

Divisive Comedy: A Critical Examination of Audience Power

Nathan A. Wilson

Northwest Missouri State University, USA

Abstract

In this essay, I examine several prominent incidents where stand-up comedy fails (at least for some) to produce humorous effects. Audiences of humour, like all rhetorical audiences, are believed to be active in the creation of meaning. Via a critical rhetoric reading strategy, I arrive at several factors that differentiate the role of the audience. Such factors include the requirement of continued laughter, despite altered expectations stemming from (physical/temporal/psychological) distance. Audiences judge humorous discourse both to be humour in the first instant and also the relevance of the politics expressed therein. These findings expand theoretical and popular modalities of understanding humorous audiences. Such reactions and attempts to regulate the uptake of stand-up comedy display that humour is best explained as a complex relation of discourse and power, a discourse formation. The discussion of key examples displays that comedy needs to be regulated because it is potentially dangerous.

Keywords: Articulation; audience; critical rhetoric; humour; judgment; phronesis; stand-op comedy.

In the following essay, I examine contemporary discourse for the signs of an underlying logic that illuminates how audiences understand their role in both the consumption and – more importantly – creation of humour. Audiences of humour, like all rhetorical audiences, are believed to be active in the creation of meaning. In examining the discussion surrounding Sarah Silverman's 'chink' joke (2001), in comparison to more recent conversations surrounding Stephen Colbert's speech at the White House Correspondents' Dinner (2006), Stephen Colbert's speech before Congress (2010), and the Jon Stewart/Stephen Colbert 'Rally to Restore Sanity and/or Fear' (2010), I point out the stated requirement of continued laughter, despite altered expectations stemming from (physical/temporal/psychological) distance that mark the inadequacy of many traditional theories of humour to adequately explain how contemporary audiences engage humorous texts. Over the course of the argument, I display how these discussions about humour mark that humour is not an

involuntary reaction to a pre-existing, self-same, inherently funny (and therefore apolitical) subject or discourse. Instead, it is better understood as a complex relation of discourse and power, a discourse formation. Audience reactions articulate social issues with the jokes in ways that more traditional theory elides prior to analysis, both enabling and constraining humour's ability to act as rhetoric. Viewed from this perspective, the discussions of the aforementioned incidents display that humour needs to be regulated because it is potentially dangerous.

A Brief History of Stand-Up

Lawrence E. Mintz notes that stand-up is 'arguably the oldest, most universal, basic and deeply significant form of humorous expression (excluding perhaps truly spontaneous, informal social joking or teasing). It is the purest public comic communication' (1985: 71). It is this 'purity' that attracts me to the form. If we can successfully remove the detritus specific to other forms of both comedy and communication, we can make out the elements essential to all.

As a term, stand-up comedy has only been used since 1966.¹ However, the practice of a speaker facing an audience and trying to be perceived as humorous is a staple of (though not limited to) western society. Some locate the roots of contemporary stand-up in the paradox of the wise-fool (whether it be a fool who says something wise, or a wise man that acts a fool), traceable back to at least the middle ages and the figure of the court jester (Gifford, 1979; Goldsmith, 1955; McMullen, 1970; Mintz, 1985; Welsford, 1961). Others link it back further, to a tradition of Greek monologues that served to warm up the audience prior to plays (Stebbins, 1990). Nevertheless, the contemporary form of stand-up is thought to have emerged in the United States when Mark Twain began as an after-dinner speaker and humorous lecturer in 1856 (Gribben, 1985; Stebbins 1990).

In the last sixty years, stand-up comedy has gained prominence as a cultural form, as displayed by its proliferation. Though variations on Twain's concept appeared in vaudeville, burlesque, chautauqua, as well as the later variety shows and night-club and resort entertainment, it wasn't until the late 1950s that rooms and clubs emerged specifically for the form (Nachman, 2003). The period from the late 1970s until the mid-1990s saw an explosion of both physical and mediated venues, including the birth of a cable channel dedicated to comedy (Comedy Central) and the birth of the stand-up concert film (Gallo, 1991; Jones, 2005; Mendrinos, 2004; Nachman, 2003; Stebbins, 1990). Though the trend of building new clubs has slowed a bit in more recent years, stand-up comedy remains a prominent feature of the entertainment landscape with the major expansions occurring in mediated venues, such as the internet. With the rise of websites such as MySpace, YouTube, Hulu, Facebook and now Google+, it is much easier for many people to access and enjoy comedy, and stand-up comedians have concomitantly become a hot commodity. Most

recently, the number of talk shows and news shows featuring political issues, hosted and/or commented on by stand-up comics, is on the rise (Jones, 2005).

Reading Strategy

One of the reasons that humour is so attractive as a rhetorical device is that it is friendly, possessing an affective quality that invites audience interaction (Grossberg, 1992; Jones, 2005). It seems that jokes have the most potential to evoke humour – and perhaps act politically – when they are ‘in play’ in the fullest sense of the metaphor. That is to say, jokes must be both proffered and encountered ‘in good fun’ – from a sense of playfulness. Further, we the audience must be free to take up the joke in our own way, to connect the dots as we wish, and to the purpose we wish – to play with it. I would therefore prefer to engage the humour on its own terms, to analyze the audience’s play, and leave the joke itself relatively untouched.

To accomplish this goal, in this essay, I employ a reading strategy I call critical rhetoric (Biesecker, 1992; Phillips, 1996; Wilson, 2008). Following from the theories of Michel Foucault and Jean François Lyotard, critical rhetoric seeks out instances that result in a proliferation of discussion, then reads the discourse for the underlying logics (e.g. statements about how audiences interact with humorous texts). The idea is that sometimes an event (practice, subject, institution, and so on) provokes us to call into question what we think we know; we then reconsider how we understand it, and thus we rush to explain it to ourselves and to each other. Foucault (1972) regards such instances as gaps between two or more competing discourse formations, Lyotard (1988), as *différends* necessitating the navigation between competing logics or sets of rules.² The resultant discourse can thus be mined as attempts to bridge the gap and clarify the rules. The discourse available for analysis exceeds the contemporary, popular discussion of the individual event, but includes the total archive of all previous (and subsequent) discussion of similar events (including scholarly analysis).

The goal of this reading strategy is to chart the history of the solutions proffered, and problematize the notion that any solution was achieved simply – not via the application of well-known social norms and rules (what I, following from Lyotard [‘Letters’] and Maurice Charland will call *litige*), but via a complex and sometimes haphazard, situationally dependent or *prudential* form of judgment (or *phronesis*; Lyotard and Thébaud). The varying discourses constitute competing rhetorics, and rhetoric deals not with the certain, but with the possible, the probable and the plausible. Further, through this method we can illuminate other potential solutions and even imagine ‘the possibility of new actions (or utterances, or selves)’ (Phillips, 1996: 332).

The benefit of critical rhetoric is that it foregrounds the audience as arbiters of meaning, placing their discourse ahead of any particular tradition of scholarly criticism (who, after all,

constitute but a small part of the text's audience). I ask, 'How do audiences understand their role, how is that similar to / different from the theory produced thus far and what else could it have been?' Further, it doesn't close the discourse, bridge the gap, declare a winner, and call it a day. Instead, it leaves the event (in this case, the joke) 'in play,' still active and open for further discussion. It expands the discourse and maintains the potential for the possibilities we've imagined to become realized.

As one might surmise, an exhaustive study of the archive relevant to stand-up comedy, or even the topic at hand (role of the audience), would be difficult, if not impossible, given the proliferation of discourse temporally spanning at least from Aristotle forward, and including in its scope terms such as comedy, humour, play, irony, parody, satire, wit, laughter, outrage, ridicule, superiority, taboos, psychoanalysis, incongruity, surprise, paradox (to name but a few). In any case, the resultant project would greatly exceed the space available to me here.

Instead, I undertake a more humble venture: to locate a few key popular discourses from among those most widely available (and therefore potentially affecting the most people) and link them to prominent theoretical discourses that contain resonant logics and put them all in conversation with one another. I recognize that my effort itself will become part of the archive, having no more purchase, ultimately, on the Truth than any of those that precede or follow it. The result will not be simple, clean and comprehensive, but such a result would be counterproductive to my goal of generating further discourse and allowing new potentialities to evolve, in short, of flushing out thought.

While arguably also meeting criteria for other forms of comedy, each of my examples represent (at least, at times) solitary speakers addressing an audience and trying to be humorous. Further, and perhaps more importantly they each generated subsequent discussion. My methodology necessitates a text comprised of public discussions, and I find the greatest proliferation of discussion occurs when some audiences reject the humour proffered by a stand-up comic and a dialogue about the role of the audience ensues; universal laughter, as the expected result of a humorous event, doesn't seem to merit public comment. These discussions about potentially non-humorous events are moments when we can see the rules of the game being hashed out, when the wave of laughter doesn't obscure the wheels turning in some audience members' heads—and that these wheels potentially always turn and further turn differently for each individual in the audience.³ Unfortunately, those who seem most invested and therefore create the most and the loudest discourse are the comics themselves and their critics, but if we remember that these are to some extent also members of the audience of humour this need not be a problem. I begin with my oldest example, the reaction to Sarah Silverman's 2001 'chink' joke, which will serve as a backbone for the progression of this essay. On the way, I tie in the other, more contemporary

examples as well as relevant theory that provide for insight and contrast as to the audience's own understanding of their role in the comedic process.

Analysis

On July 11, 2001, comic Sarah Silverman told the following joke on *Late Night with Conan O'Brien*:

I was telling a friend that I had to serve jury duty and I wanted to get out of it. So my friend said 'Why don't you write something inappropriate on the form, like "I hate chinks"?' But I don't want people to think I was racist, so I just filled out the form and I wrote 'I love chinks.' And who doesn't?⁴

NBC aired the joke uncensored. Asian American rights activist Guy Aoki saw the joke on television and began a media campaign claiming that Silverman was, in fact, a racist. After Silverman addressed the issue as guest on *Politically Incorrect* with Bill Maher (air date: 7/22/2001), Aoki was invited to debate Silverman on that same programme (air date: 9/22/2001). The other two guests on that later show were actress Anne-Marie Johnson and comic/actor David Spade.

To inaugurate the September discussion, Silverman was asked to retell (a version of) her joke, for which she got a slight laugh from the audience. As she began to explain her intention in writing it, her first challenge came from Johnson, who interrupted to ask, 'Where is the joke?' Maher responded, 'Well, I have to say, that's not the biggest laugh I've ever heard a joke get, but it did get a laugh, and considering the set-up here stacked against that joke, that means that joke is still funny.' When Johnson again challenged that assertion, Maher responded, 'Well if, with this set-up, that joke got any kind of a laugh, you have to give something to that joke.' Maher's point seems to be in response to the question 'Was it a joke at all?' and his answer is that because it evoked audience laughter, it was definitively a joke, and moreover, given the context, a particularly effective one. These remarks, accepted within the discourse without further comment, mark two important statements about an audience's relationship to humour that differ in subtle yet important ways from traditional theories: (1) that the audience defines humour as such via its laughter and (2) that the context affects or alters the audience expectation (and visa versa).

On the first point, most students of humour, at least from Sigmund Freud (1963/1905) forward, agree that humour must be affirmed by (or at the very least received by) an audience to even be defined as such. More recently, John Limon (2000) defines a genre of 'absolute stand-up,' distinguishable from serious, extrinsic forms by the audience's response. Limon argues that stand-up, unlike 'serious art,' need not appeal to any outside arbiter for a judgment that endures.⁵ Instead, he argues that laughter by individual audiences is the sole indicator of humour – any given act of laughing in the moment

retrospectively defines humour as such for that moment. The requirement of laughter thus indicates that it is incorrect to define a joke or bit as definitively funny or not, but instead we must locate it in time and place; we must state ‘it was/was not funny when...’ Funny changes from a stable trait of a routine, bit or joke to a state of the audience post its encounter and it is the achievement of this state that is the comic’s primary goal. Without laughter, even if the audience nods or smiles, the joke becomes a ‘failed joke’ (12). By Limon’s logic, if the immediate audience finds it amusing, the comic has no need to defend it once it’s repeated, filmed or digitized.

However, Silverman got a laugh in the room on Conan’s show (thus it was funny when she told it), but Maher dismisses this previous laugh in favour of pointing out that it still got a laugh on his (current) show. Maher, it seems, would go one step further than Limon: he seems to imply that the joke must continue to garner a laugh to continue to be considered as humour; that each new audience must (re)judge. Both interpretations grant considerable power to the audience: it is the arbiter of humour, determining if a joke has even occurred, but Maher’s interpretation keeps the joke ‘in-play,’ undecided in any definitive way.

Further, only Maher’s criteria is sufficient to underwrite why internet bloggers thought that, in 2006, Stephen Colbert’s keynote speech at the White House Correspondents’ Association dinner didn’t receive coverage by the mainstream media. As I’ve previously argued, the bloggers who took the correspondents to task argued that the fact that Colbert’s remarks failed to garner a laugh in the room constitutes the remarks as political—a bona fide attack on the President and press corps—and therefore proves their newsworthiness (‘Irony’). However, we should note here that many of these jokes had aired previously on *The Colbert Report*, and received laughs in that forum, so by Limon’s logic, the jokes were already established as such – vetted by studio audiences even prior to Colbert’s selection as keynote speaker.⁶ It is only through Maher’s ‘continued laughter’ criterion that the bloggers’ argument makes sense. Further, it is only in contrast to other audiences—such as the bloggers themselves—who thought the routine was hilarious that the lack of laughter in the room becomes meaningful, thus Maher’s logic allows for differences among audiences. This brings us to the second statement implicit in Maher’s answer: context matters.

For many scholars, context is an important element of humour. Freud notes that the audience must have ‘an *expectation* of the comic,’ that something funny or amusing will follow (219’ original emphasis). Primarily this psychological-contextual element is thought to separate out the humorous space from the space of serious discourse. Maher’s guest and actor/comic David Spade makes this point explicitly later in the discussion when he notes ‘it is comedy and you’re not seriously saying these things. If you were on a talk show saying “I really believe this, and this is what I think,” then I think it’s more offensive’. It is a fairly common point of view, especially since Freud’s premise has worked its way into virtually every work written on the subject of humour since. For instance, this notion of expectation

underwrites the notion of a play space free of obligation, only loosely encumbered by rules. It further underwrites the social inversion many claim is characteristic of the carnivalesque space (see for instance Stallybrass and White, 1986; Stam, 1992). Similarly, Betsy Borns (1987) notes that audience members go to the comedy club specifically to laugh, not to be influenced, and many critics agree (see for instance Gilbert, 2004; Limon, 2000; Stebbins, 1990). For these critics, the audience of stand-up comedy that enters a club isn't interested in the speaker's views, save as fodder for humour, and an audience that encounters the same act elsewhere just isn't the same.

We can see these spatial distinctions play out in more recent discussions, such as those provoked by Stephen Colbert's testimony during the hearing of the Subcommittee on Immigration, Citizenship and Border Security (from C-SPAN 9/24/2010 coverage), which some referred to as 'making a mockery' of the proceedings (Malkin, 2010). Similarly, *The Gawker* columnist Jim Newell notes that for Fox News correspondent Megyn Kelly and GOP congressmen, Rep. Steve King, 'Colbert's testimony was a tasteless disgrace to our nation's proud governing institutions.' Or consider Bill Maher's response to Jon Stewart's and Colbert's recent Rally to Restore Sanity and/or Fear, which equates to 'it's a rally, why not make it about something?' (*Real Time*). The implicit statement here is that rallies are serious, and to merely do humour and not have a point (not that this rally could be so reduced) is to waste an opportunity. Thus is the space of serious discourse policed, cordoned off from those venues acceptable for stand-up comedy, and not by virtue of the rules themselves (*litige*), but via their continued application by audiences in discourse.

In contrast to a strict spatial distinction, there is also a temporal element implicit in Maher's view. Though Silverman's joke was set up as such, it is a repetition of the event after the critique has been levelled, this impacts its ability to be perceived as humorous in any venue. Once Aoki made public his critique, those who subsequently hear Silverman do so through a more critical frame, which for some may have lessened the expectation of humour. As a result, the re-contextualization and reduction of the comic's material within a new, more conservative venue – in the case of *Politically Incorrect*, perhaps only marginally, but nevertheless – drastically changes the audience. In this temporal context and in this space, no longer are we dealing with people expecting to see a stand-up act, willing to approach the act as humour and grant some leniency to the speaker on points with which they disagree. The fact that it is submitted for their perusal in such sites frames the content as inherently political, and the audience may approach it as such. Following Freud's logic, such audiences are secondary audiences in that they need not have witnessed the original act. While recognizing the distinction, Maher's statement fails to recognize a hierarchy of audiences based on venue, and marks that the expectation of humour (or lack thereof) does not negate the laughter criterion; someone must still laugh. However, some might accuse Maher, like the mainstream media in response to Colbert's Correspondents' Association address, of privileging the 'live' reaction of those present in the room.

Many theorists of stand-up implicitly reference the traditional live audience that witnesses and responds to the stand-up act (see for instance Gilbert, 2004; Limon, 2000; Stebbins, 1990). As Borns states, stand-up comedy is not just *'live, but living* – an organic, growing, developing monologue that is as reactive as it is active,' and this could only occur in front of a live audience, or a series thereof (1987: 16). Yet, by the above logic, when the act becomes mediated via radio, television, and especially when captured in writing or on records, tapes (audio or video) or digital technology (CDs, DVDs, or MPEGs), the act loses this living quality and presumably much of the audience's power to shape it.⁷ Audiences making use of mediated forums are once again implicitly designated secondary (and therefore perhaps trivial) to (and therefore parasitic on) the immediately present audience.

This requirement of presence further justifies the separation of critics like Aoki and the bloggers alike (as well as their subsequent audiences) from humorous audiences. If we accept that once we are outside the 'living' moment of stand-up—once the text has been witnessed (whether distributed in mass mediated form or not), it is no longer adaptive, malleable, living—then in this static form the text can be examined in greater detail, as is the case with many of Silverman's, Colbert's and Stewart's critics. In this form, secondary audience members are free to reframe the comic's material as consequential political discourse. The comic's entire routine may be rendered down to a specific bit or series of jokes, critical commentary can be added in order to clarify the issue – to determine the 'True' meaning – and these new statements are then (re)presented to a new audience with different expectations.

However, Maher only represents this position by default – he has no way of monitoring his television audience. The logic of his statement resonates better with that represented by those bloggers who responded to Colbert (2006); in contrasting the response of the mainstream media in the room from other viewers they collapse any primary/secondary hierarchy. This is true also of those viewing his testimony before the Congressional subcommittee (2010). Thus, audiences for humour are not so easily relegated secondary status by a criterion of presence. These discussions seem to mark a position somewhere between Limon and Maher, in which the event may be (and perhaps *must* be) continuously re-judged in each new moment and context, by everyone who sees it. It would seem that for these audiences, as I've stated elsewhere:

In its mediated form, humour is also radically temporal, re-emerging and changing with each new context. Thus, humour can be re-judged. The humorous routine is paradoxical, contradictory; it invites not simply judgment, but re-judgment as it can never, ultimately, be decided. (Wilson, 2008: 9)

But what do such audience judgments ultimately mean?

To return to the conversation that guides this inquiry, perhaps when Johnson asked ‘Where is the joke?’ she meant, ‘What is the content of the joke, and why do people laugh at it?’ This is, in any case, the question addressed next in the conversation. The whole discussion is predicated on the notion that humour, even (or perhaps especially) when met with laughter, is politically operant in the realm of race relations. Unlike a long tradition of popular, critical and scholarly thought that would make laughter an involuntary response, an eruption of the subconscious and that subsequently ensures that humour, properly received, has no effects (see for instance, Bergson, 1911; Coser, 1960; Freud, 1963/1905; Limon, 2000; Merrill, 1988; Mitchell, 1978; Nietz, 1980; Schutz, 1977), Aoki, Johnson, Maher and Silverman believe that humour is politically relevant.

While most of the discussion hinges on the appropriateness of the use of the word ‘chink,’ the underlying presumption by Aoki and Johnson seems to be that the audience laughs harder or differently at Silverman’s joke because the word ‘chink’ is used, whereas if she had said ‘Chinese person,’ she would achieve the same purpose without perpetuating the harm the word use enables. For her part, Silverman asserts [addressing Aoki]:

I believe that comedy reflects society. And I believe that joke is a joke that points its finger at racism, just like it’s your [Aoki’s] job to point your finger at racism. And I think that it’s inappropriate and it’s counterproductive to demand an apology for someone who, like you, is illuminating racism, just for doing it in a different way than you do it.

The main distinction between Aoki’s and Silverman’s position is analogous to the distinction frequently drawn between dick jokes and sexual jokes. Put simply, a dick joke derives its laughter from use of a shocking/ridiculing/taboo term (e.g. fuck), and a sexual joke derives it from commentary on a topic (e.g. sex and sexuality). In this racially-charged incarnation, Silverman’s joke probably exceeds both, but the question on the table for this discussion is: which is primary? For Aoki, the use of the term overshadows any other usage (a hierarchy Borns [1987] and many others support), whereas by Silverman’s explanation, it is the content that matters more.

Aoki’s position (on satire) turns on a theoretical view (of irony) held by many scholars, including Lisa Gring-Pemble and Martha Solomon Watson (2003), who argue that irony is polyvalent in the sense that it affords the opportunity to apply different values and choose the object of humour, in this case, choosing to laugh at the word use and missing the author’s point. We can thus agree with Aoki that any audience member can read Silverman’s joke as a dick joke, because the term is present. For Gring-Pemble and Watson, this makes ironic humour unreliable as rhetorical strategy. However, we can agree with

Silverman that this does not rule out the potential for the joke to act in other ways: it can illuminate racism.

Silverman's obstacle depends on a distinction noted by Joanne Gilbert (2004) between laughing with and laughing at, which in turn depends on who one sees as the victim of the humour, the person or group who receives negative treatment within the narrative of the joke, and who is the butt of the humour, the person or group who is at fault and therefore worthy of ridicule. In this economy, we always laugh with the victim, at the perceived butt (to the extent that these are different). This distinction is crucial because, as Samuel Janus states, 'The ability to make a person laugh with [a minority group], not at them, is a vital one' (as cited in Horowitz, 1997: 7). However, this distinction further complicates the joke as it multiplies the potential sources of humour.

The multiplication of possible loci of the humour make it difficult to determine exactly where the humour is found, and laughter, especially when expressed as the aggregate reaction of a group, does not necessarily reveal any of the particularities. For instance, in Silverman's 'chink' joke, she is the focal point of the joke. However, we can read her as the butt of the joke, as the one who believes that 'hate' is the most hateful term in the declaration and we can laugh at her. Or we can read her as the victim of a racist system in which chink is ok to say, but hate is not, and we can laugh at the problems of such a system. Note that both of these interpretations rely on the notion that her persona and person are the same – that the implied author and actual author are synonymous – and many will find this connection untenable, and for her part, Silverman denies it. Thus we may infer that she has ulterior motives, and if we ascribe to her a positive motive for her subterfuge (as she claims), we may then claim to be laughing with her, at the racist system. If we ascribe her a negative motivation, we can either laugh with her as she subverts the system that prohibits her from saying chink, or we can be outraged (as was Aoki), thus supporting that system. There are, of course, other possibilities. This is to say that humorous texts, perhaps more-so than other texts, are polysemic, possessing multiple possible meanings (Cecarelli, 1998). Thus, Gilbert notes there is no guarantee that even members of pre-existing groups will laugh for the same reasons; it all depends on how each individual plays with it.

Nevertheless, in essence both Aoki and Silverman would take the joke out of play and determine the meaning. Aoki's determination is perplexing, as it is the most detrimental to his cause; by making this a dick joke, he asserts that the joke and the word *can only* mean harm, a position on word use widely refuted and not at all desirable (see for instance, Butler, 1997). Silverman similarly attempts to take the joke out of play by establishing her intention in crafting it. What I find most refreshing about this discussion is it does not simply solve the issue by pointing with Aoki to a large-scale 'potential for harm,' nor does it fall back on authorial intent; Silverman and Aoki are both reduced to competing voices – to members of the audience – vying for prominence in the ongoing discussion. The answers are

not established via the discourse, as subsequent audiences are invited to judge for themselves what they think the joke means.

In any case, nowhere in the discussion is the idea that Silverman's joke, whether met with laughter or outrage, does not operate politically; it is predicated on the notion that this act, humorous or not, is political. However, the conversation represents a situation widely recognized by comics, even by Silverman herself, that 'if you have to explain [a joke], it's not funny.' We might rephrase to 'once it's explained, it is significantly less funny,' and we could expand this logic to political effects as well. Perhaps politics, like humour, are found by the audience. In contrast to those who view laughter as a knee-jerk eruption of the subconscious that marks a discourse as trivial, other authors note that laughter can be a very active process (Gilbert, 2004; Horowitz, 1997; Merrill, 1988). Perhaps the audience that laughs—at least potentially—navigates just as complex a field of meanings and values as an audience that fails to. Comics and audiences alike remain active, constantly inviting and enacting suture and articulation; in the words of Lawrence Grossberg, they construct 'one set of relations out of another,' and this 'involves delinking or disarticulating connections in order to link or rearticulate others' (1992: 54). Thus they engage in 'a continuous struggle to reposition practices within a shifting field of forces, to redefine the possibilities of life by redefining the field of relations – the context – within which a practice is located' (*ibid*).

Our other examples express this process of articulation perhaps more clearly. Jon Stewart, recognizing that he is not in control of the meaning attached to his own actions, in his 'moment of sincerity' that ends the Rally to Restore Sanity and/or Fear, states, 'I can't control what people think this was. I can only tell you my intentions.' Though, like Silverman, he wishes his intention to be a part of the discourse, he recognizes it does not pre-empt or subvert the discussion – the provocation of which might be part of his goal. Much more effective is Colbert, who left his intentions in both his White House Correspondent's Speech and his Congressional testimony largely unstated—even after the fact. We are left to draw our own conclusions. It is in doing so that he provokes the most thought.

This brings us to a final point made by Silverman but unaddressed in the conversation: when accused by Aoki of 'doing satire incorrectly,' and thereby 'doing more harm than good,' Silverman responds, 'Look at the thought it's provoked,' a point that she repeats later. Almost lost in the discussion is Silverman's quip in defence of her act's political relevance, 'We wouldn't have this forum if I didn't tell that joke.' While some may argue that her joke, like Colbert's speeches, the Stewart/Colbert Rally, and so on, were merely conversation starters, the value of this provocation of the conversation should not be reduced.

Such events provoke the questioning of the enduring logics that inhere between pre-existing audiences, or *litige*, and turn instead to interaction and friction among ad hoc and

ephemeral individuals and groups—could any be more ad hoc and ephemeral than a discussion among three comics, an actor and a critic? The navigation of such interactions necessitate prudential judgment, or *phronesis*. Audiences become, in Lyotard's language, *pagans* ('Letters'). It is in these moments when we are still producing and trying out discourses (even if many of these are recycled) that change and transformation of the rules of the game can occur, when we can do more than simply *react* – falling back on convention, or 'what we do' – but instead might *reply* – make a new move that changes the rules or even the game itself. But this can only happen if we subject 'old and new discourses to a reflective/intentional pause' (Phillips, 1996: 339). It is the event itself that gives us pause. This is the space in which political work and joke work collide to provoke thought.

Conclusion

Though humour often purports itself to be pre-political, as contemporary discussions display, many do not believe this to be the case. It is the individual audience member who ultimately performs or articulates his/her identities and subjectivities in relation to the text. Audiences of humour, like all rhetorical audiences, need to be active in the creation of meaning; thus their judgment is often prudential, that is, situationally dependent, rather than following a preset model (Lyotard and Thébaud, 1999). Lyotard and Thébaud argue, 'obligation happens,' and therefore, 'judgment happens' (Sloop & Ono, 1997: 54); the obligation to judge doesn't go away just because we sit down to enjoy comedy. The performer is not always granted immunity from critique, audience members may leave, heckle or boo. The use of humour as a critique is not always welcomed. On the other hand, the status quo is not safe; even when it is received as such, humour may produce serious effects. It is the *obligation*, both to judge at all and to judge justly, that drives this process. Though humour attempts to defer or remove obligation, to defer judgment, what becomes astonishing is when and where and why (and how frequently) it succeeds.

Herein, I've tried to locate in a few, key examples of audience discourse statements about the role of audiences in judging humour. Audiences are collectively responsible for deciding what continues to pass as humour via their continued laughter. Though some continue to differentiate audiences based on spatial, temporal and psychological context that create expectations, recognizing that this will affect their inclination to laugh, others believe there is no necessary distinction among audiences of humour and serious audiences—we are always potentially both. Humorists recognize (and we should take note) that authorial intention does not ground meaning, but neither does potential harm necessarily garner the most weight. At least some comics recognize that perhaps their most active political role is to provoke thought, and recognize the value of that, even when weighed against the potential for harm.

What the Silverman, Colbert and Stewart incidents display is that play spaces need to be policed even more than other spaces, because there is potential danger – the danger of a

challenge to power. The proliferation of discourse is evidence that humorous spaces are not proof against the imposition of rules, but instead display the negotiation thereof. Though some rules are codified and seem pre-ordained, a closer examination of their application may reveal important distinctions; other sets of rules may be invented or altered – and both are enforced by the audience on the spot. This enforcement represents an imposition of judgment that doesn't serve to destroy the play space – to make it serious – but marks the dangers of the play space. If play spaces were harmless, there would be no need to police them and to protect audiences. This is clearly not the case. Further, the rise of mediation via publication of jokes and monologues, comic albums, live or pre-recorded televised performances, concert films and now internet vessels such as comedycentral.com and youtube.com have multiplied the potential audiences both spatially and temporally, complicating concepts of witnessing or firm delineations of the space of the act. It is because of these and other complications that discussion arises, as we try to parse out what this all means.

Early in this essay I introduced a statement about the purity of stand-up comedy as a form of communication (Mintz, 1985). While the analysis herein may seem rather tautological in that it mirrors perhaps too closely what the comics themselves argue that they do, I have tried to avoid imposing theory that would determine the findings prior to the investigation. By tracing the underpinnings of the discourse, I seek to understand the stated, and discover new understandings, not to impose models that would prohibit these discoveries. While the model is not without its flaws, it invites supplementation via re-judgment and analysis of new texts.

Further, what if we were to engage all other forms of rhetoric as engaging in the same goal? If we embrace all communication as pagan, if we abandon the notion of authorial intention, abandon a pre-set theoretical model for understanding a speech act, abandon an a priori notion of effectivity and instead address the conversation on its own terms, only drawing on theory where it resonates with the stated, we might discover that the positions stated lead us to new understandings of the rules operating upon the discourse. In doing so, we might move the theory beyond its contemporary forms – forms that, at least for humour, seem to display most effectively only their own presumptions – to those that focus on the audience and their expressed understanding of their role.

Biographical Note:

Nathan Wilson is an Assistant Professor of Communication and Rhetoric at Northwest Missouri State University. Portions of this article are distilled from Chapter three of his dissertation project completed in 2008 while attending The University of Iowa. Contact: nwilson@nwmissouri.edu.

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Notes

¹ *Webster's Collegiate Dictionary* and the *Oxford English Dictionary* concur on this date.

² For simplicity in this endeavor, I will employ the Foucauldian terminology, and treat the jokes themselves as events, joking as a practice, and comics and audiences as subjects - pre-discursive (even though represented via symbols) to the extent that they are the occasion for the discourse. However, I employ the Lyotardian terminology to describe what Foucault would call the rules of formation.

³ Paul Lewis (2006) talks about what I consider to be a particular subset of these discussions that he calls 'butt-wars.' Like this project, for Lewis the 'butt-war,' marks an important issue; however, his use of the term is overly limiting for our purposes here, and in any case he would move right past the discussion in favor of proffering a theoretical solution—a practice he knows to be 'killing the frog'.

⁴ Accounts vary, mainly in terms of whether Silverman originally said that the word chink was 'inappropriate' versus 'horribly offensive.' This version, from wikipedia.org and girlcomic.net is the same as the joke she retold two weeks after the original incident on *Politically Incorrect* with Bill Maher (22 July 2001).

⁵ Limon notes that 'artistic seriousness' only applies to what we might call 'high culture' (2000: 13) art, which requires recourse to critics. When the art form is ephemeral, such as ballet or opera, the decision falls to the critics who witnessed the event. When the art form is more enduring, such as a novel, the decision is deferred: 'posterity will judge' (*ibid*) thus these high forms have claims to seriousness. Of course, many have critiqued such a high/low distinction as elitist in nature, thus this distinction is fairly quickly dispensed with (see Strinati, 1995).

⁶ As archived in *The Best of The Colbert Report*. We should note, in light of this, how the previous airing of these jokes causes the critiques leveled by the mainstream media about the form of his humour (i.e. that it was formulaically flawed) to unravel as well.

⁷ In fact, many comedians find that once their act is transmitted via mainstream media, they have difficulty performing it; many in the audience already know it, and although they may want some of the old schtick, they also want some variety (as evidence of this see the discussion in the HBO special *Talking Funny* (22 April 2011), wherein Jerry Seinfeld, Chris Rock, Louis C.K. and Ricky Gervais discuss exactly this phenomenon). As a correlate, many comics will not present – or are not offered opportunity to present – their work in such venues until it is polished. Thus we should note that the artifacts included in this critique are necessarily textually fixed or 'sedimented' in particular kinds of ways, whereas previously they may have varied greatly.