

WRITING THE STRIKE:
HOW WRITERS WON THE 2007-8 WRITERS STRIKE AND CHANGED TV

by
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THESIS ABSTRACT

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I argue that television entertainment writers, their cultural status, and rhetorical skills are critical to national discourse and media structures. Focusing on the 2007-8 writers strike, the project analyzes videos that writers made about the conflict, showing how “rhetorical writers” used satire, complex argumentation, and knowledge of digital media to publicize writers’ value. These “pro-writer” videos, online and on television, challenged media executives for primacy in entertainment industries and helped writers win the right to compensation when their work is viewed online. Exploring the histories of television writers and writing alongside technological and political changes, the project pinpoints a lineage of irreverent and ironic humor that contributed to the strike videos. This lineage of “rhetorical” writers and writing, which deconstructs cable news and media politics using satire, prepared writers for the 2007-8 strike by honing their skills in argumentation and activist community-building using satire.

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CHAPTER I

RHETORICAL WRITERS & TELEVISION HISTORY

This project focuses on the 2007-8 Hollywood Writers Strike, its causes and consequences, its impact on television writers' levels of agency and value, and the satirical videos inspired by the conflict. In the fall of 2007, film and television writers began negotiations with Hollywood executives and producers (Morphis 528-529). The main issue on the table was that writers wished to be paid each time their work was screened online, just as they were when it aired on television. Because major media companies were testing internet markets, and audiences were increasingly watching shows online, writers were determined to assert their value to the entertainment industry by claiming a stake in this growing market. But on November 5, 2007, executives and representatives from major media conglomerates like Viacom and NBC Universal walked out of negotiations with writers, who declared a strike in response (Vonderau 109). For 100 days, the strike plagued Hollywood's culture and economy; production ceased, shows were cancelled, scripts shelved, and thousands went out of work (Klowden 1). In January, many media companies forced television shows back into production without their writers, which bred further resentment among television workers. Youtube and other online platforms grew rapidly, both in videos produced by out-of-work writers and in viewership, as audiences searched for timely entertainment outside of television (Handler 5). By the time writers won compensation for their online work and ended the strike in February 2008, the American media landscape was forever altered (Handler 2).

"Writing the Strike" argues that television writers, their cultural status, and the practice of writing for television, are critical to national discourse and media structures. Television writers are particularly neglected objects in scholarly study, in part because these workers have been devalued by U.S. law and within the television industry since the beginning of the 20th century. Through these struggles, groups of television writers have developed rhetorical writing strategies using satire, irony, and parody. Groups of writers have used these modes to re-assert their foundational role in American culture, politics, and media industries. Thus, television writers' levels of agency and assigned

value fluctuate over time in ways that reflect larger preoccupations with national identity, the roles of media producers and consumers, and levels of television censorship. With the 2007-8 strike, writers publicly clarified the vitality of their contributions and challenged television executives for primacy in the entertainment industry. Television writers specializing in politics, rhetoric and satire, re-framed the conflict with videos that drew attention away from the value of television, and toward the value of writing for entertainment media.

The 2007-8 strike represents a significant moment of rupture within U.S. media industries, brought on by technological change. Writers threatened television's long-held status quo, in which television executives control what programming audiences see. The strike, its outcomes, and related videos — on television and online — provide a case study illustrating why rhetorical writing in television matters, and how writers have engaged in media activism to change national conversations, their industry status, and perceptions of their trade. The unique skills that rhetorical writers used to demonstrate their value and win recognition were not natural or coincidental, but grew out of particular genre practices and norms that have fluctuated through the history U.S. television, unionization, and censorship. Using rhetoric and satire openly to address political disagreements, particularly those within the television industry itself, is a luxury that writers have fought to enjoy. During the 2007-8 strike, rhetoric and satire became weapons against television executives, as well as powerful examples of why writing for television is important.

In order to understand the significance of television writers and their skills, as well as the frustrations that led to the 2007-8 Strike, this project explores histories of U.S. television writers generally, and analyzes the histories and works of what I term television's "rhetorical writers." Focusing on the specific lineage of rhetorical writing allows me to analyze the practices by which they unpack television's complex meanings for viewers. Rhetorical writers are heavily invested in politics and its media representations, participating in modes like satire that allow for rigorous deconstructions of genres like television news. Emerging from a legacy of irreverent and rebellious

humor that situates audiences with underdogs, rhetorical writers use witty argumentation and satire to stage political critiques. Attentive to youthful outlooks, rhetorical writers satirize powerful figures and bureaucracies in studied and informed ways that mediate on American government and political coverage.

In the early 2000s, amid political discontent and an emerging Internet culture, rhetorical writers and performers destroyed cable news' authority and supplanted its position as a trusted source of topical information and analysis for young audiences. Later, during the strike, this narrower group of rhetorical satirists expressed frustrations common to television entertainment writers generally. Displaying their complex skills in argumentation, rhetorical writers simultaneously clarified writing's contributions to national discussions (online and on television), and attacked media executives who would not agree to adequately compensate them. By delving into the struggles common to all television writers, and analyzing works from a narrower group voicing these concerns, we can see why the 2007-8 strike arose and how rhetorical writers maneuvered to outpace television executives.

Even a brief history of U.S. television illustrates why writing matters to national discourse, and how it can become a form of activism. Practices like writing rhetorically for television and addressing politics with satire have been encouraged and discouraged by television executives based on television's location within national, cultural, and economic imperatives. Because television during the "Network Era" (1950-1975) functioned as a public service designed for general audiences, writers were encouraged to create programming that was unobjectionable. During this era, writers' level of value and influence were heavily policed because of television's integral role in establishing national unity. But this set of imperatives changed as the government deregulated television, and the Cold War ended. No longer needed as a tool for political harmony, television became a zone of competition between networks and emerging cable and satellite companies. To stay profitable, television channels funded programming that articulated and exacerbated divisions between American political factions, socio-economic classes, ethnic groups, and even niche tastes. This transition was accomplished

using writers, who were encouraged to write the very kinds of confrontational and politically critical material that were discouraged in the network era. Writers blended entertainment and politics more freely, and popularized controversial modes like satire. Although the seeds of this movement toward rhetoric and satire began with irreverent or ‘sick’ humor in Post-WWII culture, fragmentation of channels and political factions allowed rhetorical and satirical television writing to become profitable and expand in the post-network era (Thompson 18-19).

While television writers divided audiences into niche markets during the cable era, political and economic shifts in the early 2000s encouraged rhetorical writers to use satire for new purposes. As cable news producers, journalists and anchors, distracted by profit seeking, abandoned television news’ public service role, rhetorical writers gradually took up the task of critiquing politics and television’s role in political discourse. Political polarization made this task a critical one; post-9/11 America was torn between right and left, and suffered from unpopular leadership during George W. Bush’s presidency. Meanwhile, internet technologies and digital sharing online had changed relationships between producers and consumers. These changes provided the motivation and virtual space for political argumentation and activism, both in and outside of television. In this environment, rhetorical writers became highly successful with programs like *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* (1999 -)¹, which closely deconstructed television news, political figures and events with satire. The rhetorical and satirical practices common to these shows provided frameworks for the videos writers would create for the 2007-8 strike.

Each of the project’s chapters engages a particular aspect of rhetorical television writing and its history, leading up to an analysis of the 2007-8 strike and videos concerning the conflict. The second half of this chapter unfolds a brief history of the television industry during the network era, focusing on the period’s strictures for writers and rhetorical writing, including the content network executives deemed acceptable for

¹ *TDS* was first aired in 1996, but became *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* once he joined the cast in 1998.

television. By tracing the presence and absence of rhetorical forms of satire and political conversation in television, the project establishes the stakes of the 2007-8 strike, as well as the ongoing frustrations of television writers generally since the network era. Chapter II tells the story of television's transition from the network to the cable era. This transition encouraged rhetorical writers to define niche markets with political argumentation, and made such programming profitable. Simultaneously, the decline in television news and its public functions inspired rhetorical writers to deconstruct news shows and take up national conversations. Chapter III lays out a history of authorship and television writing in U.S. law and culture, focusing on how this history has affected television writers personally and professionally. The chapter then introduces the unions involved in the 2007-8 strike: The Writers' Guild of America (WGA) and the American Motion Picture and Television Producers (AMPTP)², or the executives who own and manage media companies and conglomerates. With this information, chapter III goes on to explain the causes, conflicts, stakes, events and eventual resolution of the 2007-8 strike.

Having established the histories relevant to television writers, and particularly rhetorical writers, chapters IV and V describe and analyze both televised and internet videos supporting the strike. Chapter IV demonstrates how rhetorical writers used satire to address the strike and draw attention to the power of writing for alternative media with online videos. The chapter further explains how these satirical internet videos were influenced by television predecessors like *The Daily Show (TDS)* and *The Colbert Report (2005 -) (TCR)*. The final chapter analyzes televised moments from *TDS* and *TCR* during the strike, aired after Viacom forced both programs to return to air without their writers in early 2008. These analyses show how both shows made formal changes to support the writers on strike, despite being forced back on the air without them. Together, chapters IV and V clarify how writers' rhetorical skills allowed them to assert the importance of

² I often refer to AMPTP members as "networks," as this is the case until the late 1970s, although the AMPTP is currently made up of the heads of cable channels and various other studios, as well as networks.

writing for television to the health of national politics and creative freedom in a new age of media variety.

Before divulging a targeted history of network television, the first chapter introduces the writer's place within media industries, and the concept of "value," as it pertains to writers' status within the television industry³. Next, this chapter explains relevant theories of rhetorical and performed satire, irony, and parody, as well as the political and industrial contexts that have made these modes popular. Finally, the chapter unpacks concepts relating to media satire, showing how writers have used rhetorical responses to fill a dangerous lack of critical discussion in cable news programs. These sections establish how TV writers are situated to inspire activism and to openly argue for compensation, particularly in new media spaces.

Writing & Performing: Functions of Rhetoric, Satire & Irony

Several key terms must be established and defined in order for the project to address how rhetorical writers function in television, during the 2007-8 Strike as well as in the more distant past. Often I will refer to "writers and performers" of rhetorical satire, rather than simply to "writers," and use this language for several reasons. First, and most concretely, the 2007-8 strike involved close alignment between the WGA and the Screen Actors Guild (SAG), and many of the videos I analyze create satire through the mutual creativity of writers and performers working together. Second, while this project is about *writing*, this activity is understood in the context of television, in which writing is destined to be performed. Many of the satirists to whom I refer work as both writers and performers, and use these skills simultaneously to craft a kind of performative satire that is distinct from purely written forms. Third, audio-visual formats like television and internet videos demand a level of gesticulation that seamlessly blends writing and performing. Indeed, this project considers the writer/performer precisely because the boundaries of this position are unclear: television writers for the videos I study often

³ I use the term "industry" to refer to the television and media industries generally, as they are owned and operated by a small number of multinational conglomerates.

become powerful figures who script, perform, and thereby teach, even attempt to motivate viewers toward political change.⁴

While I have touched on rhetorical writing, its intersections with satire and uses for deconstructing media politics require further definition. I use “rhetorical” to describe writers, television programs, and videos invested in making rigorous topical arguments, and often political ones. These arguments attend to factual evidence, and self-consciously manipulate the various formal, performative, and linguistic elements of televisual meaning, deconstructing the meanings of media texts⁵ for viewers. As distinctions between politics and entertainment have become less clear since television’s inception, satire has become a more acceptable way for writers to make rhetorical arguments. This project defines satire as the mockery (whether verbal, written, performed, or otherwise demonstrated) of specific ideas, people, or statements. This type of mockery emerges from intense moral disagreement, but can also entertain audiences with humor. Writers were discouraged from coupling rhetorical wit with satire during the network era, but eventually found niches in television and learned how to hone these skills as weapons.

Two secondary terms related to satire will also be significant to how the project understands the mode’s functions: parody and irony. Parody, in contrast to satire, mocks form (rather than content), though parody and satire share irreverent and defiant tones of humor that have been used to successfully question authority at various points in television history.⁶ However, because parody involves close imitation, it often suggests admiration, and lacks satire’s sense of moral disdain. Irony is the key component of satire, since satire emerges when a writer or performer situates multiple ironies and ironic

⁴ The compound work of the writer/performer is analyzed most closely in chapters IV and V.

⁵ By “media texts,” I mean any kind of video circulating in mass media, whether it appears as part of film, television, or as an online video. Many of the texts discussed in this project appear in more than one format.

⁶ For example, as chapters I and II later discuss, both *The Simpsons* and *The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour* question authority humorously, *The Simpsons* with social parody, and the Smothers Brothers with satire (Silverman 35-36).

devices to mock or attack a specific object. In this way, irony (and thus satire) “happens” in situations between individuals, particularly in light of cultural rifts, disagreements, or confrontations, and thus requires, indeed conjures, the active consent and participation of groups (Hutcheon 4). These communal and spontaneous aspects of satire and irony are part of their potential power: writers and performers must activate an audience’s moral sympathies and sense of public participation.

Irony and satire inevitably change the nature of any political dialogue, and the positions of those involved. Since these modes are vital parts of how rhetorical writers demonstrated their value in the 2007-8 Strike, and in related online videos, it is worth investigating how such modes function rhetorically. Linda Hutcheon’s theories of irony are particularly helpful for analyzing the strike videos, since her work focuses on how irony is spoken, enacted and performed, and not simply how it functions as a classical literary device. Eschewing traditional definitions, Hutcheon examines irony *in use*, focusing on the device’s judgmental “edge,” which emerges through social and contextual framing (4). According to Hutcheon, irony “happens,” when it is recognized within discursive communities, not simply when it is stated or performed, and its existence therefore depends on a range of factors, including identities and power relations (4). Irony both relies upon and encourages audiences to participate in meaning-making as part of discursive social communities that share evaluative attitudes (Hutcheon 12). Hutcheon’s concept of irony depends on the idea that it emerges in social situations where there are shared norms, but critical disagreements. Thus satires, constructed from multiple orchestrated ironies, are often used as social devices for addressing conflicts or moral uncertainties based on shared sets of cultural meanings.

In the case of the 2007-8 strike, writers played on shared sets of cultural meanings between themselves and audiences to ignite moral outrage over the AMPTP’s unwillingness to compensate writers for their labor. Although it depends on the pre-existence of multiple communities with shared ideas, irony emerges within “contact zones” or the “social spaces where cultures meet, clash, grapple with each other, often in context of highly asymmetrical relations of power” (Hutcheon 93). Amber Day further

argues that because irony “happens,” then it is not mere discourse or commentary on the political scene, but that *ironic moments constitute political events in their own right* (6). The 2007-8 strike videos constitute a type of media activism, in which writers addressed audiences as constituencies joined by belief in fair rewards for labor, creative freedom, and distrust of large media conglomerates. Channeling these values through satires that mock their opposition, television writers made the central issues of the strike tangible for audiences in “contact zones” like television and internet sites (Hutcheon 93).

Because irony and satire can conjure group sensibilities and moral stances in powerful ways, these forms were considered suspect, and particularly dangerous for early television programming. Satire in particular is frequently used as a weapon, and has earned a reputation as an elitist discourse that induces political apathy. But Hutcheon insists that these modes are neither conservative nor liberal, and that while satire and irony can be used to ridicule outsiders or those with marginal identities, or offer cynical views on power relations that suggest political apathy, the satires that this project discusses use irony to do the opposite: to ridicule the powerful and create alternative locations for earnest political action. While Mikhail Bakhtin’s *Rabelais and His World* is perhaps the most famous critical account of the ways that humor can be used for social renewal and hierarchical reversal, satire has traditionally been misunderstood even by theorists as a purely elitist form of comedy (Day 4).

Much of the danger ascribed to irony and satire exists because of their slipperiness and need for collective interpretation. Because irony must be attributed to exist, it is “risky business,” as audience members may not make the same ironic connections intended by its creators (Hutcheon 11). Furthermore, changing contexts in which a particular performance of satirical irony may be viewed may also alter potential interpretations of the message. So while irony is a potent means of addressing differences between overlapping communities, its slipperiness can create interpretation problems. Irony is effective because of its intimacy with the discourses it opposes and attempts to mock, and thus is vulnerable to being interpreted in unintended ways, or being mistaken for a sincere performance of the very thing it mocks.

Irony and satire's slipperiness, and dependence on recognition by audiences were incompatible with mass-audience approaches, and so these modes, and the rhetorical skills necessary to handle them properly, were not cultivated often in early television. Furthermore, satire was rare because mid-twentieth century cultural attitudes conceived of entertainment, including all forms of comedy, as generically separate from 'serious' discourses, including any political news programming (Van Zoonen 3). This orientation of TV genres, which ostensibly separates satiric mockery and irony from politics and news, effaces the ways that humor can provide relevance to political discourse, and how modes like satire can be political events themselves (Day 6). However, these tendencies are also the reason that satire is so powerful in today's contemporary media environment.

To trace the roots and of rhetorical satire in television, and its lineage up to the 2007-8 Writers' Strike, we must begin in the 1950s, when TV writers popularized forms of social parody that would serve as a foundation for sharper and more relevant programs (Thompson 3-4). When cable challenged network dominance in the 1980s and 1990s, the precedent of social parody enabled writers to sprinkle political discourse into comedy programming — which had formerly been separated by genre, program, and viewing hour according to network-era conventions — to carve out distinct taste groups (Jones 11). Since the 2000s, satire has become one of the discourses through which television writers frequently critique problems related to politics and news media. So while satire was tightly policed during the network era, we can nevertheless trace its roots from social parody of the 1950s to the "fake news" of the 2007-8 WGA strike (Thompson 3-4).

Media Satire & Activism

The soaring popularity of satire in television today is the result of many technological and political changes that have altered the way publics interact with one another, and the way writers compose material for audiences. Since the network era, the number of television channels has increased, and individual channels and shows target narrower audience groups as distinct sets of consumers. Instead of 'watching television' — or whatever aired on one of three channels — as part of households, viewers increasingly appreciated or rejected shows catered to specific tastes based on their

individual identities. Television's fragmentation of audiences has occurred at the same time that U.S. politics has become more intensely polarized between the right and left (Jones 107-116). These trends encouraged writers and performers to use satire, which synthesized communities around common sets of rhetorical discourses, and negotiated multiple perspectives within those groups simultaneously. Television viewers and internet users had grown accustomed to being addressed as members of multiple and overlapping groups, but at the same time U.S. political rhetoric was becoming more extreme in early the 2000s. The varied political outlooks of most American audiences were excluded by the polarizing and simplistic interpretations of U.S. politics featured in cable news. In response, rhetorical writers employed satire as a force for confronting the similarities and differences of these demographic groups in appealing ways.

Rhetorical writers have honed their skills to galvanize Americans disillusioned with politics and cable news coverage of politics, but by using online avenues (instead of television) they share ideas and ironic outlooks in an open, de-centralized way that builds communities. Irony's rise in popularity can be attributed in part to the tension between television and internet media, "as developments in technology have made it easier to pick up and take apart pieces of the media field around us, while mainstream news and public affairs remain as insular as ever, amateurs and professionals alike are drawing on irony as a means of entering the public discussion" (Day 42). While television programs offer a one-way feed of programming, internet platforms enable regular people, as well as rhetorical writers and performers (not career politicians) to "respond to the political discourse around them ... often to make forceful claims and to advocate action in the search for solutions to real problems" (Day 42). When television coverage seems wrong or spurious, viewers often turn to the Internet, not only to find accurate, non-biased information, but also to share the ironies that their multi-media experiences expose. Users create internet communities around ironic perspectives on politics and its coverage by circulating texts that evidence the ironies in television and politics. What many viral internet satires do is hail "their audience members" into "a shared community, creating the pleasure of recognition, affirmation, and the empowering feeling of strength in

numbers,” (Day 41). Often, these satires hail viewers because of their shared references to and opinions regarding television and politics. This work in satire matters because it undermines a growing sense of detachment and distance from U.S. politics as it is covered in cable news television.

Indeed, the forms of satire and irony that I analyze here are examples from televised and internet videos that attempt to speak truth to power and unite groups of less powerful individuals to take political action through contemporary media. In this particular situation, irony becomes a tool for earnest engagement, rather than cynical detachment or aggression (Day 8-9, 11, 22). Instead of mocking an ‘inferior’ or degraded group or position, rhetorical writers are using complex forms of satire to address and deconstruct cultural centers of inner circles from the perspective of the outsider majority, thereby generating “strong affective communities, capturing the interest of many in a way that traditional politics has often struggled to do” (Day 2). Hutcheon’s theories shed light on the dynamics that make satire important for television and internet media contexts, as well as the political happenings that conjure satire into social existence. Indeed, recent trends in technology and politics are part of the reason that satire has become more popular, and more recognized, in television culture today. These changes have also safeguarded television satirists from the political pressure they experienced during the network era.

In taking up topics related to televised satire and news, this project builds on an emerging collection of works by several contemporary critics who have identified, described and theorized ‘Satire TV,’ in various ways and in light of different generic lineages. Jeffrey Jones’ 2005 book *Entertaining Politics: New Political Television Culture* analyzes several cable-era television programs, evidencing the increasing blend of politics and entertainment with programs like *Politically Incorrect with Bill Maher*, among others. Jonathan Grey’s *Satire TV: Politics and Comedy in the Post-Network Era* from 2009 identifies the particular genre of ‘Satire TV,’ describing its history, characteristics, and analyses of satirical TV programs. In 2010, Geoffrey Baym published *From Cronkite to Colbert: The Evolution of Broadcast News*, which historicizes satirical

news shows like *The Colbert Report* through the lineage of broadcast news. Each of these works identifies and theorizes satirical trends in television, attempting to show how satirical television programming corresponds with cultural and political contexts, and has evolved over time. These works form my primary foundation for understanding the history, characteristics, and significance of satire in television, as I theorize about writers, performers, and their industry roles. Thus my project explores many of these ideas within the context of the 2007-8 strike, attending to the complex relationships between television and internet media to unpack the strike and its videos' significance. For instance, within the larger genre of 'Satire TV,' I describe 'fake news' as one format combining political material with satirical outlooks. By attending to a specific historical moment and narrow set of texts, I analyze how and why satirical discourses became powerful focal points during the 2007-8 Writers Strike.

Fake news formats became important models for the structure and appeal of the 2007-8 strike videos. Fake news programs, like *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* and *The Colbert Report*, are formatted as though they are news programs, but are understood by their creators and audience as comedic spoofs of cable news 'infotainment,'⁷ and of politicians who are complicit in offering likable images rather than likable policies. Fake news writers reflect on the troubled state of cable news by calling into questions distinctions between ideas like 'real' and 'fake,' 'news' and 'entertainment.' Cable news often cynically uses entertainment to draw audiences competitively, but stops short of in-depth reporting and skims over hard facts in favor of infotainment (Day 31-32). In contrast, "fake news" responds by using satire to reflect earnestly upon politics, facts, and complex moral ideas (Day 43). This particular genre is significant not simply because it informs the tone of many 2007-8 strike videos this project describes, but also because its particular use as a vehicle for political satire allowed rhetorical writers and performers to self-consciously critique politics and television's role in shaping U.S. political discourse.

⁷ "Infotainment" is a colloquial term describing a common cable news strategy: delivering facts about stories that entertain, but that distract from more pressing news and information. "Infotainment" is often used to boost ratings by dwelling on light, positive, or else scandalous, stories.

Rhetorical writers and performers used fake news to interrogate television's problematic relationship to national politics. This interrogation beginning during a time of intense political polarization and unrest, beginning with 9/11, and continuing with president George W. Bush's unpopular administration, high-profile cases of corporate greed, and severe economic decline.

Fake news iterations of political satire, and their use in particular conflicts like the WGA strike, must be understood in light of the genre's origins as a public political tool for rhetorical writers and performers, tolerated by networks because of its ability to yield profits. Rhetorical writers have turned their attention to address television's blind exploitation of sensationalism, conflict, disagreement, and fragmentation for profit at the expense of national policy — particularly as these tendencies increasingly appeared in cable news programming (Baym 112-115). Competition among networks and cable channels made possible shows blending comedy and politics, and eventually meant that political satire could find a niche. But this same competition also encouraged networks to capitalize on news shows by using them as selling tools and entertainment programming, a practice that flew in the face of the public service and 'watchdog' function news had served in early radio, television, and print journalism (Baym 33-34).

Although countless factors shaped the outcome of the 2007-8 strike, writers found, through rhetorical satire, new ways of thinking about activism and their value to television. Because programs like *The Daily Show* and online resources re-situated the meanings of cable newscasts, satire became a popular tool for writers and performers addressing politics. Strike videos like "Not *The Daily Show* With Some Writer"—one of the key online videos that I analyze in this project— re-contextualized the strike for writers and even wider audiences.

While rhetoric and satire were occasionally found on U.S. television in the past, cable competition, political strife, and emerging digital media outlets have made rhetorical satire a foundational mode for understanding how television operates and influences 21st century politics.

Television Writing & the Network Era

To understand the tensions that led television writers to strike in 2007, and how rhetorical writers made media industry conflicts matters of public concern, we must delve into a history of the network television era (1950-1975), during which many of the dynamics of television writing were established. This history provides a chronological overview of the network era, focusing on the ways network structures censored writers and determined what would and would not air. While this history applies to all television writers, I also analyze situations in which rhetorical writers experienced difficulty in televising their creative work. A history of the network era allows us to see how the radical changes in the following cable era enabled rhetorical writers to find audiences and work with satire. Following television writing illuminates the contradictions of the profession, as well as how rhetorical writers have influenced media industries and national culture.

Television writers and their professional origins belong to a wider lineage of network television and its shifting functions. Network television began with dual purposes: as a commercial enterprise and a national service, and its public orientation accounts for many of the limitations imposed on writers and their creative works during this era. Emerging from the tradition of commercial radio, which had previously been co-opted by the U.S. military during World War I, network era television was regulated by the federal government (Edgerton 4). The Federal Communications Act of 1934 protected the “Big Three” networks, CBS, ABC, and NBC from competition by barring further networks obtaining broadcast licenses (Baym 11). In exchange, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) mandated that the big three were to act as “trustees of the air,” serving the “public interest, convenience, and necessity,” by airing public affairs programming like nightly news in keeping with “the right of the public to be informed” (Baym 11). This act, born from strong national belief in the ‘public good,’ fostered by Depression-era challenges, determined network era television politics and its complex censorship regimes, even into more conservative periods (Silverman 3).

Network television writers faced unique challenges regarding creative control that contributed to many of their conflicts with networks. Because of the government's role in regulating broadcast licenses, radio and television programming (unlike films and books) have never enjoyed first amendment rights (Silverman 3). The FCC held broadcasters accountable to the vague concept of the “public good ... ill-defined community standards — a constantly changing and highly variable target” (Silverman 3). However, the FCC would only intervene or take action after ‘indecent’ material had aired, if there were enough complaints to warrant an investigation (Silverman 3). But if the FCC determined that a network had violated its trusteeship, it could levy large fines or even revoke broadcast licenses — a risk networks were not willing to take. So while the three major broadcasters of the “Network Era” were granted government access to program U.S. television for vast audiences, their relationship with the FCC meant that these networks preferred to self-censor, and adopted ‘least objectionable programming’ strategies (Silverman 3, 13). For decades, TV writers were forced to write material that remained inoffensive at all costs, commented as little as possible on divisive issues like politics, and used as little insightful rhetorical examination as possible, lest they offend audiences.

The purpose of writers during the network era was not to compete, but to charm, unite, homogenize, and pacify large groups of audiences. Because only the big three networks existed, each faced very little competition and could easily convince advertisers of their ability to reach mass audiences. Therefore, the goal for networks was not so much to attract audiences, but *not to lose them*. The centrality of television to the 1950s household and family life led broadcasters to believe that at any given time, the network airing the least objectionable, divisive, or controversial programming would capture the widest swath of the American audience — thereby serving the interests of the FCC and advertisers at once (Silverman 3, 13). The tasks of keeping and delivering audiences to advertisers drove the production systems of the network era. By the late 1950s, networks had taken direct control over television programs, selling air time to advertisers who were no longer the direct sponsors of shows (Edgerton 4). This control allowed the big three to

establish uniform standards⁸ for all television programming. Advertisers paid networks for air-time during shows that were guaranteed to have large, ideologically receptive audiences who were *not* thinking critically, but engaging emotionally.

Network heads encouraged television writers to produce escapist programming packaged in proven formulas, even during the political and social upheavals of the 1950s and 1960s (Becker 82-3). Executives wanted television programming that engaged with audiences in prescriptive ways, and programming schedules that worked to legitimize the logic of the status quo for mass audiences. With shows like *Leave It To Beaver* (1957-1963) and *Father Knows Best* (1954-1960) “networks embraced the stability of homogeneity and formulaic programming practices ... program diversification and innovation weren’t needed; in fact, they jeopardized the system’s efficient and predictable delivery of the mass audience to national advertisers” (Becker 82-3). This climate was stable for writers content to play the game, promoting a positive, carefree atmosphere for selling that generated considerable network wealth. But this was also a highly dangerous time for rhetorical writers and performers with creative ambition, or a desire to comment critically on important issues.

In fact, we can most clearly see evidence of rhetorical writing’s value during this era by examining records of its punishment. The kinds of writers, writing and performances that were most severely disavowed and punished give us a sense of the potential power they could wield, and how their treatment built a foundation of distrust between writers and television executives that would persist in coming decades. While the big three monopolized television, rhetorical and satirical writers and performers were quickly put on the defensive, either ousted from the industry or shoved into line out of very valid fears of losing their livelihoods. This sordid history makes rhetorical argumentation difficult to locate, buried beneath a veneer of commercialist escapism. A powerful urge to de-liberalize television grew as executives recognized the medium’s enormous potential power to convey the intellectual ideas of rhetorical writers and

⁸ “Standards” became codified rules that each network maintained through an internal department, sometimes called “Standards and Practices” departments, which censored scripts for content that interfered with a network’s priorities or rules for decency.

performers, and to spread messages that might undermine networks' politically and financially.

Writers' faced severe retribution for violating networks' ideological stances because television discourse was implicated in national politics. Among the consequences for breaching network standards, blacklisting — the practice of hiring and firing that is covertly based on perceptions of a worker's (liberal) politics during the 1950s panic over Communism — remains one of the most bitterly remembered practices. Network executives used blacklisting to damage the careers of writers who expressed liberal views, and thereby controlled what counted as valid political discourse. During the Red Scare, blacklisting provided a convenient means for networks and their advertisers to tightly police everything from actors to scripts. The Red Scare and Senator Joseph McCarthy's HUAC⁹ hearings began as a political witch hunt, but Hollywood quickly became a focal point for anti-communist panic (Smith 130). Aside from the film and television industries' national visibility, many high-profile writers and performers working during this period had been affiliated with progressive movements since the 1930s, when the Popular Front united multiple progressive causes in response to Depression-era conditions (Smith 28). By the 1950s, this national wave of progressivism had ebbed, but many Hollywood writers and performers were easily linked to liberal causes by then considered to be “communist,” and for which many of them had assumed leading roles¹⁰ (Smith 28).

As Hollywood came under HUAC's scrutiny, television executives, took advantage of Americans' intensified fears of communism, and used them to railroad and eliminate members of Hollywood who opposed them politically. In 1947, the committee held hearings over the “Hollywood Ten,” a group of ten screenwriters, producers, and

⁹ The House of Un-American Activities Committee.

¹⁰ Liberal organizations that had been highly popular during the Depression were, by the early 1950s, considered ‘Communist Fronts,’ including even such positive and innocuous causes as the National Federation for Constitutional Liberties, and the American League Against War and Fascism, the Negro Labor Victory Committee, and the Stop-Censorship Committee (Smith 135).

directors who “refused to answer HUAC’s questions, exhausted their appeals and were imprisoned on contempt charges in 1950” (Smith 132). That same year, *Red Channels: The Report of Communist Influence in Radio and Television* was published, listing “151 people ... with ‘citations’” and included ‘the most talented and admired people in the television industry — mostly writers, directors, and performers’” (Barnouw 122). Days after *Red Channels’* publication, the Korean War broke out, seemingly verifying public fears of communists. Hollywood executives in film and television took advantage of this moment, and began to “quietly” use the list for hiring and firing decisions, reassuring advertisers and serving their own goals (Silverman 7-8).

Blacklisting was not simply a nationalist crusade to make television cohere with U.S. foreign policy. It was, importantly, a powerful means for networks and corporate powers to limit and shape American thought, ideology, and behavior. It was also a way to threaten those who did not align neatly with their vision: primarily political progressives, immigrants, people suspected of homosexuality, and non-Christians. Within the Hollywood and entertainment communities, this aspect of blacklisting keenly affected Jewish intellectuals, writers, actors, and artists, many of whom had been deeply involved in the Popular Front as part of leftist, socialist, anti-fascist, union-related, civil-rights, and other groups and movements during the 1930s and 1940s (Smith 134-135) (Denning xvi-xxix). The Red Scare intensified undercurrents of anti-semitism in U.S. culture, and blacklisting based on these prejudices ended the careers of many Jewish television workers, among others (Smith 134-135). Although many network executives were themselves Jewish, they worked to entertain a culture that they believed valued assimilation and white privilege, particularly in television representations of American life (Smith 114-115). Therefore, many network executives resisted representing aspects of Jewish ethnicity with “self-protectiveness against any anti-Semitic charge that Jews are too powerful in the media” (Smith 115).

In addition to self-policing television content concerning non-Christians, TV executives worked to keep content ‘safe’ as “HUAC the Senate Judiciary Committee, and their many allies worked feverishly” to draw connections between communism and

liberals who supported Roosevelt's New Deal policies, as well as communism and non-heterosexuality, resulting in the persecution of homosexuals in government known as the "Lavender Scare" (Smith 134) (Johnson 1). Even those in Hollywood who had left their liberalism behind them had something to fear, because as HUAC targeted former New Deal supporters whose "activities were dated from years earlier, in the years before involvement in such causes was considered suspect" (Smith 134-5). By the 1950s, "civil rights activists and organizers, Jewish actors and entertainers, journalists and teachers, found themselves on the defensive, scrambling to explain political activities once championed but now seen as criminal" (Smith 134-5). With the swift change in America's political climate during this period, the tolerance for expressing even mundane liberal ideas through television — at least from the perspective of networks — was nonexistent. This kind of censorship, initiated by corporate influence, was intended not only to shape political and public conversation, but also to intimidate left-leaning Americans, and to galvanize the public based on old prejudices.

Because the big three networks held uncontested control over U.S. television, they also stood to lose the most revenue and viewership if they were perceived to endorse communists. Though the big three handled the Red Scare poorly, networks and sponsors did have reasons for concern that consumer boycotts might affect business. For example, New York supermarket owner Lawrence Johnson threatened to boycott the products of any sponsors who employed blacklisted workers. Since home goods manufacturers sponsored around sixty percent of television revenue, networks took these threats very seriously (Smith 149). CBS head Frank Stanton "instituted a system of loyalty questionnaires and clearances for all employees," which he later rationalized by explaining that these measures were intended to respond to extreme pressure from sponsors, who in turn were under pressure from shop owners and distributors (Smith 153). Ultimately, facing pressure from the government as well as sponsors and consumers, networks showed nearly absolute compliance with the blacklist's restrictions on free speech, and liberal writers, performers and workers, as well as the circulation of

ideas. The incredible potential of television and its creative workers seemed a moot point in the face of such absolute concern for appearing inoffensive.

Animosity between television writers and executives since the blacklisting era has persisted in part because networks have continued to self-censor through corporate strategies and practices that keep writers in the dark. These practices continued to dictate the terms of television programming decisions, even decades after blacklisting had ceased. The bulk of these strategies empowered executives and disempowered creative workers for the purposes of accruing revenue for networks. For instance, early in television history, networks shifted from frequently airing anthologies to popularizing serials, because serials allowed for predictability, efficiency, and standardization that more easily aligned with sponsors' interests (Browne 180). Furthermore, serials were created using teams of writers, rather than a single author, limiting the creative control of any single worker and making writers more interchangeable (Browne 180). Indeed, corporate censorship often works, as with the example above, in quite indirect ways and on multiple levels of managerial decision making.

Networks made money and garnered power by pleasing advertisers and the FCC at the expense of television writers, who were encouraged to self-censor and to regard network executives as enemies who policed shows that might otherwise have been more relevant. The most obvious forms of censorship had to do with the bottom line, like NBC's "Continuity Acceptance" department, which censored scripts to avoid offending gas and meat interests, florists, bowling and billiard interests, warehouse interests, meaning that none of these industries or their employees were to be shown in a negative light in any programming (Stempel 72). Advertisers didn't want their brands to be associated with anything considered immoral or unsavory, and depended on network executives to regulate the 'environment' within which their ads would appear by keeping writers in line and minimizing the degree to which their works could make an impact.

Because the big three television networks were catering to mass audiences, precisely what counted as 'objectionable' material was difficult to define, and thus a very useful tool with which network executives justified decisions and controlled creative

workers. NBC demanded that shows respect regional, social and philosophical special interests, and the office was ‘very active in censoring ...racial stereotypes, religious oversimplifications, unkindness toward the physically handicapped, ignorance regarding the emotionally disturbed’ (Stempel 72). This kind of corporatized self-censorship ensured not only losses in terms of scripts censored and rejected, but also “in scripts never written, in subjects never considered” (Barnouw 27). Although networks were sometimes bullied into self-censorship by boycott threats, particularly during the blacklisting era, a culture of self-censorship continued to thrive without such encouragement as a product of television’s relationships with the FCC and advertisers.

Network era history offers an abundance of anecdotes concerning the animosity between writers/performers and network management (and advertisers) over corporate censorship and least objectionable programming policies. For comedy writers in the 1950s and 1960s, writing for network television meant creating jokes that were inoffensive and encouraged consumerism, sometimes with very little editorial control over what actually aired (Silverman 13). Everett Greenbaum, comedy writer for *The George Gobel Show* (1954-1960), lost his temper when a network-affiliated ad agent suggested altering one of his joke (effectively making it senseless) in order to include the sponsor’s product (Stempel 109). “By the time I got home to dinner, I’d been fired” Greembaum recalls” (Stempel 109). If a network were forced to choose between an advertiser and a writer during the network era, the choice was a clear one: advertising was the essence of television.

Despite the enormous risks for television writers and performers in commenting on political issues, many found strategies for working with network censors and advertisers that illustrate their skill and the potential value of their rhetorical discourse. *Laugh In* (1968-1973) writers, for instance, found ways to mention current events like the Vietnam War, without overtly commenting on them in a negative way, satisfying NBC and sponsor Ford, which was building equipment for the war effort (Stempel 114). Allan Manings, one of the show’s writers, remembers that dealing with the network censors “became a game ... They would see how much they could force us to give up. We would

see how far we could push” (Stempel 115). This kind of manipulation, push-and-pull between networks and writers would become characteristic of their union bargaining practices, which snowballed with mutual mistrust over the decades. Because of television’s relationships with the federal government and nationally powerful advertisers, network executives de-valued their writers by restraining them from commenting on significant issues in compelling ways. Writers who wanted to examine political issues critically and with rhetorical openness had to do so in oblique ways.

To understand rhetorical writers’ contributions and limitations in early network television, we must look closely at how they used forms of parody, rather than direct satire, to achieve a less confrontational posture while still commenting on relevant issues. Parody and satire were used unequally by rhetorical television writers during this era, and performed different functions. As I have stated, parody involves reproducing formal qualities of another person, character, genre, or text, and thus often expresses a degree of admiration for the original. Satire, in contrast, mocks ideas and people directly, and does not always involve accurate mimicry. Thus networks’ mass marketing schemas could profit a great deal by playing with the emerging “teenie bopper,” “hippy,” or “square” social categories of this era, or the “looks” of other TV shows. In contrast, satirizing a particular person, idea, law, or policy, networks reasoned, would only divide audiences and drive potential viewers away, particularly during such a tumultuous political time. So while both parody and satire appeared forcefully in socially-conscious stand-up routines and magazines, finding audiences “in print culture and on vinyl records,” the satirical performances that grew out of this cultural movement were seldom seen on television (Gray 20). Because of their industrial positions, rhetorical writers for television were effectively blocked out of more consequential national discussions characterized by satire, rhetoric, or national politics.

The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour (TSBCH) (1967-1969) — and, importantly, its cancellation — provide a useful example of the ways that some rhetorical writers and performers *did use* satire and worked around network-era censorship, as well as the price they eventually paid for the liberties they took with such political commentary. *TSBCH*

was a CBS topical variety program featuring comedian brothers Tom and Dick Smothers (see image 1), as well as performers Pat Paulsen (see image 2) and Peter Cullen (Silverman 35-36). The program was unique among its fellow programs in the CBS lineup, which in 1969-1970 season included *Gunsmoke*, *Mayberry R. F. D.*, *The Red Skelton Hour*, *The Beverly Hillbillies*, *The Glen Campbell Goodtime Hour*, *Hee Haw*, *Green Acres* and *Petticoat Junction* (Gitlin 206). CBS was the number one network in the Nielsen ratings, with a set of highly popular programs based on escapist, rural Americana. *TSBCH*, in contrast, was a witty, youthful variety show that engaged comedically with contemporary issues that were pursued rhetorically in critical ways (Silverman 35-36). Indeed, *TSBCH* was not censored for its specific words so much as for its tone; the show embraced counter-cultural ideas, featured blacklisted performers, and would not shy away from political issues like “gun control, Vietnam, and the presidency” (Silverman 35-36). *TSBCH* illustrates the potential value of rhetorical writers to provide salient



Image 1 (left). Image of Tom and Dick Smothers. “Three Thoughts for Thursday.” Web Image. jolenephilo.com. May 24, 2012. Web. <http://jolenephilo.com/2012/05/three-smothers-brothers-thoughts-for-thursday/>

Image 2 (above). Image of Pat Paulsen on *The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour*. “Three Thoughts for Thursday.” Web Image. jolenephilo.com. May 24, 2012. Web. <http://jolenephilo.com/2012/05/three-smothers-brothers-thoughts-for-thursday/>

commentary, as well as the entrenched conflicts between writers and networks, which relied on writers to skillfully execute their corporate and ideological image. Breaching

this implicit contract, *TSBCH* provided a model for political rhetoric and defiant humor that would inspire successful programming in the cable era.

Analyzing *TSBCH* and its sketches shows us the value of television writers and their rhetorical performances, which captivated and galvanized audiences not often addressed by mainstream network television. This strategy of activating a particular counter-public¹¹ and confronting national issues from a perspective specifically tailored to them (notably with a defiant, youthful humor) would eventually define a new network, Fox, and a host of channels like Comedy Central in the coming decades. In the network era, however, *TSBCH* crafted an irreverent and satirical brand of humor virtually unseen before on television, and that unsettled established norms and attitudes. In one particular sketch, the show opens with Tom and Dick Smothers, playing an old-fashioned, mournful cowboy love song on an acoustic guitar and bass. The song's rueful country melody would have been far better suited for nearly any other show in the CBS lineup, and indeed, the brothers never finish playing, as Tom interrupts the song, telling his brother that it's "no good." Dick replies that "It's a good song, it's an old traditional song. It's been with us over a hundred years. If it wasn't good it wouldn't have been around so long." But Tom rejects his brothers' reasoning, saying "That's a pretty dumb argument ... You've been around for a long time too." Dick snaps back, "Some things improve with age, like wine and cheese." Tom replies, "I don't trust any wine or cheese over thirty," and after some further banter Dick becomes insistent: "We came out here to sing a traditional folk song entitled 'Red River Valley.' Some things don't change and 'Red River Valley' is one of them." Tom tells Dick that "Music has changed ... the music of the day needs electricity ... electrical instruments," and then reveals that he sold Dick's car at a loss to pay for their new electrical instruments. As the set behind them transitions from

¹¹ A "Counter-Public" can be understood as a demographic group with some degree of self-awareness, so that members can see themselves as hailed and represented by certain overlapping groups of mass media programs. Theorists like Amber Day and Michael Warner use this term to understand interactions between mass media texts and group identities.

a curtain to a flashy backdrop, the two begin to play out the sketch with a rock song using the electric guitar and bass.

Here, the Smothers brothers provide commentary that held considerable value for their audiences, speaking to their generational concerns in complex ways. The “Red River Valley” sketch may seem benign, but the banter between brothers comments upon counter-cultural conflicts hotly debated in the 1960s. Clearly, the songs are used as metaphors for old and young, but here age is loaded with political implications because of the draft for the Vietnam war, and the rise of counter-cultural and civil rights movements. Everywhere during the 1960s, old patterns, convictions, ways of doing things, and even musical tastes seemed to be confronted by new forces, often represented by, or associated with youth. When Tom says he never trusts a wine or cheese over thirty, he refers not to wine and cheese, but to a controversial saying — “Don’t trust anyone over thirty.” This phrase emerged from the Vietnam draft era, as young men were forced to give their lives in battle for conflicts that belonged to an older generation of Americans, and to their out-dated ideologies. However, the show mentions none of this directly; even though the implications of the sketch — that the old ways are boring, sad, destructive, and even just “no good” — are quite sharp. *TSBCH* blunts these sentiments for television through playful banter, side stories, and metaphors of wine and cheese. Only through rhetorical, topical writing and performing, was this sort of moral and political dialogue possible, and only with the constant threat of cancellation.

Another *TSBCH* sketch takes aim at network news, which was just beginning to falter in its ability to speak to the varied concerns of Americans, divided by political differences relating to generation, ethnicity, gender, and ideologies about the morality of war. In the sketch, Pat Paulsen reads an editorial as though he were a newscaster, sitting before a microphone. Paulsen, in particular, politicized his comedy, launching a fake bid for the presidential election long before Stephen Colbert would attempt a similar stunt in 2004. Paulsen’s campaign slogan, “Just a common, ordinary, simple savior of America’s destiny,” provides some insight into his particular style of humor, characterized by his deadpan tone, double-talk, use of obvious lies, and tongue-in-cheek verbal attacks. Using

complex patterns of these rhetorical devices, Paulsen's editorial playfully reverses an argument about care for the elderly and social security to call attention to the draft. Although he is introduced as "Pat Paulsen" and plays himself in the sketch, his flattened tone and affect, intentional mispronunciations, and comic misuse of facts suggest that he is playing an inept and boring newscaster character. After each ridiculous sentence, he takes a definite pause, looking into the camera, as though believing in his own words completely. He begins by saying that, "Today in America, according to a recent statistic [sic] the average couple living on social security receives about \$1500 a year. We think this is a disgrace; why should they get that much?" The studio audience laughs at his mispronunciation, and the surprising assertion that old people receive too much money.

He continues, "They don't work. They just sit around doing nothing. If they were a few years younger they'd be called hippies. Personally, we think it's high time we stop cow-towing to that old fogies lobby. All they do is complain. Picky, picky, picky. But I have yet to hear of anyone burning his social security card." The audience laughs and applauds, recognizing the reference to young men burning their draft cards during the Vietnam war. Television's recognition of the audience's reaction reminds us that rhetorical satire like this matters because it must be recognized and confirmed by the audience, and only through this resonance can ironies like a society that cares for its elderly and sends its youth to die, "happen" (Hutcheon 13). Paulsen goes on, "The more they get, the more they want. Nobody bothers to tell you that right now the oldsters get more than just the \$1500 a year. They are also entitled to \$100 a month for every child under five. But you'd be surprised how few are taking advantage of this. Now let me make this crystal clear: we have nothing against old folks. As the social workers say, '[unintelligible jibberish] ... functioning action necessary generate a domestic sterile pattern purpose ... and keep the flies off 'em.'" These comments and the jibberish seem to underscore the speaker's lack of seriousness and even boredom with the subject matter about which he's chosen to editorialize. After an anecdote about caring for his 92-year-old grandmother, Paulsen concludes that "We say it is time to reexamine this whole social security program. It all started back in 1932. They said it would take care of our old

people. Now we've been paying into it all this time. Thirty five years. And what good has it done? There are more old people now than when it started. So if we can't be constructive, let's forget it. Thank you and good night."

While Paulsen's editorial may not seem politically engaged, it carries on the same implications as Tom & Dick's opening "Red River Valley" routine, pitting the old against the young in unexpected ways. This time, instead of describing the old in a way that indicates boredom and stiffness, Paulsen draws a parallel between social security cards and draft cards. He reverses the typical course of this discussion, however, by suggesting that the American people care far more about the basic needs, rights, and dignities of the aged, than about young men going to war. From this perspective, Paulsen is clearly not arguing against providing social security for the aged; by making an ironic argument against social security, and by contrasting the purposes of these two types of cards (one provides the means of dignity, one revokes them), he makes an oblique argument against the draft while comparing the rights and privileges of the old and young. As a writer and performer, Paulsen draws audiences into recognizing a contemporary irony based on shared moral judgments outside of mainstream ideology, an illustration of rhetoric's value and rhetorical writers' potential power that was rare in network television.

TSBCH, its writers and performers colored outside the lines of good-natured parody into satire, and in doing so upset the traditional practiced of network television in ways that were unacceptable for executives. Network heads were hounded by the federal government for the show's controversial aspects, including its very convincing anti-war rhetoric, coupled with its intense appeal to youth. Senator John Pastore from Rhode Island initiated a plan in the late 1960s to prevent 'offensive' material from airing by demanding that controversial programs like *Laugh-In* and *TSBCH* submit tapes of episodes to be pre-screened before airing (Silverman 17). Pastore also threatened network licenses directly, warning broadcasters that if they were not able to self-regulate effectively, that he would push for further legislation (Silverman 55). Allegedly, the Smothers brothers did not make a pre-screening of one of their episodes available, and were subsequently fired by new CBS president Robert Wood (Silverman 49-52).

TSBCH's cancellation was linked to the show's deft satirization of the U.S. government via subjects like the Vietnam War, the draft, and gun control. Although CBS gave an official reason (failure to meet pre-screening deadlines) for canceling such a popular show, many writers and performers suspected that the network simply yielded to government pressure (Silverman 49-59). It may have been that Wood simply needed to convince Pastore of CBS's commitment to self-censorship, or that he was waiting for an excuse to cancel *TSBCH* (Silverman 58). Whatever the real reason for the show's end, Wood would go on to follow profits even into the cable era, eventually supporting controversial like *All In the Family* (Silverman 17). But even on the cusp of big changes in the television industry, rhetorical writers and performers in television were largely prevented from participating in political discourse, particularly in so-called 'non-serious' modes like satire.

While rhetorical performances were rare in television, what made *TSBCH*'s cancellation particularly ironic was that it came during an extended historical period in which the popularity of *social parody* was experiencing a boom in television and other media (Thompson 3-4). In fact, this sentiment and creative impulse would even extend to sharper forms of comedy like political satire during the 1950s and 1960s, but only in vinyl and print media (Thompson 47-48). This trend illustrates the importance of rhetorical writing during national transitions. While networks were reluctant to invest in controversial or confrontational programming, social parody, a much gentler form of mimicry, became a viable way for television writers to comment on cultural change without offending alienating mass audiences. Social parody became a popular television genre in the postwar decades as television was establishing its standard practices and relationships with widening audiences (Thompson 3-4). Social parody and television, then, emerged simultaneously and interdependently, and "by the end of the 1950s, parody had become one of the preeminent ways in which Americans both made fun of and made sense of their culture" (Thompson 146).

Recovering from a war that called into question conventional morals, nationalism, and traditional domestic life, social parody "emerged as a 'way of looking' not only at

television, but at ‘American life in general’ and encouraged rhetoric that crossed “the boundaries of what was considered to be good taste” (Thompson 146). But social parody was not simply a meeker way of addressing cultural differences; it was a step towards recognizing how to speak to particular groups, as “questioning what was considered normal was increasingly a sign of sophistication. To know the rules, and to break them, was a sign of distinction” (Thompson 146). Responding to the prosperous, postwar culture of the 1950s, Americans found new ways to distinguish themselves politically and intellectually. Appreciation of humor that broke social boundaries, sometimes called “sick humor,” allowed people to demonstrate their intelligence and willingness to question tradition in the wake of a war that had demanded unwavering patriotism and social cohesion (Thompson 18-19). While television writers could not continuously use rhetoric like satire to discuss politics in the network era, they were key players in the development of social parody, which established an irreverent counter-public and ways of questioning convention.

Network television executives repeatedly quashed relevant programming because it was controversial, despite counter-cultural trends elsewhere, limiting television writers’ abilities to comment on significant trends. Outside of television satirical works continued to impact the political turmoil of the 1960s: MAD magazine, for instance, covered the Army-McCarthy hearings, coordinating both parody and satire to re-imagine the hearings as a quiz show (Gray 20). But in contrast to magazines or LPs, television accepted few politically satirical shows on a long-term basis. For example, hit British television program titled *That Was the Week That Was* (TW3), was adapted for U.S. audiences on ABC, but struggled in its American context. The show was “a satiric take on the week’s news” featuring prominent writers and performers like David Frost, Buck Henry, Alan Alda, Calvin Trillin, and Gloria Steinem. It was quickly cancelled “because of the reluctance of ... the network brass to ruffle the feathers of advertisers and the politically powerful” (Gray 21). Precisely because *That Was the Week it Was* spoke irreverently about political problems in resonant ways, it was deemed too controversial for wide television audiences. Network structures diminished television writers’ value

and participation in national discourse, and bred tensions between executives and writers. Even after the network era, tensions between writers and executives persisted, and contributed to divisions between the WGA and AMPTP.

Network News: A Public Service

News programming radically changed in the transition from the network to cable eras, and this change re-oriented writers and their potential value. Network news, from the early days of television, was conceived as a public service component of programming that allowed networks to maintain trusteeship and thus exclusive rights to broadcasting. This sense of trusteeship was also maintained by the strict separation of entertainment genres—which were more likely to use irreverent tones and rhetoric like parody and satire—from news programs, which were conceived as ‘serious’ presentations of facts. This public service orientation of broadcasting, reinforced by television’s close relationship with the federal government, was also important to network executives. Richard Salant, president of CBS News, saw it as ““something that CBS owed to the public and to its conscience,”” and CBS president Frank Stanton went so far as to argue that network news played a “critical” function in the formation of public opinion, and therefore in the “very survival of democracy itself” (Baym 11-12).

As a result, television programming was strictly divided between network news, which provided public information, and everything else, which provided entertainment and catered to the network’s selling strategies (Baym 11-12). News programs were produced and filmed in New York, where its producers and workers were free from the expectations of commercial gain, while most other programming was produced in Los Angeles for revenue purposes (Baym 11-12). For network presidents like Salant, the news was separated from entertainment programming by geographical location, scheduling, and ideology. In the network era, news represented the actual, while entertainment partook of the aesthetic-expressive functions of television, two projects that were never to be combined (Baym 28-29). In other words, network journalism relied on the Modernist belief that facts could and should be presented differently than fictions in the context of television, a belief made possible by the denial of reporters’ subjectivity

and a mutual understanding between TV producers and viewers that such information would not be distorted.

This stance on the purpose and functions of network television news was not without its problems, ones that entertainment writers would work to correct with the coming cable era. TV news in the network era consisted largely of authoritative monologues, with the anchor impassively relating the unquestionable truth for citizens to use as a democratic resource. This kind of journalism was only possible “because it conformed to the particular contours of network television technology, U.S. broadcasting law, and cultural mores that privileged a particular attitude about public information” (Baym 31-32). Anchors like Ted Koppel, Edward R. Murrow, and Walter Cronkite were among the most trusted and beloved figures of the network era because they fulfilled viewers’ expectations for factual, authoritative accounts within a very specific network orientation and understanding of the issues considered newsworthy at the time. While many journalists have a great deal of nostalgia for this particular era of news reporting, it problematically depended on the erasure of the reporter’s subjectivity to satisfy viewers with such a narrow and limited definition of what counted as “news” (Baym, 31-32, 12-13). In effect, the ‘mass’ nature of television broadcasting in this era imposed a “consolidation of the ‘verbal-ideological word’ that occurs hand in hand with the wider processes of sociocultural and political-economic centralization” (Baym 12-13). Network news limited both the types of issues that counted as news, as well as the formats with which the news could be conveyed, standards that came to embody common sense (Baym 12-13). Such strict definitions of what counted as news and who was allowed to make public arguments about politics kept the news safe from commercial concerns, but it also excluded alternative viewpoints and failed to connect with viewers sense of passion and community. This was a void that would later be filled by entertainment writers in the cable era.

Network news conventions, originating in print journalism, enabled anchors to avoid television’s stylistic conventions with talking-head monologues, and opt for a discourse that worked in interest of national unity. As the need and desire for unity

between Americans dissolved, so would these authoritative versions of the news. Entertainment writers were consequently freer to take up national political discussions in rhetorical ways that challenged conventional thinking, while news writers and producers found ways to profit from *how* they interpreted politics. Chapter II will show how the cable era changed the function of television news, and thus the function of its entertainment writers, in ways that enabled them to more fully challenge audiences with rhetoric and satire.

CHAPTER II

SATIRE ON CABLE AND ONLINE

This chapter argues that rhetorical television writers took on new roles as political commentators, while cable era news programs abandoned their previous functions as political ‘watchdogs,’ and ceased to operate as ‘public services’ that ostensibly kept politicians honest. While network-era news was inadequate for representing a variety of perspectives and dissent, cable news fell laughably short of expectations, both in terms of verifiable information and genuine, proactive discussion. Indeed, the cable era changed television’s entire orientation, from the definition of ‘news’ and who was qualified to make political arguments, to the tone and address of all television genres. Channels scrambled to carve out narrow niche groups necessary for the cable system, which encouraged writers to work with rhetoric — in ways that were forbidden during the network era — by using their skills to address and create confrontations, dwell on disagreements, and maximize audience’s emotional investments. Some cable channels relied on lineages of irreverent humor, and therefore encouraged writers to seize upon politics and current events using rhetoric and satire.¹² As the cable era progressed, political discontent and online alternatives to television fueled a youth culture in which irony and satire became popular ways for young, liberal, and politically disenchanting audiences to understand politics. Deregulation, narrowcasting, and user-produced content online continued to devalue writers — even as their work became key to the education of the public, and to media revenue streams.

Chapter II explores television’s transition from the network to the cable era by showing how rhetorical writing practices have shaped around histories of television news, U.S. politics, economic competition, and internet technologies. This chapter begins by describing how cable-era competition resulted in dramatic changes to television news, eliminating its public service aspects. To show how rhetorical satirists would eventually take up some of the ‘public service’ functions that used to belong to news, this chapter

¹² Comedy Central built its popularity on content combining humor and politics, often in satirical ways.

describes cable competition's causes and effects. This discussion explores how deregulation allowed cable channels to compete with large networks, and how competition challenged shows to produce relevant material that drew narrower, but more loyal and affluent audiences. By analyzing a segment of sketch comedy program *Saturday Night Live* (1970), the chapter shows how writers helped to loosen NBC's standards by using satire to comment on politics and draw controversy. The chapter explains why rhetorical writers were encouraged to use satire, and links niche marketing trends with the end of the Cold War, as television's function to cultivate national unity was usurped by its commercial function to divide audiences into taste groups. Analysis of *The Simpsons* shows how networks like Fox worked to court youth markets by mocking authority and marking the differences between viewers.

After detailing how cable-era trends fostered divisive modes like satire, the chapter explores how writers have used rhetorical satire in the 2000s. Rhetorical writers became central to national conversations as cable news became unreliable and politically biased. But at the same time, writers struggled with executives as online content became an unpaid part of their jobs. The last sections of chapter II introduce *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* to discuss their contributions to rhetorical satire, since these shows were particularly influential to the strike videos discussed in chapter IV, and will be analyzed themselves in chapter V. Although it covers a great deal of ground, this chapter's focus is the trajectory of rhetorical writers and writing as their power, influence, and perceptions of their value transformed over time. As writers practiced skills in rhetorical satire, they prepared themselves to demonstrate their value online during the 2007-8 strike.

Cable News: A Promotional Enterprise

News amid cable era competition became less focused and definitive, but more importantly its purpose changed: instead of seeking to inform, the news began targeting niche audiences like any other television genre, branding content that entertained audiences in appealing ways. The purpose of news changed because federal control over television loosened in the late 1970s, and an increasing number of channels created

competition that altered many network era practices. Writers could build audiences for channels by writing in ways that would have been punished during the network era, such as blending aspects of genres like news and comedy. At the same time, television news—industrially, formally, and commercially—was drastically changed by cable competition. The function of news programming developed during the cable era was not to present unedited facts and images, but to present them in novel, entertaining ways that distinguished one program, channel, or network from others.

As notions of ‘news’ expanded, outlets for distributing news diversified, and networks became desperate to distinguish themselves by offering information and entertainment together. The need for a definitive, authoritative news program was not only less pressing, but it had become an outdated concept. Under these conditions, networks and cable channels re-evaluated the purpose of television news. “The press,” once performing a vital public service, gradually became “the media, a multi-nodal organization charged with multiple and contradictory agendas ... reflecting and refracting countless other media” in a “dramaturgical exposure that bathes the political domain in light and, in so doing, fundamentally redefines the boundaries of that domain” (Baym 50-2). Cable news began catering towards diverse perspectives, but self-promotion and commercial pressure prevented cable news anchors from performing their ‘watchdog’ functions.

Amid the cable-era’s competition, networks began eliminating costly programming that did not accrue enough advertising dollars, including news programming. Network era news was not expected to meet any standard of profitability, cushioned by entertainment programming revenues and rules that strictly separated its purpose from commercialism. In contrast, cable era economics did not allow for programs that did not financially support themselves. This new attitude was a profound change from how networks had formerly understood the purpose of news programming. Cable era news producers saw themselves as “businesspeople, committed ... to increasing shareholder values,” and no longer as “broadcasters ... speaking for the nation” (Baym 14-15). In 1986, when his company took control of NBC, General Electric’s CEO Jack

Welch “dismissed the idea that network news was a ‘public interest’ to be protected from the network’s commercial imperatives,” (Baym 14-15).

Under this commercial rubric, news as a democratic service was replaced by news programming that aimed to entertain more than inform. The upshot of this transition was that news producers changed the genre’s purpose, content, and ways of representing current events. Cable news generally turned “away from hard news focused on governmental policy and foreign affairs,” while CNN President Jonathan Klein insisted that his news staff develop “emotionally gripping, character-driven narratives” (Baym 14-15). While these tactics may have drawn more audiences, they largely abandoned, simplified or glossed over rigorous discussions and debates about intricate but highly significant issues like national policies, leaving these topics to be taken up by entertainment writers in other genres like comedy.

In fact, cable competition encouraged an aesthetically-pleasing, emotionally gripping, and audience-pandering approach for almost all television programming. Controversy and current events were increasingly used to draw viewers for emotional, rather than informational, reasons. Television journalists blended the sleek aesthetics of in-studio technology with news stories that simplified political issues into two-sided contests to make them more compelling, often informing such stories with a perspective reflecting the network’s brand image (Baym 14-15). Today’s news revolves around opulent graphics displays and the general promotion of visual technology, incorporating commercial elements that have enabled news programs to remain financially viable. Much of this excess is related to the 24-hour cable news cycle, which demands constant, up-to-the-minute programming with an emotional or ideological ‘spin,’ but no time to reflect upon what is ‘newsworthy,’ or how to handle individual stories. For instance, financial news programs like *Mad Money with Jim Cramer* (2005 -) routinely interview business spokespeople financially affiliated with the program, who in turn have access to a “friendly” news outlet (Caldwell 340-341). Rather than risk telling the audience only one version of the facts, cable news risks telling the audience only what executives believe it wants to hear, rather than what it needs to know. This problem, which has

become more pronounced since cable's early days, eventually provided television satirists with a great deal of political news commentary to critique using rhetorical satire.

Turning to Relevance: Deregulation & the Erosion of Standards and Practices

Legal changes at the federal level, initiated by Ronald Reagan's 1980 election, gradually made room for programming innovation that would eventually allow rhetorical writers to explore news and current events with satire (Baym 13). The national sentiment that led to Reagan's election, as well as his particular approach to the role of television ultimately enabled TV writers and performers to engage with rhetoric in new ways, eventually forming a niche for rhetorical discussion and satirical programming in popular culture. However, in the early days of Reagan's presidency, many networks misinterpreted his election as an indication that audiences preferred conservative economics *and* conservative TV content. Reagan's election emboldened a wide swath of Americans who felt disenfranchised by the civil rights movements of the 1960s and 1970s, so at first many networks interpreted his election as the American tide turning against more daring television programs, sponsoring and canceling shows according to such logic (Gitlin 247). Immediately following Reagan's election, writers braced themselves for a return to the non-controversial, as conservative groups vied to influence the medium's content, beginning a "crusade to 'clean up television,'" (Gitlin 247).

The 1980s began with a misleading, but crushing blow to writers' ability to speak rhetorically about relevant topics that might offend audiences or cause controversy. As niche groups were sought by TV channels, warring political groups began to share the belief that TV images were "central to their strategies of dignity and power," and began understanding TV shows primarily "as the products of political agendas" (Gitlin 250). A rightward crusade led by "antiabortion, antifeminist, anti-environmentalist, and pro-prayer" groups formed over "television's growing permissiveness, its display of flesh, and its extramarital innuendo" (Gitlin 258). Although they would not hinder writers' creativity for long, these campaigns temporarily threatened television's advertising revenue, reinforcing bad relationships between writers and network heads. For example, Owen G. Butler, board chairman of Proctor & Gamble and television's biggest spender at

the time, explained that “We think the Coalition [a conservative group called The Coalition for Better Television] is expressing some very important and broadly-held views about gratuitous sex, violence, and profanity”; as a result, P&G withdrew sponsorship from over fifty programs for reasons of taste during the 1981 season (Gitlin 258). Terrified at the prospect of losing sponsors, networks responded by raising necklines, closeting gay characters, and cutting any material that “might make vociferous enemies” (Gitlin 260). Situation comedies long in development concerning Vietnam were scrapped, and one executive observed that “If I had a pilot that had a lot to do with content, I’d be concerned right now” (Gitlin 9).

Despite such temporary obstacles, Reagan’s presidency ushered in an era of deregulation, increasing competition, and niche marketing that enabled rhetorical writers to reach narrower audiences by discussing controversies tailored to these niche groups. This gradual process occurred as television evolved from a limited good and public service to competitive, multi-channel environment. No longer part of the exclusive “big three” outlets for television content, networks competed with cable channels to attract narrower, and far more loyal, taste groups. Amid this intense competition, rhetorical television writers and performers could engage and experiment with satire for more sustained periods than in the past. Reagan’s administration transformed the way television related to its public; his FCC appointee Mark Fowler, believed that the government should “get out of the way” with regard to regulating the broadcast industry, and allow the TV market to shape itself (Silverman 21). His position was consistent with Reagan’s broader economic position encouraging free market dynamics, rather than federal control. Indeed, this stance was more than a political position; it was an attitude toward television and its role, which Fowler believed should be private, not public. The multiplicity of channels and news outlets convinced Fowler that “broadcasting required no special oversight,” and amounted to nothing more than “a toaster with a picture,” (Baym 13).

Writers became freer, over the coming decades, to use rhetorical satire and its devices like irony to investigate current events, news media, and national politics, and thus to display their value. These changes were the result of continuing deregulation,

which transformed the television industry into a landscape of plentiful variety, where content had to be relevant to compete. Starting with Reagan's presidency and culminating with the Telecommunications Act of 1996, "the government dropped most of the regulations that mandated news and public affairs programming" (Baym 13). These legislators conceptualized the public "as an assemblage of consumers, not citizens," who didn't need trustees to oversee programming content (Baym 13). Importantly, Reagan's administration did not regulate television's content like past administrations. Instead, Reagan and Fowler believed that economic forces would regulate what aired on television, as channels would respond to audience tastes. Although interest groups argued over television's content and impact, Reagan's conservatism and his vocal constituents actually had relatively little impact on what television writers were able to say.

Though the Reagan administration established the economic foundation for the cable era, the 1992 elections also inspired journalists, writers, and audiences to see politics as a subject for entertainment television. In this environment, rhetorical writers became freer than ever to address political controversy with satire. Clinton's campaign and election provided an opportunity for news programs to capture audiences by characterizing his presidential run, and his later affair with intern Monika Lewinsky, as personal battles or trysts between individuals, colored by charisma, hidden motives, sex, and scandal. Politics quickly became fodder for entertainment, even in news shows. Cable news coverage of presidential campaigns and terms no longer indulged in concepts like "neutral observation," or logically argued factual claims, but instead engaged in "the comparing and contrasting of the two sides' machinery of spectacle generation" (Baym 71). Clinton's presidential campaign, his involvement with Lewinsky, his impeachment, and the media coverage of all these events, called a massive amount of attention to politics in ways that aimed to entertain rather than inform.

Cable news trends made politics more profitable and prominent in television, but also left a void in reporting that focused on factual evidence, eschewed partisan competition, and discussed American politics with proactive dialogues. Clinton's campaign and election typified cable news programming: elections were no longer

reported as significant moments of decision-making for citizens, but instead framed as competitions, with candidates “understood as contestants in the ritualized competition of electoral politics” (Baym 65). By reporting on presidential elections as though they were games, news programs began focusing on trivial and personal aspects of the ‘players,’ suggesting a cynical view of politics as nothing more than a contest, implying that the “whole endeavor is meaningless” (Baym 74). Clinton’s win in 1992 rewarded his campaign’s keen understanding of how to win youth votes through strategic media appearances on late-night talk shows, rather than simply stating his platform in the standard televised speeches, debates and newscasts like his opponent, George Bush, Sr.

While election coverage was changing, the Monica Lewinsky scandal most clearly demonstrated the dissolving boundaries between news and entertainment, as well as the news media’s newly commercialized attitudes. Television news programs and late-night comedy shows alike drew from the Lewinsky affair and Clinton’s impeachment for news highlights and edgy jokes. Bathed in “spectacle, overexposure, and cross-talk,” the scandal demonstrated that news and entertainment programming were relying on politics for commercial value, as a means to attracting viewers with sensationalism (Baym 74). Cable news invited more perspectives on what was considered ‘news,’ but much of its factual coverage was diluted by its own self-promotion. While people on television were considering political policy, ideology, and representation, they were not members of cable news teams, but rhetorical writers and performers for comedy shows.

What networks would also change as the cable era progressed were its “standards and practices” departments, investing in less staid and more dynamic programming favored writers’ creativity, skill and input. These departments were responsible for a network’s self-regulation, and censored scripts for material that violated a network’s brand image, ideological outlook, advertising relationships, or with the FCC’s rules of decency. During the network era, these departments aided executives in the task of keeping writers and performers in line and conforming to network standards (Gitlin 208). But beginning in the late 1970s, CBS president Robert Wood initiated a wave of change with two decisive moves. First, Wood pioneered the idea of catering to younger

audiences, as ratings specialists realized that viewers 18-49 had the most disposable income (Gitlin 208). The question determining a show's market value was no longer "How many people watch it?" but instead "Who is watching?" A modest audience composed of 20- and 30-somethings could be more lucrative to advertisers than a vast audience of children or retirees. Wood's new programming strategy was a move away from trying to please mass audiences, and toward the idea that content is an important way to draw the right audience, an assertion that elevated the status of writing for television.

Wood's second move was a means of responding to this new way of interpreting Nielsen ratings: a decided shift toward incorporating relevant social ideas, current events, and timely trends into entertainment shows — all of which disrupted network era standards and practices. Following CBS, the big three instructed writers to capture younger audiences by making entertainment shows less about timeless American family situations, and more about recognizing the social changes of the present moment. In 1979, CBS replaced shows like *Green Acres* (1965-1971) and *Petticoat Junction* (1963-1970) with *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (1970-1977), *All In the Family* (1971-1979), and later *M*A*S*H** (1970-1983). NBC's Paul Klein, one of the first to point out that "it was individuals who bought products, not households, and that it was the precise composition of the household — age, sex, and income — that counted" (Gitlin 208). NBC also moved in this direction, bringing *Saturday Night Live* to the air in 1970. Networks began exploring niche marketing, lifting many long-held standards of 'decency,' and allowing writers to experiment with political material in entertainment contexts to court more affluent viewers.

Writers and performers in the 1970s began investing in irreverent humor as political work even as they contended with standards and practices departments, which were then a vital part of network television's structures. But as deregulation continued, networks felt less pressure to appeal to the conventional norms of mass audiences, and cut costs by eliminating or downsizing standards and practices departments. In 1988, "both NBC and CBS eliminated their respective standards and practices staffs entirely,"

and ABC's staff was sharply reduced (Silverman 24). Decisions about TV content were left to "the program producer and network programmers" (Silverman 24). The FCC relaxed threats over broadcast licenses as a consequence for airing 'objectionable' material, and allowed cable channels to obtain licenses more easily. Channels fragmented audiences, since attracting a particular niche market or demographic with disposable income was more important than "not offending a general viewership" (Becker 99). Rhetorical writers and performers learned how to engage desirable niche markets with relevant, highly stylized shows that used irony as a means of conveying distinctive 'edginess.'

Saturday Night Live (1970 -) specialized in youthful humor and used irreverent tones to comment on politics, but the show's early writers struggled with NBC's standards and practices, which were still a vital part of the network's operations. When the show debuted, NBC's standards and practices department routinely received scripts for all shows before each live taping (Plasketes 37). To get around the department's restrictions, *SNL*'s writing staff would purposely send in scripts of sketches that were excessively outrageous, so that the actual sketches they wanted to air seemed tame in comparison (Plasketes 37). These tactics enabled writer and producer Lorne Michaels to broaden the standards of acceptability for his show, and to work around routine corporate censorship practices, a task made somewhat easier by the show's late-night time slot. *SNL*'s writers and performers used youthful energy, parodic sensibilities, and relevant subject matter to address politics with humor, but were not able to rhetorically satirize these figures or address more intricate matters of policy, particularly given network censorship.

To illustrate the fine line that *SNL* writers and performers walked in terms of politics, controversy and rhetoric, let us briefly examine one of the show's early political sketches: Chevy Chase's imitation of an address from then-president Gerald Ford (see image 3). While the sketch's style of humor is certainly satirical, it falls short of rhetorical satire precisely because of the broadcast limitations that characterized the late network era. Chase's full Gerald Ford sketch would be quite lengthy to describe in full, but

analysis of a few key moments illustrates *SNL*'s general approach to satirizing political figures. This particular sketch is known as one of the more biting satirical pieces in the show's history, and so it is also important for identifying the outer limits of the show's tone.



Image 3. Chevy Chase as Gerald Ford on *Saturday Night Live*. Ury, Allen B. “The Accidental President — 9 Fun Facts About Gerald R. Ford.” Image. August 15, 2014. Web. <http://www.fridayfunfacts.com/2014/08/15/the-accidental-president-10-fun-facts-about-gerald-r-ford/>.

With a few notable exceptions (among them Tina Fey's Sarah Palin from the 2008 elections), *SNL* subscribes to the “all in good fun” school of political spoofing, in which political camps are parodied with the same level of scrutiny, and in which the politician's personal style, speech, and public bumbles are mocked more than his or her character or political beliefs. During the 1976 election year, Gerald Ford's stand-off with Ronald Reagan provided *SNL* with a host of parodic inspiration, not least of which was Ford's well-known clumsiness. Chase's sketch opens by introducing the president in the oval office addressing the nation, with a caption reading “THIS IS NOT A GOOD IMPRESSION OF GERALD FORD.” From the start, we know that the sketch is not

about impersonation or skill — which would imply that the actor had studied the person being parodied, indicating a degree of admiration and commitment to accuracy.

Chase, as Ford, announces that he will discuss the possible default of New York City, and Ronald Reagan as his opponent for presidency. But the speech is interrupted as the red phone on his right rings, and “Ford” picks up a water glass, answering it as though it were a phone as the water spills to the floor: ““Y’hello? Hello! Hello, Nessen [Press Secretary Ronald H. Nessen, 1974-1977]. I can’t hear you, what are ya, in the pool? Ah, I guess the other phone’s ringing, I don’t know ... All right.” He puts down the empty water glass as the phone continues to ring and tries to resume his address, but finally answers the red phone that has been ringing: ““Hello, hotline ... uh, Anwar [Egyptian President Anwar Sadat], just a second. I’m on the air right now, I’ll get you Kissinger, ok?” He dials a black phone to his left, bringing the receiver to his other ear, now on two phones at once, then says, “Hank, can you talk to Sadat for a minute?” He then struggles to put both phones away on their respective receivers. Failing this task, he sets them to the side and continues, “The point is, do I really know what the issue is? Relevant, irrelevant, fault, default, these are just hard words.” The black phone on his left buzzes from being left disengaged, and “Ford” answers again: “Hello? Yes, Hank. All right, I’ll talk to Anwar, ok.” He hangs up the black telephone receiver on the red telephone hook, then picks up the red phone receiver: “Hello?” then hangs the red receiver on the black phone.

This sketch and its popularity show how television’s general tone was changing to address youth with a strain of derisive, mocking humor that would later become increasingly rhetorical as politics became fare for comedians in other shows. The sketch continues, but what is outlined above shows the boundaries of what *SNL* assumed was relevant, funny, and even ‘outrageous’ to their audiences. It is true that the sketch is not quite in the sort of “good fun” tone that would govern many other presidential sketches. Chase’s impression attack’s Ford’s seriousness as a candidate by making him appear air-headed, bumbling, and inept without attending to any sort of faithful performance or the man himself. It is absolutely plausible that Chase’s impersonation affected Ford’s public

image and chances in the upcoming election. However, the sketch features no real rhetorical discussion or interrogation of Ford's politics beyond general statements. Indeed, the address to the nation never really gets going. The humor in the sketch never connected with matters of political policy, rhetoric or ideology. Indeed, this omission may have been a measure to avoid censorship, since the show's liveness made actions even more difficult to anticipate and control than scripted words. Although *SNL* attempted a type of topical satire of President Ford, it was perhaps more of a personal than political satire, albeit with potential political implications.

Narrowcasting: Style, Satire & Conflict in Niche Markets

"Narrowcasting," or niche marketing for television, was another part of the process by which rhetorical writers found outlets in television, and greater freedom to explore controversy and politics through satire. The collapse of the generic boundaries between news and entertainment in the 1990s was the eventual result of deregulation and programming innovation in the 1970s, followed by cable competition and narrowcasting in the 1980s. Narrowcasting was based on the idea that more television choices, coupled with the ability to easily switch channels with the remote control, created a new kind of consumer — one who demanded more specialized, cutting-edge programming. Armed with a remote control and sought by multiple channels, TV viewers were no longer considered "couch potatoes," but discerning consumers. Imagined as "young, male and in control ... he determines what, when, and how he watches media ... [He is] critically aware and discriminating" (Jenkins 135). Importantly, this consumer is envisioned as [white], male, intelligent, and demanding — one whose tastes, executives imagined, would lean *towards* conflict and not away from it. Narrowcasting also meant that TV channels were busy carving up audience shares into more targeted groups based on age, sex, income, race, and so forth. Specific, fragmented demographics were sought through different types of shows, aesthetic "looks," and marketing strategies (Caldwell 9). As networks and cable channels adopted more particularized ways of reaching audiences, executives as well as writers worried less and less about whether they are going to offend viewers: audiences were grouped according to identity markers and consumption patterns

that made their preferences easy to anticipate. Narrowcasting helped ensure that writers' jobs were increasingly about honing their rhetorical skills to compete for audience attention with engaging content.

As selling style became TV's primary purpose and mode of competition, its function as a public resource for discussing morality and politics seemed lost. While writers were freer with the content they could present, the role of content in television programming declined in favor of stylistic exhibitionism. While network era television focused on broadcasting messages, it subordinated stylistic concerns to focus primarily on content. But the competition of the cable era also meant that shows began targeting audiences through aesthetics; style was "no longer a bracketed flourish, but was the text of the show" (Caldwell 6). Television production in the 1970s depended heavily on writing and acting, often using zero-degree¹³ studio style. By contrast, production styles in the 1980s were largely focused on stylistic presentation (Caldwell 6). The style and unique aesthetic branding of a show became tantamount to its primary contribution: promoting lifestyles based on consumerism (Caldwell 6). New channels like MTV were based on aesthetic ways of modeling and selling 'coolness' to youth markets. Many of their shows were de-narrativized and video-graphic content became the central mode of transmission.

The television industry's preference for style and stylization during the cable era motivated some writers, and many niche groups of viewers, to recognize and comment upon the growing ironies evident television, news and politics. Television, a technology that was once a miraculous invention for mass communication, horizontal unity¹⁴, and commercial space, was now only an appliance for selling audiences coffee and light

¹³ Caldwell uses "zero-degree" studio style to describe a an approach to television focused on conveying content using words and images, but not on the unique formal capabilities of the medium or on showcasing a program's aesthetic uniqueness. "Zero-degree" style would emphasize aesthetic aspects of a show, like set design, costumes, and music no more (and sometimes even less) than elements like the script and performances.

¹⁴ Mass media like radio, and television functioned to unite Americans as citizens and consumers. These outlets facilitated national cohesion by delivering simultaneous broadcasts to all areas of the country.

bulbs. TV's exhibitionistic and commercial aspects began to directly contradict its former public service origins. Television's deeply contradictory nature means that information was only provided according to channels' own economic imperatives, an irony that many viewers have recognized and upon which they increasingly demand reflection.

Television's increasing lack of depth, pandering to contradictory viewpoints, and relentless commercialism pushed rhetorical writers to invest in new kinds of programming that spoke to audiences who felt alienated by hollow stylistic displays.

Narrowcasting encouraged writers to use modes like satire that focused on the differences between Americans, and generated groups of loyal fans who identified with shows that spoke to their interests in particular. This television marketing trend meant that writers were asked to write for programs designed to offend some audiences while attracting others, and to make arguments based on assumptions about identity groups (Becker 84). Fragmenting audiences through narrowcasting was possible and desirable because the Cold War ended, making the maintenance of a common American cultural identity less important to television's functions. Without the national unity provided by the Cold War, differences between Americans seemed "starker and more relevant than ever" after Reagan's presidency, as his policies "widened and fortified" the economic and cultural gaps between social groups (Becker 27). Network and channel heads targeted demographics in terms of identity groups, and relied on differences to see audiences as lifestyle clusters. Programs promoted lifestyles and patterns of consumption by pitting identities against one another, cultivating and rewarding distinctions in terms of class, race and gender (Caldwell 261). Even outside of television, individuals were increasingly hailed as specific types of consumers, and as a result, "instead of trying to avoid or smooth over any differences that may have existed among people with different social experiences, target marketing exploited them in order to forge more intense connections between a product and its consumer" (Becker 84).

Television executives sought to address audiences as exclusive groups of consumers and articulate their channel's uniqueness by suggesting controversy and attempting to shock or fascinate viewers. As a result, writers during the cable era learned

to create scripts for niche audiences with “street-smart, young and raw” tastes using “edgy, ironic shows” (Caldwell 80, 96). Fox¹⁵ pioneered this approach to programming, creating sensationalistic, fast-paced shows with bold graphics, offering entertaining news and topical entertainment. Fox’s long-running show *The Simpsons* (1989 -), a subversive critique of the American family, embodies the network’s strategies. The show attracts viewers by speaking to them as an “in crowd” who can appreciate jokes grounded in rebellion and disdain for authority figures. Seeking to outpace more established networks in attracting viewers 18-49, Fox allowed both its news journalists and entertainment writers to take new liberties, framing fiction and nonfiction stories as exciting and controversial. Fox’s openness to more direct forms of satire and topical relevance helped establish the popular practice of engaging younger markets with edgy, contemporary television fare. Humor that situated audiences as underdogs against bureaucracy and old guard leadership with topical satire became a key component of winning youth markets and inspiring rhetorical writers with its irreverent tone.

The Simpsons’ (see image 4) most significant legacies are its irreverent tone and its reputation as a training ground for rhetorical writers. The show may use political and rhetorical satire in moments, but the purpose of the program is not to sustain a political critique. Instead, the show uses primarily social satire, parody and pastiche to explore the American family. While the program sometimes relies on topical jokes, like *The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour*, *The Simpsons*’ appeal and irreverence lies in the show’s foundational rebelliousness, reflected in its formal and generic play, but less in its rhetoric. The show’s writers are free to explore angry moments, including jokes, pranks and pratfalls laced with bitterness or condemnation, but ultimately portrays a nuclear family unity that keeps the show friendly for mainstream network audiences.

¹⁵ In fact, Fox, emerging during the cable era as the fourth U.S. network, built its reputation on stylized visuals and youth-oriented promotion.

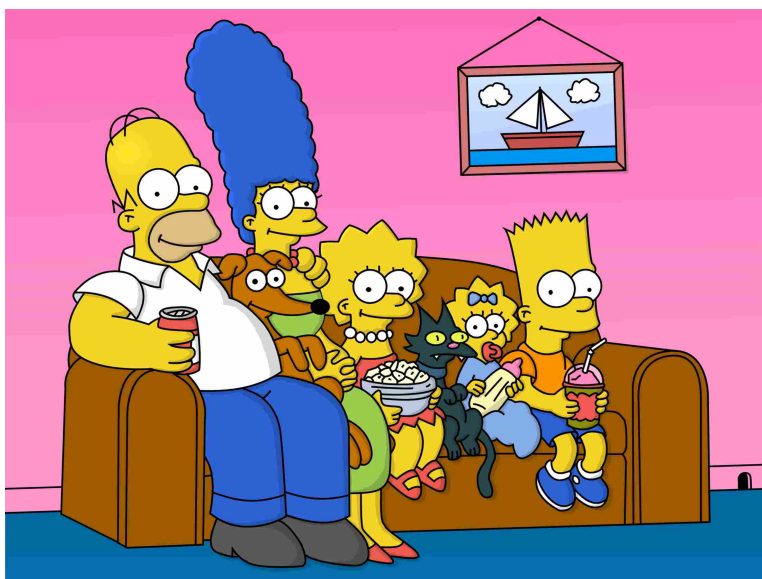


Image 4. Image of *The Simpsons* family. Vitto, Laura. “5 Absurd Fan Theories About *The Simpsons*.” Image: Fox Broadcasting Company. August 24, 2014. Web. <http://mashable.com/2014/08/24/simpsons-fan-theories/>

In an early *The Simpsons* episode I analyze below, entitled “Kamp Krusty” (1992), rebellion and disdain for authority figures, expressed through trickery and wisecracking, drive several narratives, showing one example of how writers encouraged subversive takes on relevant concepts. Once irreverence about social mores became a staple of television, more direct and biting forms of humor about politics, framed by more challenging rhetoric, could become acceptable. The episode begins in Bart’s dream, in which it is the last day of school and report cards are being distributed. Bart receives all F-minuses, and protests to his teacher that “If I don’t get a C average my dad won’t let me go to Camp Krusty.” “Well,” she responds, “it isn’t fair to the other children, but ok,” and changes his Fs to Cs. Bart replies, “Much obliged, doll,” and spansks her, to which she chuckles and responds: “Oh, Bart Simpson, I’m gonna miss you.” Then teachers and students rebel against the school, destroying the building together. But this sequence is cut short when Homer awakens Bart, who discovers that it is indeed the morning of the last day of school. At breakfast, the family converses about the summer, as Marge says “Homer, do you remember the promise you made to the children?” Homer replies: “Sure do. When you’re 18, you’re out the door!” missing

Marge's hint about summer camp. Bart asks about whether he really needs a C average to go to camp, to which Homer responds: "If you really want something in this life, you have to work for it. Now, quiet. They're about to announce the lottery numbers." These sequences deliberately work to show authority figures hypocritically undermining their own ethics for our enjoyment. This attitude is rooted in emerging contradictions between Cold-War American values like progress through hard work, idealism, and community, and an emerging fascination with marginal identities, and particularly with criticism of traditional power structures like schools.

The episode continues to characterize adult-child relationships and American values with irony. Later on at Springfield Elementary, Lisa's teacher hands out report cards, and Lisa is shocked and dismayed to discover that she's received a B+. The teacher tells her that, "Everyone needs a blotch on their permanent record." At the same time in Bart's classroom, his teacher gives him all D-minuses. When he poses to her the same dilemma about Camp Krusty as in his dream, she tells him to have a "Deee-lightful summer!" On the bus ride home, Bart forges his report card, changing the Ds into As. When he gets home, he watches television, seeing a Camp Krusty commercial promising that campers will spend the summer with Krusty the clown himself. Later on outside, when Bart gives Homer his report card, Homer remarks, "A+! You don't think much of me, do you boy?" "No, sir," Bart replies. Homer continues: "You know a D turns into a B so easily. You just got greedy." "So do I get to go to Camp?" Bart pleads. Homer says, "Now, Bart, we made this deal because I thought you would get good grades, and you didn't. So why should you pay for my mistake?" Bart is stunned: "You mean I can go?" "Yeah, I didn't want you hanging around all summer anyway," Homer admits. "Thanks, Dad! You're the best father a boy could ever have," Bart cheers. Although scripted, this brief exchange is steeped in irony that Hutcheon would say 'happens' in the viewers' mind because of the political moment: Homer's hypocrisy is part of a timely critique of American families' social and economic values. In this context, Bart's declaration that "You're the best father a boy could ever have" stings simultaneously with irony and joy. Eventually, the parents see their kids off to camp on a school bus. As the bus drives away,

the group of parents cheers and pops open a bottle of champagne. Homer and Marge spend the summer romancing each other and getting in shape, while Bart and Lisa suffer at a run-down Camp Krusty with drafty cabins, mean counselors, dangerous activities, and nothing but gruel to eat. Bart eventually leads a rebellion against the camp authorities, which Marge and Homer learn about on the news.

Although a rough sketch of one episode, this synopsis illustrates how Fox and the show's writers advanced the irreverent tones of satire and irony as popular television discourses amid the political and economic contexts that characterized the early cable era. *The Simpsons* invites viewers to critically reflect on their lifestyles with a comedy program. Indeed, with a town called "Springfield, USA," filled with detailed ancillary characters, it is difficult *not* to see *The Simpsons* as a sort of every-town, reflective of American life and its foibles. Each character represents a set of values, or a lack of values, creating irony when these characters interact and their values collide. In Bart's dream, adults and children alike unite behind their hatred of school, and later Bart is consigned to rebelling against authorities who are either spineless, dimwitted, or uncaring. Homer, the husband and father, is fat, slovenly, lazy, and abusive. Marge, the wife and mother, is selfless, creative, and devoted; the show implies that her talents are wasted on her unappreciative family. Meanwhile Bart, the oldest child, is a mischief-maker in constant battle with authority figures, all of whom are portrayed as hypocritical, insincere, weak, or stupid. In contrast, Lisa, the oldest daughter, is a sensitive intellectual, often out of place in a family, school, and town filled with ineptitude, pettiness, and indolence. Maggie, the baby, does not speak as she is always sucking on a pacifier, but her contented passivity acts as a metaphor for American attitudes. This highly critical reflection on American lifestyles framed topical discussions within a humorous tone that writers could repurpose for rhetorical discussions and political satires, both for television and during the 2007-8 writers strike.

The Simpsons was a flagship program for Fox as the newest network, and a pioneer in cable-era strategies. Bold, eye-catching, and cheekily topical, *The Simpsons* provided Fox with a youthful, sellable franchise. The show's wacky, un-idealized, but

lovable family was a refreshing contrast to staid sit-coms, and its animated format enabled the show to visualize any scenario. *The Simpsons* has been an enormous success for Fox and is one of the longest running programs in television history. The show also plays into the network's division between entertainment programming, which is boisterous, topical, and playful, and its news programming, which is conservative by default. But the show's largest contribution to rhetorical writing is the long list of *Simpsons*' writers who have gone on to work in shows based in rhetoric and political satire. Josh Lieb, who wrote for *The Simpsons* in 2002, went on to be a major writing contributor to *TDS* from 2007-2010 (imdb "*The Simpsons*" and "*The Daily Show*"). Greg Daniels and Bill Odinkirk both worked for *The Simpsons*, and went on to write for *Parks and Recreation* (2009 -) and *Mr. Show with Bob and Dave* (1995-1998), respectively (imdb "Greg Daniels" and "Bill Odinkirk"). The list is much longer, but these examples illustrate the wide influence of *The Simpsons* and its impact on writers' ability to blend satire with relevant contemporary issues.

In the early 1990s, new television spaces emerged in which rhetorical writers practiced and developed particular comedy formats and turned toward politics and television news for subject matter. Inspired by Fox programming strategies, cable channels like Comedy Central (CC) sought even more specified niche demographics. Launching in 1991, CC staked a claim on young, educated, primarily male audiences¹⁶, with topical and political humor that often utilized satire. The Clinton election in 1992 provided an idea opportunity for CC writers and performers to comment on notable changes in political news media coverage with the channel's "Indecision 1992" special¹⁷ (Gray 25-26). Since the first "Indecision" special, rhetorical writers and performers have used the channel to create shows that specialize in rhetorical political discussions framed by satire. In 1993 the channel launched *Politically Incorrect with Bill Maher* (1997-2002), a talk show featuring a mix of guests from TV personalities and comics, to

¹⁶ The channel's original name was Comedy TV, which was later changed to Comedy Central (Gray 25-6).

¹⁷ The special, formatted like a cable newscast, mocked both the campaign's strategies and television news coverage that sensationalized the elections like sports events.

political figures and activists. *The Daily Show* (1996 -), once Jon Stewart replaced former host Craig Kilborn, likewise became a place where news media, topical events, and politics could be explored satirically and in great rhetorical detail, using a TV news format that both mimics cable news and mocks its shortcomings. *The Daily Show*'s spin-off, *The Colbert Report* (2005 -) uses Stephen Colbert's performances as a conservative pundit to satirize right-wing politics. Additionally, *South Park* (1997 -), an animated social satire that follows the irreverent and often crude perspectives of four elementary school boys, has become one of Comedy Central's more lucrative programs. These successful shows popularized writing-focused programming that required sharp, witty dialogue.

Although Comedy Central built its brand on political satire in the 1990s, other networks were quick to invest in this kind of discourse, offering rhetorical writers and performers opportunities to address politics. Bravo produced documentarian Michael Moore's *The Awful Truth* from 1999-2000 while HBO funded *Da Ali G Show* (2003-2006) with Sacha Baron Coen, not to mention the increasingly frank discussions of race and class emerging in stand up routines like those of Chris Rock and Dennis Miller, re-aired on television (Gray 26). Comedy Central and other networks marketed these performances as raw and controversial, often with bold visual graphics emphasizing how such shows break boundaries of taste using topical issues. Like television parody in postwar U.S. culture gave viewers an air of cultural distinction, what Jonathan Gray has termed "Satire TV" defines its audiences as special and unique in terms of taste, intellect, and political approach.

In the late cable era, rhetorical satire became more profitable and visible on television than ever before, particularly when it addressed high-profile politics. As rhetorical writers became instrumental to channel branding, they continued to explore politics using even more aggressive, confrontational and judgmental aspects of satire. Network heads tolerated these trends because they were profitable, and sponsors, once fearful of offending audiences, were choosing particular channels and viewing slots to target specific audiences seeking out controversy. Particularly as politics became

increasingly polarized in the 2000s, confrontations between political views on vital issues of national policy provided fuel for satirical performances, ironic outlooks, and rhetorical conversations. Writers intertwined satire and irony “with serious political dialogue” because “these modes offer a particularly attractive method of political communication” given how politics was being discussed and represented in cable news (Day 3). This change represents a major turning point in television history: “We have passed a point in which entertainment television would only occasionally dip into politics .. such as *Rowan & Martin’s Laugh In*, *The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour*, *Saturday Night Live*” (Jones 7). In this television landscape, rhetorical writers who scripted political satire gained cultural currency that would later be important for how they handled future conflicts.

Rhetorical Writers Supplant Cable News

But rhetorical writers did more than simply advance political satire in television; they destroyed cable news’ authority and supplanted its position as a trusted source of topical information and analysis for young audiences. In the early 2000s, amid political discontent and an emerging Internet culture, rhetorical writers and performers for programs programs like *TDS* and *TCR* made themselves central to national conversations in ways that changed American politics, primed writers themselves for the 2007-8 strike. George W. Bush’s presidency, the September 11, 2001 attacks, subsequent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, economic downturn, corporate greed and other national problems abruptly confronted the American people in the early 2000s, and news coverage of these events called attention to how fragmented, shallow, and non-investigative TV journalism had become. Watching two different news networks might give one the impression of living in two entirely different countries: one in a war based on lies and misinformation struggling to keep its own economy afloat amid corporate greed, and another in a patriotic war doing its best to stay the course and beat away unpatriotic doubts. Profit-seeking cable news was not capable of holding politicians or corporations accountable. In a national landscape of polarization and sensationalism, many ordinary Americans began turning to satire, and to programs by rhetorical writers to understand the present moment.

These changes occurred at a profound moment in U.S. history, as America's fascination with its own political divisions nearly halted at the threat of war. Just as comedians like Jon Stewart and Bill Maher had begun using rhetorical satire to closely examine intense political disagreements, and to criticize the government (mocking George W. Bush's directionless new presidency), the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center in New York City temporarily stalled all critical discourse about national politics, and raised the stakes of making critical political observations in entertainment television. Immediately following the attacks, even light "television comedy — and particularly the ironic sort — received a great deal of attention ... suddenly it was assumed to be in poor taste for TV comedians to crack topical jokes" (Gray 28). Bill Maher got in hot water over comments he made during a discussion of terrorism, and eventually his show was cancelled (Gray 28). Politicians and news anchors retaliated against rhetorical writers and performers by implying that being funny about 'serious' issues was not a way of dealing with grief or making sense of the world, but of mocking victims. But importantly, rhetorical writers and performers did not stop working, and while *SNL* sought mayor Rudy Giuliani's live TV approval to be funny again, *TDS* and rhetorical shows focused on political critique had enough clout and ratings to continue without 'permission'¹⁸. Rhetorical satirists' commitment to effecting important political critiques of powerful people and institutions, including news networks, gave young audiences a sense of representation and writers a sense of value and agency.

More specifically, rhetorical writers gave young and liberal Americans ways to navigate a landscape of media news and politics characterized by irony, and to potentially sustain proactive discussions despite polarizing cross-talk. This work became even more important as political problems escalated: George W. Bush's administration exercised a high level of influence over the news media, while over time, and as U.S. military efforts were launched in Iraq, questions began to surface about the evidence for war, while scandals like the abuses at Abu Ghraib caused many Americans to question our military

¹⁸ "9/11 Tribute: Mayor Rudy Giuliani & Lorne Michaels." Saturday Night Live. NBC, September 29, 2001. <https://screen.yahoo.com/cold-open-9-11-tribute-070000854.html>. Web.

efforts. Republican and Democratic politicians promoted (often through television news and ads) increasingly oppositional stances on key issues from foreign policy to healthcare and social security, which compromised their ability converse logically or govern ethically. Cable news workers exacerbated these extreme positions in sensational ways for commercial gain, disregarding the opinions of others or even factual evidence. For example, while news outlets like MSNBC investigated questions concerning the Iraq war and reported on the relationships between risky Wall Street trading and economic problems, networks like Fox News equated questioning the war with not “supporting the troops” and focused far less on faulting Wall Street for U.S. economic decline. Rhetorical writers and performers responded with programming that satirized extreme conservative or liberal opinions by putting their public statements, proposed laws, and party platforms into conversations that were orchestrated rhetorically to expose the unrealistic nature of these extremes.

“Fake News,” a format used by many comedy shows to frame topical humor, became one of the primary ways rhetorical writers organized satires to connect with viewers who were disillusioned by politics and cable news. Perhaps the two most notable programs in this genre today are *Daily Show with Jon Stewart* (1998 -) (see image 5) and *The Colbert Report* (2005 -) (see image 6). *The Daily Show* explores news media, topical events, and politics with rhetorical satire using a television news format that mimics cable news and mocks its shortcomings. On *The Daily Show*’s spin-off, *The Colbert Report*, which premiered in 2005, Stephen Colbert performs as a conservative pundit to satirize and critique right-wing politics from an intellectual standpoint. These shows are formatted to mock news and political punditry programs by rhetorically calling into question distinctions between ‘real’ and ‘fake,’ ‘news’ and ‘entertainment.’ For example, cable news networks often work with the federal government to handle the president’s image, and stage political ‘events’ for television promotion. These manufactured happenings call into question whether politicians are concerned with *actually* governing or with *being seen* to govern. *TDS* and *TCR* point out the frequent contradictions between verifiable facts and commercial promotions to help audiences recognize these ironies.

Fake news helps rhetorical writers for shows like *TDS* and *TCR* show how cable news falls short of expectations in terms of factual information, minimal bias, nuanced discussion, and indeed, makes it “difficult to distinguish the informative from the distracting, the valuable from the manipulative” (Baym 4).



Image 5 (top). Jon Stewart on *The Daily Show* set. Lee, Jennifer and Sewell Chan. “Deep Secrets of *The Daily Show*” Photo: Michael Nagle for the *NYT*. *NYT*: City Room: Blogging from the Five Boroughs. November 10, 2008. Web. http://cityroom.blogs.nytimes.com/2008/11/10/secrets-of-the-daily-show/?_php=true&_type=blogs&_r=0

Image 6 (bottom). Image from *The Colbert Report*. “*The Colbert Report*: Recap.” *Kingoftheflatscreen.com*. Official Comedy Central Photo. August 1, 2014. Web. <http://kingoftheflatscreen.com/the-colbert-report-recap/>

Both *TDS* and *TCR* deconstruct arguments or lines of reasoning featured in high-profile political speech, public policy, or cable news, staging rhetorical conversations that re-contextualize fragments of news programs in a satirical light. Using excerpts of video

from a variety of television and internet sources, *TDS* and *TCR* animate arguments to interest audiences who would otherwise be excluded from these discussions of government and policy by bureaucratic language. The satirical perspective of these shows allow rhetorical writers intermingle discourses from popular culture, left- and right-wing politics, conjuring satire by illuminating the contrasts between these perspectives. These shows are not simply applying comedy to politics; they are situating arguments and perspectives pointedly in relation to one another, encouraging audiences to recognize ironies, through both scripted monologues and performed interactions. Removing cable news moments from their original contexts and showing them as evidence of journalistic laziness or collusion with government encourages viewers to apply the same satirical logic to news media individually.

Although *TDS* and *TCR* were build on trends of audience fragmentation, they now reinforce a sense of unity and pleasure for viewers based on the shared recognition that cable news and political posturing are constructed fluff avoiding America's most critical and pressing national issues. Both shows reveal cable news to be funny, particularly when compared to its potential to provide information and genuine discussion. What fake news shows like *TDS* and *TCR* succeed in doing is seizing upon the shallow nature of contemporary public discourse, and thus becoming "focal points for existing dissatisfaction with the political sphere and its media coverage" (Day 44). By performing a newscast in an artificial way, for instance, *TDS* draws attention to the ways that many political media events are equally staged and lacking in substance. Unlike the monologic nature of network and cable news, rhetorical satire in fake news is dialogic, capable of staging inquiries, disagreements, and multiple points of view simultaneously, at a national moment when suspicion of politicians and news media demands this sort of scrutiny (Day 73-74). As comedies examining the shallowness of cable news programs, political ideas, and public figures, have become known for their earnestness, complexity, and commitment to accuracy.

The writers crafting the rhetorical satires for *TDS* and *TCR* help viewers understand national politics and place them in an imagined horizontal relationship with

other similar viewers in similar niche audiences. Narrowcasting television's political programming based on identity politics causes audiences to form constellations of media publics, or audience groups that are represented and rallied through niche programs. Also called counter-publics, these groups are not merely categories of people, but "intertextual frameworks for understanding texts against an organized background of the circulation of other texts" (Day 16). These publics are imagined relationships between strangers, sustained through media circulation (Day 16). *TDS* and *TCR*, as well as the videos that television writers produced during the strike, produce texts "which provide a focal point for many who ... hold similar opinions" and "look to satirists as representatives who will push their particular worldview into the wider public sphere" (Day 10). During George W. Bush's conservative presidency or a particularly harrowing union conflict, satirists like Jon Stewart do the public a service by showing how the rhetorical structures of news and politics are duping citizens. By exposing these structures and representing corresponding feelings of alienation, writers and performers like Stewart empower viewers, inspiring fan communities based on shared political views, intellectual ideas, and rhetorical arguments that may fall outside the mainstream. In *TDS* and *TCR*, rhetorical writers expertly situate evidence to speak truth to power in visible ways.

Writing for the Internet: Internet Technologies and Must-Click TV

Internet technologies have been instrumental in rhetorical writers speaking truth to power, but have also contributed to the conditions that caused writers to strike in 2007. An important driving factor in the success of online videos campaigning for writers during the 2007-8 strike, was a wide population of internet users accustomed to nomadic digital practices like sharing links, interacting in various forms, and creating creative remixes of television material. Having online spaces outside of television means that contradictory political ideas and discourses are no longer simply broadcast discretely, and that people and ideas previously separated by broadcasting structures may intersect

(Jenkins 3). Henry Jenkins calls this process “convergence,”¹⁹ or how content flows across multiple media platforms, and how fans follow such content, encouraging activities like navigation, cooperation, and a host of social confrontations, as formerly fragmented groups address one another as a part of this process (Jenkins 3). Online, “ordinary citizens” can express their political opinions, seek members of similar niche communities, share their favorite rhetorical satires, or craft satires themselves from the Internet’s vast catalogue of contradictory arguments (Jones 21). While scholars disagree on whether trends like online ‘interactivity’ and ‘convergence’ are primarily the products of top-down corporate marketing strategies or grassroots networks, it is clear that “the audience has moved beyond its role as simple receptor of top-down political communication as traditionally established by elite gatekeepers” like journalists and politicians (Caldwell 260, Jones 21).

By the early 2000s, television *viewers* were simultaneously becoming Internet *users* capable of sharing and reflecting upon television content. Users navigate online spaces, “accustomed to the process of sharing with their friends that entertainment which they enjoy most — immediately” (Ross 110). Internet use accounts in part for the “pervasiveness of ironic/satiric humor,” evidenced by its prominence in “email inboxes and Facebook updates ... on Youtube and Google Video ... with short clips of *The Daily Show* forwarded widely among friends, transcending television schedules and national borders” (Day 24-25). Like their favorite fake news anchors, users can compare newscasts, re-watch television material at their leisure, and even upload material, mashing up clips from multiple shows to suggest new meanings (Day 42). Lowered production costs and improved consumer technologies “ranging from the photocopier to the home computer and the video cassette recorder,” and today personal computers and editing software, give users the ability to “reshape and recirculate” media flows (Jenkins

¹⁹ Henry Jenkins describes convergence as “the flow of content across multiple media platforms, the cooperation between multiple media industries, and the migratory behavior of media audiences who will go almost anywhere in search of the kinds of entertainment experiences they want,” a set of “technological, industrial, cultural, and social changes” (2-3).

149-150). These technology-dependent viewing practices have keenly awakened viewers to the superficiality, bias, and corruption of cable news and its relationship to politics. While television newscasts remain insular and unreflective, internet users are able to check facts, watch multiple newscasts simultaneously, and critique flaws in TV's authority.

While media companies learned to harness fan practices for promotional purposes, they relied on writers for the labor of composing content for internet users, and encouraging those users to interact. But at the same time, the vast presence of amateur content-creators online began to cause serious problems for professional writers, as their work lost value among millions of videos by fans who worked for free. This problem emerged at a moment when television executives were maneuvering to compete in online markets and cutting costs. Executives relied on user-generated content more and more, and many channels were enjoying the profits from unscripted 'reality' programs like *Survivor* (2000 -) and *American Idol* (2002 -) that functioned without the expense of writing staffs. Meanwhile, writers working in television found themselves responsible for creating more and more content to expand shows into online franchises, but without any extra compensation. Simultaneously, networks and channels counted on writers and their understandings of entertainment online, but threatened the value of their work by moving toward unscripted programming whenever possible. Despite the extra work they were doing and their centrality to moving television concepts online, writers knew that executives would not hesitate to cancel scripted shows.

Tensions over compensation between writers and executives that led to the 2007-8 writers strike emerged in part because they disagreed about how television should function. Executives of major media companies were trying to "channel [fan activity] into ... revenue streams," to compete in internet spaces (Ross 18). They aimed to compete using a programming strategy that Jennifer Gillan calls "Must-Click TV" (Gillan 5). This strategy was specifically designed to help media conglomerates compete "in an environment in which viewers could choose not only from a channel spectrum full of original hour and half-hour scripted series, but also from a variety of web-, gaming-, and

mobile-based entertainment content” (Gillan 5). Media producers, rather than curtailing online practices — as had been the typical response in the 1990s — began embracing these activities as free labor and promotion (Gillan 3). Fans have increasingly seen Internet platforms as a means of collaborative creativity, imagination, and even action surrounding television programs. Networks and cable channels have also found this activity and unprecedented level of access for fans positive: in a landscape of media abundance, it no longer pays to be elitist, but instead be ubiquitous.

Must-click TV was problematic for both writers and consumers, because it concentrated power in the hands of media executives, while devaluing the labor necessary for television production by exploiting consumer labor. Must-click trends were a way executives could emphasize efficiency and revenue over quality, but they also bred resentment among writers and performers (Banks 23). To create “multiple ways of selling content to consumers” media companies maximize fans’ affective investments by conceiving of television shows as multi-platform franchises that include TV programs, movies, websites, and video games — thereby, maximizing and controlling fan activities (Gillan 1).²⁰ While executives demanded additional written and creative content that make up these immersive multi-media worlds, most of this extra labor was not compensated by media companies because it was considered “promotional” material (Gillan 16). Yet many veteran television writers had to learn additional skill sets in order to create online content and sustain fan communities (Banks 20). At the same time, cable channels and networks, once multiplied by cable competition, were — thanks to deregulation — free to merge, encouraging “an alarming concentration of the ownership of mainstream commercial media, with a small handful of multi-national media conglomerates dominating all sectors of the entertainment industry” (Jenkins 18). Writers

²⁰ Niche cable channels like Comedy Central, which developed *Motherlode*, Nickelodeon with *TurboNick*, and MTV with *MTV Overdrive*, were among the first to utilize external servers to supply fans with entertainment that extended TV content into online spaces (Ross 110). Because channels like Comedy Central were leaders in Must-click trends like website investment, fans of edgier cable content like television satire that require subscription were among the first and most prolific sharers of clips, remixes and tributes to their favorite shows on sites like Youtube.

were bargaining for compensation against behemoths with unlimited capital and increasing power over creative workers.

While all writers found their value under-recognized and under-compensated, rhetorical writers were in a position to contest this position with the very skills that were being under-valued. As satire became a prominent way of understanding political conflicts, rhetorical writers used the mode — and their skills at producing videos for online audiences who would share their messages — to call attention to their own conflicts with executives. *TDS* and *TCR* were particularly influential for the writers' strike videos in 2007 and 2008 because their segments were among the first and highest quality fake news shows devoted to self-consciously examining and re-focusing public political discourse using rhetorical satire. Indeed, *TDS* and *TCR* established some of the fake news conventions that were most effective for clarifying arguments during the strike.

Understanding the history of tensions between television executives and writers helps to set the stage for chapter III's discussion of the 2007-8 writers strike. The history unfolded in this chapter also provides context for rhetorical satirists' use of online videos to demonstrate their skills, and control representations of writing's cultural value. Knowing online markets and their potential better than media executives, rhetorical writers were able to make their case to wide television audiences *outside of television*, relying on particular fan activities that executives could not anticipate. Central to the popularity of strike videos like Videologblog²¹ by *The Colbert Report* writers, are the techniques rhetorical writers used to determine how their messages would be received and circulated online. Because of their extensive experience writing for both television and the Internet, rhetorical writers were adept at using the internet and its practices to their advantage. The videos that rhetorical writers and performers made during the strike were arguments for their compensation for online work, but also evidence of their value.

²¹ "Videologblog" is one of the videos I analyze in Ch. 4 that was made by striking writers in support of the WGA strike in 2007-8.

CHAPTER III

TELEVISION WRITERS & WRITING: A JOURNEY TO THE 2007-8 STRIKE

Chapter III builds on the media histories established in chapters I and II by focusing specifically on the histories of television writers and rhetorical writing. This chapter tracks the fluctuating value assigned to authorship and television writers over several decades to show how their functions have been critical to public discourse. By chronicling the ongoing devaluation of television writing, in legal, economic, and technological terms, I discuss the ways rhetorical writers have responded to these struggles. I will also illustrate how writers and performers have unionized, combatted censorship, and challenged media executives in ways that contributed to the 2007-8 strike. Tensions between executives, represented by the American Motion Picture and Television Producers (AMPTP) and writers/performers, represented by the Writers Guild of America (WGA), set the stage for this chapter's examination of the strike's events and outcome. Describing the factors at the heart of the 2007-8 writers' strike shows how rhetorical satirists' used online videos to demonstrate their skills outside of television, and controlled representations of writing's cultural value. Writers strike videos not only demonstrate that online content can make money — and therefore that writers deserve compensation for it — but also that creative writers and performers don't need television or its structures to reach the public and spread messages widely, a fact that elevated their status in media industries.

The beginning of this chapter sets up a brief history of authorship in U.S. law, showing how corporations legally became authors of their employees' contracted works. This loss of ownership in exchange for payment provides a great deal of insight into the conflicts between writers and their industry employers even today. Following this explanation, the chapter lays out a basic analysis of the structures of and relationships between writers and employers, as well as the Hollywood unions involved in the 2007/8 Strike. Within this discussion is a detailed explanation of how factors like network standards, blacklisting practices, industrial relationships, and economic imperatives have created censorship challenges for television writers and performers throughout television

history. After describing how Hollywood's systems and relationships create corporate censorship for television writers and performers, I will give a recent history of union conflict between the WGA and AMPTP. Finally, the chapter explains the causes, conflicts, stakes, strategies, events, and eventual resolution of the 2007-8 Writer's Strike, which won writers residuals for their work when it is screened online. I explain both the significance of the conflict and why rhetorical writers' protests were particularly salient given the emergence of online media and deep oppositions within the television industry. Although not a comprehensive history of TV writers in Hollywood, this targeted account highlights how writers have approached union conflicts in the past and the significance of rhetorical and satirical performances to their more recent industrial and cultural positions during the 2007-8 strike.

The project, and this chapter in particular, attempts to amend the lack of research on television writers, which I ascribe to popular notions of the solitary romantic author. I argue that the value of television authorship is critical to issues of creative and political freedom. As this project illustrates with its attention to television writers' struggles, the difficulty of making rhetorical and satirical arguments about political issues is directly tied to television's primary function as a commercial tool for mass marketing. The medium's significance to American culture means that groups of creative workers, political factions, and executives have all sought to control its content. Television executives have worked hard to disempower writers and limit their control over what airs on such an omnipresent medium. Television writers are also at a disadvantage because their jobs descriptions breach popular ideas of what "authorship" means (Auerbach 95). Indeed, television writing contradicts many myths about authorship,²² for which many hold the traditional writing profession in high esteem. Writing for television means collaborating with a team of writers and ceding complete control of material and autonomy to corporations (Plasketes 27). The ultimate goal of this chapter is to discuss

²² Writers (and indeed, artists) in American culture are often popularly imagined as solitary geniuses who do not make artistic compromises for commercial payoff. These understandings of writing and creativity are rooted in Romantic traditions from the 19th century (Auerbach 95).

the 2007-8 writers strike and establish its significance to media industries by examining a history of television authorship, the strike's causes, events, and eventual resolution.

Writing for television is a profession that has been persecuted legally, economically and industrially in ways that shaped the 2007-8 strike. Since television is a highly commercial medium, TV writers are implicated in a process of branding and selling beyond the exchange of ideas. For many Romantic purists, the fact that television writers must work from others' ideas or guidelines divides them from more 'authentic' writers of other forms like novels (Auerbach 95). Instead of imagining writing as a form of creative labor, there is a general tendency to imagine creative writing as "the result of inspiration, genius, or ... tenacity" (Auerbach 95). Often, TV writers experience a "catch-22": their work is perceived as less valuable by the general public because of its industrial production, while the employers of television writers still consider writing as less a form of labor and more as a form of wit or leisure. This chapter demonstrates how television executives and sponsors have controlled and devalued writers' and performers' work through various legal and corporate means. These methods of control include censorship, idea theft, low compensation, and job insecurity, which writers must unionize — and sometimes strike — to combat.

Mass Media & Writing in the 20th Century

Most Americans are unaware of how writers' legal and industrial rights impact their cultural imaginations and free discourse, and of how these rights have changed drastically during the 20th century. The role of the writer shifted from creator and owner of his or her own work to that of unionized employee at a time when the national need for mass media required large-scale collaboration. As a result, corporate ownership of mass media centralized profits, while writers and other employees unionized to demand fair treatment. This sweeping transition in what it means to be an 'author' was a great departure from how the constitution once explicitly empowered writers and guarded their interests.

Writers were originally protected by the U.S. constitution as owners of their works, but this protection was reversed in the early 20th century by giving ownership to

employers —eventually initiating tensions between writers, who create material, and executives or owners of mass media like newspapers, radio, and eventually television, who sell it (Barnouw 16). The U.S. constitution gave Congress the right to “Promote the Progress of Science and useful Arts, by securing for Limited Times to Authors and Inventors the exclusive Right to their respective Writings and Discoveries” (Barnouw 16). By stipulating that writers, as creative intellectuals, were owners of their own work, this provision was “intended to nurture and promote the flow of knowledge and ideas,” and strengthen “the position of the author” (Barnouw 16). But in 1909, congress passed a new copyright law that changed the meaning of the word “author,” to include “an employer in the case of works made for hire,” meaning that employers and corporations had become the owners and authors of their employees’ on-the-job creative products. While the original constitutional clause had given writers exclusive rights to publish and sell their work (benefitting the gentry class of what was then an agricultural economy), this new copyright law meant that employers (by 1909, wealthy industrialists) could profit from the works of many writers without being creative laborers themselves. As television became a mass medium, divisions between executives, who owned programming rights, and writers and performers, who performed all of the creative and intellectual labor, formed the roots of dissatisfaction and conflict that led to many union conflicts, including the strike in 2007-8.

By making employers and corporations “authors” of their employees’ works, Congress eliminated protections for industrial writers at the very time when industrial writing for films was becoming lucrative. During early television history, this meant that writers did not receive air credit, had no claim or rights to their written material, and were not compensated for rebroadcasts (Barnouw 18). Once a TV writer wrote a script, he or she lost control of its direction, and its content could be completely overhauled, or its messages reversed (Barnouw 18). Networks routinely barred writers from rehearsals as well (Barnouw 18). However, because industrial writers had become employees, they were able to unionize (Barnouw 20). Effectively, Congress had traded industrial writers’ control over written material, in exchange for a say in the collective conditions of their

employment. This legal reversal alienated film, radio, and eventually television writers from their works and limited their creative freedom by anchoring them within employer-employee relationships.

As a result, relationships between writers in mass media like film, radio, and television, and the producers, executives, studios, networks, stations, and cable channels that employ them, have traditionally been strained at best. Writers' frustrations have coalesced around two related issues: creative control and compensation. These tensions later contributed to the 2007-8 strike, when writers in the WGA used rhetorical arguments and satire in online videos to illustrate their creative worth and unfair treatment. Writing practices in television emerged from those in radio, and creative workers in Hollywood from radio and television were largely unionized in 1933, when studios reacted to the Depression by cutting all but executive salaries by 50 percent to "save the industry" from economic ruin (Rannow 162). Organizing collectively gave writers and performers ways to increase compensation and creative control through contract bargains.

Union History: Tension Between Writers and Executives

Eventually, radio, television, and film writers formed the Writers Guild of America in 1954 (Paul & Kleingartner 269-270). Residual payments, a critical aspect of writers' compensation today, were first introduced in 1941, when The American Federation of Radio Artists' Transcription Code stipulated that performers be paid each time their work was replayed (Paul & Kleingartner 269-270). By the 1960s residual payments had become common practice, after "major studios surrendered in the face of bitter strikes by both SAG (Screen Actors Guild) and the WGA" (Paul & Kleingartner 269-270). Unionized writers have long understood residuals as a hard won and necessary compensation, as television writer Jerry Rannow remembers: "They were wrenched out of management's pockets ... there were long strikes in which writers walked the picket line for months to get some kind of proper monetary recognition for their creative efforts" (165). While media writers as a whole have always struggled for fair treatment from studios and networks, the network era of television, beginning in the 1950s, saw

blacklisting practices that radically deepened divisions between writers and media executives.

While chapter I briefly addressed blacklisting, this chapter examines more closely how blacklisting influenced censorship and union practices into later decades, and intimidated individual writers personally. Censorship has always been a part of writing for mass media responsible to the federal government. Since 1923, the major networks had upheld a Production Code under the National Association of Broadcasting (NAB), regulating what could and couldn't be said on radio and thereby avoiding government intervention (Silverman 7). In 1934 the Communications Act created the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) to regulate the film and broadcasting industries (Silverman 7). When the Production Code was extended to television in 1952, the FCC urged broadcasters to air adequate amounts of educational programming, but were generally more concerned about what *should not* be broadcast than what actually was shown. (Silverman 7). The extended code forbade “profanity and obscenity, any words derisive of any race, color, creed” and “any attacks on religion” (Silverman 7). It also stressed that “respect be maintained for the sanctity of marriage and the value of the home,” and therefore “illicit sex relations are not to be treated as commendable” (Silverman 7). Additionally, “narcotics addictions should not be represented except as a vicious habit, and ... the detailed presentation of brutality or physical agony by sight or by sound” were also not permitted (Silverman 7). The code regulated broadcast standards according to matters of mass audience taste, morality, and the public good — all vague and conveniently malleable concepts. While the FCC could potentially revoke broadcasting licenses, the commission only rarely involved itself with broadcasts, and only after-the-fact if sufficient complaints made such an intervention necessary. What limited television writers' creative freedom was not so much the FCC, but the pre-emptive power it bestowed on network executives, who quickly panicked under commercial pressure (Doherty 34).

The 2007-8 strike was the direct result of the established cultural and professional distance between executives and writers. This division between creative workers like

writers and performers and executives was reinforced by an ongoing culture of exploitation, secretive employment practices, and unequal compensation. Although deregulation, cable, and Internet trends have resulted in enormous media growth and profit, creative workers have reaped only small rewards, while horizontally-integrated media conglomerates enabled executives to amass enormous wealth (Auerbach 96-97). Additionally, media conglomerates today, unlike traditional networks, are increasingly more likely to be run by executives and CEOs unfamiliar with the creativity central to television programming. While network heads in the network era worked their way up the ladder in fields related to media, consolidation and deregulation have resulted in conglomerates run by executives with backgrounds in business and finance, who are better equipped to manage several franchises simultaneously (Gillan 10-11). But because executives are inexperienced with media production, they are less able than their predecessors to handle problems within any one media franchise or sector, and more apt to treat labor disputes uniformly (Gillan 225-227).

Oppositional relationships between television writers and media executives have a long history, including, most notably, Hollywood's blacklisting practices during the Red Scare. As chapter I details, blacklisting served as a powerful example of how writers' levels of creative freedom and creativity mirror aspects of national politics. But blacklisting was made worse for writers because of union and media industry tensions that divided their group interests. For one thing, by the 1950s film and television writers were no longer concentrated solely in New York City, as they had been during the 1930s and 1940s. While many film writers remained in New York, television writers —along with most aspects of film and television production — relocated to Los Angeles to be on set for fast-paced television productions (Auerbach 95). This geographical reorientation split the WGA into East and West factions and made it more difficult for the union to organize effectively (Auerbach 96). Hollywood labor unions, formerly strong, became divided by the New York/Los Angeles relocation (Auerbach 96).

By the early 1950s, internal union divisions and Hollywood's competitive atmosphere made it difficult for writers to collectively fight for fair treatment. Hollywood

provided fertile ground for vengeance and paranoia: because of labor disputes between writers and network executives, many network heads remained bitter over the impact of progressive movements from the 1930s and 1940s (Smith 28). Old conflicts, as well as competition between and within unions led many industry workers to use the ‘Red Scare’ to their advantage, scrambling to name their competitors as communists, rather than supporting fellow workers or fighting anti-communist persecution together (Smith 28). In an era when progressive ideas and liberal values were being publicly equated with communism and therefore anti-Americanism, McCarthy had no trouble linking Hollywood writers and performers to liberalism and progressivism, as many had unionized, protested, and worked for the Popular Front during previous decades (Smith 28). Executives and even fellow writers and performers turned on one another, degrading the value and power of writers generally, and elevating the stakes of expressing political opinions in television.

Blacklisting was so powerful and devastating because it imitated ‘business as usual,’ and validated practices that made writers’ livelihoods subject to the whims of executives. Since typical relations between writers and executives have almost always been tense, blacklisting justified executives in further discouraging writers and performers from investing personally in their work and value to the industry by treating them as expendable. Even when political blacklisting later ended, forms of corporate censorship that developed with blacklisting increasingly became standard ways for network executives to control television content. Blacklisting was in part so devastating for writers and their standing in Hollywood because it was carried out secretly through indirect, corporate means, in an industry in which connections and continual project offers make or break careers (Silverman 8). Although a writer could be called to testify before HUAC, the fatal blow to a writer’s career came when the phone inexplicably stopped ringing — was it just a lull or had you been ‘named,’ and thus deemed a liability? (Silverman 12). Blacklisting’s secretive approach made such censorship all the more insidious, because hiring and firing decisions seemed to be made under the auspices of professional standards or taste (Silverman 12). Cooperative and secure in their

dominance, the big three networks regularly exchanged information with ad agencies and sponsors about blacklisted performers and artists (Silverman 12).

Although networks made sure that performers were “cleared” before they could go on the air, and that anyone on “the list” was not used, writers and performers were not usually informed of their status, and instead were given any number of “brush offs” or labelled “bad actors” (Silverman 12). Because networks were scrambling to please sponsors, they unofficially banned performers in order to avoid “the appearance of supporting communism,” and limited subject matter to only the most safe and mundane (Silverman 13). CBS head Frank Stanton “instituted a system of loyalty questionnaires and clearances for all employees,” which he later rationalized by explaining that these measures were intended to respond to extreme pressure from sponsors, who in turn were under pressure from shop owners and distributors (Smith 153). In a system propelled by fear, ambition, and appearances, blacklisting not only gutted writers’ solidarity, but also their senses of creative possibility and professional security. Meanwhile, networks did nothing to buffer writers and their shows from sponsors’ complaints, and largely worked to support sponsors’ concerns for being represented only with and among inoffensive content. Writers bore the brunt of this policy, producing squeaky-clean scripts — or else.

Examples of rhetorical satire and political organizing in network television are rare, but there is considerable evidence to suggest that writers and performers were punished for their political views and satirical work. Philip Loeb (see image 7), although not a television writer, was a television performer, union organizer, and frequent editorial writer whose rhetorical arguments galvanized union members. Loeb was best known for his role as Molly’s husband “Jake” on writer/producer Gertrude Berg’s hit series *The Goldbergs* (Radio: 1929- 1946, Television: 1949-1956), a successful radio and later television show during television’s earliest years (Smith 114)²³. Loeb was equally committed to acting and activism, as a co-founding member of AFTRA (the American

²³ *The Goldbergs* was a successful, character-driven domestic serial written by Gertrude Berg, who also played wife and mother Molly Goldberg on the CBS show. Loeb’s career, as well as Berg’s and the survival of the show all suffered as a result of the blacklist (Smith 114).

Federation of Television and Radio Artists) and part of Actors' Equity Association, a group and magazine devoted to furthering fair working conditions for actors (Smith 107-8). Since the 1930s, when left-wing politics was far more popular in the U.S. cultural climate, Loeb had been a particularly outspoken advocate for a number of liberal and pro-union causes. But as the Red Scare loomed heavily on the American consciousness, Loeb's politics came under increasing scrutiny, and he was named one of the 151 entertainers with supposed Communist affiliations when *Red Channels* was published in 1950 (O'Dell 47).



Image 7 (left). Image of Philip Loeb. “Philip Loeb.” Wikipedia.org. Last modified July 24, 2014. Web. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Philip_Loeb

Loeb's blacklisting sent his life into a rapid decline, as no TV network was willing to hire a 'controversial personality' associated with "Communist" ties (Smith 157-7). In the end, Loeb was abandoned by even the fellow actors he had labored tirelessly to empower, and found himself without work for five long years, with a dependent son and mounting debts (Smith 157-163). On September 2, 1955, a maid at the Taft Hotel in New York discovered Loeb's body on the bed, next to a bottle of sleeping pills (Smith 162). Although he left no suicide note, his sister Sabina Loeb, was certain that a combination of health and "his political troubles" (Smith 162). His thirty-five year career "as a teacher, actor, and political activist was erased in the span of eighteen months" (Smith 162). But

Loeb's premature and tragic ending was not simply the result of his holding liberal viewpoints — Loeb had been a thorn in network executives' side for years, and the HUAC investigations gave this conservative group a way to end his efforts, which included encouraging union activity through satirical performances and rhetorically deft editorials that made his enemies look foolish (Loeb 9-12, Smith 137-144).

Although direct examples of Loeb's satirical political activism are rare, there is plenty of evidence to ascertain that he was a considerable force in motivating union members to achieve their goals and challenge network management through satirical performances at union meetings and witty rhetorical pieces in *Equity* magazine.²⁴ In one such editorial from 1935, Loeb shatters his opponent's argument with sharp responses that comedically call attention to its logical holes. His opponent, Mr. Turner, sides with the union's incumbent party, which held an election without consideration of Loeb's new party, the Independents. Loeb, in opposition, argues that new ballots should be distributed. Loeb writes: "says Mr. Turner, 'members voting by mail could vote but once.' Article III, Section 4 says nothing of the kind. Moreover, Mr. Turner [says that] 'members voting by mail, could come to the meeting to vote a second time.' This kind of argument defies comprehension" (Loeb 12). He adds: "Mr. Turner insists that under the Constitution, each member has 'but one vote,' and he tries to make it appear that the Independents counseled a violation of this provision. Mr. Turner confuses 'ballot' with 'vote'" (Loeb 12). In this passage, Loeb quotes his opponent's own words, disputing each point individually. By refuting each component of the argument, Loeb exposes Turner's insincerity and use of bureaucratic language to obscure *Equity* procedures from readers. In contrast, Loeb's logic defines his perspective as earnest and straightforward. This kind of rhetorical picking apart of bureaucratic procedures that had been used to shelter favoritism and the status quo were grating to long-time management of both TV networks and Actors' unions, who resented Loeb's efforts (Smith 137-144).

Although Loeb's history may seem distant from the 2007-8 Writers Strike, his activities model the kinds of rhetorical work that the strike videos used to combat

²⁴ *Equity* magazine is a guild publication for actors.

television executives. In addition to his editorials, Loeb is also remembered for his satirical performances, which instigated conflicts and solidified challenges against old Equity leadership (Smith 109). Because Loeb worked closely with oppositional groups, allowing union members to recognize his satire of network executives was instrumental to enhancing guild solidarity. Loeb encouraged actors to laugh at network heads *together*, and in the process to recognize their shared oppositional identity. Just as the 2007-8 strikers were not afraid of inviting conflict, Loeb encouraged confrontation; rising to speak at an Equity meeting, he once remarked that “I don’t feel at home without a few hisses,” (Smith 109).

The influence of Loeb’s satirical performances, which strengthened the resolve of creative workers, illustrates why he became a political target during the Red Scare. Other union members remembered Loeb’s unique performances as motivational events: “In those church meetings, one man stood out from the crowd of almost two hundred performers. Loeb (who was well known for his razor-sharp wit as he was for his commitment to political issues) kept everyone entertained with his *on-the-spot impersonations of the current Equity leadership* ... it was the intensity he brought to political discussions and debates ... to challenge Equity’s status quo” [my emphasis] (Smith 96). Rita Morley Harvey, who authored a history of AFTRA, remembers Loeb’s impact on the Actors’ Forum: “Attendance had soared ... some say *as much to see Phil Loeb do his hilarious takeoffs on Equity incumbents as to discuss the issues*” [my emphasis] (Smith 137). Loeb’s clever use of humor blended with political and union goals made him a powerful force for the Actors Equity union, particularly in his ability to galvanize large groups of creative workers who would otherwise have been unwilling and unable to organize without his perspective.

But Loeb’s liberal activism, executed through rhetorically skilled editorials and satirical performances that took aim at specific network executives and old guard Equity leadership, was also the reason that he was rejected and abandoned by the television industry. But even after he was accused of Communist sympathies in *Red Channels*, Loeb used his rhetorical acumen to rebut accusations against him and highlight the fragility of

civil rights, stating to Richard Ames, staff committee director for HUAC that, “If I am a Communist — which I am not — and you are authorized by the Government to interrogate me and find out if I’m a Communist, if you flagrantly violate my rights, I think you do more harm than I could do as a Communist,” he offered to Richard Ames, the committee staff director” of HUAC (Smith 109). Blacklisting and the HUAC hearings were intended not only to shape political and public conversation, but also to intimidate left-leaning Americans and minorities by exacerbating ethnic prejudices (Smith 130, 134). Rhetorical examinations of these policies, like the ones Loeb wrote, would easily dredge up these unpleasant aspects of television programming and threaten the status quo.

Decades after blacklisting, divisions between the compensation, assigned value, and industry power of television executives and creative workers like writers and performers sustained oppositional cultures between these groups. Executives and writers developed discourses that justified their perspectives and industry logic. During a 1988 strike, author Joan Didion contributed an essay to the *New Yorker*, in which she “expressed the deep resentment of writers working with executives and directors who fundamentally do not understand what writers do, devalue the craft of writing because a script is only a small step in the process of ‘packaging’ a motion picture ‘product,’ and believe they could bang it out themselves if they only had the time” (Smith 264). Didion’s essay articulated a frustration shared by many television writers, who felt disillusioned with network executives’ concern for television shows only as products, and writers only as employees to be managed.

For their part, network executives developed a host of justifications, systems, and ad-hoc ‘lore’ to justify their power to green-light some shows and cancel others (Gitlin 4). These systems have only fueled mistrust between writers and executives, contributing to many strikes including the one in 2007-8. Executives do have a tremendous amount of money and power, but they are also threatened by a sense of distance from the public they serve, the material they sell, and therefore uncertainty about how to make programming decisions. Network producers and executives have traditionally viewed themselves as

distinct from the rest of America in terms of geography, class, lifestyle, and insider status (Zafirau 193-5). There is some truth to this belief, as network executive and management culture is uniquely obsessed with success, visibility, selling and winning (Gitlin 142). A complex logic of denial permeates executive decision-making, along with the insistence that each executive asserts a uniquely marketable sense of taste through instinct, rather than hard work. According to this perspective, “If there is no uniform system, then I, this unique human, am central. My power, my perks, my income, the deference talented and glamorous people pay me, are all justified” (Gitlin 25). For network heads, managers, and executives of television, uncertainty is both a constant torment and the means by which they hold power over creative workers.

The disadvantage of this position is that television executives and managers see themselves as cut off from the audiences upon which they depend, reducing their efforts to chaotic guesswork. CBS Vice President Scott Siegler describes the difficulty of this process: “You can work off precedents about what’s worked on television before ... You can let your personal judgments enter into it to some extent ... [You can ask whether] this is something that people in Georgia and Nebraska will appreciate ... But you never really know” (Gitlin 22-23). So many variables apply to programming for television that there seem to be no consistent rules about what makes a successful show (Gitlin 22-23). Executives manage this guesswork and maintain their power with institutional lore and flexible logic that helps them more easily disarm and casually refuse the concerns and efforts of writers and performers. Executives circulate axioms and “breed notions of alive or dead genres, doomed formats” and cycles to manage this “flux of possibilities” (Gitlin 22). The flimsiness of this lore, and its flexibility, are the reasons it is so valuable for executives as way to defend decisions that are largely guesswork.

In order to justify the shape they want a show to take, the reason behind a show’s cancellation, or why a pilot was never picked up, network executives can to point to any number of vague and inconclusive ideas to conceal their decision making process and keep writers and performers from taking creative control. Because these axioms are “flimsy” and “ad hoc,” and malleable, they allow executives to tell a writer “No thanks”

for any number of supposed reasons, and leave writers with no way of knowing when old genres, cycles or axioms “might get exploded by exceptions and new ones dropped in their place” (Gitlin 22-23). Executives reject show concepts based on vague criteria, such as “whether a concept was ‘special,’ ‘different,’ ‘unique,’ even (wonder of wonders) ‘very unique’; whether a show had ‘chemistry’; whether it ‘clicked’; whether ‘it all came together’” (Gitlin 26). Further, this system wears down writers’ investment in work and good relations with networks. For example, a writer might work excitedly on a show concept for months, or even years, only to have the idea permanently shelved. Particularly during the network era, executives’ attitudes and positions within TV industries ensured that writers, while dissatisfied and devalued, rarely made rhetorical arguments or used satire in consequential ways.

The network era’s big three networks exercised considerable leverage over television writers and performers, and through them, the flow of labor and ideas in Hollywood. The indirect institutional language used to reject show concepts, or the “slow no,” and the “lure of the possible yes” meant that television writers were constantly overproducing show ideas, creating a buyer’s market (Gitlin 26). Competition between television programs also put networks in an advantageous position, since “a single rating point difference” could mean a substantial increase in network support, “so when a show is marginal and the numbers ambiguous, it’s easy for actual and anticipated advertiser pressure to make the difference” between a show’s cancellation or survival (Gitlin 9-10). Networks had considerable leverage to cancel shows, and thus fire writers, who were performing well, and replace them with shows that did only slightly better — a powerful incentive for creative workers to stay in line and comply with network demands (Gitlin 9-10). During the network era, staying in line meant participating in a “culture of ingratiation” that seeks to sell products, not dabble in ideas (Gitlin 224-5).²⁵ Although

²⁵ This cultural feature explains why, for example, networks tried but failed to write, produce, and market a sitcom about Vietnam after the war: any comedy show on the subject would inevitably offend powerful interests, evoke disagreements about the war, and put any network that aired such a program at the center of controversy (Gitlin 234). Such a programming choice was unacceptable in network era economics.

networks eventually changed the types of programs they were willing to air in order to compete with cable channels, these tactics for managing creative production have changed little, and remain at the heart of union conflicts between writers and networks.

Divisions between the roles and perspectives of creative and managerial workers in the television industry have continued to present significant obstacles for writers' creative freedom, throughout the cable era and leading up to the 2007-8 strike. Writers and performers as creative workers have the primary task of providing entertainment by intuiting the emotional and intellectual needs of particular demographics. This work typically involves explaining ideas and mediating between mainstream and marginal concepts, general and specific – albeit on deadline, and in particular media formats and for different shows. Network and media conglomerate executives often have very different roles than writers, although some successful writers eventually become show-running producers with more creative control. Executives are tasked with ensuring profit, not integrity, consistency or artistic value. These distinctions are further encouraged because network history has taught writers and other creative workers that media institutions will not protect writers' interests. After all, during the blacklist era “the powerful institutions ... networks, sponsors, and advertising agencies buckled in unison” to political and commercial pressure (Doherty 34). Working relations since this period have held little trust, and a great deal of resentment and fear.

Writers' eventual turn to rhetorical arguments and satire during the 2007-2008 strike reflected the ironies of their everyday tension with ‘management,’ or upper-tier members of television networks, including a variety of producers and executives. One of the ways that industry conflicts become most visible to the public is through union publicity campaigns and disputes. Every three years, the WGA and AMPTP unions negotiate a Minimum Basic Agreement (MBA), which determines minimum compensation for 12,000 guild writers, and their employment conditions at 350 production companies and studios (Morphis 525). Once reached, this agreement dictates the minimum compensation for writers and provides a “no strike” clause for studios,

effectively guaranteeing prosperous relations between these two factions of the entertainment industry (Morphis 525).

The WGA and AMPTP approach collective bargaining differently in ways that have built animosity between the two groups, at put the WGA at a disadvantage. While the WGA gears up for MBA negotiations every three years, the AMPTP is constantly negotiating with other unions. With creative unions like the WGA, Screen Actors Guild (SAG), Directors Guild of America (DGA), the AMPTP engages in “pattern bargaining,” meaning its negotiators assume that the more they agree to give one guild, the more the others will demand as well, since the next union negotiation is never far away (Auerbach 99). Pattern bargaining means that while creative labor unions like the DGA and SAG can cooperate with the WGA when pursuing similar interests, the AMPTP is extremely conservative in its bargaining strategies and does what it can to undermine the value of creative work, anticipating that whatever it concedes to one union it must grant for the others as well (Auerbach 99). The history of collective bargaining between the WGA and the AMPTP is replete with distrust, bitterness and personal vendettas.

A brief look at the history of union conflicts and strikes between the WGA and AMPTP reveals how the distance between the unions’ perspectives has spawned cycles of tension over decades. Although many writers and producers belong to both guilds²⁶ the bargaining postures of the guilds themselves have been either been fearful and antagonistic, or else so friendly as to imply collusion. Residual payments, a key issue in the 2007-8 strike, were originally won in 1941 when the American Federation of Radio Artists’ Transcription Code stipulated that performers be paid each time their work was replayed (Paul & Kleingartner 269-270). The WGA and many writers saw this development as a much needed reward, won after a costly battle with radio networks. Residual compensation had become common practice by the 1960s, “when the major studios surrendered in the face of bitter strikes by both SAG and WGA” (Paul & Kleingartner 269-270). Since then, the WGA has fiercely protected any rights to residual

²⁶ These are often successful writers who have gained control over their own projects by becoming writer-producers, known as “hyphenates” or “show-runners” (Handler 4).

payments, since compensation for works as they are screened repeatedly ensures that writers survive between projects.

Before the 2007-8 strike, the most recent union conflict of such magnitude occurred in 1988, during the rise of cable and home video. As chapter II explains, this was also a period of deregulation, in which businesspeople, rather than artists were more likely to own media conglomerates, and thus make executive decisions about television content. The gulf between network executives and creative writers and performers grew more profound as writers lobbied for residuals from home video sales during both 1985 and 1988 MBA negotiations. Indeed, strikes in 1985 and 1988 made bitter memories for both the WGA and the AMPTP. In both strikes, the WGA was troubled by dissenting members who believed that the short-term loss of striking was not worth the potential long-term gains (Rohter C22). An attempted strike in 1985 collapsed due to a lack of group cohesion within the WGA, and during the 1988 strike, a powerful dissenting faction emerged again within the guild, and threatened the WGA's hard-won long-term gains (Rohter C22). Low solidarity and lack of effective intra-guild communication plagued the WGA's collective efforts.

Since 1988, solidarity problems, weak leadership, and fear of the financial cost of striking have made it difficult for the WGA to make demands on the AMPTP (Rohter C22). In 1990, both sides agreed to a contract extension, touted optimistically as a victory for both unions (Rohter C15). But despite being "hailed as a major step towards improved labor relations," the agreement, which extended writers' existing MBA contract through 1995, was more a reflection of both sides' eagerness to avoid another strike like the one in 1988 (Rohter C15). In hindsight, this measure seems not so much a victory, but a strategic avoidance of long-simmering tensions and resentment that neither party could bear to address so soon after the longest strike in Hollywood history. Fear and intimidation tactics have played a part in discouraging WGA strikes as well. Network and cable executives have routinely ordered scripts to be stockpiled "to forestall any shortage of written product ... of course, the irony is that those writers doing all the increased work weakened their own guild's position (Auerbach 96). This tactic eventually backfired and

caused writers to cooperate more earnestly with each other, but throughout the 1990s and early 2000s the WGA lacked the organization to strike effectively.

The main reason for the WGA's comparative weakness against the AMPTP is that the WGA's membership is diverse in terms of their labor and compensation concerns. Indeed, different kinds of writers, because of how they work and receive compensation, seek different kinds of union action in the MBA process. Screenwriters for movies are paid based on their success, while almost all TV writers are paid the same initial minimum compensation (Auerbach 95). More in-demand TV writers are sometimes paid as producers instead, and thus may also be members of producers guilds (Auerbach 95).²⁷ Screenwriters are paid a percentage of studio profits for the use of and reuse of feature film scripts, but TV writers are instead paid a flat fee for the reuse of shows based on their initial minimum compensation (Auerbach 95). So for example, "screenwriters are invested in raising the percentage paid when their feature screenplays are repackaged for TV ... [but] because TV writers are not paid a percentage, they have no interest in this fight" (Auerbach 96). Just because film and television writers negotiate with the AMPTP together does not mean that they want the same things out of these negotiations. For instance, writers who are in-demand and paid over scale are not likely to care much about minimums compared to younger or less successful writers (Auerbach 96). Similarly, screenwriters (writers for feature films) and TV writers must prioritize different aspects of compensation because they operate by different pay models. The upshot of these various distinctions between roles and guilds means that MBA negotiations are often plagued by collusion, secret deals, and lack of mutual understanding among multiple parties.

The 2007-8 strike would grow out of writers' increasing dissatisfaction with both network greed and WGA leadership. In 2001, splinter groups again fractured the WGA's bargaining power, and engaged in closed-door negotiations without members' approval (Auerbach 96). The real negotiations that year went on between the AMPTP negotiating

²⁷ During the strike these 'hyphenates' were forced to choose whether to stand with writers, foregoing their salaries and jobs, or to side with producers and continue working during the 2007-8 strike (Handler 4).

committee and the leader of the WGA west, who was friendly to the AMPTP's concerns (Auerbach 96). As a result, writers barely achieved a cost-of living increase to minimums (Auerbach 96).²⁸ A similar non-negotiation took place in 2003, even as the AMPTP regularly refused even modest demands. In fact, the AMPTP continued to bargain, throughout these years, as though there were no available funds for writers to request, and yet this assertion came amid years of record profits and executive bonuses, like Viacom's 2003 award of \$160 million to executives (Auerbach 100). The 2007 MBA negotiations would mark the first time since the 1988 strike that writers would successfully overcome these challenges and make formidable demands. They would do so only as a result of digital media and rhetorical writers' ability to argue satirically in ways that corresponded with popular television trends.

The 2007-8 Writers Strike

The 2007-8 WGA strike represents a consequence of media consolidation's problematic nature: the CEOs, networks, and producers who benefit from the immense profits of must-click TV are severely out of touch with the writers and other creative workers whose efforts make such franchise growth possible (Gillan 16). Like other strikes before it, the conflict's more immediate cause was technological change and AMPTP and executives' repeatedly inadequate recognition of writers' value to the television and film industries. The WGA's list of demands included a few negotiation priorities, such as requests for authority to represent writers for animated and reality genres and a new formula for calculating DVD sales residuals, but the union's central goal was to gain residuals for scripted online content (Morphis 530). Until 2008, writers were not paid for digital content, nor were they compensated for TV episodes streamed online (Gillan 16). Television networks were able to deny writers compensation for works streamed online by defining online content as "promotional" (Gillan 16). But as digital technologies became an increasingly prominent part of how viewers accessed television, and as fans' expectations for online spaces expanded, writers also became more conscious

²⁸ Screenwriters did not fare much better than writers in 2001, receiving only a script 'royalty fee' for the publication of their screenplays on a movie's DVD. Out of a nearly \$20 billion annual market, the screenwriters each got merely \$5,000 (Auerbach 96).

of how their digital work translated to network profits (Gillan 16). As chapter II details, must-click TV strategies meant that television programs were conceived as components of trans-media franchises that also included immersive online spaces where fans could interact anytime, anywhere (Gillan 16). While franchises with multi-media outlets increased fan investment, they also created more unpaid labor for writers, who generated character blogs or updated creative content on websites, which was still defined as “promotional,” work and therefore uncompensated (Henderson 232).

While concerns about gaining a foothold in digital compensation may seem like a highly technical concern that has confronted the industry only recently, this is only the latest conflict between the WGA and AMPTP concerning how writers’ work should be compensated given the features of contemporary technology. In the 1980s, “when the cost of producing VHS tapes was excessive,” writers agreed to receive low residuals in the VHS market, “in exchange for the promise from studios to increase compensation when earnings improved” (Morphis 533-4). But studios neglected to modify the compensation formula even after VHS became less expensive and profits grew from home video sales (Morphis 533-4). Beyond concerns for compensation models or new technologies, television writers have also increasingly struggled since the 1980s to justify their positions, as networks have actively searched for ways to produce cheap, unscripted programming.

Such network strategies did not necessarily create better programming, but lessened costs by de-valuing writers, made paid positions less available, less well compensated, and crucially reminded writers of their rank, in order to make contract negotiations easier in the future. Furthermore, executive support for scripted shows continued to the decline as the cable era progressed, and writers were often powerless to defend their creative ideals as executives waited eagerly for opportunities to replace scripted programming with less expensive fare. Ironically, it was precisely because writers’ claims to higher compensation and recognition were so strong that networks felt it necessary to remind them of their ‘unimportance.’ Thus the MBA negotiation that began in 2007 were about value and respect, quantified through compensation.

The stakes of the fall 2007 MBA negotiations were high for both parties, and beyond the central disputes themselves. The AMPTP was also in contract negotiations with the Directors Guild (DGA) and the Screen Actors Guild (SAG), as their contracts had expired June 30, 2007 (Breznican). Further, the stakes were higher for the entire Hollywood industrial community than they had been in 1988. While television was the primary entertainment channel for most Americans during the 1980s, by 2007 multiple means of communication delivered content to viewers (Morphis 529). Thus, a long strike could permanently damage the TV industry, as viewers turn to other modes of access, and might not return to TV for entertainment when the conflict subsides.

Yet in the months prior to the negotiations, both unions staked out extreme positions, deceiving the opposing union about any willingness to compromise (Morphis 530). Because of misapplied strategies and leftover tensions from past negotiations, such as the AMPTP's neglect in honoring former promises or refusal to share new revenues, industry insiders and savvy onlookers warned audiences about a potential deadlock as the MBA contract between the AMPTP and the WGA reached its expiration on October 31, 2007 (Morphis 528). News outlets quickly seized on a ready-made narrative that pit the two guilds squarely against one another. As one *USA Today* columnist wrote: "You couldn't script this showdown. Hollywood writers are facing off against networks and studios in a test of wills that could play havoc with the TV season and disrupt the flow of movies to local theaters" (Breznican). This sort of publicity, and the fact that many television programs were suspended during part of the strike, made this particular union conflict unusually public, and the question of TV writers' value, particularly the value of their online work, a prominent one.

So when the MBA negotiations began in July of 2007, mistrust and contradictory expectations quickly led to a stalemate between the two parties, and AMPTP members eventually walked out of negotiations (Morphis 529). Indeed, the strike's eventual economic losses were particularly maddening because they could have easily been avoided with more engaged bargaining postures. From the AMPTP's perspective, writers had been easily split in previous negotiations over disagreements as to when and if they

should strike. Alternatively, writers' demands for the MBA contract were relatively modest, particularly given the rising revenues and lowered costs of production networks were enjoying in 2007, and could easily have been honored. But rather than conceding some of the WGA's demands, AMPTP leadership took a hard-line stance, and "in July [2007]," they "put forward agreements that partially revoked rights to residuals previously won by the WGA, rather than offering the guild a point of entry into digital compensation rates" (Banks 23). The offer was one that WGA members could not possibly accept, and illustrates the lack of understanding between these two groups.

What made the July 2007 offer so blatantly outrageous was that television writers, more than ever before, were performing essential and complex work that carried out network strategies by orchestrating multiple goals, audiences, and media platforms (Gillan 225-227). Disagreements between the WGA and AMPTP persisted throughout the negotiating process, as contrasts between the perspectives, roles, and priorities of managerial and creative workers hindered productive discussion. During talks between both unions, *Lost* (2004-2010) executive producers Damon Lindelof and Carlton Cuse reported that "there's a wide gap between the studios and networks and the writers regarding what constitutes a reasonable deal" (Breznican). Given such staunch opposition, the strike became about which side could hold out the longest financially, while still maintaining public goodwill and union solidarity.

As a result of the adverse relations between both guilds, and the results of recent MBA contracts, the AMPTP bargained as if they could never afford to concede anything significant, while the WGA negotiated as though only the most aggressive demands would be honored, believing that "even if the studios promised future residuals, they would never be paid" (Morphis 533-4). So "while studios bargained as if their claims were true, the writers bargained on their perceived reality that these claims were false" (Morphis 533-4). What made matters worse was that the AMPTP did more than merely refuse writers' requests; its members "ridiculed the writers' demands for higher residuals," although "it does not appear that the studios truly knew of what the writers' demands consisted" (Morphis 535). When pressed, the AMPTP denied that writers should

receive residuals for online content because it was not yet possible to quantify online revenues (Handler 3). The cumulative effect of all of these factors reduced the MBA negotiations to a “contest of wills” (Morphis 532). The inflexible attitudes of both parties led AMPTP members walk out of negotiations.

In response to the AMPTP walk out, WGA members voted on October 18, 2007 to go on strike (Breznican, Cieply). The programs immediately affected included shows that were recorded daily, including talk and variety shows that relied on scripted, but timely material, like *The Daily Show*, *The Tonight Show*, and *Letterman* (Carr). Within two weeks, all of Hollywood and the Los Angeles economy had felt the strike’s impact, as thousands of makeup artists, set designers, electricians, assistants, not to mention writers, and other service workers found themselves out of work or underemployed (Klowden 1). Tensions flared as hardships began to accumulate. Reporters noted that the strike “has been the talk of coffee shops and playgrounds” and became “something of a metaphor for the broader labor force of Los Angeles, a place of enormous geographical and class division” (Steinhauer A18). The strike further “pit studio executives against writers — the bulk of whom are paid far less than high-profile strikers like Larry David — and writers against some trade professionals, whose feelings about the strike are ambivalent at best” (Steinhauer A 18). For one hundred days the strike bred tensions and divisions in the larger Hollywood community, including thousands of workers dependent on film and television production (Klowden 1).

The WGA handled the strike as a public relations campaign, encouraging writers to share their views and creativity in publicly, both to maintain solidarity and counter the AMPTP’s corporate power. Voicing the WGA’s position and arguments on YouTube was part of a larger strategy the guild executed as part of their negotiation strategies with the AMPTP. The WGA used three main tactics during bargaining and the strike to successfully manage public relations: first, the guild used high-profile members as key players in negotiations, both to build public visibility and to remind producers of the contributions of celebrated writing talents (Banks 24). Second, the WGA utilized blogs and emails to access membership and the general public, inviting a plurality of voices to

be heard (Banks 26). Indeed, “while the growing interest in digital distribution was the impetus for this strike, it was also the medium that enabled writers to successfully communicate with each other, with the media industry, and with the general public” (Banks 20). This open ethos of the WGA campaign is significant because while their discussions were always public, and particularly so given their ready adaptation to social media, the AMPTP conducted all meetings and intra-union business behind closed doors, presenting a united — but very private — front at all times (Banks 20).

The WGA’s third strategy was the most consequential, and changed the orientation of television and the internet: writers harnessed the power of streaming online video to articulate pro-strike messages, entertaining fellow strikers and the general public with clips that blend education with advocacy (Banks 29). By coordinating so much of their collective power to focus on visibility and new media, the WGA tapped into a synergy with similar grassroots efforts and modes of digital cooperation, overwhelming the AMPTP with the pervasive and viral spread of online messages. WGA members were quick to recognize the significance of these pro-strike videos, as Strike Captain Peter Rader (*Waterworld*) stated: ““We’re beating the AMPTP at their own game. The strike is about the Internet, so we’re using the internet to fight back ... we are going to get America to recognize one way or another that the Internet is a democratic space and there needs to be unions to protect those who provide its content”” (Banks 29). The import of these videos was neither merely symbolic or subjective, as YouTube’s audience grew 18% over the strike’s duration (Handler 5). The writers strike, and the videos to which it gave rise, was largely responsible for pushing online viewership to the numbers it now enjoys. Writers were not only challenging the AMPTP for compensation, but for control of U.S. media industries.

WGA members had skills that were growing in importance and value in 2007, including keen understandings of how to successfully combine rhetorical messages with digital media. But the strike could have been an easy victory for the AMPTP — after all, the organization had enjoyed the upper hand in contract negotiations for over 50 years. The AMPTP had greater funds than the WGA to weather an immediate future without

income, as well as the infrastructure to influence public perception. But digital media was paramount to promoting television content, and writers understood this more acutely than executives. AMPTP members saw online markets and their potential as untested investments, but writers saw the Internet's additional potential for community. Television writers knew that Internet videos could make money and build audiences because executives had routinely demanded for years that they “‘make things more YouTube-able,’ writing scenes that could be clipped and uploaded into three or four minute streaming videos for use as promotional ads” (Banks 22). While television writers and audiences were connecting online, executives were more familiar with the world of Nielsen ratings and established revenue streams, and the AMPTP maintained throughout the strike that they were unsure about how digital technologies would intersect with traditional business models (Vonderau 109).

While the AMPTP was claiming that Internet-based viewing was not a reliable source of revenue, many of its most powerful members were investing heavily in platforms for streaming television content online (Vonderau 109). The AMPTP's tentative attitude about internet revenue was inconsistent with how many major media corporations were conducting their public image and investment campaigns. In 2007, as negotiations began between writers and studio executives, “Google's YouTube began competing with Hulu, co-owned by NBC Universal, News Corp. and Providence Equity Partners, for the best solution on how to ‘monetize’ creative content online (Vonderau 109). Networks and studios were denying writers residuals in the very markets in which they had themselves invested heavily *that very year*.

Clearly, studios and networks had a sense of the worth of online markets — but importantly did not understand how to create content specifically for these markets or how to fairly compensate the producers of such content. While corporations like Google and Newscorp were launching sites that monetized television franchises, their executives planned to do so without paying the writers responsible for their gains. To expose this exploitation, writers proved their importance to online revenue by expressing their struggle to one another and to the Internet audiences they had established for their

employers. Television writers — and rhetorical writers, specifically — knew how to use online forums to spread messages and information. Rhetorical writers in particular had an intimate knowledge of techniques for composing multi-media content, and understood the viral nature of satirical videos online. While television executives understood the Internet as a new substitution for broadcasting — YouTube was originally marketed as a way to “broadcast yourself” — rhetorical writers knew that satirical videos were not just watched, but exchanged, discussed, and imitated online. YouTube was an effective way for writers to organize and share ideas; it was also the medium that enabled them to visibly protest in front of audiences and beyond network control. While scripted television took a hiatus during the strike, audiences gravitated towards spaces like YouTube for entertainment, and writers turned to these platforms to establish their talent and independence from established television outlets.

Striking writers’ visibility on YouTube helped them demonstrate their work’s value with pro-strike videos. The success of these videos showed that quality writing, rhetorical satire, and minimized censorship could compete with big-budget studio productions, particularly in a digital age with multiple outlets of entertainment media. With highly talented writers producing activist content on sites like YouTube, UnitedHollywood.com, and Strikelife.net, user content became an increasingly visible trend, one that “offered evidence of innovative formats and potential revenue streams” and presented “new role models for media workers” (Vonderau 118). The spread and impact of these strike-related videos was impressive: “The Office Is Closed,” which was produced by *The Office* accumulated an impressive 280,000 views in its first week on YouTube (Banks 29).²⁹

But using YouTube as the most prominent purveyor of strike videos was not without its own complexities and challenges. The site presents potential conflicts for writers eager to protect their position as content creators, and the compensation value of

²⁹ For reference, Comedy Central videos posted on Youtube typically garner 20,000 to 60,000 views during their first week. https://www.youtube.com/results?filters=week&lclk=week&search_query=comedy+central&search_sort=video_view_count

their creative labor, since the site is “characterized by the kinds of ‘messy’ emergent relations among participants” (Burgess 3). YouTube is problematically involved in trends toward ‘free’ user-generated content, as is one of the many ways executives have encouraged “cheap, user-initiated programming through unpaid consumer labor. In other words: turning viewers into your workforce” (Vonderau 111). Despite these structural implications, writers sharing pro-strike messages on YouTube found a core community of users with similar motivations and loyalties (Burgess 4). Rhetorical satires that poked fun at corporate executives allowed YouTube users, including writers, liberal viewers, and regular youtube users, to recognize themselves as counter-publics and the strength of their collective connection.

YouTube was never designed as a site for social collaboration, but rather for “broadcasting” individual creativity. However, the site’s first, most frequent, and loyal users created a community that found ways to share and work together as a social network (Burgess 4). Users accomplished this task by working around the site’s limitations, developing and sharing “cheats” that allowed them to live video chat, add hyperlinks, annotations, and use external programs to improve the site’s functions (Burgess 5). Even before the strike, “Vlogging” (video blogging) had become a process of community building on YouTube, as personal vlog entries invited responses and video sharing among (Burgess 7-8). But regular YouTube users who accessed the site to forge creative communities also struggled with the site’s corporate aspects. As YouTube became popular, the site began importing high-profile video campaigns, featuring stars like Oprah Winfrey, which long-term YouTube users viewed as an intrusion, altering their sense of influence and perception of the site’s bottom-up dynamic (Burgess 9-11). When writers converged on YouTube to voice their frustrations with the AMPTP in 2007, they found a prominent community of users who were equally distrustful of corporate enterprise and appreciative of videos that blended a vlogging ethos of sharing and discussion with professional writing.

While some writers created videos in support of the strike, others used YouTube as a creative outlet during their unemployment in ways that challenged AMPTP members’

influence over activities in online media. As WGA organizer Doug Liman explained in 2008:

If the last strike [1988] was remembered for the studios attempting to show that they could create programming without writers ... [this would be] the strike where the writers show they can do it without the studios. We are at a moment of opportunity in television where we have gone from three networks to six and from a handful of channels to a thousand and YouTube. In that environment, what matters is compelling programming, and compelling programming starts with the writer (Vonderau 118).

When television networks and channels successfully lure viewers and advertising dollars, they are cashing in on writers' quantifiable creative value. Whether using video sharing for personal creativity or strike-related efforts, the value of writers to the entertainment industry had never been so clear as it was during this emerging digital moment of the 2007-8 strike.

As rhetorical writers in particular created videos on YouTube and other websites to build solidarity and a positive public image, the types of rhetorical satire they had developed into popular TV formats (through fake news shows like *TDS* and *TCR*) proved invaluable to their efforts. Ironic attitudes and rhetorical modes of satire became key discourses for hashing out meanings of the strike for both writers and viewers. Rhetorical writers had articulated Americans' frustrations with the Bush administration, cable news, and the entertainment-focused nature of politics and political reporting. They reprised the same fake news techniques to demand compensation in online markets. Rhetorical writers, many from *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report*, used these fake news models to bring the AMPTP's inconsistency into focus satirically.

The value of this kind of satire is that it enabled writers to publicly attack the root of their negotiation problems by examining dialogues between WGA and AMPTP members. For example, chapter IV describes one particular YouTube strike video in which writers re-contextualized footage of executive Sumner Redstone declaring his own desire for online profits alongside writers' requests for Internet residuals ("Not *The Daily Show* with Some Writer"). These techniques revealed Redstone and other executives' lack of understanding and concern for writers' livelihoods ("Not *The Daily Show* with Some

Writer”). By staging a dialogue that critiques executives’ own words, rhetorical writers highlighted basic factual information, contrasting AMPTP positions against the WGA’s reasonable demands. This kind of satire deeply engaged rhetorical argumentation, just as *TDS* and *TCR* filtered political information with satire, and invited viewers to process media jargon and acknowledge the suspect nature of cable news. Writers sought to imitate these successful rhetorical and satirical approaches to galvanize audiences, particularly other writers on strike, in online spaces that provided flexibility for communication.

The AMPTP’s hard-line stance was the reason for its eventual defeat; a number of factors related to the strike videos and their impact on public opinion made executives’ uncompromising positions ill-timed. Because they had walked out of negotiations, many Hollywood workers viewed the strike — and its financial devastation — as the AMPTP’s responsibility. As the next two chapters illustrate, videos made by writers on strike publicized the AMPTP’s positions to the Hollywood community and larger public audiences. These public image campaigns against the AMPTP were made even more significant by the national economic downturn that began in 2008 (Banks 31). In light of Wall street corruption, large corporations like the AMPTP were experiencing peak unpopularity, not to mention declining ratings without scripted material. For the week of January 21-27, 2008, ratings dropped a collective 21% for the top five networks (Klowden 14). In a final desperate measure, corporations like Viacom forced their suspended shows back on the air without writing staffs — further alienating the remaining workers on these programs. When they returned to television, shows like *TDS* and *TCR* did their best to highlight the strike’s conflicts and hardships for writers, just as their writers were doing online. Writers, even the East and West guilds, were more united than ever before, thanks to online videos that used satire to activate them as counter-publics against the AMPTP. Unable to split the WGA or distract public attention from the conflict, the AMPTP returned to the bargaining table, and 92.5% of WGA members voted to end the strike on February, 12, 2008 (Handler 1).

The next two chapters analyze many of the videos that were instrumental to the strike's success. Chapter IV explores the videos that writers and performers crafted to support the strike and convey their motivations. Analyzing these online videos, based in rhetorical satire, allows me to show the value of these writing skills given the particular timing of the strike. Television writers orchestrated these videos to intersect with discourses on cable news and U.S. politics, capturing many viewers' underdog sympathies. Chapter V builds on discussions of satirical media as activism, as I analyze segments of *TDS* and *TCR* that aired during the strike, when both shows were forced back on the air without their writing staffs. Instead of obeying Viacom's dictates to simply recover lost ratings, *TDS* and *TCR* used their large audiences to publicize writers' struggles and reasons for striking. These chapters demonstrate the importance of rhetorical writing and satire to expose conflicts and transform viewers into counter-publics.

CHAPTER IV

WRITERS ON STRIKE AND ONLINE

While chapter III describes the 2007-8 WGA strike, this chapter analyzes a number of videos³⁰ supporting the WGA's demands, which were uploaded to YouTube while the strike was in progress. I examine these videos and describe how the writers and performers who created them used rhetorical and satirical skills to address strike issues, court public opinion, and illustrate the value of their work to the television industry. While each of the pro-writer videos I analyze are distinct, I argue that they share similar dynamics: they are all examples of satirical activism, created by rhetorical writers and shared digitally to promote the WGA's political goals. This chapter shows how writers have activated satire with particular rhetorical techniques, first in fake news shows like *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart (TDS)* and *The Colbert Report (TCR)*, then how they influenced a wave of online activism with the 2007-8 strike pro-writer videos.

The chapter's analyses of pro-writer videos are informed by historical research about the 2007-8 strike's contributing factors, events, results, and relevant perspectives of the parties involved. I additionally analyze these videos in terms of the television predecessors that prepared writers for addressing conflict with satire, the media distribution systems that allowed these online videos to be effective, and the ways the rhetorical structures of these pro-writer satires impacted the strike's conflicts and outcome. This chapter first addresses the influence of *TDS* and *TCR* by analyzing segments of both shows to reveal the rhetorical and technological methods these shows use to create ironies. The next section will analyze pro-writer videos to show how they borrow the layered structures of *TDS* and *TCR* to create satires that support their cause. These videos are analyzed in groups, according to their messaging functions, and, in some notable cases, according to their creators. I have titled these sections "Explaining the Strike," "Satirical Spoofs," the "Speechless" Series, and "Youtube Protests: Brought to You by TV." These labels are intended to clarify how each set of videos contributed to

³⁰ For simplicity's sake, from this point forward I will use the term "Pro-Writer Videos" to refer to these online videos that supported the WGA strike.

dialogues about the strike from writers' perspectives. Each set of videos is examined for how it creates satirical messages by layering formal, performative, and rhetorical elements.

Faced with a long strike, but armed with alternative media outlets, writers used rhetorical and satirical approaches like staging conversations with news clips to re-contextualize them, contrasting images with voiceovers, and performing the logical fallacies of one's opponents — all modeled by politically satirical shows like *TDS* and *TCR*—to address the American Motion Picture and Television Producers (AMPTP). The WGA knew that they needed a means of rapidly responding to and countering negative coverage launched by the AMPTP, and so they began an extensive grassroots campaign to carry out their media agenda. YouTube videos, blogs, and websites like Unitedhollywood.com became important digital points of access that allowed writers to communicate with one another, counter negative press, and communicate with other industry workers and unions. Digital technology was particularly helpful in this regard, because it provided an open and flexible model that was easy for writers and viewers to access. Features like linking and hypertext through blogs enabled the spread of information and ideas about the strike (O'Brien 8).

Pro-writer videos owed much of their success to the popularity of their television counterparts like *TDS* and *TCR*, which had established fake news conventions focused on mocking, and thus transforming, media and politics. The shows' approaches are distinct from literary forms of satire in their layering of media components like digital editing, set design, and character performance *in addition to* rhetoric to create satirical messages. Pro-writer strike videos were so widely shared among Internet users because they drew from *TDS* and *TCR*'s multi-layered, and digitally-informed brands of satire. These satires are made with, and shared through, television and internet technologies and practices that allow both shows to gather and edit television footage, and then audiences to share this research immediately.³¹ In fact, *TDS*'s early years coincided with the emergence of video sharing online, and Comedy Central made short clips of the show available on the *TDS*

³¹ *TDS* was the source for many of the first “viral” satires online.

website. The show's first several years also coincided with George W. Bush's first term in office and September 11, 2001, as satire was becoming a means of understanding political divisions and the complacency of cable news. Digital systems and political polarization have positioned shows like *TDS* and *TCR* to examine politics and media coverage closely, and for audiences who are free to engage with these shows and their ideas more than ever before.

The satirical conventions that layer elements of technology and rhetoric require definition, since they determine how I will group similar videos together and explain their functions in the strike. I describe the videos in this chapter by analyzing how layers of form, performance, and rhetoric interwork to reveal irony. Distinguishing these three categories in each video allows me to show how their interworking components create ironic and satirical meanings. By aspects of "form," I refer to any aspects of editing, non-spoken sound, cinematography, set design, lighting, the use of playing video clips, and any other details that are not part of the performance or script. "Performance" describes the physical actions, costuming, and character personas of any performers in these clips. "Rhetoric" describes any scripted parts of these videos, including spoken dialogue or visible written words.

Using descriptions of these layers and how they are coordinated, this chapter labels specific coordination patterns that illustrate the influence of shows like *TDS* and *TCR*, as well as how writers activated and demonstrated their value online. Although not all of the videos I examine fall in the category of "fake news," this orientation of form, performance and rhetoric — which uses a news set and anchor to directly address the audience and sometimes to mock cable news conventions — was highly influential to many of the videos this chapter analyzes. Fake news primarily uses formal aspects of real news, and contrasts them with the anchor's performance and rhetorical content to create ironies for audiences. While not all of the pro-writer videos use formal elements of fake news, they do borrow from other alignments of form, performance and rhetoric common to fake news shows. Many of these videos stage what I call "Dialogic Critiques," which stage conversations between a performer(s) or rhetorical voice, and images or footage

(often of public figures speaking). Dialogic critiques re-contextualize television footage against the comedic performances and rhetorical scripting of the videos. What I label “Contradictory Combinations” is another significant technique that these pro-writer videos used in their public image campaign against the AMPTP. This technique situates either the form, rhetoric, or performative aspects of the video against one another, creating irony from this tension. the form of the video against the rhetoric, or the performance against the form, or else several contradictory video clips back to back. By orienting a rhetorical script or performance to repudiate aspects of clips played within the video, or by playing several clips back-to-back that negate or counter one another, pro-writer videos produce structured ironies to make satirical arguments against the AMPTP’s bargaining stances.

Pro-writer videos also use what I call “Clips as Evidence,” another technique emerging from fake news programs. These videos use clips within them, sometimes as part of dialogic critiques, to substantiate the argument or perspective of the rhetorical script or performer. These clips can still provide irony because the clips sometimes feature false or exaggerated evidence (often making comparisons to popular culture), or else support an ironic point in the video’s rhetoric with factual clip footage. In one of the videos this chapter discusses, an anchor refers to AMPTP members, then cuts to a clip showing ravenous worm-like monsters from a recent film, supporting his argument that AMPTP members are a greedy, negative force. The last strategy blending form performance and rhetoric that I identify in pro-writer videos is termed “Performing” or “Exposing Logical Fallacies.” When logical fallacies³² are performed, a character or persona takes on the negative qualities of an opponent, revealing through performance or rhetorical dialogue the faults in his or her perspective. Pro-writer videos often use performers as a means of demonstrating the poor logic of the AMPTP’s bargaining stance. But logical fallacies can also be exposed without performance, sometimes through unspoken words shown onscreen, through imagery or diagrams that fall outside of

³² Logical fallacies are ideas or explanations, sometimes seemingly true or sensical, that can be proven false by examinations of their barest logic.

performance. All of these specific strategies rely on the skills of rhetorical writers, who knew from their television careers ways to combine rhetorical work with digital media.

Using these particular orientations of form, performance and rhetoric, pro-writer videos written for the Internet publicly conveyed the power and value of television writing, without network and cable support. As a result of the solidarity these videos helped to inspire, the AMPTP was forced to acknowledge the WGA's claim that digital markets *were* profitable, and those profits came *because* of writers. As chapter III details, a major source of conflict between creative and managerial workers in media industries has been the widening gap between their experiential and economic backgrounds: management tends to graduate from business schools, while writers work daily with digital platforms and creative ideas. As a result, writers knew more than executives about how to use digital platforms and coordinate them with messages, and used these skills during the strike. Because many rhetorical writers were out of work during the 2007-8 strike, and thus unable to produce daily material for their respective television programs, many of them focused their skills in crafting timely content for online platforms, to create the kinds of satires that galvanized YouTube users on behalf of the strike.

Like the political humor shows that inspired them, pro-writer videos stage dialogic critiques, employ contradictory combinations, use clips as evidence, and expose logical fallacies to facilitate the audience's recognition of satire, but in an online context. These rhetorical strategies and satirical tones pinpointed the oppositional dynamics between the WGA and AMPTP, creating a sympathetic— but also entertaining — view of writers. Simultaneously, pro-writer videos were written for online audiences, adapting the direct address of fake news to personal video blog (or “vlogging”) formats, for instance. While satires do not account for all of the pro-strike videos, satirical examples reflect the work of rhetorical writers and their lineage of political value. By adapting satire for the Internet and its users, rhetorical writers showcased the complexity and vitality to skilled writing, and illustrated satire's usefulness in confronting stalemated conflicts between groups, whether used for national conflicts like the Iraq war, or industry conflicts like the 2007-8 strike.

Because they were entertaining and widely accessible, pro-writer videos provided key advantages for writers in their stand-off with the AMPTP by supporting an open, visible, and flexible community of writers, unconstrained by geographic distance. YouTube's use is problematic because the platform's corporate nature and uneven distribution make for better amateur, rather than skilled productions. But in spite of this structural issue, YouTube provided a common venue for writers and performers to share their creative ideas publicly, circumventing mainstream television, which is largely controlled by AMPTP affiliated producers, cable channels and networks. While the writers used YouTube to publicize their message and maintain group cohesion, their efforts shook the television industry by expanding YouTube's viewership by 18%, while television ratings took a nose dive (Handler 5). In one particularly bad week, the top five networks dropped 21% in ratings (Klowden 14). Writers had demonstrated that television was no longer the only medium that could entertain a wide viewing public, and indeed that it was quality content, and not any particular format, that drew audiences.

In order to understand the full significance of the pro-writer videos, we must first analyze portions of the two TV shows that produced the rhetorical and satirical strategies that pro-writer YouTube videos later adopted for their own purposes. *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* and *The Colbert Report*, both satirical shows written by rhetorical writers, provided successful models for political activism. These television programs had satirized political and cable news media for years, aligning form, performance and rhetoric to unpack their meanings and challenge their authority. Rhetorical writers on strike adapted these strategies for the WGA's internet campaign. Analyses of sample segments from both television programs illustrate how their formal, performative and rhetorical strategies inspired writers during the strike and helped them clarify their positions.

The Daily Show & The Colbert Report: Models of Rhetorical Satire

While satire has been commonly misunderstood as inherently cynical and disengaged, *The Daily Show (TDS)* and *The Colbert Report (TCR)*, both topical comedy programs that apply rhetorical satire to politics and cable news, refute this misconception

(Day 9). While televised political dialogues have traditionally taken place in an exclusively professional, ‘serious,’ and non-comedic register— covered via separate channels like CSPAN³³— these is not the only valid way to conceive of political discussions. In fact, problems in national politics and cable news made *TDS* and *TCR* more appropriate than ‘serious’ genres and shows for executing “substantive political speech” (Day 9). Because cable news shows were more focused on self-promotion than fact-checking or research, and because U.S. politics became severely divided between Republicans and Democrats, television writers’ rhetorical satires of these problems have become highly influential to popular discussions about politics and media. Critic Amber Day notes that satires of news and politics “seem to be attracting and engaging numerous fans and building strong affective communities” and that “for many, irony is becoming a new marker of sincerity” (42). Viewers have responded to an era of news and politics replete with fakery, distraction, and simplistic, two-sided debates with rhetorical forms of satire and irony that now constitute a significant part of how U.S. politics is communicated and understood.

TDS and *TCR* stand apart from most traditional literary satires in that embodied hosts engage actual political figures and news institutions (Day 2). Both programs capture and retain audiences by activating the pleasure and entertainment of hearing and expressing political views. This kind of satire relies “on deconstructions of real news events” for material, as Colbert “engages, interrogates, and interacts with the real” (Day 2). For both *TDS* and *TCR*, factual news footage of real events generate “evidence in a real political argument” in a way that other forms of fictionalized satire cannot do so directly (Day 8). Perhaps because it is not sanctioned, this kind of verbal and performative ‘pie throwing’ draws fascination, awe, and imitation.³⁴ By performing in the registers of news, entertainment, comedy, and politics, *TDS* and *TCR* have “generated

³³ A public television network designed to air government proceedings, thereby keeping citizens informed about federal politics.

³⁴ Day argues that “satire does not solely reside in narrative, but also in a singular act, such as the throwing of a pie at a public figure” (8).

strong affective communities, capturing the interest of many in a way that traditional politics has often struggled to do, as viewers look to parodists to voice their opinions within the public arena” (Day 2). These programs offer viewers a consolidated outlet for similar opinions, but also demonstrate how satirizing politicians and news personalities with complex rhetoric can be entertaining and motivating.

TDS and *TCR* uncover the ways that the politics is scripted by talking points, how media corporations use the news to spin stories, and thus fail to speak truth to power. Performing this task does not mean that *TDS* and *TCR* are “real” news shows, for they do not have the same functions. Instead, by satirizing the fakery of news media and political television coverage, *TDS* and *TCR* produce critiques that are simultaneously humorous and sincere, because these shows furnish earnest attempts to inform viewers about how cable news frames political issues in terms of partisanship and commercial promotion. By repeatedly mocking highly stylized form and content of cable newscasts, these shows and their rhetorical writers call attention to the deliberate construction of what cable news presents as “real” and “newsworthy.” Many of *TDS* and *TCR*’s critiques hinge upon tensions between network and cable era news. While network-era news created expectations that television news should provide authoritative facts to the public, cable news troubles these assumptions by sensationalizing, over-simplifying, and speculating over news stories, and formally stylizing shows in a quest for higher ratings. *TDS* and *TCR* frequently situate form, performance, and rhetoric to expose the contrasts between expectations of non-biased facts, and highly biased cable news reporting.

The Daily Show With Jon Stewart formally mimics cable news, both in order to mock its shortcomings, but also to stage satirical reports that provide factual information. The program is shot in a studio modeled after news reporting and topical interview shows, complete with a sleek desk, showy graphics on green screens, and an authoritative opening sequence announcing that *TDS* airs from “Comedy Central’s world news headquarters in New York.” Stewart appears well dressed and coiffed. Stewart looks the part of the news reporter, and aspects of his rhetoric convey factual research, but his performance and side commentary convey the energy of an empathetic every-man

crossed with an impish devil's advocate, who can't help but find the foibles of politicians and news shows. Indeed, the show's rhetorical scripting and the performances of Stewart and his correspondents are orchestrated against the show's format to satirize news conventions and specific moments of coverage. For example, in an episode aired Tuesday, April 20, 2010, Stewart attacks the Fox News network for its well-known and oft-denied conservative bias in reporting while championing the slogan "Fair and Balanced." The slogan "Fair and Balanced" reflects Fox's official denial of and apathy concerning the network's strong reporting bias. But the phrase also highlights Fox's leading position in cable news trends, as Fox News programs have routinely exacerbated political polarization and framed stories as two-sided, liberal versus conservative contests. Stewart's frequent attention to Fox News and other cable news programs clarifies for viewers how networks manipulate audiences and influence national politics with misinformation.

While Stewart frequently faults Fox News for how the network characterizes partisan politics and national issues, this segment from April 20 is notable for its critique of how Fox represents political groups and in turn influences national politics in a negative circle of polarization. Stewart's discussion begins as he addresses the audience in the studio, stating that, "Yesterday, I'm having my usual afternoon. I was down at the orphanage making soup and darning clothes. Fox News is on in the kids' day room and I see this." The screen cuts to a promo of Fox's political opinion show *The O'Reilly Factor* (1996 -)(*TOF*), as the show plays footage of Stewart "slamming Fox" by telling Bernie Goldberg and others at the network that "I've said it before, and I'll say it again: go fuck yourself."³⁵ The promo continues with a voiceover: "Now Bernie Goldberg fires back at the funny man. Don't miss an explosive *O'Reilly* tonight ..." The screen returns to Stewart in the studio, who responds: "And at first I was like 'Oh, man that funny man's screwed!' and then I was like, 'that's me.'" Stewart's voice and demeanor begin as amused, then become meek with the realization. "I don't want to be fired back at!" Stewart continues, "You see, funny story. Last week I mentioned Fox was upset about the

³⁵ This line is bleeped in its context on basic cable.

media generalizing who the Tea Parties are, and I agree with them ... And I may have at that point then shown some of the very same people at Fox, giddily generalizing about liberals and the left ... and I might have, when presented with this rather bald hypocrisy ... um ... I may have told them to go fuck themselves.” After speaking somewhat ashamedly, Stewart pauses and mocks himself: “And now they want to respond! So what did Bernie Goldberg have to say about me?”

The screen cuts to a split screen from *TOF* of Bill O’Reilly on the left, asking Bernie Goldberg, who is shown on the right, whether he believes that Jon Stewart has a point about Fox News’ bias: “Are we being hypocritical by generalizing about some people?” Goldberg replies as his image now fills the entire screen, admitting that, “I’ll just speak about me: he does. I am pleading guilty, and that is a sincere plea of guilty.” The screen returns to Stewart in the studio, with an over-the-shoulder image of Goldberg to the left of the screen (see image 8). He responds with a mixture of surprise and satisfaction: “You’re welcome. I win again.” But the screen once again returns to Goldberg, who continues, “But let me just speak directly to Jon Stewart for just a few seconds, and I know he’s watching, he’s a big fan of the show —” The screen cuts back to Stewart in the studio with a look of contrived embarrassment as he emits a sheepish falsetto “guilty as charged!” He mocks the idea by elaborating that “I watch it every night with all my friends. The screen cuts briefly to an image of Stewart in an *O’Reilly Factor* t-shirt surrounded by 16 stuffed animals. “Continue Mr. Goldberg!”

This show segment is structured by several of the strategies that the 2007-8 pro-writer videos borrowed for the strike, including dialogic critique. By structuring Stewart’s rhetoric and performance as a conversation with Fox News clips, Stewart highlights the way cable news personalities like Goldberg use news shows for attention, and attempt to build ratings by creating irrelevant controversies or dwelling on celebrity promotion. The video shows Stewart in a suit and tie, behind a news desk in a professional studio, through which the camera swoops during the show’s introduction. While formal aspects of the set and costuming mimic cable news, they also legitimize Stewart’s engagement with Fox anchors, who are ironically, by comparison, much less professional than Stewart

in terms of their commitment to providing reliable information and relevant discussion. In contrast to Goldberg's direct accusations, Stewart's performance and rhetoric are self-deprecating, positioning himself as a slavish fan of Bill O'Reilly's show—which Stewart frequently criticizes on *TDS*—with nothing better to do than hang on Goldberg's every word. The show's access to Fox news clips and ability to simulate conversations with this footage is also reliant upon digital technology, and well-suited for audiences that appreciate how clips from one show can be re-contextualized, or remixed, within another show.



Image 8 (above). Jon Stewart discussing Fox's Barry Goldberg on *The Daily Show*. "Bernie Goldberg Fires Back." *The Daily Show With Jon Stewart*. Comedy Central, April 20, 2010. Web. <http://www.thedailyshow.com/watch/tue-april-20-2010/bernie-goldberg-fires-back>.

As the *TDS* segment continues, Goldberg presents his argument, saying "If you just want to be a funny man, who talks to an audience who will laugh at anything you say, that's ok with me, no problem. But if, clearly, you want to be a social commentator more than just a comedian, and if you want to be a good one, you'd better find some guts." Stewart responds by criticizing Goldberg's, once again, biased stance: "Not everybody

has your guts, Bernie. It takes a big man to walk into Bill O'Reilly's lion's den [*a conservative program*] and criticize liberal elites." He continues to assert his right to speak about politics: "to say that comedians have to decide whether to be comedians or social commentators — *comedians do social commentary through comedy*. That's how it's been for thousands of years. I have not moved out of the comedians' box into the news box. The news box is moving towards me." He continues after the audience applauds, "Here's the point: you can't criticize me for not being 'fair and balanced.' That's *your* slogan, which, by the way, you *never follow* ... which brings us back to the essence of the whole 'go fuck yourselves' piece."

The *TDS* segment continues to use clips of Goldberg on Fox as evidence of the channel's drift from news into comedy. Goldberg uses his airtime as a news personality to launch a personal attack about 'guts,' not to report the news or even talk about facts. This evidence is further supported by Stewart's rhetorical response that exposes Goldberg's misuse of logic. Stewart first addresses the idea that "guts" are important to Goldberg, who is sounding off as a conservative pundit to a receptive audience already distrustful of liberals. But Stewart also refutes the idea that news is hard and comedy is easy. In fact, he insists that his comedic and politically satirical view of political news media is not only valid, but more appropriate than ever given *TOF*'s focus on fighting with other show hosts rather than discussing political issues. The satirical tone of Stewart's performance and rhetoric positions him to make these critiques because "satire is a discourse of inquiry, a rhetoric of challenge that seeks through the asking of unanswered questions to clarify the underlying morality of the situation," (Day 73-4). By engaging these Fox news clips in a dialogue, Stewart probes the reasons why a news show would bother with airing irrelevant personal vendettas, uncovering the disingenuousness of *TOF* and Goldberg's appearance. Goldberg was not appearing on *TOF* to inform the public or discuss political issues as the show purports to do, but to create 'buzz' or to entertain — leaving news reporting and political discussion to rhetorical writers and comedians.

It is *because* and not in spite of his satirical outlook that Stewart claims his right to speak about politics, and the show's complex tension between rhetoric and form allow

him to critique statements and media evidence in ways cable news cannot. For a show like *TDS* to launch satirical discussions of cable news, rhetorical writers must perform massive amounts of research in contemporary politics, while also maintaining a working knowledge of public opinion and popular culture against which to compare the often ugly truths about politics and news media. Furthermore, these writers must understand how to craft satire by alternating form (technology) with rhetoric. Sketches like the one described above blend editing skills like digitally organizing clips from news programs, television shows and other sources, with rhetorical argumentation. Writers use their rhetorical skills to set up the context for each clip, which often means creating an expectation that the clip will fail to meet, as Stewart does when he accepts Goldberg's "sincere plea of guilty" to generalizing about liberals — only to air a clip of Goldberg following his plea with a threat. By framing the dialogue between Stewart and these clips ironically, writers have created space for a rhetorical response, which again contrasts in its logic to the accusatory tones of cable news shows like *TOF*.

Another segment from *TDS*, aired February 15, 2007, further showcases the program's satirical strategies in its use of dialogic critique, clips as evidence and contradictory combinations of clips. In this segment, Stewart performs an every-man role while surveying the ways that members of the House of Representatives, Republicans and Democrats alike, are characterizing the Iraq War. The dialogic elements of this segment situate a series of CSPAN clips so that the speakers in each clip contradict one another, exposing House members' unrealistic, factually inconsistent, and unsettlingly polarizing views on the Iraq War. Stewart begins his monologue by asking: "Did you find the Senate's inaction last week concerning the Iraqi war infuriating? Maddening? Well you're not alone." The screen's image switches to CSPAN footage of the House of Representatives with a *TDS* graphic title that reads: "Iraq Resolution: The Debating Game." Stewart continues to speak in voice-off, claiming that "This week the House of Representatives, the Garfunkel to the Senate's Simon decided the stakes were just too damn high!" Stewart's rhetoric seems to describe the house's conversation as though it were a trailer for a bad action movie, but in fact his performance resonates with clips that

are about to be shown, which reveal several congress members' casual and disengaged attitudes toward the topic of war.

Following Stewart's opening statement about high stakes, *TDS* plays two series of CSPAN clips: the first series includes all Democrats, and the second all Republicans. Each individual clip shows a different member of congress on the house floor commenting on a resolution that house Democrats had just introduced. *TDS* orchestrates these two montages of clips to illustrate how members of congress are more concerned with individual grandstanding and public appearances than with actually governing. In the first montage of all Democrats, the clips are orchestrated so that each new speaker's words seem to continue the thoughts of the previous one. The first clip in the montage of Democrats shows Florida congressman Robert Wexler stating that "This resolution sends the president an unequivocal message." Next, Michigan congressman Jim Dingell says "...that his policies are failed ...". Because the clips situated one right after the other, Dingell seems to be continuing Wexler's thoughts. In the next clip of the series, New York congressman Gregory Meeks even states that "The cameras of history are rolling," echoing Wexler and Dingell in his belief that their party's resolution is an important matter. When the series of clips ends, Stewart immediately questions the Democrats' enthusiasm by responding to Meeks' statement that "...well at least CSPAN's [eyes] are, and the house has decided that ... this has gone on ... far enough!" His rhetoric suggests that traditional news sources like CSPAN is not engaging, and further, that this resolution is not as groundbreaking as Democrats would like to think.

Stewart continues mimicking Democrats' enthusiasm by exclaiming what the resolution does, but the confidence of his performance tapers off his words clarify the weakness of the Democrats' position. He says: "It was time for them [the Democrats] to take the president to task, to introduce their *own* ... non-binding resolution, which, if passed, would go directly ... to the committee to reconcile resolutions ... with ... I'm sorry, even I'm not listening anymore." *TDS* frames these clips of house Democrats with Stewart's bored attitude to suggest that house resolutions, particularly those articulated only on CSPAN, have no meaning for citizens, and do nothing to resolve conflicts over

the Iraq war. Stewart continues by quoting the resolution as its words flash up onscreen: “The House of Representatives supports the troops, but ‘Disapproves of the president’s policy.” Stewart seems confused, “How ... what ... disapproves? Can we even say that on TV?” Stewart looks to his right, presumably to the director, “Oh my god, I hope they didn’t bleep that,” he says, mocking Democrats’ lack of assertiveness with a president from their own party. By framing clips of congressional Democrats as insubstantial political theater with a dialogic critique, *TDS* implies that members of congress engage in political acting, not rather than political action.

The second series of clips shows Republicans, but this time organizes these clips so that the statements made in each one contradict those of the last, an editing technique that *TDS* shows how congressional Republicans lack a cohesive, logical party stance. Stewart sets up this montage series, describing how “Republicans immediately rose to make the argument that the resolution was A) meaningless, and B) catastrophically meaningful.” The first clip in this montage shows Missouri congressman Roy Blunt is first in the montage from footage of House Republicans’ arguments. He states that “A resolution like this would discourage the troops.” But following his statement in the next clip, Florida congressman Adam Putnam argues that the resolution “This is a rather toothless 97 words.” The next clip shows Roy Blunt again, as he contradicts his former statement that this resolution would hurt the troops, stating “This resolution says just enough to not say anything at all.” Showing these clips of these statements so close to one another exposes Blunt’s inconsistency and insincerity. Next, a clip of Arizona congressman John Shadegg is shown, in which he says, “This resolution would undoubtedly harm America.” A third clip of Roy Blunt appears, showing him contradicting his second statement by arguing that “A resolution like this would embolden the enemy.” Stewart responds to the montage of clips of congressional Republicans by imitating their confused tone and thereby performing their logical flaws: “It is a mere trifle, an empty gesture held in the hand whilst raping a bald eagle in front of a handicapped woman ... So consider this: had congress not supported previous presidents, this is what they’re are our record at war would not be, it’s sterling twelve one

and one, which by the way is bowl champion series — no! Our record would probably be like six and eight.” Stewart is able to critique these inconsistent positions by putting these statements in conversation with one another, and by satirically mocking their insincere performances.

Stewart and *TDS*'s rhetorical writers also create satire to correct misrepresentations of facts and history, contrasting these misrepresentations with historical facts for humorous effect, and exaggerating the ridiculousness of public figures who misuse the past for partisan goals. Later in the same sketch with the Democrat and Republican clip montages, Stewart shows footage of a Republican congressman Todd Akin of Florida who asks smugly, “Could you picture Davy Crockett at the Alamo, looking at his Blackberry getting a message from Congress: ‘Davy Crockett, we support ya ... the only thing is we’re not gonna send any troops.’ I’m sure that would really be impressive to Davy Crockett.” The screen cuts back to Stewart in the studio, with a troubled look on his face, and an over-the-shoulder image of the historical Davy Crockett. He responds, “Yes, if Congress hadn’t supported Davy Crockett at the Alamo, my god who really knows what would have happened there? ... Maybe everyone would have been killed *twice* ... Actually I have to think ... that if Davy Crockett had received a message on his Blackberry from *anybody*, it would have been very impressive.” Stewart corrects Akin’s narrative of Davy Crockett, reminding the audience that Crockett died with his men at the Alamo without any congressional support, and imagines how such emergency support would have been provided with frontier technology. By doing so, Stewart exacerbates the ridiculousness of Akin’s ideological interpretation of history.

As the Davy Crockett example illustrates, *TDS* creates satire by situating its form, performance and rhetoric to satirize media politics. By layering clips from cable news and CSPAN within rhetorical conversations performed at varying registers of seriousness, the show’s approach suggests that complex, media-informed satires are the most appropriate means of understanding the interworking mechanisms of U.S. news and politics. *TDS* and satirical programs like it bear an activist relationship to the direction of cable news and politics because, “rather than being confined to the page ... these

television programs, and pranks incorporate the real into the satiric in a tangible way. This ability to manipulate and alienate the real gives the satire a great deal of power” (Day 8). Injecting satirists or satirical ideas into conversations with politicians, for instance, or re-contextualizing the words of a news anchor by editing footage gives these shows and their segments an active role in framing political meanings. By filtering news and politics through satire, *TDS* implies an oppositional relationship between itself and large, powerful organizations like networks and the federal government — fulfilling for audiences the ‘watchdog’ function that disappeared with network news, but without the network era’s confining sense of what counts as newsworthy.

The Colbert Report, begun in 2005 as a splinter program off of *TDS*, uses similar satirical strategies, but its layers of performance and rhetoric are more contradictory, as Colbert often performs the faults of his opponents, while using rhetoric that reveals the faults in their arguments. In contrast to *TDS*, *TCR* is set up less as a news reporting show and more as a news opinion program, modeling its look and structure from punditry shows like *The O’Reilly Factor* (1996 -) and later *Glenn Beck* (2009 -). The show’s form, including sets and graphics, is explicitly tailored to showcase Colbert’s ironic persona in intensely stylized ways. Colbert’s character is fundamentally different from Stewart’s. Although both hosts play news/opinion anchors, Jon Stewart slips in and out of impersonations, but primarily plays a kind of ‘every-man,’ continually outraged at the superficiality of cable news and the inconsistency of politicians. Colbert, on the other hand, always plays an absurdly staunch conservative, and, in the actor’s own words, a “‘well-intentioned, poorly informed, high-class idiot’” (Bailey 50-51). Instead of positioning himself against conservative politicians or cable news distractions, Colbert praises, imitates, and celebrates his targets in an exaggerated manner.

Colbert often shifts his persona to imitate (and mock) various well-known conservative figures from cable news opinion shows. For instance, he frequently aligns himself with pundits like Bill O’Reilly, who shouts down opponents, ignores facts, and belittles liberal intellectuals. At other times, he satirizes political figures like President George W. Bush by using Texan mannerisms like the president, and exaggerating his

performance of anti-intellectualism. While imitating aspects of real public figures, Colbert uses rhetorical maneuvers to undermine the seriousness of these figures. Colbert also interacts with the studio audience by making them part of the show's satire, as their laughter often confirms that they understand his impersonations to be unflattering and ironic. When they cheer at Colbert's urging, they participate in his satire of pundit shows, their entertainment-driven structures, reinforcement of zealous partisan politics, and distraction from facts.

In the following segment, from the show's first episode (October 2005), Colbert injects himself into the political discourse surrounding the George W. Bush presidency and the Iraq war. While Colbert's mannerisms indicate his sympathies with the president, the show's use of two layers of rhetoric contradict his attitude, creating an ironic relationship between this rhetoric and his performance. This segment is particularly important rhetorically, because in it *TDS* invents an ironic term for the government and media's public evasiveness: "truthiness." Truthiness describes the practice of allowing party lines and biased assumptions dictate beliefs about what is true instinctively, without thinking. Colbert ironically addresses this term as a positive concept, but the rhetoric of the sketch shows how truthiness gives a specific name to the ways politicians and pundits use insincere talking points, formulate excuses that tiptoe around significant facts, and thereby reinforce the status quo without addressing problems. *TCR* often uses this term as a name for when politicians say things they wish were true, but that do not align with facts. The term was quickly adopted by people from television personalities to ordinary citizens, who recognized its relevance to how standard news and public relations practices work to obscure political facts.

Truthiness is introduced in a segment called "The Wørd," which has since become a reoccurring bit on the show. The Wørd's particular arrangement of form, performance and rhetoric has an added layer, as two lines of rhetoric allow *TDS* to comment on Colbert's monologue, reinforcing his persona's ironic messages. While Colbert's performance and the show's formal elements during this segment are exaggerated

imitations of cable pundit programs, the sketch's lines of rhetoric show these formal and performative elements to be laughable.

Colbert begins his first "Wørd" sketch by looking into the camera, declaring "Cause you're lookin' at a straight shooter, America. I calls 'em like I sees them. I will speak to you in plain, simple English, and that brings us to tonight's 'Word.'" Colbert's use of colloquial and western lingo indicates his character's alignment with President George W. Bush, which continues throughout the sketch. Colbert addresses his audience as synonymous with "America," often referring to them as the "(Colbert) nation," both to inflate his persona's ego and to properly imitate pundits use of patriotism to validate their opinions. As Colbert says "Wørd," the left half of the screen becomes a graphic space on which words appear in response to Colbert's assertions (see image 9). These words — visualized as white words against a plain, dark screen — form the second line of rhetoric that sometimes mock's Colbert's position, and other times reinforces the undercurrent of irony in Colbert's monologue. I will refer to Colbert's spoken monologue as "Colbert 1" and the statements that appear on the graphic screen to the left as "Colbert 2." This distinction serves to highlight how the show's satirical humor is produced through layering formal elements like graphics, with over-the-top performances, and multiple lines of rhetorical reasoning.

As "Colbert 1" shouts the Wørd's title: "Truthiness!" the same title appears on the graphic screen to the left ("Colbert 2"). "Colbert 1" continues, "Now I'm sure some of the 'wordinistas' over at Websters are gonna say, 'Hey, that's not a word.' Well, anyone who knows me knows I'm not a fan of dictionaries or reference books. They're elitist, constantly telling us what is and isn't true and what did or didn't happen." Here Colbert mocks president Bush's denial that inaccurate intelligence led the U.S. to declare war on Iraq. As he makes this statement, on the "Colbert 2" screen appear the words: "Reference Books High and Mighty," which Colbert's allegiance to anti-intellectualism plays on Bush's Texan mannerisms and 'good ol' boy' demeanor, which often appeared to mask the more sinister aspects of his military policy, and attracted groups of voters for whom

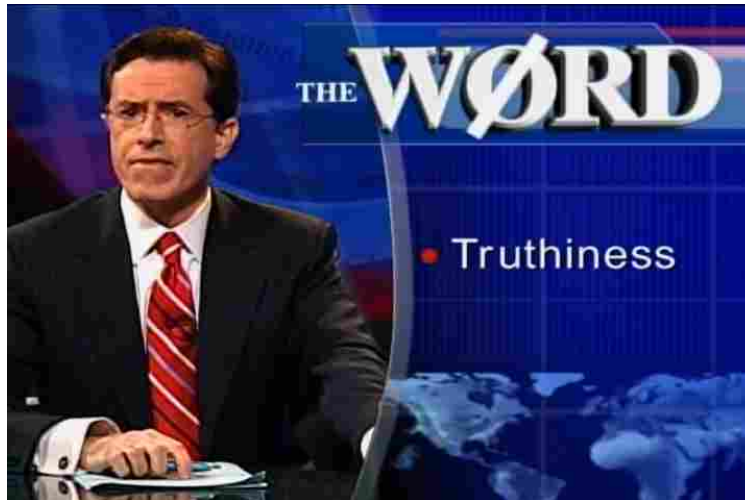


Image 9 (above). “The Word: Truthiness,” *The Colbert Report*. Comedy Central, Season 1, Episode 1, October 17, 2005. Web. <http://www.colbertnation.com/the-colbert-report-videos/24039/october-17-2005/the-word---truthiness>

his policies were less than ideal. “Colbert 1” continues his argument with a parallel example to expose Bush’s faulty logic: “Who’s Britannica to tell me the Panama Canal wasn’t finished until 1914. If I wanna say it happened in 1941 that’s my right!” Colbert’s performance exposes the folly in claiming that all intellectual material is elitist. “I don’t trust books. They’re all fact, no heart. And that’s exactly what’s pulling our country apart today, ‘cause face it, folks. We are a divided nation ... not between Democrats and Republicans or conservatives and liberals, or tops and bottoms, no.” On the graphic screen “Colbert 2” the words “Pitchers and catchers” appear, emphasizing the equation of political positions to sexual positions, and thereby undermining Colbert’s claim that thinking interferes with patriotism. “Colbert 1” continues, “We are divided between those who *think* with their head, and those who *know* with their heart.” “Head bad, heart good” appears on the graphic screen (“Colbert 2”). The simplistic structure of “Colbert 2”’s sentence exaggerates the simplicity of “Colbert 1’s” argument.

To evidence his point about “truthiness,” Stephen returns to an earlier discussion of Bush’s nomination of Harriet Miers to the Supreme Court. Interactions between the rhetoric of “Colbert 1” and “Colbert 2” undermine the segment’s argument: that “heart,” or patriotic emotions, are more important than “head” or facts. Miers’ nomination eventually failed because Bush made his decision based on his friendship with her, and

not on her qualifications for the job. In fact, Miers could not release records of her work for the White House³⁶, had no prior experience as a judge, and her views did not align politically with the Republican positions (Stout & Williams). “Colbert 1” states, “Consider Harriet Miers. If you think about Harriet Miers, of course her nomination’s absurd ... But the president didn’t say he *thought* about his selection. He said this.” The screen cuts to footage of a press conference from October 4, 2005 in which George W. Bush stated of Miers that he “know[s] her heart.” The screen returns to Colbert, who says “Notice how he said nothing about her brain. He didn’t have to. He feels the truth about Harriet Myers.”

Colbert turns to the Iraq War to show how truthiness has impacted federal decisions about military engagements. “And what about Iraq? If you *think* about it, maybe there are a few missing pieces from the rationale for war, but doesn’t taking Saddam out *feel* like the right thing?” “Colbert 2” agrees: “I’ll say!” Colbert stresses that Bush’s explanation of his decision celebrates the ‘gut,’ intuition, and an ‘act-first-think-later’ attitude. Colbert points to his own stomach: “Right here. Right here in the gut. ‘Cause that’s where the truth comes from, ladies and gentlemen. Do you know you have more nerve endings in your stomach than in your head?” “Colbert 2” on the left says “True.” The corroboration of “Colbert 2” mocks the way that confidence and assurance of television pundits is often mistaken for factual certainty. “Colbert 1” assures his audience: “Look it up. Now somebody’s gonna say, ‘I did look that up and it’s wrong.’ Well, mister, that’s because you looked it up in a book. Next time, try looking it up in your gut.” This continual play between “Colbert 1” and “Colbert 2” forces the audience to focus on discerning whether his statements are true or false. The veracity of each individual statement is less important than the continual reminders to question what is asserted. The meanings of this monologue are not in “Colbert 1” or “Colbert 2”’s precise words, but in the relationships between these two rhetorical components.

While entertainment programs have reframed political issues in various ways, digital technology and internet-use have allowed communities to form and sustain

³⁶ This problem drew attention to the Bush administration’s lack of transparency.

themselves around *TDS* and *TCR*'s critical and satirical messages. Despite ongoing problems with whose speech is validated in terms of race, ethnicity, and gender,³⁷ both shows have changed the tone of national political discussions and, along with other programs, have shifted popular attention to address many problems with politics at a critical point in U.S. history. Political talking points and conciliatory cable news are no longer controlling political conversations; *TDS*, *TCR*, and a host of other entertainment programs are now part of the political "framing process ... the way in which particular issues are publicly discussed" (Day 19). Both Stewart and Colbert "project the feeling of a community in opposition" for viewers who have become disillusioned with televised politics: while Stewart plays an every-man with whom to identify, Colbert satirically performs as an attention-seeking media pundit. Both provide "suggestions for political action and resources for further research, along with the sense that they are part of a

³⁷ While these two shows and their predecessors have inspired creative forms of political activism, this kind of political speech is often restricted to certain bodies, individuals, and social positions. Jon Stewart, Stephen Colbert, and hosts of similar late-night programs are largely white and male. Their freedom to make fun of their own identities and heritage in the course of political sketches rests entirely upon an unspoken hierarchy of privilege in which only those who have some degree of authority can afford to mock authority in general (Day 9). Moreover, these men are just the latest in a history of white men standing in for the generalized identities, opinions, and bodies of others. Thus Jon Stewart, a Jewish, white man:

Draws upon his distinction as a means of fueling his wry commentary on the social problems he sees around him, while still producing that commentary as the audience's everyman stand-in, who can display his disgust and amusement on our behalf. And it is absolutely because he is white and male that he can easily assume that privilege ... there are, of course, many advantages to attempting to stand in for a generalized public. The commentary, for instance, often avoids appearing whiny, too like a tirade, or dangerously transgressive (Day 9-10).

Anyone could say what Stewart says, but Stewart has been authorized to say it on TV, with the show's production at his disposal. His ability to do so depends on U.S. culture's shared paternalistic ideologies that mark male outrage as acceptable and female outrage as whiny, the outrage of white people as understandable, and outrage of nonwhite people as a nonissue. Because Stewart is white and male, he is able to use his Jewish identity to synthesize feelings of marginality for the audience, feeding into his 'every-man' persona. In a similar way, Stephen Colbert frequently rekindles his ties to a particular background, either his Southern or Irish heritage, baldly offering his stories to appear relatable and authentic.

larger group of people with shared goals” (Day 13). These shows and their complex uses of rhetoric are more powerful because they affirm and reinforce community-building based on shared political outrage (Day 13). *TDS* and *TCR* inspire online communities because fans can share clips of these multi-layered critiques online, encouraging counter-publics who affirm their collectivity through sharing groups of similar texts. Counter-publics allow viewers to “identify through the consumption of and interaction with particular popular culture texts, while providing an easy shared reference” and encourage viewers to “look to satirists as representatives who will push their particular worldview into the wider public sphere” (Day 10-11). Stewart and Colbert operate as representatives of large counter-publics as well as focal points for significant national discussions.

Because *TDS* and *TCR* coincide with an era of increasing digital participation, it is important to realize the extent of the digital communities that have formed around these shows and how they have inspired other forms of politically satirical media. As satirical videos were shared among users and opened political discussions to public forums beyond television, many users began using rhetorical satire to address their own localized political impasses. Rhetorical writers in late 2007 and early 2008 translated the satirical strategies from these shows into videos expressing their frustrations and organizing as a counter-public during a critical moment for television’s future. As writers from *TDS*, *TCR*, and other shows went on strike, their writers and performers, as well as other WGA members, adopted techniques from these shows that layered form, performance, and rhetoric to satirize the AMPTP and emphasize the value of their skills.

The Writers Strike Online

The following sections of this chapter detail and analyze satirical web videos supporting writers during the WGA strike, all featured on Youtube and other pro-WGA sites. I have grouped these videos according to aspects of their function and authorship. The groups of videos are titled: “Explaining the Strike,” “Satirical Spoofs,” the “Speechless” Series, and “Youtube Protests: Brought to You by TV.” Each analysis points to the continuity between the techniques used in these pro-writer videos and the layered satires created by *TDS* and *TCR*. Each video uses one or more strategies, including

“dialogic critiques,” “contradictory combinations,” “clips as evidence,” and “performance/exposure of logical fallacies,” which are derived from particular orientations of form, performance and rhetoric specific to *TDS* and *TCR*’s innovation in rhetorical satire specific to media technologies.

Explaining the Strike

The two videos in this group illustrate the basic dynamics between AMPTP studio executives and WGA writers and the writers’ reasons for striking. “Voices” and “Holy Grail” both utilize dialogic critique and use clips as evidence to reveal the inconsistencies of statements by AMPTP members like Rupert Murdoch and Disney executive Bob Iger with regard to Internet revenue. Both videos are alike in their use of rhetorical dialogic critique, but without the use of a news anchor or ‘host.’ These videos borrow from *TCR*’s use of inter-titles or onscreen text to provide a rhetorical line of reasoning. Editing clips of media executives into conversations with written words draws attention to the writer’s work, and situates executives’ statements to contradict one another. The authors of these videos activate their satirical portraits of AMPTP members with form, by coordinating clips and pauses between them in a particular order, and rhetoric, situating inter-titles to respond to the clips and undercut executives’ claims.

“Voices of Uncertainty”

This short video juxtaposes clips of AMPTP members’ refusals to pay writers residuals for new media content with television footage of studio executives touting their confidence in Internet revenues to shareholders. Subtitles between these clips work to undermine executives and to mock their “uncertainty” about Internet markets. The video begins with inter-titles that explain the basic conflict between the unions: “The studios say they can’t pay writers when they sell their work online because the impact of the Internet is still uncertain. These are the heartbreaking voices of uncertainty” (see images 10 - 12). These words are immediately followed by a clip of Disney executive Bob Iger telling CNBC reporters that the corporation has seen \$1.5 billion in digital profits annually. Characterizing the executives voices as “heartbreaking,” then immediately following this description with reports of their record profits establishes the video’s level

of irony and the perspective of the argument. Next, the sound of a typewriter dings as the following words appear in fine print, as if being typed out as a footnote by a writer, at the bottom of the screen: “*For accounting purposes, subtract about a billion five.” Using fine print suggests that executives use bureaucratic techniques to argue that these profits don’t benefit writers.

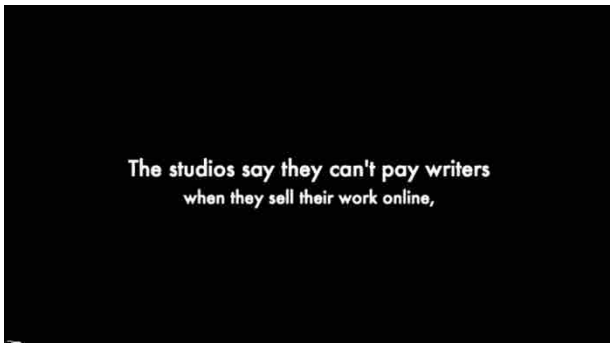


Image 10. Inter-title from “Voices of Uncertainty.” “Voices of Uncertainty.” Web Video. *Youtube.com*, November 12, 2007. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8a37uqd5vTw>. Web.

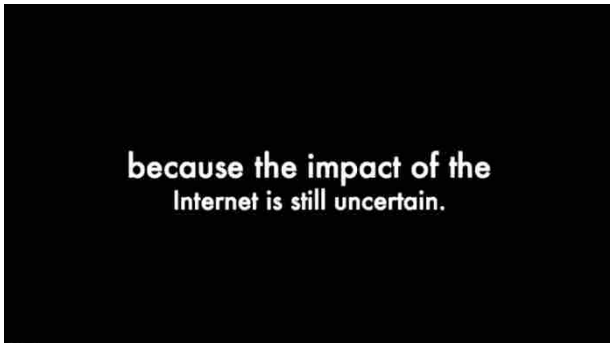


Image 11. Inter-title from “Voices of Uncertainty.” “Voices of Uncertainty.” Web Video. *Youtube.com*, November 12, 2007. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8a37uqd5vTw>. Web.

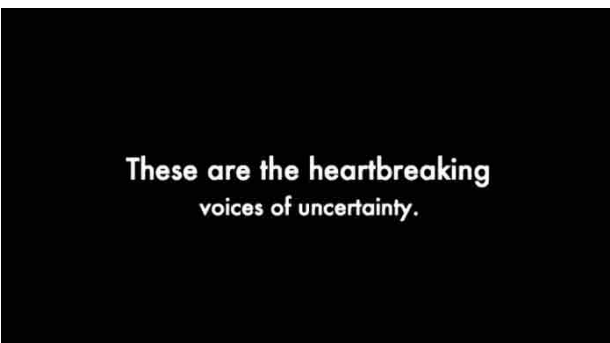


Image 12. Inter-title from “Voices of Uncertainty.” “Voices of Uncertainty.” Web Video. *Youtube.com*, November 12, 2007. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8a37uqd5vTw>. Web.

More evidence is furnished with footage of Sumner Redstone, a majority holder in Viacom, who boasts of his plans to double digital revenues in the coming year. The same typewriter print is used to respond, this time stating: “Writers will also double their revenues from digital, from \$0.00 to \$0.00.” Juxtaposing clips of executives’ claims with typed facts about writers’ compensation statements with facts and quips about what writers are paid highlights the Iger and Redstone’s hypocrisy. The video also features Rupert Murdoch: media magnate, chairman and CEO of News Corp., who is shown in a clip from an interview with Charlie Rose announcing that digital media represents “golden opportunities.” Again, a typeface message appears in small print as a disclaimer: “*Golden opportunity not open to writers or residents of Guam.” Next, Bill Silverman, chairman of NBC entertainment also appears in a clip, stating that content will become more important as the presence of screens becomes more pervasive, and that NBC is “one of the best companies in the world at feeding those screens.” The next typed disclaimer plays on his words: “*Screens will be fed. Writers, not so much.” Murdoch’s language in this clip particularly reinforces how executives maintain a disconnect between “feeding” screens with content and how content is produced.

The last clip evidencing the falseness of executives’ uncertainties shows Les Moonves, CEO of CBS, who assures investors that networks and production companies that they will get paid regardless of whether a show like *CSI* is accessed online, on television, or via mobile devices. The typed response reminds viewers that “*‘We’ does not include writers of ‘CSI.’” The final exchange in this dialogue rhetorically implies that executives are not “uncertain,” but greedy. This time in the center of the screen, the typed words ask, “How come the only time the Internet seems to confuse the studios ... is when it’s time to pay their writers for it?” Punctuated by typewriter sound effects, “Unitedhollywood.com” appears, ending the video.

“Voices of Uncertainty” arranges footage of media executives bragging about their Internet profits, and juxtaposes this footage with disembodied statements that highlight how they are exploiting the content that writers create. The conversational structure of this critique uses clips to provide evidence of executives inconsistent claims

about Internet revenues. The second “Explaining the Strike” pro-writer video, titled “Rupert Murdoch and the Holy Grail,” uses similar devices, but with a three-sided dialogue. The video intercuts footage of CEOs and executives praising the Internet as the future of revenues, with clips of an interview with Rupert Murdoch saying that the Internet would *not* be a “holy grail” for writers. This contrasting footage (form) is buffered by inter-titles (rhetoric) that structure their opposition as a conversation. “Holy Grail” orchestrates AMPTP members’ statements to contradict each other, and furnishes evidence of the revenues that Murdoch and others enjoy by selling television content through online markets.

“Rupert Murdoch and the Holy Grail”

“Holy Grail” consists of many of the same techniques as “Voices of Uncertainty,” and both videos were uploaded to Youtube by strikingwriter2007, “Voices” on November twelfth, 2007, followed by “Holy Grail” on December seventh. Both videos utilize inter-titles inserted between television clips in a dialogic critique, but “Holy Grail” features three rhetorical perspectives, allowing two sets of clips to contradict each other. The video begins with an inter-title that reads: “Dear Rupert Murdoch, ... Since the writers’ strike began, you seem to have lost your faith in the Internet.” The video cuts to a clip of Murdoch in a Fox Business Channel interview, in which he is asked, “So those writers who think the Internet is going to be their Holy Grail — you don’t think it is?” Murdoch responds, simply: “No.” The next inter-title responds: “Not the Holy Grail? We know some people who think otherwise ... Like the head of the network you just partnered with online.” The next clip introduces the first of several clips that represent evidence the Internet’s success and together form the video’s third rhetorical ‘voice’ or line of reasoning. Jeff Zucker, CEO of NBC Universal, is shown in an interview on CNBC Dec. 3, 2007 about the launch of Hulu in a partnership with News Corp. Zucker states that online content “is the future of advertising, and the future of how advertising dollars are going to be spent, and how viewers are going to get their programs.” Another inter-title appears, reading: “C’mon — that’s pretty convincing, right?” The inter-title is followed by a hard cut back to the clip of Murdoch’s original response: “No” (see image 13).

Pitting the statements of multiple media moguls against one another is an effective way for writers to discredit their official bargaining positions, and also makes Murdoch look insincere and uncompromising.



Image 13. Rupert Murdoch from “Rupert Murdoch and the Holy Grail.” “Rupert Murdoch and the Holy Grail.” Web Video. *Youtube.com*. December 20, 2007. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XpwJfD7pgLY>. Web.

The video continues as another inter-title appears, responding to Murdoch’s repetitious answer and setting up further evidence. “Oh ... Well, then how about that guy’s boss, the CEO of GE?” The next clip returns to the line of evidence, showing another CNBC interview, this time with GE CEO Jeff Immelt, saying “Anybody out there who thinks that the TV network business is gonna be run the same way two years from now that it’s being run today is crazy.” The inter-title that follows jokingly creates animosity between Immelt and Murdoch: “We think he just called you crazy. (Try not to take it personally.) ... So, has he sold you on the Internet?” But once again, the video cuts back to Murdoch’s “No.” As though responding in a debate, the inter-title’s voice returns: “Well, there’s one last guy who might be able to convince you ... He seems pretty sure of himself.” The next clip, of course, is an interview of Murdoch himself — in fact, this clip is the same Charlie Rose interview used in “Voices,” in which Murdoch tells Rose his

hopes that the Internet ushers in “a golden era. It is certainly one with golden opportunities.” By setting this evidence up in opposition to Murdoch’s refusals, the video calls attention to how he is cheating writers. In a final blow, the inter-title quips: “And what do you make a Holy Grail out of? ... Gold! ... C’mon, Rupert! ... Are you calling your past self a liar? ...” The last clip is another cut to Murdoch’s “No.” “We didn’t think so” responds the inter-title. “Unitedhollywood.com,” one of the primary organizing websites for the WGA strike campaign, appears before the screen fades to black.

“Explaining the Strike” videos use very basic graphics and low-budget effects to quickly spread their messages and appeal to the do-it-yourself character of YouTube’s users. In contrast, their editing structures and rhetorical lines of reasoning reveal a sophisticated knowledge of the media industry, access to interviews, and editing conversationally that suggest professional authorship. Editing together clips from multiple sources to craft a comedic argument, these videos employ a conversational structure and use sub- and inter-titles to complement the open and social ethos and nonprofessional ‘look’ already popular on Youtube, consisting of simple typeface messages and borrowed video footage to make up for lack of a shooting space. The inter-titles are significant in several ways, acting as a representation of the writers’ collective satirical voice — which is imagined as literal (even typed) writing — that conjures a sense of unity behind the WGA’s struggle, as though they are questioning the AMPTP together. “Voices” and “Holy Grail” demonstrate the value writers contribute to making television work online. Rhetorical logic governs the structure of “Explaining the Strike” videos in ways that expose ironies about digital revenues.

Satirical Spoofs

All of the pro-writer videos in this section borrow aspects of well-known films, television shows, and genres to imagine how Hollywood productions might be different without talented screenwriters. What is spoofed in these videos is not the texts that are borrowed, but the logic that they could be meaningful without writers to guide their messages, as the AMPTP’s bargaining stance implied. Each of these “Satirical Spoofs” combines contradictory combinations of form and rhetoric (script), which reveals the

centrality of writers to media texts. Even though these pro-writer videos re-create famous film and television moments with poorly-written scripts, these examples of ‘bad writing’ or no writing work to remind viewers of iconic lines from movies, and illustrate the creativity of rhetorical writing. The writers creating these videos were able to play on their intricate knowledge of film and television conventions, while showing how ridiculous these formulas would be without highly-developed scripted concepts to support them. The techniques in “A World Without Writers,” “WGA Galaxy,” and “Murder Unscripted” suggest that every aspect of a film or TV series, including the characters, set design, animation, and lighting, are bound together and rationalized through the script, and thus the writer.

“A World Without Writers”

Imagining alternative versions of beloved films and shows allows “A World Without Writers” to imply that the very greatness of these ‘classics’ hinges on their *written* concepts and scripted lines, without which their high production values and dramatic effects appear silly. Like *TCR*’s “The Wørd” segment, and the videos from the “Explaining the Strike” section, “A World Without Writers” mobilize satirical relationships between images and subtitles to emphasize the value writers provide the entertainment industry. Rather than these sub-titles standing in for the voices of writers, however, “Without Writers” matches frames from famous Hollywood films and television shows with sub-titles suggesting different — badly written — dialogue to illustrate how scenes from movies would be less powerful without the expertise of skilled writers. Each still frame from a different movie appears as a sub-title fades in with the character’s re-imagined lines, while a mariachi guitar cover of Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony plays throughout the video. The frames, one following the next, provide numerous examples from the best and most well-known American films and TV programs. For instance, the first frame comes from a concluding scene from *It’s A Wonderful Life*, in which George, Mary, and their daughter thank their friends and neighbors, who’ve come to their financial rescue. In the scene, George’s brother exclaims: “To my big brother, George, the richest man in town!” But in the “Without Writers” version, this famous line is

substituted, and the image is paired with the following line instead: “To my brother George, who owes everyone eight grand” (see image 14). The new sub-title is funny because it reverses the film’s message of generosity with a more literal notion of wealth, and also because the focus on money (and the choice of a movie that contrasts a greedy businessman with a loving family man) echoes the fact that writers are often cut from media productions to save money, despite the high revenues they often earn for executives.



Image 14. “A World Without Writers” Inter-title with image from *It’s a Wonderful Life* “A World Without Writers.” Web video. *Youtube.com*. November 11, 2007. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PKtKteRTA-8>. Web.

“Without Writers” includes many examples that undercut the visual mastery of a particular film or show with intentionally dull, fumbling, or lackluster scripting — to trigger the viewer’s memory of lines that were so well-written that their replacement is laughable. Another still image from *Gone With The Wind* shows Rhett Butler with the words “Whatever, Scarlet” (see image 15). These words replace one of the most famous lines in literary history: “Frankly my dear, I don’t give a damn,” which create a far more explicit and scandalizing moment. Another frame shows gun-wielding Faye Dunaway from the final scene in *Chinatown*. The subtitle reads: “ Forget it Jake. In an ethnic enclave like *Chinatown*, things can be hard to figure out” (see image 16). The line clumsily makes explicit aspects of *Chinatown* that the scripted film conveys with artful subtlety, gradually eluding to the darkness of its characters over many scenes and understated dialogue.



Image 15. “A World Without Writers” Inter-title with image from *Gone With the Wind*. “A World Without Writers.” Web video. *Youtube.com*. November 11, 2007. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PKtKteRTA-8>. Web.



Image 16. “A World Without Writers” Inter-title with image from *Chinatown*. “A World Without Writers.” Web video. *Youtube.com*. November 11, 2007. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PKtKteRTA-8>. Web.

While some of these image/quote pairings suggest the absence of quality phrasing or eloquence, others undercut the very core of the original film or TV show’s narrative, emphasizing the writer’s foundational role in creating media content. The computer’s robotic, red “eye” from *2001: A Space Odyssey* appears above the quote: “Okay, Dave. No problem,” and not the more menacing “I’m afraid I can’t do that, Dave,” which coolly signals the computer’s imprisonment of the main character (see image 17). The substitute line makes the omnipotent computer submissive and casual. Another combination shows a close up of Hugh Laurie as Fox’s *House*. Beneath the image appear the words “It’s ok Dr. House, we figured it out without you” (see image 18). Fox’s hit show *House* relies on the way Laurie’s character is written as a brilliant doctor without whom patients would die in every episode. “Without Writers” pairs iconic images from films with ‘bad writing’ that creatively position viewers to remember writers’ contributions to their favorite media texts.

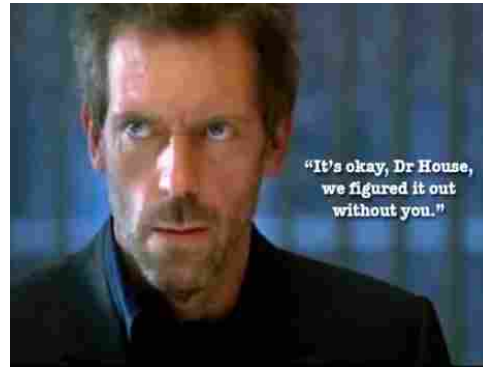
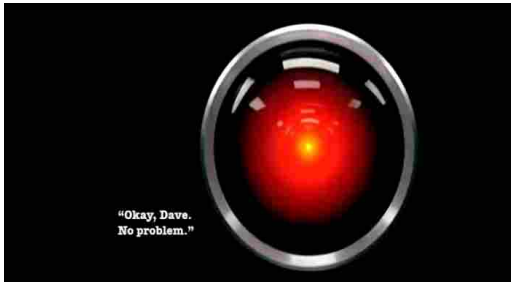


Image 17 (left). “A World Without Writers” Inter-title with image from *2001: A Space Odyssey*. “A World Without Writers.” Web video. *Youtube.com*. November 11, 2007. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PKtKteRTA-8>. Web.

Image 18 (right). “A World Without Writers” Inter-title with image from *House*. “A World Without Writers.” Web video. *Youtube.com*. November 11, 2007. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PKtKteRTA-8>. Web.

“WGA Galaxy”

“WGA Galaxy” also spoofs a famous concept from the world of motion pictures. Using the prologue format from *Star Wars: Episode IV A New Hope*, in which an outer space setting acts as a backdrop while scrolling text summarizes how the film’s present conflict emerged. This scene is especially suitable for the writers’ purpose, as it opens with one of the most famous lines in film history: “A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away ...” The writers strike version, by contrast, replaces eloquent scripting with an new prologue that seems improvised and unplanned, illustrating how even in a special effects thriller like *Star Wars*, the script unifies the story and lends weight to the visual concepts. “Galaxy” fades in on a dark sky filled with stars. The words “A galaxy without writers is a galaxy without stories” appear in bold yellow font as the *Star Wars* theme begins to play. The words glide from the bottom to the top of the screen as they become smaller, appearing to move into the distance as new words replace them. After the first sentence, the words function imitate lackluster, unstructured writing with no sense of the story’s direction. The words read, line-by-line as follows: “Episode IV A / New Hope / It is a time of ... / uh ... ya know... / Hmm / Okay / So there were these guys -- / Whadd’ya call ‘em? / You know, like bad guys. / Bad guys who ... uh ... / Hmmm ... / Maybe ... uh ... /

Maybe they could er ... / Uh ... / What do those lasers sound like? Djoo djoo! Aahh! / And flying saucer guy is all like... Ahhh / ... / ... / Oh, man. Where's a writer when you need one?" (see image 19). As the last of the words fade out, a shooting star crosses the dark screen, leaving "Unitedhollywood.com" in its trail. The video shares a similar conceit with "Without Writers," but elaborates one particular example to highlight the value of narrative construction.



Image 19. Image from "WGA Galaxy" video. "WGA Galaxy." Web Video. *Youtube.com*, November 8, 2007. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9s04LlhIEIk>. Web.

"Murder Unscripted"

"Murder" plays with similar concepts to "World Without" and "Galaxy," but does so with a slightly different orientation of form, performance, and rhetoric. The video features real actors and a complete set, but the performances of the actors and the absence of a script to rationalize the scene render all of these formal and performative elements useless. "Murder" has the look of a televised police procedural drama, but not the backstory, evidence, or plot details that make the stories in this genre plausible. The video explores how actors must engage in humorous guesswork, dissolving the 'cool' personas and professional air that the script would typically substantiate. "Murder" is credited to the AMPTP, suggesting that if they had their way, this is how television scenes would always appear. The video begins as the words "The AMPTP presents" fade in, and opens on what is clearly a crime scene with a murder victim. Next, an inter-title appears again, introducing: "a special preview of this season's new hit drama ... Murder Unscripted.

Starring: An impossibly hot detective team.” These inter-titles draw attention to the way scripts rationalize aspects of a show’s form that would otherwise not make sense.

The video cuts back to the scene, as a male and a female actor (detectives) stand in a library facing the victim’s (a young woman) murdered body (see image 20). The female detective is *Law & Order: Criminal Intent* actress Kathryn Erbe, who plays a police detective in her television role. The pair, dressed as detectives, casually try to decide if, in fact, they are in a library — ironically focusing on the most basic and least relevant aspects of the scene. As their dialogue continues, it becomes obvious that the actors have no lines or plot information. The detectives’ conversation continues as Erbe asks “Do you think we should be worried about fingerprints?” “No, I don’t think so,” her partner replies. By cheekily referencing, then discarding, the idea of fingerprints — something any casual viewer of television detective stories knows to be a crucial detail — “Murder” draws attention to the actors’ inability to create a professional scene without a script.



Image 20. Image from “Murder Unscripted” Video. “Murder Unscripted.” Online Video Clip. *Youtube.com*. January 7, 2008. Web. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u_igKSYspPs.

An inter-title appears to introduce a new character that reads “The Case-Hardened D.A.,” referencing the standard ‘types’ commonly seen in police procedurals. These

'types' are made transparent, suggesting the repetitiveness of formulas that are made fresh with the details and characters that writers must invent. Erbe and her partner struggle to tell the D.A. about the crime scene, telling him "Well we're thinking, we had an episode like this once where her mom did it, and so maybe this also was her mom." The only way for the actors to 'solve' this crime is through references to past scripts. Another inter-title presents the "Old Timer Who's Seen It All," who recommends that they "Call the, oh what'd you call it? Thing, um ...". Meanwhile, everyone in the scene seems to be tampering with evidence and violating the genre conventions for police dramas. The next inter-title introduces "The Omniscient Forensic Profiler" and "The Overburdened Captain." The segment that follows shows the profiler, played by *Law & Order* profiler B.D. Wong, who stares gravely at the body until pressed for an opinion his Captain, played by *Law & Order: CI* captain and actor Eric Bogosian, cast here in a similar role. Wong replies that "It's obvious. He's a killer. No doubt about it." Wong's serious manner, typical of his television characters, sharply contrasts his vacuous contribution. The next inter-title announces a "Special Guest Appearance by The Seasoned Pro With the Golden Gut," who is played by Chris Noth, another *Law & Order: CI* actor. He tells the captain, "So, she's dead right? So, I guess that means ... she's definitely not living," and then suggests that perhaps she died from choking, despite the dead girl's bloody wounds. The video ends with the sarcastic words: "Writers, who needs them?"

"A World Without Writers," "WGA Galaxy," and "Murder Unscripted," situate form, performance, and content in ways that activate contradictions. Ironically, by showing how films, shows, and genres would be incomplete without writers, the writers who created these videos reveal their skills at navigating popular media and spreading satirical messages. "Satirical Spoofs" mock the real efforts of studio executives and other producers to create writer-free genres like Reality TV, and to devalue writers' work by remaining unwilling to negotiate reasonably, despite the centrality of writers to quality media production.

The “Speechless” Series

The next group of videos have been analyzed together because they were planned and made as a series. The “Speechless” collection, which featured pro-writer videos on a daily basis during the strike, was located on its own Youtube channel by the “speechlesshollywood” account. The “Speechless” channel was the result of extensive collaboration between the WGA and Screen Actors Guild (SAG) performers, who appear in many of the videos to help writers publicize the strike by highlighting the ways their work depends on writers (Banks 29). “Speechless” videos use contradictory combinations to expose the centrality of writing to actors’ careers. Although there are too many of these videos to describe each in complete detail, this section will discuss their common features, namely that they isolate form and performance *without* rhetoric — but only to reinforce rhetoric’s importance. These videos validate writers’ work by situating form and performance to convey ironies without words — and equating their silence to the absence of Hollywood creativity.

Most of the “Speechless” videos are shot in black-and-white, and use high-profile stars, many of them award-winning actors. These choices signify understated taste, and erudite appreciation for cinema history. The more famous or celebrated the actor, the more stately the setting, the subtler the camerawork — the funnier the silence. Episode 20, for example, features writer/actor/director Woody Allen, who sits by the fireside holding a cup of tea (see image 21). The video begins with an inter-title that reads: “Fade-In.” The first shot is an unconventional close-up of a pile of logs that pulls back and to the left to gradually reveal a fireplace, and then Allen seated in an armchair. As he lifts the teacup to his mouth and takes a sip, a loud, roaring laugh track erupts, and then subsides as he lowers the cup again. He silently repeats this action several more times, as the laugh track plays predictably until the scene fades to black. This single shot recalls experimental aspects of mid-century cinematography by de-centering the subject, beginning the scene with an abstract close-up of an irrelevant object, then zooming out to reveal the setting and orient the viewer. The laugh track and Allen’s minimal movements suggest his comedic work, but also hints towards the video’s satire of his silence. The

laughter contrasts the video's artistic direction and indicates that something important is missing.



Image 21. Image of Woody Allen from “Speechless” Series Video. “Speechless.” Web Page. *Youtube.com*, November 22, 2007. Writers' Guild of America and Screen Actors' Guild. Web. <http://www.youtube.com/user/speechlesshollywood/featured>.

A similar clip comes from “Speechless” Episode 13, in which actor Ed Asner is shown in close-up eating a sandwich. While the camera remains stationary, Asner’s performance provides the contrast to the silence. At first he appears not to notice the camera, but once he makes eye contact, he hurries to chew and signals to the camera, as though he has something important to say. He readies himself and finishes chewing, but then ends his performance by acting as though he cannot remember what he wanted to say (see image 22). The video ends with him shrugging in embarrassment. The only sound in the video is natural ambient noise as Asner chews and fidgets. By juxtaposing performances of talented actors, creative cinematography, set design with silence, writers emphasize their role in supporting actors and the inadequacy of form without structure or content.



Image 22. Image of Ed Asner from “Speechless” Series Video. “Speechless.” Web Page. *Youtube.com*, November 22, 2007. Writers' Guild of America and Screen Actors' Guild. Web. <http://www.youtube.com/user/speechlesshollywood/featured>.

By using Allen and Asner also projects the unity between the WGA and SAG. The silence of similar scenes are performed by a diverse array of well-known Hollywood actors that includes Martin Sheen, Demi Moore, Kate Beckinsale and David Schwimmer. The silence of these videos is pointed in multiple ways. While the strike left the entertainment industry without scripts, the conflict also silenced actors and writers, alluding to a sordid history between writers and networks, which have previously censored content and interfered with creative production to punish writers for making financial demands and organizing collectively.

Other “Speechless” episodes find ways besides silence to make fun of a Hollywood without professional scriptwriting. In one example, Susan Sarandon and actor Chazz Palminteri meet in a tightly shot, black and white cafe scene (see image 23), The two actors say “blah blah blah” rather than actual lines, but nevertheless act out an emotional moment. The scene begins with Sarandon and Palminteri hugging as if reunited, then in the course of what would be a conversation of emotive “blahs,” Palminteri ‘reveals’ something that upsets Sarandon, they both begin to cry and hug, in what is a comically dramatic scene without content or motivation. Sarandon and Palminteri give sincere acting performances, but without words the emotions they perform become silly in their lack of foundation. The video create gritty images by shooting in black and white and cropping shots intimately in shot-reverse-shot sequences between the two characters. But as with Allen and Asner’s skits, the formal and performative techniques in these videos are grossly depleted without coherent characters, motivations, and plot structure.



Image 23. Image of Susan Sarandon from “Speechless” Series Video. “Speechless.” Web Page. *Youtube.com*, November 22, 2007. Writers' Guild of America and Screen Actors' Guild. Web. <http://www.youtube.com/user/speechlesshollywood/featured>.

Other videos in the “Speechless” series play less on aspects of silence or a lack of words and instead draw on the problems with a purely improvisational approach to entertainment — as with new unscripted genres like Reality TV. In Episode 11, actress Laura Linney appears in a living room, and speaks as though she were in an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting, but instead says the following: “Hi I’m Laura.” “Hi, Laura,” we hear a group chants back. “I’m an actress without a script.” She confesses: “I’ve realized that my life has become unmanageable in this situation, um, and I’m glad that I have the tools to recognize that. So, I’ve decided to take it one step further and ask my higher power for guidance and help.” Linney performs the scene nervously, as someone with little confidence (see image 24). She continues, “Because, I ... I ... I *can write*, okay. I went to school, I can write. So, um, I’m gonna take matters into my own hands. So would, anyone mind if I read some unofficial material? ... This is really good stuff.” She opens a box of cards from “Scene It,” a trivia game based on movie knowledge. “So I’ve just been looking for, um, just inspiration ... and we’re not alone ... we’re never alone.” Although Linney asserts that she “can write,” her demeanor evidences the actual difficulty of writing quality scripts.



Image 24. Image of Laura Linney from “Speechless” Series Video “Speechless.” Web Page. *Youtube.com*, November 22, 2007. Writers' Guild of America and Screen Actors' Guild. Web. <http://www.youtube.com/user/speechlesshollywood/featured>.

Linney chooses a card from the deck, and reads it aloud: “Name the actor who appeared in all of the following: *Charles The Great, Cleopatra, Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf* ... Scene: alcohol in a room, alcohol has been consumed, ummm Woman screams at husband: ‘You don’t take care of me the way I want you to!’ Husband: ‘Well, you’re not here. How can I take care of you if you’re not here?’ ... and then maybe a young couple will come in, maybe from down the hall.” She tries to draw inspiration

from older films, reminding viewers of writers' contributions. Linney pauses and sighs, then continues, "and um, um, maybe I need to re-inventory this. Young couple ... young couple ... stay with it. Young couple comes in, and the young couple sort of eyes the older guy, sort of gives him a look, and then he sort of gives them a look — that can be all subtext, I can type that all out, so that's not dialogue." While Linney's performance of a nervous actor without a script is skillful, she is unable to create a script of her own using improvisation. Even when she attempts to write a scene, her contributions are performative subtext, and not written dialogue. But Linney's performance also characterizes the work of actors and performers as a creative and collaborative process that can reach an audience through alternative media platforms.

Although each of the "Speechless" videos shows the problematics of producing media texts without professional writers, they do so in highly creative and, ultimately, *scripted* ways. For instance, in another "Speechless" video, Holly Hunter attempts to act out a scene in which she plays a blind girl describing her life experiences. A voice from behind the camera says to Hunter: "Tell me what it's like to be blind." Hunter begins her scripted monologue: "Black. No light. No car at sixteen. No ... No, I've never been to a movie, or been aroused by the vision of a man, reaching for a book in a library." She sighs, "or a sunset, or a bush —" She touches the window and reacts, "ooh, cold! cold ... or a brushstroke in a painting ... or ..." In frustration, Hunter breaks character and asks to get the writer on the phone (see image 25), but when she does, she finds herself on the phone with a man in Bangalore, who tries to tell her about a subscription tier plan, and then about PC scripts³⁸. After he remembers the movie script she needs, Hunter tells him that she feels her character is written a little too "on the nose." The 'writer' opens Webster's English Dictionary to look up "on the nose," and when that doesn't work, he refers her to their "level 2 support."³⁹

³⁸ PC Scripts refers to computer programs, not written scripts.

³⁹ References to outsourcing the labor of writing align writers with other workers whose jobs have been moved overseas to increase profits for CEOs by making manufacturing less expensive.



Image 25. Image of Holly Hunter from “Speechless” Series Video. “Speechless.” Web Page. *Youtube.com*, November 22, 2007. Writers' Guild of America and Screen Actors' Guild. Web. <http://www.youtube.com/user/speechlesshollywood/featured>.

The “Speechless” series, as a collaboration between WGA and SAG members, is one of the strike’s clearest examples of union-affiliated media activism. The series exposed the ways that executives were silencing writers and muting Hollywood’s creativity. By featuring prominent SAG performers, writers solidified their alliance with the most visible union in Hollywood—a significant alliance given the close timing of both unions’ bargaining sessions with the AMPTP, discussed in Chapter III. Using well-known actors drew attention to these videos, as they appeared in search results for celebrities’ names. While these videos satirize Hollywood’s dilemma during the strike and support writers’ public image, they also enable writers and actors to work creatively without studio interference while still attracting audiences — a frightening prospect for networks accustomed to controlling both media access and content.

Youtube Protests: Brought to You By TV

The two examples in this category are pro-writer videos created and uploaded by the writing staffs of *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* that openly publicize their affiliations. These videos draw most heavily of all the examples in this chapter from the formats, performances, and rhetorical strategies featured regularly *TDS* and *TCR*. The writers who created and are featured in “Not *The Daily Show*” and “Log Blog” are some of the most high-profile and experienced rhetorical satirists working in television, and they use their skills and expertise to devastate the AMPTP’s public image and bargaining posture. While *TDS* and *TCR* writers were well-equipped to attack the images and positions of their opponents in the AMPTP, these videos do more than simply comment on compensation, bargaining, and the strike. These pro-writer videos made by *TDS* and

TCR writing staffs demonstrate that quality writing can capture attention and profit online just as well as on television.

Although writers did not have all of their demands met with the 2008 MBA contract, the stalemate's end and their success in obtaining rights to digital residuals is in part a testament to how these pro-writer videos changed the bargaining conversation. Writers' rhetorical satires online boosted the WGA's unity and activism, helping them contend with media executives and the AMPTP. The rhetorical writers of *TDS* and *TCR* structured their satires in complex layers to activate ironies through the intersection of technical editing practices, rhetorical scripting, and aesthetic design. By making digital technologies and concepts inspired by the Internet into their satirical devices, writers clarified their work's value in a changing marketplace, showing how quality writing still matters in digital formats, and that high production values are not necessarily the key to engaging audiences digitally.

“Not *The Daily Show* with Some Writer”

“Not *The Daily Show*” adopts a lower-budget version of *TDS*'s format by staging a newscast outside of a WGA protest in New York City. Jason Ross, a *TDS* writer on strike, performs the role of news anchor to inform viewers about the strike, and characterize the conflict. The video begins with an inter-title reading: “New York November 13, 2007.” The scene opens on Jason Ross, who is not as professionally dressed as Stewart, and is seated in front a small table. which stands in for a news desk. He begins his monologue: “Hello and welcome to what is obviously not *TDS*. I'm obviously not Jon Stewart. I'm Jason Ross, one of the show's 14 writers. Our top story, really our only story: the ongoing writers strike, which started last Monday after talks broke down between writers, seen here, working slavishly for your entertainment.” The video cuts to a black and white clip of a large office typing pool, then back to Ross. “... and media company CEOs, captured here in their natural habitat,” as the video cuts briefly to a clip of gruesome jungle worms from the 2005 *King Kong* remake. A man stands next to Ross, holding a sign that imitates an over-the-shoulder graphic reading: “Winter of our Dissed Content,” as Ross continues, “It's about whether writers should get

paid when media companies make money from their work online (see image 26). Writers think they should get paid. Corporations think the writers should ...” As he picks up a sheet of paper to read, the video’s sound is bleeped for obscenities.



Image 26. Jason Ross in “Not *The Daily Show* with Some Writer” Video
Ross, Jason. “Not *The Daily Show* With Some Writer.” Online Video Clip.
Youtube.com. November 14, 2007. Web. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PzRHlpEmr0w>.

A screen appears explaining that portions of the video have been removed from Youtube. When the bleeping stops, Ross is still quoting the corporations: “... herpes in their nasal passages.” He puts down the paper. “And I’ve gotta say they have a point, I mean this is the Internet, it’s not about money ... Besides, media conglomerates say it’s too soon to put a dollar value on Internet content. They say — what’s that?” His assistant holding signs whispers in his ear, and Ross responds: “Viacom is suing Youtube for a billion dollars for using its content online? A billion! That can’t be right. In fact, I can’t even believe it. Unless there’s some kind of *Daily Show* style montage ...” The video cuts to footage of writers quoting reporters, whose names, network affiliations, and the dates of the reports are graphically inserted at the bottom of the screen. [Give us the gist of what they are saying so your later points are clear.] The final clip in the montage features the quote “Hey, you can’t put our stuff out there for free!” The video returns to Ross, who

quips “That’s a catchy phrase. Do you mind if we use that ... and don’t pay you? But is there anyone older and more personally identified with Viacom who can help us make our case?” The video cuts to a June 2007 clip of Viacom chairman Sumner Redstone, who says: “Say hypothetically if someone filed such a lawsuit, what would they expect? They would expect money, they would expect the protection of their rights for the future, and they might expect a deal that reflected the value of their content.” The video cuts back to Ross, who laughs, saying “I know. It may seem that Redstone’s Youtube stance contradicts his stance with the writers, but it’s really quite simple: When you’re not paying *him*, you owe him a billion dollars. When he’s not paying *you*, *he’s not paying you.*”

The report concludes with an appearance from *Daily Show* correspondent John Oliver, dressed in a tuxedo and top hat, who interrupts the report to announce that he is John J. Viacom Jr., and insists that Ross cease and desist, because Viacom owns his jokes, and thus Ross owes them a billion dollars (see image 27). Ross asks, “Can we have just a small percentage of that?” Oliver yells “No!” Ross asks, “Why is that?” Oliver responds, “Because they’re worthless.” Ross asks, “Well, which is it? Are they worth a billion dollars or worth nothing?” Oliver knocks over Ross’s table and runs away. The video ends with a brief clip of Redstone, who states, “Getting paid is the name of the game.”



Image 27. Jason Ross and John Oliver in “Not *The Daily Show* with Some Writer” Ross, Jason. “Not *The Daily Show* With Some Writer.” Online Video Clip. *Youtube.com*. November 14, 2007. Web. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PzRHlpEmr0w>.

This video models nearly every orientation of form, performance and content this chapter describes: Ross stages a dialogic critique, uses clips as evidence of writing’s

value, and performs the fallacies of its targets. “Not *The Daily Show*” rewards, like writers, who appreciate literary jokes, and pay close attention to the video’s multi-layered critique. “Winter of Our Dissed Content,” for instance, is a pun likening the Winter 2007-8 strike to a John Steinbeck novel titled *The Winter of Our Discontent*. The reference to Steinbeck’s novel, which centers on one man’s quest for wealth and the relationship between ruthlessness, cheating, and success, links the strike to questions of morality. Do AMPTP members’ successes hinge on their ruthlessness? The footage of Redstone stating that “getting paid is the name of the game,” implies that he is breaching his own ethics to cheat writers out of income.

“Videologblog: Writers Strike (*Colbert Report Writers*)”

“Videologblog” models its techniques using strategies specific to *TCR*, specifically the use of an exaggerated character that represents AMPTP members (the target), but whose rhetorical scripting makes his performance ironic. But instead of staging the video in a television studio, “Videologblog” takes place in an office with several wide screen monitors playing in background, as the speaker directly addresses his audience in a “vlog” format. Embodying AMPTP arguments in a comically unlikeable character, the video suggests that executives’ inconsistent claims about internet revenue and compensation for writers are the result of childish egotism and stupidity. This video opens on a supposed “member” of the AMPTP (actually a writer from *TCR* staff) in his office, doing his first video log blog, in which he calls himself “hungvp58,” a signal that his character is a high-powered, vain, sexually obsessed, and unable to anticipate how his image will be interpreted by other internet users (see image 28). “Hungvp58” is a slender man in his early 30’s, who wears a bluetooth earpiece and speaks aggressively about his right to make money, but reveals in the process that the money will only be spent to fuel his sexual ego — and coincidentally the online pornography industry, which is one of the medium’s most lucrative. The character shares Stephen Colbert’s arrogance and lack of reflection, exposing the AMPTP’s misleading claims about internet markets.



Image 28. Image from “Videologblog (Colbert Writers).” “Videologblog (Colbert Writers).” Web Video. *Youtube.com*. November 15, 2007. Web. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JFntFDfaf5o>.

“Hungvp58’s” monologue is spliced together with choppy jump cuts, as though he clumsily spliced together the most coherent parts of a long rant. He explains that he wants to get the AMPTP’s story out there unfiltered, because “guess who writes the news, folks? Writers! Yeah, exactly! They control the media! And it’s about time that those of us who own movie studios and networks have our voices heard.” The rhetorical aspects of this monologue are scripted to juxtapose ideas that are mutually exclusive. He continues, “Now the writers want us to pay them every time we use some of their material on the Internet, but you know what folks? I think we all know that it is impossible to make money off of the Internet, and if you don’t believe me, google it.” “Hungvp58” asks viewers to check his argument using one of the most successful online search engines. He tells viewers to “Think about it, you’re always paying *for* the Internet. I mean, me, I’m out 39.95 a month. Plus I gotta pay an extra hundred bucks for my subscription to blondandbusty.com ... That’s more of a business expense, really. It’s for casting.” These statements are arranged rhetorically so that his evidence disproves the statement it is supposed to support.

The performance in “Videologblog” blatantly describes how money is made from online media as the AMPTP character unwittingly reveals the commercial structure executives use to make money shows streamed online. He continues, “I’m gonna prove to you that you can’t make any money on the Internet ok? Here we go.” He holds up a

laptop. “Here is a computer that’s streaming an episode of *Heroes*, ok? Well, right after it’s done showing me this Old Spice commercial.” The AMPTP member shakes the computer. “Money? money? Come out come out wherever you are! ... You know why? Because you can’t put any money in, there’s no place to put...” He tries to insert cash. His performance continues and his frustration builds until he tearfully demands that the writers “Leave the AMPTP alone!” This last exclamation is in reference to a popular viral video of an over-emotional teen fan defending recording artist Britney Spears. Like *TDS* and *TCR*, “Videologblog” structures its form, performance and rhetoric to produce an ironic persona that stands in for the AMPTP. While “Videologblog,” like “Not *The Daily Show*,” is not able to produce its star television host, both videos’ titles publicize their associations with *TDS* and *TCR*. By situating “Hungvp58’s” performance to reveal the logical fallacies in the AMPTP’s assertions, and by juxtaposing his confident demeanor with self-defeating rhetorical arguments. The satirical approach to writing a character whose logic unravels itself and whose arrogance reveals his stupidity is nearly synonymous with Stephen Colbert’s character — and *TCR* writers were able to illustrate their contributions to that character, even though they were not writing for the show.

While programs like *TDS* and *TCR* had long achieved popular success on cable television by reflecting on cable news’ shallow focus on partisan politics, the 2007-8 pro-writer videos inspired by these shows use their satirical techniques to motivate strikers and spread information. Pro-strike videos layer form, performance, and rhetoric to create satirical meanings. “Dialogic Critiques,” “Contradictory Combinations,” “Clips as Evidence,” and “Performing Logical Fallacies” help these videos establish satirical patterns that publicized the collective frustrations and concerns of writers and mobilized them as a unified counter-public. The creation and sharing of pro-WGA videos during the strike provided a means for writers to organize, express their frustrations, demonstrate their skills, and challenge their opponents in the AMPTP publicly — through the Internet, the medium for which the AMPTP was downplaying writers’ importance.

The videos I analyze in this chapter were powerful components of the WGA’s internet-savvy public relations campaign during the 2007-8 strike. Online petitions

circulated on blogs and social networking sites that enabled various constituencies to articulate their collective desire to see the writers ‘get a fair deal’ (O’Brien 18). Blogs and online updates were also important ways for writers to organize meetings, benefits, and protests among large groups of workers. Sites like United Hollywood blog was central, but ‘unofficially’ affiliated with the WGA, meaning that it could occupy a middle space that allowed for ready access to public participation (O’Brien 10-11). Flexibility, in turn, made it possible for a wide variety of voices to be heard, and encouraged a collective identity and shared ethos to shape around writers and writing. For instance, A *United Hollywood* sponsored Flickr group hosted over 170 web-based photo albums, to which WGA members, strikers, observers and fans contributed their images (O’Brien 18). The ‘Pencils2MediaMoguls’ movement, to support the strike, sent over 500,000 donated graphite pencils to be mailed to the offices of the major AMPTP signatory executives to show solidarity with the WGA’s plight (O’Brien 18). These activist events were organized through online media, but also, importantly, by the pro-writer videos that inspired and conjured support groups into being.

Motivating these writers to take collective online projects seriously was in part the “swiftness” of blogosphere communication, “... and the plurality of its voices” (Banks 30). Writers narrative testimonies about their strike experiences on their own blogs as the strike continued, and the WGA used this shared sense of frustration to build a cohesive strike community. As David Goodman has stated, “There’s no question the internet helped us. Enormously. [Writers] were hungry for information [. . .] so we could be certain if we got it out there, they would see it. And that was something the companies didn’t expect and that’s how we stayed united for as long as we did” (2009) (Banks 30). Paradoxically, the AMPTP’s singular voice, a result decades of mergers and acquisitions that seemingly created an all-powerful conglomerated block of media companies, was less equipped for this battle than the diverse membership of the WGA. Thirty years of merging media has developed behemoths slow to change, and thus often out of date with both audiences and creative laborers (Banks 29-30).

AMPTP members like Viacom made another crucial mis-step as the strike stretched into 2008. Insisting that *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* return to the air without their writers, the media corporation mobilized the writer/performers from these shows who were unable to strike, and motivated them to use their forced airtime to support the strike. *TDS* and *TCR* used their rhetorical conventions to publicize the writers strike and criticize the AMPTP, and even Viacom specifically, with satire. In the next chapter I analyze relevant segments of *TDS* and *TCR* that aired during January and early February, 2008, before the strike was resolved. Both shows' attention to the strike further damaged the AMPTP's public image. Meanwhile, writers remained in solidarity with performers in spite of the AMPTP's attempts to divide their loyalties by separating writers from their shows.

CHAPTER V

WRITERS ON STRIKE AND ON AIR

During its January 8, 2008 episode, *The Daily Show* aired one of several segments addressing the ongoing writers' strike. Entitled "Oliver's on Strike," the video opens with host Jon Stewart confessing that the strike has made the show feel "a little weird ... we miss our writers terribly and hope they get back here soon. The segment then cuts to correspondent John Oliver for further coverage. Oliver, reporting from outside *The Daily Show* studio, begins by making it "perfectly clear, that I am just talking to you. This is *not writing*. I have no idea how this particular sentence I am currently saying is going to finish ... when and if it does, I can only hope it makes some kind of ceramic pineapple." This segment illustrates the dilemmas that television programs and their staffs faced when they returned to air in January 2008 without their writing staffs, as well as the formal, performative, and rhetorical changes that satirical shows *The Daily Show (TDS)* and *The Colbert Report (TCR)* used to draw attention to impact of their writers' absence.

While chapter IV addressed how writers argued for compensation with pro-writer videos demonstrating the appeal and value of writing, chapter V takes up the writers' strike from the perspective of *TDS* and *TCR*, which Viacom ordered to return to air without their writing staffs in January 2008. This chapter analyzes episodes of the politically satirical programs *The Daily Show (TDS)* and *The Colbert Report (TCR)* produced when they returned to television for the first time since the strike began in November. While unionized writers refused to work, media conglomerates threatened the jobs of remaining show staffs, forcing them to go back to work after end-of-the-year holidays. This move put many of the most visible creative workers, like show hosts, performers, and hyphenates⁴⁰ in difficult positions. In response, *TDS* and *TCR* drew national attention to the writers' strike by altering their show names and formats when they returned to television in January. These alterations in form and content stressed how

⁴⁰ "Hyphenates," or show-runners write and produce television programs, often as head-writers, and thus struggled with loyalties during the strike. Most hyphenates were writers first, but were then promoted to producers, and because of this typical professional track, many even hold memberships in both the WGA and AMPTP.

the absence of writers fundamentally changed both shows, demonstrating that until writers returned, *TDS* and *TCR* would also not return to the air.

This chapter examines how *TDS* and *TCR* operated during this contentious time, illustrating how shows that influenced many of the pro-writer videos discussed in chapter IV dealt with the WGA strike, by using rhetorical approaches to satire that conveyed the value of writers and writing and actively campaigning for their compensation. In order to flesh out the roles *TDS* and *TCR* adopted during the writers' strike, and their significance to long-term media trends, this chapter will explore how both shows manipulated their forms, performances, and rhetorical stances to challenge the AMPTP. Using the language developed in chapter IV, this chapter will identify and analyze common orientations of form, performance, and rhetoric, including "dialogic critiques," "contradictory combinations," "clips as evidence," and "performing/exposing logical fallacies." I approach my analyses of *TDS* and *TCR* segments chronologically, examining the first episodes of these shows from January 2008, when they returned to air, followed by analyses of important segments in which the shows commented on the strike throughout January and early February. Finally, I turn my attention to how *TDS* and *TCR* approached the end of the strike on February 12, 2008. These analyses of televised segments related to the writers strike show how these programs took action on behalf of writers, making the strike and the WGA's perspective more visible on television.

While chapter IV focused largely on digital and online texts, I turn now to the original televised programs that inspired them, illustrating what happens when political conflicts appear at the doorstep of shows based on rhetorical satire. As the creation of pro-writer videos ignited a satirical streak in writers and their collective strike efforts, *TDS* and *TCR* returned for the sake of their remaining production staffs, but used their visibility to express their loyalty to the WGA. Networks and media conglomerates' hard-line stances against both writers and their programs ultimately backfired because of

writers' and performers' visible skill at turning this political and economic conflict⁴¹ into popular entertainment.

As the programs returned to air on Comedy Central, strike-focused segments of *TDS* and *TCR* served a different purpose than pro-writer online videos. While the online videos mainly addressed industry insiders and built solidarity among writers, *TDS* and *TCR* segments on the writers' strike presented the conflict to a much larger general audience, one unfamiliar with unionization and compensation in the entertainment industries. To highlight the gravitas of the conflict, *TDS* and *TCR* did more than just publicize the writers' strike — they also changed their routines to reflect writers' absences. *The Daily Show* temporarily became "*A Daily Show*," emphasizing its change from a definitive and unique version of political comedy to just one show out of many others. *TCR* inserted pauses where clever puns should be, in an effort to mark the absence, and value, of written creative work. The format changes on *TDS* and *TCR*, made in support of the 2007/8 Hollywood Writers' Strike illustrate how television's political satirists manipulated their satirical strategies to publicly convey the value of writers and writing for television, while actively campaigning for their compensation on television.

Both shows' satirical engagement with the strike, the AMPTP, and major media networks were the culmination of internal conflicts for the television industry. But unlike previous conflicts between the WGA and AMPTP, the 2007-8 strike was not settled by the power of corporate influence, but with the creativity, rhetorical logic, and pointed media messaging of writers and their allies. The products of internet culture and political polarization, the strike and its texts reveal the pivotal nature of writers' rhetorical and technological approaches to satire. By unpacking the implications of televised satires

⁴¹ Although disagreements over compensation are typically classified as "economic" conflicts, there are political implications for the writers' strike, both because the strike impacted writers' ability to speak freely to audiences, and because the strike's economic elements coincided with questions of power and transparency. Indeed, the power of large conglomerates to determine and side-step the law has become an immense political issue in U.S. politics. However, while the strike and its satires are "political," they are somewhat removed from matters of national policy that are more typically topics of choice for *TDS* and *TCR*.

from *TDS* and *TCR*, I show how writers' skills and their importance to internet revenues have forced the television industry to re-negotiate its operations. My analyses of *TDS* and *TCR* segments also demonstrate how both shows have promoted satire as a mode for interpreting cable news, U.S. politics, and government, as well as navigating these fields with social media. By exploring these segments, I describe the 2007-8 strike as a turning point for the television industry, at which writers fought for compensation in digital markets and control over the medium's direction. *TDS* and *TCR* very publicly aired writers' grievances, namely that networks had been enjoying new media profits without reimbursing writers for the labor that sustained new media content. By addressing this problem with rhetorical forms of satire, however, these shows gave the strike a national audience and a common summary of the conflicts. This summary humorously mediated between the incompatible viewpoints of the WGA and AMPTP, while exposing executives' flawed logic and the uneven power dynamics of media industries.

The Daily Show premiered on Comedy Central in 1996, but its current incarnation began in 1999, when the show was changed to *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, and Stewart became lead anchor and re-directed the program's focus. Under Stewart's influence, *TDS*'s use of "fake news" transformed from a jokey mock news show reminiscent of *Saturday Night Live*'s "Weekend Update," to a vehicle for sharp, self-conscious political satire and commentary. Stewart and his correspondents use the guise of fake news to critique U.S. politics and journalism, frequently using satire and humorous concepts from popular culture to contribute a reasonable perspective in an increasingly polarized political scene. Amid disheartening political events and ineffective journalism, audiences became eager for entertaining and genuine discussions of media and politics. The show's success and significance beyond television was apparent by 2004, as *TDS* was routinely challenging the Bush administration's policies and ideological perspectives with rhetorical examinations.

The Colbert Report emerged as a spin-off of *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* in 2005, hosted by former *Daily Show* correspondent Stephen Colbert. Colbert hosts *The Colbert Report* as a rich and confident, but poorly-informed, conservative television

pundit, who arrogantly shouts down those who disagree with him, and spouts empty and self-serving rhetoric with no regard for facts. Colbert's character was an ideal vehicle for embodying and criticizing the polarized attitudes and sensationalistic journalism that fed national politics in the late cable era. His use of ironic performance in recurring segments like "The Wørd" allows Colbert to take on spurious arguments made by media officials and politicians as his own, emphasizing their most ridiculous features to expose their flawed reasoning. While *TDS* critiques news and politics using the voice of an 'everyman' expressing the frustrations of many, Colbert embodies and exaggerates the worst tendencies of his satirical targets. *TDS* and *TCR* have similar formats, both shows generally begin with an opening monologue, and utilize a variety of segments with in-studio and on-location shooting that explores topical political issues and their media coverage. The shows typically end after a guest interview, with guests varying widely from actors plugging their next comedy, to professors of philosophy and politics, to heads of state.

Although both *TDS* and *TCR* seem, on the surface, to be entertainment-based, in fact the pop culture rhetoric and references on both shows serve to make legal matters and political jargon relatable for audiences by effectively blending entertainment and politics.⁴² Because of the political and cultural standing of *TDS* and *TCR*, these shows were ideal platforms for discussing a large-scale strike. Both programs are popular venues for intellectual discussion, and booking an interview on either show has become an expectation for high-profile public figures, political commentators, and U.S. historians. Recognizing the influence of *TDS*, guests like Howard Dean, Al Gore, Michelle Obama, Bill Clinton, and journalist/author Fareed Zakaria have routinely appeared on the show to court youth votes, influence public opinion, publicize political movements, and promote books.⁴³ *TDS* and *TCR* rarely miss an opportunity to comment

⁴² Lisbet Von Zoonen explores the phenomenon of blending entertainment and politics.

⁴³ Howard Dean appeared on the program to draw attention to the Democratic party, Gore appeared to promote his film lecture: *An Inconvenient Truth*, Michelle Obama has appeared to discuss childhood obesity programs, and former President Clinton has appeared more than once to discuss *The Clinton Global Initiative* and his books.

on widespread national issues, and have thus become routine sites for political discussion.⁴⁴ The shows' interview segments serve a variety of civic and intellectual purposes: while scholars can find a forum to share their ideas, political figures may find themselves in a heated debate. Using multiple satirical approaches, *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* address difficult political and cultural problems. When the strike arrived, few programs were as deeply affected, or as well prepared to cover the conflict.

TDS and *TCR*, produced daily and popular for their topical wit, depend heavily on staffs of rhetorical writers and their routine intellectual labor. The absence of these writers during the strike gutted both shows of their most valuable assets, save the few hosts and performers who remained. Because their topical humor could not be pre-taped, Viacom could not stockpile episodes of *TDS* and *TCR* in advance, as they did with other scripted shows as negotiations soured between the WGA and the AMPTP. While many writers were forced to produce material that ultimately strengthened the AMPTP's bargaining position and weakened their own, *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* faced different problems. When the strike began on Nov. 5, 2007, both shows ceased to produce episodes because their writers were on strike, creating a noticeable void in Comedy Central's late-night lineup. But *TDS* and *TCR*'s writers did not sit idly while the strike progressed, and shifted to producing online videos for the strike.

TDS and *TCR*'s writers, on strike and without official writing work to do, became some of the most effective spokespeople for the WGA's demands, creating online videos like "Not *The Daily Show* With Some Writer" and "Videologblog: Writers' Strike (The Colbert Writers)" that satirically mocked the AMPTP's unreasonable bargaining posture. Meanwhile, the remaining *TDS* and *TCR* hosts, performers, and staff were also left without work. But as the strike continued into December, networks grew nervous over low ratings, and looked for ways to pressure writers to break the strike. Eventually,

⁴⁴ Critic Geoffrey Baym has noted that, "*The Daily Show*, and its spin-off *The Colbert Report* have become central sites for news and political discussion in an increasingly complicated media environment ... the interview segments on both shows have become near-mandatory bookings for authors selling works of political nonfiction as well as for politicians hoping to influence the national conversation" (5-6).

executives sought to divide loyalties between writers and remaining television staffs, who were largely sympathetic to writers but struggling without work. *Daily Variety* announced on Dec. 21, 2007 that *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* and *The Colbert Report*, both Comedy Central programs owned by media giant Viacom, would return to air the following January (Littleton 1).

As the news broke, Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert issued a joint statement the same day, reporting, “We would like to return to work with our writers. If we cannot, we would like to express our ambivalence, but without our writers we are unable to express something as nuanced as ambivalence” (Littleton 1). Clearly, Stewart and Colbert were not returning without their writing staffs by choice, but return to the air they did. *TDS* and *TCR* aired from Jan. 7 to Feb. 12, 2008, without writers and to mixed reviews (Handler 1-2). Many critics noted that the shows’ general tones and direction remained the same, but that they lacked the sharpness of wit on which both programs had built their reputations (Denhart 1). Stewart, Colbert and their respective staffs would have wholeheartedly agreed, and in fact sought to maximize the visibility of writers’ absences, using the same satire for which both shows had become noteworthy.

Why two successful shows like *TDS* and *TCR* would seek to project their industrial problems satirically can be understood by examining how the strike coincided with transitional moments in U.S. history, finance and media. As I’ve laid out in the opening chapters, the Bush presidency and Wall street corruption had resulted in an economic downturn, exposing the greed and risk involved in consolidation as well as vertical and horizontal integration. While the economic devastation was certainly hard on unemployed writers, the conditions may have been pivotal in tilting popular sympathy toward writers, who seemed, in the visibility of their struggle, to embody the main street versus Wall Street dynamic that resonated with the public. One November 2007 article from the *Los Angeles Journal* reported that “When the Hollywood writers’ strike pulled back the curtain on the world of television, what Americans saw was not a cashmere-wrapped actress alighting from her Escalade, but rather a bunch of middle-aged writers in ill-fitting red T-shirts standing on a picket line” (Steinhauer A18). Writers were public

underdogs at a moment when public sympathies were especially primed to appreciate a David and Goliath story.

As my analysis of *TDS* and *TCR* evidence, commentators and TV hosts were quick to recognize the magnetism of the writers' message, as they worked in the same industry. Many actors and other unionized workers were also familiar with the AMPTP's bargaining strategies and attitudes. The resulting publicity, along with visible changes in television programming that made the incident difficult to ignore, made a noticeable impact. Cynthia Littleton of *Daily Variety* reported in November that "One aspect of the walkout that is clear is that the scribes are, thus far, winning their case in the court of public opinion — even as many biz insiders predict the strike will ultimately be settled in a way that favors the major studios" (1). What is perhaps more surprising is that *Daily Variety* (an industry magazine) found in a survey that over two thirds of respondents agreed that the WGA "is representing its side of the battle more forcefully and more clearly" than the AMPTP, and that the WGA was "being more honest and forthright" in its discussions "of the key issues, chiefly increased residuals and digital distribution" than the AMPTP (1). Unlike past negotiations, this strike took place within the very media being negotiated, not behind the scenes, thanks to writers' visibility and rhetorically-scripted satires of the AMPTP.

TDS and *TCR*'s approach to supporting writers, while back on the air without them, provided a way for production staffs to help the WGA and demonstrate their loyalty even if they could not strike⁴⁵ or more directly support the writers. While I have painted broad strokes to characterize the differences between the attitudes and perspectives of writers and networks/media executives in chapter III, the real picture is somewhat more nuanced. Show hosts and hyphenates,⁴⁶ for instance, exist in a grey area somewhere between network heads and writing staffs, often belonging to both the producers' and writers' guilds simultaneously. In fact, many writers seek to eventually

⁴⁵ Some writers, for complex legal reasons, and other production staff like directors, who have their own guilds, could not strike in sympathy with writers because it would violate their own union agreements.

⁴⁶ Hyphenates refers to writer/producers or "show-runners" in this instance.

become hyphenates in a quest for greater creative control over projects and shows. During the strike, however, hyphenates found themselves beholden to networks and media conglomerates for their livelihoods, yet sympathetic to writers' needs, and thus in a strained position. Many media corporations used these distinctions to strain solidarity between creative workers. Although hyphenates were technically allowed to strike from their duties as writers, they were still required to perform their duties as producers (Handler 3). But dividing duties between these two roles was far easier said than done in a "seamless industry," in which structuring shows and scripting their exact dialogue are both central aspects of crafting the programs' rhetorical perspectives (Handler 3). In fact, the WGA and AMPTP disagreed on what counted as writing labor:

The WGA has stated that 'writing services' include cutting production footage for time; making changes in technical or stage direction; reassigning lines because of cast changes, and making casual, minor adjustments in dialogue or narration just before or during a shoot. On the other hand, the AMPTP believes those are all 'nonwriting' services that hyphenates should still be allowed (and potentially required) to perform during the strike (Handler 3).

Hyphenates were being asked to be loyal to writers while doing work that weakened their strike positions, and without clear definitions of where their writing work stops and managerial work begins.

Public opinion was also split on the matter of how show-runners, hosts and other workers should handle the strike. Littleton and *Daily Variety's* survey indicates that respondents were split roughly fifty-fifty on whether hyphenates should continue working during the strike, as well as on whether guild members should report strike-breaking activities to unions (2-3). But such transitional difficulties, brought on by the demands of the industry at a crisis moment, would also prove beneficial for writers with loyal friends who also resented networks and conglomerates but felt they could not strike. Hosts, like show-runners (hyphenates), were also caught between loyalties to writers and the rest of their staffs, who still needed employment. This dilemma was even more significant and complicated because Colbert and Stewart were highly visible public figures, responsible for their shows' brand images by their public visibility and identification with show brands. While hosts could not leave their shows or refuse to create new episodes starting

in January 2008, they could use their on-air visibility to make writers' absence noticeable and mock the entrenched positions that led to the strike.

Given this kind of strain between show staff positions, it is not surprising that although *TDS* and *TCR* were generally supportive of the WGA, this support was not without its conflicts. *Daily Show* host Jon Stewart openly questioned the WGA's tactics during the strike, and ugly rumors surfaced that he did not support unionized writers in general. *Daily Variety's* Michael Schneider published an article on Jan. 9, 2008, reporting on Stewart's on-air remarks in an interview the previous day with Cornell professor of Labor Relations Run Seeber. In the interview, Stewart questions why the WGA had made an interim agreement with David Letterman's *The Late Show* and *The Late Late Show*, allowing their writers to return to work before the official strike was over, but would not agree to a similar deal with *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* (Schneider 1). Apparently, such a deal had been in the works, and reportedly Viacom, which owns Comedy Central, had agreed to a deal with the WGA identical to the one Letterman signed, which would have allowed unionized writers to return on *TDS* and *TCR* (Schneider 1). Unfortunately, and probably because it was still bargaining with Viacom and Comedy Central as larger entities over other programs, the WGA decided not to go through with the agreement, angering Stewart (Schneider 1). Additionally, the WGA had been willing to negotiate an individual deal with *TDS* and *TCR* to unionize writers in 2006, leaving Stewart and others to wonder why such good relations were no longer extended to the shows (Schneider 1). In the Feb. 7 interview with Seeber, Stewart complains of the situation by asking:

Are they being arbitrary with it [extending interim agreements to particular shows], perhaps denying some shows who would willingly do it? Wouldn't you want to get as many shows ... ? Let's say you're not as big – let's say you're on basic cable. But you'll do it and you've gotten your company to say 'OK,' even though they clearly think you're insane. Why would you turn something like that down?

While Stewart's frustration is visible in the interview, his comments also illustrate his skills as a critical thinker who is trying to understand the motivations of both sides in this

conflict. Despite these moments of critical questioning, Stewart's on-air appearances generally portray support for writers and their compensation demands.

Yet uglier rumors emerged online and in less highly-publicized interviews of those acquainted with Stewart, like writer/actor David Feldman, who stated in an interview with Ed Brayton's *Culture War Radio* program that Stewart was blatantly anti-union, along with numerous character insults that paint Stewart as a manipulative crowd-pleaser, who was abusive to writers, and punished those who chose to unionize (Fincke). While such rumors may have some truth, *TDS*'s friendlier history with the WGA seems to contradict Feldman's claims. A more rational way to consider this conflict, and a significant point to bear in mind when examining any union strike, is that collective bargaining is always punctuated by internal rifts and struggles to stifle differences for a common cause. Various positions within the TV industry, particularly ones like Stewart's, often mean managing multiple loyalties and perspectives. Stewart's perceived hostility towards the WGA most likely indicates the strain involved in performing multiple and contradictory industrial roles, more than a lack of support for unionization.⁴⁷

While networks made life difficult for hyphenates and hosts like Stewart by playing on divided loyalties and contracts, *TDS* and *TCR* reluctantly returned to air without the spirit networks had intended. Instead of repairing Viacom's image and ratings by drawing attention away from the strike, as Viacom expected, *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* explored the strike and its nuances for viewers, drawing attention to the absence of writers on both shows. Although these shows have always been both satirical and political, the writers' strike forced them to become active in their satire, using it not only to comment on the conflict, but to support a particular side.

The remainder of this chapter is dedicated to analyzing segments of *TDS* and *TCR* that aired during the strike and comment on the conflict specifically. More than simply mentioning the fact that their writers were not at work, *TDS* and *TCR* made key format

⁴⁷ Frustration, relief, tension, and appreciation can all be detected in Jon Stewart's address on *TDS* the day WGA members voted to end the strike: "It's looking like *The Daily Show* might return tomorrow. As we speak, the writers are voting on a new contract. If they vote 'yes,' they'll be back for tomorrow's show. If they vote 'no,' I will kill them."

changes to indicate the precarious positions of these shows without writing staffs. When the initial walk-out occurred, both shows had been in the midst of covering the presidential races, which were heating up in preparation for the 2008 elections. Upon their return after a two-month absence, due to the strike and holiday hiatus, several format changes were immediately implemented to highlight the writers' strike. *The Daily Show* became "*A Daily Show*," while Colbert introduced an official strike shredder, ostensibly to hide evidence of scripting his show from the WGA. Both shows aired footage of writers picketing outside their studios during segments on the strike. The first episodes of *TDS* and *TCR* aired on January 7, 2008 were also notable for the high energy of their live studio audiences, invigorated by a chance to see shows that had been on hiatus since November 2007.

A Daily Show and The Colbert Report Debut

The following analysis takes a much closer look at the first episodes of *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report*, respectively, to describe how both programs approached their return. Next, I will highlight important moments as *TDS* and *TCR* reported on the strike throughout January and early February. Finally, I turn my attention to how the shows handled the writers' return when the strike was settled on February 12, 2008. With reference to various orientations of form, performance and content introduced in chapter IV, I analyze segments of *TDS* and *TCR* related to the writers' strike to show how both shows took action on behalf of writers and gave their cause visibility on television.

The Daily Show began its first show of 2008 with Jon Stewart explaining their conspicuous absence in his opening monologue. Aspects of the show's form (the studio, costumes and professional glossiness) are unchanged, but Stewart's performance and rhetoric are noticeably altered. He addresses the audience in a more personal tone that emphasizes his own voice, in contrast to typical episodes in which his voice represents the efforts of his writing staff, stating:

Imagine having a show ... go ahead. You're just like me right now, you don't have writers either, so go ahead, imagine you have a show! And the show that you have enjoys the occasional chuckle at the absurdities of the American political process, and then imagine that this is an image you see when you're not on the air ... it's Mike Huckabee winning Iowa ... with Chuck Norris behind him! Chuck Norris!

The cameras cut briefly from Stewart to an image of Mike Huckabee standing with Chuck Norris, whose head is circled in yellow. Stewart emphasizes the ways the show could have made light of the presidential candidate's friendship with Norris, but reminds the audience that this would have required writers. With contradictory combinations of the show's sleek form, against informal performance and rhetoric, Stewart signals the significance of his writers' absence and playfully marks the program's return.

Stewart's opening jokes continue to call attention to the strike and *TDS*'s awkward position in returning to the air. Stewart congratulates Huckabee and Barack Obama for winning Iowa, and then claims that he called the race accurately back in November. The cameras cut to a shot of Jon Stewart that was taped in the studio earlier that day, but is falsely dated November 1, 2007. In the clip, Stewart exclaims: "The Iowa caucus will go the black guy and the guy who doesn't believe in evolution. See you in January under uncomfortable circumstances!" The camera cuts back to Stewart in the studio, who comments, "Wow, I wore the same everything ... for continuity's sake." This time engaging form (the "November" clip in which he wears the same clothes), performance (a cheeky tone), and rhetoric (references to "uncomfortable circumstances"), Stewart demonstrates that being back on the air is a compromise. With an ironically obvious attempt to fabricate a "last show" from November reminds viewers of the forced nature of their absence, as well as the forced nature of their current presence.

Stewart begins the second segment of the show with a unibrow drawn on his face, explaining that it is his "solidarity unibrow" to show support for the strike (image 29). "It's taken me two months to grow this in, but I'm hoping that this is the statement of solidarity that catches on. I really do." Introducing the unibrow (after appearing without it in the first segment) establishes his solidarity with writers in a way that is not too serious, and mocks typical, but meaningless, group solidarity demonstrations, like growing mustaches and beards until the strike is broken. Stewart performs the fallacies inherent in this vague, individual expression of solidarity, and goes on to model the show's own method of standing with writers and acting as their proponents on television.



Image 29. Jon Stewart with strike unibrow on *The Daily Show*. “Full Episode 1/7/2008.” *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*. Comedy Central. Viacom. Web. <http://thedailyshow.cc.com/videos/14eiq9/introducing-a-daily-show>

Moving on quickly, he reminds the audience of the introductory graphic sequence that opens each show, in which the words “*The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*” appear on a spinning globe. Stewart explains: “That is a show that we do with our very creative team.” Without this whole team, he explains, they will not be doing *The Daily Show*, but instead *A Daily Show*. The show’s graphic logo fills the screen. “The” is crossed out with a red “X” as an “A” is inserted in its place. This change to the show’s name is both rhetorical and formal: replacing “The” with “A” removes the show’s air of specialness, changing the show’s identity in a way that is visible in its graphics — which are less polished. The crowd erupts in applause at the show’s blatant abandonment of professional aesthetics. Stewart sums up the segment by stating: “So there you go. That will be what it is. Writers Guild of America on Strike.” Here, Stewart anchors the show’s format change not just to the absence of the show’s *own* writers, but to the WGA and writers against the AMPTP in general. After such a long hiatus, and with so much election news to cover, Stewart could easily have ended his discussion of the strike with this segment. But instead, the entire episode articulates the finer points of the strike, from the WGA’s demands and the AMPTP’s refusal, to the WGA’s piecemeal deals with individual studios.

In the next segment of *TDS*, entitled “Writers’ Strike Math,” Stewart explains the strike for viewers by shifting through several satirical techniques, first by performing the illogical position of the AMPTP (see image 30). Form and rhetoric contradict one

another, as Stewart's explanation proves how content written for the Internet holds the same value as content written for television. He begins by pointing out the lackluster television fare that networks are airing instead of their regularly scheduled programming. The screen cuts to the 'new' *American Gladiators*, as Stewart comments: "Here's what I find interesting about the new *American Gladiators*. They didn't hire new ones, they just unfroze the old ones." Although an aside, this moment suggests that executives care very little about what they air, recycling successful programs endlessly. Next, Stewart speaks directly to the conflict between guilds: "The dispute is actually between the Writers' Guild of America, and the Association of Motion Picture and Television Producers, or NAMBLA. That joke has been grandfathered in, It's from a long damn time ago!"⁴⁸ We see in an over-the-shoulder graphic to the left of Stewart that reads "SPACE RESERVED FOR CLEVER PUN." Stewart's performance here is not particularly satirical, but the rhetoric here emphasizes the irony that *TDS* is also leaning on recycled material. Again, *TDS* eschews professionalism to stress the absence of writers and the value they would have brought to the show.



Image 30. Jon Stewart discusses the strike on *The Daily Show*. "Full Episode 1/7/2008." *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*. Comedy Central. Viacom. Web. <http://thedailyshow.cc.com/videos/l4eiq9/introducing-a-daily-show>

Next, *TDS* uses graphics displays to emphasize Stewart's rhetorical reasoning as he attempts to explain why writers are not paid for online content. He states that, "The dispute is over pay for the Internet. The writers ... want to be paid for Internet content.

⁴⁸ The reference to NAMBLA is indeed an old joke from the show's early years. NAMBLA stands for the North American Man/Boy Love Association, and has often been used as a joke used with acronyms on the show.

Now they are already paid for content on television. So why is the Internet different from television? That's a very interesting question." The screen cuts to a 3-D graphic screen showing an animated model living room with a human figure sitting on a couch in front of a TV. Stewart explains, "This is a typical amorphous blob watching television. Now you can see he's around eight feet from the screen, and whatever show he's watching must be very entertaining to hold his attention. Clearly that's worth money to the people who've provided him with that content for that television program." *TDS's* news-like format and use of professional graphics are ironically positioned to visualize Stewart's simplistic and insulting comments about viewers of television, but also to detract from his next point.

The graphic changes to show the same human form sitting in front of a computer screen. Stewart treats this new graphic as a contrasting example, when the similarity of the graphics actually makes the two situations seem quite alike. "Now let's look at that same person watching television on the Internet. He's only two feet away, but let me show you the really interesting thing about that picture. Can we zoom in on that Chuck?" The graphic morphs to show a closer view, revealing a keyboard. "There's a keyboard right there! *A keyboard!* And what is a keyboard for? Writing." The screen returns to Stewart in the studio as he continues: "How can Viacom or Time Warner or any of these companies be sure that he's not the guy that wrote that show while it's going? Why should the producers pay for something that the viewers are writing themselves while they're watching! That's why the Internet is free." Stewart's rhetoric here is a performance of the AMPTP's mistaken thinking about television content. While the AMPTP members do not literally think that viewers are writing shows as they watch them, this exaggeratedly poor logic is reminiscent of Reality TV programming trends, and tendencies to lean on user-generated content.

Stewart continues, by disproving himself: "Now you might say to me 'Jon, I've been on the Internet and I've been on the itunes, and your show costs \$1.99 an episode. Why shouldn't the writers get a piece of that?' Well, that's not a content charge, that's a shipping and handling charge. Should the writers be paid for shipping and handling?"

Because what is the Internet?” We abruptly cut to a clip of Senator Ted Stephens, ex-head of the commerce committee in the senate, in charge of regulating the internet, which he famously called “a series of tubes,” saying those famous words.⁴⁹ Stewart’s rhetorical performance creates a likeness between the inability of the AMPTP to compensate writers for internet content to governmental blunders in attempts to regulate the Internet. Both organizations are in charge of coordinating large-scale campaigns regarding online technologies, but have little technical knowledge of how the Internet works.

Stewart’s monologue continues to probe the logical problems with the AMPTP’s argument that online content is merely ‘promotional,’ using a false analogy. His performance sides with the AMPTP ironically to undermine its bargaining positions. Stewart’s attitude here is contradicted by his rhetoric and superfluous over-the-shoulder graphics. Stewart begins his analogy: “By the way, if you download a show and watch it on an ipod, do you think people should get paid for that? An ipod is like this big,” Stewart gestures to demonstrate the size of a iphone. “It’s a very small portion of show! Now when you go to a restaurant and you eat a big meal, yes, you expect to pay for that meal. It’s a delicious meal. It’s presented big. But if you were to walk by a mall and a Hickory Farms and someone was standing there with little pieces of cheese on a toothpick,” an image of cheese samples appears over Stewart’s shoulder. “That is clearly promotional cheese! And that is what watching a show on an ipod is. A piece of TV cheese.” Interpreting television shows and their value in terms of different types of screens and screen size hints ironically at the fact that the labor involved in writing, and import of its messages, are the same viewed on any screen, with greater longevity and more influence than most other consumer products.

Stewart’s monologue turns next to the most well-known hole in the AMPTP’s assertion that internet content is not profitable enough to be anything more than promotional: Viacom’s suit against Youtube for \$1 billion, a figure based on the idea that Viacom lost ad revenues to Youtube because the site allows users to share portions of its

⁴⁹ In fact, *TDS* has frequently used this clip, inserted into many jokes to insinuate the government’s (and other institutions’) lack of technological savvy and competence.

televised content online. Stewart's performance continues to side with Viacom, but his performance reads ironically against the rhetoric of his monologue. He begins this portion of the monologue by asking: "Then why did Viacom sue Youtube?" He shakes his head, chuckling. "Well, they sued them for *a billion dollars*. Clearly, a figure they pulled out of their asses. If there were real money on the Internet, don't you think they would have gone with a believable figure?" Stewart's sarcastic explanation laughably questions whether something is valuable at all simply because it is estimated to be more valuable than an amount he can comprehend. He goes on: "So you see it's very simple why writers are not paid for Internet content. It's actually a very clever formula." On screen a graphic appears, titled "Guild Residual Formula" that reads: $D/S^2 \times 2\frac{1}{2} = SHUT UP$. Stewart explains that the formula stands for "the distance from the screen, divided by the screen size squared, times two-and-a-half equals shut the fuck up .:. it is known in the business at "Sheen's Constant."⁵⁰ Although Stewart is often straightforward and often plays straight-man to his correspondents, here he litters the monologue with thinly-veiled sarcasm that implies the irony and insincerity of his AMPTP defense. While he pretends to rationalize the AMPTP's reasoning, Stewart uses deliberate rhetorical errors like the misuse of analogies, and synthesizes of humorous 'facts' to clarify how unreasonable the AMPTP is being, particularly given how central writing is to television, the Internet, iphones, and countless other points of media access.

In the second portion of the segment, Stewart's tone changes to address the conflict directly in a less sarcastic, yet still jocular tone. Instead of mocking the AMPTP with an ironic performance, Stewart mocks the writers' conviction and solidarity in a way that flatters them while still making light of the conflict. He says, "I don't think the AMPTP understands the gravity of the situation and I don't think they understand the blowback that is going to happen. Writers are, let's face facts, a sometimes small and sickly bunch who do their work in the dark, surrounded by *Simpsons* action figures, and only the occasional hours Wii and Guitar Hero for any kind of a break." Strike protest footage appears over Stewart's shoulder as he attests that, "by my calculations if this

⁵⁰ Ostensibly referring to well-known, and famously out-of-control actor Charlie Sheen.

strike lasts through February, then these clearly out-of-shape, sickly writers will morph, walking in a circle, into some kind of unstoppable, hugely strong, unbelievable fighting destruction machine!” The screen cuts briefly to footage of a scene of Arnold Schwarzenegger in *Robocop* (1987). Although his characterization of writers is comic, Stewart subtly implies that writers are not spoiled or demanding, but pathetic in common and relatable ways. In contrast to AMPTP members, whose incomes rank in the millions (as noted in chapter III), writers look like “average Joes” according to Stewart’s description. On top of this characterization, Stewart mocks the idea that writers might become so angry and resentful that they turn from weak to unstoppable.

Stewart’s words about the potential “blowback” have a slightly prophetic, if ridiculous ring to them, as this conflict truly showed the AMPTP how much they depend on their creative staffs, without which they have little to offer media customers. Stewart’s satirical take on the strike favors the WGA’s position by performing the AMPTP’s flawed logic. He mentions WGA’s efforts to fight back “the best way they know how: by getting actors to speak out on their behalf, in a series of ads called ‘Speechless.’” With the last bit of his monologue, Stewart addresses the “Speechless” campaign, saying that the tone of the ads was “dead on.” The screen cuts to one of the more sombre and dramatic “Speechless” videos, in which a still shot of the cast of *Ugly Betty* is shown superimposed with a ticking clock, followed by a black screen and the inter-title “Speechless.” Stewart responds: “Ok, that’s a little somber for a writers’ strike. Actually, you know what, I think I’m wrong. I think know what I that ad might have been for.” The screen cuts to the same clip, but this time followed by an inter-title reading: “silence = death. Stop AIDS.” Stewart sets up this comparison to put the strike into perspective: yes, the strike is bad, but like AIDS, there are far worse things that make the strike seem both minute and even more frustrating, since it could be resolved much more easily than truly devastating diseases.

The point of Stewart’s argument, which digs at the position of the AMPTP, but also more lightly at the WGA, is that both sides are, at least in some measure, making resolutions that would profit writers more difficult to achieve. The AMPTP’s continuing

stance is to blame, but Stewart also cites the influence and visibility of pro-writer videos online. While the examples of pro-writer videos analyzed in chapter IV are satirical, and mark the conflict with a humorous tone, other “Speechless” and strike-related videos adopted a somber quality that is also laughable. Stewart explains that:

Look, this is a dire situation, but let’s have a little perspective here. Somewhere between the idea of arguing for minimum wage and jobs that pay thousands of dollars and have residuals, perhaps we’ve lost perspective on the fact that at heart, this really is a math problem. And last time these talk shows were off the air for this length of time was after September 11, and at that time most shows were off for about a week. *So if my math is correct, the writers’ strike is now nine times worse than September 11* [my emphasis].

Stewart makes several vital points here. Of course, no one believes that the writers’ strike was nine times worse than September 11 — but Stewart uses the satire of situating these events next to one another to compare their disruption of media industries. Although September 11 was a massive crisis, people were far more proactive in resolving its impact (on television’s structures) than they were attempting to be in settling a strike that seemed minute in comparison. Here, Stewart uses a comparison of these two events to create a satirical point that encourages viewers to think about conflicts with a wider perspective on conflicts and crises. Simultaneously, Stewart confirms that the strike is not about life or death, but about payment, and essentially about math. By using the concept of “math” in another sense, namely to quantify the damage each event has done to the television industry’s economy, Stewart shows audiences that although entrenched positions can be alluring — as conflicts that entertain audiences and as perspectives in an conflict — these unreflective patterns of conflict drain industries, sour attitudes, and block the free circulation of ideas.

Stewart’s monologue breaks down a very technical industry conflict using contrasts between his performance and rhetoric to mock the AMPTP, making the strike tangible for audiences, and the WGA’s perspective seem largely sympathetic, if overly driven. In doing so, his aim is not simply to mock the AMPTP’s position, but to address the distance between writers’ and executives’ bargaining stances. While accusing the AMPTP of taking an untenable position in terms of “math,” he also accuses the WGA of

overdramatizing their plight and sensationalizing the strike. In this way Stewart uses satire to mockingly perform the polarizing stances that have prolonged the strike, and to address the basic problems that exacerbate disagreements, advocating for more pragmatic methods. Satire “happens” here because Stewart taps into the most contrasting perspectives at work in this conflict, and situates them side-by-side in his performance. By engaging these mutually-exclusive perspectives together, Stewart probes them for their contradictions and failed logic, while his satire actually synthesizes a meeting point between the WGA and AMPTP’s stances. Even though Stewart clearly advocates for writers’ compensation, he also situates the WGA’s bargaining strategies against more dire situations to encourage the dispute’s resolution.

For the final segment of the show, Stewart interviews Professor of Labor Relations at Cornell University, Ron Seeber, to talk about the strike and how it might be resolved. At the beginning of the interview, Stewart confirms with Seeber the fact that many people advised him not to appear on the program for fear he would hurt the WGA’s cause. The thinking behind these concerns was that since these programs were back on the air without writers, that writers or guild advocates should not engage with such shows in any way, even to publicize their cause. This admission of uncertainty about how to appear loyal to writers hits at the stakes of the strike: to appear on television or not was a choice that could impact your career, either in terms of current employment or future goodwill among co-workers. The two go on to discuss the nature of the strike and how both sides view the conflict. I have provided transcriptions of a few important moments in their conversation, which touch on some of the most notable and salient talking points for the conflict:

JON STEWART. Is this a social justice strike or a math strike?

RON SEEBER. Well it’s both ... The justice part of it is getting the fair share of the return for the intellectual property, and everyone tried to do it. It’s a big issue for us globally; it’s a big issue for the writers here. They’re trying to get ahead of the technology curve, and it’s courageous to try to think that far in advance.

Stewart then asks how the AMPTP can argue against the writers' rights to residuals. Seeber responds that the AMPTP was unsure about the Internet market. Stewart recalls how the networks bragged to their investors about internet revenues, and quotes Sumner Redstone, who told investors during one Viacom shareholders' meeting "You'll be dipping your balls in gold." Seeber responds to this question, which Stewart poses from the perspectives of writers on strike:

RON SEEBER. That would be a public relations error, I would say, to claim that you're making money on the one hand, and then on the other hand not be willing to share that.

Seeber's comments point out that the AMPTP's members, despite being some of the largest media owners in the country, don't know much about how to convey their stance to the public through media — a task for which they had relied on writers, performers, and other creative employees. Jon Stewart continues the conversation by positing how residual compensation levels for writers could be easy to determine and put into action:

JON STEWART. And if it's already done for television, wouldn't it be simple to just apply that formula ...⁵¹

RON SEEBER. One would guess, yes.

JON STEWART. One *would* guess. Can you imagine, we've all been out of work for two-and-a-half months over a problem that could be solved ...

RON SEEBER. It's typical ... when positions become rigidified and it's impossible for parties to go ahead and get back together until the somehow solve that difficulty of not being able to talk to one another.

JON STEWART. Well, I'm glad the psycho-sexual drama that's played out is going to keep us all out of work for the next six months.

By using "us," Stewart identifies himself with creative workers who actually produce shows, not the executives or media conglomerates who fund them. Additionally, Stewart mocks the entrenchment of this particular conflict, which seems so easily solvable. As

⁵¹ Here, Stewart is referring to the Minimum Basic Agreement between the WGA and the AMPTP for residuals from television content, suggesting that the same MBA be used to determine residual payments for Internet content.

Seeber suggests, the strike is a problem of communication, and Stewart's remarks during their conversation, tinged with sarcasm and frustration, serve to clarify the errors that resulted from a lack of sincere dialogue between the two guilds. The conversation is humorous because Stewart and Seeber solve the problem in minutes through talking and listening to each other, in contrast to the actual bargaining patterns of the WGA and AMPTP, which used messages to the public, but included very little direct conversation.

Stewart's perspective and use of satire attempt to make an impact on the strike by targeting poor communication and lack of mutual understanding, more than a single party. Although the AMPTP's logic and bargaining stance was grounded in misconceptions about the value and visibility of creative work, the WGA had adopted public relations messages that belittled the AMPTP and, although effective, had forestalled the possibility of reconciliation. By humorously acknowledging the faults in both strategies, Stewart initiates dialogue where before there had only been refusal. In fact, the remainder of Stewart's interview with Seeber consists mainly of Stewart's complaints about the seemingly arbitrary nature of the WGA's independent deals with production companies. While it might seem that these public complaints contradict Stewart's support for writers, the depth of his interest and displays of frustration actually indicate his level investment in their cause, but also in the greater well being of media workers.

In the final segment of *TDS*'s first January 2008 show, Stewart "checks in" with Stephen Colbert at *The Colbert Report*.⁵² This segment features a split screen showing Jon Stewart on the left and Stephen Colbert on the right. For this particular "check-in," Colbert wears a long, fake beard, which he calls his "strike beard," reiterating the irony of Stewart's strike unibrow. Colbert also busies himself by shredding evidence of pre-show writing, like scripts, which are contraband during the strike. The fact that he is shredding written work indicates that Colbert has adopted an ironically oppositional performance

⁵² During the early seasons of *The Colbert Report*, a spin-off of *The Daily Show*, these "check-ins" provided a smooth transition between the two programs and forged their association with viewers, in hopes that *TDS*'s popularity and viewership would extend to *TCR* as well.

against the WGA by suggesting that the show uses “scabs” to script the show while his professional writers are on strike, a typical direction for his mock conservative persona. He tells Stewart, “I am very alarmed by how prepared you seem,” insinuating that Stewart had pre-scripted parts of *TDS*, and then pretends to get his beard caught in the shredder underneath his desk, which ostensibly destroys evidence of *TCR*’s own forbidden scripts. He emerges clean shaved to laughter and applause. Colbert performs the kind of tensions the strike initiated between television co-workers, as he tries to direct attention to Stewart’s preparation, and away from the actual written documents he is shredding.

Colbert’s interaction with Stewart shows not only that industry conflicts like strikes deaden communication, as evidenced with the shredding, but also that they instill fear and tension into the acts of creative production. Written material, communication and creative work are destroyed in this performative exchange, both literally and figuratively. As usual, the hosts serve as foils for each other, modeling two responses to the conflict: Stewart embodies those who try to rationally understand the strike but become frustrated because of its ironies and lack of rational substance. Meanwhile, Colbert mocks those who fall in line with network management by enforcing a code of fear-based silence and secrecy around staff dismissals and covert deals that often take place during strikes. After the “check-in,” Stewart announces the “Moment of Zen”: footage of a strike protest outside their studio building. By highlighting this footage, *TDS* ends its first episode of 2008 by stressing the ongoing strike at a human level by showing the protesters. The image’s perspective is sympathetic towards writers, showing them huddled beneath a faceless corporate headquarters building.

While *The Daily Show* ended on an unusually sombre note, *The Colbert Report* marked its return with more immediate and dramatic alterations to form and omissions of rhetoric. Colbert exaggerates aspects of his persona to emphasize the show’s energy and expensive production, while revealing that it contains zero substance. At first, the show’s musical theme and usual introduction imply that the show is carrying on as usual. But instead of beginning the show by shouting several pre-scripted puns that introduce the

show's main stories (each directed toward a different camera angle), Colbert uses his character's ill-informed persona to highlight the show's lack of content. Colbert has no clever, pre-scripted lines, and so he opens the show as follows:

STEPHEN COLBERT. Tonight: ...

STEPHEN COLBERT. And then: ...

STEPHEN COLBERT. Plus ...

STEPHEN COLBERT. Hey! This is *The Colbert Report*. [*Ts emphasized*]⁵³

While this sort of opening might easily be a failure on any other sort of show, the audience immediately recognizes the humor in Colbert's amped-up energy, followed by awkward pauses. The enunciation of both hard Ts in the show's title serves a similar function as *A Daily Show*, allowing the program to acknowledge its incompleteness without a writing staff. In fact, the audience is so excited that it takes several minutes for the cheering and clapping to stop after this introduction. While Colbert's audience is always over-excited and enthusiastic, encouraged to view participation in the show as participation in his satire of contemporary media and politics, his return in January was a unique moment. Colbert waits for the cheering to stop—checking his watch, putting his feet up on the desk, and beginning to read the paper—before looking toward the camera again. He eventually runs out into the studio audience to manually push people in the front rows into their seats. Finally he returns to his desk, and says “Ladies and Gentlemen, I thank you for that brief ovation.” This ironic understatement reinforces his character's arrogant assumption that since the show is all about *him*, that his return to television is a personal triumph, regardless of whether or not he has actually ‘won’ anything, or if the conflict is even really over.

⁵³ The T's in “*Colbert Report*” are usually silent, and this pronunciation is just one of many ways *TDS* plays with language. The silent T's indicate Colbert's false sense of superiority and elevated class, while also creating a pun based on the similarity between the words “report” and “rapport.” While “report” denotes a definitive statement, “rapport” suggests friendly conversation. Together, these two words suggest the tension between the tasks of news reporting, and the fluff of creating rapport between news personas.

The next segment of the show unpacks *TCR*'s production to bring the strike into focus for viewers. Stephen discovers, humorously after reading the show's empty introduction out loud, that there is nothing for him to read in the tele-prompters (see image 31). He begins by apologizing and acknowledging that he usually gives more information in the opening segment, but that "We've had got bit of a technical snafu going on here tonight. The situation is fubar — that's showbiz talk. Now nobody is to blame here ... except my director Jimmy. Jim, I've got a problem here. There are no words in my teleprompter." He instructs a camera operator to shoot the spot where the prompts should be. "There are no words in that damn prompter over there. Then the other prompters. Jim, what the hell is going on? Where are my words?" The following conversation ensues between Colbert and his director, Jimmy, who we hear from offscreen:

JIMMY. There's no script, Stephen.

STEPHEN COLBERT. Why is that?

JIMMY. The writers are on strike."

STEPHEN COLBERT. I know that Jimmy. I'm not a complete idiot. But how does that affect me?

JIMMY. We have nothing to put in the prompter."

STEPHEN COLBERT. No, that's not my understanding of how this works, Jimmy. My understanding is that this little ... this little ... uh ... this little magic box right here [*gestures*] it reads my thoughts and then it lays them up on the screen right there into little words that I read and my audience can read my ... it's a labor saving device!

JIMMY. Well, it's actually what the writers put in.

STEPHEN COLBERT. The writers? The guys up there on the fourth floor with the opium bongs and playing Guitar Hero⁵⁴ all day? You're telling me that those guys are responsible for what I say? I find that a bit of a stretch, Jim. I'm sorry. Get it fixed, and get it fixed now.

⁵⁴ Guitar Hero is a popular video game.

Using his intolerant and bumblingly arrogant character, Colbert highlights the contributions of writers that make his show and his character possible. By asking “How does the strike affect me?” he subtly instructs viewers to question where their entertainment comes from and who is compensated for that entertainment. But he also mimics the AMPTP’s hard-line stance and simplistic understanding of how television shows are made. Colbert handles his director Jimmy the way the AMPTP handled its writers, ordering them to create content or else — regardless of whether such demands were reasonable. Satirizing the AMPTP is not a stretch for Colbert, who performs the ironies of big-business attitudes and the conservative ideologies that underpin these institutions. Colbert’s rhetorical remarks reveal the importance of writers, while his performance downplays the importance of anyone who is not in a position to give orders. With this performance he shows the ironic helplessness of executives because they are used to leaving creative work to others.



Image 31. Stephen Colbert on *The Colbert Report*. “Full Episode 1/7/2008.” *The Colbert Report*. Comedy Central. Viacom. Web. <http://thecolbertreport.cc.com/videos/3q3gby/intro---1-7-08>.

Colbert returns to the strike soon after his opener, using clips as evidence to re-perform his inflexible conservatism, and thus the AMPTP’s inflexible approach to union bargaining. He addresses his return to air, saying “Ladies and gentlemen, let me get on to

the strike, let me talk about the writers' strike for a minute here, as long as we're on it, as long as you brought it up. There's an elephant in the room here ... um, the elephant's not actually in the room, the elephant's on strike as well." Colbert's insistence that the audience "brought it up" allows him to address the strike while still maintaining the irony of his character, who would never mention, let alone side with, a labor union for any reason. He continues, "Why did I do the show tonight? Why did I decide to come back on the air and do my show? Well let me tell you something. To all my doubters and haters out there, let me tell you this: I have always been anti-labor, always been anti-union! This is completely politically consistent. Jimmy! Show them the strong stances I have taken in the past." An extended montage of moments from past *TCR* follows, showing Colbert denouncing unions in many different segments from previous shows. Colbert's TV persona, who cannot accept defeat, avoids the fact that he was forced off air by the WGA, then back on again by Viacom, by "admitting" to his anti-union stance and maintaining that he has been "completely politically consistent." His need for partisan consistency more than reason reflects upon the deep commitment of both the WGA and AMPTP to their respective sides of the conflict.

Many of the montage moments include Colbert spouting illogical statements that are rhetorically satirical, although Colbert performs them with conviction. For example, in one clip, Colbert insists that "Labor unions are ruining America, one mandatory bathroom break at a time. With unions it's all about *them*: *their* wages, *their* benefits, *their* fatal industrial accidents." Colbert rages about union 'selfishness,' but the cogency of his point falls apart with "fatal industrial accidents," reminding viewers of the need for workers to be protected and for companies to be held responsible for their workers' safety. In another clip, Colbert interviews a labor representative, asking her, "Aren't labor unions just bullies who gang up on the factory owners?" Colbert uses loaded words like "bully" to ironically reverse the typical power dynamics between owners and employees, while simultaneously crediting unions for enforcing fairness in the workplace.

Several of Colbert's ironic statements in this montage of come from Colbert's well-known segment entitled "The Wørd," which coordinates multiple, and sometimes

contradictory lines of rhetoric together. In one *Wørd* segment, Colbert asks: “What have unions ever done for anybody anyway? Absolutely nothing.” Meanwhile, the left side of the screen shows a list of the things unions have accomplished, scrolling down to include milestones like ending child labor, enacting worker safety laws, instituting the 40-hour work week, increasing pay and benefits, and, inexplicably, bowling. This clip reminds viewers of the benefits that unions afford ordinary workers, while Colbert remains the butt of the joke for denying these advances. By adhering to a ‘straight’ performance of rhetoric that reveals an ignorance of facts, Colbert satirizes big business and his own defense of the AMPTP.

When the montage ends, Colbert insists: “I think I have made this very clear. I am completely ethically consistent. And you know what, folks? *I don’t need my writers.* Which brings me to tonight’s ‘*Wørd*’” Stephen waits, but nothing happens. No graphics or words appear for the ‘*Wørd*.’ He tries again, “... which brings me to tonight’s ‘*Word*.’” He gestures with his hands as though his performance will magically result in content, but not even the segment’s title appears. Finally he concedes: “... And that’s the ‘*Wørd*.’ we’ll be right back.” The montage of clips from previous shows allows *TCR* to fill air-time with relevant, written material while not breaking the strike. But the clips also illustrate how skillful writing is critical to the show’s popularity. These clips are edited one after the other, orchestrated this way so that evidence of writers’ value snowballs as the segment continues. This montage of evidence is followed by an empty ‘*Wørd*’ segment to show how Colbert’s performance, although fun, is not interesting without content. Colbert states emphatically that he does not need his writers, but the show’s blatant omissions of content force him to ‘unwittingly’ demonstrate that in fact, without his writers, he has nothing to say.

TCR’s return episode ends with an interview with Richard Freeman, author of the book *America Works: Critical Thoughts on the Exceptional U.S. Labor Market*. Freeman, a slightly older gentleman with a mustache and watery eyes, wearing a dark green hat and a plaid green sport coat, responds to Colbert’s first question: “Why are unions good?” I

have transcribed a portion of the interview below to illustrate how the conversation reflects upon the strike.

RICHARD FREEMAN. Corporations are where capitalists come together, and unions are where workers come together, and our society recognizes both.

STEPHEN COLBERT. Workers come together, working for the capitalists. Workers would not be workers, they would just be people, unless the capitalists said ‘here’s a place to work.’

RICHARD FREEMAN. And the capitalists would not be capitalists if they didn’t have the workers to do the work [*The audience cheers*].

STEPHEN COLBERT. –That’s the chicken or the egg [*SC hears audience cheers and addresses them*]. Wait, hold on – I haven’t crushed him yet! [*SC turns back to Freeman*] This is the chicken and egg. The capitalists are chickens, and the workers are eggs ... that we have the right to scramble.

RICHARD FREEMAN. And if you scramble the eggs a lot, you’ve got nothing left to eat.

STEPHEN COLBERT. We’ll make more. Now what is a union?

RICHARD FREEMAN. A union is a group of workers, it’s not some outside organization, as sometimes employers say.

STEPHEN COLBERT. They’re outside of this show.

RICHARD FREEMAN. That is correct, but normally it’s inside the show. They come together to defend their interests, and deal with an employer. It’s awfully tough for a worker, individually, to go to deal with a difficult boss.

STEPHEN COLBERT. Why should you think that a boss is going to naturally exploit a worker? I mean, if you’re good at your job, there’s no reason to think they wouldn’t work you sixteen hours a day.

RICHARD FREEMAN. Because the shareholder ... Because the shareholders would like that, and they’d like you to be paying them 30 cents so there’s more profits, and so the workers have to organize themselves, to make sure they get a fair share —

STEPHEN COLBERT. But doesn't a rising tide lift all boats? If there are greater profits because labor costs are low, and let's say you don't have to pay, um, the internet residuals, won't that raise all the boats in the harbor?

RICHARD FREEMAN. If some of the wages are close to zero those boats are not going up. We've had the experience in the last 30 years ... unions have gotten weaker, and weaker, and weaker —

STEPHEN COLBERT. Well, hasn't the market spoken? Isn't that just the free market speaking?

RICHARD FREEMAN. Every survey we have says that many people want unions more than ever before in our country.

STEPHEN COLBERT. How many more?

RICHARD FREEMAN. Fifty percent.

STEPHEN COLBERT. Half? You can just get fifty percent of Americans to say anything. Ok, [*turns to the audience*]. Who here wants to be a pirate? [*universal applause and cheers*] See, that's 100% of a random sampling of America, out there ... You've compared unions to insurance. Ok, how is it insurance?

RICHARD FREEMAN. Because if you have trouble at your workplace, there's a group of fellow workers and an organization that will help you. Everybody has some bad experience with an employer. And some people — even though some people want to be nice employers, when you have power over people, you tend to abuse it. You yell at someone because you had an argument with you're wife the previous day, and you make the whole workforce feel bad and maybe you fire somebody.

STEPHEN COLBERT. So can the union stop me from yelling at people?

RICHARD FREEMAN. No, but they'll make you think that maybe there'll be some problems.

STEPHEN COLBERT. Ok. Do you yourself belong to a union?

RICHARD FREEMAN. No.

STEPHEN COLBERT. Thanks for stopping by.

Throughout this conversation, Colbert models conservative, anti-union logic using false analogies, allowing Freeman, in correcting him, to publicize how unions play an important role in workers' rights. The formal structure of this conversation puts Freeman and Colbert's rhetorical viewpoints in dialogue: while Freeman's explanations of union benefits are logical and eloquent, Colbert's continue to reveal his laughable ignorance. With a foil elevating his expertise, Freeman is able to explain basic facts about unions and clear up typical public misconceptions. Colbert, meanwhile, is free to do what he does best: mock the attitude of the opposing side by posing as indiscriminately anti-union.

First, Colbert argues that the problems between employees and workers are like a "chicken and egg" dilemma, which Freeman proves to be a irrelevant analogy.⁵⁵ Colbert's use of this particular metaphor is interesting, because it actually alludes to two sayings, the first being the dilemma of whether the chicken or the egg came first, and the second being the idea that if you want to make an omelet, then you have to scramble a few eggs — both of which allude to the AMPTP's perspective on the strike. Equating employers to chickens and workers to eggs, thereby arguing that this relationship is natural —since neither came first — plainly ignores history. Certainly labor of many kinds predated legal notions of ownership and employer-employee relationships. Colbert's logic in the "scrambling" metaphor is also flawed in obvious ways. This saying is another way of implying the Machiavellian concept that the ends justify the means, or that in order to make television work, executives must "scramble," or exploit, "a few eggs," or employees. Although Colbert is performing as an advocate for big-business, the mixture of these two chicken/egg metaphors allows him to express the irony of applying either to the writers' strike or the logic of unions.

Colbert's next false analogy is his argument that a rising tide lifts all boats, meaning that if television and the Internet are profitable, that these profits benefit

⁵⁵ This moment, in which the audience applauds genuinely for Freeman, also provides Colbert an opportunity to assert his ironic belief that any audience cheers must be for him, and that the audience is applauding prematurely for his victory.

everyone working in media industries. But the phrasing of his “rising tide” metaphor reveals that tides rise for some because they are lower for others. He explains that “If there are greater profits because labor costs are low, and let’s say you don’t have to pay, um, the internet residuals, won’t that raise all the boats in the harbor?” Colbert’s wording brings up residuals, but fails to explain that residuals and profits are the same thing: compensation. If writers earn zero percent of internet revenue, a rise in internet revenue will not help them, even if they were instrumental in creating that profit. To make the “rising tide” metaphor accurate to the relationship between the AMPTP, the WGA and compensation, the tide would raise five or six large boats, while all smaller boats would be barred from entering the harbor. Colbert’s metaphor provides an opportunity for Freeman to counter that “If some of the wages are close to zero those boats are not going up.” In fact, the idea of employment and wage-earning, as opposed to earning a percentage of profits,⁵⁶ is a common way for corporations, like media companies, to increase profits (tides).

Colbert’s final point concerns fifty percent of Americans supporting unionization, a statistic cited by Freeman, which . Colbert turns to his audience for validation, asking them “Who wants to be a pirate?” and deduces from their eruption in applause that one hundred percent of them agree. But the meaning of this moment is more subtle and complicated than it seems, particularly because Colbert’s studio audience is cued as part of the show’s ironic stance. If we understand this moment with Linda Hutcheon’s theories of how irony is synthesized between performers and audiences in context (as noted in chapter I), the audience’s cheers can be read differently. While the audience could not have known how Colbert would use their applause as evidence, they do understand the task at hand: mocking a kind of TV pundit-audience relationship characterized by reactionary conservatism, ill-informed arrogance, and vacuous entertainment. The fact that Colbert’s statements in this conversation are nearly all illogical supports and reinforces the audience’s understanding of their own role, and their desire to participate.

⁵⁶ Hollywood writers both work for wages and receive a percentage of profits, and in this way are a step removed from typical laborers. But this compensation was won by unions and is still contested during bargaining sessions.

Colbert ends the interview by pointing out that Freeman is not in a union, a statement Colbert performs as though he has won the argument. But a studious viewer would recognize that this question — ironically posed to affirm Colbert’s ‘win’ — may not even be relevant if it is irrelevant if Freeman is not an employee, a question Colbert fails to ask. As a book author, Freeman is an owner of his work, which separates him from the authors of shows like *TCR*, who are employed by Viacom, which owns rights to use the program for profit. This distinction harkens back to the very difficulties that television writers—as a unit—face in asserting rights to their creative work and fair compensation. Colbert’s question is consistent with his satirical persona’s tendency to hurl objections from any possible angle in an attempt to derail threats and win regardless of the consequences, as opposed to “seeing” the truth.

Keeping the Strike on TV

The first January episodes of *A Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* covered the writers’ strike heavily, investing more screen time on the conflict than either show typically would on any other single issue, while hosts took personal approaches to the strike. The jobs of both shows’ staffs were at stake, and both Stephen Colbert and Jon Stewart seemed eager to explain their dilemmas to the public. As the strike continued throughout January, both shows would return to intermittently cover its progress. For *A Daily Show*, the most notable segment on the strike after the show’s initial return to air was entitled “John Oliver on Strike.” The segment begins with Stewart explaining how deeply the show feels the writers’ absence, then the clip cuts to Oliver, who is dressed in a correspondent’s suit and tie, standing in front of a green screen in the studio. The green screen plays footage showing *The Daily Show*’s studio beset by a group of protestors picketing with signs.

Oliver’s segment is notable for its intricate combination of form and content to express his divided loyalties and the stakes of the strike for him personally. He begins by making it “perfectly clear, that *I am just talking to you. This is not writing.* I have no idea how this particular sentence I am currently saying is going to finish ... when and if it does, I can only hope it makes some kind of ceramic pineapple.” Oliver’s intentional

word blunder cleverly qualifies his appearance on the show, which some would view as disloyal. Stewart asks Oliver how the strike is going. Oliver responds that “Well, the writers here are frightened, and for good reason. They’re marching outside of our studio, which is an area of New York which you’d best describe as ‘up-and-coming’ —”⁵⁷ He is cut off by Stewart, who sees *two* John Olivers: correspondent Oliver reporting in the studio, and another Oliver in plain clothes among the group of picketers on the green screen (see image 32). John Oliver the striker begins yelling at John Oliver the correspondent, seemingly through the camera: “Scab! Scab! Scab!” Correspondent John Oliver shouts back: “This is not your fight Oliver, go back where I came from!”



Image 32. Jon Oliver reporting on *The Daily Show*. “Oliver’s On The Strike.” *The Daily Show With Jon Stewart*. Comedy Central, 2007. <http://thedailyshow.cc.com/videos/ixq99m/olivers-on-the-strike>. Web.

As the sketch continues, Oliver draws an apt comparison between censorship and how a combination of executive control and WGA rules impacts individual writers. Stewart asks Oliver how he can be out on strike and in the studio doing a report at the same time. Oliver explains: “It’s a funny story, Jon. Now, I’m a proud member of the

⁵⁷ Oliver’s joke at first suggests that writers should be frightened of the AMPTP, since the context of this conversation is the strike, but Oliver redirects these expectations, stating that they should be frightened because the neighborhood in which they are protesting is not safe.

Writers' Guild, but I'm also here in America on a work visa, meaning that striking is not allowed. It's punishable by — and this is the really funny bit — deportation. You couldn't write it. *You literally wouldn't be allowed.*" The presence of two Olivers helps him perform the legal ironies of his position. Even though he is a writer specializing in satire, he is forbidden from expressing his loyalty as a "proud" member of the WGA, and is legally obligated to write the show's satirical rhetoric. The format of this sketch coordinates two layers of footage, in which Oliver performs two sides of himself that the strike has placed in conflict.

Juxtaposing his two selves, Oliver explains why he is unable to fully stand with the other strikers because of his work visa, and therefore is forced to work as a strike-breaker against his will. The striking John Oliver inches closer and closer to the camera recording the footage for the green screen, and begins pleading "Please don't make me leave America. I like it here. Mr. Stewart? Mr. Stewart? Let me stay." Oliver uses his British accent and the similarity of his last name to the famous Dickens character Oliver Twist to transition his performance from outraged striker to desperate beggar. Correspondent John Oliver in the studio chastises his striking image on the screen, telling him to "have some self-respect!" and noting, "that's an unforgiving close-up." By alluding to Dickens, an author widely known for his sympathies with the working poor, and likening WGA writers to Oliver Twist, who pleaded for more, Oliver casts the AMPTP as Twist's cruel guardians who refuse his pleas. "Oliver On Strike" coordinates layers of form, rhetoric and performance in complimentary ways to liken writers to a meek, yet ultimately triumphant literary character.

While *A Daily Show* created whole segments around reprising the strike as a news item, *The Colbert Report* made more frequent, but less organized mention of writers' absences. Several times during January 2008, Colbert spoke directly to his writers on camera. At the end of the first show on January seventh, he signed off by saying, "Well, that's the end of the show. Writers, I'll see you in my dreams. Good night everybody." His January eighth episode ended with a similar sign-off: "I just want to say to the strikers outside, please remember to take off your shoes before you get into the jump

castle. Good night!” On January 10, after a particularly slap-dash episode — during which he read about the U.S. primaries and Iowa caucus in a series of newspapers from other countries, translating as he went — he had a special note for his writers: “I know what you’re thinking, and I agree.” But *The Colbert Report* also returned attention to the strike more frequently than *TDS*.

In one episode, Colbert gives a performance that pokes fun at his inability to admit defeat, while crediting his writers with the labor of creating the show. He opens the show while eating lo mein, and explains between bites the reason for his casual attitude:

I’m sorry for the casual nature of the opening of our show tonight, but I figured, you know ... writers’ strike’s still goin’ on. As you can see, I’ve got nothing in my prompters [*gestures as camera cuts to prompters briefly*] ... I just figured, you know, as long as we’re changing things up around here, why not make it a little more fun. Have something to eat. I have already done four shows without my writers, and I don’t think I’m tootin’ my own horn when I say it went pretty well ...And evidently I’m not the only one who noticed how well I’ve done, because my hero, papa bear Bill O’Reilly⁵⁸, evidently, last week, said something about me and my performance without writers on his show, and a lot of people said I should take a look at it. I haven’t seen this yet.

The clip shows O’Reilly discussing *The Colbert Report* with comedian Dennis Miller. O’Reilly says, “Stewart and Colbert, they can’t even find the cameras without their writers, I was watching them last night and it was like, ‘Oh, where do I go now?’” The screen cuts back to Colbert in the studio, who exclaims, “Fuck you, old man! I would like to see you do this for thirty seconds! Your wizened old frame would snap!”⁵⁹ *TCR* airs O’Reilly’s comments to highlight the show’s deficit without a writing staff, which again is the goal of the format changes of both shows. But Colbert’s persona reacts with an exaggerated outburst, in keeping with his anti-union stance and refusal to admit that he needs writers. The implication of this performance of anger is that of course Colbert *does*

⁵⁸ Fox News pundit Bill O’Reilly has been a frequent target of Colbert’s show, which was partially modeled after O’Reilly’s bullying, aggressive interviewing style and conservative spin.

⁵⁹ This outburst faintly recalls O’Reilly’s own famous outburst at TV production staff, footage of which was leaked on the Internet and quickly became fodder for Colbert, who has done multiple impressions of the incident.

need his writers, and the strain is beginning to show in his persona's performance. These brief references to writing as labor, and the strike specifically, kept the issue in the public eye as the strike continued through January.

By January 22 most workers in the entertainment industries were wondering how and when the strike would be settled, hoping for a swift resolution. *The Colbert Report* returned to the strike by discussing how to come to a resolution and get writers back to work. This shift in focus from stiff resolve to practical compromise was reflected in the show's guest that evening: Ambassador Andrew Young. Young was a member of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s inner circle, and had once worked closely with Colbert's late father, an attorney, to settle a hospital strike. Their interview informatively highlights some of the similarities between the hospital strike and the writers' strike. Colbert introduces Young by shouting, "He might just be my new black friend.⁶⁰ Please welcome, Ambassador Andrew Young!" Eventually, Young answers that, "I'm more than your new black friend. I am your destiny." In a brief reverse shot, we see Colbert with a fascinated expression. "See this strike was 100 days, and your father and I settled it. But the key to settling it was, neither of us got credit. And so you have to settle this strike, and not get credit." Colbert questions him: "And not get credit? I like to take credit for things." Young responds that being humble is a difficult task.

As the conversation continues, Colbert asks Young to compare the writers' strike with the one he and Colbert's father resolved. "Were you guys fighting over Internet residuals, by any chance?" Young believes the two strikes are still comparable. Here is a transcription of their conversation as they discuss the importance of respect and face-saving in resolving strikes.

⁶⁰ Colbert routinely mocks the insularity of white culture by satirically pretending to be searching for new token 'friends' of various ethnicities, in order to project a false image of welcoming diversity while continuing to see nonwhite people as novelties. This aspect of his persona attacks Americans' simultaneous denial and concealment of racist attitudes.

ANDREW YOUNG. It's the same thing, though. I mean, Internet residuals is like, two-point-five percent? We worked it out, so that everyone got what they wanted, and nobody got any credit.

STEPHEN COLBERT. But did each side get what they wanted in the strike?

ANDREW YOUNG. Well, pretty much, but they didn't say so.

STEPHEN COLBERT. Yeah, but I have trouble with strikers, and my problem with strikers is that if you don't show up to work, then that's like not playing the game. You know? You can't win the football game you can't show up to. How is striking the right thing to do?

ANDREW YOUNG. Well, it's not. You only strike, when you can't talk. And the right thing to do is to talk. I was the mayor of Atlanta, and strikes were going on all over, and a teamster for a union told me: 'Strikes are never about money, they are always about respect.' And when people can sit down and respect one another, and work a problem out, it's settled. And that's what your father and I did.

STEPHEN COLBERT. But I understand that this is the way strikes go – and this is the only strike I've ever been involved in – that the way that strikes go is that one side makes a proposal, and then the producers get up and leave and don't talk anymore.

This part of the interview is insightful on several levels. Aside from reminding the public that the strike was still affecting writers and networks, and likening it to civil rights issues, Young acknowledges that talking is essential to avoiding and ending strikes. Young's discussion of not taking credit and of making others look like they "won," speaks to a kind of wisdom that Colbert cannot model, and thus must rely on his Young to substantiate. While satire brings disagreements into focus directly, humility and goodwill can actually end these polarizing conflicts. Colbert's comments about the producers walking out of negotiations remind us that while the WGA and its supporters had been very vocal about their reasons for striking, the AMPTP had put forth very little in terms of public relations information about their perspective. Thus while the AMPTP refused to

bargain or discuss the strike, public conversations concerning unions and media compensation, many of them satirical, had gone on without them.

The interview ends with Young giving some suggestions as to how Colbert could help end the current writers' strike. Young suggests that Colbert "get on the phone tomorrow and call a couple of people," but that he should not tell anybody. Colbert jokingly responds, looking at the camera: "Ok, we're not going to tell anybody that I'm doing that, ok?" Young, unfazed, continues, "This is all behind the scenes. And then you've gotta work out a way so that everybody comes on the show and is a winner. And I tell you, listening to you practice out here, you need some writers." As with much of *A Daily Show* and *TCR*'s coverage of the strike, the emphasis of these discussions is not simply explaining the strike, but illustrating the absence of writers' valuable contributions. References to both shows' lack of wit and content, as well as rhetorical changes that remind viewers of writers' absence, are part of this acknowledgement.

The January 22 show concludes in an unusual, and perhaps hyperbolic manner. Returning from commercial break, Colbert addresses the audience: "Who knows how much longer the writers strike will go on? I certainly hope it ends soon. But, one thing I've learned from studying the Civil Rights Movement is the power of song. And tonight, I'd like to dedicate this song to everyone involved in the WGA strike, but especially my writers ..." After a pause, Colbert sings out: "When Israel was in Egypt Land!" His call is first answered by Young, who sings back: "Let my people go!" Colbert sings again: "Oppressed so hard they could not stand!" and the camera cuts to journalist and Malcom Gladwell,⁶¹ who sings the second response: "Let my people go!" The three men continue to sing "Let my People Go" with the Harlem Gospel Choir. As they sing, pictures of each of *TCR*'s staff writers flows across the screen. As the song concludes, Colbert addresses the camera: "Well, that's it for *The Report*, everybody. Guys [*addressing his writers through the camera*] I hope I'll see you soon!" *TCR*'s alignment of the writers strike with civil rights is comic, but pointed. While the two causes are certainly not equal, this segment draws on their similar aspects to playfully acknowledge their kinship in

⁶¹ Gladwell is an author of multiple books including *Outliers* and *The Tipping Point*.

Colbert's characteristically over-exaggerated manner. Colbert would indeed see the writers again soon, and predictably, he would take all the credit.

The Daily Show and The Colbert Report Writers Return

The strike was settled February 12, 2008, and the next day writing staffs for *TDS* and *TCR* returned to work. This change was visibly highlighted in the content and formats of both programs. Stewart's opening monologue expresses the jubilation of their return. He begins reading from the teleprompter:

Greetings! I bid you the fondest of welcomes. And bid for your pleasure an evening of pleasure and mirth. Tonight's journey, while admittedly brief, will encompass the most elusive of human foibles – what the fuck is this? What am I? [*gesturing toward the prompter*] ... Wait a minute, words in the prompter, a script on my desk, vending machine upstairs out of Funyuns ... The writers are back! [*Stewart cheers, throws his hands up in the air and does a dance.*] ... It is no longer *A Daily Show*, it is once again *The Daily Show*!

The screen cuts to *The Daily Show*'s opening graphic sequence, showing the changeover from *A Daily Show* back to *The Daily Show*. The camera cuts back to Stewart, who continues:

We're back, baby! Oh, how I've missed you, definite article. We're back with our whole crew, what I believe is the finest writing staff in the business. We're so excited. I can't wait to see what they come up with. It's like Christmas morning ... from what I've been told. Obviously, I have no real experience with that.

This segment's content and Stewart's performance highlight the writers' return by heightening the monologue's vocabulary, reminding viewers of the teleprompter, and stressing a return to the show's original format. Even the joke about Stewart, who is Jewish, not experiencing Christmas morning suggests that what makes him funny results from a collaborative effort. This episode ends with another "check in" with *The Colbert Report*, in which Stewart and Colbert discuss the end of the strike:

JON STEWART. Stephen, nice to have the writers back, eh, my friend?

STEPHEN COLBERT. Yeah, but now I've got another strike to deal with. The coffee-getters union walked out this morning.

JON STEWART. Coffee-getters union?

STEPHEN COLBERT. Yeah, the guys who get me coffee. All nine of them are on strike now.

JON STEWART. You've got nine coffee-getters?

STEPHEN COLBERT. And it's not just affecting me. Hosts across the country are going without coffee, Jon.

JON STEWART. What do the strikers want, Stephen?

STEPHEN COLBERT. To stop getting me coffee. I mean come on! I'm willing to give a little but that is unreasonable.

JON STEWART. Why can't you get your own coffee?

STEPHEN COLBERT. Do I look like a scab to you, mister? ... Hey, hey Jon, what are you doing for coffee??

JON STEWART. I'm drinking tea.

STEPHEN COLBERT. Are you?

JON STEWART. All right, that's our show.

STEPHEN COLBERT. J'accuse!

For Colbert, always mocking extremism and self-righteousness, the fight still continues. With the encouragement of his studio audience, Colbert stands firm and against striking, whether by writers or imaginary coffee-getters. In his well-known persona as a privileged, but poorly-informed and overly-confident idiot, Colbert adopts the most recent and notable forms of arrogance as part of his performance. His persona's polarized thinking disavows both striking coffee-getters, but also "scabs." His rhetoric here, of course, highlights the ongoing struggles of workers for fair treatment by large corporations, while his performance also embodies the unreasonable stance of the AMPTP, from the perspective of the segment's writers.

The Colbert Report's opening monologue the same night embodied the opposite of what Andrew Young would have considered appropriate post-strike behavior. Colbert begins by addressing the audience from his desk, saying, "You know something have I learned that I did not know is that reading is a muscle. And it can go soft on you. But let's get to the really important news, folks: The writers' strike is over! I did it!" He points to

an over-the-shoulder graphic that simply states: “I did it!” as well. After taking credit for ending the strike, he continues:

And this morning I was able to shave my strike beard. Oh yeah. *Downtown*. Oh. Oh, it was unruly. And the guys in the steam room are going to be so happy that the strike is over. So first thing’s first [*pounds fist on the desk*] let’s all welcome back *The Colbert Report* writers!”

Colbert gets up from his desk and runs over to greet the writers as they walk out on set, one-by-one. Inexplicably, Kevin Bacon and the New York Mets’ mascot join the group, which gathers for a photo. A sequence of freeze-frames simulates pictures being snapped for TV viewers. Colbert high-fives several of his writers and runs back to his desk, grasping the script in his hand. Clutching the script, he exclaims “This!” After the applause dies down, he continues, “This is great. I’ve got my prompter back. Wow. Wow. Wow ...” The camera cuts to show the teleprompter, on which we can see a series of “wows,” written by his newly-returned writing staff. Colbert, too, emphasizes the teleprompter and writers’ words at the top of the show. Still mocking corporate reasoning, however, Colbert transforms a victory for union-company relations into a moment of self-promotion. His performance, and his show’s heavy stylized format, satirizes an approach to labor relations that favors face-saving and promotion over accountability and cooperation.

The episodes analyzed in this chapter reflect changing attitudes about media communication and corporate power. Both *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* speak to audiences whom they regard as discerning and familiar with current events and technologies. Because they acknowledge that their viewers would appreciate the stakes of the strike and understand their media options as consumers, both shows used their influence to make the absence of writers, and thus impact of their work, tangible. *TDS* and *TCR* were two of the only programs that, while affected directly by the strike and forced to return to air without their full staffs, took the opportunity to speak out and address the industry’s problems using a satirical tone that synthesized various perspectives on striking, unions, and corporations. By doing so, both shows helped

outpace networks and conglomerates by framing the AMPTP's refusal to negotiate as evidence of corporate greed born from an unreasonable sense of entitlement.

Moreover, *TDS* and *TCR*, along with the Youtube videos discussed in chapter III, promoted the perception that media conglomerates had been two-faced in their attempts to brag to investors without properly paying their creative workers. In marked contrast to previous strikes and disputes within the entertainment industry, like the impact of the blacklist discussed in chapter II, the strikers in this conflict were able to take advantage of new media options for publicity outside the control of studios, as well as mutual support. Because of these resources, a relatively small group of workers was able to contend with the power and influence of corporate media enterprises. *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* played a critical role in illustrating to national audiences both the power of new media to garner support and viewership, and the importance of writing to the television production process and the wealth of media corporations. Finally, satirical discourses proved to be particularly effective in successfully communicating complex messages about the legal aspects of compensation to a wide range of viewers.

CHAPTER VI

POST-SCRIPT: AFTER THE STRIKE

The end of the strike officially came on February 12, 2008, allowing the 12,000 writers who had been on strike to return to work, if their jobs remained (Handler 1-2). The WGA's new MBA contract answered the strike's primary goal: to gain a foothold in the digital market at a critical time in new media advancement (Handler 1-2). Writers were now entitled to between 2 and 3% residuals for content streamed, and doubled their compensation for downloaded materials that sell over 100,000 units (Handler 2). The WGA's priority had been secured by gaining a piece of digital revenues. As the Internet continues to grow as a market, this MBA agreement sets a precedent entitling writers to a portion of its profits. Rhetorical writers were key players in the strike, publicizing the conflict by satirizing the AMPTP's illogical bargaining stance.

Although Reality TV trends threatened writers' value and opportunities in television during the strike, current network schedules suggest that scripted programming is highly lucrative and valuable. For instance, in 2013 and 2014, elaborately scripted programming and have appeared among the top 25 rated shows, including *Modern Family* (ABC) (2009 -), *The Walking Dead* (AMC) (2010 -), *NCIS: Los Angeles* (CBS) (2009 -), *Criminal Minds* (CBS) (2005 -), *The Following* (Fox) (2013 -), *Chicago Fire* (NBC) (2012 -), and *Castle* (ABC) (2009 -), just to name a few (Schneider).⁶² These shows are highly popular online and on television, and writers today own a share of the profits they generate, no matter how they are accessed.

Writers' achievements came at considerable costs, as the WGA sacrificed other demands to win online compensation. New media residuals only begin after a 17-24 day window, during which networks can provide writers' work to audiences online as free "promotion" (Handler 1). The guild also dropped demands for higher residuals on DVD sales, and jurisdiction over Reality TV programs and animated series — despite the fact that these genres depend heavily on scripted content (Handler 1). The final agreement

⁶² These videos have each drawn at least over 10 million viewers.

between the guilds did not include the WGA's long-sought gains for DVD compensation or jurisdiction over animated or Reality shows.

Writers' careers and personal lives also felt the impact of the strike. In fact, the strike touched every sector of media industries, in ways that continued "to resonate over time, causing direct impact on employment, output, and wages and salaries, in turn affecting retail sales and causing ripples through other industries" (Klowden 1). In the fourth quarter of 2007 alone, one thousand jobs were lost, with a projected loss of \$57.5 million (Klowden 3). Total personal income in the Hollywood fell by \$1.2 billion, and by \$995.8 million in the first and second quarters of 2008, respectively. The total salaries lost in California during the first and second quarters of 2008 were also considerable, totaling over \$900 million (Klowden 6).

Major networks were also affected financially by the walk out, and responded with cost-cutting measures that made writers pay for the strike indirectly. Network schedules for 2007-2009 were noticeably altered due to the conflict, workers were cut, and salaries trimmed (Klowden 14). NBC was the most aggressive in this respect, replacing many on its already scant list of scripted shows with Reality programs, aiming to attract the 18-49 demographic (Klowden 14). In general, networks changed their schedules to feature fewer scripted shows and more Reality fare, lowering expenses and eliminating employees. Networks were also less likely to experiment with pilots⁶³ (Handler 4). Other casualties of the strike cost large networks and studios money as well. The Golden Globes, an annual award show and major television event, was cancelled for early 2008, meaning a loss in revenue for NBC and the Hollywood Foreign Press Association, estimated at \$6 million. Although major networks and media entities were financially secure enough to handle these losses, executives worried about how lower ratings would affect advertising, and many wondered whether television viewing levels would be permanently gauged.

⁶³ New television shows are tested by provisionally airing their debut episodes, called "pilots."

Networks used the strike as a way of putting writers on the defensive and kill production deals, canceling scripted shows led by ‘troublesome’ hyphenate writer-producers (Henderson 236-7). Media companies demanded that employees take pay cuts to remain employed (Handler 2). Although studios and networks lost considerable revenues, these losses were far from crippling for these diversified conglomerates. Still, studios frequently used the strike to argue for lowering writers’ salaries and replacing monetary with non-monetary compensation, blaming their losses on the writers to scapegoat and punish them for striking (Henderson 235). One screenwriter, Felicia Henderson, explains her contract negotiation for work on the show *The Fringe*, recalling that the studio offered her a salary 20% lower than her last two comparable positions (Henderson 235). Fox’s explanation was that they “had lost so much money due to the writers’ strike that writers, more than anyone, should understand that their salaries have to be cut substantially” (Henderson 236). Fox executives further argued that the pay cut was inconsequential because any writer would be lucky to work with J.J. Abrams (Henderson 237). Their logic was that writers were responsible for studios’ losses, and therefore responsible for taking pay cuts, and additionally that ‘perks’ like working with J.J. Abrams are part of, and can therefore be used to replace, compensation. Studios told writers that they were lucky to still have job offers after the strike, let alone the salaries their labor would have warranted before it. Henderson’s account alleges that in the wake of the strike, studios shed expensive production deals with writers illegally, and limited writers’ pay as a way of countering their compensation for residuals (236-7).

The next round of MBA negotiations in 2011 reflect the impact of these intense short-term costs, as the WGA quickly agreed to a new contract with little collective organization and very modest gains. Influenced by the recent memory of the 2007-8 strike, writers and studios seemed eager to put their economic woes behind them, and prevent new strikes from occurring. The result, however, was that The WGA did very little coordinating within the guild, and demanded less than they had in previous bargaining sessions. An agreement on the updated contract appeared in only two weeks, and a full six weeks before the 2007 MBA contract was set to expire (Morphis 543-545).

Although they made some progress, writers agreed to a freeze on prime time residuals and did not move forward on the other interests foregone in the 2007 strike (Morphis 543-545). It seems as though the WGA acted defensively for economic reasons when they might have recalled the long-term recognition the strike and its online videos brought to screenwriters, the solidarity achieved by Hollywood writers as a community, and the ways that writers' protests forced studios to reconsider their approach to creative workers.

"Writing the Strike" illustrates how rhetorical writers used satire to publicize the 2007-8 strike and won the right to be paid when their works are screened online. Through the 2007-8 WGA strike and the union's media campaign, television writers publicly asserted the value of their work and challenged executives for primacy in the entertainment industry. Television writers, who were responsible — but not compensated — for written online content, became determined to assert their value to the entertainment industry by claiming a stake in growing internet markets. Rhetorical writers in particular used their complex skills in argumentation, irony and satire to reframe the strike, crafting videos that drew attention away from the value of television, and toward the value of writing for entertainment media. Pro-writer videos, influenced by satirical television shows like *TDS* and *TCR*,⁶⁴ simultaneously allowed rhetorical writers to argue for internet compensation while demonstrating why it was deserved.

Using rhetorical satire to openly address political disagreements, particularly those within the television industry itself, is a luxury that television writers have fought to enjoy. The unique skills that rhetorical writers chose to demonstrate their value were not coincidental, but grew out of a history of struggle, censorship, niche marketing, and

⁶⁴ *TDS* and *TCR*, with their writing staffs, continue to use techniques that layer form and content to produce satires that target news and politics, and frequently influence national discussions in important ways. Stephen Colbert's word "Truthiness" entered Webster's dictionary as the 2006 "Word of the Year." The word and its popularity illustrate how U.S. politics was being understood through irony during this period (Merriam-Webster). "Truthiness" refers to ironies stemming from contrasts between facts and fictions, and how they are presented in cable news and political coverage. The word describes political manipulation via news shows, and insincere performances of political convictions — as these have become cornerstones of political public relations.

political transitions. While the importance of television writers and writing have been challenged by U.S. law and television executives, the strike enabled writers to assert their foundational role in American culture, politics, and media industries. The histories and analyses in “Writing the Strike,” provide a case study of the 2007-8 strike, its outcomes, and related videos — on television and online — to illustrate why rhetorical writing in television matters, and how writers have engaged in media activism to change national conversations, their industry status, and perceptions of their trade.

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