ABSTRACT

Satire as a genre is often associated with progressive causes and liberal politics. Academics and common audiences alike see it as a form of punching up, of speaking truth to authority, challenging the status quo and potentially displacing or destabilizing established forms of political power. The majority of recent mainstream political satire in the U.S., such as that of the *Onion*, Jon Stewart and Trevor Noah’s *The Daily Show* or Stephen Colbert’s *The Colbert Report*, appears to affirm this view. This paper will argue that satire has overlooked conservative functions. Not only providing a false release of emotions and a flattering sense of intellectual or political agency, satire also introduces an ambiguity into political oppositions that can paralyze political and social change. What’s more, satire can covertly co-opt and divert the energies of those who present the largest threat to the status quo—those with advanced intellectual and creative capacities—who all the while believe that they are supporting progressive ends. Thus, although appearing progressive, satire serves conservative ends by co-opting and diverting progressive energies and reducing actual change to a minimum.
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INTRODUCTION

Political satire’s irony does not end within its respective text, video clip, cartoon, or whatever other form it may take. In fact, these ironies may not even be the most ironic elements of political satire. The greatest irony of political satire lies in its serving those whom it mocks and in harming those whom it seems to address or validate. This paper will argue that political satire, including satire with liberal or progressive content, ultimately has a conservative propaganda function. First, I will examine how mainstream political satire in the United States tends to be created by liberals, for liberals and is commonly believed to serve progressive, action-inducing ends. Second, I will examine the psychological explanations behind this perception of satire as liberal and the apparent liberal monopoly of the genre. In the third section, I will examine how political satire, or comedy, has recently changed styles in the Trump era, reflecting the increasing powerlessness of political satire to effect change. Fourth, to show how liberal satire often achieves conservative effects, I will discuss satire as a form of propaganda according to the definitions offered by Jacques Ellul. Fifth, I will outline the conservative functions of political satire. Lastly, I will cover the implications this research has for future uses of political humor on both sides of the political spectrum. Political satire is an incredibly effective form of propaganda, albeit one that must be acknowledged to only function conservatively.
THE DECIEVINGLY LIBERAL BIAS OF SATIRE

When one thinks of satire in the U.S. over the last two decades, what are the first things that come to mind? Inevitably, The Onion, Jon Stewart’s and Trevor Noah’s The Daily Show, Stephen Colbert’s The Colbert Report, Saturday Night Live, and South Park. These are some of the most popular examples of satire in mainstream U.S. culture. The Onion and its various web offshoots, ClickHole and The A.V. Club, are were visited by over thirty million people a month in 2015 (Heller). The Daily Show with Trevor Noah had a .39 rating and 700 million cross-platform video views in the first quarter of 2019 (The Daily Show…). The finale of The Colbert Report in December 2014 had 2.5 million viewers and an average of a 1.0 rating. “Cable’s highest-rated non-football related broadcast of the night among adults 18-49” (O’Connel). Saturday Night Live’s current Season 45 has accumulated 1.26 billion YouTube views as of March 1 (Andreeva). South Park was the “top telecast among all cable comedies” in 2019 (Baysinger). Though not all of them deal only with political issues, all of them have frequently taken on the political. What’s more, all of them, with the possible exception of South Park, lean noticeably to the left. By this, I mean that the people creating them are largely liberal; their content is intended for a liberal audience; and, even if they do occasionally mock liberals, their primary political targets are conservatives and their policies.

Before moving into the specifics, it must be acknowledged that this is not an isolated phenomenon. Satire has a long history of being tied, if not always to the political left, to progressive change, i.e., change from current ruling powers or values. Horace, a Roman satirist in the last century BC and Juvenal, another Roman satirist in the first century of AD, both, “took extraordinary pains to avoid entanglements with authority—Juvenal ends his first satire with the self-protective announcement that he will write only of the dead” (Elliot). In 1599, the “Bishop’s
Ban” in England involved the issuing of “an order prohibiting the printing of any satires whatever and requiring that the published satires of Joseph Hall, John Marston, Thomas Nashe, and others be burned” (Elliot). As an example of how satire may be progressive without skewing to the political left, some satirists, though not all (as will be seen in the Ellul section below), who mocked Russia’s Communist regime were seen as threats to Stalin’s authority and severely punished. One, Osip Mandelshtam, satirized Stalin, was subsequently arrested, then died in transit to a Soviet labor camp in 1938 (Elliot). Thus, satire has, for millennia, been seen as a progressive threat to the status quo both by the authority that desires to retain this status quo and by the satirists who set out to mock it. In contemporary U.S. politics, progressivity is typically associated with the political left, the Democrats and other liberal parties, and they seem to have retained this age-old phenomenon of the belief in satire’s progressivity.

The liberal nature of satire will become clear from discussing a few examples in detail. First, *The Onion* is widely recognized as a liberal satire. In the *Time* article “How *The Onion* Covers Politics,” Myles Little introduces the satiric newspaper in the following way: “*The Onion*, first published in 1988, has been a campus rag, a newspaper, a website, even a feature length film. Left-leaning, it skewers the media, politics, consumer culture, and more.” Commenting on this political trend of the paper, one of *The Onion*’s writers, Todd Hanson, admitted to Little: "I wouldn't say we have the broadest spectrum of political inclinations on our staff, but we're not here to be a pal to liberals or to be a mouthpiece for the Democratic Party. We're here to make fun of things that are dumb." And he is largely correct. *The Onion* doesn’t just make fun of conservatives. It has gone after Obama, Joe Biden, Elizabeth Warren, Antifa, etc. Yet, its sharpest and most frequent criticisms of this left-leaning publication are reserved for conservative politicians and policies, consistent with the politics of the majority of their staff.
Another incredibly popular satire production is *The Daily Show*, first hosted by Jon Stewart, then Trevor Noah. According to Joanna Weiss of PoliticoMagazine, “Jon Stewart is often tagged as left-leaning… he was secretly invited to the Obama White House.” Once again, Jon Stewart occasionally mocked liberals, but his target and his style were generally geared toward mocking conservatives. “‘Stewart did make fun of both parties, but his style was fundamentally liberal’, says University of Delaware communications professor Dannagal Young: ‘playful, subversive, at once cynical and weirdly optimistic’” (Weiss). When Trevor Noah replaced Stewart as host in 2015, the political preference of *The Daily Show* stayed consistent. As Timothy Bella notes, he is setting out to support a Democratic candidate:

Noah has seemingly found his voice among late-night hosts, not dissimilar to that of his predecessor, Stewart, under the administration of George W. Bush… He’ll have to cover an improbable president’s tireless reelection bid, while figuring out who among a wide field of Democratic candidates is worth his time.

More complicated than Stewart and Noah, but liberal nonetheless, is Stephen Colbert. In *The Colbert Report*, Colbert appeared to be a conservative, and he criticized liberals, but in such a way that he was really mocking the manner in which conservatives speak about liberals, not liberals themselves. In other words, it was a show with liberal content appealing to a liberal audience. As Chris Cillizza states in his article “How Liberal is Stephen Colbert,” “Stephen Colbert made his mark in comedy — and politics — as a conservative. He repeatedly lambasted President Obama, the Democratic Congress and a panoply of liberal outlets. Like this riff on President Obama and the NSA spying scandal. Except that Colbert was kidding.” And the audience largely understands this irony. “The assumption — among Democrats and most Republicans — is that the real Colbert is a Democrat, a perception largely due to his viciously biting satire of conservatism as ‘Stephen Colbert’” (Cillizza). In 2005 Colbert explicitly
mentioned his political stance in an interview on NPR. "Jon [Stewart] asked me to have a political opinion, and it turned out that I had one…But I didn't realize quite how liberal I was until I was asked to make passionate comedic choices, as opposed to necessarily successful comedic choices” (Qtd. in Cillizza). To realize the extent to which both The Daily Show and The Colbert Report produced liberal content for a liberal audience, Cillizza put a graph in his article from a 2012 Pew Research Center survey:

The only show that drew a smaller percentage of conservative viewers than these two comedy routines was the Rachel Maddow show. Stewart and Colbert’s shows had a more liberal-saturated audience than even MSNBC and NPR!

Those three publications, The Onion, The Daily Show, and The Colbert Report, are arguably the most political examples of mainstream U.S. satire. However, other satire productions, which are not explicitly political, do take on political themes. In fact, Saturday Night Live has become increasingly political over the last couple of years. According to Erik
Hayden in his 2019 article, “Many Americans Say ‘Saturday Night Live’ Is Now ‘Too Political,’ Poll Finds,” SNL’s political jokes are enjoyed more by liberals, are understood by most to be liberal-leaning, and are recognized by a majority of Americans as making explicit political statements. First, concerning audience enjoyment: 60 percent of Democrats are okay with the political lean of SNL while 52 percent of republicans are not. Next, concerning understandings of political bias: 48 percent of viewers see the series as politically liberal and only 5 percent see it as conservative. Finally, concerning the increased politicization of the show, a majority of viewers, 68 percent, saw the show as making political statements (Hayden).

Of course, it could be possible that this is simply a money issue, not an explicitly political one. Shows like SNL, which aren’t so intricately linked with politics like those of Stewart and Colbert, may simply be capitalizing on the recent trend of political polarization that has surged in the Trump era. Politics have become popular in mainstream entertainment, not just the news. Thus, a mainstream satire program would necessarily deal with them more, especially if it brings in money. However, the poll dispels this notion. “Asked what is ‘more likely to make you watch late-night shows,’ about 41 percent of respondents replied, ‘jokes that are not political,’ while 22 percent said ‘jokes about Republicans,’ and just 6 percent said ‘jokes about Democrats’” (Hayden). It actually appears that refraining from the political would be more financially beneficial to SNL, and yet, they have increased their politicization instead of decreasing it. Nevertheless, if one must mock politics, it appears more profitable to do so by mocking conservatives, since such jokes were 16 percent more popular than jokes mocking Democrats. However, choosing to take this route instead of the much more popular ‘jokes that are not political’ speaks to a liberal bias amongst the SNL satirists and producers.
One of the most popular examples of mainstream satire in the U.S. is also one of the most difficult to gauge for political stance. *South Park* seems to go after everyone, including liberals. To do this, they do not focus solely on politics, but various social and cultural issues which sometimes have ties to politics. For example, in episode 7 of their 23rd season, they satirically criticized the controversial liberal movement to allow transgender individuals to compete in women’s athletics. In this episode, the hyperbolically liberal characters “PC Principle” and his wife “Strong Woman” find themselves in a corner when their support for allowing transgender individuals into a women’s multi-sport competition results in “Strong Woman” being beaten to a pulp by the transgender individual “Heather Swanson,” a parody of “Macho Man” Randy Savage, who is bearded and twice the size of all the other women. Thus, liberal progressivity is mocked as hypocritical when it results in a female being terribly beaten up by a biological male in a refereed sport. Though such an issue is more directly focused on the politics and policies of various sports organizations, it is also linked to the liberal trend of increasing LGBTQ rights in all areas of the law and can thus be said to be mocking liberals and their values at large. When *South Park*’s creators mock explicitly political issues, they do so in their trademark style of incredibly offensive humor which does not care for anyone, or any ideology, other than angering as many people as possible. It is actually the one example of popular mainstream satire whose creators have openly claimed their conservative affiliations. Yet, the difficulty in distinguishing this stance through their content is much higher than that involved in distinguishing the political leanings of any of the previously mentioned publications because they go after conservatives just as often.

This ambiguity was, rather comically, made evident in 2018 when the two creators of the show, Trey Parker and Matt Stone received a Freedom award from the People for the American
Way Foundation, which is, “an advocacy group for progressive values chaired by television’s Norman Lear,” and whose statement identifies it as, “a progressive advocacy organization founded to fight right-wing extremism” (South Park’s Trey Parker…). At this very event, the two creators announced, “We’re Republicans…No, seriously, we’re Republicans.” They had hinted toward this tendency a few times previously. “In 2005, Matt Stone said, ‘I hate conservatives, but I really fucking hate liberals’” (South Park’s Trey Parker…). In a 2010 Huffington Post interview with writer Alex Leo, Matt Stone explained their reasonings as purely business and creative-based.

Ripping on Republicans is not that fun for us only because everyone else does it. It’s so much more fun for us to rip on liberals only because nobody else does it, and not because we think liberals are worse than Republicans but, just because…it’s like fresh snow…It’s hard to compete with Jon Stewart, etc – those guys are brilliant.

Thus, it is difficult to determine whether their conservative stance is a truly personal and ideological one, or if attacking liberal causes simply distinguishes them from other satires and helps to sell their product.

Nevertheless, the content of the show, and the audience understanding of it, do not so explicitly reflect the conservativism of the creators as the contents and understandings of the previously mentioned liberal satire shows reflect the liberalism of their creators. Parker and Stone tend to mock both sides so equally that even award organizations, not to mention audience members, cannot decipher their political affiliations through their content. The fact that the only popular U.S. satire whose creators claim to have conservative affiliations does not, like liberal-affiliated satirists, primarily and more-frequently target their political opponents further supports the idea that satire is and has been associated with liberal progressivity. The only well-known mainstream U.S. satire with ties to conservatism is in fact simply “equal opportunity” satire.
Parker and Stone’s supposed conservativism must be hidden in content which satirically mocks both sides more or less equally. For some reason, a satire with conservative content that openly and more frequently targets liberals has yet to succeed in the U.S. mainstream.

While there are different explanations for the largely liberal majority of mainstream satire in the U.S., such as media industry bias, there are two that seem to most succinctly explain it. First, the already-mentioned, historically held, common conception of satire as a progressive genre may mean that conservatives, both creators and consumers, are less drawn to the satiric genre of humor. Second, and even more interesting, are the psychological bases of the two political sides and the ways that these psychological traits influence the consumption of humor by persons of different political views. This psychological relationship between political affiliation and the consumption of humor is the subject of the next section.
THE PSYCHOLOGICAL BASIS FOR SATIRE’S LIBERAL BIAS

In the contemporary U.S., liberals may be more psychologically predisposed to enjoying and consuming satire than conservatives. As I mentioned when speaking of Jon Stewart, Dannagal Young has explanations for the apparent monopoly of satire with liberal content in the U.S. mainstream. In the 2019 article, “Psychology, Political Ideology, and Humor Appreciation: Why Is Satire So Liberal?” D.G. Young and associates explained an extensive psychological experiment on the relationship between psychological traits, political ideology, and humor appreciation. Of course, with a national survey of only 305 participants, the study is far from definitive, but it certainly points to some interesting correlations which may help explain the differing preferences for humor rhetoric among people of different political affiliations.

Young et. al. began by identifying psychological traits that predisposed one simultaneously to certain political ideologies and understandings of satiric jokes. Using the scaled survey questions for indicating psychological traits developed in psychological studies by J. Cacioppo et. al, W.B.G. Jarvis and R.E. Petty, and A.W. Kruglanski et. al., along with scaled survey questions to gauge political attitudes and ideologies developed by the authors, it was found that those in favor of conservative policies were less likely to have a high need for cognition (enjoyment of active and exploratory thinking), tolerance for ambiguity, or need to evaluate (Young, et. al. 8). While the first two findings corresponded to previous studies, the last one, about the need to evaluate, did not. There have been several studies, such as those of Bizner et. al, that found “a high need to evaluate,” or “judge issues as positive or negative” among conservatives (Young et. al. 3). This is empirically reflected in conservatives’ preferences for strong leaders, strict moral codes, and definitive distinctions between right and wrong—these cause less ambiguity and require less careful thinking. In The Reactionary Mind, Corey Robin
acknowledges that, for conservatives, things are typically categorized in complete binaries instead of ambiguous or uncertain spectrums. “Far from affirming a simple hierarchy of preferences…the choice is not between something and its opposite but between something and its negation” (21). Thus, for the purposes of this paper, it will be assumed that conservatives do have a high need to evaluate, or judge issues as good or bad, which reduces ambiguity and need for cognition.

Young and associates then tested the relation between these psychological traits and the appreciation of irony and hyperbole, the most common comedic elements in satire. This was done by showing participants short videos with jokes that utilized these different humor styles and then asking participants how funny and enjoyable the joke was on a 5-point scale. It was ultimately concluded that “Conservatism is a significant negative predictor of irony appreciation…a finding that does not replicate with predicting exaggeration [hyperbole] appreciation” (Young et. al. 10). In other words, conservatives may be more likely to appreciate straight hyperbole than irony. While it appears that liberals enjoy thought provoking and ambiguous humor, the hallmarks of satire, conservatives seem to enjoy exaggeration with less ambiguity that allows them to more definitively evaluate differences between positive and negative.

For example, conservative comic Steven Crowder has a special segment on his YouTube show, Louder with Crowder, that is titled “WHAT A PIECE OF SH*T.” It will call out various hypocrisies of people on the left, such as Jussie Smollett when he lied about being the victim of a hate crime or CNN host Brian Stelter when he blamed the recent Synagogue shooting on FoxNews. In other less comedic segments, like “Change My Mind,” Crowder, to his credit, does use statistics and critical thinking to argue conservative points. But there is no ambiguity,
subtlety or thoughtful nuance in his comedic skits. Instead of satire, it is hyperbolic outrage humor. The left-wing target is a “piece of sh*t” and they, along with their conservative viewers, are not. In contrast, liberal, ironic satire is often more ambiguous, more subtle. For example, the recent satiric *Onion* article concerning Trump’s proposed relief checks during the Caronavirus outbreak, “Conservative Worries Relief Checks Would Discourage Americans From Providing For Selves By Killing Him And Taking His Property,” cannot be taken literally like Crowder’s segment. For the joke to be funny, the reader must see through the literal faux-conservative hyperbole and into the ironical, liberal critique of such hyperbole. The binary here is less clear, requiring a higher tolerance for ambiguity. Is it mocking all conservatives? Only those who stubbornly oppose all forms of aid no matter what? The left’s stereotypical view of conservatives as unwilling to budge from their ideological views in the face of a crisis? Deciphering these questions for entertainment requires an enjoyment of cognition and a tolerance for ambiguity which, according to Young, liberals are more likely to appreciate.

Young et. al.’s study also focused on the effect of these politically oriented psychological traits on satire comprehension. After the participants watched the joke video clips, they were asked to identify the main argument of the joke between its explicit and implicit statements. Oddly, it was found that the conservative need to evaluate was positively associated with the comprehension of both irony and hyperbole, while the more liberal need for cognition was negatively associated with the comprehension of both forms. Once variables similar to those mentioned above were controlled, it was concluded that “Conservatism is a significant negative predictor of exaggeration comprehension but exhibits no significant relationship with irony comprehension.” (Young et. al. 12). It must be remembered, however, that the conservatives in the study were found to not have high needs to evaluate. While it appears, from other studies
such as Bizer et. al., that many conservatives do. Therefore, many conservatives may comprehend satire since a need to evaluate was related to the comprehension of irony and hyperbole. It seems that they simply don’t appreciate it like liberals. They get less pleasure or mental gratification from understanding satire than liberals do.

Some of the findings of this study by Young et. al. are confusing. Based on the results of the study alone, conservatives are likely to appreciate hyperbole, but not comprehend it. On the other hand, they are not likely to appreciate irony, but they are just as likely as not to understand it. Some of this confusion could be attributable to the faults and biases of the study. First, the sample of 305 participants may be too small. Second, it did not seem to explain the results of the liberal group as frequently or as clearly as it did the conservative group. Another limiting factor, this time addressed by the authors themselves, was that “Although the joke topics were not explicitly political, the arguments they make... may have activated broad political belief systems” (Young et. al. 14). Nevertheless, it serves to point to one of the most logical explanations for the lack of conservative satirists.

It seems that the lack of conservative political satire is not merely about conservatives’ reluctance to challenge governing institutions or the existing social order. Conservative political voices today often do both of those things. Instead, the lack of conservative satire likely stems from differences in the vehicles and rhetorical forms that liberals and conservatives use to issue such critiques. For conservatives, humor is simply not their preferred vehicle. (Young et. al. 15)

This isn’t necessarily true. Conservatives do use humor to speak about politics. But they rarely use satire. Even Trump himself frequently uses humor, but not humor that is ironic or nuanced, rather humor that is biting, direct, and meant to insult or offend. Crowder’s segment, mentioned above, also fits into this category. In the 2015 article, “Waiting for the Conservative Jon Stewart,” Oliver Morrison acknowledged this tendency in the one form of media that has
been dominated by conservatives: talk radio. “Liberals have never managed to equal conservatives’ success in that arena...conservative talk radio humor tends to rely less on irony than straightforward indignation and hyperbole” (Morrison). This corresponds with the argument that conservatives have less need for cognition and less tolerance for ambiguity but more need to evaluate, along with a higher probability of appreciating hyperbole. Straightforward indignation and hyperbole, excluding ironic hyperbole like that in the *Onion* article, reduce ambiguity and need for cognition. It is simple, straightforward, and encourages an easy judgement: the person they are mocking is bad and they who are doing the mocking are good. Indignation and hyperbole create a simplified black-and-white which does not reflect the ambiguity of reality that conservatives have difficulty tolerating. Irony, on the other hand, seems to enhance the ambiguity of reality even more, making satire appealing to liberals, who not only tolerate ambiguity more than conservatives, but who also get more enjoyment from cognitively analyzing ambiguous contexts. Thus, the psychological traits associated with different political affiliations can correspond to differing preferences for certain humor styles. These are the psychological bases for satire’s liberal bias.
THE INCREASINGLY CONSERVATIVE STYLE OF LIBERAL HUMOR

With the evidence demonstrated thus far, satire today seems to be overwhelmingly liberal. Young et. al.’s 2019 study suggests that satire simply doesn’t appeal to conservatives. Yet, conservative-style humor has become increasingly appealing to liberals in recent years. Young et. al. did not directly address the popularity of hyperbolic outrage humor among conservatives in the above-discussed, 2019 article. However, Young does distinguish liberal and conservative preferences for humor elsewhere. When interviewed by Joanna Weiss for her article, “How Trump Turned Liberal Comedians Conservative,” Young differentiated between the “liberal style” of Jon Stewart, “playful, subversive, at once cynical and weirdly optimistic,” and the conservative style of, “Fox News talk-show hosts, who draw an audience for reasons that are ‘almost physiological’” (qtd. by Weiss). This conservative style is the straightforward, division-creating humor that is oriented toward the conservative preference for need to evaluate.

For example, both sides of the political comedy spectrum mocked Senator Elizabeth Warren’s claims of having Native American ancestry despite being visually, genealogically, and culturally white. On the fifteenth of October 2018, the left-leaning and satirical Onion published a picture of Warren in what appears to be a classroom, wearing normal clothes, with the headline: “Elizabeth Warren Disappointed After DNA Test Shows Zero Trace Of Presidential Material.” This is a perfect example of detached, liberal-style satire. It does not directly address the issue being mocked. To understand it, readers must already have some knowledge of the false ancestry claims incident. It is also subversive and prone to various interpretations. It mocks her for lying about her ancestry. It mocks her for believing that her genetics will somehow determine her success in an election or politics in general. It mocks the general weight that our culture has recently placed on genetic testing and the ancestry it reveals, which has had no part in
peoples’ cultures or appearances. In any case, it is detached and, as Young says in Weiss’s article, “playful.”

Compare this to Crowder’s non-satiric, comedic take on Warren. It is indicative of the conservative style of humor: hyperbolic, outrageous, and “almost physiological.” In the short, animated YouTube clip “Pow Wow Chow with Elizabeth Warren,” Warren’s likeness is animated, quite poorly, wearing a Native American headdress and shirt while instructing viewer’s on how to make her “papa’s famous DNA dip.” Native American flute music plays in the background. Then, in the longer talk-show clip, “Top 5: Elizabeth Warren’s Campaign Lies!” Crowder goes on to directly criticize her claims. “[The DNA test] actually showed that she may have less Indian blood than your average non-Indian American. A whopping one in one thousand twenty-fourth Native. By the way, for reference, here’s my 23andMe. I’m about as much Sub-Saharan African as she is Indian!” A few moments later, the conservative penchant for binary opposition comes into play. “Donald Trump exaggerates actions…There’s a difference between lying, like a sinister lie, and being a bit of a bulls*** artist…He’ll exaggerate his successes and diminish his failures…versus Elizabeth Warren who misrepresents who she is…That’s more off-putting to me…someone lying about being Injun.”

While The Onion diminished the actual incident being mocked to a mere allusion requiring a tolerance for ambiguity and a high level of cognition, Crowder hyperbolically exaggerated the incident in the Pow Wow Chow clip, leaving no room for ambiguity and requiring no need for advanced analysis. Viewers could easily evaluate the hypocrisy and absurdity of Warren. Then, in the Top 5 clip, Crowder presents a typical conservative binary which his viewers can evaluate, and which appeals to the physiological sensation of fear. After the line about Crowder’s 23andMe score elicits a laugh, he turns serious. The conservative
Trump also lies, but his lies, and those of the right in general are, according to Crowder, relatively harmless exaggerations. Warren’s, and those of the left in general, are “sinister.”

This conforms to Robin’s analysis of conservatives in The Reactionary Mind. Conservatives, according to Robin, are driven by two general things: a desire for some sense of social superiority and the emotions of fear or danger (67). The paradox in this, which Robin credits the early conservative Edmund Burke as recognizing, is that “Once we actually are assured of our power over another being…our inferior loses her capacity to harm or threaten us” (69). Hyperbolic, conservative-style humor overcomes this paradox. Laughing at Warren’s exaggerated absurdity gives viewers a sense of superiority over her, but Crowder’s warning about the “sinister” nature of her and other liberals’ lies at the end of the Top 5 video reintroduces the fear and danger that, according to Robin, inspires conservative, reactionary action. Viewers get a taste of the superiority they desire, but then it is taken away, through a reiteration of the comic target’s threat, inspiring conservatives both to come back to watch Crowder’s show and to adhere all the more strongly to their conservative principles, both of which are done in an attempt to regain the feeling of superiority. This is part of Crowder’s appeal to conservative audiences. His humor elicits the satisfaction of superiority while simultaneously tapping into the physiological fear of threat that drives conservative cohesion and action.

In fact, it is this physiological element to conservative humor and discourse which Young and Weiss attribute as being partly responsible for Trump’s political success.

By and large, though, Trump’s humor is different from droll, intellectual wit. ‘It’s impulse-based and it’s hyperbolic, Young says, and its broadness is a key to his political appeal. His insanely impolitic language sends the media reaching for Xanax, but to his fans, it’s ongoing proof of his authenticity. (Weiss)

This success is related to Young’s explicit statement of outrage humor’s benefit to conservatives: it is much less ambiguous and much more action-oriented than liberal satire.
‘When satire is doing a good job, it’s not just punching up. It’s reminding us of our complicity,’ Young says. But there’s no double meaning in outrage: ‘Outrage tells you, ‘Here is the thing, here is the thing that’s bad, here is the thing that’s good. … It says exactly what it should conclude. You don’t have to draw conclusions’ (Weiss).

Political action requires a clear target and, at least for conservatives, according to Robin, is usually inspired by fear. Outrage and insult humor eliminate ambiguity and the need for comprehension, which translates more easily into clear understanding and, possibly, political action. Ambiguity and analytic thinking, though possibly conducive to more mindful political action, are not efficient or cohesive. This will become clearer in the section on Ellul and propaganda.

It is important to be clear on the point being made in Weiss’s article: In the Trump era of outrage and insult humor, liberal satirists have been gradually stepping away from the satiric style and adopting conservative, non-satiric styles of humor. When did this start? According to Weiss, the golden age of the liberal satire style that has been discussed so far was roughly from 1999 to 2016. “From 1999 through roughly the start of the Trump administration, the prevailing comedy tone was a kind of ironic detachment, perfected by Jon Stewart on ‘The Daily Show.’” But something happened around the time that Trump was elected. The content of some liberal comedians became less satiric and more outrageous, like the conservative humor of Steven Crowder or Fox News hosts. Why did it happen? It has to do with that physiological drive, fear, and, possibly, the ineffectiveness of liberal satire that is argued for in this paper.

First, as an example of a liberal satirist turned outrage comic, Weiss uses Samantha Bee, who had previously been on The Daily Show, and, following the liberal style of that show, helped in producing detached, witty humor, which mocked politics indirectly. However, in May 2018 on her TBS show “Full Frontal,” she “called Ivanka Trump a ‘feckless c----‘…the line
drew a laugh, but there was nothing to puzzle out. No irony, no distance. She just meant it.” And this wasn’t a one-time instance either. “Today, Bee’s faux innocence [from previous ‘Daily Show’ appearances] is gone; her ‘Full Frontal’ persona understands everything that’s happening. Her fury is directed not just at Trump, but at everyone on the right” (Weiss). Her ambiguous humor has become more hegemonic, more binary, like conservative-style outrage humor. Weiss also cites a similar effect on Stephen Colbert, post-Colbert Report: “his jokes are more vicious and often less surprising.”

Ironically, Trump may be causing liberals to become more conservative, if not ideologically or politically, at least stylistically. According to Weiss, “Social science research has shown that liberals and conservatives are (on average) wired differently, with social and cultural conservatives personally more attuned to danger, worried about intruders, primed to protect an establishment under threat.” Robin’s discussion of conservatives being inspired by fear and threat supports this statement as do various psychology studies. Dodd et. al. found that, when shown collages with a mixture frightening and happy pictures, the eyes of conservative participants spent more time viewing the frightening images while the liberals focused on the happy ones. Dodd et. al. argues that this “negativity bias” is conducive to increased threat consciousness. Oxley et. al. measured physiological responses to “sudden noises and threatening visual images,” finding that conservative participants tended to react more strongly than liberals. Most importantly for Weiss’s argument, it may be possible for these psychological characteristics to change if the perception of threat is increased. In Nail and McGregor’s 2009 study, they compared surveys on political attitudes and orientations taken from the same population before and a month after 9/11. Their findings suggest that conservative attitudes
increased in both conservatives and liberals as a result of the increased perception of threat following the terrorist attack.

A similar mechanism may be at play among contemporary liberals who see Trump as a threat. According to Weiss, the increased perception of threat from Trump has caused liberals to flock toward the straightforward hyperbolic humor previously preferred by conservatives. Under such senses of threat, the liberal tolerance for ambiguity and enjoyment of wit in humor is drastically reduced. When one feels threatened, it makes sense that they will be less concerned with ambiguity and wit, and would, instead, search for explanations which allow for an easier evaluation between good and bad, dangerous and safe. Senses of threat also encourage greater group cohesion, which, in turn, reduces ambiguity and analytical thought. In other words, when someone senses a fearsome enemy, the enemies of that enemy become their friends and the ambiguous social context becomes an unambiguous binary: good/bad, with us/against us, etc. Outrage and insult humor do this rhetorically, which explains Weiss’s following observation.

So the chorus of left-leaning comedians who evaluate Trump every night has switched from detached amusement to sounding the warning bells...In posture, if not politics, the language [of recent liberal comedy] often matches what Young has observed about conservative outrage. Not only is it positioned against fighting a threat, it’s also straightforward in perspective—not a multilayered critique of a system, but a blunt road map for politicized anger.

Once again, there is the connection between straightforward physiological drives and politics. This time another drive, “anger,” which is closely related to fear, is “politicized.” Clear-cut physiological drives such as these can be more easily channeled into political action than detached, analytical, “multilayered critique[s].” Ironically, Trump’s humor has caused some liberals to adopt humor styles which are more conducive to action than satire.
[Outrage humor] does contain something that satire lacks, Young says: a consistent call to action. That feels like the purpose of this brand of late-night comedy—not to wryly observe the world and encourage us all to do better, but to harness people’s anger, make them ready to revolt. (qtd. by Weiss)

To summarize the points made thus far. First, mainstream political satire, at least in the U.S., is almost entirely liberal, meaning that it is made for liberals, by liberals, and its content in some way mocks conservatives and their policies more so than liberals and their policies. Second, liberal satire appears to appeal to the largely liberal psychological traits of tolerance for ambiguity and need for cognition by utilizing wit, irony, distance, multi-layered meaning and critique, etc. Hyperbolic outrage humor appears to appeal to the conservative need to evaluate. Third, as indicated by Weiss’s article, when this liberal satire came up against more stylistically conservative humor and the fears induced in liberals by Trump’s political success, liberal satire quickly became less satiric and more conservative in style, utilizing straightforward hyperbole, outrage, insult, etc. Some, like Bee’s, changed to the point that it was no longer satire at all. This serves as empirical evidence that the conservative style of humor is more effective in terms of inspiring more action and political adherence, since the liberal style of distanced satire has, for some popular liberal comedians, gradually given way to the conservative style of straightforward insult humor in the Trump era. Of course, this is not an air-tight proof that insult/outrage humor is more politically effective at mobilizing constituents than satire. But it is sufficiently strange to warrant a more thorough investigation. According to Robin, the typical trend of history is that conservatives co-opt and use the strategies of the left, consciously or unconsciously, in their reactionary activities (47-8). However, here this is reversed. The left has adopted the outrage humor style of the right. And, as I hope to make clear with this paper, the left’s use of satire is and has been fundamentally, though unconsciously, conservative all along.
In the following pages I will argue that satire's ineffectiveness at inspiring clear political action does not necessarily mean that satire is politically useless. In fact, it has the potential to be incredibly effective, but not in the ways it was previously being used. Ultimately, the next section of this paper argues that political satire should be seen as propaganda serving a conservative function.

Before moving on to the next section, which will frame satire within the realm of propaganda and clarify the various phenomena of different types of propaganda, I must make an important distinction of terms. Up to this point I have been using the term “conservative” in the sense of political affiliation. Hyperbolic outrage humor is a “conservative style” of humor because conservatives tend to prefer it. South Park is made by “conservative” creators because Trey Parker and Matt Stone identify with the right-of-center Republican party. However, “conservative propaganda” is not going to refer to propaganda that right-of-center individuals prefer, or to propaganda made by right-of-center political actors. The terms “conservative propaganda” and “conservative function” will be used throughout the remainder of the paper in its more traditional sense, indicating a preference for the status-quo and an aversion to change. “Conservative propaganda” signifies propaganda that causes inactivity or indifference. Propaganda that does this serves a “conservative function.” This type of propaganda should be directed at political opponents. In contrast, the terms “progressive propaganda” and “progressive function” will refer to propaganda that causes political action or increased support for certain political actions. This type of propaganda should be directed toward one’s political allies.

Each side of the political spectrum can use each type of propaganda. For example, conservative individuals could make progressive propaganda that incites action, like voting or protesting, and direct it toward other conservative individuals. Liberal individuals could make a
conservative propaganda, which somehow disincentivizes voting or causes individuals to be indifferent toward politics, and direct it toward conservative individuals, thus paralyzing their opposition. For the remainder of the paper I will do my best to clarify when I am using “conservative” in the political affiliation sense and when I am using it in the propaganda, disincentivizing or “de-activating” sense.

This paper argues that satire is a conservative propaganda that causes inaction or indifference. However, when it comes to satire, since it seems to be consumed mostly by liberals in the U.S., the conservative functions of satire, by reducing the political actions of the liberals who consume it, will benefit the conservative political interests of the U.S. This also indicates that satire has been used incorrectly by the liberals who largely produce it; instead of being directed at their political opponents in order to cause indifference and inaction among them, it has been directed toward liberal audiences. In other words, liberal satirists have been unknowingly causing inaction and indifference in their own political allies, harming their own political interests. Thus, satire was not only defeated by hyperbolic insult humor because said insult humor was more effective at inspiring action, but also because, at the very same time, satire was self-defeating; it was disincentivizing progressive political action all on its own. The party who attempts to mobilize its members with satire while another party is using straightforward outrage humor will shoot itself in both feet. Yet, the party which can mobilize its own members with straightforward outrage while simultaneously paralyzing its opponents with satire will be doubly successful. But I am getting ahead of myself. The following section will clarify these distinctions in types of propaganda and how they apply to different styles of humor.
Before moving on to the analyzation of satire as a propaganda tool, I must provide the lens through which I will determine what propaganda is and how to gauge its effectiveness. Jacques Ellul, a French philosopher and sociologist, wrote Propaganda: The Formation of Men’s Attitudes in 1962. It is an incredibly succinct, and incredibly depressing, book which provides theories and observations surrounding propaganda in the modern world. Of course, these observations occurred nearly fifty years ago, but they are arguably the more valuable for doing so. First, Ellul’s physical distance from the U.S. and his temporal distance from the present provide an objective distance from the chaotic milieu which is current U.S. politics. His generalities are less prone to the specific partisan biases which any current description of American political propaganda would instill in an American writer. That is not to say he’s completely unbiased, but just not so much when describing the U.S. Second, many of his generalizations surrounding propaganda are either still true today, or even more true today, than when they were written. This lends a good deal of authority to his studies. Third, Ellul’s observations and theories over what is propaganda and how it works are much more varied and self-aware than other popular treatments of propaganda, such as the better-known Theodor W. Adorno’s 1951 “Freudian Theory and the Pattern of Fascist Propaganda.” Adorno, like many others, falls prey to the common misconception that propaganda is more or less specific to sinister and tyrannical, or “fascist” governments.

Many fail to analyze the extent of propaganda in modern, relatively peaceful and so-called democratic societies. Ellul does not. He posits that propaganda is a necessary and inescapable part of modern daily life, which may, at first, seem far-fetched, until one comes to realize that propaganda describes a much wider swathe of phenomena than the average
individual may think. Ellul adopts a more expansive view of propaganda, inspecting the ways that it permeates daily life, unconsciously influences citizens of the freest nations, and is sometimes created by those who are not even intending to create it. While categorizing satire as propaganda may offend our commonsense notions of what propaganda is, Ellul is useful in suggesting that satire, along with many other seemingly safe forms of media or information, function as propaganda.

The main thesis of Ellul’s *Propaganda* is this: First, propaganda is a trap from which the only adequate escape is a different propaganda; second, propaganda is necessary for and central to a democracy while it simultaneously makes true democracy impossible by eliminating the freedom of will and choice upon which notions of democracy are built. This, according to Ellul, is the paradox of democracy in modernity. Once again, this may seem far-fetched. In fact, at times Ellul appears to overrate the effects of propaganda. He sees propaganda almost as if it is some disease which has infected all of modernity and for which there is no cure. Nevertheless, the deeper one delves into his theories, the harder it is to deny them.

His definition of “propaganda” is extensive and multi-layered. But a few basic characteristics should begin to clarify how he can view propaganda as being so pervasive. First, propaganda is total. All forms of media are used by propagandists. Ellul lists movies, basic human contacts, public meetings, posters, the press and the radio (10). Of course, now, this list would include social media, which is virtual human contact, as well as TV and the internet. The extent of such totality is best provided in this quote. “Propaganda tries to surround man by all possible routes…It furnishes him with a complete system for explaining the world, and provides immediate incentives to action. We are here in the presence of an organized myth that tries to take hold of the entire person” (11). Institutions of learning are not devoid of this totality either.
Education, literature and history are all forms of propaganda (13-14). While noticeable propaganda, which he terms “overt propaganda,” is what most people think of when considering the subject, “covert propaganda tends to hide its aims, identity, significance, and source. The people are not aware that someone is trying to influence them” (15). In fact, overt propaganda that is too noticeable as such is rarely effective (19). Covert propaganda is increasingly pervasive. Second, contrary to the common belief of scholars like Adorno, propaganda can often achieve ends which are good. It is not always justifying evilness or lies. “In most cases propaganda seeks to point out courses of action desirable in themselves, such as helpful reforms. Propaganda then becomes this mixture of the actual satisfaction given to the people by the reforms and subsequent exploitation of that satisfaction” (21). Thus, good actions can serve as propaganda later on. Third, propaganda involves the manipulation of symbols which, “persuade the individual to enter the framework of an organization…furnish him with reasons, justification, motivations for actions…obtains his total allegiance” (23). Finally, Ellul posits that all modern propaganda tends to obtain an “orthopraxy”: “An action that in itself, and not because of the value judgments of the person who is acting, leads directly to a goal, which for the individual is not a conscious and intentional objective to be attained, but which is considered such by the propagandist” (27). In other words, propaganda, by so entirely encompassing an individual’s life, comes to unconsciously influence their actions, even against their better judgements. The base laid by this immersion in propaganda can be manipulated by propagandists to incite a wide variety of unconscious actions.

Let’s examine how Ellul explains society’s arrival at this frightening point. First, he posits that the modern State is in the following dilemma: “the government can no longer operate outside the pressure of the masses and public opinion; on the other hand, public opinion does not
express itself in the democratic form of the government…obeisance by the State to public opinion is impossible” (Ellul 124). This is one example of an observation of Ellul’s that has become increasingly true today. With so many average citizens technologically equipped with the means of expressing themselves on the internet for the entire world to see, present governments are more pressured by the masses than even those in the 1960’s. For example, in the Arab Spring uprisings of the 2010’s, social media played a crucial role in toppling authoritarian regimes. “Networks formed online were crucial in organizing a core group of activists, specifically in Egypt” (Brown et. al). The even larger impact of social media, “was in communicating to the rest of the world what was happening on the ground during the uprisings,” rallying outside support and aid (Brown et. al). Yet, it is still impossible for a State to truly follow the fast-changing, often unrealistic opinions of these masses. So, Ellul posits a solution.

Only one solution is possible; as the government cannot follow opinion, opinion must follow the government. One must convince this present, ponderous, impassioned mass that the government’s decisions are legitimate and good and that its foreign policy is correct…The democratic State, precisely because it believes in the expression of public opinion and does not gag it, must channel and shape that opinion if it wants to be realistic and not follow an ideological dream (Ellul 126)

Ellul uses this premise to conclude that, “A modern State, even if it be liberal, democratic, and humanist, finds itself objectively and sociologically in a situation in which it must use propaganda as a means of governing. It cannot do otherwise” (Ellul 138). Only propaganda can channel that public opinion which is so problematic for modern States. This provides a further clue to the pervasiveness of propaganda and satire’s classification as such. Once the State has created and channeled various opinions, the artistic creations of individuals—or satirists—not associated with the State, can function as propaganda, even when they themselves do not
acknowledge it as such. Opinions, thus channeled by the State, become a sort of exponential propaganda.

Even more interesting is Ellul’s observation that individuals need propaganda just as much as States, even if they consciously and outwardly detest it. First, he cites the dilemma of modern people as being concerned with and wanting to participate in politics—to speak coherently on pressing issues, vote for the best candidate, make objective informed decisions, etc.—but being unable to fully comprehend, let alone analyze current political and social issues. Propaganda also solves this dilemma.

As most people have the desire and at the same time the incapacity to participate, they are ready to accept a propaganda that will permit them to participate, and which hides their incapacity beneath explanations, judgments, and news, enabling them to satisfy their desire without eliminating their incompetence (140).

To this he adds that propaganda provides explanations for, and thus soothes, the sacrifices which the modern world demands of individuals, such as increased work hours, more dangerous wars, chaotic technological environments, etc. The most important of these sacrifices satisfied by propaganda are information overload, feelings of diminishment, and the increasing repression of natural tendencies and desires.

The individual needs propaganda to filter the incredible amount of information available in the modern world. This, again, is truer today than in 1962; there are many more venues by which the individual can be assailed by information now, i.e., cell phones, internet, etc. Ellul describes the situation as such:

[Modern man] finds himself in a kind of kaleidoscope in which thousands of unconnected images follow each other rapidly. His attention is continually diverted to new matters, new centers of interest, and is dissipated on a thousand things, which disappear from one day to the next. The world becomes remarkably changeable and uncertain…The news is only about trouble, danger, and problems. This gives man the
notion that he lives in a terrible and frightening era, that he lives amid catastrophes in a world where
everything threatens his safety (145-6)

It is impossible to objectively analyze and judge each instance of information; they keep coming.
Propaganda provides an information filter, telling us what to believe or ignore. “Effective
propaganda needs to give man an all-embracing view of the world…That panorama allows the
individual to give the proper classification to all the news items he receives; to exercise a critical
judgment, to sharply accentuate certain facts and suppress others” (Ellul 146-7).

Next, propaganda provides a much-desired feeling of superiority to the modern
individual, who experiences increasing feelings of diminishment. “As soon as I have been
politicized by propaganda, I can from my heights look down on daily trifles. My boss, who does
not share my convictions, is merely a poor fool…I take my revenge upon him by being
enlightened” (Ellul 150). The individual is drawn to propaganda to eliminate, albeit falsely, their
inferiority. Feeling superior to one’s boss does not change the fact that they are in charge, but it
can partially soothe the feelings of subjection.

Also incredibly important when considering satire, propaganda can provide a means to
release the natural desires and tendencies which modern individuals are increasingly required to
repress. As Ellul explains,

To seal all outlets and suppress man in all areas is dangerous. Man needs to express his passions and
desires…Either sublimation or release is necessary…Propaganda offers release on a grand scale. For
example, propaganda will permit what so far was prohibited, such as hatred…man always has a certain
need to hate…Propaganda offers him an object of hatred…and the hatred it offers him is not shameful, evil
hatred that he must hide, but a legitimate hatred, which he can justly feel (151-152)

Whoever provides these seemingly legitimate releases will be rewarded with passionate
adherence. “The individual attaches himself passionately to the source of such propaganda,
which, for him, provides liberation. Where transgression becomes virtue, the lifter of the ban becomes a hero” (Ellul 152).

To avoid getting lost in a labyrinth of theory, let’s connect this discussion of propaganda back to humor for a moment. This release of repression can apply both to satire and the insult humor discussed above. With Young’s interview by Weiss and the “almost physiological” enjoyment of conservative-preferred outrage, insult humor appears to be, one, much better at releasing these repressions and, two, better at directing them toward action. Satire appears to provide a false release which is undirected, or multi-directed, and minimal. Recall the comparison between The Onion’s and Steven Crowder’s comedic treatments of Elizabeth Warren’s DNA scandal. The Onion’s liberal satire had an ambiguous variety of targets. Of course, it mocked Elizabeth Warren, but it also reminded readers of their complicity. The headline, “Elizabeth Warren Disappointed After DNA Test Shows Zero Trace Of Presidential Material,” on a deeper level, seems to ask: why are genetics that are not physically evident or relevant to our cultural practices suddenly so important to our society’s concept of identity? It is hard to release repressed emotions such as hate on someone or something that has been written off as absurd and reminded us of our own complicity in that absurdity. Crowder’s videos mocking Warren, though less witty, had no such difficulty in releasing repressed emotions. The hyperbolic exaggeration of her absurdity was almost hateful in itself, and it certainly made Warren an easier target for hatred than The Onion’s article. Then, Steven’s reminder of the “sinister” threat posed by Warren and the political left further increases the potential for the release of hatred while decreasing the potential for writing off the target as unimportant.

Unironic
Hyperbolic mockery solidifies consumers’ status as insiders by exaggerating the “otherness” of the target, in this case Warren. It separates her/them from the viewer (the opposite of reminding them of their complicity) and then the reminder of threat necessarily elicits hatred, a natural response to fear. Through hyperbolic mockery, these “activating” emotions are increased and directed at specific targets: Elizabeth Warren and the political left. Meanwhile, The Onion’s satirical article diminishes these energies and displaces them on a myriad of uncertain targets: Warren, the weight attributed to genes, identity politics, etc. In this case political action and the paths to it are obscured and reduced. Hopefully it is becoming clearer how even humor can fit into the discourse on propaganda.

Thus far, Ellul’s basic premises are that both the modern State and the modern individual need propaganda. So, it would appear that it is an ideal, symbiotic relationship. In a way, it is, but it is not a democratic one. “For propaganda, regardless of origin, destroys man’s personality and freedom” (Ellul 137). Here Ellul does go a little overboard. He claims that, “The illusion that one engages in psychological action as a defense, while respecting the values of democracy and human personality, is more pernicious than any cynicism which looks frankly at the true situation” (Ellul 137). Of course, given the various unconscious, psychological effects of and the dependence on propaganda which he describes, it is valid to claim that propaganda is necessarily undemocratic. Yet, it is still possible that one regime which controls individuals with propaganda can treat those individuals better than another or can achieve better ends. The point is that the individuals who think they have a choice in the matter and can exercise free will concerning their political situation are deluded. Propaganda, no matter how progressive or beneficial the ends it purports to aim for, turns humans into tools. With these considerations in mind, I will analyze the modes of satire as propaganda without moral value judgments pertaining to the side which uses
it, and will instead look only at the effectiveness, i.e. the control, which satire affords those propagating it in various instances.

Another misconception about propaganda is that it is always untrue. Ellul frequently describes how propaganda attached to truth, albeit partial truth or truth filtered through a confirmation bias, will always be more successful than an outright lie. Thus, all forms of information in the modern age—due to the extreme complexity, variety and multiplicity of events—are propaganda. “The two realities—information and propaganda—are so little distinct from one another that what the enemy says is nothing but propaganda, whereas what our side says is nothing but information” (Ellul 127). This is evident in the U.S today. Each side calls the news of the other ‘fake news,’ while claiming that their news sources are legitimate. In reality, although some news may be purposely falsified, it is more common that each side publishes those seeds of truth that most help their cause while avoiding or blurring those that do not.

One may, at this point, be wondering how propaganda can be both a filter for information and information itself. The answer: certain information serves to predispose consumers to either dispel or accept other information. For example, a person whose socio-psychological predisposition to conservatism has been strengthened by conservative propaganda will be imbued with an information filter that attracts them more to FoxNews than MSNBC. The information from FoxNews will serve to strengthen the filter even more when the conservative viewer confronts other, outside information. If FoxNews reports, truthfully, that a liberal politician lied about issue W, but they do not report that the same politician has been truthful and helpful on issues XYZ, this will both confirm the viewer’s filter (that liberals are bad/liars) and steel them against accepting a reasonable argument from that politician because the only
information they have is that the politician is a liar. Essentially, this is the phenomenon commonly referred to as the “echo chamber.”

With all information considered propaganda, it is not a far jump to see education, often believed to be a buffer against propaganda, as an effective form of propaganda. In the modern world, “No contrast can be tolerated between teaching and propaganda, between the critical spirit formed by higher education and the exclusion of independent thought” (Ellul 13). The ability to read without the ability to critically analyze what one reads is the perfect environment for propaganda to take hold because these individuals will either, “attribute authority and eminent value to the printed work, or conversely, reject it altogether” (108). Once the ability to critically analyze comes, the individual is already thoroughly propagandized. “Before he can pass to the second stage, he will find himself in a universe of propaganda. He will be already formed, adapted, integrated” (Ellul 109). The specific “truths” a society teaches its students will forever influence their worldviews and how they teach the next generation.

A crucial element to Ellul’s arguments, and the ensuing argument of this paper, is that intellectuals are not immune from propaganda and that, in certain circumstances, they are more susceptible to it than the common citizen. The propaganda to which intellectuals are most susceptible is that of integration.

Propaganda of integration…aims at making the individual participate in his society in every way. It is a long-term propaganda, a self-producing propaganda that seeks to obtain stable behavior, to adapt the individual to his everyday life, to reshape his thoughts and behavior in terms of the permanent social setting (Ellul 75).

Consider the example of the car in America. Since Henry Ford it has been a constant trope of the integration propaganda of the American Dream and consumerism—which satisfies various materialistic desires, creates group adhesion, and has often served as a major reason for inciting
people to fight in order to defend the “Dream.” The car is central to American movies and culture. Now, when the majority of liberal intellectuals are aware of the negative effects of these vehicles on the environment, many are still unwilling to give up their cars, or other extraneous material items, despite the help to the environment which they acknowledge this would provide. They have been thoroughly “integrated” into the concept of the American Dream and will not submit to the inconveniences of public transportation, pedestrianism, etc. Instead, many have rallied for electric cars or corporate adoption of eco-friendly measures, which would have much less impact on the American Dream than giving up the personal automobile altogether.

Integration propaganda is distinct from agitation propaganda, to which less educated individuals are more susceptible and which is geared toward immediate action. In very general terms, this distinction reflects that between the liberal and conservative styles of humor. The liberal style, which is propagandistically conservative, appeals to comfortable, intellectual detachment. It is more integrational. The conservative style, which is propagandistically progressive, requires less educated analysis and incites more action. It is more agitational.

Integration propaganda is also “self-producing.” This means that those who fall prey to it may then unknowingly propagate it without considering themselves propagandists. For example, Ellul describes social propaganda, which is closely tied to integrational propaganda, as such: “The group of manifestations by which any society seeks to integrate the maximum number of individuals into itself, to unify its members’ behavior according to a pattern, to spread its style of life abroad…” (62). The major example of this type of propaganda being self-produced in the U.S. would be Hollywood. Directors are constantly making propaganda which will spread the American values and behavior they themselves have been “integrated” into around the world, though they may not be primarily concerned with this propagandistic function of their work.
Successful social and integration propaganda can be quickly transformed into a powerful, action-inciting force. “The individual in the clutches of such sociological propaganda believes that those who live this way are on the side of the angels, and those who don’t are bad…Nothing is easier than to graft a direct propaganda onto a setting prepared by sociological propaganda” (65, 66). Once again, the example of the American Dream comes into play. Consider how “protecting the American Dream” has been used to rally soldiers in the fight against Communism or, more recently, terrorism. Anything not conforming to that dream is seen as threatening or is, at the very least, avoided. This binary created by social propaganda will be discussed shortly.

For the moment, we should recognize that Ellul proposes an inescapable cycle here. Information is propaganda. To become educated, one must become a propagandee. Then, once one is a propagandized intellectual, they will unknowingly disseminate propagandistic information to others. This is the “orthopraxy” that Ellul described as the main aim of modern propaganda. Intellectuals are unconsciously propagandizing others while believing themselves to be above propaganda just as they, despite what beliefs they may have about the environment or economic equality, still implicitly, if not explicitly, support the consumeristic values of the American Dream and, through this implicit support, are helping assure their maintenance in that the next generation, even if they explicitly criticize these things, may implicitly support them.

Another consideration which many do not attribute to propaganda is that propaganda does not always try to instill adherence or incite action; sometimes propaganda is intended to cause indifference and inaction, which, for the purposes of this paper, will be referred to as “conservative propaganda.” This is an important distinction. To reiterate it once more, both the left and the right can use this “conservative propaganda.” It is simply one of the tools of the propagandist and it is used to cause indifference or inaction in the propagandee. For example,
people on the left could use it to “paralyze” opponents on the right or fringe elements within their own ranks. In contrast, what I will term “progressive propaganda” is that which incites action of any kind. It can also be used by either side. For example, the right could use it to incite action against the movements of the left.

To clarify this “conservative propaganda” a bit more, Ellul uses the example of “a propaganda of terror,” which causes privatization in individuals, wherein their political motivations and actions are diminished in favor of embracing family and private life (191). In other words, when citizens of an authoritarian state are terrified of participating in politics, they will be more concerned about keeping themselves safe than they are about various political rights or public policies. However, things besides terror can cause this. For example, he also cites privatization as occurring when, “two opposing propagandas work on the same group with almost equal force” (191). In this instance, which is much closer to the situation in the U.S., the individual will become apathetic after being tugged in two different directions and thus withdraw into private life with an attitude akin to saying, “Both sides are evil and it doesn’t matter what I do. So, I won’t do anything.” There are other methods of inducing this privatization as well, which will be discussed later, when I propose that satire is one such method. No matter how it is induced, privatization creates, “a situation in which the State has a free hand because the citizenry is totally uninterested in political matters” (Ellul 192). This type of propaganda is thus incredibly effective propaganda even though such methods are not thought of as propaganda. He later states, “Indifference is not a failure but a success of propaganda” (282).

Finally, Ellul cautions that it is practically impossible to accurately measure the effectiveness of propaganda, especially in the present. First, there is no discernable point of departure. “We cannot find a ‘zero’ point from which to begin, not only because none of us has
remained immune to propaganda, but also because supporters of a cause have become supporters through propaganda” (260). Public opinion polls can’t be accurate for the same reason: a single propaganda effect cannot be separated from all the others which constantly influence individuals. Even elections are insufficient proof since the campaign depends on the propagandization which occurred beforehand and since it is too short to thoroughly effect the social climate (261).

Second, the multitude of objectives in propaganda make it difficult to discern success.

The propagandist may also aim at many other objectives, such as the destruction of micro-groups, labor unions, associations…he may seek some determined action (strike, boycott, pogrom)…he may seek to influence some public opinion, aiming not at immediate actions, but only at changing a climate or evoking an atmosphere of sympathy or antipathy…If I see that few votes were won and that the undecided were not reached by the campaign, I will tend to regard it as a failure. But the same propaganda may have galvanized the militant group, reinforced the party, given it a chance to experiment with new methods, or led to the solidarity of certain micro-groups—equally important results (261).

While we mainly consider propaganda to only be used to directly influence some action, the incredible variety of phenomena which Ellul presents as propaganda make it difficult to say whether something has failed or succeeded. Add to that the fact that some propaganda, such as integration and social propaganda, may take decades to thoroughly influence a significant number of people, and it is even more difficult. Nevertheless, it is possible to postulate which types of propaganda would best to use in which context.

Of course, there are limitations to Ellul’s theories. Their application to the internet age is uncertain. At times he overrates the effects of propaganda, almost personifying it into an undefeatable force. There is the difficult contradiction wherein he states that nearly everything is propaganda, yet, his own analysis purports to, somehow, be above it. I am not sure how these two can be reconciled. Yet, neither can I deny that his observations are incredibly valuable and applicable to contemporary society. No theory is perfect, but Ellul’s concepts of propaganda are
Interestingly incisive in their considerations of propaganda in the everyday life of modern democratic societies. Using the general theories and tendencies outlined by Ellul I will explore the propagandistic possibilities and probabilities of satire. Also, it is important to note that I am not so much attempting to describe a precise level of effectiveness as I am trying to describe which propagandistic objectives will be most and least likely to be achieved by satire. This, I believe, is well within the realm of possibilities. Ellul himself, albeit very brusquely and in limited fashion, connected satire to propaganda in his book.

So far, I have discussed how satire, for all intents and purposes, seems to be associated with liberal causes. Since it is made for liberals, by liberals, it appears to be a progressive propaganda (if it is seen as propaganda at all), which incites liberal, progressive action. Yet, the single explicit mention of satire in Ellul’s book is far from conforming to these American presumptions concerning satire. As a side-note to the section, mentioned earlier, when Ellul is describing the individual’s need for propaganda to release repressed desires, he writes:

> propaganda can also provide release through devious channels...Authoritarian regimes know that people held very firmly in hand need some decompression, some safety valves. The government offers these itself. This role is played by satiric journals attacking the authorities yet tolerated by the dictator (Ellul 152-3).

Here he limits his example to authoritarian regimes, citing Russia. Yet, it is important to remember that, one, he concluded that no State using propaganda, or in which propagandists/satirists are unwittingly self-producing integration/social propaganda, could be truly democratic; and, two, he suggested that all modern individuals have repressed desires which need decompression, not only those in authoritarian regimes. So, differences aside, his observations concerning these “devious” satirical releases can be applied to the U.S. Also, before moving on, this serves as an example of the difference between propaganda made by conservatives and conservative propaganda. Communist, Soviet Russia is about as far to the
political left as it gets. Yet, it uses conservative propaganda to deviate energies and cause inaction. It is propaganda of the left because it is created by left-wingers, but instead of being progressive, it has a conservative function.

Far from describing the progressivity typically attributed to satire, these government-sanctioned satires, according to Ellul, serve two conservative propaganda functions. First, they single out “those about to be purged by the government as guilty of all that the people dislike” (153). This is connected to one of the oldest false-releases of humankind: the scapegoat. Instead of directing their anger and hatred at changing the complex system which oppresses them, the masses are periodically fed a single individual or group which they can blame for all the problems, kill or excommunicate, and thus cathartically overcome their oppression without actually changing much. This is a conservative function since it decompresses the urge to change an entire system without changing much at all. However, what Ellul does not mention is that satire in non-Authoritarian regimes is even more conservative than traditional scapegoating. While traditional scapegoating could remove some one high-ranking official and usher in some bit of progressive change, satire has even less progressive potential. The catharsis in satire concerns making a laughingstock of the scapegoat instead of killing, excommunicating or “purging” them. By mocking the authority in question, the masses imaginatively sacrifice him or her, but only imaginatively. The mockery reduces their threat-level to the point that the masses do not feel the need to take serious action against them. Satire, unlike the insult humor from the Steven Crowder example, does not re-iterate the threat of the target. It just diminishes it. Thus, satire serves a scapegoating function without requiring an actual sacrifice.

Second, these satires, “serve the function of giving the people the impression that they are free” (153). One will not fight oppression if one does not believe that he or she is oppressed.
Similarly, and more applicable to the current U.S., one cannot object to an all-encompassing and freedom-suppressing propaganda State if one believes that they are able to see through the propaganda and are above its influence. Like the scapegoating function, this promotes inactive complacency through a false reality and is thus conservative. These are two of the most important conservative functions of satire, the false release of repressed emotions and a false sense of superiority (or agency), which will be further analyzed in the ensuing pages.
THE CONSERVATIVE PROPAGANDA FUNCTIONS OF SATIRE

In this section, I will outline and analyze the conservative functions of satire and the possible propagandistic objectives which these can achieve. It is important to re-iterate here that the term “conservative” in reference to propaganda or propaganda functions is not referring to the political right, or the ideologically conservative, rather the more general term of the word, as in un-changing, or keeping with the status quo. When I am referring to the ideological, political right, I will explicitly state it. Ideally, conservative propaganda would be used against an opponent while progressive propaganda, which induces action, would be directed toward one’s own side, but, it appears that in the case of satire, liberals have unknowingly been directing conservative propaganda toward other liberals, causing increased inaction and indifference among those who would most help their cause. There are three central conservative propaganda functions of satire: the false or deviated release of revolutionary energies, the false sense of intellectual superiority or political agency, and the introduction of a paralyzing ambiguity into the typically--and necessarily--polarized political discourse. At the end of the day, satire is an effective propaganda tool, but only when its conservative functions are recognized and subtly exploited; otherwise the propagandists will be working against their own interests.

Before going too far into this discussion, I must note the organization and variety of sources in this section. The study of satire’s political effects represents a rather chaotic intersection of multi-disciplinarianism; it is part literary criticism, part psychology, part communications/media studies, and part political/social theory. However, up until the past two decades or so, satire studies were largely relegated to the field of literary criticism alone. Increasing interest in, and popularity of late-night political satire in the early 2000’s has spawned the emergence of a small field of interdisciplinary social science experiments regarding the
psychological effects of the genre and their implications for politics. These studies, being relatively new and limited, are far from definitive. They almost all involve gathering a few hundred American college students, offering them extra credit to participate, giving them a pre-exposure survey to gauge demographics and initial feelings, exposing some to satiric and some to non-satiric content, giving them a post-exposure survey to gauge the effects, comparing the differing exposure groups, then tying these findings back to their interdisciplinary research. Almost all are based around either The Daily Show With Jon Stewart or The Colbert Report. Some have contradictory findings. While I will not claim any definitive conclusions from these studies, they do point to interesting propagandistic possibilities within the satiric genre. To increase the breadth and scope of these social science studies, I will compare their findings with literary critics who analyze satires other than The Daily Show or The Colbert Report, as well as with the social/political theories of Ellul and Robin. There are certainly elements open for dispute within this chaotic field of satire studies, but the general picture of satire’s conservative propaganda function appears to gain strength with the field’s increasing interdisciplinarianism.

The general inability of satire to produce tangible social change has been recognized, or at least hinted at, by literary critics and theorists without the inclusion of psychological study. In "Power and Resistance: A Case Study of Satire on the Internet," Lijun Tang and Bhattacharya Syamantak analyze the 2007-8, Very Yellow and Very Violent incident in China, which involved common citizens mocking a government attempt to increase censorship on the general public. They satirically mocked the appearance of a 13-year-old girl on China’s state news station CCTV, where she spoke about seeing violent, vulgar and pornographic pop-ups when searching the internet. Many Chinese citizens saw this as a thinly veiled attempt by the Chinese government to build a case for further censoring of citizens’ internet accessibility, so they
mocked the CCTV interview with online satire in the attempt to de-base the government’s censorship efforts. Yet, Tang and Syamantak found that these efforts largely proved fruitless. 1.5 years later, an incredibly similar incident occurred involving Google. “Clearly the VYVV incident and the Google incident shared many [similar features], which however indicated that no real impact on CCTV had been made.” Also, the authors claim, this is not an isolated incident of the inability of satire to spur social change. Citing several previous critics, they write, “Evidence suggests that in its long history, satire has hardly produced any tangible effect on the material world and practical politics… It has been noted that satire rarely changes power relations but serves to reaffirm the powerless status of the political underdogs (Elliot 1960; Griffin 1994; Speier 1998).” Jamie Warner, in “Tyranny of the Dichotomy: Prophetic Dualism, Irony, and The Onion,” analyzes the satiric newspaper’s undermining of the Bush Administration’s response to the terrorist attacks of 9/11. Despite setting out with the intention of demonstrating satire’s progressive qualities, she has to admit, “The Onion did not close Guantanamo Bay, stop the invasion of Iraq, or even prevent President Bush from being elected to serve a second term.”

Finally, there is also the example of Ellul, mentioned in the previous section, who recognized, in 1962, the inability of satire to change authoritarian governments like that of Russia, or the power relations within them. So, despite the commonly held belief that satire serves liberal, progressive propaganda functions, critics and theorists in varying decades and nations have recognized the inability of this supposedly progressive genre to spur any sort of tangible change.

If satire does not function progressively, then what does it do? First, satire provides a false, or deviated, release of emotions which would have otherwise contributed to social change. Ellul tied Russian satire to purging in the Soviet Union (i.e. scapegoating, perhaps the most effective and traditional of such conservative false-release functions). But satire doesn’t have to
lead to scapegoating or purging for this false release to be affected. Satire itself is a sort of cathartic pseudo-scapegoating, wherein no one is actually sacrificed or excommunicated. While Aristotle described the catharsis of tragedy as purging pity and fear (Catharsis), satire similarly “purges,” not actual people, but the angry emotions held against them. Dustin Griffin, in *Satire: A Critical Reintroduction*, points to this function using Freudian psychoanalytic theory.

The few modern critics who have speculated at any length on satiric pleasures have largely depended upon Freud’s account of jokes, and in particular his notion that what he calls ‘tendentious jokes’ are an expression of repressed hostility. Thus one critic suggests that satire is a form of witty sadism. Both satirist and reader derive pleasure from participation in an act of rhetorical violence. Another finds that the pleasure derives not only from the release of aggression but also from the reassurance that such release, normally unacceptable, is under the control of the conscious mind. (162)

This doesn’t appear to be a bad thing on the surface. Instead of actual physical aggression or “unacceptable” hostility, the emotions are let off in a relatively harmless joke. Yet, it must be realized that this catharsis displaces and deviates angry, or even revolutionary, feelings, which could have otherwise been channeled into enacting concrete, positive change. Relative harmlessness, in this case, is also relatively ineffective.

This false/deviated release effect is supported by at least two social science experiments. In the 2007 psychological study, “Primacy effects of *The Daily Show* and national tv news viewing: young viewers, political gratifications, and internal political self-efficacy,” Holbert et. al.’s findings suggest that, “individuals who perceive themselves to be politically incompetent and ineffective become especially attached to the satirical message of *The Daily Show* and what it has to say about national television news.” This study indicates that satire gratifies feelings of political impotence. Baumgartner and Morris’s 2008 study, “One ‘nation,’ under Stephen? The effects of The Colbert Report on American youth,” used the findings of their study, coupled with
psychology’s EML theory (elaboration likelihood model), to suggest that satire, “may block, disrupt, or distract further processing or elaboration of the message in the central route in viewers by causing positive affect in the viewer.” In other words, satire, in this case The Colbert Report, diverts the tense and complicated emotions of politics into the “positive affect” of humor, which blocks disrupts or distracts the satire consumer from further processing or contemplating the political issue at hand. In this way, revolutionary emotions of political frustration can be falsely released into laughter. These two studies make sense together as well. Perhaps people who feel politically ineffective are the most strongly drawn and attached to satire because it discharges these emotions of frustration and impotence into positive affect. This is a conservative propaganda function because the emotions here discharged, frustration over political ineffectiveness, could have otherwise translated to progressive action if they were directed by a non-satiric propaganda, such as a clear and angry call to action.

Literary critics have noted this conservative tendency of false/diverted release in satire as well, and it does not appear to be limited to American TV. Despite the markedly different circumstances of Tang and Syamantak’s analysis of China’s VYVV incident—i.e., it was in China, it was satire made by common citizens and produced on the internet, etc.—satire’s false release function was still noticed. “In this context, satire helped netizens to release their anger by launching a symbolic attack on CCTV…though it hardly inflicted any real damage to the enemy, it nevertheless offered a sense of triumph and moral victory.” Perhaps this release of tensions and sense of triumph is emotionally important to a subjugated people, but politically, it is disastrous. It disincentivizes political change. Dustin Griffin emphasizes this point, similar to Ellul, that satire can function as a “safety valve,” which lets off the steam of pent-up emotions and aggressions just enough to keep them from exploding and causing real change (156). Also like
Ellul’s example of satire in Russia, the VYVV incident involved scapegoating. “Because no alternative avenue was available to challenge the latter [the government itself], many of them opted for making the girl a scapegoat to achieve the end. This strategy served to reaffirm the underdog status of netizens: they could only attack weak scapegoats.” It is highly probable that the Chinese government foresaw backlash from this broadcast, so they set up the 13-year-old interviewee as a scapegoat instead of having an official make an explicit appearance calling for strict censorship of the internet. Thus, the internet satirists fell right into their trap and experienced a double false release of their frustrations over censorship: through satire and through scapegoating.

In America, other satires are noted as causing the same phenomenon of false/deviated release. Brock analyzed all types of U.S. satire like The Daily Show or The Onion, which ironically parody the political media and are, according to Maria Brock, very similar to a genre of Russian satire known as “stiob.” She warns: “The parodic deconstructions of stiob enable the audience to experience transgressive enjoyment without any need for a more active response” (288). Just as Baumgartner and Morris’s 2008 study indicated, Brock notices that viewing satire can discharge energies concerning politics into the “transgressive enjoyment” of the passive, positive affect of humor. Ted Gournelous’s article “Irony, Community, and the Intelligent Design Debate in South Park and The Simpsons,” notices these discharging effects in both of these popular animated satires. In the South Park episode “Go God Go,” Gournelous acknowledges the following: “Inscribed within a larger trajectory of sexual transgression in the show, ‘Go God Go’ places itself within a social context that displaces the polarizing power of the evolution debate.” This episode perfectly exemplifies this function. In “Go God Go,” the character Ms. Garrison, a transgender elementary teacher, ironically plays the bigoted
conservative who refuses to teach evolution. She is then temporarily removed from her teaching position and replaced by a stereotypically liberal, atheistic evolutionary scientist. However, Ms. Garrison and the male scientist quickly enter into an inappropriate sexual relationship which they do not hide from the children. Ms. Garrison gives up her conservative views and swings violently to the other side. Then, at one point, the liberal scientist becomes disgusted and horrified when he discovers Ms. Garrison’s transgender status, which was obvious to everyone else the entire time, discrediting both his liberal acceptance and his credentials as a scientist. This, and so many other instances of ridiculousness in the episode, “displace” the polarizing anger of the politicized evolution debate onto various sexual transgressions and social hypocrisies which allow viewers, whatever side they may be on, to mock their opponents and falsely release their frustrations through laughter.

The false/diverted release function of satire is closely tied, in fact overlaps, with the next conservative function of satire: providing a false sense of intellectual superiority or political agency. This conservative propaganda function is not new, and it is not exclusive to satire. Robin illustrates that ideological conservatives have, for centuries, maintained the status-quo by allowing the masses to have feelings of superiority over others. “The masses must…be provided with real opportunities to become faux aristocrats in the family, the factory, and the field…[it] makes for a democratic feudalism, in which the husband or supervisor or white man plays the part of a lord” (30). This, he argues, has been integral to politics in the United States, even among supposed liberals. “Even the American democrat, [John] Adams reasoned, would rather rule over an inferior than dispossess a superior. His passion is for supremacy, not equality, and so long as he is assured the audience of a lesser, he will be content with his lowly status” (68). Thus, masses can be pacified to accept the status quo if they believe themselves to be superior to
someone else. Ellul also touched on this when he spoke about Russian satire causing citizens to feel freer than they actually were, thus providing a false sense of agency. Such feelings of superiority or agency are integral to false release of energies because these energies are typically built up through feelings of inferiority, oppression, impotence etc., thus a feeling of superiority or agency, even when false, can counteract them. The preceding paragraphs demonstrated how these energies could be released by discharging them into the positive affect of humor. Yet, these same energies can be released by symbolically conquering, i.e. feeling superior to, the opponent, or at the very least someone, through humor.

The psychological studies on this are mixed. They typically center around the concept of “efficacy,” which is a bit ambiguous and is defined differently in different studies. The most succinct definitions divide it into two parts, internal and external. Internal efficacy, in general terms, concerns feelings or beliefs in one’s own abilities to understand politics and participate in them successfully. External efficacy, on the other hand, concerns beliefs about the governmental systems’ abilities to enable changes to occur based on public opinion. Balmas’s 2014 study, one of the only studies conducted outside of America (in Israel), found that saturation in satiric political content, at the exclusion of traditional “hard news” resulted in increased inefficacy, alienation and cynicism among participants (446), but these results only tended to occur among those who “consider political satire to provide a realistic representation of politics and politicians” (446). For those who understood that the satire was not real, the relationship to these variables was not significant. It is somewhat frustrating that the two sub-types of efficacy are not differentiated in the results, since internal efficacy, the belief in one’s own competence, does not necessarily have to be tied to beliefs about the government’s competence, which are indicated with external efficacy, political alienation and political cynicism. Also, the fact that these
findings only apply to those who don’t get that the satire is a joke necessarily complicates this view. Nevertheless, Balmas does not show a relationship between satire exposure and increased feelings of superiority; in fact, in those who don’t get the joke of the satire, it diminishes feelings of competence.

However, other experiments do correspond to increased feelings of personal superiority or competence. Baumgartner and Morris’s 2006 study, “The Daily Show Effect: Candidate Evaluations, Efficacy, and American Youth,” did, unlike Balmas, separate internal and external efficacy. They found that internal efficacy, or one’s self-confidence, was increased while external efficacy, or belief/trust in the government, was decreased among participants exposed to the satiric message of *The Daily Show*.

*The Daily Show’s* effect on political efficacy is mixed. To begin with, exposure to the show lowered trust in the media and the electoral process…Relatedly, we found that exposure to *The Daily Show* increased internal efficacy by raising viewers’ perception that the complex world of politics was understandable. Stewart’s style of humor paints the complexities of politics as a function of the absurdity and incompetence of political elites, thus leading viewers to blame any lack of understanding not on themselves but on those who run the system (362)

Basically, the response is, “I’m fine, the problems stem from those idiotic politicians.” The conjectures on the implications this has for political participation are even more “mixed.” At first, they contend that, “Increased internal efficacy might, all other things being equal, contribute to greater participation,” (362). But all things are not equal. Satire decreased external efficacy. “Decreased external efficacy may dampen participation among an already cynical audience (young adults) by contributing to a sense of alienation from the political process. And it has been demonstrated that lowered trust can perpetuate a more dysfunctional political system” (362-3). In essence, satire in this case was found to satisfy the need for a feeling of superiority or
agency while simultaneously assuring satire consumers that political action would be useless. This study offers the most support for the conservative functions of satire in this arena. Hoffman, et. al.’s 2011 study, also found that satire raised internal efficacy among participants, but they argued that this would also raise participation, not lower it. However, this study was only a survey, which did not expose the participants to satire, and of the mere 267 college students who participated, very few consumed political satire at all, let alone frequently. Thus, the authors suggest that the findings concerning satire and participation could be the result of a “floor effect,” and not be indicative of actual results on a larger scale.

As one may see from these frustrating contradictions, this area of satire studies needs much more data before anything can be said conclusively about the effects of satire on feelings of superiority or agency. What’s more, “efficacy,” though related, is not entirely indicative of one’s own perception of his or her own intelligence. Nevertheless, the only study that indicated satire lowered efficacy was that of Balmas, and this was only in those who misunderstood the satire as being reality. Hoffman, et. al and Baumgartner and Morris’s 2006 study both found that satire increases internal efficacy. The relationship between this increased internal efficacy spawned by satire and political participation is still up for debate. In the context of Rubin’s comments about dispersed feudalism, I argue that it will generally decrease participation.

Several literary critics, if not explicitly, would seem to implicitly agree. First, Gournelous quotes Crispin Miller’s 1986 essay, “Deride and Conquer,” which puts this sense of conservativism in false superiority into a context that may be simpler to understand:

TV does not solicit our rapt absorption or hearty agreement, but – like the ads that subsidize it – actually flatters us for the very boredom and distrust which it inspires in us. TV solicits each viewer’s allegiance by reflecting back his/her own automatic skepticism toward TV. Thus, TV protects itself from criticism or
To further explain this, Gournelous cites instances where Miller writes about various 1980s sitcoms, wherein a then-typical TV trope, such as a father giving out a stereotypical, 50s-esque sitcom warning, would be accompanied by kids rolling their eyes. This, he argues, incorporates the awareness that viewers had of previous eras of TV attempting to influence certain family values and flatters them for this “enlightenment,” which causes them to have a continued interest in the programs they are skeptical toward. It is an appeal to the meta-awareness of television tropes which causes audiences to happily consume more television tropes precisely because they think they are above their influence. Tying this to his satiric-focused argument, Gournelous states, of *The Simpsons* episode “The Monkey Suit,” that, “the political impact of *The Simpsons* is here almost completely limited to the creation of an ironic, media literate ‘in crowd,’ and isolating that community from deeper (and potentially polarizing) social issues.” Audiences are flattered and captivated by their abilities to recognize various media references and ironies in the show, and thus are drawn away from the polarizing political and social issues, in this case the evolution debate.

Luring consumers by flattering their sense of intelligence, satire can then draw their psyches into a de-politicized field. Brock touched on this conservative function of satire in terms of mocking Trump: “Parody or impersonations in their most toothless guise, in fact enable a further depoliticization of the political field by focusing on low-hanging fruit such as the US President’s more irksome mannerisms or his appearance” (288). Essentially, Trump’s threat, or any other political official’s targeted by satire, is often downplayed in exchange for mocking various appearance issues, speech gaffes, spelling mistakes, etc. This is, admittedly, a less sophisticated form of satire which will appeal to a less-informed or less-intellectual audience.
Those who are more ‘in the know’ will see through these hyperbolic critiques of “low hanging fruit” and recognize that, it doesn’t matter if Trump is ugly or has bad grammar, he still holds a lot of power.

Simply “exposing others’ shortcomings” can appeal to even the least informed audiences. However, satire can captivate incredibly intelligent people as well.

Like other literary forms, satire is about representation, although it specializes in representation of deformity. Such representation offers intellectual satisfaction as it demonstrates our ability to understand and control the world, and at the same time gratifies our sense of superiority by exposing others’ shortcomings. (Tang and Syamantak)

The first part of the quote, about the “ability to understand and control the world” is appealing to everyone. To understand satire, one needs a well-rounded and informed knowledge of the satiric target. As Aaron Santesso notes in “Satire and Elitism,” “When satire is appealing, it is usually because the satirist flatters his or her chosen audience, implicitly complimenting their intelligence and discernment. The satirist treats the audience as part of an elite—a group intelligent or virtuous enough to see through irony” (287). The more ironic or parodic the satire, the more one needs to understand the events and context surrounding it or else fall victim to believing it as reality. And that is part of the fun of satire. An Onion article appears to be real news, and misinformed people may be apt to believe it as such, but those who grasp the irony can laugh, not only at the irony itself, but also at all those who are bound to be stupid enough (stupider than them) to believe that such an article is real. Satire can reach many more levels with this than mere “low hanging fruit.” It can appeal to meta-awareness of culture, media, politics, style etc. and have a wide range of subtleties to be perceived by a wide range of intellects.

This range can come to include not only consumers of satire, but creators of it as well. After all, it is common knowledge that the creation of a work denotes more intellectual weight
than its mere consumption. Griffin, unlike many other literary critics concerning this theme, frequently includes the effects on satirists as well as satire consumers.

In some readers (and satirists too) satire no doubt induces a gratifying sense of moral victory to compensate for their status as political underdogs or outsiders. Compensation combines the ideas of substituting for loss and conferring benefit...The special compensations of satire have to do not with fame or immortality but with the sentiment it fosters of superiority in morality or in wit or in power. (156)

This is an important aspect to consider, especially in this age of the internet, when anyone can publish content online with relative ease, as the subjects in Tang and Syamantak’s Chinese case study did. It is also incredibly important for explaining the argument that runs throughout this paper.

How can satire, a genre commonly considered to be made by liberals, for liberals, and to serve progressive purposes, actually be serving conservative propaganda functions by disincentivizing liberal activity? How could self-proclaimed liberals like Stewart or Colbert come to produce conservative propaganda that serves the interests of the political right? The key to these answers lies in the feeling of superiority in “morality, wit or power” which Griffin points to, not only in the consumers of satire, but the creators of it as well. Recall Ellul’s analyzations of social or integration propaganda; intellectuals are vulnerable to it and it is self-reproducing. Also, recall Ellul’s modern propaganda ideal of orthopraxy: causing individuals to unknowingly do certain things which may be against their core values.

Here is a prime example of the cycle that Ellul was speaking of. An intellectual may easily be drawn into sophisticated satire. First, it will appeal to their meta-awareness of literary style, or culture, or psychology etc. Second, it will inspire notions of political or psychological superiority; i.e., since they can understand the subtle, ironic jokes being made about the media, politics, propaganda etc., they will believe that they aren’t vulnerable to these mechanisms which
necessarily entrap those who don’t have the awareness or intellect to grasp the joke. Third, some percentage of creative intellectuals who enjoy the sense of superiority they obtain from consuming sophisticated satire will begin creating their own satire, which will even further reinforce their sense of superiority while simultaneously, in their minds, awakening the awareness (which is, in this case, unknown to them, a false awareness) of other intellectuals’ superiority over the common mass and the various societal mechanisms which control that mass.

Such intellectuals will not realize, however, that not only are they not superior to those mechanisms, but they are so complicit in them that they have come to propagate them themselves; their superior intellects will have been co-opted, thus diverted, into serving the very system which they thought they were above. Their intellectual prowess, instead of being utilized to enact more explicit change, will have been occasionally drawn into the consumption of deactivating satire. In fact, if they happen to be a part of the group which then creates satire, they will exponentially multiply this conservative function, capturing other intellectuals in the stagnating trap by flattering their intellects. All the while they, and their audience, will believe that they are laying the ground for progressive changes. This may be amplified by the fact that, in their non-satiric exploits, they are, in fact, promoting progressive changes, for example, in their other academic pursuits, their activism, their political affiliations or donations, etc. But their satire will serve conservative functions and these functions will be all the more powerful because of their progressive masks. This is how people like Stewart, Colbert or Noah, self-identified liberals who are categorized more as entertainers than propagandists, can come to make conservative propaganda that serves the interests of the right.

This leads to another paradox within this paper which is best addressed here. If satire serves conservative propaganda functions, i.e., inducing inaction in constituents, and is largely
consumed by liberals, how can there, in this contemporary age, be both an abundance of satire and an apparent increase of political activism on the left? Of course, it is not a zero-sum game. In this age of rampant satire, there is an abundance of political action on the left: BLM protests, LGBTQ parades, ANTIFA riots, and the ever-increasing realm of internet activism including Tweets, online petitions, social media posts and arguments, etc. Satire is like a parasite, always draining off some, not all, of these progressive energies. Parasites get the most nutrients from a healthy host. Thus, today, when the left is active, energetic or growing, the parasite of conservatively functioning satire, injected into the minds and habits of various individuals on the left, will grow and thrive along with it. This parasite may not cause the host of the left to fall, but simply to limp a little. Someone can read an *Onion* article, then attend a protest. But their anger at the thing being protested may be the slightest bit dissipated. A renowned political satirist may contribute funds to Democrats’ campaigns or lobby for left-leaning policies, but all those hours at the keyboard every week writing satire will have been time and energy devoted to falsely diverting or diminishing the energies of other liberals. In the all-out battle that is contemporary U.S. politics, these small ounces of political energy are too valuable a resource to be squandered in these manners.

At first it may seem that these previous two functions of satire, false/diverted release of emotions and feelings of superiority/agency, are not so different from the conservative-style insult or outrage humor previously discussed. For example, how can a conservative not feel superior to Elizabeth Warren when Steven Crowder is hyperbolically mocking her hypocrisy regarding the lie about her Native American heritage? Crowder’s attack on Warren could also certainly fall under Griffin’s Freudian discussion of humor as a sadistic, energy-releasing act. Yet, recall Young’s interview in the Weiss article concerning the clarity of outrage humor. Also,
recall that Crowder, although mocking Warren and the left, quickly waxed serious and reminded viewers of the very real threat that Warren and the ideals of the left posed. Here the enjoyable release of emotions and false sense of superiority was quickly diminished in favor of explicitly addressing action-inducing threat. Satire is rarely so clear or explicit. Now, consider this in terms of Ellul’s treatment of the release of repressed desires. Releasing repressed desires through clear, angry objectives, such as those of insult and outrage, can lead to action and the adherence of constituents. But satire, as was seen in the preceding examples, displaces, diverts, or falsely appeases polarizing tensions into less serious humor. Unlike satirists, outrage humorists do not seem so reluctant to wax serious and speak about threats, bringing clarity to the consumer. Outrage humor does not so much release these energies, but as aims them at clear objectives (i.e. Warren, the political left, etc.). Satire scatters these same energies.

This scattering, energy misdirection of satire is the fulcrum around which the genre’s propagandistic conservatism truly revolves: its ambiguity. The false/diverted release of emotions had a couple strong, social science sources. The false feelings of superiority or agency, though gestured at by several critics and theorists, are admittedly lacking in this regard, and the relation between these efficacy effects of satire and political participation are even less clear. However, the ambiguous nature of satire and its uncertain effects on consumers are well-documented and they may actually serve to explain the lack of definitive conclusions in the field of efficacy and action. Satire’s ironic nature, wherein the explicit message is meant jokingly and the true, intended message is implicit, is incredibly vulnerable to an array of misinterpretations. Some may simply not get the joke, taking the explicit message seriously. Many others, however, may see it as humorous but get lost along the path from the explicit to the implicit meaning. As will be demonstrated by the social science experiments in this area, this can have surprising,
multifaceted and unintended effects on public opinion and political participation. Another source of ambiguity in satire is that, even when the implicit message is gleaned, it tends to decrease trust in the government, the media, etc. and chip away the polarizing black-and-white view of the world which Ellul has stated is necessary for inciting political action.

Polarization is often, especially in the Trump era, touted as a bad thing. In many ways it is. However, according to Ellul, polarization is a political necessity in the modern world. First, recall that, according to Ellul, successful social propaganda will lead people to see the world in clear binaries which are necessary for inciting any sort of political action (65, 66). Second, this polarization is not only necessary for political action, but for basic sanity. Recall that one of the reasons Ellul stated for the modern man needing propaganda was modernity’s information overload. Because no average citizen is capable of consuming the vast amount of information, judging it objectively, and making decisions based on it, they need propaganda to provide them with the means to filter the information. Otherwise, “a surfeit of data, far from permitting people to make judgments and form opinions, prevents them from doing so and actually paralyzes them” (Ellul 87). Such a “surfeit of data” is akin to an exterior psychotic break where constant and contradictory information assails and fragments the consciousness, making confident decisions impossible. Third, once this polarization filter is in place, “Attitudes are reduced to two: positive and negative. In plain view, propaganda will simply place anyone with more differentiated opinions into one group or the other” (Ellul 205). This is increasingly common in the US today. To many Republicans, all Democrats are socialists or potential communists. To many Democrats, all Republicans are real or potential racist neo-nazis.

However unfair or problematic this may seem, it is necessary. To achieve the greatest amount of adherence and action from the mass, subjects of propaganda must believe that
everyone on their side is totally good and everyone on the opponent’s side is totally bad. If some side gives in, and acknowledges some ambiguity, they become incredibly vulnerable to defeat by the superior propagandizer (i.e. polarizer). In fact, according to Ellul, their defeat is imminent. “Only a superior group can affect other groups…where neither side is superior, propaganda can only have the effect of increasingly separating them” (214). So, two choices are set up here for the opposing side once propaganda enters the other side of the equation. Fight its propaganda with a polarizing one, causing more and more polarization, or accept ambiguity and leave your constituents to be taken up by the side which is unashamed at splitting the world of grays into black and white. As he says of democracies, which necessarily become undemocratic with propaganda, “Propaganda almost inevitably leads to a two-party system…we find fewer and fewer nuances…opinions are more incisive; there is only black and white” (219).

I’ve already demonstrated some empiric evidence for this; in the Trump era, according to Weiss, liberal comedians have increasingly moved away from the liberal, satiric style to the more clearly polarizing conservative-style outrage humor. In this context, the reasons for this change are clarified. The conservative-style humor is more propagandistically progressive (better at inciting action through polarization). In the choice between accepting ambiguity (and defeat) or fighting the right’s polarizing humor with their own polarizing humor, many liberals have chosen the latter.

So, moving forward with the analyzation of this conservative function of satire, it is important to remember that the introduction of ambiguity into the polarizing social system may appear to be morally good, revolutionary even. In many ways—psychologically, emotionally, etc.—it may be. But politically it is incredibly harmful; it will lead to paralyzing indecision which will be exploited by the powers that rely more heavily on polarizing propaganda and rhetoric.
The first aspect of ambiguity in satire is that its implicit message can be misinterpreted, causing unintended, and sometimes uncontrollable, actions or responses. LaMarre et. al’s 2009 study found that both liberal and conservative participants who watched *The Colbert Report*, wherein Stephen Colbert is explicitly a hardcore conservative but is implicitly and satirically mocking conservatism, found the program to be equally funny (255), yet the conservatives did not glean the implicit left-leaning message of the satire. They simply thought he was jokingly putting across a conservative hyperbolic message that he actually meant. Liberal participants tended to see the irony and understand that he was “not serious when offering political statements” (212). Most surprising of all, the study found that conservative participants came to more favorably support the specific political agenda laid out in the Colbert clips to which they were exposed: the military’s use of embedded journalists in Iraq (225). The findings regarding liberals in this context were not mentioned. Nevertheless, this shows the “danger” of satire’s ambiguity. Colbert’s ironic mocking of ideologically conservative news actually served to reinforce and even strengthen conservative views in conservative viewers. This study’s findings are not unique in this regard either. Baumgartner and Morris’s 2008 study found that *The Colbert Report* significantly increased support for “the Republicans…on economic policy…for the Republican Party’s ability to manage the War on Terror,” for George W. Bush, and for Republicans in Congress, even when party identification of the participants was controlled. Support for Democrats in any of these categories was either not significantly affected or was decreased. Thus, this study is even more indicative of satire’s propagandistic conservatism than that of LaMarre et. al. It found that watching Colbert increased support for the ideological right even among liberal participants. This may explain the contradictions concerning efficacy and political participation found in previous experiments. These experiments, if they did gauge
participation, did not measure which side of the political spectrum that participation served. At times, satire can cause increases support or action, but it is likely going to be for the side which that satire mocks. Whatever intellectual gratification gleaned from liberal viewers who understand the implicit message of the satire and know that others will not is here ironically negated by the fact that this intellectual gratification comes at the price of encouraging and activating those whom that satire targets.

The second aspect of ambiguity in satire is that even, or perhaps especially, when its implicit message is gleaned by the consumer, their cynicism and alienation from politics on both sides can be increased, causing the necessary polarization posited by Ellul to break. Becker’s 2012 study demonstrates how, when this ambiguity is eschewed for outrage humor, it can be effective. Baumgartner and Morris’s 2006 study demonstrates how the typical ambiguity of satire can plunge one into indecision. In 2012, Becker conducted an interesting experiment wherein she tried to distinguish the different effects of different types of satire, self- and other-directed. To do this she exposed some participants to a clip where McCain appeared on SNL, mocking himself and his own 2008 presidential campaign (self-directed), others to a Colbert Report clip where Colbert explicitly, not implicitly, mocked McCain (other-directed), then others to straightforward attack ads aimed at the McCain campaign. All the clips mocked the same aspects of McCain, but in different ways. What is interesting though, is that the other-directed clip verged on being outside the field of satire and entering the category of insult humor. Colbert, who rarely explicitly mocks conservatives in order to keep up his ironic conservative persona, in this clip, “likened the candidate's campaign to a ‘flaming bag of dog poop dropped on America's doorstep.’” This instance then, is perhaps a precursor to the left’s gradual adoption of conservative-style insult humor. In any case, it actually worked. Instead of increasing support for
Republican causes, as Colbert was shown to do in the previously mentioned studies, this instance actually worked the way it was intended. Those exposed to Colbert’s clips actually came to dislike McCain more than even those who were exposed to the attack ads! This shows, once again, that once satirists step outside of their ironical, multi-layered meanings (i.e., out of satire), even for a moment, and directly, viciously attack their target with conservative-style outrage humor, it gets the message across much better.

But satire cannot frequently and directly attack in this manner, or they lose the element of satire and become outrage humor. Unlike outrage humorists, satirists must occasionally attack their own side to keep up their appearance as a distanced, ironical observer. As Young, Lance and Jamieson state in their 2013 article, “Successful Practices for the Strategic Use of Political Parody and Satire”: “Political satirists must maintain their ‘equal-opportunity attacker’ status to be successful at their craft…The ideal approach for a political satirist is to criticize human folly, regardless of where the satirized political object…falls along the ideological spectrum.” The findings of Baumgartner and Morris’s 2006 study suggest that watching The Daily Show during the 2004 Presidential Election caused viewers’ dislike of both candidates, Bush and Kerry, to increase even when party identification, ideological intensity and race were controlled (349). What’s more, viewing Stewart “caused a 23% increase in the probability that a participant would disagree that he or she has faith in the electoral system” and an 11% increase in the probability of distrust the media (352). What does one do when they do not like either candidate, they do not have faith in the electoral system or trust in the media? Their first priorities are probably not voting or advocating for any one political agenda over another.

So, to summarize satire’s ambiguity in social science experiments, when satire does cause action it is only when its implicit message is not understood, and this causes action that supports
the side it sets out to mock. When satire’s implicit message is understood on some level, it causes the consumers themselves to be plunged into a paralyzing ambiguity wherein all sides and all decisions are ridiculous.

Literary critics have also noted satire’s ambiguity. Some of them have noticed its dangerous implications while others tout this characteristic of the genre as one of its better qualities. In his essay, “Cynicism and Other Postideological Half Measures in South Park,” Stephen Groening criticizes satire like that of South Park, which he terms “equal opportunity satire.” By this he means that it targets every side of controversial issues, mocks everyone and everything, etc. Remember in the first section, when I spoke of the show’s creators mocking everything so evenly that a politically progressive institution gave them an award, and everyone was shocked to find out they were political conservatives? Recall Gournelous’s analyzation of the “Go God Go” episode, wherein both sides of the evolution debate, and the political spectrum, were made to look like ridiculous hypocrites? It is precisely this even-handed mocking which irks Groening. According to him, this sort of “postmodern irony” produces extreme cynicism because of its introducing ambiguity. “Postmodern irony is cynical irony: calling attention to injustices and proposing that nothing can be done” (120). He argues that viewers will come to see each side as hopelessly corrupt, then become cynical of every movement, even those which are actually ‘good’ and thus absent themselves from all political involvement. Then, “this cynical inactivity leads “Viewers [to] become susceptible to particular types of domination that take advantage of complacency and apathy” (125). In other words, Groening recognizes that polarization isn’t necessarily a bad thing if it leads to action and that, conversely, breaking polarization can actually cause more harm that polarization itself. Gournelous gestures toward the conservativism of breaking ambiguity when he cites John C. Meyer: “irony, like humor,
double-edged and breeds criticism and distance that conflict with the necessary appearance of ideological stability for a functioning hegemony (Meyer 2000).” Satire disrupts the “functioning hegemony” and the only political strategy that can “function” is a “hegemony.” Thus, when satire functions as Baumgartner and Morris’s 2006 study showed it to, all sides seem too ridiculous and action becomes impossible.

Other critics argue that this is a good, progressive aspect of satire. Once again, it may appear that way. By breaking the polarization inherent in the modern, over-propagandized age, one could theoretically see things more clearly. But one must recall that, according to Ellul, an unpolarized view necessarily succumbs to superior or polarizers. Warner fails to acknowledge this caveat in her analysis of satire’s ability to break polarization. In her article, “Tyranny of the Dichotomy: Prophetic Dualism, Irony, and The Onion,” Warner describes what she terms “prophetic dualism” in the social climate of the US after the terrorist attacks of 9/11 and how The Onion introduced ambiguity into this rhetorical framework. Basically, “prophetic dualism” is incredibly similar to the necessary polarization mentioned by Ellul, wherein propaganda of a party or a state ensures its adherents that they are on the side of the good, and their enemies—or their opponents, or their critics, or anyone else—is evil. Warner focuses on the prophetic dualism propagated by the Bush administration after 9/11 and argues:

And while this framework for making sense of the attacks helped to unite the country together in our distress and sorrow, it also had profound consequences for dissent. This either/or construction not only had the effect of demonizing the terrorists, it also worked to demonize anyone who questioned either side of the binary or even the construction of the binary itself. Any interpretation that differed from the official account of the attacks was labeled suspect, unpatriotic, even treasonous.

Unlike Ellul or Groening, Warner does not acknowledge the relative universality of this phenomenon among organizations that use propaganda, including the political left of the US.
Thus, she frames her article as *The Onion* valiantly fighting, albeit not too successfully, against the oppressive and polarizing political right of the Bush administration by successfully introducing ambiguity into the equation for their audience. Nevertheless, her analyzation provides good examples of how satire can introduce ambiguity into a social climate, and by re-framing her argument into the more realistic context that polarization is necessary and used by each side of the political spectrum, her evidence can illustrate how satire ultimately serves conservative ends.

Warner’s analysis demonstrates how satire can undermine two necessary components of progressive (action-inducing) propaganda: rhetorical trust and side affiliation. “First, *The Onion* published articles that called attention to ambiguities in the mutual exclusivity of Good and Evil…Second, *The Onion* published articles that highlighted ambiguities and incongruities within each supposedly monolithic side of dualism.” In the first category, Warner cites various articles as evidence of the way that the rhetorical frame of prophetic dualism was attacked. Referring to the article, “U.S. to Arab World: ‘Stop Hating Us Or Suffer The Consequences’,” she wrote, “*The Onion* story uses the same either/or logic of prophetic dualism, but in exaggerated form which highlights prophetic dualism as a rhetorical tactic.” However, what Warner crucially misses is that, once this tactic’s false/ridiculous nature is revealed, it will also be less effective when it is used by the left. And the left, according to Ellul and the current political atmosphere of the US, relies just as heavily on either/or logic.

The second, and perhaps most telling component undermined is that of “side affiliation.” This category of *Onion* articles analyzed by Warner include those which introduce ambiguity into each side of the prophetic dualism frame; she includes stories which introduce ambiguity into the supposedly evil side, the supposedly good side, and that of the Democrats. Most
important for this paper is the ambiguity that *The Onion* introduced into the political left of the U.S. “While most of *The Onion’s* articles targeted the originators of the prophetic dualism frame – the Bush Administration and its signature policies – it also ran stories that underscored the Democratic Party’s lack of power in the face of the frame” (Warner). These stories included “Democrats Somehow Lose Primaries” in 2004 and “Democrats Vow Not To Give Up Hopelessness” in 2006, after they lost the 2004 election. According to Warner, these stories, “highlight the strength of prophetic dualism. The one group from which one would expect opposition to President Bush’s policies was completely reduced to incoherence in the face of the overwhelming power of the frame.” Here, Warner recognizes the power and the value of polarization in politics but fails to see the irony that can be inferred from her own evidence, i.e., that things like *The Onion*, and the political left’s calls for tolerance of ambiguity were actually elements that helped Bush’s prophetic dualism to be more powerful than the left. It isn’t that *The Onion* was fighting prophetic dualism and came up short, but that, in introducing so much ambiguity, it was incapacitating the only thing which could, theoretically, have beaten the right’s prophetic dualism, a stronger and more stringent prophetic dualism propagated by the left. In other words, she fails to see that ambiguity could never defeat prophetic dualism, which can only be defeated by an even more polarizing and appealing prophetic dualism.

Warner is not alone in failing to notice the conservative implications of breaking polarization through satire. The concept that this is progressive seems to be as thoroughly ingrained as the widespread assumption that democratic citizens are not victims of rampant propagandization or that satire is progressive. Gournelous, who gestured toward the conservatism of ambiguity with the Meyer quote, counters this gesture when he quotes Savage,
who acknowledges others’ claims of the conservativism of ambiguity, but dismisses these in
order to embrace the idea that satire is a progressive propaganda.

in response to critics who assert that irony’s polysemic potential results in political ambiguity (and thus
reactionary politics), [William Savage] reminds us that ‘the danger of misinterpretation inheres in any
utterance complicated enough to be worth discussing and should not in any way disqualify The Simpsons
or South Park as potential sources of cultural critique.’ (220)

However, this assertion is flawed on a few levels. First, it assumes that if someone gets
ambiguous feelings from a work of satire that it has been misinterpreted, i.e., that satire has one
explicit, intended and unambiguous interpretation which will necessarily be a cultural critique.
Satire, by its very nature, is ambiguous, and once it isn’t, it is no longer satire. There may be a
more strongly implied implicit message, but there also must exist multiple explicit or half-
implicit messages for the content to be satiric. Second, it fails to recognize that these utterances
of cultural critique “complicated enough to be worth discussing” which run the risk of
misinterpretation, are not always going to be progressive. Like Warner, he seems to assume that
a “critique” of the cultural status-quo automatically denotes a progressive quality, that a cultural
critique which is intentionally reactionary is “disqualified” from being a legitimate cultural
critique, when, in fact, the opposite seems to be true. If that critique, especially if it is enacted
through satire, inspires ambiguity in a lot of people by blurring traditional boundaries of
interpretation instilled by integration and social propaganda, it can be simultaneously legitimate
and reactionary. Few critics fail to notice the ambiguous possibilities of satire, but some, like
Savage and Warner, fail to see that breaking polarity and binaries with satire typically serves
more conservative functions than progressive ones.

At times, the ambiguity induced by satire seems to be simply an additional layer added on
to the already-overwhelming information-overload of the contemporary age. In “Successful
Practices for the Strategic Use of Political Parody and Satire: Lessons From the P6 Symposium and the 2012 Election Campaign,” Young et. al. summarize a conference attended by practitioners and researchers of contemporary satire wherein various strategies and core principles were laid out. They state that post-modern audiences have “acquired skepticism through their immersion in a sea of symbols, mediated information, and attempts at coercion…These audiences reject notions of authority and fixed reality.” What could be more ambiguous? If reality is not fixed and no authority can be trusted to explain these multiple realities, how can one act? It seems that Ellul’s comment about info-overload submerging individuals in a paralytic and confusing “kaleidoscope” is becoming increasingly common today. In such a situation it becomes much more comfortable to consume satire, which acknowledges and increases such ambiguity while flattering one’s sense of being able to glean that ambiguity better than others, who act and re-act according to polarizing and problematic rhetoric like Colbert’s explicit Republican persona. Satire’s irony never seems to end.

Depending on the exact type and content of various satire, one of these functions may be stronger than another. Effects will also depend on the type of consumer. Most often, it will be some mixture of all three. In any case, the only evidence for political satire causing adherence or activity is when that of Colbert actually causes the intended targets (political conservatives/Republicans) to gain increasing support for the party at large and its specific policies. In all other cases, satire seems to trend toward a conservative propaganda function, which runs counter to common notions about propaganda. As Ellul stated, not all propaganda must cause action, some of the most effective propaganda causes inaction or indifference. And satire, it seems, is incredibly effective in this regard. It can function as a “safety valve,” releasing revolutionary emotions into ineffective channels. It can falsely appease the need for a feeling of
superiority or agency over others, making actual subjection more tolerable. It can unintentionally inspire political opponents to action while plunging political allies into a paralytic ambiguity where indifference and inaction are the norm. Most crucial, and ironic, of all, is the fact that it can be made by the very side which it harms. Satire, being a conservative form of propaganda, should be directed toward political opponents. Yet, at least in the U.S., it is made by liberals, for liberals, which essentially amounts to a propagandistic “friendly fire.” Somewhere along the way, perhaps from the beginning, satire’s symbolic attack on authority, tradition, conservativism—its “punching-up” nature—came to be associated with an actual act of liberal progressivity, or revolution. Thus, liberals have themselves fervently created and consumed it, unaware of its conservative functions. The political right in the U.S. is probably just as unaware of how its interests are being aided by satire as the political left is of how satire is hurting its own. Satire, is thus a parasite, injected into the minds of various members of the political left, thriving and re-producing within them, always draining off some percentage of their political life-force.
LESSONS LEARNED

What are the implications of these findings? If satire is propagandistically conservative, how should humorists produce it without harming their political interests? It may be tempting to advocate that political humor be dropped altogether. But this is problematic. A world without humor would be a sad one indeed. Also, by foregoing the intricate and powerful psychological effects of humor that have been demonstrated, one would be seriously negating propagandistic possibilities. No, humor should not be thrown out completely. Yet, as this analysis has shown, there are lessons to be learned on how to execute political humor differently, in order to both maintain laughter and inspire political engagement and action.

There seem to be two possible and productive paths moving forward. The first path involves using satire’s conservative functions as conservative propaganda was intended to be used, to incapacitate opponents. The political right in the U.S. has a largely unrecognized propaganda potential in satire’s incapacitating functions. Conservative comedians could follow the path of the creators of South Park, Parker and Stone, and covertly produce an ambiguous satire which, according to the left’s psychological penchant for ambiguity and wit explained by Young et. al in 2019, could appeal to and incapacitate the left more than the right. These same psychological preferences may mean that not many conservatives will enjoy producing satire, especially with the implicit left-wing messages needed to attract their opponents. Also, these conservative creators would have to keep their political affiliations secret or ambiguous, which may be difficult in the age of social media. Yet, as South Park has shown, if even a couple self-described conservatives are able to create a captivating satire, it can potentially capture and “infect” thousands of liberals with incapacitating ambiguity, false superiority gratifications and diverted energy releases. Also, conservatives have the added benefit that, even if they do nothing
in this regard, it appears that the self-producing aspect of satire will cause liberals to continue incapacitating other liberals for a while.

What about liberals? How can they go from “friendly fire” comedy to taking out their opponents with conservative-functioning humor? The reversal of this strategy would be more difficult, if not impossible. Because political conservatives do not appear to enjoy satire as much as liberals do, as evidenced by the empirical lack of it made by or for political conservatives as well as the psychological explanations offered by Young et. al’s 2019 study, it is doubtful whether liberals could covertly create satire meant to incapacitate the political right. Conservatives are more attuned to outrage humor which, as the Weiss article has shown, tends to help their side propagandistically. However, if liberal comedians learned some covert tactics from their own problems with satire, they may be able to infiltrate conservatives’ outrage humor. A true liberal, posing as a conservative comedian, could somehow create outrage humor content which mocked diverting targets and, unlike Crowder’s humor, did not wax serious as often and re-iterate threats. For example, say such a comedic “infiltrator” made outrage humor for conservatives mocking a relatively unimportant Democratic Representative or local official, thus discharging conservative anger and attention at less-important targets in order to leave the more important ones, like presidential candidates or senators, unscathed. Also, by not as frequently re-iterating true threats, it is possible that the false release/diversion of energy and the false feelings of superiority could be activated without the “directing” quality of traditional outrage humor, like Crowder’s. Thus, a certain amount of conservatives’ energies could be drained to their political detriment. The one caveat here is that satire’s most powerful conservative function, ambiguity, would never be able to be used in this capacity. According to Young et. al’s 2019 study,
conservatives may not enjoy or understand ambiguity as much as liberals and so are more “immune” to the most potent part of satire’s “infection.”

The second path of possibilities involves harnessing the progressive propaganda functions of humor. Conservatives, as demonstrated in the Weiss article, are already competent with this. However, they do lack a wide presence in popular media. There are very few well-known conservative political comedians. They could improve their reach by increasing the amount of conservative outrage humor on popular television channels and social media sites. As the Weiss article also demonstrated, liberals like Samantha Bee have already begun to take cues from the right in order to produce more effective, less ambiguous outrage humor with liberal content. However, the production and popularity of this new liberal outrage humor was only possible because of the left’s perception of the right’s threat in the Trump era. According to Young et. al’s 2019 study, liberals may desire ambiguity and wit in their humor, which predisposes them to less propagandistically effective humor. This preference can only be overridden when a perception of threat forces them into the conservative-style desire for clear hyperbole in humor. Thus, if liberals want to activate liberal audiences with outrage humor and remain popular, they must, in addition to outrageously and insultingly mocking conservatives, constantly re-iterate the threat of those conservatives to the left’s ideologies. This will both damper liberal audiences’ troublesome desire for ambiguity and more actively direct their energies toward oppositional targets, just as conservative outrage humor has been doing for decades.

Of course, once again, none of these suggestions can be considered definitive, but they are certainly supported enough to warrant further investigation in the growing field of political satire and humor studies. Today’s social and political climate is a propaganda-infested battlefield
wherein fire must be fought with fire and no resource can be overlooked. In this battle, humor is a potent weapon, both for energizing one’s own troops and incapacitating the troops of the other side. Yet, the propagandistic potentials of humor have long been overlooked, undervalued, and misunderstood. Political humor is not merely entertainment. It is propaganda. Depending on which type and how it is used, it is either an action-inducing war cry or a loaded gun. It is about time that political comedians take notice of which one they are pointing at their audiences and adjust accordingly.
Works Cited


