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Winter 2012

### Live From New York, It's the Fake News! Saturday Night Live and the (Non)Politics of Parody

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#### Recommended Citation

Day, Amber and Thompson, Ethan, "Live From New York, It's the Fake News! Saturday Night Live and the (Non)Politics of Parody" (2012). *English and Cultural Studies Journal Articles*. Paper 44. [https://digitalcommons.bryant.edu/eng\\_jou/44](https://digitalcommons.bryant.edu/eng_jou/44)

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**Live from New York, It's the Fake News!**  
***Saturday Night Live* and the (Non)Politics of Parody**

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### Abstract

Though *Saturday Night Live*'s "Weekend Update" has become one of the most iconic of fake news programs, it is remarkably unfocused on either satiric critique or parody of particular news conventions. Instead, the segment has been shaped by a series of hosts who made a name for themselves by developing distinctive comic personalities. In contrast to more politically invested contemporary programs, the genre of fake news on *Saturday Night Live* has been largely emptied to serve the needs of the larger show, maintaining its status as just topical, hip, and unthreatening enough to attract celebrities and politicians, as well as a mass audience.

Live from New York, It's the Fake News!  
*Saturday Night Live* and the (Non)Politics of Parody

If one were to measure the success of any given news parody program by traditional industry parameters such as numbers of viewers or seasons on the air, *Saturday Night Live's* "Weekend Update" stands without peer. True, "Update" may make up less than ten minutes of a 90-minute program. But given its history dating back to 1975, the subsequent careers of its various anchors, and the superior ratings of network programming, even late at night, even on the weekend, and even in the "post-network" era, "Weekend Update" still enjoys a privileged spot among the "fake news."

As "Update" has maintained its presence on *Saturday Night Live (SNL)* for so long, it has also borne witness to profound transformations from the height of the network news in the 1970s to the rise of cable in the 1990s and the convergent 2000s. However, transformations in what the news looks and sounds like (and indeed, what constitutes "news") have not necessarily been the predominant influences on *SNL's* news parodies. Neither has *SNL's* longevity been the byproduct of cutting-edge political satire. Despite *SNL's* posturing as countercultural, rebellious, or at least impolite television, any number of commercial imperatives have taken precedence over the qualities we would highlight as key to "real" satire. As we will explore, the show has certainly included a good deal of political humor over the years, but far less satire. While the former is simply humor about politics and politicians, the latter, though often light-hearted, includes aggression and critique, focusing not just on personalities but on institutionalized policies, norms, and beliefs. As Gray, Jones, and Thompson (2009) explain "it is the ability to attack power and pass judgment on the powerful while doing so in playful and entertaining ways that makes satire a particularly potent form of political communication" (p. 12). "Weekend

Update” has doubtless had moments of satiric bite, but we argue that the segment has developed primarily as a vehicle for comic personalities rather than as a platform for political critique or parody of news conventions. “Update” has been central to creating and maintaining the *SNL* brand as “hip” or relevant TV, a site for topical humor and new comic voices, as well as a relatively nonthreatening space where “real” celebrities and public figures can play comic versions of themselves. But, in order to be these things, the fake news on *SNL* has historically been emptied of real satire.

Nevertheless, *SNL*’s continued notoriety and its subsequent impact on the “face” of news parody, as well as its ability to grab headlines with successful caricature, from Chevy Chase’s Gerald Ford in 1975 to Tina Fey’s Sarah Palin in 2008, suggests the importance of understanding what molds the content and tone of its “fake news.” The evolutions of *SNL*’s news parody have been greatly shaped by the specific creative and industrial context of the program. We look to developmental and transformative moments in the history of *SNL* to better understand how creative shifts and executive decisions have resulted in limitations upon the satiric and political content of the program, and how “Update” has parodied changes in news programming in the network and post-network eras. We also briefly touch on several of the most successful news parody programs that have subsequently developed in the contemporary moment of niche programming (*The Daily Show*, *The Colbert Report*, and the *Onion News Network*), tracing their divergent approaches.

#### **ORIGINS: THE PREHISTORY OF *SNL*’S FAKE NEWS**

News parody was, of course, not invented by *SNL*. In broadcast history, comic commentary on the news dates back to radio. On television, there were several examples of genre-blending

satirical news programming in the 1960s that lived somewhere between real news reportage and satire by irreverently interpreting the news of the week—notably, *That Was The Week That Was* in Britain and later the United States, and *This Hour Has Seven Days* in Canada. As Day (2011) has argued elsewhere, because of their hybridity these shows could all be considered closer relatives to more political contemporary programs such as *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* than what came after them for several decades, but it was this slipperiness that also made them potentially dangerous during the more jittery network era. All three were cancelled amidst industry worries that they were pushing too far. After their demise, US parodic news found a less contentious home in the variety show, programming more clearly demarcated as light entertainment removed from the political world. Programs such as *Rowan and Martin's Laugh-In* and *The Flip Wilson Show* included news reports alongside other sketches, but the scenario became popular, so that by the time *SNL* premiered, it was a well-established format—and a politically safe one at that.

While *SNL* didn't invent fake news, its creators and cast did imagine themselves as *reinventing*—or at least tearing down and reconstructing—TV comedy for a new generation. *SNL* has become the standard-bearer (for better or worse) of sketch comedy and parody on television. At its creation, however, both the network and the show's producers conceived and marketed the program as a pronounced break from other television comedies, to the point of even distorting how “different” it really was. NBC was looking for some way to bring back baby boomers who had soured on television, and a space with relative freedom to try out different strategies to do so became available when Johnny Carson no longer wanted “Best of Carson” reruns in syndication on Saturday nights. NBC president Herb Schlosser, who eight years earlier had green-lit *Laugh In*, tasked late-night programming supervisor Dick Ebersol with doing this.

Ebersol turned to the man who would become synonymous with *SNL*, a young veteran of Canadian and American television comedies named Lorne Michaels (Shales & Miller, 2002).

Michaels recognized the imperative to create a show that was self-conscious about seeming different from other television, even if its substance wasn't exactly revolutionary. In the program's first season he explained, "I wanted a show to and for and by the TV generation. 30-year-olds are left out of television. Our reference points, our humor, reflect a life-style never aired on TV" (*Time*, 1976). The generational appeal of *NBC's Saturday Night* (the original title) relied less on innovative comic strategies than it did on articulating an us/them dichotomy based in cultural tastes rather than politics. *SNL* foregrounded the performers as the embodiment of breaks with the "square" connotations of television, claiming that its ragged and uneven nature gave access to authenticity, as opposed to the professionalization and compromise of typical network entertainment. In a 1976 *Rolling Stone* profile of the show, Michaels said,

I envisioned this show in which all these individual styles were gotten across as purely as possible, with me clearing away the network and technological barricades. This is why *Saturday Night* must stay a *live* show, I've fought for that, to keep it *theater*, a pure communication between writers, players and audience. (Burke, 1976, p. 34)

Michaels conceptualized *SNL* as revolutionary not because it would break new satiric ground, but because of this "pure communication"—the presentation of authentic selves, unfiltered and uncensored. What seems exceptional in retrospect, is how that presentation of authenticity was achieved by opposition to TV artifice through parody. "The nonpareil achievement of 'Saturday Night'," wrote David Tipmore in *The Village Voice*, "is to be the first TV show which could not exist without the form of TV. Parody commercials and 'Weekend Updates' and references to products and soap operas and other TV shows compose its reflexive

and conceptual comedy” (p. 21). But as the development of “Update” makes clear, the parody was aimed more at a diffuse “establishment” than at the substance of any particular conventions.

### **THE MOLD: CHEVY CHASE AND NOT CHEVY CHASE**

While *SNL* took advantage of its fringe timeslot, executive thinking at NBC had always been that the show could function as a sort of workshop, spinning off performers and projects that could be moved to primetime (Hill & Weingrad, 1986). The first to leave for other projects was the first “Update” anchor, Chevy Chase. Chase needed no long-term historical perspective to recognize how important the role had been to launching his career. He explained his success in a 1977 *Playboy* article: “The fact that I said my name and said, ‘I’m Chevy Chase and you’re not’ [...] That, more than anything, made me stand out. [...] I had a showcase—Weekend Update—and you heard my name every week and I got to play to the camera” (p. 220).

One way in which Chase embodied Michaels’ rhetoric about unfiltered authenticity was that he had been hired as a writer, and in fact never had a contract as a performer on the show. Once given the “Update” chair, Chase set the tone for the recurring sketch. Rather than focusing on trenchant political commentary, it became more of a vehicle for developing comic personalities, while taking the self-seriousness of public figures down a notch. In this template, the anchor quickly jumped from story to story, creating a rapid-fire succession of one-liner jokes, most of which began with a true-to-life premise or picture, but were followed by a comically fictional twist. So, for instance, in the opening joke of the first “Update,” Chase announced that “dedication ceremonies for the new Teamsters Union building headquarters took place today in Detroit,” a real headline of the day, but he continued, “where union president Fitzsimmons is reported to have said that former president Jimmy Hoffa will always be a cornerstone in the

organization” (October 11, 1975). Subsequent jokes in that episode jumped from the Emperor of Japan’s visit to Disneyworld, to president Gerald Ford’s supposed ineptness, to a new stamp commemorating prostitution (costing ten cents, but 25 if you want to lick it). As Geoffrey Baym has pointed out, this is a version of what Neil Postman called the “now this” format of news, “in which no topic is placed in wider context or receives elaboration” (2005, p. 263). On the straight news, Baym argues, this reduces the importance of political information to fodder for trivia games with seemingly little real-world importance, while the comic version “further reduces any sense of engagement with or connection to the political public sphere” (p. 263). Indeed, the emphasis on Chase’s “Update” was certainly not in-depth political analysis. But its rapid-fire style also effectively parodied the “now this” real news which was itself far from thorough.

As “Update” developed, jokes about politicians and celebrities began to fall into repeated motifs. Most famously, Chase took regular aim at then-President Gerald Ford, creating a vision of Ford as both stupid and hopelessly clumsy, needing the Secret Service to protect him from everyday objects and activities. Each episode would invariably include at least one such joke, usually ending with “alert Secret Service agents” seizing Ford’s car / handkerchief / thumb, etc. and “wrestling it to the ground.” The appeal of these jokes was intertextually reinforced in other segments as Chase developed a regular routine of impersonating Ford, always ending with a spectacular pratfall. It was a vision of the President that ended up sticking, becoming an indelible piece of Ford’s legacy. Following that success, *SNL* has continued to rely on caricature for the bulk of its political humor—but as Jeffrey P. Jones argues, typically these are toothless impersonations with “an emphasis on physical or phonetic resemblance that focuses on the politician’s representation of self” (2009, p. 43). Rather than critiquing substantive policy issues, then, these impersonations have tended to focus on personality quirks and physical flaws.

Beyond impersonations, however, part of the appeal of news parody in particular is the pleasure of witnessing the self-seriousness and importance of a newscast deflated and of glimpsing the fallibility of the “reporters.” Chase played the part of a newscaster with conviction, rarely if ever breaking to giggle at his own jokes or otherwise acknowledge that he was not really a newscaster. In that sense, he conveyed full belief in his own status and importance as a journalist. However, his character (like those of the correspondents) was often comically unprofessional. On Chase’s “Update,” the audience got the pleasure of glimpsing a news team’s personal secrets and bad behavior. Beginning on the second episode of the program and continuing throughout his tenure at *SNL*, Chase would start the segment while chatting on the phone, seemingly unaware that the cameras were rolling while he indulged in intimate sexual conversation before noticing he was on air. In addition, Chase as anchor could not abide another cast member having something serious to say. When one would appear to deliver a serious response to an “Update” editorial, Chase would make silly faces at the camera as he or she spoke, undercutting whatever the speaker was saying.

Chase’s comic lack of professionalism stood in stark contrast to the posturing of network news anchors at the time. Baym (2010) describes the 1970s as the “high-modern” era of television news, which was predicated on a clear distinction between journalism and entertainment and the notion that journalists relayed information in an unbiased manner. He describes how that distinction led to institutionalized strategies that codified disinterested journalism, such as written guidelines at CBS that instructed journalists to appear “in a restrained and disciplined manner” (p. 32). Chase’s authentic/parodic voice subverted the high-modern distinction between journalism and entertainment, symbolically striking a generational blow against the establishment as he stumbled through the news or across the stage.

In the 1977 *Playboy* profile, Chase managed to both flippantly downplay the significance of the program's satire ("These folks are the best writers and performers around, but remember that this is just showbiz—so who gives a shit how great we are?" [p. 65]) and take credit for Carter's defeat of Ford ("It's the most heinously egotistical thing to say I had anything to do with it, but I think I must have had some influence" [p. 76]). While Chase seems to contradict himself here, his statements are consistent with *SNL*'s emphasis on the articulation of comic personality and individual perspective as the defining characteristics of comedy freed from old-style television constraints. *SNL* was conceived as TV by and for the TV generation, but without bothering to tether that generational perspective to a particular political ideology. Rather, it was conceptualized as perspective freed from institutionalized distortions and censorship. Chase's anchor effectively parodied the "high-modern" news anchor, but "Update" made no explicit critical statements about the media or the political landscape as a whole. Instead, it created a platform for the talents of the cast, raising Chase's profile, and also launching well-remembered characters like Gilda Radner's constantly mistaken Emily Litella.

It would be many seasons before another cast member successfully established "Update" as his or her comic springboard. Jane Curtin, who immediately followed Chase in 1976, was a talented performer adept at delivering punch lines with feigned professionalism and seriousness. However, she did not write her own jokes, was hampered by the mildly sexist material often written for her, and was often teamed with Dan Aykroyd or Bill Murray. "Update" no longer showcased a charismatic writer/performer as it became a spot for recurring characters who weren't otherwise written into skits. Despite Chase's early departure, the first five years of *SNL* continued to be a success, and fans and critics consider those years to be the program's golden era.

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### **TRANSITIONS: MILLER, MACDONALD, AND NOT AL FRANKEN**

When Michaels left *SNL* at the end of his five year contract, most of the remaining writers, producers, and cast left with him, and the popularity and critical reputation of *SNL* suffered greatly. Still, fake news continued to play a key role on the show via “Update” and other parodies. Anchor Charles Rocket did a recurring segment titled “The Rocket Report” which parodied soft news segments and “man on the street” interviews, for example. In contrast to Chase’s insouciance, Rocket, who worked professionally as a newscaster prior to getting the *SNL* gig, played news anchor straight. Unfortunately, he also said “fuck” on the air and was fired before the 1980-81 season ended.

The final episode of that disastrous season was hosted by a returning Chase, who assumed the role of anchor again (April 7, 1981). Most notable about that particular “Update,” however, was a monologue from Al Franken, who was one of the first writers hired by Michaels, and was thought of by many as the logical choice to replace him as producer. Franken used the opportunity to vociferously complain that he had been passed over yet again in favor of another non-comedian replacing Michaels. This time it was for Dick Ebersol, the executive who had hired Michaels to develop the show. Ebersol did not have a background in comedy, and according to cast and crew, would routinely ask whether a bit was funny.

Ebersol did, however, successfully turn around *SNL*’s fortunes, although the anchor of “Update” was more or less a revolving gig during his years in charge. Brian-Doyle Murray, Mary Gross, Christine Ebersol, Brad Hall, and assorted cast members and even hosts took turns at the desk. Ebersol’s final season in 1984-85 (featuring one-year stints from Billy Crystal, Martin Short, and Christopher Guest) is considered a series high mark, but not because of a

renewed sense of social relevance. At the time, an article in *Newsday* noted, “The new “Saturday Night Live” angles for well-crafted professionalism rather than inspired (or insipid) amateurism” (Robins, 1984). Indeed, it was with the polished characters they created (Crystal’s Fernando) or brought with them (Short’s Ed Grimley, from *SCTV*) and filmed segments (a Guest-directed film starring Short and Harry Shearer as synchronized swimmers) that the show regained its footing, not through biting satire. As Jones (2009) has noted, *SNL* was surprisingly “hands off” during the Reagan years, and remained so even when Michaels returned in 1985 (p. 42).

The 1985-86 season, with Michael’s back at the helm, proved so disappointing that the following year’s premiere began with Madonna reading a formal apology for it. On the bright side, however, two future standouts were hired: Dennis Miller and Jon Lovitz. Miller would prove to be the first “Update” anchor post-Chase to leverage that position into a successful post-*SNL* career. Miller veered further away from news parody than any of the other news anchors, using his time on “Update” to develop a comic persona known for rants and obscure references, not insights on political life or media critique, even relative to Chase’s subtle subversion of the network anchor. Indeed, Miller’s anchor was a rock star: each week his “Update” started and ended not with the sound of teletype or a generic instrumental like the real news, but with a different rock song. Miller developed a trademark smart-ass style that was the core of the segment. Making no pretensions about being a serious news host, he instead regularly commented on his own delivery and chided or congratulated the audience on their reactions to the jokes. While other “Update” anchors parodied news anchors, Miller himself became an object of parody. Cast member Dana Carvey, host Tom Hanks, and future anchorman Jimmy Fallon all have imitated Miller’s characteristic facial ticks, head shaking, and sarcasm-drenched rants and references.

Miller was most famous for that delivery, not for any particular devastating critiques. Nor was there anything populist about Miller's approach. On the contrary, he was known for his misanthropy, often turned against non-urban, non-upwardly mobile America. Wrote Stephen Holden, "Mr. Miller can be scathingly contemptuous of rural and working class people. 'If you make it to age 38 and your job still requires that you wear a name tag, you probably made a serious vocational error'" (1988). He was, however, the star of "Update," and the segment would make him a successful comic and pundit. His HBO program *Dennis Miller Live* lasted nine years, and in addition to appearing on various cable news shows to voice increasingly conservative viewpoints, Miller has had his own daily talk radio show since 2007.

Al Franken, on the other hand, was never given the chance to helm *SNL*'s parodic news. Though he returned to *SNL* in 1985 and continued there for ten years, he never served as "Update" anchor. Franken's failure to take the reins, despite his seniority at *SNL* and many years writing and performing commentary on the segment, is an important piece of the puzzle for understanding the nature of *SNL* news parody. Franken would achieve greater success post-*SNL* as he became more explicitly political, with best-selling books such as *Rush Limbaugh is a Big Fat Idiot* and *Lies and the Lying Liars Who Tell Them*, and as host of a political talk show on the "liberal" talk radio network, Air America. Franken ended his final radio show with the announcement of his candidacy for the U.S. Senate in 2008, which he won following a bitterly contested recount. Such explicit politics, however, were never part of the *SNL* equation. Miller's and Franken's career trajectories suggest a diffuse politics might have been below the surface of their performances at *SNL*, but never fully articulated. Also, while Miller's and Franken's personas/performances became more political, they did so in niche media environs (talk radio,

cable television) which in the 1990s and 2000s increasingly turned to explicit politics to attract audiences.

Franken left *SNL* in protest after Norm MacDonald was chosen in 1994 to follow Kevin Nealon's lackluster run as anchor. Michaels blamed the choice on NBC West Coast head Don Ohlmeyer, who he said believed Franken was too associated with the "old" show (Shales & Miller, 2002, p. 411). NBC's decision could very well have been based on perceptions of generational appeal (MacDonald's youth to Franken's "oldness"), but it also resulted in a less political tone for "Update." MacDonald relished being apolitical. He was uninterested in the "real" news, claimed only to read the sports page, and relied upon writer-producer Jim Downey to stay current about politics, which he said he "had no interest in at all" (p. 413). Instead, he had his own favored topics, such as the ongoing saga of OJ Simpson's murder trial, and a long-running fixation with jokes about anal rape in prison and how much the Germans love David Hasselhoff. Like Miller, he pointed to the fact that he was not a real newscaster, frequently using the opening tag-line "I'm Norm Macdonald, and now the fake news" and also happily touting his own lack of knowledge or even interest in what he reported. After a story about the stock market rallying past 4,000 points, for instance, he quipped "I have no idea what that means" (February 25, 1995). While he made no particular critique about the genre of television news, he was, like Chase, playing with the pleasure of taking the news down several pegs. Unlike Chase, he was doing so in the multichannel 1990s, when the self-importance of news was already significantly deflated. His flippant attitude toward current events wasn't so much a critique of the news as it was an analogue to the transformation of news content. After all, the "real news" was as obsessed with the OJ Simpson trial as was MacDonald. In that environment, why not just see "Update" as another chance to tell jokes?

NBC executive Ohlmeyer objected. Although he had chosen MacDonald for the anchor chair, he would soon target “Update” as the source of *SNL*’s mid-1990s woes. Ohlmeyer had a clear sense of what he believed the function of the segment should be:

“Weekend Update” is what gets you to midnight. You tune in and there’ll be a couple of weak sketches, and there might be a sketch that works and then a couple that don’t work, and that’s the nature of the show. But you grew up knowing that “Weekend Update” was coming. [...] That’s part of the brilliance of Lorne’s construction of the show—that you have this thing at midnight that would hold people there for the first half hour even if some of the sketches in the first half hour weren’t that strong. (Shales & Miller, 2002, p. 443)

MacDonald, on the other hand, regarded “Update” as a stand-alone arena for what he (and Downey) thought was funny, explaining “we figured it wasn’t that important to the show, you know, and we could just do whatever and they’d leave us alone. I didn’t even want to go to dress rehearsal because I didn’t care about the audience reaction at all” (p. 430). Ohlmeyer argued that rather than serving to pull the audience through the rest of *SNL*, people were starting to tune out during “Update” (p. 432). MacDonald was sacked before the 1997-1998 season was done, and cast member Colin Quinn took over, initiating another uninspired “Update” run.

MacDonald’s crime wasn’t his approach toward politics; it was his proprietary attitude toward “Update” and his failure to see the segment’s centrality to the overall show. “Update” provides continuity as the one continual, recognizable segment amongst a changing cast of players and sketches, sometimes even driving home the theme used to open the episode. Within a single episode, it can provide variety through its topical humor based on “reality” versus the fictions of the surrounding sketches. Still, it can serve as a zone to develop characters that don’t

otherwise fit in sketches, as well as a place where “real” people such as celebrities and politicians can make comic appearances. Thus, the primary function of the fake news of “Update” has never been to provide satire or political comment, but to act as a familiar segment and episode linchpin. While critics balked at the notion that firing MacDonald would cure the show’s ills, the centrality of “Update” does suggest that changing the anchor can have a powerful impact on the *SNL* brand.

### **RENEWAL: FINDING A VOICE IN THE 2000S**

When “Weekend Update” received a makeover in 2000, Michaels turned to a young cast member who didn’t even want the job (Jimmy Fallon) and the show’s head writer who had seldom appeared in front of the camera (Tina Fey). According to Fallon, Michaels told him, “Tina’s going to be the smart, brainy girl, and you’re going to be the kind of goofy guy that doesn’t do his homework and asks her for answers and stuff” (Shales & Miller, 2002, p. 441). The instructions from Michaels were to foreground performance, again with an emphasis on perspective, not parody, and certainly not politics. Fey and Fallon both affected a vaguely professional demeanor, but like Miller and Macdonald, they would acknowledge the artifice of the sketch, regularly commenting on their own and each other’s jokes or the audience’s reactions. True to Michaels’ instructions, each played up a particular version of themselves. Throughout his tenure on “Update,” Fallon came off as an amiable, goofy guy who was thoroughly enjoying himself on the set, but who was neither political nor knowledgeable about current events. This was set up on their first episode together when a number of the night’s jokes were focused on the recent 2000 presidential debates. Fey attempts to engage Fallon in a conversation about the debate, but he reveals, to Fey’s feigned annoyance, that he found it too

boring to sit through so he ended up watching *Dark Angel* instead (October 7, 2000). For her part, Fey portrayed herself as slightly nerdy and awkward and as more politically invested. As with the other hosts, while these are crafted personas, they are rooted in their real personalities rather than in parody.

For her part, as head writer, Tina Fey gave herself more barbed zingers, visibly taking pleasure in landing a particularly good one. Says Fey:

I wanted to make sure I felt that the point of view of the jokes was in keeping with [...] my own point of view of the story. And Lorne said to not worry about it as a parody of the news so much anymore. We use that when it helps us and not worry about it when it doesn't. Because there've been so many parodies and satires of TV newscasts over the years. (Shales & Miller, 2002, p. 442)

Since most of her tenure on the show was during George W. Bush's presidency, many of her jokes were directed his way. For instance, in the midst of the scandal over Valerie Plame's blown cover, Fey announced:

As of yesterday, the Bush administration said that they still hadn't found the source of the White House leak that outed a woman as a CIA operative. So, just to recap, here are the things President Bush can't find: the White House leak, weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, Saddam Hussein, Osama bin Laden, a link between Saddam Hussein and Osama bin Laden, the guy who sent the anthrax through the mail, and his own butt with two hands and a flashlight. (October 4, 2003)

Though Fey also delivered plenty of fluffy one-liners, she was cuttingly direct when tackling an issue she cared about. For example, after a true-to-life headline about scientists working on producing genetically modified onions missing the enzyme that makes one cry, Fey cupped her

hands to her mouth and shouted, “Hey guys, AIDS! There’s still a lot of people dying of AIDS. Put the onion thing on the back burner and cure AIDS!” (October 19, 2002).

True to its well-established template, “Update” in the 2000s remained primarily a platform for jokes delivered by specific comic personalities; in this case, Fey’s persona was a particularly critical one. Fey, more than any of the other “Update” anchors, periodically spoke her mind about larger political debate and public life, similar to the more politically invested *Daily Show* and *Colbert Report*. For Fey, though, this would only be one joke amongst many, whereas Stewart or Colbert frequently engage in ten-minute explorations of political issues. Fallon later left *SNL* and was replaced by Amy Poehler, who cultivated something of a quirky, upbeat persona, frequently hinting that she was an enthusiastic pot-smoker and party animal. Like Fey, though, she also became linked with more political material, particularly during the 2008 election season.

In what is probably the most explicitly political moment on *SNL* ever, Fey and Poehler endorsed Hillary Clinton as Democratic candidate on the February 23rd show, arguing that primary voters should elect her because “bitches get things done.” Poehler’s and Fey’s profiles would increase even more due to their impressions of candidates—Poehler’s Clinton and Fey’s Sarah Palin. Though these impersonations occurred almost exclusively in other parts of the program (with the exception of one “Update” installment briefly visited by the real Sarah Palin), they were intertextually reinforced by “Update” jokes, and created a buzz that stoked audience interest in political humor.

The skit that first caught popular attention opened the program in September of 2008. Fey, who had by then left the program for her own show, *30 Rock*, returned to impersonate Sarah Palin alongside Poehler as Clinton, the two of whom were supposedly collaborating for a joint

statement on sexism in the election. Poehler portrayed Clinton as quietly seething over the fact that Palin was still in the race when she was not, as Fey's Palin vamped for the camera and made obtuse policy statements such as her idea that global warming "is just God hugging us closer" (September 13, 2008). While Clinton came off at worst as a sore loser, Palin was depicted as absurdly unqualified for office. The skit became an immediate Internet sensation and was rebroadcast and discussed on "real" news shows. The impression of Palin in particular resonated with audiences and Fey was pressed into service several more times, while the show's election-focused skits moved to the forefront of popular cultural attention. As Gray, Jones, and Thompson (2009, March 20) have argued, "Fey's sketches bristled with judgment and aggression. This wasn't just mocking Gerald Ford for being clumsy or Hillary Clinton for wearing pantsuits; something important was being said." Fey largely used Palin's own words and embellished them to highlight their naivety and nonsense, ultimately creating a vision of the politician as hopelessly vapid and uninformed. It was, in fact, more satiric than the vast majority of *SNL*'s material, including "Update."

#### **TRANSFERENCE: OTHER SEGMENTS, OTHER SHOWS**

Oddly enough, the delivery of the news on "Weekend Update" in the 2000s bears closer resemblance to network news of the 1970s than contemporary "real news." Profound changes have been brought about by changing ideas about the economic role of news amidst the greater competition for viewers in the multichannel era. In contrast to the "high-modern" news of the 1970s with its assumptions of a clear distinction between journalism and entertainment, Baym (2010) describes the postmodern "turn toward infotainment, the hybridization of genres of broadcast journalism and televisual entertainment" (p. 41). While the "high-modern" news relied

upon relaying information and long “actuality” clips, the truth of which were assumed to be self-apparent, postmodern news relies upon “packages” of visual imagery and sound bites to “narrativize” the real. “Update” rarely puts together such news packages, and instead continues the model of one or two anchors at a desk, going through the “top stories” in order to set up one joke after another. As such, they bear little resemblance to the carefully produced packages that now dominate TV news. As Fey mentioned, “Update” turns to news parody only when it helps them because there have been so many news parodies by now. In contrast, parody of the news package is a mainstay of *The Daily Show*, and several scholars (Baym, 2010; Day, 2001; Jones, 2010) have shown that that program deals largely in critical deconstruction of how TV news constructs the “true” and the “real.” Most recently, the *Onion News Network* meticulously reproduces the postmodern aesthetic of cable news, taking aim at its excesses and extravagance.

However, as the popular response to Fey’s Palin impersonation shows, “Update” is not the only place on *SNL* where it has been possible to experiment with parodic material. Because “Update” has avoided extended news parody or political critique, *SNL* has produced other one-time segments created for this purpose. In the early seasons, Jane Curtin played host on a roster of fake programs even as she was hosting “Update,” perfecting her air of authority whilst interviewing absurd guests. Many of these were faux talk show programs, but over the years, fake news reports of varying types have also increased. Mentioned earlier, “The Rocket Report” amounted to a “soft news” parody that was featured in eight of the eleven episodes Charles Rocket appeared on before he was fired. A number of others have been parodies of particular programs; for example, spoof versions of the *Charlie Rose Show* or *Meet the Press*. One particular parodic target repeatedly used to open the show in the 2000s was *Hardball with Chris Matthews*. In it, Darrell Hammond, a cast member particularly gifted at impersonations, plays

real life newsman Chris Matthews as a constantly shouting, cantankerous host who takes pleasure in the craziness of his guests, asking them serious questions, but then reveling in the absurd extremes of their positions. For example, in an episode aired in the early stages of the “War on Terror” in Afghanistan, then-Attorney General John Ashcroft (played by Senator John McCain who hosted *SNL* that evening) is portrayed as rabidly anti-libertarian, announcing that “as Americans, we will never truly be free until each and every one of us is afraid of being thrown into jail,” and boasting that he has been able to “detain tens of thousands of potential American terrorists for months at a time for little or no reason, just like the founding fathers dreamed” (October 19, 2002). His counterpart, a faux representative from the ACLU, argues that detained terrorists should be given guns and badges and allowed to police the police as a system of checks and balances. Thus, the segment achieves its own political “balance,” and the fact that the Republican “hawk” McCain could caricature Ashcroft suggests the critique that US policies were seriously encroaching upon civil liberties was by then familiar and comfortable.

Segments such as these become a platform for parody of a particular news program and a rotating slate of pundits. The typical formula begins with a public figure’s perceived views and personality quirks and then exaggerates both to comical extremes. The humor can sometimes be stinging, certainly as far as the individual targets are concerned, but because these segments tend to be premised on the idea that all of the personalities are kooky and the positions absurd (none really more so than others), they rarely incorporate any clearly defined social critique. Rather, the take-away is that the public square is dominated by a crazy cast of characters. This would seem to support many of the recurrent criticisms of political humor, which charge that the genre encourages cynicism and retreat from political ideals. Indeed, much political humor, including much produced by *SNL*, could be described as the “equal opportunity offender” style of comedy

which paints all players as flawed, sending the message that everyone is equally inept and immoral and that not much can be done about it—an arguably cynical view.

Since *The Daily Show* has gained prominence, this cynicism charge frequently has been lobbed its way. Hart and Hartelius (2007), for example, warn that Jon Stewart “saps the audience’s sense of political possibility” (p. 263). We would argue, however (as have many others), that *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* do precisely the opposite. Though these programs do take pot-shots at individuals, they also dissect policy, breaking down the agenda behind political talking points, and pointing out where media coverage of a particular issue is lacking, often very clearly taking a position on the issue. More importantly, they imply that there can and should be *alternatives* to the problems they highlight, gesturing toward desired-for solutions rather than simple withdrawal. The way in which the cynicism critique is marshaled, though, often unhelpfully lumps all political humor together, assuming that it all operates in the same way and is received similarly by audiences. It is likely even too simplistic to say that the parodic news on *SNL* is always of one type. “Update” has had moments of critical satire, while some of its other news parody skits have pointed to the particular (correctable) failings of the news media, such as a segment titled Action 8 Newswatch, which highlighted the tendency of news shows to rely on fear as a means of hooking their audience (Oct. 2, 1999). But, as we have argued, due to a number of executive and creative decisions, the show itself, and “Update” in particular, has *chosen* a path other than that of trenchant satire and political critique.

Of course, it is important to acknowledge that *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* were created and continue to thrive during the post-network era of niche broadcasting, a different world from the one *SNL* originally entered, one in which there is far less worry about appealing to a mass audience or guarding against offense. These newer shows also are entirely devoted to

news parody and critique, while “Update” fights for airtime amongst all manner of comic sketches and musical performances. It is unsurprising, then, that the fake news on *SNL* is often emptied of satiric critique, and instead generally serves to maintain the program’s topical-but-not-political brand.

## CONCLUSION

Of these successful American programs that have constituted a boom in news parody since the late 1990s, there has been a split in terms of their relative investment in genre parody, satiric critique, and comedic personalities. While the correspondents of *The Daily Show* are committed to the fiction of the newscast, anchor Jon Stewart is not, as his comedy is often built on his own personal reactions to the political hypocrisies of the day. Stephen Colbert exists somewhere in-between as he maintains the fiction that he is a pompous, conservative pundit, but provides sly winks to the audience to make his real opinions clear. The *Onion News Network*, on the other hand, is built almost entirely on its unblinking commitment to parody the cable news form. Its humor lies primarily in its note-for-note re-creations of the excesses of broadcasters such as CNN. The program is full of ridiculously overwrought graphics and music, weirdly boastful catch phrases, and absurdly high tech gizmos used to illustrate little. In that sense, *ONN* is closer to the occasional *SNL* parodies of shows such as *Hardball* than it is to “Weekend Update.” However, its humor is far darker, and its critique dryer than the comedy derived from the wacky parade of characters on *SNL*.

Both *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* have proven successful by cable industry standards of audience share, and they have already logged respectable numbers of seasons on air, and garnered considerable critical acclaim. *ONN* will have to prove that a strictly news parody

program can be successful in the long-run without the comic personalities and non-news parody segments of *SNL*, or the biting critique of up-to-the-minute political developments that Stewart's and Colbert's audiences have grown to crave.

As noted, *SNL* was conceived as a program that could succeed as fringe programming, but also could spin off performers into primetime slots for more mainstream TV comedies. By those criteria, "Weekend Update" is more successful than ever. Fallon, Fey, and Poehler all left the anchor chair and ended up elsewhere on NBC television: Fallon as host of "Late Night" (Lorne Michaels, Executive Producer), Fey as creator and star of the sitcom *30 Rock* (Lorne Michaels, Executive Producer), and Amy Poehler as star of *Parks & Recreation*. While "Weekend Update" may fulfill the spin-off promise of *SNL* imagined at its creation, Colbert and Stewart succeed in a niche manner unavailable in 1975. That is, they enjoy a committed following that hungers for the satiric deconstruction of political debate, and tune in nightly in numbers large enough to satisfy cable television executives. But what also isn't likely is that NBC or Michaels will start thinking of Stewart or Colbert as their competition in the near future. Michaels and crew may have started out with one hand "flipping the bird" at the establishment and mainstream society, but as Jones (2009) has noted, *SNL* has effectively ceded the audience for cutting-edge satire to cable. Says Michaels, "We're a big tent show. We bring a coalition of tastes. A cable show can do a 1 rating and be enormously popular. We're not that show" (p. 46). To borrow a metaphor from sports, it's not that the playing field for news parody has changed. It's that news parody shows like Colbert's, Stewart's, and *ONN* play on a different field, with different equipment, for fans looking for a different kind of game.

Having been a leader in its game for so long, *SNL* continues to benefit from being a popular cultural staple. It remains a show that celebrities are honored to host, and it is just topical

and hip enough to make it attractive even for politicians to drop by to play comic versions of themselves. Such appearances, regardless of possible PR benefits or effects upon the electoral process, help maintain *SNL*'s status. Michaels, NBC, and his cast and crew have learned that the program will always be criticized as uneven, and that every few years there will be speculation of its imminent cancellation. Nevertheless, the *SNL* formula for "fake news" has proven resilient.

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