

Chapter 23

Standing–Up to the Politics of Comedy

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the discourses of the U.S.'s 10 top-earning comedians in 2009 and 2010 through systematic textual analyses. Building from two prior case studies and working toward a communicative worldview for comedy as a pervasive mode of public communication, the results indicate that there are several generic clusters emerging across these acts involving rhetorics of optimism, uncertainty, individualism, and others. Many distinctive characteristics in the comedians' messages are also noted. Through such practices, humorists advance a language with political significance—so this essay draws several connections and implications regarding comic discourses in public culture.

INTRODUCTION

Anyone who makes you laugh is always doing more than just that. -Provenza & Dion, 2010, p. xvii.

Across the spheres of entertainment, politics, and beyond, we are living in an era inundated with comedy. From sitcoms to YouTube parodies, the Internet, television, and other public forums are abuzz with comic discourses. Late-night programs like *The Daily Show* filter each day's events through a humorous lens, while paradoxically, political candidates are both mocked by and seek to appear on *Saturday Night Live*. Once a year, even U.S. presidents are expected to go beyond their State of the Union address and perform a stand-up comedy monologue to the nation.

Over the past decade, communication scholars have been at the forefront of these trends, critically analyzing the manifold dimensions and effects of humorous texts. Communication research has debated and explored the conventions and forms in mostly political comedy, including its potential to advance or undermine democratic discourses (Baym, 2005, 2007a, 2007b; Day, 2011; Feldman & Young, 2008; Gray, Jones, & Thompson, 2009; Hariman, 2008; Hart & Hartelius, 2007; Hoffman & Young, 2011; Holbert, 2005; Jones, 2005; Lamarre, Landreville, & Beam, 2009; Meddaugh, 2010; Pfau, Cho, and Chong, 2001; Shifman, 2007; Smith & Voth, 2002; Xenos & Becker, 2009; Waisanen 2009, 2011c, 2013).

Researchers have also shown how varying kinds of humor can be radical or conservative

(Christiansen and Hanson 1996; Greene 2008; Thompson 2009), and function to both limit and liberate (Atakav 2010; Lavoie 2010; Lockyer and Pickering 2009; Lynch, 2002; White 2010) or divide and unite audiences in their outlooks and appeals (Meyer 1997, 2000). A next step in these efforts is to engage comic texts with wider, more systematic approaches highlighting their common and distinctive features (Waisanen, 2011a, 2011b). Accordingly, my project seeks to expand discussions from emphases upon comedy in politics to a broader inquiry into the politics of comedy.

Many people consider comedy nothing more than lighthearted entertainment. From a communicative perspective, however, there is much more to these types of acts than passing judgments might suggest. Park, Gabbadon, and Chernin (2006) find, for example, that while comedy often privileges readings of its content as harmless, its “generic conventions and textual devices” can sometimes undermine reflective criticism and “naturalize[s] racial differences” (p. 157). All forms of public discourse are invitations to view the world in certain ways, and are thus inescapably suasive and political in focusing or deflecting various phenomena from public attention (see Black, 1970; Burke, 1969; Morris, 2002; Wander, 1984). The strategic engineering of modern comedy texts thus deserves attention that is more critical. Indeed, jokes and argument forms share many features (Conley, 2004). Fine and Wood (2010) also contend that “jokes and joke-telling serve complex political ends. . . . Humor, no longer a matter of amusement alone, becomes a topic of shared concern, a social problem” (pp. 299-300), just as stand-up comics create spaces of “social and cultural mediation” (Mintz, 1985, p. 78).

As Hart (2000) argues, “when viewed rhetorically . . . politics becomes repositioned. It no longer involves just a set of power vectors but also a relational grammar” (p. 27). He even states that “by taking campaign texts seriously and even *by taking unserious texts seriously* [emphasis added] (Jay Leno comes to mind, as

does *Politically Incorrect*),” scholars can track how language teaches, preaches, and sensitizes various audiences (Hart, 2000, pp. 8-10). These comments echo recent calls for more standardized analyses in humor research; as Hurley, Dennett, and Adams (2011) note, “it would be interesting to see if there are notable patterns discernible in the history of humor creation, like the patterns we find in musical composition, poetry, etc.,” raising two questions: “what progression (or even progress!) in style of content can be charted” and “how important is structural or thematic novelty” in comedic texts (p. 277)?

As one set of authors has said, if politics is a “struggle over alternative realities, then language is the medium that reflects, advances, and interprets these alternatives” (Callaghan & Schnell, 2005, p. 2). At the same time, communication critics need to focus on structural rhetorical forms, or “certain ways of thinking, of viewing the world . . . that are not necessarily implied by the substance of the discourse” (Hahn, 2003, p. 70). As such, unlike studies of explicitly political comedy, this article argues that comedy is already political through the symbols and structures comedians employ in their performances. The organizing themes and structures of comedy urge audiences to laugh, but also to take on certain interpretive commitments. Like Day (2011), I do not attribute causality to isolated texts, but instead see the accumulation of such discourses as warranting more comprehensive investigation.

My project uses and rounds out the frameworks and concepts developed from two prior, exploratory individual case studies of Dennis Miller and Joan Rivers (see Waisanen, 2011a, 2011b) to chart a broader, more genre-focused investigation of multiple prominent comedians. My explorations of Miller and Rivers led directly to the following research question: what is common and distinctive across, and not simply within, different comedians’ acts? Using *DICTION*, this study will systematically examine the converging and diverging discourses of the U.S.’s 10 richest

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