talk”).¹⁰⁷

Taking a critical approach to researching political comedy also presents a unique challenge, as most major late-night comics are politically progressive and, at least sometimes, funny. Studying their work through a critical academic lens helped me consider my approach to critical thinking, since I tend to agree with most of the political arguments on comedy shows and, on top of that, the arguments were funny and entertaining. Critical thinking becomes easier when research sources are saying different things, but that tends not to be the case with comedy.

My thesis naturally blended my work across my two major disciplines of English and Political Science. I was also able to discover, however, the way my work crosses into other disciplines as well. While working on my thesis, I had the opportunity to take an Honors science communication class. I saw how the communication principles we learned about from Dr. Jennifer Peebles reflected some of the work I was already doing on my thesis. The new understanding about communication research helped me see my thesis project in a new light.

Because I had the opportunity to present my research at the National Conference on Undergraduate Research in Oklahoma City, I was able to observe, to some extent, the impact my research can have on others. As I had suspected, the name “Trump” in the title of my presentation attracted a full house, and I had a number of questions after my presentation. The one question that really stood out to me, however, was the first one, when one of my peers asked me where to find the best and most accurate source of news. I was struck that the key takeaway from a presentation on political satire for this student had been to question how to find reliable

¹⁰⁷ Patriot Act, “Saudi Arabia | Patriot Act with Hasan Minhaj | Netflix,” *YouTube*, October 28, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LUhbZdvtzcw>.

information. But the question echoed what I have heard from my peers many times before. We have worried so much that every news source is biased by a political agenda that we have concluded reliable information does not exist. I want to continue researching political communication, presenting that research, and contributing to a positive culture of integrity and reliability in this age of alternative facts.

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Author Biography

Landon Graham is majoring in English and Political Science. He was Vice President of Sigma Tau Delta, Rho Tau Chapter from 2017-2018. He has presented papers at undergraduate conferences, including NCUR, UCUR, and Sigma Tau Delta's International Convention, where he won Honorable Mention for his essay on James Baldwin's "The Fire Next Time." He has also been employed in the Supplemental Instruction and Undergraduate Teaching Fellows programs, teaching review sessions for Dr. Lyons's Introduction to US Government and Politics course. After graduation from Utah State, Landon plans to attend graduate school and become a writer for Stephen Colbert. If that plan fails, he will join the Foreign Service instead.