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### Shifting the Conversation: Colbert's Super PAC and the measurement of satirical efficacy

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## Shifting the Conversation: Colbert's Super PAC and the Measurement of Satirical Efficacy

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*See the companion work to this article*

*"When Parody and Reality Collide: Examining the Effects of Colbert's Super PAC Satire on Issue Knowledge and Policy Engagement Across Media Formats"*  
by Heather LaMarre in this Special Section

Stephen Colbert's announcement in 2011 that he was starting his own Super PAC one-upped *The Colbert Report's* already substantial commitment to boundary muddling. By raising real money, producing commercials, and exploring the nuances of campaign finance regulations, Colbert acted out his critique of current law in tangible form. The novelty of the experiment created anticipation amongst fans and commentators that the project would have a direct effect on attitudes about campaign finance, or that Colbert would veer into clear advocacy work. Indeed, expectations matched the standard assumptions about satire: that efficacy should be gauged by measurable influence on individual opinions. In reality, the PAC's commercials likely did not influence many outside his existent fan group. However, the project as a whole did work to license journalistic attention and to impact the wider debate about campaign finance. The example demonstrates that the more grandiose expectations of political entertainment are often misdirected, as they are premised on the prospect of instant audience malleability. Rather the most interesting possibilities involve more incremental shifts in the public conversation.

*The Colbert Report* has, from the beginning, been remarkable for its slipperiness of form. Stephen Colbert, as double-voiced host, invites viewers both to ridicule the political reasoning of his character, and to eagerly engage in his fan challenges and contests, while the show itself bounces between trenchant political satire, in-joke character-based comedy, and playful fan hijinks. Colbert's announcement in early 2011 that he was starting his own political action committee (or super PAC) one-ups this boundary muddling, further blurring lines between entertainment television and political reality, between comedy and activism. A major part of the appeal of both *The Colbert Report* and its sister

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program *The Daily Show* is the performativity of the satire. Hosts Stewart and Colbert don't do impersonations or make up fictional stories about politicians. Rather, they interview real public figures, interrogate the day's news coverage, and do the investigative work of matching a politician's or pundit's statements with past actions and positions. Viewers tune in to watch the real be critiqued and transformed. Colbert's super PAC experiment drew attention squarely to this dynamic, holding out the possibility that he could intervene directly into the political campaign and the underlying controversies about campaign finance law. The audaciousness of the experiment raised expectations among many viewers (perhaps to an unrealistic level for some) that Colbert would use television advertisements and other public interventions for direct advocacy work against the current proliferation of super PACs. In the end, the commercials themselves likely did not end up speaking to people outside of Colbert's existent fan group in a significant way. However, the totality of the larger project, including the segments on super PACs on *The Colbert Report*, as well as Colbert's public appearances, worked to both license journalistic attention and significantly impact the wider debate about campaign finance. This outcome draws attention to the problematic tendency (amongst many fans, satire researchers, and journalists alike) to want to measure the efficacy of satire or political entertainment by looking for direct and immediate effects on individual opinions, when the more significant impact is often felt in public discussion as a whole.

In what follows, I use Colbert's super PAC as a case study for examining the expectations we have of satire, and for exploring what we are talking about when we reference satire's effects. It is a particularly fascinating example, primarily because it was such a novel experiment, one that allowed the satirist to both wade deeply into the real world of campaign finance and create eager anticipation over what he might do next. Colbert and his staff appeared to be making up the rules as they went along, while fans, journalists, and researchers were able to project a whole range of expectations on the project. Ultimately, I argue that the more grandiose expectations of political entertainment, whether on behalf of fans, journalists, or academics, are often aimed in the wrong direction, as they are premised on the possibility of instant audience malleability. Rather, the far more interesting possibilities involve the more gradual, incremental shifts in the wider public conversation.

### **Satire: Expectations and Efficacy**

When reporters write stories about any one particular example of political satire, a favored angle is to ruminate on whether or not the piece of satire will have a tangible effect, which is almost invariably conceptualized as a direct impact on citizens' behavior in the voting booth, or as measurable influence on individual opinions. The problem with such a framework, however, is that it assumes a one-to-one relationship between satiric text and action, as if one television episode, book, play, etc. is expected to spark a revolution, or at least regular mass epiphanies. In reality, however, there is almost nothing (satiric or otherwise) that has such a dramatic and immediate impact on people's opinions. The typical conclusion, then, is that satire is "only entertainment," a term used to imply that it is insignificant or peripheral from the political, despite widespread acknowledgement that it is difficult to keep entertainment separated out and quarantined off from the theoretically more serious spheres of public life.

Indeed, Colbert (much like his *Daily Show* counterpart, Jon Stewart), has been fairly regularly dismissed or minimized by commentators, particularly when he strays outside the confines of his program,

trespassing into territory that is not so easily ghettoized as “entertainment.” When he was invited by Congresswoman Zoe Lofgren to testify at the House Judiciary Subcommittee on Immigration about the plight of migrant farm workers, for instance, he was roundly castigated. In his testimony, Colbert began in character, peppering his speech with the sort of blue humor often used on his show, though he also advanced several clear arguments about the problems with migrant labor, and finally dropped his character to conclude by earnestly quoting scripture. Despite the impassioned appeal embedded in Colbert’s testimony, a great number of politicians and pundits alike fulminated that it had been entirely inappropriate of Lofgren to debase the proceedings by allowing the entertainer into Congress. Arguing that Colbert’s motives were only about self-promotion, Leon Wieseltier of the *New Republic* wrote, “It was tiresome and exploitative and insulting to the chamber’s ghosts” (2010). Since many such commentators could not imagine what the effect of Colbert’s speech could be on an intangible like the wider political conversation, it was interpreted as entirely nonsensical, a stunt designed only to advertise his television program.

Similarly, during the Rally to Restore Sanity, hosted by both Colbert and Stewart, commentators struggled to assess exactly what the event was meant to do. The content of the rally was unrelentingly focused on critiquing the extreme polarization of political debate in the United States, and on lambasting the flaws of cable news. However, journalists tended to either dismiss the rally as lacking content, reporting instead on the funny costumes worn by audience members (as it was held on Halloween weekend), or, in the case of many partisans on the political right, interpreted it as a “pep-rally” (Editorial, 2010) for the Democratic Party, despite the fact that there was not actually a single mention of the upcoming election at the event. I would argue that this was because commentators were relying on the standard frames routinely used to assess political satire. That is, it is either intended to tangibly influence voter behavior (in a predictably partisan manner), or it is not really doing anything at all.

A great deal of the academic research on the effects of satire (or political entertainment more generally) hews to similar assumptions as those evidenced in the journalistic discussion. More often than not, this research attempts to assess the impact of a particular program or genre by measuring the individual opinions, reactions, and inclinations of viewers. While there is certainly some utility in understanding who engages with a text and what they are taking away from it, there is a tendency to assume that individual reactions to particular segments are analogous to the totality of the program’s effect (not to mention the fact that those reactions are often highly constrained by the experimental structure). Left out of this framework is the larger-scale impact on the cultural conversation as a whole, either through viewers, critics, or further press coverage.

Several recent effects studies have indicated that exposure to political satire such as that of *The Daily Show* or *The Colbert Report* does not often radically alter one’s existing opinions. Mark K. McBeth and Randy S. Clemons (2011), for instance, found that self-described moderates and liberals were more likely to report learning something from a segment on either *The Colbert Report* or *The Daily Show* than were conservatives. Similarly, Xenos, Moy, and Becker (2011) found that, after watching segments of *The Daily Show*, viewers’ partisan predispositions were still the strongest driver in their attitudes toward the particular political figures targeted for critique on the segments, leading the authors to conclude that the program has little persuasive power for those who already have definite opinions. I would contend that the

results of these studies should probably not come as an enormous surprise. Most of us are not so fickle in our beliefs that we are easily swayed on issues about which we already feel strongly. But I would argue further that it would be wrong to assume that this is how we should measure democratic debate (i.e., if we were to assume that almost everyone could be instantly persuaded to agree with a particular position if presented with a sufficiently convincing argument). It would be naïve to ignore the fact that most of us do have pre-existing opinions, allegiances, and predilections. That said, majority opinions *do* shift over time, and the taken-for-granted assumptions of the dominant culture *can* be slowly challenged. What politicized satire has the potential to do is to push peripheral worldviews further into the mainstream, to contest the existing framing of particular issues, and to gradually change the associations that we collectively have of particular concepts/people/ideals, etc. A program like *The Colbert Report*, in particular, often draws critical attention to how the culture privileges what warrants attention in the first place, and it works to direct scrutiny toward the vested interests of those normally driving wider public debate. In the specific instance of his work on super PACs, Colbert, as I will discuss, has both greatly magnified public discussion about campaign finance and sparked enhanced examination of how the current system is being used.

### **The Super PAC Experiment**

The structure of campaign finance law, though already contentious, changed rather dramatically in 2010 with the U.S. Supreme Court's decision on the case *Citizens United v. Federal Election Committee*. The court ruled to lift restrictions on the amount of money corporations and unions could spend in their attempts to influence elections, provided that the money does not go directly to a political candidate. The rationale for the decision was to remove barriers to free speech—and indeed, public support of this reasoning was offered by both conservative think tanks and the American Civil Liberties Union (“Citizens United”). However, opponents argued that it would irreparably flood elections with special-interest money. In a *New York Times* debate, for instance, campaign finance reform advocate Fred Wertheimer voiced a popular critique when he wrote, “it will unleash unprecedented amounts of corporate ‘influence-seeking’ money on our elections and create unprecedented opportunities for corporate ‘influence-buying’ corruption” (Wertheimer, 2010). Regardless of whether one sees it as a positive or negative development, the ruling certainly did pave the way for a new sort of electoral animal. Dubbed “super PACs” (as they are a far more expansive version of the previously existing political action committees, or PACs), a plethora of new organizations have since popped up with the intent of raising as much money as possible for political advertisements.

Colbert stepped into the fray surrounding the issue by literally performing the debate. Beyond simply scrutinizing the flaws of American campaign finance law, he opted to illustrate his critique through playing out a real-life example. He formed his own super PAC, “Americans for a Better Tomorrow, Tomorrow,” in early 2011, and then began gleefully soliciting donations to be directed toward influencing the 2012 election (though in exactly what way was left deliberately undefined). Since the initial announcement, the show has used the super PAC as an ongoing storyline, producing a great number of segments on campaign finance in general, while funneling it all through a narrative about Colbert's personal quest (from his initial legal troubles in establishing the super PAC, through his ambitions to have a super PAC more powerful than Karl Rove's, to his brief attempt to hand over the organization to his

friend Jon Stewart as he supposedly explored a bid for the presidency). And, like all super PAC's, Americans for a Better Tomorrow, Tomorrow has also produced real commercials, which have had limited television runs in select areas.

One of the most consistent elements throughout the experiment has been the way in which the program has used its segments on the topic as a type of extended civics lesson. No matter the angle, Colbert begins each piece on his super PAC with explanatory information about campaign finance law, the Citizens United decision, or the most recent doings of real-world political players and the super PACs that support them. In the process, the show has had the remarkable achievement of both managing to make the intricacies of campaign finance law entertaining, and simultaneously imparting more information than many newspaper articles on the same topic. For example, the show has spent a great deal of time exploring the finer points of super PACs' sister organizations, 501(c)(4)s, which are named after a part of the tax code that allows nonprofit organizations to collect charitable donations. By law, the majority of their activities are not supposed to be political. However, as *The New York Times* reported, there were a flotilla of 501(c)(4)s rushing to produce television commercials designed to sway voters during the 2010 mid-term elections, a trend that has only continued to gather steam since then. The advantage these organizations have is that, unlike PACs, they are not required to disclose their donors, allowing companies, unions, or wealthy individuals to give anonymously for so-called "issue ads," meaning that 501(c)(4)s are often paired with super PACs as an alternate option for more reticent donors. While the legality of what many of these organizations is doing is questionable, they have escaped investigation because "they fall into something of a regulatory netherworld" (Luo, 2010, p. A1) existing between the space governed by the Federal Election Commission and that overseen by the Internal Revenue Service.

Through the help of his lawyer, Trevor Potter, Colbert has succeeded in creating comedy out of the incredibly dry details of the regulations surrounding 501(c)(4)s, all while shining a spotlight on the systemic failings. In the episode in which the topic is first introduced, Colbert, in character as always, frames himself as in competition for political influence with Karl Rove. After an absurd interlude in which he eats a piece of a ham loaf in the shape of Karl Rove's head, Colbert supposedly gains access to the man's secrets (as well as a compilation of news clips on the topic), and he also discovers how successful Rove has been in soliciting massive amounts of money for his 501(c)(4), Crossroads GPS (linked to his super PAC American Crossroads). Feigning awe over Rove's savvy, Colbert handily communicates his more biting appraisal, musing that these organizations "have created an unprecedented, unaccountable, untraceable cash tsunami that will infect every corner of the next election. And I feel like an idiot for not having one" (September 29, 2011). Next, he brings on Potter to help him set one up, dubbing his 501(c)(4), "Anonymous Shell Corporation," and signing the papers on camera as both men luxuriate in how easy the process is. At the end of the segment, Colbert marvels over the fact that he does not even have to disclose how much money has been given to him until six months after the election, and never has to say who it is from. He finally comes to the realization that he can take the 501(c)(4) money and give it to his supposedly transparent super PAC. Elated, he asks Potter, "What is the difference between that and money laundering?" to which Potter replies, "It is hard to say."

Segments such as these convey a great deal of technical information while also deliberately implicating real-world political players, providing tangible examples of how the system is being used. In all

segments, the critique is clear, at times even impassioned, despite the fact that it is all delivered as a defense of the very political calculus being torn apart. For instance, in February of 2012, Colbert began a segment on super PACs by announcing,

Nation, you know I have been talking about super PACs for almost a year now. They were created after the Supreme Court Citizens United ruling which allowed unlimited corporate, individual, or union donations for political speech. I like to think of them as a give a penny, take an election tray. (February 2, 2012)

Here, he quickly gives enough contextualizing information to bring any casual viewers up to speed, and to efficiently signal the direction of his attack. He goes on to explain that, since a filing deadline had now passed, there is information available about who has donated to all of the super PACs. He reports that half of the candidate-directed super PAC money thus far has come from just 22 billionaires, to which he adds, "Now, I am sure that the good government goo goes out there are saying this is just handing all the power to the 1%," as he pulls out his calculator and explains that twenty-two people is actually seven one-millionths of 1%. Oblivious to the audience's hisses, he assures them that he is positive "it's the way the twenty-two billionaires who chose our founding fathers would want it," asking them to join him in honoring "these twenty-two patriots who have given so much, and who expect so much in return." On the screen, we then see an American flag backdrop with a picture and label for each person or corporation on the list while the off-key recording of Mitt Romney singing "America the Beautiful" plays in the background. Colbert's objections to the law are quite unmistakable, while he also provides specific details on where, exactly, the money is coming from, as well as on where it is going.

The super PAC segments have been interspersed with all of the other usual topical material on the program, sometimes disappearing off the radar for weeks at a time, only to be taken up with renewed vigor each time a new thread or direction is added. The various thematic phases that the storyline has taken all seem to have been inspired by particular elements of current campaign finance law which the show has aimed to put under its microscope. So, in the midst of the Republican presidential primaries, Colbert pretended to be considering a presidential run (limited to the state of South Carolina), despite the fact that it was past the allowable date to add his name to the ballot. Since he was then obligated to hand over control of his super PAC, he was able to publicly explore the laxity of non-coordination laws meant to keep super PACs from collaborating with political candidates. Again checking in with his lawyer over all of the legal details, Colbert ceremoniously handed the PAC to his friend, *Daily Show* host Jon Stewart, renaming the organization the "Definitely Not Coordinating with Stephen Colbert Super PAC." In the following weeks, Colbert teased his audience with a variety of ambiguous announcements about his plans for the race, eventually settling on slyly asking his potential supporters in South Carolina to check the box for Herman Cain, a real candidate who had officially dropped out of the race, but whose name was still on the ballot in the state's primary. He even convinced Cain to show up with him for a rally at the College of Charleston, while the super PAC released a tongue-in-cheek advertisement with the voting instructions.

The presidential bid predictably did not last beyond the South Carolina primary. However, the aim of the experiment was, in actuality, to draw scrutiny to the non-coordination regulations. As the new manager of the super PAC, Stewart made several appearances on *The Colbert Report*. The two made a

point of highlighting their close relationship and shared business interests, much like some of the real candidates and the staff of the super PACs working to support them. Meanwhile, in the midst of a number of real-world spats about overly aggressive attack ads which the candidates denied having any control over, The Definitely Not Coordinating with Stephen Colbert Super PAC released an exaggeratedly aggressive commercial, accusing the front-runner Mitt Romney of being a serial killer (of corporations). When news organizations reported on the advertisement, linking Colbert to the ad in the process, he responded on his program:

[F]olks, I need to make it as clear as the bleach that Mitt Romney may or may not use to dissolve the bones of his victims; this commercial is the sole responsibility of the person I turned my PAC over to four days ago, a man named—and I hope I am pronouncing this correctly—Jon Stewart. (January 16, 2012)

He goes on to say that, if the ad turns out to be inaccurate, he hopes that Stewart “takes it off the air (and leaves it on the Internet). But, folks, legally I can’t make him do that. We cannot in any way coordinate, even though we currently co-own a combination bagel shop and travel agency.” He argues further that they are not violating any campaign protocols; rather, they are meeting the “high standard set by political master-scalp Karl Rove, whose American Crossroads super PAC employs campaign strategist Carl Forti, who operates Black Rock Consultants, who makes ads for the Mitt Romney campaign.” Once again, the critique is aimed both at the system as a whole, and at the actions of individual players. The non-coordination issue is clearly not one that was chosen for its inherent comedic value, but for its real-world flaws. Colbert’s critical assessment about the lack of enforcement of even minimal regulation within the system of campaign finance is illustrated in stark detail by being played out in tangible form.

### **Fan Engagement and Desire**

In the process, the ongoing storyline on and off the show has sparked a great deal of excitement and engagement among *The Colbert Report’s* already eager fans. From its beginning, the program has built in a central space for active fans. As Jeffrey Jones explains, because Colbert’s character is constructed as a vain egotist, he implicitly asks his audience to play two roles, excessively adulating him on command while “simultaneously ridiculing and vilifying the inanity of his distorted logic,” (2010, p. 225) applauding both his double-voiced witticisms and the retorts of the guests he is supposedly opposing. The committed fans who make up the “Colbert Nation” have not only happily assumed the role, they have also gleefully followed Colbert’s directives in collectively changing Wikipedia pages, stuffing ballots of various online contests, and creating their own video mash-ups in response to a variety of challenges. It is perhaps not surprising, then, that many have also happily donated money to the super PAC experiment, sending “Americans for a Better Tomorrow, Tomorrow’s” coffers over the million dollar mark within the first eight months of operation (Riley, 2012), while also responding enthusiastically to several requests for suggestions on what to do with the money.

While it is, of course, impossible to speak of any fan group monolithically, since individuals respond to texts for different reasons and in different ways, it is apparent when one peruses the postings



on fan boards or the comments beneath the show's online video clips that many see the super PAC project not simply as a funny prank, but as a potentially important public service. A great deal of the posts on the Comedy Central site are addressed specifically to Colbert, often beginning "Steven, . . ." Some go on to congratulate or thank the comedian for what he is doing, while others offer impassioned proposals for what to do next, suggesting further strategies on how to shed light on campaign finance abuses, arguing that he should tackle voter ID laws, or providing their own theories on congressional term limits. Others are addressed to fellow posters as intra-fan discussions are sparked. Some of the posts are silly or tongue-in-cheek, but near the start of the experiment, in particular, there was a pervasive sense of excitement and eager anticipation. The very fact that so many people happily gave money to the cause also indicates a widespread desire to actively perform their support for Colbert's project.

As I have argued elsewhere (Day, 2011, p. 75), both *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* attract viewers who already share many of the same instincts and ideals as the hosts, particularly when it comes to perceptions of the deficiencies of the news media and the hypocrisies of the wider political debate. Fans take great pleasure in hearing their opinions articulated in a public forum, particularly in such a witty manner. Stewart and Colbert thus perform the role of viewer surrogate for many who delight in cheering on their high profile stand-ins. And each time that either of the two performers have pushed their critique outside of the normal boundaries of their television programs (for instance, Colbert's infamous White House correspondent's dinner speech to president Bush, his address to the Congressional sub-committee, Stewart's tirade on *Crossfire*, or their shared Rally to Restore Sanity), there has been a flurry of gleeful fan forwarding of the available footage, pushing their critique further into the wider public sphere. After Colbert's initial introduction of the super PAC storyline, there was palpable excitement both among fan forums and the popular press, likely because money in politics is an issue that many find distasteful and are happy to see critiqued, but also, equally, because the project held out the promise of potentially allowing Colbert to speak directly to a far greater number of people than normally watch his show.

Though some of Colbert's other forays into the political sphere have met with critique from traditional political gatekeepers and members of the press (Jones, Baym, & Day, 2012), the announcement of the super PAC seemed to engender some awe and anticipation in these circles. David Carr of *The New York Times*, for instance, wrote a largely complementary article about the initiative, but he also implied that the comedian had better now deliver something spectacular, announcing, "Maybe the whole system has become such a joke that only jokes will serve as a corrective. But if Mr. Colbert succeeds only in drawing out more humor, then the whole idea is a failure" (Carr, 2011). Knowing that there was real money involved and a real opportunity to run commercials and draw attention to the issue in a tangible way, much of the fan excitement seemed to come from a similar expectation that Colbert now had the opportunity to accomplish something big (though exactly how and what were not entirely defined). However, as the show began to develop commercials, while there was plenty of delight over each new witticism, there was also some disappointment expressed in fan forums about whether the commercials were living up to their full potential.

The first commercials that the super PAC produced were during the Iowa straw poll near the start of the Republican primary season. They developed two advertisements in short succession. These were

aired (in a very limited way) on Iowa television, while also playing on *The Colbert Report* itself and online. Both obliquely took aim at the money flowing into the campaigns, targeting the large amount of super PAC funds going toward one Republican candidate in particular: Texas Governor Rick Perry. The first commercial names some of the organizations that “think they can buy your vote with their unlimited super PAC money,” going on to say that “Americans for a Better Tomorrow, Tomorrow ask, what about *our* unlimited super PAC money? We want you to vote for Rick Perry too, but not their Ricky Perry, *our* Rick Parry” (<http://www.colbertsuperpac.com>). It concludes by urging Iowa voters to write in “Rick Parry,” a misspelling of the real candidate’s name.

After the release of the ad, regular participants at fan sites like colbertnewshub.com cackled with glee, referring to the commercials as brilliant and speculating about what the fallout would be in Iowa. Some who responded on the official Comedy Central site, though, expressed frustration that they were not straightforward enough. One commenter wrote the following:

Watching your first ad, I'm concerned that you're going to waste our money on satirical ads that will be lost on the very people we need to influence. If you don't get serious about making a positive difference in this country, why should I support your PAC? (EDB, 2011)

Another mused:

You guys have put a lot of work into getting message of big \$\$\$ buying elections out there. These first ads are funny but can you use our money to preach to those not in on the joke choir, too? The parry thrust was very funny though probably not the best vehicle for spreading the good word. [sic] (equaduck, 2011)

Whatever disapproval was expressed was never about the fans’ own pleasure or engagement, but about the desire for Colbert to broadcast his critique as widely as possible.

Indeed, Colbert and his staff were in the difficult position of negotiating how to further the super PAC narrative and keep the regular fans engaged for the nearly a year and a half leading up to the election, while also attempting to periodically insert themselves into the national conversation. At times, it seemed that they were not entirely sure what to do with the money or where to take the narrative next, polling fans for direction or taking long breaks from the storyline. For the most part, what they ended up doing was successively focusing on varied portions of the laws and regulations (or lack thereof) surrounding super PACs, and then creating commercials that followed from whatever was currently being explored on the show (rather than breaking entirely new or shocking ground in the commercials). For example, in the fall of 2011, the show devoted several episodes to discussion about 501(c)(4)s. On the same night as the segment focused on Rove’s 501(c)(4), Crossroads GPS, Colbert announced that 90% of the donations to Rove’s organization were from three billionaire donors. This set him up to segue into a spoof of the game show *The Dating Game*, here called “The Donating Game.” Guest-hosted by actor Kevin Kline, the premise of the segment was to find an “anonymous” billionaire willing to donate a large sum of money to Colbert’s 501(c)(4). Kline described three potential billionaires with characterizations designed

to be transparent, clearly pointing toward Oprah Winfrey, Rupert Murdoch, and the owner of the Dallas Mavericks basketball team, Mark Cuban, who was then in the midst of the very public dispute between basketball players and team owners that had resulted in a player lockout. The Cuban candidate became Colbert's match, and then he reappeared (this time not in disguise) in the interview segment at the end of the show. There, Colbert asked him, if he were to hypothetically give money to a 501(c)(4), whether he had any issues he would want advocated in ads that he would not want the public to know he had funded—at which point, the program cut away due to supposed technical difficulties (September 29, 2011).

After repeated hinting that Cuban had, in fact, donated money to Colbert's 501(c)(4) (Colbert Super PAC SHH!), money that was promptly transferred to his super PAC, the super PAC released two commercials focused on the NBA lockout. Airing only on one Dallas television station (as well as on *The Colbert Report* and its website), the ads purported to advocate for the NBA owners in the dispute, with one of them explicitly referencing the gag order that Cuban had been placed under, announcing "Colbert Super PAC stands behind Mark Cuban, who may or may not stand behind us" (*The Colbert Report*, October 6, 2011). Though the ads were literally about the NBA strike, they were developed out of the desire to illustrate the effect that a few wealthy individuals can have on the public political conversation without ever revealing their identities or taking ownership of their position. However, this secondary meaning is legible only to a viewer who has been following the show closely and has seen the episode with Mark Cuban. In other words, it is aimed primarily at the in-group of regular *Colbert Report* viewers. Once again, though, on the show's official comment boards, these ads received a fair amount of negative feedback from fans hoping that Colbert would focus more clearly on the election and campaign finance. One poster writes, "can someone tell me why the hell Colbert is wasting our time and PAC money on this NBA \*\*\*\*\*?" (Phoenix, 2011). Another says the following:

i feel that most of the ads i've seen so far created by the Colbert SuperPac are a little too subtle for a wider audience. Can you open it up a little bit and maybe dumb it down just a tad? (Benorder, 2011)

A number of posters seemed to feel that these particular ads were not living up to their potential.

At issue for those disappointed with the commercials is ultimately what their purpose should be. The underlying sentiment for these fans was that Colbert ought to have seized the opportunity to produce commercials that would spread his critique of campaign finance law as widely as possible, literally speaking directly to as many television viewers around the country as he could. In reality, though, even a million dollars does not go all that far when it comes to national advertising, particularly when it is meant to last almost a year and a half. Colbert also did not express any clear desire to knock on (television) doors. In fact, it became apparent as the project developed that, though many of the advertisements were quite clever, they were not the ultimate focus of the endeavor. Rather, they were one more piece of the critique, developed both to further the ongoing narrative, and to license journalistic attention and fan engagement. For those hoping that the super PAC project would cross over into activism, clearly advocating a particular solution and attempting to speak to as many people as possible, the reality has presumably been less than satisfactory. However, that expectation was perhaps misplaced to begin with,

or at least was rather narrowly focused. Not incidentally, there was some similar disappointment expressed by a select group of fans after Colbert and Stewart's shared Rally to Restore Sanity. In that case, some very eager participants complained that they had hoped the two performers would step forward as galvanizing leaders, directing the crowd toward further collective action. In both cases, the thwarted desire was for a more direct form of political action, which is ultimately not the target for which these performers were aiming. That does not mean, however, that either experiment was without political import. Rather, both were focused on more incremental shifts in the wider political imaginary. Though Colbert's super PAC advertisements did not reach as far as they might have, I would argue that the project as a whole did have a significant impact on the public conversation of campaign finance.

### Directing the Conversation

Over the course of the project, the show has alternated between its more insular storylines and several larger gestures designed to attract expanded press coverage that could help to propel the critique onto a larger stage. Indeed, Colbert and his staff have proven remarkably savvy in their understanding of how to create news events as a way of attracting attention to particular issues. While Colbert's critique of campaign finance law is often incisive, he also frequently lays the groundwork for reporters to pick up that critique almost whole cloth, thereby amplifying it far beyond the reach of *The Colbert Report* itself. The first and primary stunt was, of course, the very creation of the super PAC. Since Colbert is by definition a comedian, not a political operative, the novelty and seeming audaciousness of him setting up his own super PAC and actually soliciting money immediately generated headlines. Colbert also drew out the process, preemptively (and perhaps needlessly) filing a special request with the Federal Election Commission about his case as an employee of a media corporation, visiting the FEC hearing on his request, and creating a great deal of fanfare on his show. As a result, the developments were reported on fairly widely. In all, the reporters provided background explanation or opinion on Citizens United or campaign finance in general. A *Washington Post* writer argued the following, for instance:

[T]he real campaign finance abuses are more horrible than Colbert's fiction. The Supreme Court, in five straight campaign finance decisions, has largely wiped out post-Watergate campaign reforms and, in the case of corporate contributions, undone nearly a century of law. Adding to the anarchy, Congress has been unable to agree on legislation requiring donors' disclosure. (Milbank, 2011, p. A17)

While the opinion here is the journalist's own, Colbert's stunt created an opportunity for its airing, along with explanation of the underlying issues. In *The New York Times*, David Carr wrote a lengthy report on Colbert's project, often mixing his own descriptions with Colbert's, thereby amplifying the critique. In filling in the background on super PACs, for example, Carr writes, "in the 2010 Congressional races, Super PACs spent over \$60 million, managing to get their voices heard through what Mr. Colbert has described as a 'megaphone of cash'" (2011).

Colbert has also not shied away from pointing fingers at some of the real politicians and strategists whom he believes to be abusing the system, or who are simply providing a good example of the law's loopholes. Karl Rove, as an extremely successful super PAC fundraiser, is one of the program's

favorite targets. And, indeed, much of this critique has been repeated in reportage. After the episode on 501(c)(4)s, for example, *The Christian Science Monitor* produced a story about the segment headlined "Stephen Colbert vs. Karl Rove: Who's Better at 'Money-Laundering'?" (Grier, 2011). In the article, the reporter states that Rove is the "force behind the creation of a GOP super PAC named 'American Crossroads,' and a shell corporation named 'Crossroads GPS' that can accept unlimited cash from individuals and corporations, then funnel it to American Crossroads" (ibid.). In response, Rove sent a formal complaint to the *Colbert Report*, maintaining that his organizations have not funneled money to one another. Colbert subsequently offered an apology on his program, though a typically backhanded one designed to further criticize Rove's activities. There are certainly many others who have critiqued the activities of fundraisers like Rove, but Colbert's coverage has, on many occasions, provided the justification for further articles.

Likewise, the surreal South Carolina rally with Herman Cain and the concurrent focus on federal non-coordination regulations produced a great deal of publicity. In this case, there was certainly some negative press, with several commentators arguing that the rally was cynical or silly, and that, by pretending to run for president, Colbert was debasing the electoral system. An editorialist in the *Washington Post*, for instance, argued that the idea of encouraging people to vote for Cain, who was no longer a real candidate, was tantamount to asking citizens to throw away their vote, ultimately making "a mockery of the race" (King, 2012). Many others, however, had reams of praise for what Colbert was doing, including several *Washington Post* readers who responded to the editorial, one of whom argued that "Mr. Colbert's super PAC is another step to get us to fight for what should be our right as Americans: free and fair elections, led up to by decent politics" (ibid., p. A20). Several of the articles on the rally included a parsing of the many levels of meaning involved, with full explanations and implicit support for the larger point Colbert was making. A *Dallas Morning News* reporter, for instance, marveled over Colbert's "hall of mirrors," explaining for readers thusly:

[Colbert] was holding an apple pie rally to disparage American politics. He was saying vote for Cain—the former GOP front-runner who dropped out but is still on the South Carolina ballot—to withhold your vote in protest. And he was touting corporate money in campaigns because he wants to show the campaign finance system is absurd. (Hoppe, 2012)

Jason Zinoman of *The New York Times* wrote, "What makes Mr. Colbert such an ingenious satirist is not just that he exposes political fantasy but that he also takes it to its illogical conclusion" (2012, p. C1). Whether positive or negative, the articles served to continue attracting attention to Colbert's critique.

Colbert himself also got the chance to extend his performance onto larger stages, as the presidential bid in particular led to several high-profile interviews and other media appearances. A largely humorless George Stephanopoulos of ABC News, for instance, interviewed Colbert the weekend of the rally. Though Stephanopoulos was somewhat tone deaf, struggling against the in-character Colbert and trying in vain to pin him down on whether he was actually running for President or not, he provided Colbert with the opportunity to hammer home his underlying evaluation of campaign finance law. In

response to a question about his feelings regarding the influence of money on politics, Colbert (as usual, enthusiastically speaking the opposite of what he really believes) responded thusly:

Why would you worry about what money is doing to the political environment? There are \$11.2 million in super PAC ads being run in South Carolina. Super PACs are outspending the candidates two to one in South Carolina right now. That just means, according to Citizens United, there's just more speech than there was before. (Stephanopoulos, 2012)

He went on, "Money equals speech, therefore, the more money you have, the more you can speak. That's just—that just stands to reason." The implicit message, of course, is that that does not stand to reason at all, an argument he was able to make for a far different audience than that of his own program.

The study published in this special section that was conducted by Heather LaMarre does indicate that the full extent of Colbert's analysis is likely better understood by audience members when situated within the larger context of his show (LaMarre, this special section) than on a program like the one hosted by Stephanopoulos. Indeed, this may speak to the importance of the full range of performative dynamics present on Colbert's program (everything from the supportive audience laughing on cue to his familiar set and contextualizing graphics). Nevertheless, simply increasing the amount of media discussion around the issue of campaign finance certainly seems significant in itself. Indeed, there is a reason that others wishing to impact the public conversation—from political activists to politicians—engage similar strategies in attempting to attract journalistic coverage and influence debate.

All of the more spectacular portions of the Colbert super PAC experiment have served to manufacture news events that license journalistic attention. In many cases, reporters have used the opportunities created by Colbert and his writers to embark on lengthy explorations of campaign finance law, or to simply quote extensively from Colbert's pithy monologues on the issues, amplifying their reach much further than that of the program itself. This undoubtedly has an effect on the larger public debate about campaign finance. Not only does it help to push the issue further into the public consciousness by simply providing more opportunities for encounter, it also affects the terminology and parameters of that debate. This, in itself, seems enormously significant, though it is the type of effect too often overlooked in much academic research on political entertainment, and also by the measures used to gauge satire's efficacy within the popular press.

I think it is clear that the project has had a marked effect on the larger cultural conversation, through both traditional journalistic reportage and the ensuing popular cultural discussion. While expectations about instant mass epiphanies (from both fans and observers) are ultimately unrealistic, I would argue that *The Colbert Report's* focus on campaign finance has accomplished something almost as impressive in acting as an agenda-setter for public debate. In his discussion about the relationship between news media and political life, Geoffrey Baym argues that the news "helps constitute the very parameters of political culture itself" (2010, p. 8), both structuring what we can conceptualize as within the realm of the political to begin with and framing how we might process those issues. Colbert's focus on the super PAC phenomenon has allowed him to momentarily usurp some of that power, suggesting

particular explanatory frameworks through which we might conceptualize this topic and ensuring that it receives ample attention in the first place.

When assessing the effects of satire such as this, particularly satire that marches so aggressively into the political public sphere, it seems imperative that we examine its impact on both public conversation and the political imaginary. If we believe that anything is to be gained from political debate and discussion (and indeed, the idea of deliberative democracy is predicated on it), then it would follow that increased access to information and broader terms of debate work toward a richer, more informed conversation. This sort of effect is certainly difficult to measure, but it is of crucial importance. While Colbert's super PAC is by no means a panacea for the woes of American campaign finance, it does illustrate the opportunities that satire can provide for drawing scrutiny to an issue; shifting the existing conversation, even in small ways; and providing an accessible object of identification for those already sympathetic to the critique.

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